“I Sort Rather with Those who Do Not Read”: Edward Carpenter, the Religion of Socialism, and the Prophetic Agitation of Literary Form

WANNE MENDONCK

In the early 1880s, Edward Carpenter, a poetically inclined itinerant lecturer, said farewell to verse measure. Imagining this moment “of adopting new forms” in a sonnet published much later, he saw himself setting sail for “a stormier main” than the Muse’s “soft rippling chime,” tuning in to a “profounder . . . rhythm,” as of “ocean-waves” “o’errun[ning]” his lines:

. . . Henceforth I strain
My lyre to Life’s profounder diapason:
The rhythm of ocean-waves o’erruns my strings—
Of waves which over harbour-wall and bason
The flooding tide inevitably flings.[1]

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 77, No. 1, pp. 56–90, ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352, © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2022.77.1.56.

[1] Edward Carpenter, “To the Muse of Measured Verse: on the Occasion of Adopting New Forms,” in his *Sketches from Life in Town and Country: And Some Verses* (London: Allen, [1908]), p. 254.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

Any comparison of the sonnet's conventional pentameters with the result of the formal turning point they describe bears out the radical character of Carpenter's deep-sea plunge:

> Out of all would YOU emerge?
>
> Would you at last, O child of mine, after many toils and endless warfare (for without such all is in vain) emerge and become MY EQUAL?[2]

In *Towards Democracy* (1883), Carpenter introduced long lines that had broken free from meter, interspersed with bracketed thoughts, talking of "toils" and "warfare" rather than lyres and diapasons, and directing its message of spiritual democracy not at the Muse but at "YOU," the reader, his equal. Poetry's "new forms," here, were both brashly direct and mystically involved. They also looked a lot like prose. And they were a political statement. Carpenter (1844–1929) resigned from a Cambridge clerical fellowship in 1874 to lecture in the industrial North of England. There, he began living more openly as a homosexual man and became an early gay rights activist, constructed a mystic spirituality, and reimagined himself as a socialist market gardener. His frugal "simple life" in the Derbyshire village of Millthorpe soon attracted both working-class and middle-class seekers after a holistic political experience. Carpenter's inclusive school of radicalism has received scrupulous treatment in the intellectual biography by Sheila Rowbotham, who comments elsewhere that Carpenter's substantial influence "was less a matter of logic than of a cultural stance."[3] On the page, where this influence was greatest, Carpenter's "cultural stance" was also a formal one. It is curious, then, that his poetic form has so far received little political (or indeed any extended) critical reading, despite his prominence as a disciple of Walt Whitman, his rediscovery by the 1970s gay liberation movement, and increasing attention from intellectual historians.

[2] [Edward Carpenter], *Towards Democracy* (London: John Heywood, 1883), p. 117. Initially a single poem, subsequent editions throughout Carpenter's career added much material to what became an expanding collection.

[3] Sheila Rowbotham, "In Search of Carpenter," *History Workshop Journal*, 3 (1977), p. 129. See also Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2008).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

In this essay I recontextualize Carpenter's "new forms" in his conception of authorship and authority, arguing that they constitute the first political act of his radical career. Thus, I sketch out a (counter-)culturally determined, late-Victorian understanding of literary agency that asks larger questions about the politics of form.

Oscar Wilde, reviewing a socialist songbook that Carpenter edited, commented: "What Art gains from contemporary events is always a fascinating problem and a problem that is not easy to solve."[4] One of the few scholars who have tackled this problem in Carpenter's work is Terry Eagleton, who, in the conclusion to *Shakespeare and Society* (1967), presents Carpenter's artistic radicalism as ultimately relapsing into "self-fulfilment rather than . . . social transformation."[5] Refusing to take seriously Carpenter's own understanding of "self-fulfilment" as a transformative social force, Eagleton ramps up his critique in an unpublished 1968 doctoral dissertation. In the process, he interestingly relates Carpenter's purported bypassing of commitment directly to lyrical form, arguing that there is an evident "way in which moral inconsistencies register themselves directly in the quality of poetic language," with vagueness in the one sphere implying obfuscation in the other.[6] Eagleton's argument involves a remarkably static perspective that accords very little agency to the poet and has ideology translating transparently and unreflexively into form. Despite seeming to focus on the texture of Carpenter's literary work, then, Eagleton draws attention away from the discursive agency of the author as well as from the dynamics inherent in poetic language itself, into the determinist context of intellectual history, ideology, or biography.[7] In this essay, I suggest ways

[4] [Oscar Wilde], "Poetical Socialists" (rev. of *Chants of Labour: A Song-Book of the People*, ed. Edward Carpenter), *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 February 1889, p. 3.

[5] Terry Eagleton [as Terence Eagleton], *Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 201.

[6] Terry Eagleton [as Terence Francis Eagleton], "Nature and Spirit: A Study of Edward Carpenter in His Intellectual Context" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1968), pp. 187, 227.

[7] The deterministic pitfalls are shown most egregiously in Eagleton's attempt to locate style in Carpenter's sexual and emotional economy by asserting that the "immaturity of the impulse to escape rather than realise the self through sexual orgasm

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

in which an explicitly political reading of Carpenter's form can be valuably renewed, while avoiding such determinism and making space for authorial agency and commitment. Such a reading, moreover, can make sense of the very ideological and stylistic unfamiliarity that yet obstructs fuller treatment of Carpenter's socialist poetry.

To a twenty-first-century eye, after all, the left wing of the late-Victorian political landscape is *unheimlich*, marked by an ideological and affective hybridity that may seem alien, even bathetic. Orthodox Marxists and Fabians, Anarchists and Ethical socialists combine and differentiate their overlapping spheres of influence within a wider field of "unofficial culture" that Matthew Beaumont has aptly described as a "muddy marsh . . . in which positivists and anti-vivisectionists, socialists and theosophists, freely cross-fertilised."[8] Often, it was a similar spiritual outlook that bound these movements (momentarily) together. As Michael Robertson has put it, the "socialist revival" of late-nineteenth-century Britain took place at a moment when the anglophone "political left broadly overlapped the spiritual left" as well as a "post-Christian mystical spirituality."[9] Their point of juncture is sometimes called the "religion of socialism," a historical term reintroduced by Stephen Yeo. This term denominates the revival's emotive-aesthetic and spiritual-millenarian structure of feeling, "a this-worldly religion" promising social transformation to a "new life" realizable by the very movement that announced its coming.[10] Grounded in the idea that, once a sizeable body of the populace would be convinced of the truth of socialist doctrine, the means for the reorganization of society would be found semiorganically, its strategy of "making socialists," Anna Vaninskaya points out, was

reflects itself in a diffuse and enervated writing," a statement without critical or biographical ground (Eagleton, "Nature and Spirit," pp. 82–83).

[8] Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 26.

[9] Michael Robertson, *The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and Their Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), p. 146. The "socialist revival" can be considered to take off with the 1881 foundation of the Democratic Federation, soon becoming Britain's first Marxist body.

[10] Stephen Yeo, "A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896," *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), 30.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

considered sufficient to bring about the millennium: "The utopia promised by the religion of socialism was achieved in the very act of propaganda."[11] This conception, it will be readily recognized, elevates the artistic and linguistic to the very center of agency in a political imagination. Indeed, Ruth Livesey has argued that it was the binding force of the aesthetic that enabled the socialist revival's synthetic "pluralism"; it "stimulated hope and desire within the individual subject and these transitive qualities formed a bridge between the aesthetic ideal and the material world."[12] The cultural situation of the "religion of socialism," then, is a useful lens through which to investigate the mutual, dialogic pressures exerted by religio-political purpose and literary form.

The late-Victorian socialist revival also presses on the historically sensitive critic a flexible, responsive conception of socialism itself that can take in its stride ideological hybridity and variable self-identification. In the case of the extended nineteenth-century aesthetic-political tradition that Mark Allison has recently called its "long socialism," it is best, he argues, to approach socialism "as a *goal to be imagined*, rather than an ideological program to be instantiated."[13] This emphasis on socialist artists' self-imagination as socialists is crucial, and gels with Mark Bevir's understanding of socialist revival authors as "situated agents" acting within the influence of "social inheritances," inheritances that they simultaneously transform "in response to historical dilemmas" that often turn on social perceptions.[14] In this essay I translate Bevir's historiographical "dilemma" model into critical terms and close reading praxis, sharpening our awareness of the formal affordances and implications of its dynamic. In what follows, then, I first establish the intellectual texture of Carpenter's own model of authorial agency and commitment, which I call "prophetic," and point

[11] Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 177, 191.

[12] Ruth Livesey, *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880–1914* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 8, 9.

[13] Mark A. Allison, *Imagining Socialism: Aesthetics, Anti-politics, and Literature in Britain, 1817–1918* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021), pp. 6, 2; emphasis in original.

[14] Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 11, 12.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

to its "situated" nature in relation to Carpenter's own reading, his evolutionism, and his sexual radicalism. Carpenter's working out of the prophetic model is illustrated via a close reading of his early play *Moses: A Drama in Five Acts* (1875). In the second part of the essay, I project back this model into both harmonious and conflicting relation to the hybrid lyrical-narrative form of Carpenter's magnum opus, *Towards Democracy,* excavating some of its formative "dilemmas."

In so doing, I argue that Carpenter's work is shaped by a deeply anxious self-consciousness about its political-spiritual duties, and that this anxiety expresses itself in a form that attempts to cancel out its own formalism. Where Mike Sanders, in his investigation of Chartist poetics, focuses on "the political effect of poetical affect," my emphasis is rather on the poetical effect of political, and "prophetic," affect.[15] Carpenter's poetry, after all, can be framed as in a lyrical state of "agitation," to be understood in the protean ways that Steven Goldsmith has applied the concept to that earlier prophetic poet, William Blake: "agitation" as both "interior, affective state" and external "political intervention," as well as the general conception of an unsettled movement that safeguards vitality itself.[16] Like Blake's, Carpenter's poetry is alive in these different ways. It "agitates" by appealing to a political-spiritual critical consciousness, and shapes into poetic form the "agitating" experiences of conversion and illumination that built up, and were soon required by, a religion of socialism. At the same time, it embeds within its literary texture a deeper affective state of agitation, or anxiety, about its own political viability as singular, artificial communication, which even pushes towards its self-cancellation. Reflecting on this agitated and agitating complex,

[15] Mike Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), p. 13.

[16] Steven Goldsmith, *Blake's Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013), p. 43. Blake's influence on Carpenter would repay further inquiry: *Towards Democracy,* for one, includes a reimagination of Blake's "To Tirzah" (1794), which adopts its meter and refrain ("what have I to do with thee?") to reroute the earlier prophet's repudiation of fallen matter as a celebration of unalienated Nature and Labor in the present. See Edward Carpenter, "What Have I to Do with Thee?," in his *Towards Democracy,* second edition, enlarged (London: John Heywood, 1885), pp. 150–51.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

then, this essay ultimately proposes a dynamic understanding of socialist revival poetry as simultaneously responding to and resisting the cultural and countercultural requirements for discursive authority and intelligibility implied by an embedded authorial model.

"What the ideal cherished by the people at large is, that the nation will soon become": Carpenter's conception of progress has an idealist character that could almost be called Hegelian.[17] More evocative of its radicalism is Antony Copley's formulation of "an inverted Marxism [in which] superstructure would determine infrastructure."[18] His "socialism," the poet declares, is built on "a higher morality," and is "a science . . . only secondarily": Carpenter belongs to a nonmaterialist (even antimaterialist), "ethical" trend within the socialist revival, whose socialism "must mean a changed ideal, a changed conception of daily life. . . . These things first and a larger slice of pudding all round afterwards!"[19] For Carpenter, "material changes" did not cause intellectual or "moral revolutions," but are the "first outward and visible signs" of the same.[20] It is testament to the strength of the socialist revival's millenarian optimism that he could conceive in such confident terms of the sufficiency for wider social transformation of "a change . . . in the general sentiment": "if it becomes anything like general, then inevitably . . . it will bring a new state of society

[17] Edward Carpenter, "England's Ideal" (1884), rpt. in his "*England's Ideal" and Other Papers on Social Subjects* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowry and Co., 1887), p. 4. For a recent discussion of the links between British (Hegelian) Idealism's superstructurally focused, "reparative forward momentum" and the "reformist literary mode" of the turn of the twentieth century, including Carpenter's, see Benjamin Kohlmann, *British Literature and the Life of Institutions: Speculative States* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021), pp. 15–17.

[18] Antony Copley, *A Spiritual Bloomsbury: Hinduism and Homosexuality in the Lives and Writings of Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster, and Christopher Isherwood* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 84.

[19] Edward Carpenter, "Social Progress and Individual Effort" (1885), rpt. in *"England's Ideal" and Other Papers on Social Subjects,* p. 59.

[20] Edward Carpenter, "Exfoliation," in his "*Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure" and Other Essays* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1889), p. 143.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

with it—will be in fact such new state of society" (Carpenter, "Social Progress and Individual Effort," pp. 57–58). Carpenter's emphasis on the political agency of the moral and ideational might rightly remind one of that "education of desire" that Miguel Abensour has famously put forward as key to the utopian project.[21] Moreover, because "the Artist" and others are impelled by "the same needs and emotions" seeking expression, Carpenter opined that "the ideas which are going to dominate the life of an epoch often . . . appear in Art simultaneously or beforehand."[22] Literature, then, can become prophetic by its sensitivity to developments in our common human sensibility. Conversely, if it wants to have social authority (and agency) within this schema, literature will have to demonstrate its pedigree as the outgrowth of such sensibility. While working on what would become *Towards Democracy*, Carpenter wrote to his friend Charles Oates about his "prophetic writings."[23] They, too, would have to channel a commonly shared kind of life.

Carpenter's notion of ideational agency was ultimately rooted in a neo-Lamarckian theory of natural evolution (Carpenter thought Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was "a true poet") that he called "exfoliation" (Carpenter, "Exfoliation," p. 140). The principle of "exfoliation" is that the "order of creation" runs "from within outwards" and that evolution is fundamentally expressive, "a true *unfolding* of a higher form latent within" ("Exfoliation," pp. 133, 136; emphasis in original). As Carpenter had it, the process of "change begins in the mental region—is felt first as a desire gradually taking form into thought, . . . expresses itself in action . . . , and finally solidifies itself in organisation and structure" ("Exfoliation," p. 135). Such development was to be applicable to the social sphere as much as to individual organisms or species, as "a new sense of justice, of fraternity" first "takes intellectual form" in books,

[21] See Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," in *Revolutionary Romanticism*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), pp. 145–46.

[22] Edward Carpenter, "The Individual Impression," in his *Angels' Wings: A Series of Essays on Art and its Relation to Life* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1898), p. 119.

[23] Edward Carpenter, letter to Charles Oates, 27 November 1882; Sheffield City Archives, Carpenter/Mss/351; quoted in Kohlmann, *British Literature and the Life of Institutions*, p. 129.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

then expresses itself in "definite new organisations," and finally becomes structural and unconscious ("Exfoliation," p. 139). Clearly, this deductive patterning of social transformation reserves a special role for the thinker and the artist: by desiring and imagining differently, and causing others to do so, they can, insofar as their desires are true to a higher ideal already secreted within humanity itself, bring about structural change. As Livesey argues, "The poet in Carpenter's Lamarckian aesthetic was . . . nothing less than a catalyst of evolutionary change, arousing desire in his readers who modified themselves and the coming generations as a result" (*Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain*, pp. 114–15). Like the word "exfoliation" itself, this valorization of socio-artistic pioneers owes much to Walt Whitman, probably the most dominant single influence on Carpenter's thought and style. Not gratuitously did Edward Aveling, in the first review of *Towards Democracy*, label him "an English Walt Whitman."[24]

Carpenter first encountered William Michael Rossetti's selection of Whitman's poetry in 1868 or 1869, and he later noted: "From that time forward a profound change set in within me."[25] Both poets went on to correspond and met twice in person. Though much less discussed in relation to him, Carpenter also thought much of Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871), in which Whitman writes of a "recast" "theory of noble authorship," modeling the new "Literatus" on the "unparalleled Judean prophets," evoking an authorial elect with a suitably wide social role adaptable to a socialist setting while also putting considerable demands on the language of any poet intent on emulating it.[26] Whitman envisions the modern print market as a commercialist Deluge: "a nation may hold and circulate rivers and oceans of very readable print, . . . yet, all the while . . . may possess no literature at all" (*Democratic Vistas*,

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

[24] Edward Aveling, rev. of *Towards Democracy*, by Edward Carpenter *Progress*, 1 (September 1883), 189.

[25] Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams: Being Autobiographical Notes* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1916), p. 64. See Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter*, pp. 42–43, 51–57, 80–81.

[26] [Walt Whitman], *Democratic Vistas* (Washington, D.C.: [Walt Whitman], 1871), pp. 9, 74. See Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*, p. 65.

p. 50). His metaphors demand a linguistic authenticity that accepted usage is unable to provide, necessitating the emergence of a new, organic language that acts through a process of necessary growth, "a language fanned by the breath of Nature, which . . . seldomer tells a thing than suggests or necessitates it" (*Democratic Vistas,* p. 76). In order to match the socio-artistic stature of the "Judean prophets," poetic voice had to be organic. Carpenter himself expressed such organicism most briefly in his *Days with Walt Whitman* (1906): "Prophecy at all times has [an] inevitable spontaneous character, as of something arising from below the ordinary consciousness."[27] Also in Carpenter's foundational relation to Whitman, then, inevitability and spontaneity arise as key requirements for transformative authorial agency.

In 1892, John Addington Symonds wrote to Carpenter that *Towards Democracy* was "the most important contribution which has as yet been made to the diffusion of Whitman's philosophy of life, & what I think we may now call the new religion."[28] The "new religion" that Symonds is referring to is not socialism, but a more abstractly conceived Whitmanian comradeship with an important homoerotic component. Indeed, Carpenter's emphasis on the prophetic flavor of self-expression relates to both his homosexual identity and his performative rejection of middle-class status, both profoundly linked to, but not identical with, his brand of socialism, conception of evolution, and love of Whitman. As a gay man, Carpenter came in direct contact with the repressive workings of a sociocultural hegemony and with the psychological agony of imposed silence and threat to expression.

In 1898 Carpenter suggested: "Life must be an expression of one's Self. In proportion as it approaches that is it worthy to be called Life"; life without such expression "is not to live: it is only to exist."[29] In response, Carpenter developed an

[27] Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman: With Some Notes on His Life and Work* (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 74.

[28] John Addington Symonds, letter to Edward Carpenter, 20 March 1892, in *The Letters of John Addington Symonds,* ed. Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters, 3 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1967–69), III, 675.

[29] Edward Carpenter, "The Art of Life," in *Angels' Wings,* pp. 211–12. The phrase interestingly echoes Wilde (see Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *Fortnightly Review,* n.s. 49 [1891], 297).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

affirmative vision that is not unlike the queer aestheticism identified by Dustin Friedman, who asserts that late-Victorian "queer aesthetes made the . . . claim that queerness can be an advantage intellectually, creatively, and ethically, not in spite of but because of social opposition toward nonnormative desires": by "tarry[ing] at the very limits of what is thinkable in one's culture," one may change it.[30] In his late (pseudo) anthropological work *Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk* (1914), Carpenter suggests that what he calls the "intermediate or Uranian" disposition could result in "diviners and prophets in a very real sense" and "point to a further degree of evolution than usually attained."[31] Carpenter adopted a gender essentialism widespread in late-Victorian intellectual circles to combine what he saw as the harmonization of masculine and feminine temperaments with an understanding of same-sex love as preeminently cross-class in nature, to argue that

> the Uranian people may be destined to form the advance guard of that great movement which will one day . . . substitute[e] the bond of personal affection and compassion for the monetary, legal and other external ties which now control and confine society.[32]

The expression of same-sex desire is, then, as per the "exfoliation" schema, endowed with pioneering social(ist) agency captured in the notion of an "advance guard," at the front of evolutionary models and prophetic of a coming state of social relationships. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick emphasizes in her brief contribution on Carpenter: "sexual meaning is inextricable from social meaning."[33]

The idea of pioneering intellectual or affective agency, then, often shading into prophetic status, is at work across

[30] Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2019), pp. 7, 4.

[31] Edward Carpenter, *Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk: A Study in Social Evolution* (London: George Allen and Co., 1914), pp. 62, 63.

[32] Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1908), p. 116; see pp. 114–16, 120–22.

[33] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), p. 214.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

Carpenter's thought, including in his socialism, evolutionism, homosexual identity, and relationship to Whitman. The interpretive models constructed in these various areas, however, entail conditions (in Whitman's case, significantly, of a linguistic nature) to the authority that such prophetic status can afford in a political-cultural context, like the "religion of socialism," based on the agency of communicative acts. Prophecy needs must be organic, spontaneous, inescapable, inevitable, unconscious, and must exist almost despite its agent's subjectivity. Before we go on to investigate the dialogic relation of these required qualities with the form of Carpenter's poetry, I will home in on this concept of prophecy itself, and Carpenter's earliest literary engagement with it. After all, prophecy has always come with caveats. Max Weber's definition of the prophet as "a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine," is useful here.[34] Charisma, for Weber, is a hyperindividualized source of sociopolitical power, "qualitatively delimited from within" but dependent on its continuing recognition as such by the community: thus, it "revolutionizes men 'from within' and shapes material and social conditions according to its revolutionary will," but is also "naturally unstable" (Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 1113, 1116, 1114). Weberian charisma, then, in its outward directionality and reliance on "will," shows some similarity to expressed desire as the source of social revolution in Carpenter's "exfoliation" scheme. But it also glosses this scheme's dreams of self-sufficient agency by pointing out the contingency of its reliance on pioneering individuals. The authority of prophets is, after all, "unstable," and needs the continuous renewal of assent from an audience to fulfill its role. It is the tension underlying this situation that Carpenter dramatized in *Moses: A Drama in Five Acts*.

To Whitman, Carpenter described the drama as an analysis of the individual Will, "an effort to represent the character of one who . . . has conceived a new idea, a new development for

[34] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischoff, et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 439.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

mankind, and by the very force with which he has conceived it wills to shape out . . . the way of its realization."[35] Moses is Carpenter's earliest structural symbol for ideational or affective agency, both engaging prophecy's religious associations and abstracted (semisociologically, perhaps) from them. Although the word "prophet" is not, in fact, used, Carpenter's play soon implies a distinction between the prophet Moses and his brother Aaron, who embodies the priestly function. Carpenter may well be influenced by Whitman here, for whom the cleric was a reactionary figure whose socioreligious role would soon devolve onto literature: "The priest departs, the divine Literatus comes" (*Democratic Vistas,* p. 6). "There will soon be no more priests," Whitman suggested in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass,* because "the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place"—thus not only providing a model for Carpenter's personal development from Cambridge curate to prophetic poet, but also anticipating, in the notion of "prophets en masse," the ruling tensions of the socialist revival's combination of individual prophecy and collectivism.[36] After all, if "every man shall be his own priest," what function could the "new order" consisting of "the priests of man," or the Literati, fulfill (Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass,* p. xi)? Can there be a socio-spiritual role for the intelligentsia at all if one, like Carpenter, transfers its associated authority to the bare fact of common humanity? In his early drama, this tension is focused through an anxiety about the right use of language, which the priest Aaron distorts for theological and political gain. Aaron's sister Miriam styles him "a very Cain; / Each word you utter murders its own brother, / And every lie is traitor to the last."[37] Aaron is presented as a canny politician whose words themselves embed an ontological dispersion into murderous individualism. To gain control of the crowd, he adopts the garb

[35] Edward Carpenter, letter to Walt Whitman, 3 January 1876; quoted in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden, Volume Three* (*November 1, 1888–January 20, 1889*), ed. Sculley Bradley (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), p. 414.

[36] Walt Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: [Walt Whitman], 1855), p. xi.

[37] Edward Carpenter, *Moses: A Drama in Five Acts* (London: Moxon, [1875]), p. 95. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

of the Egyptian priests who, Moses argues, are "teach[ing] the mass a lie" (Carpenter, *Moses*, p. 49). Echoing Whitman, Carpenter's Moses identifies a moment of authentic spirituality when the "priesthood" of Egypt "Vanished in visions of a realm of priests—/ A kingdom of high priests, a holy nation, / God dwelling with them in their midst" (Carpenter, *Moses*, p. 49). This immanence has democratic potential, as an unnamed Israelite notes: "A kingdom of priests! / We shall all be priests" (Carpenter, *Moses*, p. 49).

Unlike the verbally dexterous Aaron, Moses asserts the authority of his own words by their authentic derivation from God, who "spoke / Face to face with him, as unto no man / Before or after" (Carpenter, *Moses*, pp. 78–79). Moses declares:

> These are the words of God. Hear, Israel,
> Hear and obey!
> . . . .
> Behold, now, I do stand 'twixt him and you;
> . . . .
> His words are in my ears
> By day and night continually for ever.
> (Carpenter, *Moses*, pp. 30–31)

In a study on Romantic prophecy, Ian Balfour argues that "the decisive factor in the prophet's relation to the divine word is its immediacy," but he adds that if, as per Maurice Blanchot, prophecy is regarded as the record of a dialogue with the divine, then the prophetic word might only channel a compromised authenticity: "In the beginning . . . is the repetition of the word," at an anxiously second remove from its divine origin.[38] In Carpenter's play, the prophet facilitates knowledge of the divine will, but also stands in the way of the message's directness: "Behold, now, I do stand 'twixt him and you." Attention is drawn to the prophet's role as mediator, who is also the verbalizing obstacle between the divine and the devotee. Moses's adversaries latch onto this aspect of mediation: "Will you note how this man continually removes from us all evidence of the

[38] Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), p. 5.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

God? . . . We look, and look; and still see only Moses" (Carpenter, *Moses*, p. 32). The insurrectionist Korah warns that "we let this man increase his measure / Until he wipes Jehovah from our eyes, / Standing before his face" (Carpenter, *Moses*, p. 8). Korah, indeed, tars the prophet with the same brush that Carpenter applies to Aaron, accusing him of a deviously misleading use of language.

Korah points to the democratic prophet's dilemma. He argues that Moses puts himself above a nominally egalitarian collective despite assertions in which the prophet "Declared us equal, and, in God's high name, / Holy unto His service," assertions that thus seem no more than his other "feints and fair false promises": "Since this whole people is holy, all of them, / And the Lord is among them, why do ye / Lift yourselves up above the Lord's elect?," he asks, likening both Moses and Aaron to "the priests of Egypt" (Carpenter, *Moses*, pp. 104–5). The traitorous similarity between prophet and (false) priest, their tense relations to a democracy and collectivism they might themselves proclaim, and the status of their (obfuscating) language, is a quandary that, over the course of the play, erupts in a spiral of violence. Korah's words here, it should be noted, are taken directly from the King James Bible:

> Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD? (Numbers 16:3)

Carpenter, a former curate of Cambridge's St. Edward's Church under Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice, was highly biblically literate. By transposing the words of the Bible passage into a new, semisecular context, replacing "congregation" with "people" and "elect," Carpenter formalizes his valorization of an organic, socially rather than clerically focused prophecy. In his memoir, Carpenter recalled how he began to doubt the minister's role (associated in his play with Aaron), because he could not square his own and Maurice's nuanced "historical-philosophical" understanding of Scripture with the task to proclaim it before an audience of known literalists: the situation gave him an "insuperable *feeling* of falsity" (*My Days and Dreams*,

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

p. 58; emphasis in original). D. K. Barua has well described Carpenter's qualms as a "conflict of 'veracity' and 'sincerity,'" or an inability to tolerate "a seeming gap between one's heart's assent and the verbal articulation or answers to the problems of faith."[39] This problematics was carried over into Carpenter's thinking about art, as his organicist aesthetic of sincerity embeds the "idea of the necessity, the inevitableness, the absolute directness of all good art-work, . . . at the farthest pole from the elaborate study of artificial effects."[40] There is, then, a continuity between Carpenter's engagement of prophecy, clericalism, and aesthetics, through the notion of testimonial sincerity.

This continuity would have been unsurprising to Thomas Carlyle, who included both prophet and poet as types of the history-building "great soul" in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841). "*Vates,*" Carlyle reminds us, "means both Prophet and Poet. . . . they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe."[41] The test of both prophet and poet is an authenticity "without consent asked of" its carrier, an experience lived and expressed by necessity: "Whosoever may live in the shows of things, it is for him a necessity of nature to live in the very fact of things. . . . He is a *Vates,* first of all, in virtue of being sincere" (Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 69; emphasis in original). The "great soul," for Carlyle, was, after all, always "a voice of Nature," whose "works . . . grow up withal *un*consciously, . . . as the oak-tree grows from the Earth's bosom" (*On Heroes*, p. 92; emphasis in original). From Carlyle, to Whitman, to Carpenter, then, there is a prophetic requirement for sincerity and organicity. But we cannot measure sincerity telepathically: it needs to be shown through verbalization. In other words, it is the recognized *affect* of sincerity (which one may call charisma), indicating but not

[39] Dilip Kumar Barua, *Edward Carpenter, 1844–1929: An Apostle of Freedom* (Burdwan: Univ. of Burdwan, 1991), pp. 32–33.

[40] Edward Carpenter, "Art and Democracy: Wagner, Millet, and Whitman," in *Angels' Wings*, p. 4.

[41] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History,* ed. Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 69; emphasis in original.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

synonymous with its presence, that usually authorizes the prophet. In *Moses*, Carpenter imagines this figure within a social fabric that is essentially oral, with dramatic tension revolving around contingent exchanges in the public forum, Moses's words coming into close contact with the response of the many. Carpenter's authorial persona needed to develop an aesthetic that could transport this sincerity affect into his own lyric. This aesthetic is what I turn to now.

For Carpenter, modern civilization was characterized by "the abnormal development of the abstract intellect in comparison with the physical senses on the one hand, and the moral sense on the other": *mere* intellect had led to an "abstraction from reality" that, instead of experiencing "Nature and God" at first hand, read of "the 'ghosts of things' . . . in books."[42] At first sight, such neo-Platonic anti-intellectualism (if the intellectual construct stands at a remove from the real Ideal, then the written word stands at a second remove), seems unexpected and self-defeating from the mouth of a poet and university-educated intellectual. While Carpenter's intellectual roots lay in the university, however, it was a world he came to think of as the very antagonism of prophetic spontaneity, its "everlasting discussions of theories which never came anywhere near actual life, . . . impress[ing] [him] with a sense of utter emptiness," producing mere "talking machines" (Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*, pp. 72, 63). Tariq Rahman has aptly identified Carpenter's "idealization of lack of formal education."[43] Indeed, in the first edition of *Towards Democracy*, Carpenter had already imagined a parallel between a contemporary proliferation of formal languages and "scrambl[ing]" commercial society:

[42] Edward Carpenter, "Modern Science: A Criticism," in "*Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*" *and Other Essays*, p. 34.

[43] Tariq Rahman, "The Literary Treatment of Indian Themes in the Works of Edward Carpenter," *Durham University Journal*, 80 (1987), 77.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

> Ah, England! Ah, beating beating heart!
> No wonder you are weary! weary of talk!
> Weary seeking amid the scramble, amid the scramble of words and the scramble of wealth,
> Amid the fashionable, the scientific, the artistic, the commercial, the political, the learned and literary scramble—weary,
> Seeking, seeking, seeking for a God!
>
> (*Towards Democracy* [1883], pp. 54–55)

Linguistic overproduction, here echoed in the unbalancing enumeration of abstract nouns, leads to verbal and material glut but metaphysical poverty, as unified value (the "beating heart") dissolves into scrambling chaos. The wider socialist revival's attitude to a state of contemporary cultural "scramble" was anxious and conflicted. Chris Waters notes contemporary socialist uneasiness about the effect of mass cultural democratization on artistic integrity and value, apparent in the revival's preoccupation with how mass or popular culture should look.[44] Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, meanwhile, has shown how its radical press struggled to square a countercultural rejection of mass market print with an ideal of general democratic participation: Carpenter's "squarely print based" poetic response to this conundrum, she argues, differs from that of the socialist press in its "means of achieving universality—formal innovation," liberating the individual poet and reader from rhythmic and epistemic convention, "versus appeal to familiar forms" that, by reliance on predictable "aural effect," could evoke "the possibility of live, communal voice emerging from print."[45] Carpenter, however, although he did not publish in popular media or genre forms, did not wish to level up popular tastes: far from associating the "scramble" with mass culture, he worried that conventions of literary merit were not truly popular enough.

Deeply suspicious of contemporary literature, Carpenter echoed the "deluge" metaphor of Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* in characterizing it as "a few pithy passages . . . and for the rest what a deluge of words!" (Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*,

[44] See Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884–1914* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 4, 13–15.

[45] Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2013), p. 188; see pp. 2–5, 184–87, 202–4.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

p. 103). The surfeit, here, however, is not of books, let alone of readers, but of words: Carpenter's diagnosis is not of a socio-economic phenomenon but of a style that thinly spreads out a constant weight of meaning over a plethora of superficial verbalisms: "Words, words, and fine-spun forms out of the thinnest basis of material!" (*My Days and Dreams*, p. 104). The idea of fine-spun words evokes an image like a costly gown, and, indeed, the category of the purely verbal, in which words were severed not only from their referents but also from their roots of power and agency, was for Carpenter the work of the leisured classes. Fashionable writing does not appeal to "great reaches of human passion and experience," he thought, because it ignores the mass, and makes words themselves into agents of elitism: "The purely literary work has its interest, has its place; but its appeal is so limited" (*My Days and Dreams*, p. 104). To be truly prophetic, then, and address more fundamental human "experience," Carpenter's own work had to be more than "purely literary," even to be, paradoxically, nonliterary. In his preface to *Chants of Labour* (1888), a collection of socialist songs for use in meetings, Carpenter claimed that the book was "in no sense . . . a merely 'literary' production": it "emanate[d] rather from the heart of the people."[46] Presented by Carpenter as "being genuinely accepted and in use among Socialist bodies of workmen," *Chants of Labour* derives its authenticity as a truly popular emanation not from its method of production (the songs were composed *for* the workers, many by middle-class writers), but from its use (Carpenter, preface to *Chants of Labour*, p. vi). Having been "accepted," the material has by frequent use become inherent to "the heart of the people." This view implicitly configures an individually crafted poem such as Carpenter's own "England, Arise!" (no. 12 in *Chants of Labour*) as essentially oral and inherently democratic, not "literary" but arising from within the popular sensibility itself.[47]

[46] Edward Carpenter, preface to *Chants of Labour: A Song Book of the People: With Music*, ed. Carpenter (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1888), p. vi.

[47] See *Chants of Labour*, pp. 18–19; and Carpenter, *Sketches from Life in Town and Country*, pp. 257–60.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

The paradox here recalls the democratic quandary faced by Carpenter's Moses figure: how is the authorizing root of spontaneity located in the popular collective to be combined with the single prophet's election and spiritual-ideological (or stylistic) individualization? Such tension is at the heart of much radical poetry since Romanticism. Mark Allison, for example, has recently explored a similar contradiction between the purportedly democratic message of Capel Lofft's Chartist epic poem *Ernest; or, Political Regeneration* (1839) and the "absolute ontological superiority" of its poet figure (Allison, *Imagining Socialism,* p. 90). For Lofft, Allison argues, the solution lay in a Shelleyan logic of poetic "vanguardism," in which the remembered charisma of the popular poet-leader impels the people to republican self-government.[48] Carpenter's fabrication of a democratic-pioneering poetic persona is not dissimilar. In the preface to *Chants of Labour,* Carpenter fundamentally implies that his own lyric contribution, through its appeal to socialist workers, out-peoples the people. Lacking the community of performance spectrally present in any reading of *Chants of Labour,* however, the earlier *Towards Democracy* required other strategies to claim such countercultural authority, part of which was an attempt to frame its own textuality, in its innovative stylistic character, as a return to discursive immediacy.

For Carpenter, the mechanical aspect of words was always threatening to take over, and "expression [was] continually tending to die, to become external, mechanical, inhuman": the role of the poet was to carry language "back to the living, the direct, the actual, the human."[49] Poetry, for Carpenter, is a revitalization and a disalienation of language through language itself, but this role was under threat from the artificiality, or the mechanistic tendency, of language, of which the lyrical texture inescapably partakes. In *Towards Democracy,* his response to this conundrum occasionally takes the form of a literary self-destruct:

[48] See Allison, *Imagining Socialism,* p. 91.

[49] Edward Carpenter, "Tradition, Convention, and the Gods," in *Angels' Wings,* p. 98.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

> Therefore I say unto you: Faint not;
> Rest here awhile and forgive my foolish prating;
> Turn from these words and look again at the world around you, the work you have to do.[50]

In biblical tones ("Therefore I say unto you"), Carpenter outs his speech as mere "foolish prating" not worth listening to, as elsewhere the lyrical voice finds itself "tired of this endless nonsense-reading and writing, and will have no more of it" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 35). The purpose of Carpenter's words here is to cancel themselves out, to direct the reader's attention away from themselves to the authentic (because non-verbal) extratextual reality from which their authority derives. The voice of "After Long Ages" appeals for an antagonistic reading, "to crush and destroy these thoughts of mine which I have written in this book or anywhere"; "Me alone, when you have separated and rejected all these, shall you see and not reject" (Carpenter, "After Long Ages," p. 239). Reading, here, is a process of eating away the very externality of the author's words into transparency, revealing the individuality behind. While, however, the extratextual reality is often presented as the true source of Carpenter's lyric truth ("where I was afraid to utter my thoughts dumb things shall utter for you words impossible to be misunderstood"), this assertion itself implies that the necessary redirection toward actuality is realized by the very words to be discarded (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 71).

The correct role of such mediation is the subject of an inherent anxiety, as words, unlike Carpenter's "dumb things," can be misunderstood. Kirsten Harris, who writes extensively on Whitman's influence in British radicalism, argues that the politically embedded poetry of Carpenter harbors, to an extent absent in Whitman, a need to be correctly understood that informs "a productive friction between his insistence that his readers unfold his message for themselves and the anxiety he betrays about it being correctly decoded."[51] Indeed, from the

[50] Edward Carpenter, "After Long Ages," in his *Towards Democracy*, 2d ed. (1885), p. 238.

[51] Kirsten Harris, *Walt Whitman and British Socialism: "The Love of Comrades"* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), p. 51; see p. 39.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

start of the 1883 *Towards Democracy*, Carpenter claims: "These things I, seizing you by the shoulders, will shake you till you understand them! but my words whether you understand or not is nothing to me—I sort rather with those who do not read them" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 1). The tactile directness of Carpenter's language ("I, seizing you") is aimed at an understanding that, in fine, may be contradictory to the poem's ideal. Yet any poetic move away from text needs the text that obstructs it. Carpenter's language, then, is simultaneously the reflection of a preexistent natural dynamic, its obstruction, and the removal of that obstruction. Carpenter acknowledged the power of "the word that is nothing—as fire is nothing and yet it devours the land in a moment" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 14). The revolutionary power of the word depends on its nothingness, the transportable negativity that affects matter by making itself self-destructively transparent. In the remainder of this section, I discuss two strategies by which this urge to transparency is formalized in the texture of Carpenter's poetry: first, his adoption of prose rhythms, and second, his use of a carefully chosen quotidian diction suggesting the proximity of his language to material life. Both aspects of Carpenter's form, I argue, can be seen as responses to an emergent, ideologically situated understanding of prophetic authorship and its formal affordances.

"Take care," Carpenter's voice warns, " . . . how you touch these words: with curious intellect come not near, lest I utterly destroy you," for "if learning and skill admit you to wonders, ignorance and awkwardness shall give you entrances equally or more desirable" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 109). The seeming objectification of "words" into things that can be touched, rather than interpretive intellectual challenges, underscores the celebration of "ignorance" and "awkwardness" (which may even "destroy" intellectualism), framing Carpenter's lyricism as a paradoxically unliterary literature that imagines "giv[ing] the illiterate the advantage of those that read and write" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 50). One way of giving this impression is through the illusion (or deferred reality) of deixis and direct address: the 1883 edition of *Towards Democracy* contains nearly seven hundred instances of the second-person pronoun

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

(including reflexive and possessive pronouns). Another way is the adoption of prose poetry, which can pose as platform speech, conversation, or impromptu confession, and evokes the inevitability of prophetic authorship through a performative absence of formalities. That Carpenter had been thinking in the terms of prose poetry since the first *Towards Democracy* is clear from an 1882 letter to Whitman, in which he said of the poem:

> It is in paragraphs some short, (half a line or so), some long, in the ordinary prose form, tho' poetical in character. It is a good deal made up of previous writings of the last 5 or 6 years *squeezed out*—a drop or two here & there.[52]

One may observe Carpenter's imagining of the writing process as effortful (but not artificial) labor, a squeezing or pressing out, perhaps, of one's own lifeblood.[53] The formulation "poetical in character" is rather vague. One may think of the spiritual content of the poem and its universal perspective, or to the omnipresence of a nominally lyrical "I." Carpenter is very clear, though, that the poem's "form," unlike its "character," is that of prose, and he takes as his structural unit not the verse line, but the paragraph. If short, this unit may coincide with the length of a line—without, in fact, being a line of verse. Anne Janowitz shows that what she calls the "loose prophetic line," or "biblical line," had been carried forward from Romantics like Blake, via Chartists such as W. J. Linton, to Whitman.[54] It therefore could signal an allegiance with a distinctly radical lyricism deeply embedded in the real, the popular, the political, as well

[52] Edward Carpenter, letter to Walt Whitman, 16 March 1882, The Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, 1839–1919, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., loc.01237; Walt Whitman Archive transcription, in *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price, available online at <whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/loc.01237.html>; accessed 7 February 2021.

[53] For the multivalent figuration of writing as labor in the nineteenth century, often linked with bourgeois anxieties around the intellectual's social value (as well as gender, class, and industrialism), sometimes in reaction to Romantic models of inspiration, see, for instance, *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830–1910: Authorial Work Ethics*, ed. Marcus Waithe and Claire White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[54] Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 204.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

as the spiritual prophetic. But Carpenter's line hovers on the boundaries of both prose and verse—it is poetical "in character," but not in "form," even if, paradoxically, it may sometimes seem to be. The fluid boundaries of the categories of "character" and "form" themselves complicate the categorization of Carpenter's lyric yet further.

Part of the reason for this fluidity is Carpenter's resistance to the notion of "form" itself, which was suspect in its familial association with formalism. His understanding of rhythm is especially enlightening in this respect. Fond of calling rhythm "a purely physiological" question, Carpenter argued:

> No absolute line of course can be drawn between the forms of Prose and Poetry. . . . rhythms and rhymes and recurrences will take on the simplest and briefest or the most complex and far-reaching forms according to the character of the emotion concerned. . . . There is something inevitable about this, and beyond the author's control.[55]

While "forms" are regarded as artificial categories, fundamentally unreal in their impossible delineation, emotional "character" is a more solid rubric, determining the "rhythms and rhymes and recurrences"—in other words, the formal aspects—of utterance. When Carpenter, then, suggests that his poem is not a poem in "form," he is not denying the applicability of such formal concepts, but rather he is performing a disentangling, attempting to rescue his lyric from purely literary convention and regrounding it in, and identifying it with, the arguably more "real" foundation of "emotion."[56] The expression of "emotion" is partly "beyond the author's control," which means that the less obvious is any mediation from formal rules, the more the utterance is implied to be "inevitable," organic, indeed popular—and hence, within the Carpenterian value system, authoritative. Only if the poet

[55] Edward Carpenter, "The Human Body and Its Relation to Art," in *Angels' Wings*, p. 73.

[56] See Steven Goldsmith's analysis of Blake's avoidance of metrical monotony in favor of an "irreducible tonal specificity" that would emphasize "the speaker's personal, embodied presence within the text," "making writing seem like speech" (Goldsmith, *Blake's Agitation*, pp. 58–59).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

cannot but speak can such speech be prophetic. For instance, Carpenter argued that Whitman

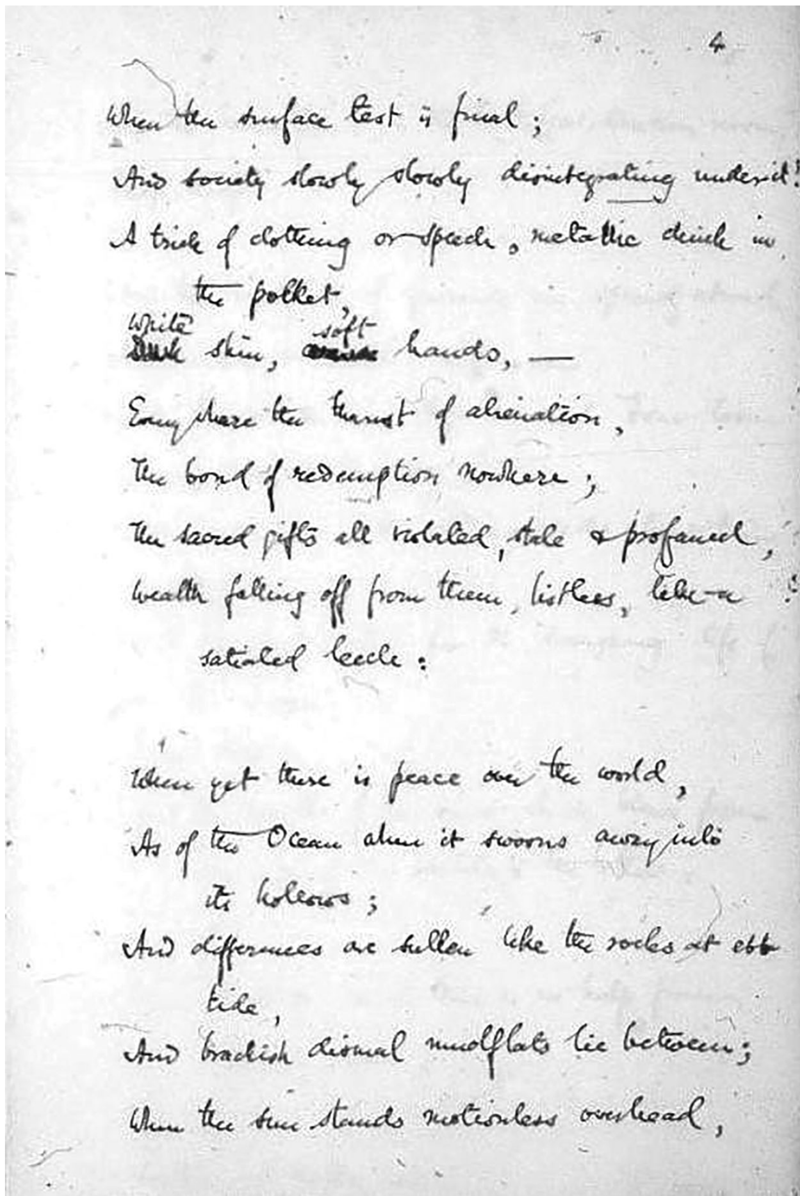
> *had* to enlarge the boundary of human expression; . . . he reverted to the primitive law—the law that inspired Biblical and all early poetry—namely, that human feeling . . . compels speech to its own rhythm. . . . Here we have "need" again lying at the root of the matter. ("Art and Democracy," p. 11; emphasis in original)

Carpenter's line, then, is "Biblical" (to speak with Janowitz) in more than one sense. Only when inspired by a similar "need" could it "enlarge the boundary of human expression," thence human power of moral conception, social desires, and, therefore, developmental agency.

The difficulty with this perspective for the socialist poet is that it focuses on production to the neglect of consumption. For all its address to the reader, Carpenter's source of authority for his prophetic lyric lies in its manner of production ("out of" the mass sensibility, abstractly conceived), not its reach ("to" the mass). His specialized, sometimes protomodernist techniques, therefore, could backfire. Edward Pease, secretary to the Fabian Society, welcomed Carpenter's introduction of ideological or technical political terms into poetry ("It sounds prosy, but, after all, it is the stuff of which the truest poetry is made"), but also noted: "The style and the contents of this book are so eminently peculiar, that a specially cultivated, perhaps even an artificial, taste is required for its due appreciation."[57] An artificial kind of cultivation here reattaches itself to Carpenter's work, even as his studied spontaneity hopefully looked forward to deintellectualization and an understanding of cultivation (literary and otherwise) as the guidance of natural growth. Perhaps yet more aptly, as Carpenter's construction of lyric authority necessarily involves an implied reader, it can be said to focus its efforts, as in the case of *Chants of Labour,* on the reader's *perception of* production. The spontaneity of Carpenter's lyric prose or prose lyric, after all, is an effect rather than a compositional trait. If one compares, for instance, the

[57] Edward R. Pease, "'Towards Democracy': A Note on Edward Carpenter," *To-Day,* 6 (1886), 39, 37.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024


4

When the surface test is final;
And society slowly slowly disintegrating under it!
A trick of clothing or speech, metallic chink in
the pocket,
White skin, soft hands, —
Everywhere the thrust of alienation,
The bond of redemption nowhere;
The sacred gifts all violated, stale & profaned,
Wealth falling off from them, listless, like a
satiated leech:

When yet there is peace over the world,
As of the Ocean when it swoons away into
its hollows;
And differences are sullen like the rocks at ebb
tide,
And brackish dismal mudflats lie between;
When the sun stands motionless overhead,

FIGURE 1 Edward Carpenter, manuscript version of "The Wordless Sign," Sheffield Archives, Carpenter/Mss/3/8, fol. 4.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

When the surface test is final—the rainbow-coloured scum—and society rotting down beneath it; a trick of clothing or speech, metallic chink in the pocket, white skin, soft hands, fawning and lying looks—everywhere the thrust of rejection, the bond of redemption nowhere; the sacred gifts all violated, stale and profaned—men and women falling off from them listless, like satiated leeches;

When Labour is not loyal and true, nor the Labourers loyal and true to each other; when a man has no pride in the creation of his hands, nor rejoices to make it perfect; when machinery is perfectly organised and human souls are hopelessly disorganised;

Do you think all these things mean nothing?

FIGURE 2 Edward Carpenter, "The Wordless Sign," in *Towards Democracy* (1883), p. 54.

manuscript of Carpenter's early poem "The Wordless Sign" with its reworking in Section XLII of the 1883 *Towards Democracy* (see Figures 1 and 2), one notices that what in the manuscript version often still looks like lines of verse are in the published version merged into a sequence more akin to paragraphs: the text shifts from indenting the overspill of a line, even if in prose, to indenting the first line of a paragraph.[58] Rather than the "inevitable" consequence of an inner expressive need, such artistic intervention seems conscious, stylistic decision-making. Carpenter's friend and fellow "ethical" socialist Henry Salt noted that, contrary to first appearances, Carpenter, by his own confession, "thought a great deal about literary style, though he always . . . avoided 'anything that *looks* like what people call style.'"[59] There is an important sense in which such

[58] See Edward Carpenter, "The Wordless Sign," Sheffield City Archives, Carpenter/Mss/3/8; and Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (1883), pp. 52–54. I am grateful to archivist Robin Wiltshire and the archival team at Sheffield City Archives for help with access to the Carpenter collection.

[59] Henry S. Salt, "A Sage at Close Quarters," in *Edward Carpenter: In Appreciation*, ed. Gilbert Beith (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 198n; emphasis in original.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

stylistic simplification is about appearance rather than production. Carpenter's poetry is very closely concerned with matters of "style," indeed "form," after all.

M. Wynn Thomas argues that Carpenter's poetic project is the reconciliation of different trends in "progressive art," combining idealism and Zolaesque realism into "a 'hybrid' form—that of the prose poem," which evidences the attempt "even in the form of his writing . . . to join and fuse all of those elements his society was so intent on keeping apart."[60] The passage that Thomas adduces brings Carpenter's poetic incorporation of prose, narrative, and quotidian actuality to its rhythmical extreme:

> The graduate from Cambridge is a warm-hearted impulsive little woman, genuine and human to the core. Having escaped from high and dry home-circles, she found curiously the answer of her heart in a wage-worker of an East London workshop—a calm broad-browed woman, strong, clearheaded, somewhat sad in expression, and a bit of a leader among her trade-mates.[61]

A passage such as this one is certainly not devoid of rhythm, but the rhythm in question is that of prose, complete with paragraph structure and a performative kind of semicolloquial tentativeness ("somewhat sad," "a bit of a leader"), with the period rhetorically balanced across three parts of increasing length, the last extended into a similarly lengthening series of modifying phrases. It should be mentioned that Carpenter certainly could, and did, write in other forms (such as the passage from "To the Muse of Measured Verse" quoted at the beginning of this essay). Indeed, *Towards Democracy* contains a variety of rhythms, tempos, and organizing principles (including, occasionally, rhyme and formal meter) that distill nuanced shades of prosodic meaning.

The linearity of prose can, for instance, be broken up into shorter, axiom-like paragraphs containing individual

[60] M. Wynn Thomas, *Transatlantic Connections: Whitman U.S., Whitman U.K.* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2005), p. 183.

[61] Edward Carpenter, "A Mightier than Mammon," in his *Who Shall Command the Heart: Being Part IV of "Towards Democracy"* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1902), p. 36.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

observations or adages, which may be further interrupted by a dialogic intrusion:

> Do not hurry: have faith.
> [Whither indeed should we hurry? is it not well here?
> A little shelter from the storm, a stack of fuel for winter use, a few handfuls of grain and fruit—
> And lo! the glory of all the earth is ours.].[62]

The quiet command with the serene, stately caesura at its center is quickly followed by a welter of little phrases, whose visual organization hints at verse lines. The square brackets, dash, and pauses introduce a dynamic hint of thought-in-motion, worked out on the spot. Elsewhere, rhythm can be less messily contiguous, and introduces a clear cadence, providing a weighty, stately beat:

> For the face of the farm-lad who came and sat beside me, the handfuls of pease that he offered me—for the taste of their juicy sweet pods. (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 111)

Two obvious caesuras, marked by comma and dash, give the sentence a dignified tripartite structure and a flowing gravitas fitting to the prophetic authority of Carpenter's vision of the new life of comradeship on the land. The point of extremes like the "graduate from Cambridge" passage from "A Mightier than Mammon," then, is that the rhythm runs on, that there is no bounding of the form, that it spills over and runs off into alleyways, makes little, unexpected jumps. The way "a bit of a leader" trails off is not a fault, but the effect that Carpenter wished to produce—gauche, perhaps, but, within the context, poetically and politically effective. Formally, it gives an ad hoc impression to the anecdote, as if the poet has just remembered it, anchoring its authorizing spontaneity. Its poetical "character," in turn, exists in its functionality within the composition, which brings together several similar prose-poetical narratives, as well as more lyrical and line-based sections, into an accumulative, patchwork-like vista of experiences that suggest a developing,

[62] Edward Carpenter, "Have Faith," in *Towards Democracy*, 2d ed. (1885), p. 179.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

broad common humanity, the whole marked off as a poem ("A Mightier than Mammon").

Towards Democracy gestures boldly, and showily, toward the extratextual, absorbing the rhythms of prose to perform a deconstruction of formalism. In the realm of diction, meanwhile, Carpenter appropriates constructions that even Whitman might have thought overly ordinary, or insufficiently euphonic. His writing abounds in metrically ponderous phrases such as "mechanical facilities," or prosaic ones evoking daily life or speech formations such as "eau de Cologne" and "being in the swim" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], pp. 6, 20, 29); in the 1885 edition he uses such phrases as "half-furnished," "five-course dinner," and "bread and butter" ("After Long Ages," p. 252). Edward Aveling, somewhat surprisingly for a Marxist, took issue with Carpenter's realist diction: "Unpoetical language," he argued, " . . . is nearly the unpardonable sin in a writer of poesy, and all the admiration to which the power of the author of 'Towards Democracy' moves us will not enable us to forgive him for the use of such words as 'slapping,' 'gab,' 'blob,' 'flop'" (rev. of *Towards Democracy*, p. 189). For Carpenter, however, these words were essential elements in a textual poetic economy as much as they were part of day-to-day intercourse. While the ponderously mystical often dominates Carpenter's lyric ("The medium in which the Knowledge of Yourself subsists is Equality"), it rubs shoulders with evocations of homely labor and daily life, which are thus, the poem projects, transcendentalized in their very actuality: "daily life remains, and the scrubbing of doorsteps, . . . but Joy fills it" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], pp. 41, 5). This combination of the quotidian and the transcendental, which might itself be said to operate in a late-Romantic vein, is echoed in its lyrical diction. Already in Carpenter's early manuscript poem "I Dream the Dream," a vision of transcendent human community is introduced by the very prosaic "I give myself the slip."[63] That such phrasing is not a matter of laxness is shown well by two later

[63] Edward Carpenter, "I Dream the Dream," Sheffield Archives, Carpenter/Mss/3/7, fol. 16.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

pieces expressing Carpenter's support for a radicalism that went "Back to the Land."

"The Ploughboy" starts off as conventional pastoral ("The blackbirds sing so sweetly in the morning"), but is taken over by Carpenter's ventriloquizing the laborer himself: "And when the ground is soft-like, it's good enough going, but when it's stiff it stretches your arms a bit: / Lord! it does make you sweat!"[64] The introduction of semicolloquialisms ("-like," "a bit," etc.) formally underscores the move from what might have been two-dimensional pastoral to the assertion of an embodied relationship with the land that can only exist in physical labor, formally expressed in lengthy prose rhythms that mimic daily speech patterns.[65] Similarly, in "The One Foundation," Carpenter wrote:

> . . . to-day the lands are slimed and fenced over with denials; and those who would cannot get to them, and those who own have no joy in them—except such joy as a dog may have in a fodderam.[66]

The manuscript of this poem (see Figure 3) shows that the sentence originally ended differently: "such joy as a man may have in using an engine of oppression." The published word, "fodderam," is rhythmically more effective than the unwieldy triple phrase, but there is more. The "one foundation" referred to is the land itself, and Carpenter chooses a highly specific and local word in "fodderam," which seems a Derbyshire spelling of the dialect "fodderum," either a fodder storehouse or the passage for its dispensing.[67] The word choice is clearly artistically

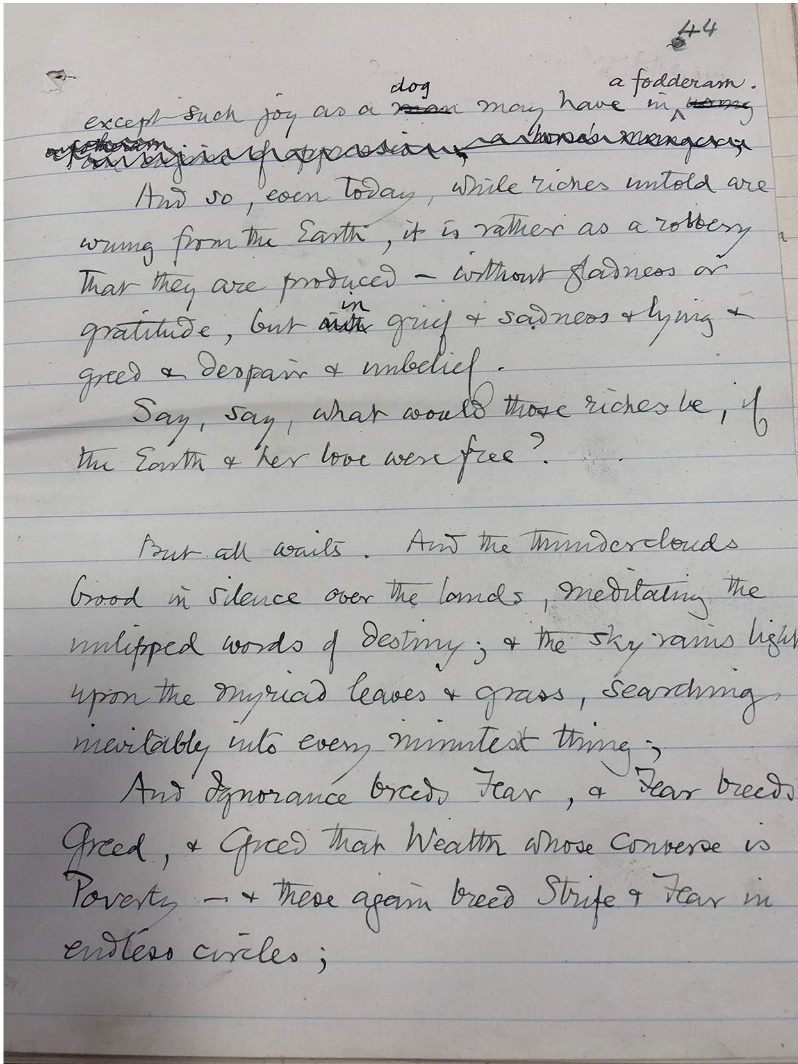
[64] Edward Carpenter, "The Ploughboy," in *Who Shall Command the Heart*, pp. 89, 90.

[65] For Carpenter's call for dialogic/dialectical "responsiveness" to the Earth and a return to its ontological "solidity" in the contemporary context of the land reform movement, see Kohlmann, *British Literature and the Life of Institutions* pp. 120, 134–35.

[66] Edward Carpenter, "The One Foundation," in *Who Shall Command the Heart*, p. 26; cf. Sheffield Archives, Carpenter/Mss/21, fol. 44.

[67] See "fodderum," in *English Dialect Dictionary Online 3.0* <http://eddonline-proj.uibk.ac.at/edd/index.jsp>; accessed 6 January 2021. Hits for this spelling in the *British Newspaper Archive* bring up mainly Derbyshire papers, such as *Derbyshire Courier*, *Derbyshire Times and Chesterfield Herald*, and *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, as well as some Nottinghamshire papers. See *British Newspaper Archive*, available online at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search/results?basicsearch=%22fodderam%22&exactsearch=false&retrievecountrycounts=false>; accessed 6 January 2021. The word was still used in this form in Morley, Derbyshire, in the 1970s: see Morley Village

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024



44

except such joy as a ~~man~~ dog may have in a fodderam. ~~some~~

And so, even today, while riches untold are wrung from the Earth, it is rather as a robbery that they are produced — without gladness or gratitude, but ~~with~~ in grief & sadness & lying & greed & despair & unbelief.

Say, say, what would those riches be, if the Earth & her love were free?

But all waits. And the thunderclouds brood in silence over the lands, meditating the unlipped words of destiny; & the sky rains light upon the myriad leaves & grass, searching inevitably into every minutest thing;

And Ignorance breeds Fear, & Fear breeds Greed, & Greed that Wealth whose converse is Poverty — & these again breed Strife & Fear in endless circles;

FIGURE 3 Edward Carpenter, manuscript version of "The One Foundation," Sheffield Archives, Carpenter/Mss/21, fol. 44.

History Committee, *A History of the Parish of Morley, Derbyshire* (1977), appendix 1, available online at <https://www.morleyparishcouncil.org.uk/appendices.html>; accessed 6 January 2021.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

conscious here, in the context of Carpenter's claim that "the land (the Demos) is the foundation-element of human life, and if the public relation to that is false, all else is of need false and inverted" ("The One Foundation," p. 24). The land, here, is identified with/as the Demos, the people, and, for a poetry to come forward on behalf of (and, implicitly, out of) both, its words should reflect both. "Fodderam" does that job expertly. The word functions well, then, as an emblem of Carpenter's (often anxious) artistic attention. By carefully choosing words and rhythms, incorporating prose and addressing the reader, implying a "biblical" weight and transcendentalizing daily life, Carpenter constructs his poetry as simultaneously organic, popular, and prophetic, and he constructs those categories as intimately related, if not identical.

In this essay I have presented a dynamic, dialogic perspective on politically hypersituated forms, seeing them as reacting to epistemic dilemmas. I have argued that Edward Carpenter's poetry can productively be approached as a formal response to aesthetic and ideological quandaries embedded in a conception of authorship as prophecy, and in relation to the actualization of that conception in a religious socialist context. Carpenter's friend Edward Lewis once asserted that *Towards Democracy*'s "ecstatic experience . . . necessitates and guarantees [its] prophecy."[68] Lewis, consciously or not, implied that the upholding of the prophetic model not only enables tone and effect, but also imposes limits in requiring a continuous infusion of affective energy. The formal affordances and limits of prophecy, its requirements of authenticity, organicity, and spontaneity, suggest an anxiety that is not so much an anxiety of influence as an anxiety, or agitation, of form itself, as formalism implies both artificiality and overproduction. In Carpenter, this anxiety of form focuses agency in extratextual reality by means of a form that both performs its self-abnegation and

[68] Edward Lewis, "The Wider Consciousness and Humour," *The Quest*, 6 (1915), 524.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

resists such cancellation through its textured and intertextual character. The result is a series of hybrid formal strategies, such as the speech-like urge of prose poetry and the intent everydayness of Carpenter's diction, that enable *Towards Democracy* to perform the prophetic model in its political context. Reading Carpenter's poetry thus, I have argued, newly discloses its attentive formal strategies to our critical appreciation.

In 1883, Carpenter promised his readers a transformation in sensibility: "the fall of a leaf through the air and the greeting of one that passes on the road shall be more to you than the wisdom of all the books ever written—and of this book" (*Towards Democracy* [1883], p. 119). This line, *Towards Democracy*'s most explicit deictic reference to the moment of reading ("this book"), undercuts the reading experience itself, assessing the extratextual realities of matter and community as more profound than even the sentence of sense. Behind this sentiment lies the Neoplatonism that holds "that books only deal with phantoms and shadows of reality," while "real education," as enjoyed by the worker, "must always lie . . . in dealing with the things themselves."[69] The textual dynamics of *Towards Democracy*'s seeming celebration of praxis over written reflection, however, are rarely straightforward. On the one hand, the deictic reference recalls us to the artificial nature of what we are reading and refers us to the extratextual. On the other hand, the wording of the sentiment itself is deeply intertextual, taking its cue from a verse in Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855): "A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books."[70] Carpenter's gestures toward the extraliterary were profoundly literary still, and could not otherwise be. Yet his lyric could not be suffered to rest comfortably in its literariness if it were not to risk its countercultural authority. The form of *Towards Democracy* constitutes the product of Carpenter's continuous working out of the linguistic inflection of social prophecy.

University of Cambridge

[69] Edward Carpenter, "Desirable Mansions" (1883), rpt. in "*England's Ideal" and Other Papers on Social Subjects*, p. 67.

[70] Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass*, p. 30.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024

ABSTRACT

Wanne Mendonck, "'I Sort Rather with Those who Do Not Read': Edward Carpenter, the Religion of Socialism, and the Prophetic Agitation of Literary Form" (pp. 56–90)

Edward Carpenter's prose poem *Towards Democracy* (1883) constructs "new forms" to frame a radical voice that helped shape the British "socialist revival" of the 1880s and 1890s. Formal questions, however, have often been skirted in relation to Carpenter, or referred to his reputation as a disciple of Walt Whitman. This article argues, by contrast, that they can be productively asked in relation to a prophetic understanding of individual political and artistic agency, Carpenter's working out of which is illustrated via his early play *Moses* (1875). Carpenter's hybrid lyrical-narrative poetry is shaped by a deeply anxious self-consciousness about its political-spiritual duties, which expresses itself in a form that attempts to cancel out its own formalism. Its prose rhythms and hyperquotidian diction strain toward an immediacy that ultimately chafes against its own textuality. Only thus can Carpenter attain to the spontaneity and "inescapability" that support an understanding of pioneering, prophetic authorial agency that is at the basis of his conceptualization of politics, evolution, and queer sexuality. His poetry desires to intervene in the extratextual but is intratextually "agitated" by anxiety about the political viability of its own (counter)cultural authority and texture. This reading opens newly expansive ways of understanding Victorian literary form in its dialogic relationship with the political, arguing for a dynamic understanding that regards even the most experimental of late-nineteenth-century socialist poetry as responding to, and resisting, dilemmas of discursive authority and intelligibility implied by an embedded authorial model.

Keywords: Edward Carpenter; Socialist Revival; Walt Whitman; prophecy; poetic form

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/ncl/article-pdf/77/1/56/718062/ncl.2022.77.1.56.pdf by guest on 20 June 2024