Is there a democratic style? If so, what are its ideal-typical qualities? Its subtypes, concrete manifestations, and lived varieties? Its national and international histories? Its sociologies and symbolic representations? What generalizations can be made about its social consequences and rhetorical potentialities? Does it have intrinsic moral worth, or are its expressions and deployments so diverse that any generalizations about its ethical status are problematic? Where are democratic styles cultivated? Where repressed? How does the style articulate with class, religion, race, and gender? Does it have a geography? What are its paradigmatic rhetorical texts, genres, and media of expression? How might rhetoricians profitably study it? And exactly where might we look for the democratic style?

These are some of the questions I think we should ask as we probe the idea of a democratic style. I obviously can’t do much in this brief essay, so I’ll attend to the last of the questions I raised—where might we look for the democratic style? Addressing the where gets obliquely at the question of how rhetoricians might profitably study the democratic style, and touches briefly
on the other issues as well, particularly its history and paradigmatic texts. I’ll start with a stab at an ideal-type description, then proceed through three particular manifestations and models—a text, a collective enactment, and a person. I’ll move forward conceptually through Robert Hariman, but my troika can be taken as an implicit critique of the high textualism of Political Style.

To start, we might profitably approach the democratic style as an ideal type, which would establish a heuristic framework for categorization and analysis. Hariman defines his own four ideal typical styles in terms of “a coherent repertoire of compositional techniques that will be active in any number of locales, applied to many different tasks, and modified through improvisation” (1995, p. 177). As a starting point for discussion, I would describe the compositional techniques of the democratic style as socially egalitarian, culturally wide-ranging, and morally weighted toward the demos or hoi polloi. In other words, the democratic style is one that makes invention contact with people from all social strata. It ranges freely among low, middling, and high cultural forms, and among the various subcultures that constitute a demos in a particular place and time. And it favorably weights and amplifies the virtues and interests of ordinary people over and against the privilege and posturing of elites of all kinds. If we bring the social, cultural, and moral elements of the democratic style together in an ideal typical formulation, then we have a framework for interpretation and normative evaluation alike.

Although general descriptions and ideal types are useful, style is something best addressed through particular manifestations and exemplars. Hariman does so by locating each of his four somewhat undemocratically named “master styles” (the realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic) in four “mirror texts” (Machiavelli’s Prince, Ryszard Kapuściński’s The Emperor, Cicero’s letters to Atticus, and Kafka’s The Castle, respectively). In doing so, he deepens established grooves of the rhetorical tradition. Rhetorical education has long taught style through model texts and practitioners, which rhetorical critics have attended to as well; Hariman enriches this vein by drawing upon contemporary social and political theory and refracting it all through a
late-twentieth-century critical-analytic perspective. In the spirit of moving through the particular, and supplementing the textualism of *Political Style*, I want to nominate three places to look for models of a democratic style, each of which potentially performs educative and analytic functions. I begin with Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, whose first three editions (1855-1860) I would put forward as mirror texts for the democratic style. The second is the American county fair, which I would designate as a spatial locus and collective expression of the democratic style, worked out through bodies and their labor instead of the literary text. The third is Ken Cmiel, whom I view as a human locus for the democratic style. Cmiel, an intellectual historian who wrote on rhetoric and democratic eloquence, reminds us that styles are inhabited by particular people, who animate them through *logoi* and gesture, with varying degrees of *ethos* and feeling. Cmiel died suddenly last February, so the final section of the paper has elements of encomia, but then so do the first two. I like Whitman, I like the fair, and I like Cmiel. I think they’re all good on many grounds, among them their status as models of the very democratic style that they embody.

First, then, *Leaves of Grass*, a rich textual place to look for the democratic style. Hariman’s mirror texts each had “a particular rhetorical form and hermeneutical function,… a catalog of the means of persuasion characteristic of a particular political culture that could be used by anyone attempting to secure advantage…[and] equips the reader to act skillfully” (1995, p. 4). Whitman’s is a mirror text in a slightly different sense, not showing how to secure advantage but how to live and create democratic *ethoi* that might fill the world and multiply. *Leaves of Grass* is both mirror and model, in that it provides a mixture of what was the case in the political culture of the poet’s time as well as a rhetorically compelling vision of what might be. The rambling prose preface to oratorical first edition of the book sets out parameters for the stylistic composition of self and text alike. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Simonson, 2003), with reference to the poetic revision of that preface, the text embraces popular and sacred cultures, was composed out of contact with a broad cross-section of people, and represents a heterogeneous array social types and cultural
phenomena. It was a democratic poetry of the crowd, made composite from individuals. “For
these and the like, their own voices! For these, space ahead!” It does some of its work through
rhetorical copiousness, long lists of particulars that the text draws together and expresses; its
“catalog of the means of persuasion” are literally catalogues. The book shows particular fondness
for working people, gives poetic voice to common occupations, and gives particular attention to
the socially despised and degraded. It addresses the reader as an equal, and as a lover. It
challenges the reader, cajoles, commands, and prophecies. It takes us seriously, each of us who
picks it up. “I enforce you to give play to yourself,” he would tell us near the end of the 1860
edition.

One can read a passage from the 1855 Preface as a kind of kind of dictum for democratic
invention of self and text alike, one that traverses ethical and poetico-rhetorical composition
alike:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches,
give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your
income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience
and indulgence toward the people, take of your hat to nothing known or unknown
or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons,
and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the
open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been
told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul,
and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in
its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your

1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 3rd ed. (1860/1961, pp. 113 and 452; from “Chants Democratic 1” and
“So Long,” respectively). The wild first edition of the book has recently been re-published, with an
Introduction by Harold Bloom (Whitman 1855/2005). For the best account of Whitman’s absorption of all
eyes and in every motion and joint of your body……..” (Whitman, [1855] 2005, pp. 11-12).

The words should be taken both literally and metaphorically, the former pointing toward a democratic self, the latter toward a democratic rhetoric.

*Leaves of Grass* manifests all the qualities of the ideal typical democratic style, as I sketched it earlier. Indeed, my reading of Whitman no doubt influenced my sense of the democratic as an aesthetic and normative category, which is one thing that mirror texts can do. But texts aren’t alone in manifesting a style, and serving as mirrors and modulators in the process. In fact, all kinds of rhetorical objects can display a democratic style, understood through the same ideal-typical qualities useful for examining a text. Institutions, architecture, music, rituals, and public spaces, to name just a few, can serve as mirror texts of a different sort, in addition to being phenomena that people generally come into contact with (as opposed to, say, Cicero’s letters, which don’t get around much anymore). In fact, such non-textual spaces might be better places to dwell as rhetorical critics, since so many more people dwell there as people. As David Riesman observed, in his own extension of ideal-typical analysis, “Social character is the product of social forms” (1950, p. 3). As an element of social character, style functions in the same way, so it pays to attend to social forms in which character is formed and expressed, for ordinary people and not just high literate elites.

I’ll propose the American county fair as a second place where democratic style is found and cultivated, this time through a collective enactment. In one I’ve been observing for a number of years now, I’ve been struck by the democratic composition of space and symbolics. People of all strata attend, though visual evidence suggests the working classes are disproportionately present. It’s created through the labor of dozens of local voluntary associations. It finds room for a number of cultural pursuits: agriculture, music, commerce, religion, politics, sports, patriotism, informal sociality, the eating of food, *eros*. It is culturally wide-ranging, at least within the universe of local life. Its thrills—demolition derby, supercharged truck pulls, country and
contemporary Christian music, and beauty pageant—are tilted toward the tastes of *hoi polloi*. As Leslie Prosterman (1995) has shown, the ritual heart of the fair—the agricultural and home economic judging contests—reward good work, good animals, and good fruits of the soil, all of which favorably weight virtues of ordinary people (even as the grandstand shows and midway draw attention toward thrill and celebrity, thus offering a wider mix). Much of the fair is underwritten by voluntarism and voluntary associations—fair boards, fraternal organizations, church groups, and the like, all of which attract a lot of ordinary people. Bruno Latour (2005) has recently written about the need for democratic assembly in our current political times. The American county fair is potentially one space where that might happen, and a structural model for new democratic *agorae* of a periodical sort.

Finally, let me suggest that the democratic style is above all embodied by people, individuals like Walt Whitman of Brooklyn in the 1840s and ‘50s, walking about as an editor-journalist and man about town, taking in the opera and other things high and low, making contact with all social strata and many cultural currents. In a less famous way, Ken Cmiel did these things too, from the occupational perch of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century academic life. This is a significant achievement, it seems to me. Self-absorbed courtesans and self-important republicans are common enough in our line of work, and realists and bureaucrats are all over universities. (Hariman opens his book with examples of each, drawn from American university life, which serves as a locus for his invention). Amiable democrats are a rarer breed, and the fact that Cmiel pulled it off so brilliantly makes him particularly noteworthy.

Cmiel was broad, generous, and, like Whitman, contained multitudes—as his friend, the cultural historian Tom Lutz, said of him at Cmiel’s memorial service. He was “a brilliant scholar whose capacious interests ranged from pop music to global human rights, but without pretense or posture,” three colleagues wrote; he was “able to move from Metternich to Eminem in a single
conversation and make sense of it all.” Lutz noted that Cmiel also had “what Fitzgerald called the ‘smoldering hatred of the peasant’ for the pretensions of socioeconomic or self-appointed or appointed elites,” but was also “as free as anyone I’ve ever met of envy, that virtually omnipresent scourge of our profession.” He was a well-known man-about-town in Iowa City, a public character who tipped waiters big, and talked with many people on sidewalks and in downtown haunts. He had a keen radar for poseurs and blowhards, though he was never unkind.

His style of academic life might be termed democratic anti-professional. Anti-professional does not mean unprofessional, which Cmiel never was. Although cynical about the academic profession, as he was about other things, he also realized early on that “his ability to see the world cynically did not lessen his ethical responsibility, it increased it,” as Lutz observed. Cmiel hated what he called “the chore of professional posturing,” which is one reason he hated academic conventions and wrote that “ignoring what the profession rewards might very well be a mark of sanity.” But he also served as chairman of his large department, and did a great deal of other service as well, because he always did his part, his grinning cynicism about bureaucracy and academic prima donnas greasing the tracks along the way.

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3 Tom Lutz, remarks at Ken Cmiel’s memorial service, Iowa City, Iowa, 11 February 2006.

4 A trait indicated in his review of Steve Fuller’s Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for our Times (2000). Cmiel generously acknowledged the strengths, but went on to call it “a frustrating book. There is Fuller’s tone. He is a sort of know-it-all, always looking for the least generous interpretation. Kuhn is never just wrong or lacking insight: he is always the ‘Cold Warrior,’ a phrase hauled out time and time again by Fuller without a really clear sense of what it means, save that it’s clearly bad” (Cmiel, 2004, p. 298).

5 “Teach classes that are meaningful to you and that engage that portion of your students who are reachable,” Cmiel advised. “Only write what you want to write. Once you have job security (which I know is a huge barrier) don’t write if you don’t want to…Explore other media than the printed word. Ignoring what the profession rewards might very well be a mark of sanity at the close of the twentieth century” (1994, p. 1173). He talks about “the chore of professional posturing” on p. 1170.

6 “He really did think that the academic world was, by and large, a collection of often dimwitted, often petty, misfitted, supernerdy scam artists, and he didn’t think he was any better than the rest of us; he also, in practice, was almost ridiculously devoted to doing it all as well as any of it could be done,” Lutz observed.
Like the life that lay behind it, Cmiel’s academic prose evinced a democratic mixing of high and low, popular and scholarly. He once told his friend, the intellectual historian Casey Blake, that he read Cicero before he sat down to write. Cmiel had some great opening lines.

“Objectivity, that dull-witted monarch who despotically ruled the discipline of history since the late nineteenth century, lies dethroned,” begins a wide-ranging review of a history of objectivity and several works of poststructuralist historiography (Cmiel, 1990, p. 170). Another remarkable review essay, of seven disparate books on nationalism, opens: “The nation-state is under the knife. Writers, activists, scholars of all kinds are pulling out their blades and, with a glint in their eyes, pursuing that bloated sot ‘the nation’ at every turn” (Cmiel, 1996, p. 184). “It’s back,” begins a third. “The revival of pragmatic social theory in the academy, a phenomenon beginning at least a decade ago, is now in full swing.” And then, after a quick survey of the revival across disciplines, “No doubt Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead are looking on from the beyond and yelping à la George Castanza: ‘We’re back in the game, baby!!’” (Cmiel, 1999, p. 156). This is not exactly the style of Political Style (which I might call Presbyterian professional).

As much as his personal and academic style, though, it is the substance of Cmiel’s work that is particularly relevant to this Rhetoric and Public Affairs forum. His first book, Democratic

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7 The books reviewed were Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity; Julia Kristeva, Nations without Nationalism; David Simpson, Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory; Tzvetan Todorov, On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought; Michael Walzer, What It Means to Be an American; Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community; and Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America.

8 The style came across in Cmiel’s academic presentation as well, as is evidenced by his recorded performance at a high-end Library of Congress symposium, Poetry and the American People: Reading, Voice, and Publication in the 19th and 20th Centuries (4 April 2000). Take a look at the 15-minute performance, which includes a good short account of the death of rhetoric between 1880 and 1930s, and shows Cmiel in classic form. Available at http://www.loc.gov/locvideo/cybercast.

9 “That might be it, in a nutshell: a fascination with the logos, which is understood in terms of its less rational nature and necessity for collective life; dedication to study and performance within an institutional setting that mixes professional expertise with representative governance; and a model of discourse that defines the text as an article of human craft yet subordinates technical study to understanding how the text operates as a mode of action capable of unleashed untapped sources of meaning and power” (Hariman, 2004, p. 531). Hariman is (manifestly) describing the Presbyterian church in which he was raised and remains active, but is also in an unacknowledged way describing the project of Political Style.
Eloquence, along with a companion piece in the Journal of American History, go a long way in excavating the rise and fall of a democratic style of popular speech in the nineteenth-century. The book takes us from the Ciceronian ideal of “the best speech of the best soul,” which was still dominant in late eighteenth-century America, through the democratization of language that took place from the 1830s through the 1860s, and after to the multi-streamed transformation of the culture from the 1880s on. In the middle period lay a moment of “democratic eloquence,” fed by King James English, romanticism, and preference for Saxon over Latinate words. As imagined by its champions, democratic rhetoric would be “popular but not crass” and be capable of bringing “together the highest sentiments with the lowest language” (Cmiel, 1990, p. 112). One of its exemplars was Abraham Lincoln, who channeled the humbler style of the Christian tradition into a “democratic sublime” that reached its peak in his Civil War speeches (pp. 116-120). The other was Walt Whitman, whose 1850s language experiments made poetry of the people, while he “dreamt of an unbound American language” and urged his fellow citizens “to revel in the plebeian, the sensual, the crude” (Cmiel, 1992, p. 914). Whitman loved words of barrooms and boatsmen, Cmiel observed, and of all other places in the culture. He imagined a language and style that might incorporate all the cross-currents of the country, and much of the world beyond. It was the compositional palate for a democratic eloquence that was both national and cosmopolitan at the same time (pp. 933-34).

Cmiel connects us back to Whitman, but he was no big fan of fairs. He did have some experience working at a carnival as a teenager, about which he told a couple hilarious stories. He was an urban guy, and loved Chicago and New York and Budapest, among many other cities. He was a man of the urban crowd, more than the rural. He loved cities for all kinds of reasons, but one of them, I think, was for the way they brought all kinds of people together, and set things abuzz, creating a lot of excitement and places he liked to hang out. He had long lunches with friends, and spent afternoons talking and walking, looking at buildings, and talking some more. If I brought up fairs to him as democratically styled places, he would have agreed, I think, perhaps
made a crack about me investing in them as compensation for my own spiritual homelessness, and countered that good cities are greater places with far more democratic possibility and structure. And he would’ve been right.

Democratic styles compose themselves in many kinds of places, as I’ve tried to indicate in this essay. After offering an ideal-typical characterization, I suggested that we look for its mirror texts, its social enactments and spaces, and its individual human embodiments. Lest I be accused of naïveté in offering an encomium to the democratic style, let me end by saying that I am aware of distortions and darkness associated with democratic styles in American life. George W. Bush’s faux populist style helped him defeat both Al Gore and John Kerry, and lead us in the most undemocratic of directions. As a totality, the American television system in its cable and satellite formations are democratically styled in their collective broadcast output, but it is much less clear that they are democratic in their industrial inputs and social and political outputs. A great swath of American campaign rhetoric shows democratic stylings, but the great bulk of national and state legislative politics is driven by money and elites. Democratic style can be socially dysfunctional, and movements for justice need to supplement it with realist, bureaucratic, courtly, and republican styles as well. That said, we need to attend to positive models of democratic style (cf. Gitlin, 2006). They provide resources for moral orientation, sociological understanding, and rhetorical invention. They are models in a classic sense, worth dwelling with, and drawing characters from.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^\text{10}\) Thanks to Adriane Stewart, for her insightful read and suggestions on this paper.
Works Cited


