

frank lloyd wright

walt whitman

the expatriate's dream of home

peter i. abernethy

In September, 1909, Frank Lloyd Wright left his family and successful architectural practice, and, with another man's wife, went to Europe for what he termed a year "in exile." His flight was the result of a much deeper spiritual crisis than these surface details indicate, however. Although Wright no doubt felt stifled by the limitations of his family situation¹ and successful career, the ultimate cause of his exodus appears to have been a growing disillusionment with American values and American culture. In his self-imposed year of "exile," he became a soldier in what Malcolm Cowley has called the "war of liberation" from the "genteel tradition," a tradition within which he had existed and profited,² regardless of his disenchantment. While the expatriate's usual sequence of material success, spiritual disillusionment and flight looks forward to the pattern of the Lost Generation, Wright's rationalization of his exodus and the values he later placed on it in his *Autobiography* look back to the individualism that Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau had urged. As Vincent Scully has said, Wright's "'time, his day, his age' was that of late nineteenth-century America."³ Unlike the mass-migrations of the disillusioned after the First World War, Wright's act was a singular romantic search for freedom, a spiritual quest he justified in terms similar to those described in one of his favorite poems, Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." "Forever alive, forever forward" was the road's message, and—probably in 1909 and certainly in retrospect—Wright took it to heart. After the spiritual crisis of his expatriate year, he increasingly thought of his life in terms of the great romantic adventure outlined in Whitman's poem: Frank Lloyd Wright stayed on the open road.

By 1909, the preparation for his exodus was complete. Wright was exhausted—spiritually drained by his struggle to construct and defend

his concept of "An American Architecture." As shown by his most recent biographer, Robert Twombly, the years antecedent to Wright's expatriate interlude were, materially and creatively, perhaps the most productive in his life. He had completed many buildings and, for the most part, had had a free hand in their design and construction. In Twombly's words, "by no stretch of the imagination was Wright's work abused or rejected. What bothered him most . . . was precisely the opposite: uncritical acceptance and thoughtless praise."⁴ This attitude appears rather clearly in a lecture on the "Ethics of Ornament" given in January, 1909, seven months before his departure.

The environment reflects unerringly the society. If the environment is stupid and ugly, or borrowed and false, one may assume that the substratum of its society is the same. . . . He who meddles with the aesthetic owes a duty to others as well as to himself. This is true not only where the result is to stand conspicuous before the public eye but also in regard to the personal belongings of the individual. . . . We are living today encrusted with dead things, forms from which the soul is gone, and we are devoted to them, trying to get joy out of them, trying to believe them still potent.⁵

Wright's desire was for America to abandon its necrophilic worship of such "dead things," such "forms from which the soul is gone," for the truly American architecture which would be displayed in his Wasmuth portfolio of 1910. He desired more than recognition of the kind granted by Harriet Monroe and other well meaning critics;⁶ he desired to be understood.

In what way did Wright desire to be understood? For what America was he building? Although there were, of course, many shaping influences on Wright's aesthetic, the language of his philosophy of American art and culture was to a degree established by the reading and discussion of Walt Whitman's poetry begun in Louis Sullivan's office where, in 1888, at the age of twenty-one, he went to become "a pencil in the master's hand."⁷ Although he had read American literature—Emerson and Thoreau among others⁸—it was apparently Whitman's poetry as expounded by Sullivan that stated the American experience most powerfully for him. In *An Autobiography*, Wright describes how Sullivan, in impassioned moments, would read to him from the copy of *Leaves of Grass* kept in the drafting room. Although Sullivan's own poetry was somewhat naive and sentimental, he seems to have presented Whitman's poetry to the young and impressionable Wright in a forceful, thought-provoking fashion—as words to live by, not merely as words on a page.⁹ Both Sullivan and Wright, romantics "alone against the world" in the last years of the nineteenth century, seem to have found in *Leaves of Grass* a triumphant rationale for their individualism. Whitman's romantic depiction of the democratic individual in the open landscape of the new world stayed

with Wright to the end of his life, and was certainly on his mind when he came to examine his expatriate year in later works.

Wright's early interest in Whitman as a "corrective" for errant tendencies in American art and society is further evidenced by those who knew him in the years before his exodus. His son, John Lloyd Wright, for instance, observed that "David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emerson and Henry Van Dyke were Papa's friends, too. They never flattered him, but I think he liked them best of all. He spent hours printing selections from their writings on tracing cloth. He would blue-print them and pass them out to his friends. I have often wondered if his inspiration for Broadacre City did not come from Walt Whitman's 'Song of the Broad Axe.'"¹⁰ Such use of block quotations from Whitman as inspirational mottos continued through Wright's career as indicated by the selection from "Song of the Universal" placed in gold letters in a red concrete slab at the entrance to Taliesin West, or the personalized quotations from *Leaves of Grass* used in the 1938 *Architectural Forum* issue which he designed and wrote. He set the quotations in the *Forum* in boldface type and without comment—as if the words and the name, Walt Whitman, should speak to America for themselves.

A continuing reminder for Wright, in the years before his exodus, of Walt Whitman as the poet of the Democratic Individual must have been those people associated with the Arts and Crafts milieu in Chicago. For instance, Oscar Lovell Triggs, the biographer and critic of Whitman, had founded the Industrial Art League there in 1899. Wright's membership in the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society dates from 1898, and the Arts and Crafts influence on his 1901 Hull-House lecture on "The Art and Craft of the Machine," used extensively in his preface to the Wasmuth portfolio, has been well documented.¹¹ Edward Carpenter, the English poet, craftsman and author of *Days with Walt Whitman*, was also well known in Chicago Arts and Crafts circles.¹² For Wright, however, the most influential reader of Whitman among his Arts and Crafts acquaintances was C. R. Ashbee.

Frank Lloyd Wright first met Charles Robert Ashbee in Chicago in 1900, and their friendship continued, through a "gentlemen's disagreement" in 1910, until Ashbee's death in 1942. Their disagreement during Wright's visit to England apparently centered on an issue—Wright's "individualism"—that Ashbee later set forth in his introductory essay to *Frank Lloyd Wright: Ausgeführte Bauten* (1911) through an analogy to Whitman. (In a journal entry for September 26, 1910, Ashbee records Wright as apologizing for being intemperate, saying: "I am sorry I exhibited my 'individualism' so strenuously."¹³ Later, Ashbee was to refer to Wright as that "'always offensively fascinating' man."¹⁴) Ashbee, possibly influenced by their disagreement, sees in both Wright's and Whitman's individualism a willfulness—the dark side of the "romantic" temperament—which, although giving strength, could also produce wretched

excesses which might mar their works. Ashbee's perceptive if somewhat equivocal words on the subject, from *Ausgeführte Bauten*, are worth considering for their tone as well as their proximity to Wright's period of "exile."

One may pardon in a strong man a display of individualism that one cannot forgive in a weaker. . . . I think this individualism, as seen in Frank Lloyd Wright's work, strong and sound to the core; there is in it a national ideal, but I do not always like it. It gives me at times the same feeling of irritation which Walt Whitman gives me, when, after some supreme passage at which one's whole heart goes out, the poet tumbles over some trifle badly handled, as when, for instance, in that subliment [sic] of his songs, "Come, I will make the continent indissoluble," he ends up with the words "For you, Oh Democracy, MA FEMME!" He forgets that we are of the same flesh and blood, and have a sense of humour; that this trivial note tumbles us from the sublime, into detail that is badly done. I do not mean to insinuate by this example that Frank Lloyd Wright's work has inconsistency of this nature; the analogy cannot of course be pressed, and the deduction applies only to my own personal feeling regarding the sometimes undigested trivialities I find. I hold moreover that his work is [sic—in?] architecture, while it merits the comparison, in greatness and unity, with Whitman's work in literature, is quite strong enough to stand a corresponding criticism of its limitations or its faults.¹⁵

Ashbee's analogy stresses the sometimes uncontrolled individualism which Wright came to call "Honest Arrogance"—and which he, himself, with growing frequency, came to justify through Whitman's words.

One of Wright's favorite poems for such justification was "Song of the Open Road." He cited it frequently throughout his career—several times, for instance, in the manifesto-like January, 1938, issue of the *Architectural Forum* that he designed. Significantly, the section of *An Autobiography* immediately preceding his description of his period "in exile" is titled "The Closed Road." In looking back on the causes of his flight, Wright seems to have felt that Whitman's vision of the free, creative individual in an open, expanding, frontier America was fading for him. Creatively, he had come to a dead end before his year in Europe. In his words, the "absorbing, consuming phase of my experience as an architect ended about 1909. I had almost reached my fortieth year.¹⁶ Weary, I was losing grip on my work and even my interest in it."¹⁷ In the second paragraph of the "Closed Road" section, as a contrast to the "dead wall" blocking the path, beyond which he "could see no way out," a romantic picture of his attempt to make his situation bearable is evoked in the description of him riding his horse, Kano, "over the prairies north of Oak Park, sometimes letting him run wild as he loved to do, sometimes reining him in and reading from a book usually carried in my pocket, for I've al-

ways loved to read out-of-doors—especially Whitman.”¹⁸ This use of Walt Whitman as a force to oppose his closed, entropic existence reappears in the *Autobiography* in a later period of frustration for Wright, the 1930s: “WALT WHITMAN! Dear old Walt, we need you more than ever: your salt and savor in this dish of humble-pie we are called to eat in shame and defeat, win or lose! Your robust soul might save us even now.

“We have taken the wrong way. We must wait for you on a closed road.”¹⁹

In 1909, Hans Wasmuth’s offer to prepare a portfolio of his work provided the opportunity Wright needed to gain a fresh perspective on an America that had gone stale and flat for him. Wright “had grown bitter,”²⁰ Ashbee observed when visiting Chicago in 1908, and in 1909, through Wasmuth’s offer, he began planning the termination of the Oak Park phase of his career. H. Allen Brooks states that “Wright’s departure for Europe in the autumn of 1909 was neither so sudden nor so frantic as most accounts would lead us to believe. Many weeks prior to leaving he began making plans to go.”²¹ What exact course his life would take after his European exile was apparently unclear, however.

Regardless of his preparations, there are indications that the actual leave-taking was itself essentially an unplanned act, something gotten up on the spur of the moment. It was an escape of the usual American sort except that Wright went East instead of West. Although he seems to have understood pretty clearly the nature of the restraints holding him to the genteel world of Oak Park, he was less than certain where the open road would lead. Once the escape from his restraints had been accomplished, he needed the full year “in exile” to dedicate himself to his new course of action. Essentially, this course was to keep to Whitman’s open road, a remarkable decision considering the social orientation of his profession, architecture. In a quotation from “Song of the Open Road” in the 1938 *Architectural Forum*, Wright states this position almost as a credo: “Going where I list, my own master, total absolute, listening to others, considering well what they say, pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating, gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.”²²

Wright’s physical departure was itself apparently cast in an American mode of travel. Always one of the first to see the possibilities in a new invention, he made his “getaway” in an automobile. His son, John Lloyd Wright, describes the event with a rather astonishing clarity in his book, *My Father Who is on Earth*. “I think this car [a Stoddard Dayton sport roadster] had something to do with Papa’s leaving home. I know it added new values to his life. . . . Papa was a handsome figure in the driver’s seat with linen duster, goggles and his wavy hair dancing in the breeze. One night he took his fair companion riding and kept right on going.”²³

This was indeed what Wright did; with instincts as sure as the hero of an American novel, he “kept right on going.” If the closed road were to

open again, he had to take the message of “Song of the Open Road” to heart. The theme of the poem—to keep on the move—parallels Wright’s retrospective statement of his position in *An Autobiography*, although there are echoes of *Walden* in it also. “I went out into the unknown to test faith in freedom. Test my faith in life as I had already proved faith in my work. I faced the hazards of change and objective ruin inevitably involved with our society in every inner struggle for freedom. I have since learned that objective struggle for inner freedom is a far deeper and more serious matter never finished on this earth. Notwithstanding or withstanding, all rebellion went its way in exile.”²⁴

The European “exile” itself, however, was similar to the experience of most temporary expatriates. In *An Autobiography*, he describes Europe—Florence in particular—almost as the Lost Generation expatriates did ten years later. There was “the incomparable little dinner: the perfect roast fowl, mellow wine, the caramel custard—beyond all roasts or wine or caramels ever made.” There was the experience of “walking in the high-walled garden that lay alongside the cottage in the Florentine sun or in the little garden by the pool arbored under climbing masses of yellow roses.”²⁵

One thinks of another, later, Oak Park expatriate, Ernest Hemingway, enjoying the white wine and oysters of Paris.

For Frank Lloyd Wright it could not last. If this section of *An Autobiography* reads like a travelogue, it is because that is what it is. Wright could be no permanent expatriate. In Europe he was an American Antaeus. To regain his power he had to return to the soil of the American Midwest and again take up the practice of Architecture. The finished landscape of Europe—for all its “plastic beauty, beauty in buildings, beauty in sculpture, beauty in paintings”—was no substitute for the raw, unformed beauty latent in the American landscape. This view stands out clearly in Wright’s long preface²⁶ to the publication—the Wasmuth portfolio of his early work—which was a product of this experience.

The preface begins with a reference to a lecture entitled “The Art and Craft of the Machine” that Wright had delivered in 1901 to the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society at Jane Addams’ Hull-House. In this lecture he had stressed, among other things, his negative view of the Renaissance and Renaissance architecture as essentially derivative and unoriginal—points he repeats in the 1910 preface, although he apparently no longer believed them without qualifications.²⁷ It appears that he went to Europe not to look and learn but to restate his view of American architecture which, by his forty-second year, had begun to harden into dogma. He went to Italy with a preconceived notion of what he would find there—and he found it. Thus, as his *Autobiography* indicates, he was less expatriate than tourist.

Toward the middle of the preface, however, Wright goes beyond the 1901 lecture and approaches the real problem which had caused his exodus and which justifies the title of the preface: “The Sovereignty of

the Individual.” Here his expatriate message becomes a clear Whitmanian plea: avoid the traditional and derivative, seek inspiration in experience, build organically conceived, unified works of art based on “Natural laws”—stay on the open road. Although there is no direct mention of Whitman, the poet’s message as it appears in “Song of the Open Road” or, in particular, in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”—Whitman’s versification of the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* and one of Wright’s favorite sources of ideas about America—appears throughout the later part of the essay.

This is particularly true where Wright attempts to reconcile his position as an artist of the romantic, arrogantly individualistic nineteenth-century pattern with the larger egalitarian American pattern of the “Democratic Ideal”—to reconcile what Vincent Scully has called Wright’s “tragic need . . . to keep the romantic myth of the artist as isolated creator and superman alive in himself”²⁸ with, in Wright’s words, “the democratic spirit [in which America’s] institutions are (professedly) conceived.”²⁹ He effects this resolution in essentially Whitmanian terms although his “honest arrogance” over “hypocritical humility” sounds at times more like Nietzsche than the Good Gray Poet.

Echoing Whitman’s sentiments about the common man, Wright allows that “the people themselves are part and parcel helpful in producing the organic thing. They can comprehend and make it theirs.”³⁰ And further: “In all matters of Fine Art the individual feeling of the creative artist can give but the color of his own likes and dislikes—his own soul—to anything he shapes. His individuality (above personality) he gives—truly—but this will not prevent the building he designs from being characteristic of those it was built to serve.”³¹ Thus the “Sovereignty of the Individual” must be maintained, be he architect or client. But how to deal with the superior knowledge of the artist, especially if the client lacks a feeling for aesthetics? Again, Wright’s answer is essentially Whitman’s. Possessing something similar to Coleridge’s Secondary Imagination, Whitman’s “Greatest Poet” in the 1855 Preface has the same knowledge as the common man—only raised to a higher degree. The poet epitomizes the common experience of all Americans. As Whitman versifies this in section 10 of “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”:

Of these States the poet is the equable man, . . .
He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the key,
He is the equalizer of his age and land.

Wright’s statement is similar. The building “is made to serve [the clients’] ends in their own way but with a skill far greater than their own. In so far as these client-conditions are peculiar in themselves, or real sympathy exists between them and their architect—as it should—the building will be their building no less than their architect’s: theirs more truly than though in ignorant selfhood they had stupidly sought to use means they

had never conquered to an end imperfectly foreseen. The Architect, then, is their technique and interpreter.”³²

It is at this point that Wright, forced by his profession and social situation to take a harder line, differs from the less engaged Whitman. Where Whitman sees the common man as possessing latent knowledge which the poet can bring to light but never essentially improve upon, Wright sees the common man as one who in most cases must be taught. The organic architect, says Wright, will give his client “something to grow to; some finer thing in which he may be a little ill at ease at the outset.”³³ By 1914, Wright could state this position in what was to be its final permutation:

The “Democracy” of the man in the American street is no more than the Gospel of Mediocrity. When it is understood that a great Democracy is the highest form of Aristocracy conceivable, not of birth or place or wealth, but of those qualities that give distinction to the man as man, and that as a social state it must be characterized by the honesty and responsibility of the absolute individualist as the unit of its structure, then only can we have an Art worthy of the name.³⁴

Thus the didactic Father eventually replaced Whitman’s more Brotherly companion-teacher, and the harder edge of “honest arrogance” to some degree pushed aside Whitman’s poet-as-equable-man, bringing Wright closer to Ashbee’s “always offensively fascinating man.” Although Wright did come to use the word *Aristocracy*, the divergence of his position from that of Whitman was basically one of degree and not of kind. Since all men are potentially equal, the reliance of the American artist on experience over tradition must remain the same. “Poetry (it is always Prophecy),” said Wright,³⁵ believing that all artists are essentially poets—creators, not copiers.

The new life style he deliberately adopted upon his return shows his expatriate experience to have been a lasting one. In October, 1910, he did not resume his marginal status in the genteel tradition of Oak Park. Instead, he moved from the city into the country near Spring Green, Wisconsin, built Taliesin, and permanently adopted an unconventional way of life—one designed to retain the “Sovereignty of the Individual.” Of Taliesin he said in *An Autobiography*, “I turned to this hill in the Valley as my Grandfather before me had turned to America—as a hope and haven.” There, he said, echoing Thoreau as much as Whitman, “I went to live if I could an unconventional life.”³⁶

Texas Tech University

footnotes

1. For example, see Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., “Crisis and Creativity: Frank Lloyd Wright, 1904-1914,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 25 (1966), 292-296.

2. See Leonard K. Eaton’s careful study of Wright’s clients during the formative years in

- Oak Park: *Two Chicago Architects and Their Clients: Frank Lloyd Wright and Howard Van Doren Shaw* (Cambridge, 1969). "In sum," says Eaton, "it would be hard to find a community which was a better example of the Midwestern Victorian era of the nineties." (13)
3. Vincent Scully, Jr., *Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, 1960), 11.
 4. Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Interpretive Biography* (New York, 1973), 94. Twombly's carefully researched biography does not attempt to deal systematically with the literary influences on Wright's thought. Norris Kelly Smith, *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Study in Architectural Content* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), 98, who generally agrees with Twombly's view of Wright's disillusionment in a time of plenty, does mention Whitman and Thoreau as spiritual mentors for Wright, although Vincent Scully's study (above) still seems the most sensitive treatment of the literary aspects of Wright's career.
 5. Reprinted in the *Prairie School Review*, 4:1 (1967), 16.
 6. See Twombly's account of Wright's reply to Miss Monroe's review of his 1907 exhibition at the Art Institute, for instance (*Frank Lloyd Wright*, 94-96).
 7. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1943), 103.
 8. Although Transcendentalism was part of his Massachusetts heritage, Wright probably was introduced to *Leaves of Grass* by the more "libertine" Sullivan. Whitman was apparently never mentioned at home, and Thoreau, another of Wright's often quoted favorites, was somewhat suspect. As Wright observes in *An Autobiography*: "That sentimental group at Concord: Whittier, Lowell, Longfellow, yes, and Emerson, too. Thoreau? Well, Thoreau seemed to them too smart. He made them uncomfortable." (17) Other sources, such as Maginel Wright Barney's *The Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses*, reinforces this opinion.
 9. As Sherman Paul has amply documented in *Louis Sullivan: An Architect in American Thought*, Whitman's influence on Sullivan was pervasive and deep. Sullivan was so taken by Whitman's poetry, for instance, that he sent the aging poet a poem for criticism (although Whitman neglected to respond).
 10. John Lloyd Wright, *My Father Who is on Earth* (New York, 1946), 33.
 11. See H. Allen Brooks, "Chicago Architecture: Its Debt to the Arts and Crafts," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 30 (1971), 313, 315.
 12. See Robert W. Winter, "American Sheaves for 'C. R. A.' and Janet Ashbee," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 30 (1971), 319.
 13. Cited in: Alan Crawford, "Ten Letters from Frank Lloyd Wright to Charles Robert Ashbee," *Architectural History*, 13 (1970), 69.
 14. Winter, 318.
 15. "Frank Lloyd Wright: A Study and an Appreciation by C. R. Ashbee," in *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Early Work*, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., ed. (New York, 1968), 6-7.
 16. Wright was actually approaching forty-two. See: Thomas S. Hines, Jr., "Frank Lloyd Wright—The Madison Years: Records versus Recollections," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 24 (1967), 227.
 17. *An Autobiography*, 162.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. *Ibid.*, 415.
 20. Winter, 231.
 21. H. Allen Brooks, "Frank Lloyd Wright and the Wasmuth Drawings," *Art Bulletin*, 48 (1966), 199.
 22. *Architectural Forum* (January, 1938), 37.
 23. John Lloyd Wright, 51-52.
 24. *An Autobiography*, 164.
 25. *Ibid.*, 165.
 26. Frank Lloyd Wright, "The Sovereignty of the Individual," preface to *Ausgeführte Bauten Und Entwürfe* (Berlin, 1910), as reprinted in: Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., and Ben Raeburn, eds., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings* (New York, 1960).
 27. Crawford, 67. In a letter to Ashbee dated July 8, 1910, Wright said he had "been surprised to find that all European culture in the fine arts worth considering except the Gothic of the Middle ages is but a lesser light lit from these Italian flames of the 12th 13th 14th & 15th centuries—an afterglow in the 16th."
 28. Scully, 13.
 29. "The Sovereignty of the Individual," 92.
 30. *Ibid.*, 96.
 31. *Ibid.*, 96-97.
 32. *Ibid.*, 97.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. "In the Cause of Architecture," *Architectural Record* (May, 1914), 412.
 35. "The Sovereignty of the Individual," 88.
 36. *An Autobiography*, 167-168.