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INSTRUCTING THE INDIVIDUAL IN DEMOCRACY IN WALT WHITMAN'S *LEAVES OF GRASS***

Abstract

The paper examines the democracy motif in Walt Whitman's lauded collection of poetry *Leaves of Grass*. After an introduction which asserts Whitman as a writer of democracy, the paper shifts towards the relationship between the individual and democracy. The poet's stance is that the individual is the building block of American democracy. Whitman's own democratic views expressed in his poetry serve as guidance to his fellow countrymen on how to develop their democratic potential to the fullest. The conclusion dwells on the topicality of such a democratic concept since America is in need of it now just as ever.

Key words: Walt Whitman, democracy, *Leaves of Grass*, individual, America, poetry

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"I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy, / by God!"
Walt Whitman, from "The Song of Myself"

1. Introduction

Walt Whitman's (1819 – 1892) greatest work was by far his collection of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass*. First published anonymously in 1855, it contained 12 unnamed poems preceded by a preface. Over the following half a century it would be printed and edited several times, amounting to the ultimate, "Death-bed Edition" of 1892, containing nearly 400 poems (Oliver 2004: 105).

The reinstatement of democratic ideals was one of the main reasons behind Whitman's poetry:

Anticipation lay in his hope that the nation, by seeing both its best and its worst features reflected in the improving mirror of his poetry, would reverse its current downward course and discover new possibilities for inspiration and togetherness (Reynolds 1995: 111).

The work was by no means exclusively turned to the past, but possessed a vein of futurity since the gap between the individual and the state was ever widening and the events that would occur were becoming more and more unpredictable, which perturbed Whitman. The very title of the collection indicated the contradiction the poet had not only set down on paper but lived by his entire life. In the compound, the leaves are juxtaposed to the grass in its entirety, effectively forming an order or hierarchy in which leaves are subordinated to the grass. However, the opposite is true as well, as the grass could not exist sans its comprising members, i.e. the leaves, which indicates that it too is in a subordinate position. The metaphor at work, which the poet ingeniously creates, refers quite obviously to the humankind and the issue of government, especially the American one.

"The grass represents the people, the mass, but since it is characteristic of grass not only to grow in turfs (nations) but also in individual leaves (one person), Whitman points out that uniqueness, as a whole has its place in this great world and the Universe" (Lončar-Vujnović 2007: 226). It is interesting to notice that Whitman did not opt for the proper word "blades," but chose to comprise his grass of leaves (Karbiener 2004: 10),

manifesting outwardly in the very title that he had faith in humankind and his Americans. Blades are sharp, whereas leaves are not as rigid and can adjust more easily, i.e. progress and transform themselves, creating the perfect breeding ground for democracy.

It cannot be argued that the centerpiece of Whitman's artistic endeavors was the individual, but the title of his *magnum opus* reveals a troublesome relationship between the state and its subjects. By and large, "the vision of democracy Whitman advances in *Leaves of Grass* is an explicitly constructed vision" (Mack 2002: 22). In Whitman's own words from the 1872 "Preface" the collection "is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite *democratic individual*, male or female" (1982: 1004). Summarized in one word, it is a "yawp" intended for Americans whose characteristic democracy was becoming ever dormant, and susceptible to erroneous paths it could take. But it is not a concept without a future, of which Whitman wishes to remind his countrymen in *Democratic Vistas*, an essay written after the Civil War:

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue (1982: 960).

He goes on to conclude that "it is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted" (Ibid.). Whitman had become a crucial factor of this historic enactment, not only through his poetry, but through his entire personage of a celebrated national poet for "celebrity had evolved into more than a quality granted by the public; it was also a distinct category of democratic identity" (Blake 2006: 29). For Karbiener Whitman is America, as "he represents the best that America can be—the promise of the new democracy" (2004: 7).

2. Democratic literacy

Nationality, literature and democracy all share the same building block: the individual. Whitman's famous opening lines of "The Song of Myself," "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," claim that very same individual as the object, as well as the subject, of the poet's literary proclamation. By

celebrating himself, he celebrates every “Self” in existence by ordering them to introspect: “You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (Whitman 1982: 14). Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967), the author of the famous poem “I, Too Sing America,” wrote of Whitman’s potent first person exclamation:

One of the greatest “I” poets of all time, Whitman’s “I” is not the “I” of the introspective versifiers who wrote always and only about themselves. Rather it is the cosmic “I” of all peoples who seek freedom, decency, and dignity, friendship and equality between individuals and races all over the world.¹

One of the best confirmations of Hughes description is Whitman’s address “To a Common Prostitute.” By conversing through the medium of poetry to this woman, “who was considered the lowest of the low in society” (Karbiener 2004: 30), he clearly stipulates with whom he wants to chat, effectively immersing them in his concept of democracy:

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to
rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.
(Whitman 1982: 512).

The belonging to Nature is the only ticket to the poet’s world of democracy as he was the bard of and for every person:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with the stuff
That is fine,
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same
and the largest the same ... (Whitman 1982: 203).

These opening lines of part 16 of the “Song of Myself” confirm the poet’s universal and utterly contradictory vision of America, in which total oppositions reside alongside one another.

¹ Langston Hughes, “The ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman,” (qtd. in *Walt Whitman: The Measure of his Song* 97).

This intended cultivation of the individual is the cultivation of his or her soul. It was a well-known fact since Antiquity that one's soul is enriched by literature, but Whitman argues that "even this democracy of which we make so much, unerringly feeds the highest mind, the soul" (Whitman 1982: 986). Democracy is an instrument for schooling of the individual, and the poets are the teachers which convey their message in a radically new pedagogy of oneness:

The message of great poets to each man woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What you enjoy we may enjoy (Whitman 1982: 14).

The "great poet" instructs Man not of God's ways, but of his own. For Man is the "commonplace" Whitman sings of in the eponymous poem:

The commonplace I sing; ...
The open air I sing, freedom, toleration,
(Take here the mainest lesson – less from books – less from
the schools,)
The common day and night – the common earth and waters,
Your farm – your work, trade, occupation,
The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all
(Whitman 1982: 651).

The closing couplet is important because it sheds light on the very foundation of democracy. People who are the salt of the earth are glorified as pillars of any democratic system and their mundane chores provide the prolongation of any such system. Whitman's "democracy has to work from the bottom up, not hierarchically from the top down" (Fletcher 2004: 122), which was the direction power circulated in bloodstream of humanity during the previous centuries. In Whitman's view, America was a "nation of common people, all of whom are more important individually and collectively than all the politicians who run the country" (Oliver 2004: 156).

The entire poem is, like the bulk of Whitman's poetry, an observation which is inherently in the present tense. The "present" period did not feature prominently in the literature of the 19th century, an observation

which apparently held ground even in the first decades of the 20th century. D.H. Lawrence wrote on the topic in 1920:²

“One realm we have never conquered: the pure present. One great mystery of time is *terra incognita* to us: the instant. The most superb mystery we have hardly recognized: the immediate, instant self. The quick of all time is the instant. The quick of all the universe, of all creation, is the incarnate, carnal self. Poetry gave us the clue: free verse: Whitman. Now we know” (qtd. in Bloom 2008: 128).

Democracy too “necessarily privileges the here and now, just as time, as we experience it, moves us progressively forward” (Mack 2002: 58). Its reach, the politically suitable *carpe diem* trait set aside, extends by default into the future acting as a stark contrast to hereditary forms of government which seek legitimacy in the past. In that sense, Whitman’s poetry can be regarded, along with his description of contemporary American society, as being projected into the future, futuristic even, as a renowned Serbian literary critic from the beginning of the 20th century, Todor Manojlović, noticed:

He introduced into poetry motifs, terms, and objects from modern life which was up until that period regarded in poetry, simply as “unpoetic” and “impossible” – he started celebrating by means of poetry (precursor to Futurism!) technical progress, factories, machines, steamboats, trains – he had in a similar manner the means of expressing these new terms – his tongue – cast, poured himself from the elements which no other contemporary poet would have even mentioned: from life, rough and powerful dialects of the street, suburbs, newspapers and farms (1998: 150).

Whitman truly was “the bard of the future,” as Henry Miller described him, unlike his contemporaries, namely Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 – 1882), who drew his poetic material from the past. That past is not a very far away one, as in the poem “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” which takes place at the onset of the American Revolution in 1775, but still requires the reader to recollect or be in a reminiscent mood while reading the lines.

However, democracy is such an institution of the soul that calls for an equilibrium, rather than promoting extremities. Ivo Andrić wrote that:

² Lawrence, D. H. (1920). Poetry of the Present. Intro. to *American edition of New Poems*.

Whitman perceived the task of his democracy – the democracy of America and the world – in generating a grand and a free personality out of every individual, but at the same time generating a powerful sense of solidarity in that individual (1977: 162).

Thomas Jefferson once wrote on the issue of the rigidity of constitutions that dead had no rights, referring to the lawmakers (Mack 2002: 59).

In his famous preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote a nearly imbecilic assertion of reality: “What is past is past” (Whitman 1982: 9). Behind this short sentence, whose plainness renders it perfect for an advertizing slogan, lurks a radical stance Whitman takes towards the legacy of the past. He does not denounce it entirely, but rather calls for its re-evaluation, just as his country was a massive test for the entire humankind up until the 18th century. He couldn’t do away with his predecessors because he was aware that he too would over time become one of them. He decided to instruct the reader of the past, depriving it of its own voice, but expecting in return that the free man or woman who reads his lines draw the final conclusion, thus grandiosely asserting the democratic self and fulfilling the promise of America, all through the means of poetry:

You shall no longer take thing at second or third hand, nor
 look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the
 spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
 from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self
(Whitman 1982: 189-190).

Walt Whitman was the Hermes of American democracy, readily falling in the battle for the preservation of the universal ideals his country was founded on. He was in his opinion (“nor take things from me”) only a minor casualty in the epic struggle in which every American carried upon himself the enormous weight of freedom of thought (“filter them from your self”). Whitman’s repetitive “I” retransfers the burden of freedom to the “you” of America, evoking in its citizens the initial concept of democracy that had spawned the United States of America. In the first edition of *Leaves*

of *Grass*, the famous “Song of Myself”³ opened with an “I” and ended with a “you,” which was not followed by a period, indicating that America’s democracy was still to a large extent a *tabula rasa*.

Before the Revolution, the Continent was in need of a republic of equal citizens without hereditary titles, but in the 19th century that very need took a different shape, embodied in the New Yorker’s famous cry: “... the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets ...” (Whitman 1982: 8). Whitman was to become one of these poets, but his life work would fall short to his initial expectations.

3. Conclusion

American democracy today applies to a much greater number of people than it did in the second half of the 19th century when Whitman lived. Thus, its task of uniting all Americans seems more arduous than ever. Whitman’s poetry and its teaching are great instructors on how to overcome the multitude by promoting the individual. His own democracy in personal, intimate even, and present in every task he undertakes, whether intellectual or physical. Individual’s democracy acts as a cell which merges with other such cells to build the organism of American democracy. The poet’s claim is that if we ensure that each such cell remains healthy the entire organism would too. The only way a democracy can be successful on the national scale is by succeeding inside the respective members of that nation. In *Leaves of Grass* there exists a shift of democracy, a gift one could say, that the poet presents his fellow Americans with. He possesses democratic sentiment in abundance and wishes to pass it over to the readers of the collection. Perceived as such, democracy ceases to be a choice, but rather an innateness that every individual is endowed with. For Whitman, it is inseparable from being human and every man has a right to it, just as he is entitled by birth to life and freedom. It is the “pursuit of happiness” that *The Declaration of Independence* lists as an “unalienable right.”

Leaves of Grass thus serve as a handbook of sorts on how an individual can awake the democratic feeling in himself. Such a concept of democracy promulgated by Whitman did in fact prevail in the American society and in terms led to the economic and political growth of the country in

³ In 1855 the poem did not bear that title, but was later named by Whitman.

the centuries that ensued. It is a democracy that rests on the pillars of individuality and freedom, just as the Good Grey Poet had envisioned it.

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ПОУЧАВАЊЕ ПОЈЕДИНЦА О ДЕМОКРАТИЈИ
У ВЛАТИМА ТРАВЕ ВОЛТА ВИТМАНА

Сажетак

Рад испитује мотив демократије у чувеној збирци поезије Волта Витмана *Влати траве*. Након увода у коме се још једном потврђује да је Витман писац демократије, подробније се анализира однос појединца и демократије. Песниково становиште је да појединац представља темељ америчке демократије. Демократски назори који се могу срести у поезији самог Витмана су заправо смернице његовим земљацима како да у целости развију своју кадрост за демократију. У закључку се потврђује актуелност таквог концепта демократије јер је он више него неопходан и у данашњој Америци.

Кључне речи: Волт Витман, демократија, *Влати траве*, појединац, Америка, поезија