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WALT WHITMAN'S POETIC CONCEPT OF INHERENT PERSONAL DEMOCRACY²

The paper examines the motif of democracy in the work of Walt Whitman from the standpoint of its innateness to human kind. The first part of the paper explains how for Whitman the notion of democracy and the eponymous motif in his poetry were rooted in the nature of Man, rather than the official governing structures. His poetry is thus disengaged from the institutions of democracy and directed at the individual, which is argued in the second part of the essay. The strengthening of the democratic capacity is a natural process to Whitman, since the democratic sentiment is inherent to humans, regardless of their location, nationality or religion. Sympathy is the word that permeates Walt Whitman's discourse on democracy.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, institutions, individual, democracy, sympathy, America

1. *The Herbal Union*

Henry David Thoreau, one of the most prominent American thinkers of Walt Whitman's era, once wrote:

“... to be strictly just, [the authority of government] must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual” (2010: 26).

The 19th-century America was the period when the process Thoreau spoke of reached the tipping point in favor of the individual. The actual transition took place during the revolution, and Whitman's America had the task of successfully carrying out the experiment of the Union, and the gamble of democracy which even “America's Founding Fathers were skeptical and anxious about” (Hanke, 2011). Whitman's poems, in his own words, function as “counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy” (Whitman 1982: 667), and glorify “American individuality” which is the only path to avoiding the snare of mediocrity that democracy bears within.

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Another point Thoreau made was merely an affirmation of the ideal his country was founded on, best formulated in 1863 by president Abraham Lincoln during his, now immortalized, Gettysburg address:

“... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that *government of the people, by the people, for the people*, shall not perish from the earth.”³

Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas* that the phrase was “a formula whose verbal shape is homely wit, but whose scope includes both the totality and all minutiae of the lesson” (Whitman 1982: 943). Theoreticians of society had fiercely debated over that issue, since what Antiquity and the Founding Fathers set in paper and blood in 1776, Whitman had remodeled to fit his own vision of America and “developed his style to suite his message” (Lončar-Vujanović 2007: 223).

The democracy Whitman wishes to target is the one of every man, i.e. he does not depart from the individual level, above which is the institutional. The form through which society shapes and incorporates the noble feelings of its citizens was never in Whitman’s literary focus. His “journalist Self” did dabble with politics as he was a member of The Free Soil Party, which was active during the late 1850s and early 1860s, with the primary goal to thwart the expansion of slavery west of the Mississippi river. In 1848 Whitman “was elected as a delegate to the convention in Buffalo to nominate a candidate for President and became editor of a Party paper” (Killingsworth 2007: 4). The party’s temperate stance on the issue of slavery which Whitman argued for in his paper, brought him no good as “the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was an organ of the Democratic Party, and Whitman’s change of editorial mind no doubt was the major reason he lost his position” (Oliver 2004: 348).

After he became disillusioned with political parties and their respective politicians, he turned to poetry to instruct Americans in the essence of their beloved county which was starting to fade from the people’s memory. Nevertheless, he feels the urge to slander the party system in his essay “The Eighteenth Presidency!,” written in 1856, but published posthumously in 1928:

“Are not political parties about played out? I say they are, all round. America has outgrown parties; henceforth it is too large, and they too small” (Whitman 1982: 1317).

But when a party wins an election, its power becomes official, i.e. institutionalized. In the poem “I Hear It Was Charged Against Me,” Whitman openly states his relationship with such institutions, an ambiguous one:

“I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy
institutions,
But really I am neither for nor against institutions,
(What indeed do I have common with them? or what with
the destruction of them?)

3 From his famous Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863 at the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Only I will establish in the Mannahatta and in every other city of
 these States inland and seaboard,
 And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little or
 large that dents the water,
 Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
 The institution of dear love of comrades”
 (Whitman 1982: 281).

Whitman's indictment resembles Socrates's of corrupting the Athenian youth. Both thinkers lived in a democracy, but for Whitman, the system had evolved over the twenty-three century span, so that an execution, as in the case of the famous Greek, was luckily not needed. Interestingly, the second charge against Socrates was that of impiety, a controversial issue in the literary opus of the American as well.

In the poem in question, Whitman distances himself from the institutions (of democracy) in a way which leaves plenty of room for interpretation. He, as a free individual, is on a quest which does not concern the formal institutions of a society, i.e. they are not his goal and therefore pose no interest to him. His objectives, which he reaches through himself, are other individuals who comprise the society, i.e. he deals with and targets the leaves, while institutions are concerned with the grass in its entirety. He operates alongside, but not *with* the government. A country builds edifices of the rule of law, whereas Whitman builds those very structures in the psyche of every individual, strengthening his or her democratic capacity far better than any authority could. Oliver notices that more than “the individual” is the center of Whitman's thought: “It is the nation's citizens who will, in the end, keep democracy alive against the corruption of institutionalized systems” (2004: 213).

His poetic notion did not diverge from the political thought of the era. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), alongside Lafayette the most important Frenchmen in America at the time, held the cultivation of feelings and practices of civil honesty, in a higher esteem than any written law (Peri 2000: 296). Samuel Adams, one of the founding fathers, wrote in 1749 that “Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt.”⁴ Any democracy whose citizens are not “strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich, perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love” (Whitman 1982: 616), faces a bleak future, a prophecy which is the quintessence of Whitman's latent, but thorough vision of democracy.

The relationship between a whole and its parts has an interesting linguistic implication in Whitman's blank or free verse. Namely, he frequently uses enumerations of all sorts. Although readers find them tedious at times, they do serve a particular purpose. Karbiener connected these Whitmanesque “catalogues” with “the aural quality of [his] poetry” (2004: 76), i.e. with the images that the poet kaleidoscopically conveys to the reader. Purešić in his preface to the 2005 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Serbian considers these listings as:

4 Samuel Adams, from a political essay published in *The Public Advertiser* in 1749. <<http://www.samuel-adams-heritage.com/quotes/popular.html>>. 27.01.2016.

“... the confirmation of the very existence itself and its every aspect, i.e. [he] confirms its unity through its diversity, and stressed the importance of every single part to the whole. Even the title of the collection signifies individuality and diversity, which is at the same time cohesion” (2005: 9).

Almost all of the listings are in blank verse, which is itself in direct connection to democracy, as Oliver explains: “It is as if Whitman feels a direct relationship between democracy and free verse, the form most of his own poetry takes” (2004: 156).

In “I Hear It Was Charged Against Me,” the poet denounces any concrete implications of his poetry that would be reflected in any institution or a system. Mack noticed that “even though the poet seemed to intuit how far the political implications of poetic agency might reach, he was not interested in developing them” (2002: 98).

2. “I” for all of America

Whitman, who had been disillusioned with political parties, was aware that his poetry was not a substitute for any kind of institution, especially not the apparatus of state. However, he was aware that his poems could have a strong impact onto the building block of any organization: the individual. If he could be improved, the institutions whom he governs would improve as well. The importance he assigned the individual with is perhaps most obvious in a line from the poem “Full of Life Now,” where he himself (one free citizen) becomes a quintessential milestone of time: “I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States” (Whitman 1982: 287).

His urge to number the years of his country is not as odd as his age that stands next to it. There is neither a comma, nor a preposition to separate the two as they are read in one breath, a sentence entirely on itself. This lack of differentiation is in perfect accord with the poet’s view of democracy: the state and the individual are one being. If we apply an anthropomorphic metaphor, the government could be perceived as a limb of a body comprised of its constituency. Thoreau, for instance, saw governments primarily as tools, but later mitigated the stance: “I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor” (2010: 26). Even when he assuages his stance on the issue, the government is still at best an equal partner to its citizens, which is a far cry from Whitman’s literal incorporation of the individual into his country. The poem exhibits no interest whatsoever in political intrigues at any level, because his “aim is less to express or depict persons exerting power over each other (which would yield allegory), than it is to express the adjacency of people, places and things” (Fletcher 2004: 156). Fletcher proceeds to define in his own words the “brotherhood” that both Thoreau and Whitman promulgated: “This adjacency, when articulated as a complex living neighborhood, is exactly what I am calling an environment” (Ibid.).

However it may be labeled, Whitman remains faithful to his primeval image, and instead of ascending his and the personages of his fellow coun-

trymen to their authorities (which was the task of the majority of theories of society throughout the centuries) he stoops the ruling apparatus down to its subjects and reincorporates it into its original source, the body and the mind of an individual. Thus, change in the government must start by reforming the individual which is its building block. It is not hard to draw the conclusion that properly formed democratic governments ought to display traits of an individual, namely his or her virtues, keeping in mind at all times that “virtue is not hereditary” (Paine 1995: 44). Thomas Jefferson provided guidelines for this in the eve of the Revolution: “The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest.”⁵

It does come as a mild surprise that “Whitman’s concept of democracy [was] set down in some of the poet’s clearest prose in an untitled introductory essay that served as a preface to the 1855 edition” (Oliver 2004: 13), i.e. it was presented to the reader of the day in the form of a prose writing.

The essay opened with the word “America,” with the initial letter “A” vignette-like, to announce the subject and the goal of the 21-page introduction to the 12 poems. The now immortalized statement that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Whitman 1982: 5), introduces both the subject and the goal of Whitman’s poetry. In this proclamation, Whitman starts from the premise that democracy is the basis of his quest for an authentic American poetry, i.e. it enables him to come to life and sustain himself. His personal success and popularity become equated with democracy: “Celebrity had evolved into more than a quality granted by the public; it was also a distinct category of democratic identity” (Blake, 2006: 29).

It should not be forgotten that Whitman was only one citizen out of more than sixty million people who resided in The United States of America in the year 1890 (Oliver 2004: 378). In 2013 America’s populace numbers over 315 million men and women,⁶ adding to the importance of a rather simple question that had bothered theoreticians of society for centuries: Is democracy for all? Whitman answers in his own voice:⁷

“Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,
All, all alike endear’d, grown, ungrown, young or old,
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,
Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love”
(Whitman 1982: 616).

The pronunciation of the reiterated “all” is longer as the poet utilizes phonology to get his egalitarian message across. His democracy dwells in accordance with all the traits of true humanism, and is an offspring of “Mother Earth and Father Time,” a divine-like origin which it can thank its longevity for.

5 From Jefferson’s pamphlet published in 1774 entitled: “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” <<https://www.history.org/Almanack/life/politics/sumview.cfm>>. 27.01.2016.

6 United States Census Bureau estimate.

7 In 1992, a wax-cylinder recording of the poem “America” was discovered. The recording was dated back to 1889 or 1890 and it is presumed that the voice reading the first four lines is that of Walt Whitman himself (Folsom 1992: 214).

For the Good Grey Poet the question of the universal applicability of democracy was settled before it was even raised, as the system encompassed every human being, even doing away with nationality boundaries.

“Freedom does not paint a rosy picture, for inside these nation-states, there was throughout the course of history, as it is today, a tremendous gap between the individuals. Whitman was fully aware of this and recognized it as fault of any democratic system, and had through his literary work “tried to encompass a panorama of social types” (Blake 2006: 74).

With an imperative voice (“This is what you shall do”) in the celebrated Preface, he instructs the reader to, among other things: “... despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy ...” (Whitman 1982: 11). The latter two categories of people are in terms of modern democracies equivalent to Ancient Greek groups who were passed by democracy: namely women, slaves, and foreigners who comprised the majority of populace of any *polis* (Avramović 1989: 16). Whitman possesses the knowledge that they were never given a chance to rule themselves, let alone an entire country, but wishes to include them in his vision of America. In the process, he inadvertently installs into every democratic persona a safety mechanism against the maltreatment of minority groups. A myriad of thinkers, beginning with Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century, have identified the terror of the majority against the minority as the biggest threat to any democracy, especially the American type. Walt Whitman combats the issue by equipping every individual with a genuine belief into the “democracy for all” notion. The New Yorker had been criticized numerous times for this, but his entire life stands as a testimonial to the great undercurrent of an all-inclusive democratic spirit, as Fletcher explains:

“Many have thought that Whitman’s democratic optimism shines too brightly, providing too quick and easy examples for those who have not followed him in laboriously studying the art of poetry. ... Yet Whitman was never the mindless optimist; if anything he was a tragic rhapsode, and his example remains among the most subtle in spite of its grand scope and style” (2004: 253).

Mack provides a more accurate insight into the issue: “One of the complaints that is often heard about Whitman’s poetry concerns what some regard as its cloying optimism. The same complaint, elevated to the status of criticism, is often leveled at pragmatic philosophy” (2002: 111).

Therefore it becomes clear that Whitman did not hold such a stance alone, as John Dewey (1859–1952), a leading figure of American pragmatism, also believed in the masses and the universal human predisposition for rational thinking (Peri 2000: 589). He lauded democracy as it, unlike the aristocratic regimes, enabled every individual to potentially become a leader. Dewey’s work in the field of education coincides with Whitman’s poetic, the essence of which John Adams explained nearly a century before: “Children should be educated and instructed in the principles of freedom.”⁸ Whitman’s vision tar-

8 Adams, J. (1851). *A Defence of the Constitutions of Governments of the United States of America*. Chapter 3, Seventh Rule.

geted children and adults alike, for he was not merely a tutor, but an andragogist as well, which was in accordance with his universal grasping of human essence. No man, woman, or a child, regardless of his or her age or background was to be excluded from his book, *Leaves of Grass*, which effectively became a textbook of pragmatism for:

“The notion that democracy is more than a political process, that it is a social and cultural process as well, is an idea often associated with American pragmatic thinkers ... Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Richard Rorty” (Mack 2002: xviii-xix).

The populace of New York was in Whitman's time growing increasingly polarized in terms of material wealth (Karbiener 2004: 24). The gap only increased as time went on, hindering any prudent humanist in his efforts to assert the bond between all men, which was evident even in Shakespeare's time:

“Strange is it that our bloods,
Of colour, weight, and heat, pour'd all together,
Would quite confound distinction, yet stand off
In differences so mighty”
All's Well That Ends Well (2.3.763).

The disparity was detrimental to democracy as well, as Whitman writes on the upsurge of the cult of materialism in America: “What American humanity is most in danger of is an overwhelming prosperity, ‘business’ worldliness, materialism: what is most lacking, east, west, north, south, is a fervid and glowing Nationality and patriotism, cohering all parts into one” (1982: 1057).

3. *The Bonding Sympathy*

In terms of statesmanship the bond is reestablished by nationality, but Whitman's poetry possesses yet another quality of a genuine human emotion that establishes a link between social classes, namely, the well-to-do and the poor. That quality is sympathy. Blake writes: “From the beginning of his career, the poet championed his sympathy - a quality that his early admirers as well as twenty-first century scholars have singled out in praising his efforts to get inside readers' lives” (2006: 19). The mechanism of bonding transcended all barriers, for Whitman portrayed a profound concern for the fallen soldiers as well as the fates of their families, he uplifted the status of slaves by praising their human qualities of which they were slave-owners' peers, and spoke for every man, woman or a group whose existence seemed mundane or on the margins of society. By appealing to this feeling in himself, he would in fact arouse such a sentiment in the reader as well, forcing him by means of poetry to alter his or hers stance on the issue in question. In the case of Whitman's own personality, the feeling had a profound impact, as Brkić noticed: “Sympathy. I can almost claim that in Whitman's case that sympathy, that compassion is the only reason why his being had been shaped in an artistic manner, and not, let us say, in a scientific, prophet-like etc. He had chosen his way because of it” (1972: 128).

This “way” was in perfect accordance with his democratic thought, as the path to every genuine democracy is paved with humanism and true sympathy for another human being. Where a deficit in such qualities exists, like in the Old World, any progress is hindered as Oliver notices while writing on Walt Whitman’s concept of political democracy: “In the poetry Whitman refers to the equal importance of the individual and the ‘en-masse,’ the adhesiveness of individuals within the whole population. The problem in Europe, he suggests, is the lack of such ‘solidarity’” (2004: 72).

Throughout history existed numerous examples of autocratic regimes which had veered off this path, resulting in the termination of their rule. In this sense, the famous opening line of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*⁹ can be inverted and paraphrased to serve an epitaph to all failed governments: Fallen democracies are all alike; every successful democracy is successful in its own way. “Own way” here stands for the uniqueness stemming out from each individual and his or her contribution to the ideal of democracy. This cannot be achieved without the sympathy which serves as an adhesive to the strong expression of individuality in America. Tyrannies usually ensue after the facet of sympathy fails inside a democracy. D. H. Lawrence wrote a short two-line poem in the late 1920s as an answer to Whitman, demonstrating what would happen if the promise of democracy was not fulfilled:

“And whoever walks a mile full of false sympathy
walks to the funeral of the whole human race” (Lawrence 1998: 52).

Present American democracy, with its intricate electoral system, has veered off the path of true sympathy which is, in Whitman’s views, its integral part. Instead of brotherhood of strong individuals, the poet’s native country is slowly descending into a bulky bureaucratic state, ever more resembling those in old Europe that the American colonists initially fled from. Furthermore, United States foreign policy of military interventionism is questionable as well, and it is perhaps appropriate that just a year after Whitman’s death, American marines overthrew the queen of Hawaii and annexed the Pacific archipelago unlawfully, which was admitted by the Clinton administration in 1993. This was merely the first of the hundreds of recorded cases of overseas interventions that the States have not relinquished not even in the 21st century. This seemingly imperialistic policy stands in direct opposition to Whitman’s principle of the right of any people to rule themselves, as residents of the Kingdom of Hawaii were deprived of such a right in the last decade of the 19th century.

United States are today in need of critically engaged poetry more than ever. Many of America’s poets have certainly endeavored to provide such a discourse, and all their strivings included an anachronistic discourse with Walt Whitman. Allan Ginsberg (1926–1997) wrote his famous 1956 poem “A Supermarket in California,” opening it with the line: “What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman.” Another famous example would be Langston Hughes’s (1902–1967) poem “I Too Sing America,” which was written as a di-

9 “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

rect retort to Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." Ezra Pound (1885–1972) made a pact with Whitman in the eponymous song written in 1916. All these examples go to show that the generations of American poets who came after Whitman believed that his motifs, including the one of the personal sense of democracy, were somehow topical to them and their vision of America. Therefore, there is little doubt that some future American poets will have to grapple Whitman's century-old theme of individual democracy by inventing new kinds of sympathy, ones that would be suitable for the modern world and the plight of individuals, groups, and other peoples living in it.

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PESNIČKI KONCEPT UROĐENE LIČNE DEMOKRATIJE VOLTA VITMANA

Rezime

U radu se razmatra motiv demokratije u stvaralaštvu američkog pesnika Volta Vitmana sa stanovišta njene urođenosti u prirodu čoveka. Prvi deo rada razjašnjava kako su za Vitmana pojam demokratije i njegova pesnička slika suštastveni ljudskoj prirodi, a ne institucijama koje su ljudi stvorili. Stoga, Vitmanova poezija se ne bavi institucijama demokratske države, već pojedincem koji tvori državu, što je opisano u drugom delu rada. Osnaživanje kapaciteta za demokratiju kod svakog pojedinca je po Vitmanu prirodan process, bez obzira na čovekovu lokaciju, narodnost ili veroispovest. Demokratskiost svakog građanina ne zavisi od oblika vlasti, već isključivo njega samog i prema njemu se država ustrojava, odnosno on je taj koji je oblikuje. Kako bi se ovo ostvarilo, Vitman ističe ulogu saosećanja koje je položeno u temelj njegovog motiva demokratije i bez kojeg nijedan državotvorni oncept nije potpun.

Ključne reči: Volt Vitman, institucije, pojedinac, demokratija, saosećanje, Amerika

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