

Course: English 127
Professor Elizabeth Dillon

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Alexandra Schwartz

The Convergence of American Identity and Experience:
Walt Whitman's Concept of Democracy in "Song of Myself"

by Alexandra Schwartz

When Walt Whitman's first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1855, American democracy was not so much a political reality as a social ideal. Given the legally enforced political inequalities of the time, democracy stood a far cry off from the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of "a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or privilege." In his poem "Song of Myself," Whitman sets about creating a literary form of just such an idealistic democracy, contrasting the lives of great and small characters to lend each individual's experience equal weight and credibility in his musings on American life and society. Portraying himself as an omniscient poet, Whitman incorporates the identities of the characters he mentions into his own, establishing himself as both a universal representative for the divided American populace as well as its proposed unifier. As Whitman defies vocational, geographical and social boundaries to equate a vast range of individuals, he creates a boldly expansive vision of a potentially unified American democracy that nevertheless highlights the existing social disparities and political inequalities of a society on the brink of a civil war.

Beginning with an address to a universalized, inclusive audience, Whitman sets members of every walk of life on an equal plane, establishing "Song of Myself" as a forum in which both the great and small constituents of American society can convene together under his guidance. Whitman identifies his audience as the general "you" (3), instantly unifying them under this title

of the second person plural as he tells them that “what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (25). For the moment, he sets aside whatever primary forms of self-identification his audience might profess; to be able to learn the powerful truths he has to share with them, such as how to “possess the origin of all poems,/ [and] the good of the earth and sun” (26), every reader must first enter into an anonymity which emphasizes their collective human identity. Should there be a doubt as to whether he means to include all people in his broad address, Whitman pledges his dedication to the value of plurality, assuring his readers that “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,/ You shall listen to all sides and filter them for yourself” (26). Although phrased in the imperative form, Whitman’s command to his readers obliges them to participate in the traditional democratic process of determining personal beliefs only after gaining exposure to a wide variety of publicized view points, joining them together as active citizens in a democratic appraisal of his view of the world.

Having established a common bond among his audience, Whitman draws on the experiences of as many socially distinct characters as he can conjure up, crafting an idealized view of America as a society in which each person’s experience has an inherently equal value. In the poem’s 15th section, Whitman uses the steady rhythm of list form to create an expansive portrait of American life, beginning with “The pure contralto [who] sings in the organloft” (37) and moving all the way through “The President” as he “holds a cabinet council, [and] is surrounded by the great secretaries” (39). The poet touches on figures as disparate as “newly-come immigrants [who] cover the wharf or levee” (37) and “The pavingman [who] leans on his twohanded rammer” (38). As envisioned here, Whitman’s America is a culture based in labor and participation. Each member of society performs a specific function, the common work of the

“canal-boy” (38) granted equal importance as the sophisticated conductor’s task of “beat[ing] time for the band” (38). Whitman explicitly mocks those who would contradict this notion by emphasizing the ultimate irrelevance of puffed-up vocational ambition, asking, “Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President?/ It is a trifle....they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on” (45). Picking up momentum as he lists more and more characters, Whitman lends legitimacy to the existence of otherwise marginalized people such as “The squaw wrapt in her yellow hemmed cloth” (38) or “The cleanhaired Yankee girl [who] works with her sewing-machine or in the factory or mill” (38). Alone, a character’s activities do not amount to much, but Whitman’s insistence that each be taken into account in the context of the others surrounding them indicates their collective importance in defining the nation.

Whitman furthers his project of establishing traditionally divergent groups as equal participants in American democracy by crossing barriers of geography and gender, frequently comparing extremes of character in a continuous effort to widen his own conception of equality. At a time of severe division along state and regional lines, Whitman declares himself to prefer “A southerner soon as a northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable,/ A Yankee bound my own way” (40), a remarkable manifesto of inclusion considering the tensions inherent in the different political positions of these groups. Whitman also bridges the even more innate divide of gender, as he declares: “I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man” (44), continuing a pattern of pitting “opposite equals” (26) against each other to demonstrate their mutual worth. Whitman similarly juxtaposes more theoretical opposites to create an inclusive equilibrium between groups even as generalized as “the victors” and “conquered and slain persons” (42), embracing all people regardless of their affiliations, theoretical or actual.

By striking a consistent equilibrium in sampling the varied experiences of the characters he examines, Whitman prevents himself from taking an overly active societal role in the democracy he has created and instead grants a kind of equal representation to each individual he claims to inhabit. The nature of his true identity as “poet” (44) allows Whitman to experience the world around him not merely through his own eyes, but by slipping into the positions of others. He “become[s] any presence or truth of humanity” (67), and establishes himself as “the mate and companion of people” (31) who may remain oblivious to his presence. While his creative expansiveness may permit Whitman to try on the lives of many different characters, his proclamation that he is “not the poet of goodness only.... I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also” (46), the two extremes of morality balanced by an ellipse encompassing the range between them, ensures that he will renounce all presumptions of moral superiority and grant equal consideration to each. In his poem, “the wicked” (42) rub shoulders with “the righteous” (42), and “The keptwoman and the sponger and thief are hereby invited” (42) to participate in a community in which “There shall be no difference between them and the rest” (42). For Whitman, each person’s status as an American should grant him or her permission to participate in a society that in reality does not recognize the majority of those he discusses.

Given the disparity between Whitman’s idealistic view of a cohesive American democracy and its divided reality, the poet embodies in himself the contradictions inherent in a society that struggles to encompass fundamentally irreconcilable interests. The most blatant example of this contradiction arises as Whitman attempts to grant legitimacy to the experiences of both the slave and slave owner. As one who revels in the experience of living freely, Whitman cannot help but attempt to place himself in the position of “the hounded slave” (62) who, along with the women and Native Americans of the poem, exists in reality as a disenfranchised and

abused member of society despite his attempts to incorporate them into his expansive vision. Whitman goes so far as to take a personal stance against slavery, identifying himself as having taken “The runaway slave” (33) into his home, “led him in and assured him” (33). His use of the article “the” as a precedent to the slave’s title indicates that Whitman is not recounting an actual moment with a specific slave, but rather expressing his theoretical willingness to harbor any one of them. Yet Whitman glosses over the abusive role that those “Louisianian[s] or Georgian[s]” (40) he characterizes as “planter[s] nonchalant and hospitable” (40) play in “beat[ing the runaway slave] violently over the head with their whip-stocks” (62). Such an omission echoes the general attitude of the American government, which in 1850 had once again refused to confront the diametrically opposed interests of North and South by ratifying the Clay Compromise Measures, which simultaneously prohibited the slave trade in Washington D.C. and solidified the Fugitive Slave Act. In refusing to take a direct approach to this conflict, Whitman fails to hold America accountable for propagating racial oppression even as it—and he—preaches democracy.

Whitman concludes his poem by relinquishing his role as the voice of the people, joining his fellow citizens as he calls upon them to take action towards creating the kind of inclusive democracy that he has laid out for them to explore. Leaving behind his identity as an omnipotent poet who can try on and discard as many identities as he likes, Whitman embraces his role as an ordinary member of a community, notifying those who had so recently played upon the great American stage of his creation that “I take my place among you as much as among any” (76). As he is now “one of the citizens” (73) and consequently resolves that “whatever interests the rest interests” (74) him, Whitman can no longer lead those he addresses in any particular direction towards accomplishing a truly democratic state. Instead, he informs them that “Not I, not any one

else can travel that road for you,/ You must travel it for yourself” (80), confirming his final separation from the masses he addresses by the use of enjambment. Whitman substantiates his wish for his subjects’ independence by telling them that “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (81), and indeed the very end of the poem finds Whitman “bequeathing [himself] to the dirt to grow from the grass [he] love[s]” (86) and ceasing to exist as a vocal, human entity. As in any functioning democracy, the responsibility lies with the citizenry to pursue change.

While the picture of America advanced by Whitman is one in which traditional societal barriers can be crossed in order to establish a democracy serving the interests of the collective citizenry, his inability to successfully incorporate existing practices such as slavery into such an American ideal exposes the underlying cracks in American life that would soon serve to undermine the nation’s unity. On a personal level, Whitman offers the famous disqualifier, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then...I contradict myself;/ I am large...I contain multitudes” (85) to account for the variety of experiences and viewpoints he has advanced over the course of his poem. As a manifesto of personal complexity in a time when individual belief was highly polarized along moral and state lines, Whitman’s sentiment is admirable, but it cannot serve the same purpose of neatly resolving the country’s many profound disparities. Under the pressure of inequality, “The past and present” (85) of American reality “wilt[s]” (85). Only by entirely breaking apart could the nation proceed towards the “next fold of the future” (85) as portrayed in Whitman’s democratic vision.

Works Cited

“Democracy.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford, 1989.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley. New York: Penguin Classics, 1961.