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Song of Ourselves: The Principles of American Democracy and Walt Whitman

Governments are collections of applied ideas. The principles of the United States of America, founded just under two hundred and fifty years ago, were formulated based on certain moral and political philosophies which had been best specified by eighteenth century thinker John Locke. Locke's philosophy was a deliberate departure from the popular ideas of Thomas Hobbes, the political philosophy which was believed to have fueled the colonies' mistreatment at the hands of the British empire. The years leading up to the formation of the United States were dominated by the works of these two English philosophers, Hobbes and Locke. The transition of popularity between their political theories during the years before the American Revolution anticipates a nineteenth century American intellectual movement called transcendentalism which took the theories of Locke a few steps further.

Walt Whitman, a transcendentalist poet and contemporary of Emerson and Thoreau, published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature," Whitman wrote (5). The poet, describing the diverse States as "the race of races," elevated the American values of freedom and equality by praising democracy and individualism (6). Whitman became the first internationally recognized American poet by adopting the perspective of a universal representative and reaffirming those fundamental American principles which inspired by the philosophical writings

of Locke. In order to understand the changes America has embarked upon or the essentially American aspects of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, then one must be familiar with the ideas which have historically shaped the American mindset.

Before the birth of the United States, there were two views of human nature which dominated popular moral and political thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first, presented by English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, offers a relatively pessimistic view of human nature. Hobbes believed that total freedom and human nature naturally lead to chaos and moral depravity in society. He famously wrote that human life in the state of nature¹ is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Will). Since a world at the mercy of the harsh corruption of human nature would lead to disaster, Hobbes believed that strong government is essential to maintaining order and peace in society. Furthermore, Hobbes' theory also implies the necessity for government restriction of people's freedoms to prevent the disharmony and corruption that would occur in the state of nature. To many of the British, Hobbes was logically justifying the strict rule of England's monarch; thus, Hobbes' political philosophy was widely accepted and applied when introduced to the monarchal British empire.

The second prominent view during this time, theorized by John Locke, was less popular when introduced. Locke, another English philosopher, stated that humans in the state of nature are basically, though not inherently, good. He proposed that human society without government may not necessitate constant war like Hobbes. Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that war in the state of nature would be caused by a few corrupt men rather than human society as a whole. Therefore, Locke formulated his political philosophy to respect that humans deserved as much

¹ The state of nature refers to a state or society without any government.

freedom as possible, but to simultaneously recognize that a government must restrict some natural freedoms of individuals for the purpose of keeping peace and order in society.

The Pilgrims and Puritans who sailed across the Atlantic in order to gain religious freedom disagreed with the restrictions of religious practices imposed by the British monarch, but both groups still agreed with the non-religious Hobbesian view of the depravity of human nature. John Winthrop, a Pilgrim leader who gave the famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” described an ideal Christian community. Winthrop suggested a community based on justice and mercy, one that accounted for punishment of the inevitable sins of its members while also allowing offenders to be forgiven and kept accountable.

Further evidence of an ideological connection between the belief of Hobbesian human nature and Puritan religious doctrine is found in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards. In his *Personal Narrative*, Edwards addresses primarily his own sin but under the basic Puritan doctrine that all people are totally sinful. This doctrine is most famously presented in his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The sermon’s extended use of the phrase from Deuteronomy 32:35, “their foot shall slide in due time,” reflects the Puritan ideal of total depravity relatable to Hobbes’ perspective. Edwards’ message, that “there is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God” further shows this view of inherently corrupt human nature that the Puritans shared with Hobbes (Baym 430).

If the Puritans and Pilgrims who colonized America upheld beliefs in Hobbesian human depravity, they seem to have shown disagreement with the application of Hobbes’ political theory in England by leaving the country. This defiant migration to America was the first step in a movement towards Lockean ideals in the New World.

The eventual American trade of Hobbes for Locke was the result of continued abuses dealt by the British monarchy on its American colonies. The American Revolution was declared by the colonies for the purpose of creating a separate nation with a new government which allowed more freedoms to its citizens. Mark Griffith, professor of political science at the University of West Alabama, writes that “Locke’s teaching about rights provides the justification for revolution when the government fails to protect rights. This view was his most threatening and controversial idea to the leaders of his time”. Unsurprisingly, the American Founding Fathers adopted Locke’s principles and diction to form their new government by the composition of the U.S. Constitution after the colonies won the revolution. Because the Lockean principles that all people are created equal and have the basic rights to life, liberty, and property supported more freedoms for citizens in American society, Locke’s ideas about human nature and individual freedoms provided the foundation of American political philosophy about one hundred years after his works were published in England.

One hundred years after the formation of the United States, the nation’s first intellectual movement, transcendentalism, sparked a philosophical transition even further away from Hobbes (and the implied associations with the British). All of its major adherents were Americans, its influence spread across the country, and though several philosophical influences such as Locke and philosopher Rousseau were European, the combination of these influences into transcendentalism was undoubtedly an American concoction. Transcendentalism fundamentally assumed the “belief in the innate goodness of human nature” and “Emersonian absolute moral and intellectual self-reliance” and prioritized individualism (Allen 255). No other country has been constructed so intentionally to accommodate the rights of the individual citizen.

In this way, transcendentalism presented a logical progression past Locke and opposed Hobbes' view of human nature even more strongly. For transcendentalists, life in the state of nature was good and allowed individuals to live in self-reliance. Identifying with the American transcendentalists, poet Walt Whitman emphasized the value of the individual within democracy. Whitman aspired to be, and has essentially become, the Great American Bard; his poems, his prose, and his political views are obviously descendants of an American tradition founded on the Lockean view of the rights of the individual.

Through the transcendentalist movement, Whitman's quintessentially American values were framed. His belief that all men and women are equal and his elevation of the individual informed his belief in democracy. Democracy, as an organization of many unique, equal, and valuable voices, accounted for the voice of the everyman. In America, this form of government was built with the intention of protecting Americans' abilities to be self-reliant. Therefore, Whitman's glorification of democracy is due to American democracy's allowance for self-reliance and diversity in addition to the relatively small amount of freedom it takes away from the individual.

Consider the short poetic preface originally placed at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass* called "One's-Self I Sing." Whitman introduces his themes within the nine lines of this poem. The first lines find Whitman connecting the individual and democracy: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (lines 1-2). Whitman is not singing about himself, but "a simple separate person," an ordinary person. He clarifies in line six that he not only means every man, but every human: "The Female equally with the Male I sing." By declaring, "The Modern Man I sing," Whitman makes clear that he is

writing about himself, his neighbors, and all people. Rather than a democracy of Americans, the word “Democratic,” seems to reference a democracy of the world’s inhabitants.

Even before “One’s-Self I Sing,” readers of *Leaves of Grass* have always found a portrait of Whitman on each volume’s first page. There he stands in plain dress, one hand on his hip, the other in his pocket, his hat tilted as though soon to be blown away. For readers new to Whitman, this is Walt Whitman, the poet. After reading the volume’s first poem, one might see a portrait of The Modern Man like that which Whitman dedicated himself to represent throughout his book. Some may see this picture on the frontispiece as unnecessary dramatization or self-promotion on the part of the poet, but such a view misses the meaning of Whitman’s simple opening poem. Whitman is exalting the everyman in *Leaves of Grass*, not himself.

As the longest and most popular poetic entry in *Leaves of Grass*, “Song of Myself,” supports Whitman’s democratization of the individual most thoroughly. The opening lines enforce the universality of the self: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (lines 1-3). In section sixteen, when Whitman says, “I am 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,” “I” simply cannot refer to Whitman the poet (lines 326-8). Instead, as mentioned above and made evident throughout the poem, Whitman is not describing the ordinary man from his perspective, but from the perspective of everyday men and women. By representing the individuals usually lost in the masses, he is constructing a perspective sympathetic to the ordinary citizen. “These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not

original to me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,” Whitman writes in section seventeen (lines 353-4).

Even Whitman’s invented poetic form of free verse might be attributed to his depiction of a universal representative, not because of any common rhyme or meter, but due to a lack of one. There’s a light sense of traveling and flying to Whitman’s free verse that was unparalleled by the traditional poetic forms which preceded him. Whitman scholar Gay Wilson Allen described the poet’s point of view as “a migrating soul transcending time and space...Whitman’s ego is in constant motion, flitting like a humming bird from object to object and place to place with miraculous speed” (212). To fill the democratizing purpose of his poetry, Whitman created a new poetic form that allowed him to move across time and space.

The universality of Whitman’s self in “Song of Myself” has caused some critics to forget Whitman’s aim to embody the experience of the everyday American. The concerns of the self in “Song of Myself” are said to be universal, but there is an emphasis on the American way of living. Though the poem appeared without a title in the first edition in 1855, the next edition included the title, “A Poem of Walt Whitman, An American.” A plethora of references to American citizens and states throughout the fifty-two section poem suggests that, though “I” is a universal representative, the setting of Whitman’s writing is the United States. There is a diverse group of explicit references to the United States in section fifteen alone: Thanksgiving dinners, Lake Huron, a Yankee girl, the President, a man from Missouri, numerous rivers like the Tennessee and the Arkansas, and other American geological features. Furthermore, Whitman often relates his poetry to America in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*. “The United States

themselves are essentially the greatest poem,” Whitman writes. “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations” (5).

It is also important to note that though Whitman glorifies the average American, he neither generalizes the American people nor creates an American stereotype. “The diversity of the nation’s population was part of what made America precious to him and worth writing about. Whitman’s chief display of American democracy in *Leaves of Grass* is found in sections fifteen and sixteen. Both sections feature lists of unnamed people across the country who the poet unites under the banner of American diversity. Lines 362-4 feature an affectionate dedication that further shows his love for the common citizen and the rich diversity of American democracy:

It is for the illiterate...it is for the judges of the supreme court...it is for the federal capitol and the state capitols, / It is for the admirable communes of literary men and composers and singers and lecturers and engineers and savants, / It is for the endless races of working people and farmer and seamen.

Whitman had fixed and ambitious intentions when writing *Leaves of Grass*. His purpose was to create an American type of poetry; he succeeded in his poetry’s content and form. He also knew the image of himself that he wanted to project. “Whitman clearly wanted to establish himself as a serious artist and as the archetypal average American,” wrote critic Lawrence Buell in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose* (xxvii). “In both goals he was sincere” (xxvii). In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman drew on his knowledge of American ideals and the ideas which led to them. *Leaves of Grass* both embodies the spirit of the transcendentalist movement and marks a clear progression of the American mindset from the chaotic state of nature of Hobbes to the transcendentalist belief of inherent human goodness. His

words captured the beating heart of America then and now, its people, its values, its history, and its future.

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