

WHITMAN'S AESTHETIC OF DECENTRALIZED DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Walt Whitman is cited as the major American poet who mostly championed democracy through his style and his use of a particular plain or simple language designed for common people. His poetry destroys the "teacher / student structure" that is, the prevailing vertical scheme that characterizes the relationships between Western and non Western nations, concerning the institution of democracy in human communities. Instead, the form of decentralization the poet explores in his writing refutes the hierarchical categorization in terms of democracy, when Western nations are viewed as the 'center' and other nations qualified as the periphery.

Keywords: Poetry, Center, Periphery, Democracy, Multicultural democracy

Résumé

Walt Whitman est reconnu comme ce grand poète qui a le plus lutté pour la démocratie, celle-ci étant évoquée à travers son style et l'emploi d'un langage ordinaire particulier destiné aux hommes ordinaires. Sa poésie détruit la structure « maître / élève », c'est-à-dire celle du schéma vertical caractéristique des rapports entre l'Occident et les pays non occidentaux, s'agissant de l'institution de la démocratie dans les sociétés humaines. En revanche, le genre de décentralisation dont le poète fait l'expérience dans ses poèmes nie la catégorisation d'hierarchie dans le domaine de la démocratie, cette catégorisation qui définit les nations occidentales comme le 'centre' tandis que les autres seraient désignées par le terme de périphérie.

Mots clés : Poésie, centre, périphérie, démocratie, démocratie multiculturelle

INTRODUCTION

The process of decentralization inherent in nations today marks undoubtedly an outstanding improvement in political and administrative management. It describes a policy in which decisions and activities are removed from a central government to local governing entities. Viewed in this sense, it enables to evaluate the democratic progress in a nation, as to the scope of liberty such local

governments enjoy. If decentralization is achieved in the form of an administrative policy and a mode of management in the political field, democracy, in essence, implies a decentralization of the political power. In this sense, then, the phrase 'decentralized democracy' restates the very principle of political emancipation citizens enjoy, just like regions which may be offered some degree of autonomy for their management. In the present reflection, the phrase means to emphasize that principle, extending it to an absence of 'centre' in the teaching of democracy to other nations. Concentrated on Walt Whitman's poetry, this paper seeks to investigate into the American poet's conception of democracy, and to question the hegemonic version of the 'democratic tradition' commonly attributed to Western nations, while other nations are qualified as 'smaller' ones, that is, those marked by inadequate practice of people's participation in public management of the state.

In his book chronicling the birth and growth of ideologies in the Western world, the French philosopher Gérard Mairet reveals that the force of the word Western stems from the fact that it is viewed by Westerners themselves as the permanent measurement as well as the reference of all values in human societies ("L'idéologie de l'Occident: signification d'un mythe organique" in *Histoire des ideologies: de l'Eglise à l'Etat*, 1978: 24). One of the prominent values following World War II is certainly that of democracy, that being opposed to the totalitarian regimes which had prompted the great turmoil of the twentieth century. Although most Western powers had apparently been 'tolerant' of other political regimes that did not promote freedom, civil rights, and good governance – maybe because of the preservation of some strategic and economic interests – the objective of the expansion of democracy all over the world remained a major objective for those nations after the War.

Primarily defined as a system of values serving populations, democracy cannot yet be disconnected from the desire of power of the former colonizers, as it often

occurs in the course of history. The fact is, for those developed nations, democracy is historically a Western value with which their populations are now impregnated. To the extent that it is believed to be basically of Western origin, the Western colonizer is prone to adopt an authoritative attitude in the teaching and exportation of democratic values. The hegemonic posture, for the Western world, becomes one of the logical: having successfully experienced the democratic testing, and because it defines itself as the historical depository of those values, the next and maybe the most glorious step amounts to teaching them to the rest of the world.

Walt Whitman's poetics of democracy contrasts with such visions in that they often lead to the hegemonic attitude of Western nations in their relationships with non Western ones. His poetry is reflected by one of the most fundamental theory of democracy phrased in this formula drawn from section 47 of the poem "Song of Myself": "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (*The Complete Poems* 1975, 1982: 119). In the preaching of their model of democracy Western nations become the eloquent representative of that "teacher." Proposing a postmodern approach to the American bard's poetry, this essay will "destroy" the "teacher," that is, the prevailing vertical scheme characterizing the relationships between Western and non Western nations, concerning the institution of democracy in human communities. From the moment that we agree to relate democracy to a sign of modernity, the necessity of a "rethinking" that modernity becomes pertinent, the term "rethinking" being quoted from the book *Postmodernism* edited by Thomas Docherty. Indeed, in the preface of the book that proposes a variety of essays, Docherty views postmodernism as "a rethinking of the world."¹ The postmodernist approach in this essay will amount to a questioning of the 'authority' of the Western nations which consider themselves as a kind of center, in terms of democracy, hence their developing a patronizing attitude toward peripheral nations. But the present paper will read

¹ Thomas Docherty. 1993. *Postmodernism: A Reader*, p. xiii

Whitman's conception of democracy through a representation of the geometrical circle, with both a valuation of the center and a celebration of the periphery. Refuting the hierarchical kind of categorization often developed by the former nations, the poet's aesthetics of democracy becomes a revolution in the revolutionary tradition in the field of self-government. That revolution is echoed by poetic songs, which go beyond the motif usually apparent in most his poems, to designate a new democratic ideal.

I. The Valuation of the Center, the Celebration of the Periphery

Walt Whitman's seminal book of poems *Leaves of Grass* is usually associated with the poet's desire of contributing to the development of an emerging democracy in a nation that was growing economically and culturally. The celebration of free verse, the use of simple style and the American idiom are all viewed as characteristics of the democratic ideal.

As with so much else in his poems, and non fiction narratives, Whitman defines himself as the poet as well as the eulogist of democracy, and, according to the terms by Patrick Redding "its definitive practitioner." (*Whitman Unbound* 669) It may be argued that as the poet brought forth innovations in poetic writing, he also encouraged newly democratic nations to carry the experiment to its end, the ultimate objective being the extension of the ideal of self-government to all other regions of the world. In some moments, he values America, his home country for its position as one of the pioneers in the democratic experience. Such poems as "I Hear America Singing" in the collection titled *Inscriptions* and "America" in the first annex collection *Sands at Seventy* value the United States as a nation that promotes individual freedom. Though the poem "I Hear America Singing" praises the contribution of common citizens to the socioeconomic development of the nation, the title itself first and foremost relates to America as a state entity.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should
be blithe and strong
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank
or beam
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work,
or leaves off work (...)
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none
else¹

The metonymic trope "America" in the poem is not merely used to substitute the name of the nation for the common citizens performing their daily tasks in the construction of their community. It also serves to glorify the US nation because of its democratic foundations that guarantee individual freedom, and it accordingly presents America as one emerging center of dynamic democracy.

Also notable in the poem is the recurrent assonance in 'i' sound that appears in all the lines. The following words can be quoted in this respect: "singing, varied, hear" in line 1; "mechanics, each, singing, his, it" in line 2; "singing, his, he, beam" in line 3; "singing, his, he, ready, leaves" in line 4; "Each, singing, belongs, him" in the final line. As it can be noted, here, that assonance in 'i' sound suggests about the joyful atmosphere created in a context of liberty. The song sung by each of the common citizens reads as an expression of their enjoying freedom. It can be inferred from this poem that the writer idealizes the US as a model of democracy.

The same objective of idealization is apparent in the poem "America" in the *Sands at Seventy* collection of Whitman's poetic production:

Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,
All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or
old,
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,

¹ Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, p. 47

Personal with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and
Love,
A grand sane, towering, seated Mother,
Chair'd in the adamant of Time. (*Complete Poems*
521)

Eloquently enough, this poem qualifies America as a "Centre" (l.1) providing equality among citizens regardless their social categories. America, the "Centre," is praised because it allows people to enjoy "Freedom" (l.4) that causes the nation to resist the effect of "Time" (l.6). Another similarity between this poem and "I Hear America Singing" resides in the fact that both attribute to the "America" a metonymic meaning that is extended to a personification of the nation, which acts in the sense of the development of democracy.

It therefore appears that the poet views America as an entity founded upon democratic principles through its institutions. On other occasions, however, he leaves no room for debate when he declares in the first preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) that "the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatives, nor in its ambassadors or authors... but always most in the common people."¹ Then, after the valuation of America, the "Centre", he now celebrates the periphery, the common people who, in the state apparatus, do not hold any honorable position. Even so, the poet implies that democracy acquires its full meaning to the extent that it is energized by the people who are not daily participating in activities in the government sphere.

The idea according to which Whitman values the United States – because the force of American democracy comes from the opportunities given to citizens by state institutions – and celebrates in the same degree the people in the periphery of the state entity might appear self-contradictory. But a close analysis helps disclose the logical basis in this position. Let us imagine a circle. That

¹ Mark Van Doren. 1973. *The Portable Walt Whitman*. New York: The Viking Press, p. 6

geometrical figure shows that many radiuses can be drawn, departing from the central point to the periphery. Conceiving of the central point without its periphery becomes geometrically impossible, hence Whitman's praise of that periphery. The poem "I Hear America Singing" is an evidence of that celebration of the periphery represented by the common workers, who anonymously perform their daily tasks for the growth of their nation. These include, for example, "mechanics", the "carpenter", the "mason", the "boatman", the "deckhand", the "shoemaker", the "hatter", the "wood-cutter", the "ploughboy", the "mother", the "wife", the "girl" and certainly many others of the same social category. On the one hand, these simple workers expose evidence of a nation whose dynamism comes from its people actively participating in its socioeconomic development. On the other hand, the fact of citing various jobs as well as occupations at homes becomes the expression of the American democracy daily constructed by these simple but active citizens. The poem proves that the authority is dispersed through a myriad of voices, but not centralized by a political elite.

Like the poem "I Hear America Singing", "A Song for Occupations" in Whitman's collection titled "Calamus", evokes "Workmen" and "Workwomen" as he intends to remove social differences between people. In this respect, for instance, the poet does not consider the "statesman" – although the latter is qualified as a "wise" – more praiseworthy than any other person in the nation. In this poem, too, the objective is to celebrate the common people at the periphery. As a result, the initial vertical relationships between the political elite and those people become one of the horizontal, and the latter social body equally becomes an 'actant' of the political life in its community. The poet, therefore, does not categorize among the statesman and the common citizens. Eventually, democracy moves from the state and institutional sphere and comes down to the people who, in turn, bring in energies that permit it to get in vitality.

The opening lines of the poem "Song of Myself" shares with the poems cited above similar ideas about the displacement of the 'authority' from the center to the periphery. These opening lines read as follows:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to
you. (*Complete Poems* 63)

At home, Whitman's conception of democracy favors individual participation in the management of the state, and excludes from the American democratic ideal the forming of a political elite which may believe that common people are not capable of making decisions and giving a good orientation to the destiny of their nation. In this extract of the poem, the individual "I" who celebrates and sings himself or herself becomes aware of the existence of the "you", and the two groups of people become authorities having the same abilities to "assume" responsibilities in the State. The poet's aesthetics gives rise to a decentralization of democracy, and the break-up of the patronizing or authoritative "I", also evoked by the term "Center" in the poem "America", results in various "you", that is, those outside the "Centre", or in the periphery. In this respect, the "Center" apparent in the poem "America" disappears, and in its place the people emerge. The latter become the decentralized entities that give force to the democratic experience of the state.

But in his poetry, Whitman does not address only his fellow citizens and his time. As a Transcendentalist, his aesthetics of democracy holds much of the universal that finds its expression through a discourse meant for humanity beyond time limits. Read in reference to our world today, many of his poems about democracy become a revolution in the democratic tradition allegedly entrenched in the Western world.

II. Whitman's Aesthetic of Democracy: A Revolution in the Revolutionary Tradition

That the peoples in Western Europe and North America had achieved a significant revolution with the emergence of democracy in their respective nations is an undeniable fact. The fact that democracy itself came into being through a series of social and political crisis which led to the democratic revolution is often not emphasized enough. The fact is, when aristocratic regimes in the past had been overturned by democratic governance, the revolution was said to be successful. Gradually, the revolution became a tradition settled in the Western world. But because of a desire of power supporting ideologies, that is, the tradition, the notion of democracy would be transformed into means of disqualification of other non Western peoples, just like the notion of nation developed by the Western thought.¹ The Western world, in general, believes that it is its responsibility and its salvation mission to import or transplant its model of democracy in the other areas on the planet. As a result of that belief in the superiority of their political thoughts and practices over the rest of the world, people will view their nations as the civilized world qualified enough to produce the 'meta-civilization pattern' in today's world. This term, here, alludes to David Harvey's "meta-narratives" (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 42), a postmodern approach that underscores the postmodern novel's opposition to all forms of discourses phrased by the dominant culture.

The political discourse by Western countries is, in effect, one that pays little, and even at times, no attention to "other voices" in "other worlds" (David Harvey 42). The Western world's mission of teaching democracy turns out to reproduce the claim of the Enlightenment – another Western historical period marked by the individual's right to develop his or her own ideas in opposition to dogmas

¹ In his book *Écrits pour la démocratie*, which is a collection of essays and lectures about democracy, Professor Séry Bailly discusses the notion of nation, which has become for Western nations a means of disqualification of other nations, so far the definition of the notion tends to claim its Western socio-historical reference, p18

imposed on people by the religious and political establishment of the 18th century. But with Thomas Docherty, it can be argued that the Western "Enlightenment's 'emancipatory'" mission of teaching democracy is closely associated with "a question of power" (*Postmodernism: A reader* 6).

With its leading position in the democratic world, the US usually produces a form of political discourse similar to the "meta-narratives" in literature. In the political field, therefore, those "meta-narratives" are transformed into a vertical sort of relationships between America, the 'great democracy' and other nations, when these are attributed some sort of lower rank in terms of democratic achievement. As uttered by John Alfred Williams, "the Americans presume they can control the destinies of nations smaller than theirs" (*Jacob's Ladder* 173). By virtue of the mission for the teaching of democratic principles, the US becomes not the "Center of equal daughters, equal sons", as underscored in the poem "America," but instead the great policeman that smaller nations must venerate.

To some extent, that posture adopted by the Western world may be justified by the inadequacy and even the absence of democracy as well as cases of bad governance across the world. These are undisputed practices in most developing or emerging countries. Demands of good governance and freedom have become the requirements of modernity in the political sphere. Suffice it to recall recent upheavals in African Arabic nations known as Jasmine Revolution and also the wind of democracy that blew over most Black African nations early in the 1990s. Those events on the African continent seem to echo all African peoples' desire to enjoy the same democratic development as the one in many other nations in the world. But when we agree on such objective facts, the question is to know how democracy can be successfully transplanted in supposedly undemocratic nations.

Transplant surgery teaches us that organ transplantation remains a revolutionary operation in medical sciences, as it has become possible for a person whose organ is found defective to receive a good one from a donor. Thanks to that act of abnegation, the recipient patient is offered chance to live. By analogy, let us suppose that non democratic nations, like recipient patients, need democracy that becomes, accordingly, a kind of organ. Let us now admit that for those nations, democracy is a necessity because it may help them avoid violence that, in turn, can possibly cause the dislocation of the state. If the 'transplantation of democracy' is primarily good for nations with poor democracy, the possibility of risks of failure observed in transplantation operations cannot be overlooked. A model of democracy exported into a country culturally different from the Western milieu, indeed, oscillates between those risks and the hope of success. Sometimes, the democratic experiment is successfully carried to its end. But in other cases, it yields tragic effects, especially on the occasion of elections. In terms of relationships between former colonizers and colonized nations, too, evidences of that failure emerge through tensions coupled with accusations of a desire of power exercised over smaller nations. In the meantime, the former colonizing power will often interpret its demand of democracy as an act of salvation for the colonized. To that demand, Horace, quoted by the Indian critics, Dani and Madge, will reply: "To save a man against his will is the same as killing him" (*Classical Literary Theory and Criticism* 20).

That statement by Horace has a transcendentalist correspondence in Whitman's conception of democracy. Primarily focusing on the individual's participation in the achievement of his or her own "political liberty" (*The Portable Walt Whitman* 17), his poetry of democracy displays the following teaching: "The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own" (Ibid 13). Having certainly in mind the past of the US as colonized territories, his celebration of democracy becomes one of the

revolutionary that overturned any aristocratic power. That is why his poetic writing implies a revolution in the revolution that had brought about significant change in governance in Western nations.

Whitman's poetry questions not so much the principles of self-government, as the way that political regime may be interpreted. As an artist, he had early in his time set the base of liberty, exploring what Docherty calls "the possibility of a different future" (Postmodernism 217). In that logic, too, his writing helps define him as "avant-garde artist" committed to the emancipation of both individuals and peoples in other regions. If "Song of Myself", for instance, is commonly read in the line of his faith in the individual for the forming of a strong democratic entity, it must be emphatically noted that the discourse in the poem is one that contradicts "the authority of sign"¹ – according to the terms used by Leila Baradaram Jamili and Sara Faryam Rad. The essay produced by the two scholars gives insight into postcolonial literary works, with emphasis on *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison, the objective being to show how postcolonial novels deconstruct Western master narratives to the extent that any hegemonic discourse is rejected.

The questioning of absolute authority and knowledge claimed by the Western world in the field of democracy is also apparent in Whitman's poems. Although he shows a particular interest in the progress of democracy in his home country, the United States, as a Transcendentalist he describes himself as a citizen of the world, voicing the desire of liberty of all human beings. The US become, then, the rostrum on which he stands to address all those peoples, teaching his ideal of democracy. If at some times he likes that position of teacher, at other times, too, he refuses to be authoritative. In his first preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) he recommends: "The greatest poet does not moralize or make applications of morals...he knows

¹ Leila Baradaram Jamili, and Sara Faryam Rad, "Unhomeliness: Deconstructing the Western Master Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*", p 309.

the soul. The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own" (Whitman 13). If that recommendation in the prose writing reveals more a transcendentalist principle than a political one, the American bard's poetry also emphasizes his democratic ideal.

That ideal is poetically conveyed by the writing style in most poems of *Leaves of Grass*. In "I Hear America Singing," for example, the parallel structure involves the phrase "subject+ verb + ing that occurs in eight lines out of eleven. In "For You O Democracy" inside the "Calamus" collection, parallelism is used through the poet's phrase of commitment "I will+ verb". In this poem, the speaker lists a series of achievements thanks to democracy. In its opening section "Song of Myself" is also based on similar parallel structures with "I+ verb." The parallel construction style employed in all these poems is admittedly meant to create rhythm. But even importantly it makes the notions of equality and independence related to democracy forceful. The "I", that is, the poet holding the position of the "Centre" like in the poem "America" is endowed with the same skills and intelligence as those of the "you." That implies that there is no hierarchy between the "I", and the "you", and any hegemonic power of the former over the latter is substituted for egalitarian relations between the two categories.

That subtle correspondence between the first pronoun "I" and the second person pronoun "you" yields more than a rhetorical result. Just like the process of deconstruction in which literary texts "dismantle the cover-ups" in order to "create the semblance of meaning" (Hans Bertens 131), Whitman's poems dismantle the hegemonic relationships between a category of nations called old democracy, or great democracy, and those qualified as undemocratic. When Whitman writes in "Song of Myself" "what I assume you shall assume", he means to refuse the sort of central authority that most democratic nations in the Western world define themselves. In the second section of the

poem, the notion of liberty from any exterior influence is conveyed by the following lines:

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.
(*Complete* 65)

These verses equate with the following statement in the poem "I Hear America Singing": "Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else". The poetic song for democracy first means a celebration of equality between people, and at a higher degree, between nations, in contrast to the "unequal relations" (Webster 60) former Western colonizers tend to develop in the minds of colonized peoples when describing their political achievements. Secondly, it evokes the important principle of cultural diversity, not only inside the same nation, but also the one characterizing peoples in the world. It can be inferred from the bard's statement that a successful democratic process rests on sociological factors.

After all, Whitman's poetry purports to deconstruct the ideological version which democracy is often embedded in. By means of such poetic devices as parallelism – evoking equality and independence – as well as poignant ideas in many of his verses, his work calls for a change in the authoritative posture mostly adopted by developed nations toward developing ones. Also fundamental is the idea that every individual is asked to "filter" "things" from himself, but "not look through" the eyes of others. In political terms, that means liberty for people, and for nations, the possibility to draw from their own cultural heritage the resources for the achievement of democracy. Whitman's verses above and many others, which epitomize the core of his ideal of political liberty, insist, therefore, on the teaching of democracy with no authoritative teacher: that is the revolution in the extension of self-government. That revolution in the

teaching of democracy gives rise to a new ideal poetically displayed in his songs.

III. Whitman's Poetic Song: a Motif for the Celebration of Multicultural Democracy

When thinking of Whitman's poetry, we commonly have in mind such prevailing images as the grass, the sea, the bird, and celestial bodies comprising the earth, the sun, the moon, and stars. Those images are associated with various important themes developed by the poet. But it is the grass that most scholars view as the symbol of democracy, because it represents both the individual and the collective social body in the achievement of the democratic experiment. The title of Whitman's book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, certainly provides evidence of that correlation between the image of the grass and the writer's democratic ideal. Along with the editors of the well documented book *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1998), it is fair to acknowledge that the notion of song is conveyed in *Leaves of Grass* by the poet's interest in the voices of common people, women, and minorities that evoke the multicultural dimension in his work. Completing the freedom trend permeating *Leaves of Grass*, this section will show that the song, also substituted for the term of singing, is associated with the notion of democracy of which it becomes a vibrant representation in the same way as the grass.

In essence, poetry is associated with song and both share such characteristics as rhythmic patterns, cadences, and the chronicling of human experiences. With their references to songs or singing, the titles of many of Whitman's verses as well as the lines of many other poems seem to remind us of that essential feature of his poetic production. In addition, the poet provides various materials to appreciate the musicality in his imagination through alliteration, assonance, parallelism, repeated phrases, inversion, and other devices. Whitman himself reveals the meaning of his poetic song, in his essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1888). On the one

hand, it discloses his ambition to help shape the American nation (in *The Portable Walt Whitman* 308, 309), and form what he calls "myriads of fully develop'd and enclosed individuals" (Loc. Cit. 308). Although he eloquently mentions his ambitions in the essay, the question remains to know how these songs disclose their sense and essence in the aesthetic of democracy.

One notable fact in the whole book of poetry emphasizes the importance of participation in a project that reveals itself when the poems are read with reference to the poet's dream of democracy. For instance, in his lengthy "Song of Myself" it is the individual who sings himself or herself, and in others like "These I Singing in Spring" the voice of the poet comes to us. In another group of poems the bard listens to people singing their own songs. The two kinds of voices – that of the poet and those of people – show the image of a performance in which readers become participants and are at the same time part of the audience. Poetically that interactive scheme is shown in many poems among which one can quote one that clearly relates to the notion of democracy through its title, that is, "For You O Democracy" (*Complete Poems* 150):

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever
shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades
With the life-long love of comrades.
I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the
rivers of America, and along the shores of the great
lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about
each other's necks,
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades

The song in the poem describes a voice that sings – from line 1 to line 3 in stanza 1, and from line 1 to 2, in the second stanza. That voice striking up the song is accompanied by a responding chorus – in lines 4 and 5

concerning the first stanza, and in lines 3 and 4 in the second one. In stanza one, the singer states what he or she intends to achieve, and to that commitment the chorus responds with phrases that are repeated in quite the same terms – “With the love of comrades” in the first stanza, and “ By the love of comrades” in the second stanza. Such an example in the poem and many others tend to insist on the importance of individual participation in the forming of a great social body that gives sense to the poet’s ideal of democracy.

Whether in “For You O democracy” or in other poems like “I Hear America Singing,” the principle does not vary: the poet suggests our listening to individual voices. The songs are made audible through the voice of every single participant in the collective actions for the forming of the nation. As in the poem “Song of the Answerer” (*Complete Poems* 196), no one is excluded from the achievement of that project. It therefore appears that Whitman’s songs reflect the pattern of a choir in which every one sings in his or her own voice. In this respect, the song as a motif in his poetry conveys a democratic ideal rendered by that image of the performance of a choir. When conducting the presentation, the maestro does not certainly mean to impose his or her own voice on the singers, the sole requirement being to ask each member of the group to sing in the voice that is naturally his or hers. Despite a variety of voices taking part in the choir, the effect is no less harmonious. Similarly, Whitman’s aesthetic of democracy does not mean to impose neither on individuals nor on nations a unique voice, but call for the creative genius specific to each people for the achievement of democratic values. The poet’s writing certainly meant to address both the political class and the American citizens of his time. But the echo of his vibrant voice can be heard today, and becomes a political ideal that aims to deconstruct the Western master voice, which usually tends to dictate ways to democracy. Not only does his poetry celebrate individual freedom, but also speaks in the name of all humans. From his poems the voices of all peoples emerge and disclose a fundamental democratic

lesson: instead of speaking to smaller nations that are ordered to follow a given way, the floor must be given to the peoples of those nations for their genius to blossom. To paraphrase Whitman's poem "Song of Myself", what belongs to Western nations as good belongs to other nations, and the capacities of the latter should not be underestimated. In this respect therefore, the poem, like many others, refutes the feeling of subordination smaller nations are subtly asked to develop in the course of their relationships with those called great nations. Definitely, the recurrent evocation of song in Whitmanian poetry enables one to have doubts about the idea of a democratic mainstream, as the act of singing will reveal the individual specificity of the singers through the expression of their voices. In political terms, that amounts to the principle that democracy is not to be found in one voice, that of the maestro, but in the voices of the myriad of peoples displaying their cultural diversities.

CONCLUSION

As a motif, the song reads as a celebration of individualism, that is, the qualities of the common people, as opposed to the political elite in a nation. At a larger scale, when extended to the relationships between Western nations and other 'smaller' ones, the song becomes a celebration of cultural diversities, in contrast to any pretention of cultural mainstream. On the one hand, therefore, Whitman's aesthetic of democracy valorizes all cultures in the periphery, and refutes, on the other hand, the hegemonic posture with which so called great nations regard those designated by their poor level of governance. The issue of decentralized democracy developed in this paper rests on a logic drawn from that democratic aesthetic expressed by the singing of both the self and the others. If the center is valued, the periphery also deserves to be sung. A decentralized democracy will therefore mean the participatory roles of common citizens in the process, and also the possibility for other peoples to sing their own songs, that is, any thing associated with their cultural genius. Writing in the 19th century, Whitman had

designed an aesthetic of democracy, valorizing the cultures outside the American cultural mainstream embodied by the White elite. By extension, that aesthetic amounts to the valorization of all cultures relegated to a position of secondary importance. Read in the sense of a singing of peoples' cultures, the poems suggest a rethinking of the democratic tradition, which is a sign of modernity. In other words, the poems by Whitman enable to state that postmodernism may not have begun only after World War II.

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