

Walt Whitman as a poet of 'En-Masse'

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Abstract

“Walt Whitman’s poetry has not been a poetry of a ‘class’ but a poetry in which he celebrates common humanity and applies the word, ‘En-Masse’ It has been the poetry of common people of the society where all are equal irrespective of their color, caste and religion. Many words have been used, coined since time immemorial. But the word ‘en-masse’ appeals to the poet more than any other word. En-masse stands for all humanity. Feeling of sympathy and comradeship, the inevitable offshoots of the true democratic impulse, pervade Whitman poetry. Balanced between the separate person and the En-Masse, the politics of Leaves of Grass is neither liberal nor bourgeois in the classical sense of the terms; rather the poems represent the republican ideals of early nineteenth century artisan radicalism, emphasizing the interlinked values of independence and community, personal wealth and commonwealth. The civil war transformed Whitman’s sense of both the word “en-masse” and the nature of its modernity. Throughout his poetry and prose related to the war, Whitman affirms that the war justified his faith in “en-masse” in the essential goodness and the democratic spirit of the America people.

The poet has great faith in democracy. Democracy will never betray humanity. The poet is also under the influence of the words like ‘Reality and Materialism.’ He believes in the basic realities of life. He has appreciated the constructive work done by the scientists, astronomers, geologists, mathematicians. Their work is very useful for the mankind. He is not singing of his self, but of “one’s self.” The indefinite pronoun leaves the expression with an indefinable charm because “one” refers to everyone. The “Simple separate person” is a democrat. He sings of the human body which has been generally ignored by the poets. The poet begins by claiming that the poem is an ode to “one’s-self” - an individual. He then immediately expands the scope of the poem by applying it to individual “en-masse”, emphasizing the democratic nature of the work. The present paper is an attempt to explore Walt Whitman’s democratic ideas and analyze how he has been the poet of ‘En-Masse.’

Introduction

Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass was republished ten times with certain additions and corrections which brought the poet a meager income and in the later days he was mostly supported by his friends. His friends assisted him financially for his service to humanity and for his genius. He lived in Camden, New Jersey during his last nineteen years. A few noted critics recognized his genius and hence his little house became the object of pilgrimages from all parts of America and England.

“Whitman’s poetry has not been a poetry of a ‘class’ but a poetry in which he celebrates common humanity and applies the word, ‘en-masse’¹ It has been the poetry of common people of the society where all are equal irrespective of their color, caste and religion. The spirit of

equality is the very foundation of *Leaves of Grass* upon which the entire creation of the universe stands. *Leaves of Grass* is the song of a great democratic individual, male and female in which for the first time, equal status was born to all men and women, poor and rich, Negro slaves and white people.

“Endless unfolding of words of ages!

And mine a word of the modern, a word *en-masse*”²

These lines show the democratic ideas of the poet that run through the veins of his poetry. Many words have been used, coined since time immemorial. But the word ‘*en-masse*’ appeals to the poet more than any other word. *En-masse* stands for all humanity, for all significant and insignificant things, for entire mankind. To the poet the entire mankind is one. All men and women are equal. There is no disparity between people belonging to different caste, creed or color. Whitman is the poet of “*En-Masse*.” In singing himself he sings of all for he identifies himself totally with the average. American, as well as the whole mankind. He possesses what other may possess. He does not support special favour that he can’t share with ‘all’. He declares he will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms sec. 24. He also says,

“For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you.”³

Feeling of sympathy and comradeship, the inevitable offshoots of the true democratic impulse, pervade Whitman poetry. Anyone without sympathy for his fellow human being, in Whitman’s opinion, walks into his own funeral in his shroud.

“And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy
walks to his own funeral dressed in his shroud.”⁴

“The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lesson but its own. But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other. The inmost secrets of art sleep with the twain. The greatest poet has lain close betwixt both and they are vital to his style and thoughts.”⁵ The secret of Whitman’s art and the American Union, the paradox of many in one, eventually became the opening inscription and balancing frame of *Leaves of Grass*:

One’s self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word democratic, the word *en-masse*.

Balanced between the separate person and the *en-masse*, the politics of *Leaves of Grass* is neither liberal nor bourgeois in the classical sense of the terms; rather, the poems represent the republican ideals of early nineteenth century artisan radicalism, emphasizing the interlinked values of independence and community, personal wealth and commonwealth. The familiar Whitman’s motifs are all there: the individual and the collective, man and woman, body and soul, art and America. And so, too, is the familiar Whitman ploy of communicating these themes through reader involvement. But even the appearance of this statement in print did not satisfy Whitman, who eventually condensed this inscription into the short programmatic poem, “One’s self I sing”, which was to become the lead poem to all later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. It was very slim and it contained the kernel of his thinking about the dichotomy in his society between the individual the simple separate person and the democratic whole - the ‘*En-masse*.’⁶

The civil war transformed Whitman's sense of both the word "en-masse" and the nature of its modernity. Throughout his poetry and prose related to the war, Whitman affirms that the war justified his faith in "en-masse" - in the essential goodness and the democratic spirit of the America people. The battle lines drawn by the civil war intensified the split between the ideas of individualism and union. Whitman believed that a grand nationality must allow full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions. Walt Whitman revolts against conservatism and orthodox views in the society. Only one word in his life appealed Whitman and that is 'En-masse.' It is suggesting all mankind. It is all inclusive and conveys the true caliber of democracy that all are equal.

The poet has great faith in democracy. Democracy will never betray humanity. The poet is also under the influence of the words like 'Reality and materialism.' He believes in the basic realities of life. He has appreciated the constructive work done by the scientists, astronomers, geologists, mathematicians. Their work is very useful for the mankind. Their works provide the materialistic comfort to human being which appears to be very necessary for the development of human society. After the physical and material comforts, Whitman paves the way to reach the eternal. The self of the poet becomes 'cosmic'. The self manifests itself in the universe. In the modern times we have achieved material advancement. However, he is found, bound by customs and conventions, superstitions which hamper an all-round development of his personality. Merely attainment of materialistic comfort has not been an end in itself. The self of a man should mingle with the divine. This is to be achieved only by beating "the gong of revolt." He revolted against conservatism and orthodoxy in the society as it hampers all-round development of the modern world. Therefore, he was charmed and appealed by the word 'En-masse' which is all inclusive exhibiting true spirit of democracy. Whitman is the poet of "En-masse."⁷

ONE'S – SELF I sing, a simple separate person,

Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

In the above lines, the expression 'I sing' is usually associated with the opening of the epic poem. Whitman has taken his poem to be an epic. He is not singing of his self, but of "one's self." The indefinite pronoun leaves the expression with an indefinable charm because "one" refers to everyone. The "Simple separate person" is a democrat.

"Democratic also implies the reality of a society. A democracy is made up of an association of individuals. Then Whitman's "one's self" is both separate and social. This social reality is suggested by "En-Masse." He sings of the human body which has been generally ignored by the poets. The 'form complete' is the total personality of a man. This personality includes the body, the wind and the soul. Such a form is a better poetic theme than an aspect of that form. Whitman's subject - matter includes the personality of a woman and the personality of a man. He sings of the emotional life ("passion"), human activity ("pulse") and power. These three are united in the modern man. The modern man is the modern American. Gradually he became the citizen of the World."⁸

Walt Whitman does not sing of his self but he sing of 'one's – self.' The poet is a person, and the poem leaves presents a series of personae. This self is "separate," but he is always merging with others. He is the citizen of a democratic system of the government where he preserves his identity. The democratic man holds to the inviolable integrity of the self and also to the collection of all men. He is identical, and yet not identical, with the En-Masse. He started

with an uncritical acceptance of life and gradually he turned into his consciousness through his senses and insight. Then he turned outward through love and friendliness to the democratic masses.

The poem directly addresses the successive themes in Whitman's poems. The poet begins by claiming that the poem is an ode to "one's - Self" - an individual. He then immediately expands the scope of the poem by applying it to individual "en-masse", emphasizing the democratic nature of the work. "According to this poem, Whitman's ensuing poetry will encompass both the individual and the collective, democratic mass, drawing many parallels between them. The speaker further asserts that he "sings" (or, as a poet, writes) about the body, about both men and women about life and passion. The poem concludes with the idea of the modern man, an ideal of American society that Whitman hopes to attain through his poetry."⁹

"Walt Whitman" in the text – hero named "I" should not be confused with the routine Whitman. He has been a dramatized or idealized figure and put forward as representative American workingman, but one who prefers to loaf and invite his soul. He is rough, sunburned, bearded; he cocks his hat as he pleases. He has no local or family background and he is deprived of individual characteristics, with the exception of curiosity, boastfulness, and an abnormally developed sense of touch. His distinguishing feature is that he has been granted a vision, as a result he has realized the potentialities latent in every American and every living person. Leaning and loafing at his ease, "observing a spear of summer grass," he presents himself as a man who lives outdoors and worships his own naked body. He is also in love with his deeper self or soul, but explains that it is not to be confused with his mere personality. His joyful contentment can be shared by you, the listener, "for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." His companions were the commoners, not too important and the celebrated. He took that an individual can be formed so in freedom as to possess. "the qualities that make a superb nation." He uses himself as an illustration because he represents the divine average and because he does not know any other thoroughly.

Three important events of 1869 and 1870 led Whitman to contemplate a United world. The first was the completion of a railroad across North America from east to west. The second was the laying of the transatlantic cable and the last was the opening of the Suez Canal. These achievements of science and technology made the world closer and more compact. Such reflections formed the background of his poems. By 1867 the theme of the 'Modern man' was established. He was "rude child of the people" and "liked the ungentle ways of the labourers." He was not prejudiced. He described himself as a folk poet who in a moment of illumination gained the belief that he was to be "the prophet of democracy." Here, we come to know, a poet who is putting aside all his commitment to tradition and conformity. He started with an uncritical acceptance of life and gradually he turned into his consciousness through his sense and insight. Later, he turned outward through love and friendliness to the democratic "masses."

To the poet the whole cosmos is beautiful. Nothing is trivial to him in the whole universe. Everything in this world can be subject of his poetry. It is noteworthy how he emphasizes the world "En – masses,"

Endless unfolding of words of Ages!

And mine a word of the modern, the word "En-masse"

These lines show the democratic ideas of the poet that run through the vein of his poetry. Many words have been used, coined since time immemorial. But the words “En-Masse” appeals to the poet than any other words. “En-Masse” stands for all human being, for all significant or insignificant things and for entire universe and mankind. According to the poet the entire mankind is one. All men and women are equal. Nobody can find disparity between people belonging to different caste, creed or colour. Whitman, obviously, becomes the poet of “En-Masse.”

Conclusion

Therefore, one can see in his Song of Myself, Whitman emerges as the champion of equality and democracy. He has a deep faith in democracy because this political form of government respects the individual. The poet further asserts that he sings about the body, about both men and women, about life and passion. Whitman hopes to attain ‘The Modern Man,’ an ideal of American society through his poetry by expanding the scope of the poem by applying it to individuals “en-masse.”

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