

The "Multiple" Whitman: an optimistic vision of the universe

"Who touches this, touches a man"
(W. Whitman, about his book *Leaves of Grass*)

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Abstract^o

The objective of this work is to make a survey of some characteristics that are found in Walt Whitman's poetry and relate them to his possible optimistic vision of the universe. The characteristics which were selected to develop this work can be related, along with others, to the equality issue among men and women, Whitman's concept of brotherhood, the celebration of the individual as well as the whole and his vision of death. Such characteristics can be understood not only as an optimistic vision of the world, but also they can be associated to the concepts of the transcendentalist philosophy and to the concept of Humanism.

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é realizar um levantamento de algumas características encontradas na poesia de Walt Whitman e associá-las à sua possível visão otimista do universo. As características selecionadas para desenvolver este trabalho podem ser relacionadas, dentre outras, à questão igualdade entre homens e mulheres, à sua concepção de irmandade, à celebração do indivíduo bem como da união entre os indivíduos e à sua visão da morte. Tais características podem ser compreendidas não só como uma visão otimista do mundo, mas também podem ser associadas aos conceitos da filosofia transcendentalista e à concepção de Humanismo.

"Latent, in a great user of words must actually be all passions, crimes, trades, animals, stars, God, sex, the past, night, space, metals, and the like – because these are the words, and he who is not these, plays with a foreign tongue, turning helplessly to dictionaries and authorities"¹

Some relevant characteristics in Walt Whitman's poetry can be considered representative of an optimistic and/or transcendental vision of the universe – understood as everything that exists, including the earth, the stars, space, etc. It is pertinent to assert, as it will be seen in the course of this work, that the transcendentalist concept about the universe, in a way, can also be grasped as an optimistic vision since it is directly related to a confident and positive vision of things. As a result, both visions – transcendental and optimistic – seem to be fairly close to each other and both can be apprehended in Whitman's poetry. What is more, an attempt in order to demonstrate the way some elements found in Whitman's poems can be taken as an optimistic (or even transcendental) impression of the world will also been established.

As Whitman can be considered a "multiple poet", that is, a poet who writes about many different themes such as equality between men and women, homosexuality, a vision of brotherhood, a vision of democracy, nationalism as well as internationalism, the one and the whole, death, freedom, etc. it will be needed to pick up just the most relevant (or appropriate) themes for this work.

Even though there will be a sort of 'selection' in terms of the most relevant characteristics for this study, in a way, the other aspects will be part of this work as well, because it is quite difficult to separate these characteristics from each other since they seem to be correlated or connected one to the other. Some of the characteristics that will be emphasized here are related to Whitman's vision of the individuality and of unity as well. The following citation illustrates the importance of this first topic:

The longest and generally considered the best, later entitled "Song of Myself" was a vision of a symbolic "I" enraptured by the senses, vicariously embracing all people and

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¹ FEIDELSON, Charles. Whitman as Symbolist – in: *The Poet in 1860 in Whitman – a collection of critical essays*, p. 83, 1962.

places from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans²

An additional characteristic is associated to Whitman's democratic vision, which is a recurrent aspect in his poems and from which it is possible to verify his attempt to establish a new concept regarding the equality between men and women. That can be considered a revolutionary concept if one takes into consideration the time he lived in. This vision also entails a sense of brotherhood – understood in the sense that all men should live in harmony. Consequently, there would not be a superior being since all men are taken as equivalent. One can declare that Whitman's democratic vision can be considered the best illustrative characteristic of his positive vision of the world:

Presenting himself as a model democrat who speaks as and for rather than apart from people, Whitman's poet is a breaker of bounds; he is female and male, farmer and factory worker, prostitute and slave, citizen of America and citizen of the world³

According to Whitman, there would be no death at all given that everybody is immortal or 'endless'. Whitman's concept of death can also be considered an optimistic one since the persona of Whitman's poems gives the impression of declaring that there would not be (or there is not) an 'end'. As he stated in some poems "I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself/(They do not know how immortal, but I know" p. 919).

Another characteristic is about Whitman's credence concerning everything that exists – all the elements that can be found in the universe. He tries to see goodness in every thing that lives and such an attempt is in a straight line related to the Transcendentalist philosophy can be understood as follows:

Transcendentalism, in philosophy and literature, belief in a higher reality than that found in sense experience or in a higher kind of knowledge than that achieved by human reason. Nearly all transcendentalist doctrines stem from the division of reality into a realm of spirit and a realm of matter. Such a division is made by many of the great religions of the world.⁴

The terms *transcendent* and *transcendental* were used in a narrower and technical sense by Scholastic philosophers late in the Middle Ages to denote concepts of unlimited generality concerning all types of things. The Scholastics recognized six such transcendental concepts. They were essence, unity, goodness, truth, thing, and something.

In addition, the transcendentalists were influenced by romanticism, especially in such aspects as self-examination, the celebration of individualism, and the exaltation of the beauties of nature and humankind. As a consequence, transcendentalist writers expressed a direct connection, or correspondence, between the universe (macrocosm) and the individual soul (microcosm).

Within this view, divinity permeated all objects, animate or inanimate, and the purpose of human life was the union with the so-called 'Over-Soul. Intuition', rather than reason, was regarded as the highest human faculty. Performance of human potential could be accomplished through mysticism or through a sensitive consciousness of the beauty and truth of the surrounding natural world. This process was regarded as intrinsically individual. Because of the prior concept of Transcendentalism, the idea of a sort of an optimistic vision of the universe can be emphasized.

The concept of Humanism is also important to this work in view of the fact that, in terms of philosophy, it represents an attitude that accentuates the dignity and worth of the individual. "A basic premise of humanism is that people are rational beings who possess within themselves the capacity for truth and goodness"⁵

The following quotation points up Whitman's objective when he intended to write a 'different' kind of Literature. Whitman's exuberance dictated the creation of a new, unrestrained verse form. The long, rhythmic lines, the heaping up of details, and the affirmation of mystic identity with all that exists were intended to celebrate the spiritual strength in the democracy of, as he himself stated, "powerful uneducated persons". In a long preface he announced an innovative democratic literature, which intended to be:

(...) commensurate with a people, simple and unconquerable, written by a new kind of poet who was affectionate, brawny, and

² Whitman, Walt, Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

³ ERKKILA, B.; GROSSMAN, J. *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*. P. 7, 1996

⁴ "Transcendentalism", Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

⁵ Humanism, Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

*heroic and who would lead by the force of his magnetic personality*⁶.

Whitman's commentary on his own book *Leaves of Grass* is fairly interesting in view of the fact that it is reliably related to the concept of humanism (since he refers to man in a general sense – humankind):

*This is no book; who touches this touches a man, its it night? Are we done? It is I you hold, and who holds you, I spring from the pages into your arms – de cease calls me forth*⁷

Making an allowance for the man who is referred to by the "gray poet", Walt Whitman, it is possible to state that he was bombastic, affirmative, self-involved, yet mystical and sensitive. Moreover, Whitman is considered responsible for a new form of poetry, which is interconnected to his revolutionary ideas:

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Whitman is a poet who reflects explicitly on the existence of the individual as a "separate person", who has peculiarities and importance in the universe. The individual is considered a unique human being, a person who has or would have a reason or purpose for being alive and who would have an individual attempt to live simply and in harmony with nature:

One's-Self I sing, a simple, separate person, yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse. (...) Of Life immense passion, pulse, and power, Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine, (...) (p. 914)

Through the prior fragment, one can perceive a transcendental and also a humanistic characteristic related to Whitman's poetry. The persona seems to commemorate the individual – also as a part of the world, the universe. The words "passion, pulse and power" reinforce this idea. The confident vision can be found mainly through the words "passion, cheerful, freest". Here, the individual is exalted and he/she is considered as a being who is surrounded by an intrinsic faculty for truth and goodness since the individual is a creature

"form'd under the laws divine"; the last word is straightforwardly related to truth and goodness.

In the next fragments, persona refers to his democratic vision. It is possible to observe it in relation to people. This democratic vision also refers to the equality between men and women, in the second fragment as well as the equality among several and different people in the third fragment. The sense of brotherhood (friendship and understanding among people) appears mainly in the first fragment. Moreover, in the third fragment, the persona shows that there should not be exclusion ("there shall be no difference...") in relation to people who are different from a 'social common convention (or model)' – understood as an 'implicit code' that is usually shared by the majority of a society and that is appreciated by the greater part of it:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (p. 914)

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, and I say it is great to be a woman as to be a man, (...) (p. 928)

(...) I make appointments with all, I will not have a single person slighted or left away, the kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited; there shall be no difference between them and the rest (p. 927)

Pearce states that "the 'I' of these poems is meant to include the reader – as at once potential poet and reader of poems"⁹. Considering the preceding statement, it is worth mentioning that the democratic vision is emphasized in the previous fragments given that this fragment possibly "includes the reader".

The following fragment also signals to Whitman's positive view concerning the world:

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul. (916)

The persona sees himself (or his soul) and the things (not his soul) around him "clear and sweet". The words "clear" and "sweet" refer to things that give the impression of being good, lovable and positive.

Such a view can be grasped as a tendency to expect the best in all things, the confidence or belief in people in a general way as well as in oneself and in the future, as persona states ("I

⁶ "Whitman, Walt". Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

⁷ PEARCE, R. Whitman Justified: The Poet in 1860 in *Whitman – a collection of critical essays*, p. 47, 1962.

⁸ PEARCE, R. Whitman Justified: The Poet in 1860 in *Whitman – a collection of critical essays*, p. 50, 1962.

⁹ PEARCE, R. Whitman Justified: The Poet in 1860 in *Whitman – a collection of critical essays*, p. 50, 1962.

believe in my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, and you must not be abased to the other" p. 917). Again the concept of equality can be inferred in view of the fact that, according to persona, there would be neither a superior being nor an inferior one. Moreover, persona believes in his soul, that is, he accepts as true the fact that his 'spirit' or his 'essence' can be able to provide him a sort of self-confidence and also a positive attitude in relation to the world around him and also to the future.

The persona considers people in general as equal ones – as brothers and sisters – and that humankind is equivalent to God because the spirit of God is like "his brother". If man is equivalent to God, then man possesses all the good and supreme qualities that are attributed to Him. As a consequence, there is not a superior being since everybody shares a fraternal relationship and similar qualities is obvious:

(...) And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, and I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, and that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers, and that a keelson (timbers that brace the keel) of creation is love, (...) (p. 917)

(...) I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself (p. 957)

The next fragment points to a kind of appeal to people assume their own personalities – do not wear a kind of 'mask'. In other words, whatever they assume or accept as true or innate in their own nature is part of the nature of God, that is, it would be so divine or natural as God is considered. In addition, he asserts that, in a way, nobody can judge others "You are not guilty to me", that is, 'I' cannot judge you.

Undrape! You are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded, I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no, and am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away (p. 919)

It is remarkable to observe how Whitman's poems have a type of 'intrinsic power' that seems to involve all the creatures of the universe or seems to have the intention of doing it. And by doing it, his concept of unity within diversity is also emphasized because, in some fragments, persona makes reference to different and even contradictory people's personalities.

Sometimes persona seems to contradict himself since he presents people who can be considered opposite in terms of personalities and/or

behaviors and, to a certain extent, he intends to be them ("I am of..."). Considering this perceptible 'conflict' it is pertinent to present a short fragment: "I resist any thing better than my own diversity" (p. 926), that is, he admits his own multiplicity. However, his multiplicity also gives the impression that by celebrating oneself, persona also would be celebrating a sort of 'group' formed by several 'individuals' who can be even contrary (the smallest and the largest, for instance):

Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and female, for me those that have been boys and that love women, for me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted, for me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers and mothers of mothers, for me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears, for me children and the begetters of children (p. 919)

I am of old and of 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 (...) the smallest the same and the largest the same (...) (p. 925).

Another interpretation that can be inferred through both fragments is about the persona's desire of projecting himself in everybody that lives. It is an additional characteristic related to Whitman's poetry. However, this work does not intend to put it in evidence.

A further relevant point concerning Whitman's poetry is about a possible belief in a cosmological balance of forces, that is, everything in the world would have its own place and its own function in this balance of forces, which is composed by two opposite poles (the negative and the positive one). All the elements of the universe would have a reason for existing even those that represent the negative ones. In other words, there would be a purpose for each element – even those that seem insignificant, so that they would be considered a part of the equilibrium of the universe.

This idea can also point to a positive attitude (and a transcendental one) of things (or elements of the creation) in view of the fact that it is possible to apprehend that there would be a meaning – or a cosmological purpose – in everything that lives. Consequently, as already mentioned, there would be a direct connection between the macrocosm (universe) and the microcosm (the individual) – a sort of equilibrium can be observed through this connection or correspondence. The fragments below express such a view:

(The moth and the fish-eggs are in their place, the bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their place, the palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place) (p. 926)

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day? I also say it is good to fall, battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won. (p. 226)

In the last fragment, the idea of the 'cosmological balance' of forces become clearer since persona asserts that the 'spirit' that is present in both events – to win or to fall a battle – is 'the same'. It can be inferred that there would be a reason for both events to take place. In a way, both events (the positive and the negative one) make part of the equilibrium of the universe because each one has its own particular purpose.

The following poem can be taken as having a confident view of a "thing" that cannot be described in words, but that refers to happiness. It also makes reference or can be associated to the transcendental view of life. This singular word, happiness, can be related to a feeling or/and reaction that expresses pleasure, contentment, gladness and that can be, to a certain extent, related to the concept of optimism because this word provokes the persona's optimistic attitude in the face of life. Through his attitude, it seems he intends to share his own discovery with his brothers and sisters ("Do you see O my brothers and sisters?").

It is viable to assert that the persona, in a way, provides his own concept of happiness. It is a sort of wonderful individual, that is, persona seems to have reached a personal discovery in relation to his own experiences. What is more, he considered it so good that he intends to divide his own discovery with his 'brothers' and 'sisters'.

There is that in me – I do not know what it is – but I know it is in me.

Wrench'd and sweaty – calm and cool then my body becomes, I sleep, I sleep long.

I do not know it – it is without a name – it is a word unsaid,

It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,

To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.

Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?

It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan – it is eternal life – it is happiness (p. 958)

Some ideas related to Transcendentalism can also be found given that the terms of this philosophy advocate that "knowledge" can be inferred by the person's intuition. The persona gives the impression of having discovered – by himself ("I know it is in me") – the sense of eternal life, which could be based on "form, union, plan", and it could represent or be identified as happiness.

An extra and relevant characteristic that can be found in Whitman's poetry is related to death. It is possible to argue that usually this singular word represents a sort of negative meaning given that its implication is related to suffering and sadness. Besides, this word – death – is also grasped as a direct synonym of loss or even as end (of life). However, Whitman provides a different concept of death. According to some fragments of his poems, everything is immortal, eternal:

They are alive and well somewhere, the smallest sprout shows there is really no death, and if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it, and ceas'd the moment life appear'd (p. 918)

In the previous fragment, the persona states that there is no death at all. Also, he gives the impression of providing a kind of hope for those who lost their dear relatives or friends ("They are alive and well somewhere") and it can be associated to a positive vision of death – a vision that, in a way, makes part of the large sense of the universe. Moreover, through the prior statement, it is possible to presume his vision of life after death since there would be a place where dead people would be alive "well somewhere".

The fragment below endorses that vision:

(...) And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (P. 918)

Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born? I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it. I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe (...) (p. 918)

In both prior fragments, the persona declares that the general concept of death is, to a certain extent, wrong ("And to die is different from what any one supposed"). He states that to die can be even - to use his own expression - "luckier". Through this word, an assertive idea is conveyed. As persona states, to be born "is just as lucky as to die". According to persona, death is part of life; it is

part of the destiny of everything that lives. As a result, one can say that death should not be faced like a misfortune or even as a bad event.

As stated in the introduction of this work, the purpose of this paper was to verify, through fragments from Whitman's poems, an optimistic or a confident vision of the universe. It was also possible to verify a great number of characteristics in his poetry and that sometimes give the impression of being contradictory. However, this contradiction can be explained because Whitman is 'large', he 'contains multitudes'. In short, he is a multiple poet:

Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes) (p 958).

In order to conclude this work, it is pertinent to observe that all the characteristics presented in the course of this work have pointed to a noticeable cheerful vision of the universe. Some of them, even though they were not entirely developed, are undoubtedly part of Whitman's poetry and also contribute to reinforce the intention of this work:

*The central terms in the argument of the 1860 Leaves of Grass, I suggest, run something like this: (...) self-discovery, self-love, rebirth, diffusion of self, art, (...) love-of-others, death, reintegration of self, immortality. (...) the claims are strictly humanistic (...)*¹⁰

In addition, the reference to the Transcendentalist and Humanistic philosophies, in a way, functioned as a helpful resource (or support) to emphasize the optimism that can be found in Whitman's poetry.

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¹⁰ PEARCE, R. Whitman Justified: The Poet in 1860 in *Whitman – a collection of critical essays*, p. 52, 1962.