THE POETIC ODYSSEY-A THEORETICAL DESCENT INTO THE WHITMANESQUE RENAISSANCE. PROLEGOMENA FOR WHITMAN'S UNIVERSE OF PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: The canonization of Walt Whitman in the spectrum of the American Romantic corpus represents an act of acceptance and tribute to the literary construct "Leaves of Grass", as well as an edifice in honor of the novelty brought to poetry by the daring "bard". Nevertheless, the Whitmanesque Romanticism is a slightly distinct entity in itself as it breaks from the canonic compound and sets its own identity as a workforce that dismantles the trademark of American Romanticism. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the poetic level at which Whitman reunites Romanticism and Americanism, while, at the same time, it disembarks from the literary mainstream. To parallel the Whitmanesque universe of perceptions solely to the Romantic pillars of idealism and rebellion would be unfair and insufficient, for which reason one significant aspect demands focus, namely, the depiction of the poetical responsibility and purpose. The leading premise that serves for the interpretation of this poetical structure is Roger Chartier's idea that "works have no stable, fixed meaning", for which reason a perpetual act of recontextualization and reiteration is a must.

Keywords: identity, Romantic literature, poet-seer, poetic democracy, linguistic innovation

Using F. O. Matthiessen's term "Renaissance" to designate the epoch of Romanticism in the United States requires a series of notes meant to set forth the premises of Whitman's individualism. Namely, this Renaissance was definitely and defiantly American, in the sense that the overall aim of writing was a struggle to understand the meanings of "American" and attach labels to a literature that was not British, but American. The key feature that defines the authorial individualism characteristic for this period stemmed from the writers' difficulty to disintegrate this struggle: in questioning the identity and status of the writer in the American society, matters gained an intensely personal touch rather than resume to the apparent nationalistic label.

Moreover, the intentness of Romanticism in America derived from the rhetoric of guilt and salvation (as reminiscence of Puritanism) mixed with equalitarian freedom, so that novelty and originality could be read as trademarks of Americanism and not borrowings from British Romanticism. Consequently, the occurrence of the American "brand" of Romanticism is a leap into individualism and self-fulfillment, rather than a mere copy of European forces over literature. Naturally, the components of American Romanticism count numerous traits, but, in order to resume to the Whitmanesque representation, the spectrum of reference shall be restrained significantly, so as to allow interpretation.

The poet at crossroads: between Romantics' trend and the ideology of Americanism

If contemporary assertions that a poem's subject can be a medley of anything and everything and that the content is independent of any rigor or structure may suggest the all-encompassing force of poetry, the tone of American Romanticism called for a different perspective. Despite the loosened apparatus of subject matter that Romantics embraced, there was, however, an imperious selection of material that governed the author's creativity and that

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impeded derailments towards democratic aesthetics. Whitman's understanding of this clash between a dictatorial selection of topics and democracy's liberties led, somehow, to a fair literary representation of American diversity. But, more importantly, the salience of Whitman's rupture from the mainstream in terms of choosing and representing the poetical core resides in the meaning that he gives to the "poet", as an "arbiter" of diversity and not as a judge who conducts the selection trial for the benefit of causality.

Prior to presenting the vision of "poetical destiny" it is mandatory to drill into the contextual foundations of Romantic tradition in America, and, namely, to place the Whitmanesque niche of poetic embodiment in the larger mainstream. In this respect, Emerson's essay "The Poet" (1845) provides the framework of comparison between Whitman's delineated account of the poet and that of the other American Romantics. Depicting poets as "men of genius" and "liberating gods" whose gifts raised them above an understanding of the ordinary perception of beauty, the Emersonian theory emphasizes the poetic role in such a way as it allows him to elucidate both meaning and coherence of the world, and to grasp the unity of real and ideal. Poets of Romantic nature were, to Emerson's idea, similar to visionaries of cultures, who could engage in a quest of intuition and freedom for the benefit of unveiling universalism truths. The prospect of imagining the Romantic poet as prophet/seer emerged from the specific contextualization of America, where the power of sight functioned as an ideological conundrum.

Furthermore, in order to probe the validity of the poet-prophet/seer, a remote distance from readers imposes: "he is isolated among his contemporaries; to realize his art; he must leave the world, and know the muse only."[1] Apart from this imaginative isolation, the poet also eluded the responsibility and pressure over conformity to expectations, which granted him a certain dose of "self-reliance" and power of individualism. Nevertheless, one should not read the rupture of the poet-seer with society as a complete one, but rather as a partial dislocation, through which the communicational act is maintained as a social mission of the poet. If this teaching act that poetry hereby proliferates is performed from a considerate distance, the purpose is easily accounted for in favor of the poet's duty to preserve the "purity of his conscience."

This concept of the poet as shaper of reality, a prerequisite of American Romanticism, is not endorsed in Whitman's poetry, as the idea that the poet should present meaning from either beneath or above reality doesn't comply with the Whitmanesque ideology. Instead, the poet that Whitman draws is one who digs at soil-level reality, interested in the representation of the world as it is, and not as it could be imagined by a venturous and over-imaginative mind. The average, therefore, is not a misleading principle in the taxonomy of the Whitmanesque poet, but rather a label that ensures the identity-formation cycle of the Romantic.

"The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. Let who may exalte or startle or fascinate or sooth I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as regardless of observation. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror…The poets of the kosmos possess the superiority of genuineness over all fiction and romance."[2]

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, Book Jungle, New York,2003 p. 47
[2] Walt Whitman, " The Preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass" in *The Complete Poems of Walt Whitman*, Wordsworth Library, London, 2006, p. 501

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A coalescence with the audience-reader is the governing principle in Whitman's portrayal of the Romantic poet, by which no walls could undermine the authority of an authorial voice, nor could the artifice of composition alter the causality of creative communication. In fact, Whitman dwells heavily on the omnipotence of "genuineness" as a vehicle for authentic transcendence and invites towards a reading of the "poet" as patch-work puzzle. That is, the poet's force transgresses the border of poetry and reaches the realms of readers' interpretative valences only by means of thorough liberty, both in content, form and distribution channel, respectively, in terms of message, structure and poetic oratory.

The emblem of poet-reader relationship that Whitman postulates through his understanding of the poetic function is best represented by Roger Chartier's idea that "works are invested with plural and mobile significations that are constructed in the encounter between a proposal and a reception. The meanings attributed to their forms and their themes depend upon the areas of competence or the expectations of the various publics that take hold of them. To be sure, the creators (or the power or the clerics) always aspire to pin down their meaning and proclaim the correct interpretation, the interpretation that ought to constrain reading(or viewing). But without fail reception invents, shifts about, distorts."[3]

Using this idea as guideline for the Whitmanesque definition of the poet, it becomes obvious that the author's position is strongly biased by the "reception" party, and slightly detached from the "proposal" scope. In the Romantic conceptual terminology, the "proposal" stems from the poetic responsibility to inflect and constrain, through linguistic procedure and metaphorical design, the communicative act and, therefore, to persuade the audience of the poetical intentness. However, such an Emersonian play with poetry, in which the dialectical encounter is mainly coordinated by the poet, leaves little space to the development of the reader's remodeling of the text.

It is at this point that the ideological vision of the American Romantics collides with Whitman's view, which, by comparison, takes sides with the "reception" and willingly accepts that readers are responsible and owe the author a continual remake of poetry. Needless to say, construing the poetical text at a limitless pace is an idealistic stance, for which reason Whitman seized the opportunity to transform the communicative act into an active correspondence with readers. Whitman went even further in countermanding his position as isolate by devising the multiple identities of "Song of Myself" and by reducing the Romantic prophetic outsider's voice- the theme of fusion with readers, the honest address to the working class, his renaming as "poet-comrade" during the Civil War, and his transformation into the Good Gray Poet at the end of his life.

The depiction of the Emersonian Romantic poet as prophet/seer immersed a new cultural effect in the canonic ideology: to affiliate poetry with the sacred and esoteric domain. Whitman, however, distorted this image severely through his departure from a sacred conception of poetry towards one that is more earthly-bound and more connected to the poet's responsibility to disseminate word rather than conceal meanings. A new tension occurred at the level of interposing individualism and community, where Romanticism strived for the self-expression as central object of their creed and viewed the civic responsibility as a remote, even though necessary, stance. In exchange, Whitman's creed was to covey meaning to both: his poetry would reach individualism through the civil respect and through the mechanism of responsible communion.

Experiencing poetic democracy- a bilateral communication

[3] Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books:Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth andEighteenth Centuries,* Stanford University Press, Stanford,1994,p. ix

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In addition to the portrayal of the poetic responsibility and destiny, another crucial element that reunites features of Americanism and Romantic tradition in Whitman's poetry is the *poetic experience* as guiding principle for the creative act. Such a poetic experience is centered on the creed in democracy, which Whitman emphasizes by a junction of time and space, individual and community, past, present and future and respectively instances of the material and immaterial. For a "poet who sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms" [4], the poetic experience doesn't resume only to the transcendence of the everyday, but it engages in a revolution of supplementing and capturing the novelty of the times for the sake of informing the public.

Furthermore, the poetic experience that Whitman creates is not an artifact of a unitary entity as it is ambivalent or even plurifaceted. Particularly, in the direct self-proclamation "I celebrate myself/, And what I assume you shall assume/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"[5] there is hardly a self-centered allusion, but a declared symbiosis between the individual and the community. Democracy, as the universal level that allows this communion postulates the premise of "passing forward" the visionary stance and sustains Whitman undisclosed strategy to "agglutinate" the experience of the others.

Nonetheless, this process of inter-change allows the readers to reconceptualize poetry within themselves; namely, by celebrating himself, Whitman suggests and invites towards self-discovery of every individual, showing that the latent celebration demands unveiling. Taking the poetic function further to a correlation with the democratic experience, Whitman presents a bifocal perspective. On the one hand, in order for poetry to be equated with a form of truth, universal acclamation is mandatory, while, on the other hand, it is the poet's responsibility to call forth the inner selves of the others. The effort must therefore come from both sides: from the poet as democratic profiler of truth and from the community that must mold the poetic format so as to suit their private needs. Particularly, the mission of Whitman's poetry can be regarded as "an attempt to put a *Person*, a human being ("myself", in the latter half of the 19th century, in America) freely, fully, and truly on record."[6] Consequently, reaching the stage of a democratic poet is conditioned by the use of a common language in view of building the bridge between experiences.

Following the pattern of the democratic poet the question that imposes is what, according to the Whitmanesque ideology, would be the role of poetry in the American Romanticism? To begin with, the iconic status of poetry as text genre fits perfectly with the nineteenth century trend of publishers and editors to associate the use of reading with social purposes of building ties in communities. Such a socialization of poetry in the benefit of educating masses is a proper embodiment of what Joan Shelley Rubin in *Songs of Ourselves* calls "mediations- those culturally specific activities, personal and impersonal, that construct a work's physical characteristics and content, affect its marketing and accessibility, and color the responses of readers."[7] If individuals used poetry in the noble service of forming their identities, with Whitman's poetry the scope was more focus-oriented towards the progressive reform, building, therefore the role of poetry as mainly a public one and less a ceremonial strategy.

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[4]Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968, p. 171

[5] Whitman, Walt, *op.cit.*, p. 24

[6] Edwin Haviland Miller, *op. cit.* , p. 215

[7] Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 57

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At another level, an accurate account of the status of the American poetic democracy was drawn by Alexis de Tocqueville, with reference to the freedom of speech and the poet's role to promote a libertarian discourse.

"I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America….for there is no country in Europe so subdued by any single authority as not to protect the man who raises his voice in the cause of truth from the consequences of his hardihood. […] In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them. Not that he is in danger of a blame, but he is exposed to continued obloquy and persecution. […]the ruling power in the United States is not to be made game of. The smallest reproach irritates its sensibility, and the slightest joke that has any foundation in truth renders it indignant, from the forms of its language up to the solid virtues of its character, everything must be made the subject of encomium. No writer, whatever be his eminence, can escape paying this tribute of adulation to his fellow citizens."[8]

Though acknowledging and praising the freedom of mind and speech that prevail in the American society, Tocqueville notices a specific tendency in social expectations of readers with reference to the literary content. Namely, the unanimous acceptance of creativity in language and poetical device could appear to favor a complete poetic liberty, were it not for the infringements upon the contextual and contents of the poetic schemes. The need for self-appraisal and eulogies was not, according to Tocqueville, a cry for the worldly recognition of American value and competence, as it was an inner drive of the people to cherish the democratic truth. Where, then, does the author stand in terms of speaking out his mind?

"If America has not as yet had any great writers, the reason is given in these facts; there can be no literary genius without freedom of opinion, and freedom of opinion does not exist in America. In the United States no one is punished for this sort of books (licentious), but no one is induced to write them; not because all the citizens are immaculate in conduct, but because the majority of the community is decent and orderly."[9] Whitman case, in this respect, is hardly the suitable example for Tocqueville's study, due to the unbound language and style that defined his *Leaves of Grass*. His poetic democracy is not to over-eulogize the American people, but instead to dig into the underworld of the social profiles and to uncover the commonality and mechanical features that, all in all, define all nations. For Whitman, the matter of eloquent and abstract terminology was hardly a point of interest for the creative act- as Tocqueville argued it should be- whereas the liberty to speak freely and to unclench language from the pre-established patterns of European tradition was more important. Consequently, through Tocqueville's critique of the Romantic democratically-biased writers, one may easily notice the Whitmanesque detachment from the structural mainstream and towards his personal exercise invention in language.

An expansion of the democratic façade of Whitman's poetry shifts the interpretation cone towards the problem of *poetic language*. Perceived as a bizarre mechanism of expression at the time when *Leaves of Grass* was published , the linguistic shell of poetry must be put under the scrutiny of analysis in view of supporting the idea that Whitman's direction was adjacent to American Romanticism. To do so, Tocqueville's point of view appears to be a solid counter-argument for the Whitmanesque label of linguistic newness: "poets here know but little of the language which was spoken at Athens or Rome, and they do not care to dive into the lore of Antiquity to find the expression which they want. If they have sometimes recourse to learned etymologies, vanity will induce them to search for roots from the dead

[8] Alexis de Tocqueville, , *Democracy in America*, Library of America, New York, 2004, p. 470
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 473

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languages; but erudition does not naturally furnish them its resources. "[10] Indeed Whitman strives for an entirely different register than the one Europeans might have favored in praising poets, especially because his direct interest is to build a literature of the American farmers, traders, townsmen, in which the repertoire is never a chosen vocabulary, but a flow of slang and bare formulas that make for an entire creative inventory. Whitman's "Song for occupations" is an obvious step in the direction of using mechanical and unfiltered language in view of representing all social segments

"Strange and hard that paradox true I give,
Objects gross and the unseen soul are one.
The blast-furnace and the pudding-furnace, the loup-lump at the bottom of the melt at last, the rolling-mill, the stumpy bars of pig-iron, the strong, clean-shaped T-rail for railroads…
Stone-cutting, shapely trimmings for facades or window or door-lintels, the mallet, the tooth-chisel, the jib to protect the thumb."[11]

Nevertheless, the typology of language proliferated by Whitman can sometimes be both in favor and in contradiction with his poetic philosophy. The main argument is that democracy is not tantamount to sameness, for which reason each individual must strive for a recognition of his/her uniqueness. Likewise, the difficulty that translates from Whitman's language reflects that among individuals imperfection must be highly praised and acknowledged, because a full understanding and equality is not real. This accounts perhaps for the different registers at which the poet alludes in the discourse, crossing from slang and list-enumeration of working terms to bizarre and invented words meant to designate uniqueness. Moreover, even though Whitman proves an innovative mastering of traditional poetic meter, the intention is to demonstrate that subservience to traditionalism is no longer valid for the American poetry, just as democracy puts an end to the individual's submissiveness.

If, on the one hand, Whitman's strategy is to depart from the Romantic stylistic register of using imaginative vocabulary, on the other hand, one can observe that the poet simultaneously sprinkles random words from other languages to make the discourse more exotic and unstandardized. "He took from the Italian chiefly the terms of the opera, also "viva", "romanza" and even "ambulanza". From the Spanish he was pleased to borrow the orotund way of naming his country-men "Americanos", while the occasional circulation of Mexican dollars in the States during the eighteen-forties may have given him his word "Libertad". His favorite "camerado", an archaic English version of the Spanish "camarada", seems most likely to have come to him from the pages of Waverley novels. But the smattering of French[…]which constituted the most extensive knowledge that he ever was to have of another tongue, furnished him with the majority of his borrowings. It allowed him to talk of his "Amour" and his "eleves", of a "soiree" or an "Accoucheur", of "trottoirs" and "feuillage" and "delicatesse" to say that his were not the "songs of an ennuyeed person" or to shout "Allons! From all formulas!....Allons! the road is before us!" Frequently, he was speaking no language, as when he proclaimed himself "no dainty dolce affectuoso".[12]

Such a use of terminology, though severely modified so as to fit the poetic purposes of language is the essence of Whitman's unstandardized discourse. This amalgamation of simple usage speech with foreign incorrect words is the best portrayal of the Whitmanesque poetic discourse, cast somewhere in between the Romantic and symbolic representation of America and the democratic simplicity that was desired prior to the war. Furthermore, the key to

[10] Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 581
[11] Whitman, *op. cit.*, p. 163
[12] Warren, James Perrin, *Walt Whitman's Langauge Experiment,* Pennsylvania State University, 1990, p. 529

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understanding the choice for such a colorful language resides in reading the erroneous foreign terminology that Whitman tries to Americanize as a forceful pigment of multiculturalism. If the faulty rendering of these words was specifically overlooked or simply unintentional is not the point of interest. Instead, the result was Whitman's ideological success in drawing a linguistic connection between Crevecoeur's "melting of individuals into a new race of men" and Israel Zangwill's later famous catch-phrase "melting pot". Whitman's pot is the structure of his poetic democracy, in which he melts the foreignness and exoticism of outward representation with the Romantic typology of singing the national and innocent profile of Americanism.

Eventually, Whitman's accomplishment with *Leaves of Grass* in terms of canon positioning claims its implicit hegemony in the everlasting story of desired acceptance. It was, indeed, Whitman's utmost desire both to gain supreme recognition of ideological novelty that transgressed from the verse of his poems and to settle the poetic tone as the one that defines America entirely. Nevertheless, the poet's initial publishing of his poetry was a mere fairy tale of great expectations, as Romanticism was hardly the terrain of all-inclusiveness, but rather a filter that required molding and specific literary adaptability. Torn between representing Americanism and becoming a ubiquitous representative of Romanticism, Whitman's allegorical profile was involuntarily tied to the stigmata of outcasts. Probing the benefits of a literature of exclusion in the interpretation of the American canon shows that fringes are always disputable entities, even in a context that claims its hegemony in pluralism and acceptance.

The odyssey that Whitman's poetry engages into is certainly not a Homeric one, given the circumstantial stances that either promoted or rejected the creative weapons of the poet in the battle with criticism. It might be, however, assimilated to a gesture of bravery and unbound courage with respect to the generated profile of authorship and poetic responsibility. The poet-prophet/seer was definitely not a complete breakthrough in the realm of literary representation, but it bore its private marks of originality in as much as it encompassed the potential to expand Romantic boundaries. Namely, however demeaning the representation of self may appear, the prospect of building a "genuine" authorial stance that is active militant in the readers' net of mediation becomes Whitman's personal brand in poetic manifestation of the nineteenth century.

Consequently, Whitman's secret is that of being held responsible for the visionary attributes that attach to his poetic authority and literary creations: on the verge of succumbing to traditionalist and suffocating patterns of acceptance/rejection, Whitman's daring project was to challenge the authority of the nineteenth century canon by proposing a multiplicity of methods, ideological representations and new thematic universe, all clad in an apparent structureless format. Hence, the poetic odyssey follows unsure terrains, starting from failure to adapt and stubbornness to transgress borders of the canon, moving forward to the acceptance of previously rejected projects (sexuality, homoeroticism) and plunging into a pool of overall analysis that subdues the literary validity of the Whitmanesque territory. Anchored in a pseudo-reality filled with Americanism, sexuality, altered linguistic devices, democratic representation and structural novelty, Walt Whitman's poetry is still somehow at crossroads in a no man's land, as it accepts pluralist forms of interpretation, yet no singular valence of reference. If there is any correspondence between the cultural cleavages (high and low culture) and the social differences that occur between readers, on the one hand, and distinct time-span criticism, on the other hand, remains a debatable issue. However, with each new interpretation the legacy of Whitman's poetic testimony only grows richer and richer, founding this way, an entire critical mechanism of reception.

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