

THE AMERICAN IDEA IN WHITMAN

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I don't know whether others here, who feel that Walt Whitman has better than any one else embodied and expressed the American Idea, have been at all disheartened, of late, at certain half denials of the American propositions—at all impatient of what seems the usual blindness to the one or the other side of full-orbed Democracy—

“Democracy, the destin'd Conqueror, yet treacherous lip-smiles everywhere,
And death, and infidelity, at every step.”

Such a book as Lecky's “Democracy and Liberty;” such talk as that we have had much of lately concerning the wisdom of restricting the suffrage of those who are, through some mysterious judgment, assumed incompetent to grow, by others whom the same mysterious say-so assumes to be fully equipped to do right; or concerning the folly of further corrupting the suffrage by opening the polls to bad women along with the good; or concerning the prudence of restricting immigration on the shrewd, bargain basis of admitting all who don't need us particularly and can be shown to be able to help us, and of barring out all who are in need of our help; concerning the retrogression and decay involved in discussing socialism as a factor playing its part along with individualism in shaping civilization; or concerning the risk a literary society runs in permitting all its members to offer nominations for its officers.

Perhaps I cannot truthfully say that I have been greatly disheartened at any such temporizing talk, feeling myself blessed in sharing somewhat of Whitman's large faith in the seething principle, the well-kept latent germ of the old cause of the people which is the birthright of America. But, I confess I have been just enough riled by such anti-democratic assumptions as I have mentioned to turn to Whitman afresh and see if perchance I overlooked some of the special stress that I know very well he puts on individualism in its relation to the social whole. Others may see something else in Walt Whitman on this subject. I see this :

Whitman's individualism is always of more than himself. It implies identification with all.

"Through me many long dumb voices,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon."

"Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?
Do you suppose matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs, and vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her?"

"O, I, at any rate, include you all with perfect love!
Walking New England, a friend, a traveler,
A true son either of Maine or of the Granite State, or of the Narragansett Bay State, or the Empire State,
Yet sailing to other shores to annex the same, and welcoming every new brother,
Hereby applying these leaves to the new ones from the hour they unite with the old ones.

"In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less.

"I show that size is only development.
Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President?
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on."

Three strands of thought or insight make up the one leading-thread—ever and always the indivisibly one clew to the American Idea : Oneself ; the Social One, or all other Selves ; Progressive Plan.

“Not one can acquire for another—not one,
Not one can grow for another—not one.”

Charity is useless—impertinent.

“Nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral
drest in his shroud.”

To separate individualism from socialism—the righteous,
competent self-developing one from due relation with the
other slow-developing selves of mankind—is suicidal; for

“Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said, returns at last to me.”

“I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is
deathless with me,
What I do and say the same waits for them,
Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.”

The first blade of “Leaves of Grass” carries this two-fold
message on its spear’s point:

“One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.”

The root of the whole matter is *Oneself*, but, if that is to
live, then from the emphasis put upon *oneself* grows the
the second emphasis put upon *other selves*. From *Oneself*, the
“word Democratic, the word En-Masse,” unfolds.

Unquestionably, as it looks to me, Walt Whitman’s regard
for others—for the social whole—is not based on compassion,
or philanthropy, but on his uncondescending, uncomprom-
ising identification of his own good and progress with the
good and progress of all: “I only am he who will never
consent to subordinate you.” This constitutes a regard for
others which has no self-sacrifice in it, no mere altruism, in
the usual religious sense; it is so just that any man may
take it as his due; it is so brotherly that any man must yearn
to do it credit. There is no philanthropy in it. There is no
competition in it. Neither does it stop with this assertion
of the basic importance of self-development. There is no

scorn or patronage whatever of the Socialistic Whole. On the contrary, the chanter of the Song of Personality makes a song also "of the One form'd out of all"—

"The fang'd and glittering One whose head is over all,
Resolute warlike One including and over all.
(However high the head of any else that head is over all.)"

To the talkers who call themselves individualists and the talkers who call themselves socialists he utters calmly the word of balance, the word of reconciliation, which each party needs, justly counterpoising to "*Oneself*" all the Selves for whom he speaks, and justly counterpoising to the Socialistic Whole the expanding, fluent Selfhood on which he builds it.

In one word; his own loving Personality clears up the tangle of opposition.

"Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give, I give myself."

If all other individualists did the like, the socialistic ideal would be realized, not by prescribing it as a duty, but by giving it as a living principle. What injustice could live with the spirit of such words as these animating society?

"What I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

"I resist anything better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me."

"This is the meal equally set. . . .
I will not have a single person slighted or left away."

"I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy.
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of
on the same terms."

"As if it harm'd me, giving others the same chances and rights as myself—
as if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess
the same."

This profound lesson of universal opportunity, without preference or denial of any, is the life-blood of democracy, according to Whitman. The vital force of love stirs in the

veins of this social structure, and makes the whole no longer the abstraction called the state, but a co-equal co-operant human collectivity of individuals :

“Underneath all, individuals,
The American compact is altogether with individuals,
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals.”

This is not paternalism ; it is open-eyed free-will co-operating fraternalism, which constitutes his Social Whole. The only institution is that of the dear love of comrades ; the “main purport of these States” being to found the “superb friendship,” that has always been waiting, “latent in all men.” With love are the two hitherto stubborn strands of Self and the Social Whole interwoven and tacitly convinced of their interdependence ; they follow the indicative trend of the progressive plan in which each one of us is the inevitable factor—

“Each of us limitless—each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here”—

and all “launched forward into the unknown ;” for America does not build merely for herself. Wider than her territorial expansion tend the health-giving light-beams of her vision of personal freedom, and friendship, and spiritual growth. Deeper than the utmost thought of her founders sinks her root into the fruitful soil of the whole broad earth.

“Sail, sail, thy best ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the Present only,
The Past is also stored in thee,
Thou holdest not the venture of thy Self alone, not of the Western Continent alone,
Earth's résumé entire floats on thy keel, O ship, is steadied by thy spars,
With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations sink or swim with thee.
Theirs, theirs, as much as thine, the destination-port triumphant.
. . . Thou new, indeed new Spiritual World !
The Present holds thee not—for such vast growths as thine
The Future only holds thee and can hold thee.”

The narrow competitive processes to which much is due,

doubtless, cannot suffice for that future without reinforcement by the loving cogency of mutual growth, for which equal personal opportunity must free the way, though it disencumber the open road of much precious lumber.

Democratic progress is personally, lovingly, spiritually bound, and compared with this port of the long future what matters aught else that appears to be imperiled?

"O banner, not money so precious are you, not farm produce you, nor the material good nutriment,

Nor excellent stores, nor landed on wharves from the ships,

Nor machinery, vehicles, trade, nor revenues—but you so loved, you banner, leading the day with stars brought from the night.

I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—I see them not,

I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you only,

Flapping up there in the wind."

Thus, to me, beckons the American Idea in Walt Whitman.

"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."

Hitherto in the history of the world humanity has been groping towards a basis of opinion that should make social and individual ends effective under favorable conditions without prejudice or injustice either to personal or collective growth. We see socialism and anarchism facing each other to-day with an enmity that forbids them from perceiving their supplementary relations. Yet, until now, what has been accomplished in history for human life, by slow and painful accretions stored up in the character and temperament of mankind, has been brought about by a see-saw of individualistic and socialistic predominance. Alternate revolt and peace have stirred the world to action and stilled it to the calm necessary for the incubative processes that continue and renew the capacity for action. Strong souls have effected superior personal advantage and growth at all hazards to the shrinking, bleeding flesh of the social organism through which they have burst their violent way. And

the subsiding space of time needed to enable the social body to heal its wounds, regain the unitary flow of blood through all its parts, and stand sound again as the human integer and reservoir of energy has been won by an extirpation of the leaders, who are "trashed for over-topping"—so Shakspeare's vivid phrase puts it—just as ruthlessly as the social whale was pierced and torn by them that they might win their will. The good despots, the tyrannic priests of humanity, whether Popes or puritanic Pymys, each under their different and appropriate conditions, have intervened ostensibly to protect the slow-witted body politic from the fiery brained offspring which is at once its glory and menace.

Mere selfism, on the one side, mere altruism, on the other, have had their equally important innings in the process of getting the social game played. But under the alternate ravaging and nursing of their sway, men have done each other more harm than they need, less good than they could.

The evil effects of benevolence have been as clear as the evil effects of isolated self-seeking. Jealous activity has led to disruption, chaos, and conquest on the one side; assiduous soothing has led to torpor and death on the other side. The two great political experiments in democracy which history furnishes in the Greece of Euripides and the Italy of the free cities of the Renaissance present evidence of the one; the protectorate schemes of Cæsars and churches that have sought to govern the people for their good, present evidence of the other.

Slowly, under the fire of facts, the democratic idea has confronted life for centuries and under imperfect embodiments attained intensity and clarity of aim. As Walt Whitman now expresses it, it is, politically considered, the American idea. It grasps both terms of the social equation, engrafting the essence of altruism—love—but love in a higher form, without condescension or sacrifice—upon the essence of selfism—individual development—but individual development of an enlightened sort, without arrogance or isola-

tion. Self-seeking and others-fostering are each seen to be inherently defective and instructive. Let them reinforce each other, then !

Such is the interdependence of man that only that interdependence which takes account of the independence of each soul is possible, healthy, and conducive to progress and enjoyment. Such, too, is the interdependence of man that any assumption of independence that violates or for a moment disregards the fundamental human unity strangles itself.

This is the logic, irrefragable and complete, woven duly of both factors in all social movement—selfism and altruism—set in a new relation the one to the other, the altruistic factor being grafted upon the egoistic factor, not permitted any undue dominance but allowed its proper influence. This, then, is, as it seems to me, the logic upon which Walt Whitman's idea of democracy depends.

It is the American idea, for him, and because it is the legitimately thought-out result of the high aims and correspondingly intended though necessarily imperfectly understood, unwisely rigid, and perpetually abused institutions upon which these United States of America are based.

It is, for him, an idea not limited to America but inclusive of the whole round world and utterly irrespective of any chosen people, narrow patriotism, or special national appropriation, because nothing short of all human differentiations of the individual soul can offer contributions universal enough to secure the perfection of the interdependent whole. It is for him an idea which only the heat of the most enlightened brotherly love can set in motion, because such love alone supplies motive-power subtle and strong enough to fuse Past with Present and enable all souls without exception to face the unknown future with dauntless aspiration and good cheer.

“ 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.”