

WHITMAN'S POETIC POLITICS: SYNCHRONICALLY AND DIACHRONICALLY SHARED EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: As many critics have mentioned, ordinary individuals are the subject matter of *Leaves of Grass*. A closer look shows that in focus are their experiences, categorized into two types: one on a contemporary solidarity (synchrony), and the other on a sense of continuity with the past (diachrony). The paper argues that Whitman's emphasis of the synchrony and diachrony of experience is about the process of purely descriptive of everyday experience turning into a unique American experience of self-government which enables its Republicanism. This new perspective of Whitmanian individual experiences helps us to gain deeper understanding of his works

Keywords: experience, Jefferson, synchrony, diachrony

1. Introduction

The essay forefronts a mediation between textual and contextual reading. As one of “the reasons for changing a textually oriented strategy of reading into a contextually oriented one” (Kovács 2010: 17), Kovács (idem: 27) notes, “the notion of literature has come to become a cultural product within the framework of other cultural discourses like the human and social sciences.” The cultural discourse on American governance is vast, yet the link between Jefferson's and Whitman's ideas about government has yet to be fully investigated. Jefferson was a politician and Whitman was a poet, but both share the same theoretical background – faith in ordinary people – from which they developed their ideas. Just as Jefferson challenged the idea that governing should be done by experts, so Whitman challenged the idea that self-expression should be done by experts. As Betsy Erkkila (1989: 49) remarks, “Whitman's poet participates in the act of national creation by carrying on the revolutionary task of transferring power from the government to the individual”.

This essay sets out to explore the similarity between the two enterprises, of Jefferson and of Whitman. Foregrounding ordinary people, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* centers on two different kinds of experience: on a contemporary solidarity (synchrony), and also on a sense of continuity with the past (diachrony). Whitman's synchrony and diachrony of experience is portrayed through everyday experience and from there, Jefferson's unique American experience of self-government surfaces. Investigating Whitman's works through the expanded perspective of experience – in the context of his relation with Jefferson – helps us to gain a new insight into them. In section 3 of this paper, I will show how this framework of two kinds of experience functions in Whitman's tackling of the

slavery issue and the paradoxes of America: the relation between the individual and the mass, between states and federal government (Reynolds 1995: 112).

May I add that Kerry McSweeney, while stressing the import of individual experience in his analysis of *There was a child went force*, refers to synchrony and diachrony; he states that “The synchronic experience at the poem’s conclusion recapitulates spatially the diachronic movement of the poem outward from the maternal environment to the external world” (1998: 7). While my framework is concerned with poetic politics (Jefferson’s and Whitman’s shared emphasis on the communal aspects of experience), McSweeney focuses on personal aspects. In other words, McSweeney’s use of synchrony and diachrony is made in a context different from mine.

2. Whitman’s poetic politics: synchronically and diachronically shared experience

Both Whitman and Jefferson stress the importance of experience. On the one hand, Whitman (1984: 20) calls his long poem “Poem of Pictures. Each verse presenting a picture of some characteristic scene, event, group, or personage – old or new, other countries or our own country”, and as Reynolds (1995: 285) shows, Whitman’s interest in pictures derives from their intensification of common experience. On the other hand, as Steele (2012: 124) points out, Jefferson unequivocally believed that “American social and historical experience (of self-government during the colonial era) had made a democratic American politics possible and proper” and demanded “continual cultivation and regeneration of that experience”. (idem: 132-133) In this way, this emphasis on the experience of ordinary people was shared by Jefferson – in his political philosophy – and Whitman – in his poetics. I want to emphasize that it is Whitman’s stress not only on ordinary people, but also on their experiences that makes him more exceptional.

In Whitman’s poems, experience occupies the center. Whitmanian experience, especially in his early career as a poet, has two aspects: a synchronically shared experience and a diachronically shared one. The former is about a contemporary solidarity, “fellow feeling,” and the latter about a sense of continuity with the past. On the one hand, Reynolds (1995: 337) illustrates the synchronically shared experience: “Whitman’s emphasis on the common denominators of experience – the earth, sleep, work, sex, and the appetites – shows him trying to regain fundamental laws that are unarguable and sound, not shifting and unfair. [...] He is making a strident call for the unification of humankind on the basis of natural law that is part and parcel of shared interests and common experiences.” On the other hand, Somkin (1967: 83), referring to both Jefferson and Whitman, touches on diachronically shared experience: “For Jefferson the preservation of freedom required the reenactment by each generation of the original drama of republican creation. The maintenance of an ‘out of the game’ (section 4 of *Song of Myself*) area permitted the people to act again as they had in the beginning. In their action together, republican liberty would refind its nature, and the irreversibility of time would be denied.” At the time of Whitman, this had more than a usual meaning; the sense of urgency of republican restoration – the signs of its degradation abounded – was on Whitman’s mind.

In these two kinds of experience, there are parallels between Whitman’s and Jefferson’s thinking. In terms of synchronically shared experience, Jefferson’s focus on the present is manifested in benevolence – doing good to others for the

sake of own happiness – and Whitman’s focus on the present is manifested in the love of comrades. Whitman (1980: 115), in *For You O Democracy*, writes, “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.” Both Whitman and Jefferson are of the same mind in their emphasis of the affectionate tie. Nevertheless, as regards diachronically shared experience, Jefferson’s and Whitman’s directions are opposite. Jefferson points to the future, given his faith in the capacity of ordinary people and their progress (Steele 2012: 308), while Whitman points to the past. It can be said that *Leaves of Grass* is the meeting point of Whitmanian and Jeffersonian experience, where readers re-experience the Founding spirit through their own contemporary solidarity, through common everyday experience. *Leaves of Grass* can also be said to be about Whitman’s awareness of America’s deflection from the spirit of the Founding Fathers and his effort to fill the gap between the two. Yet, even from the time of the Founding of the nation, there was the nagging issue of slavery, which came to be further complicated by the sectionalism between the North and the South. Whitman needed to face this issue as well, as I will show in section 3.

The essence of Jeffersonian experience – benevolence – is self-agency, not coercive, but voluntary action, based on liberty (Yarbrough 1998: 48), but the socio-political changes from an agrarian to an industrial society made it harder and harder to have such an experience. Furthermore, the difficulty was added by the sectionalization of the North and the South over the issue of slavery. Whitman, who viewed poetry as the best medium to re-experience and rekindle the Founding spirit, sought to help people to regain the sense of continuity with it. Through synchronic and diachronic experience, Whitman sought to restore Jeffersonian republicanism, where America could recommit to the democratic experiment and, in its self-expression, the ordinary people would play the biggest role.

3. Whitman’s poetics influenced by Jeffersonian ideas: a focus on *I Sing the Body Electric*

When we seek to find an appropriate poem in order to see the validity of the framework of synchronic and diachronic experience, a caveat is called for; Jefferson (1977: 573) disliked mysticism; emphasis is on experience. Thus, the need to find a poem without the influence of Whitman’s mysticism puts a limitation on the choice. For example, *Song of Myself*, though rich with both synchronic – “The blab of the pave” (1855: 22) – and diachronic – “the vault at Mount Vernon” (idem: 45) – experiences, is heavily coloured by his mystical views, like that of *Kosmos*; the validity of the framework becomes blurred. Considering this, I have decided to focus on Whitman’s poem *I Sing the Body Electric* in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which has the salient flow from synchronic to diachronic experience. (In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), all 12 poems are without title, therefore, for convenience, I shall call the 5th poem, *I Sing the Body Electric*, the name Whitman attached to it in *Leaves of Grass* 1871).

Although Whitman uses the term “soul” in this poem, it plays a relatively small part in the formation of the overall tone. Gutman (1998: 296) states that “some critics have felt that it (*I Sing the Body Electric*) is obvious and repetitive; others have found it lacking in the deeper mysteries characteristic of Whitman’s major works.” I argue that the poem is about the human body, with the message covering his political agenda of the unity of the nation, of the relationship between

private and public, and of slavery and prostitution. Erkkila (1989: 125) remarks that “Whitman assumes an active political posture, attempting to uproot the contradictions in the body politic of America by addressing the reader directly.” Furthermore, she adds that “Critics have tended to treat the poem as a fairly tedious enumeration of body parts, failing to note its ominous political prophecy and the fact that the body electric is also black.” (ibid.)

Here I reconstrue this poem by applying the framework of Whitmanian synchronically and diachronically shared experience. These experiences are brought to the fore through corporeal metaphors. In the opening, Whitman says:

The bodies of men and women engirth me, and I engirth them,
They will not let me off nor I them till I go with them and respond to them and love
them. (1855: 77)

.....
There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them and in
the contact and odor of them that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well. (idem: 78)

“The bodies of men and women engirth me, and I engirth them” and “the contact and odor” signify the proximity of human contact, with nothing in between. In this way, Whitmanian synchronically shared experience, a contemporary sense of fraternity, mostly starts from sensation through the basic senses – hearing, sight, touch, and smell. The inclusion of the senses which tend to be downplayed both in our life and in literary representations – touch and smell – amplifies the tone of egalitarianism of this poem.

After admitting “The expression of the body of man or woman balks account,” Whitman says:

The expression of a wellmade [sic] man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also ... it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk ... the carriage of his neck ... the flex of his waist and knees ...
dress does not hide him, ... (idem: 77, emphasis mine)

Through the trope of the human body, Whitman signifies three layers of meaning – the commonality of body, the relationship between the private and the public sphere, and the harmony between Federal government and States. First, Whitman forefronts the human body as the unarguable commonality of all people. (Here pronouns are male, but the context allows us to understand them as general, non-gendered ones.) All people, regardless of race, class, and sex, have body parts in common. Second, in the public realm, the face is the only part fully exposed. It plays a synecdochical role; we recognize others mainly through visual perception of their faces. The other parts – limbs, joints, hips, wrists, neck, waist, and knees – are also the commonality of all people, yet hidden under the “dress”, viewed as belonging to the private realm. But through their enumeration by Whitman, the body parts, other than face, go public. Thus, Whitman attains the harmony between the public and the private realm through the corporeal metaphors. Third, Whitman portrays all the body parts as if they were autonomous entities, and also functioning as a whole. Here a parallel can be drawn between the relationship between each body part and the whole and between each state and the Federal government; Whitman (1965: 735) states that “The union of the parts of the body is not more necessary to their life than the union of These States is to their life.”

Whitman sheds light on what we tend to overlook in our life, especially when we pay too much attention to our differences, like those in the political situations before the Civil War. In the above quotes, Whitman, by keeping a delicate balance, succeeds in confirming the commonality of people, without sacrificing their individuality. In the process, what the human body represents turns into a sense of fraternity, with the individuality intact.

So far Whitman has not made it clear about whose body he is talking about, but he starts being more specific:

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred ... it is no matter who,
Is it a slave? Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the welloff ... just as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession. (idem: 79)

Here, again, under the assumption that the body is the body politic of America, this *sacredness* of body reminds us of Whitman's utterance concerning "the sacredness of the *bond of union of these States*" (1920: 235). Then Whitman starts to incorporate slaves and immigrants into the subject of body, whom he considers are also entitled to join. Furthermore, after calling into the question of the inferiority of Blacks – "Do you know so much that you call the slave or the dullface ignorant?" (1855: 79) – Whitman switches to the topic of a slave auction, and says:

A slave at auction!

I help the auctioneer ... the sloven does not half know his business.
Gentlemen look on this curious creature,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for *him*,

.....
Examine these limbs, red black or white ... they are very cunning in tendon and
nerve;

They shall be stript that you may see them.
Exquisite senses, lifelit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breastmuscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, goodsized arms
and legs,
And wonders within there yet. (idem: 80, emphasis mine)

As Jay Grossman (2003: 183) notes, Whitman appropriates the role of the auctioneer through the interpellation "Gentlemen." At first, as auctioneer, Whitman plays up the body of the human chattel as a sales promotion. Yet, in the process, what started as a sales-pitch turns into something else. Engrossed in his own words, Whitman seems to forget his role as an auctioneer and changes sides. As we shall see, Whitman's sales pitch extends to a larger discourse, related to the humanity of slave. Whitman gives the negative answer to the question of the inferiority of blacks, and calls them priceless. By enumerating the body parts of the blacks as he did in the preceding section of the poem, and, furthermore, by putting them in a positive light, Whitman extends his fraternity to them.

It is in this heightened emotional state that Whitman begins to portray diachronic experience, a sense of continuity with the past:

Within there runs *his* blood ... the same old blood ... the same red running blood;
There swells and jets his heart ... There all passions and desires ... all reachings and
aspirations:

Do you think they are not there because they are not expressed in parlors and lecture-rooms?

This is not only one man ... he is the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns,
 In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
 Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments.
 (idem: 80, emphasis mine)

After formulating the synchronic experience by the portrayal of the human body, it is the diachronic experience that is forefronted. Here the blood is like the eternal red-colored river flowing between past, present, and future. The vital question in investigating this part is “whose blood does run?” Grammatically speaking, the referent of ‘him’ is a slave put on the block. If so, it can be said that Whitman includes blacks in “the start of populous states and rich republics,” tallying with Erkkilä’s interpretation that “the body electric is also black.” If not so – if the poet refers to a *general he*, without identifying him, the meaning would be more general. Here, the key is the sentence “Do you think they are not there because they are not expressed in parlors and lecture-rooms?” Whitman acknowledges that his opinion is against the conventional wisdom, connotating that *he* is a slave. The grammatical analysis of *he* and this rhetorical question concur to support this line of thought. This is sensational; there is a retroactively effective bond between whites and blacks.

Whitman goes on to the subject of “a woman at auction” – prostitution. He exhorts readers to have a second thought and feel sympathy for her. In his so doing, this part has an element of the diachronic experience.

A woman at auction!
 She too is not only herself ... she is the teeming mother of mothers,
 She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers.
 Her daughters or their daughters’ daughters ... who knows who shall mate with them?
 Who knows through the centuries what heroes may come from them?
 In them and of them natal love ... in them the divine mystery ... the same old beautiful mystery. (ibid.)

It is noticeable that the tone of this part, spanning from past, present, and future, is full of potentialities, including that of “heroes” and “mystery.” The generational relationship expressed here relates to the same relationship indicated by *blood* in the former section. Drawing on the power of imagination, Whitman urges readers to change their attitude to prostitutes.

In the closing part, Whitman writes:

Who degrades or defiles the living human body is cursed,
 Who degrades or defiles the body of the dead is not more cursed. (idem: 81)

Here, “the living human body” represents the medium of synchronically shared experience, and “the body of the dead” the diachronically shared experience. This interpretation would be strengthened if both of “the body” were translated into “the body politic of America”; “the living human body” refers to the current status of America, and “the body of the dead” to the Founding Fathers. The antonym of ‘cursed’ is ‘sacred,’ and thus what Whitman is saying here is of

paramount importance – the union of nation. Degrading or defiling those ‘bodies’ stands for a double betrayal: the ongoing failure in Republican experiment, leading to the desecration of Founding Fathers.

In this analysis of *I Sing the Body Electric*, I have aimed to show the validity of the framework of synchronically and diachronically shared experience, where the purely descriptive of everyday experience turns into the normative of the Founding Fathers.

4. Conclusion

In *Leaves of Grass 1855*, Whitman single-mindedly pursued his poetic goal of uniting a then fragmented America. For him, writing and self-publishing his poems was his revolutionary service. In his intensification of common experience, Whitman sought to portray synchronically shared experience – contemporary solidarity – and diachronically shared experience – the continuity with the Founding spirit. These frameworks enable us to delve deeper into the textual analysis, where otherwise the presences of catalogue and parallelism are merely noticed. In the case of *I Sing the Body Electric*, the purely descriptive presentation – the enumeration of body parts – encloses layers of meaning through the process of those parts going public by the act of enumeration.

Although there are few references to Jefferson in Whitman’s poems, recognizing the parallel between the currents of thought of Whitman and Jefferson can be called the foundation for understanding Whitman: Whitman’s poetics – through common, everyday experience, solidarity is felt, and eventually the Founding spirit is re-experienced – and Jefferson’s political philosophy – the unique American experience of self-government enables its Republicanism. It is with this parallelism that we can fully appreciate Whitman’s works, especially his emphasis on experience and bodily expression.

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