Acta Poética 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145
doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126
recepción: 1-ii-2021 / aceptación: 3-v-2021

Mohammed Ghazi Alghamdi
College of Arts, King Saud University, Arabia Saudita
malghamdi1@ksu.edu.sa

The Transparent Eyeball of the Nation: Walt Whitman's Imagined Nation in "Song of Myself"

El ojo transparente de la nación: la imaginada nación de Walt Whitman en "Song of Myself"

keywords:
Whitman, Nation, "Song of Myself", Nineteenth century United States, Transcendentalism.

This paper provides a textual analysis of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", revealing its significance as a national poem. The paper argues that Whitman's "Song of Myself" breaks literary and political limits, challenging the sovereignty of the nation. By examining "Song of Myself" in the six different editions of Whitman's Leaves of Grass*, this paper will further analyze Whitman's style and his speaker as representations of the limitations and sovereignty of literary tradition and the politics of his nation. By "politics," I refer to the religious, political, and social doctrines that shape the nation. By "literary," I mean the traditional literary style of writing, such as the poem's form, scope, and subject.*

palabras clave:
Whitman, nación, "Song of Myself", Estados Unidos del siglo xix, trascendentalismo.

Este artículo emprende un análisis textual de "Song of Myself" ["Canto a mí mismo"] de Walt Whitman, revelando su importancia como poema nacional. Se argumenta que este poema de Whitman rompe los límites literarios y políticos, desafiando la soberanía de la nación. Al examinar "Song of Myself" en las seis ediciones diferentes de Hojas de hierba *de Whitman, se analizará en mayor profundidad el estilo de Whitman y su voz como representaciones de las limitaciones y la soberanía de la tradición literaria y la política de su nación. Por "política" me refiero a las doctrinas religiosas, políticas y sociales que dan forma a la nación. Por "literario" entiendo el estilo literario tradicional de escritura, como la forma, el alcance y el tema del poema.*

Introduction

Frantz Fanon shaped my interest in the relationship between literature and nation. He inspired me to attempt to understand the momentous impact any nation has on shaping the identity of its literature. Before we journey through Whitman's "Song of Myself" as a national song, allow me to briefly present the definition of "nation." Theorists' debates about "nation" may be traced back to Ernest Renan's prominent 1882 lecture "What is a Nation?" in which he states that, "the nation, like the individual is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion" (19). This definition brings to mind Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of the "transparent eyeball," and thus, Whitman's "Song of Myself" can be seen as the transparent eyeball of the nation. Hugh Seton-Watson offers a more recent definition of the nation, stating that the "nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation or behave as if they [have] formed one."[5] However, is it the number of people or their power that forms a nation? Consider why we should focus on the number of people when the prominent critic Benedict Anderson posits that, "we may translate 'consider themselves' as 'imagine themselves'" (6). For Anderson, the nation is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Why do the members of a community need to form a nation when there is supposedly already an old one? I argue that the nation is a continual phenomenon shaped and reshaped by members of the community, be it writers or politicians, who perceive a threat to their intellectual or physical being as a result of cultural, religious, or political constraints. An attempt to form a new nation is usually met with resistance from the longstanding one. Consequently, a new phenomenon of a nation is born after either a successful or a failed coup. New England was quite different after the Civil War and before the Abolition Act. The nation as imagined, to use Anderson's expression, will be examined here in the context of Walt Whitman as a member of nineteenth century America. Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a true representation of George Kateb's democratic individuality. In his article "Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy," Kateb finds in democratic individuality "three components: self-expression, resistance on behalf of others, and receptivity or responsiveness (being 'hospitable') to others" (546). Unlike Kateb's article, this paper examines the poet as an individual and offers a close reading of his

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

style and the speaker in all editions of "Song of Myself," asserting how Whitman's poem is a transparent eyeball of the nation.

Leaves of Grass *and the Nation*

In 1856, Walt Whitman sent a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson containing thirty-two poems from the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman writes:

> The lists of ready-made literature which America inherits by the mighty inheritance of the English language —all the rich repertoire of traditions, poems, historics [*sic*], metaphysics, plays, classics, translations, have made, and still continue, magnificent preparations for that other plainly signified literature, to be our own, to be electric, fresh, lusty, to express the full-sized body, male and female— to give the modern meanings of things, to grow up beautiful, lasting, commensurate with America, with all the passions of home, with the inimitable sympathies of having been boys and girls together, and of parents who were with our parents (1410).

Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a mirror of antebellum America. It is the transparent eyeball of the nation that transcends its limitations. It is a national song—an American one. Faith Barrett asserts, "In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman establishes a lyric self by way of metaphors that include the whole nation" (240). As his preface to *Leaves of Grass* indicates, Whitman consciously writes what he considers national poetry. This paper will focus on "Song of Myself" as a song of the nation; in other words, it is a song that celebrates the metamorphosis of America and defines its distinctiveness from other nations. Whitman's poem's nation-making surpasses the concept of the nation as limited and sovereign. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Anderson explains that:

> The nation is imagined *limited* because even the largest of them… has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations… It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchal dynastic realm (7).

I argue that Whitman's "Song of Myself" breaks with literary and political limits and the sovereignty of the nation. By examining "Song of Myself" in the six different editions of *Leaves of Grass*, this paper will further analyze Whitman's style and his speaker as representations of the limitations and sovereignty of literary tradition and the politics of his nation. By "politics," I refer to the religious, political, and social doctrines that shape the nation. By "literary," I mean the traditional literary style of writing, such as the poem's form, scope, and subject.

In his literary attempt to break limits, Whitman's free verse revolutionizes American lyrics. "Song of Myself" is a poem that stands outside the boundaries of the traditional poetry of England and even those of Whitman's American contemporaries, such as Longfellow. The form is like *leaves* that have different shapes. Breaking form has been considered by many critics, including Norton Anthology editors, as a response to Emerson's "call for a 'meter-making argument'" (1310). Whitman's use of free verse represents the nation as unique and limitless. Thus, his use of free verse challenges the sovereignty of traditional poetry, which imposes the poetical form. The several editions undergone by "Song of Myself" also affirm the flexibility of the free verse poem to encompass more sections and lines. In his article "Form, Eros, and the Unspeakable: Whitman's Stanzas," Mark Doty scrutinizes Whitman's stanzas in "Song of Myself" from a queer perspective. However, his analysis neglects the significance beyond queerness of Whitman's several editions, and the metamorphoses that *Leaves of Grass* went through, much like the changes that surrounded the nation in the nineteenth century. In contrast to Doty, this paper examines the form in order to expose the role of the nation in shaping not only Whitman's ideologies but also the reasoning behind his work's consistent trajectory of change in the context of the nation. Unlike Doty, I argue that "Song of Myself" becomes like America or like the nation; it grows. The lines behave as immigrating Americans do, moving from one stanza or section to another. Moreover, as the process of editing continues, the loose poem from the first edition, which did not even have a title, is divided into fifty-two sections. In the second edition (in 1856, Whitman gave his poem the following title: "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American." This title consciously defines the poem as an American poem, identifying it as a poem that is meant to represent the American nation. It already has the characteristics of a transparent eyeball with the ability to judge the nation. Doty claims:

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

> Whitman did not number the fifty-two sections in the 1855 version of the great, free-flowing outpouring that is "Song of Myself," or even separate them by much. But he must soon have realized the reader's need for a helpful scaffolding, since he added stanza numbers in the edition of 1860, and section numbers in 1867 (66).

In response to Doty's analysis of Whitman's numbering system across different editions, I argue that the role of Whitman's numbering technique is not simply to help readers, it is also a means of asserting the consistent and incessant changes undergone by the nation.

Now, let us consider the following lines from the first two editions in order to examine Whitman's poetical flexibility as an author:

> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease… observing a spear of summer grass. (4-5)
>
> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of
> summer grass. (5-7)

The first two lines are taken from the 1855 first edition. They develop into three lines and run from lines five to seven in the second edition. Moreover, the use of a four-dot ellipsis in the first edition is substituted with commas, as in the case of the fifth line of the first edition and the sixth line of the second edition. This freedom to move lines or break them into new lines and use commas instead of dots represents Whitman's freedom as a distinguished American poet. If America and its people change, so does the poem. Therefore, limiting the poem to a particular form becomes a symbol of imprisonment whereas Whitman's free verse is a symbol of freedom —a symbol of America as limitless—. In addition, to better understand Whitman's consistent reform of his form, we may further examine the above two lines in the next five editions. Do they become firm and unchangeable? The third edition in 1860 has the above two lines intact. However, later editions in 1867 and 1871 show the same two lines with different punctuation while the 1881 and 1891 editions show that the two lines have been changed. These minor alterations are significant when compared to the rapid changes that were occurring in America during the nineteenth century. Let us examine the lines' significant metamorphoses after listing them below, respectively:

I loafe and invite my Soul;
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of sum-
mer grass. (5-7)

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. (4-5)

Before examining these changes, I should mention that the titles of the 1867 and 1871 editions underwent a change from "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" to "Walt Whitman." In the 1881 and 1891 editions, the title changed to "Song of Myself." The words "poem" and "American" were deleted after the Civil War (1861-66). This deletion is significant both to poetry and to the nation. Why did Whitman delete those two words? After the Civil War, the word "poem" seemed to be limited in its ability to encompass Whitman's *Americanness*. Deleting the words "poem" and "American," then, may express Whitman's disappointment in the United States as a nation. In his 1855 "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*," he wrote, "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (1315). Before the Civil War, Whitman associated the nation with the poem, but then he deleted the words "poem" and "American" from his 1867 edition. I argue that this was not his way of declaring that the United States is not a poem, but rather a declaration that it has lost its innocent poetical nature. The images become horrifying, as Whitman himself reported them to his mother in an 1862 letter that was written when he went to look for his brother George in New York:

> And now that I have lived for eight or nine days amid such scenes as the camps furnish, and had a practical part in it all, and realize the way that hundreds of thousands of good men are now living, and have had to live for a year or more, not only without any of the comforts, but with death and sickness and hard marching and hard fighting, (and no success at that,) for their continual experience—really nothing we call trouble seems worth talking about. One of the first things that met my eyes in camp, was a heap of feet, arms, legs, &c. under a tree in front a hospital, the Lacy house (Whitman Archive).

As a result of the Civil War, Whitman replaces the comma after "soul" with a semicolon. Unlike a comma, which connects the first line to the

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

others, a semicolon amputates the stanza and separates the first line from the other lines. After the Civil War, the "soul" does not seem to "loafe" at ease, though it used to in the 1855 through 1860 editions. However, in the 1881 and 1891 editions, the soul returns to its normal state. The nation's instability as it entered the Civil War seems to have influenced Whitman's use of punctuation before and after the war. Thus, the nation's politics are represented in the several changes that "Song of Myself" underwent, including changes to form, tone, and ideologies. The tone and the notions of the poem are represented through the speaker.

'Song of Myself' as a Mirror of the Nation

The speaker is the most vivid sign of nationalism in "Song of Myself." In his article "'Song of Myself' and the Class Struggle in Language," Andrew Lawson asserts that:

> The loneliness of the speaker in the closing sections of 'Song of Myself' is bound up with a feeling of nostalgia, of yearning for a more settled, less ambiguous class location: a longing for rural folkways and hallowed patterns of labour... In the dusk, Whitman waits by the road for them, still stranded between conflicting languages and classes, still speaking with a forked tongue (390).

Unlike Lawson, I argue that the speaker in "Song of Myself" is able to unite different social classes implicitly given his seer-like vision of the nation and his Christ-like acceptance of its various individuals. The speaker's presence is felt from the beginning of the poem. The "I" in the poem is the nation —a transparent eyeball of the nation—. Also unlike Lawson, Scott MacPhail highlights how twentieth-century readings of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* assert that the "Self and America become the same thing: the reader identifies with the lyric speaker and through him voices a shared, nationalist identity" (135). However, MacPhail does not provide an in-depth analysis of Whitman's work, surveying instead how "[h]is work is powerfully intertwined with an American mythology and thus lends national legitimacy to the writer who can muster him in support of his or her project" (152).

Unlike MacPhail, who focuses on how several critics, such as Leslie Fiedler, James Miller and Helen Vendler examine Whitman's works, this

essay scrutinizes Whitman's very writings. Therefore, armed with an understanding of the speaker in "Song of Myself" as well as how Whitman is able to inspire future writers, I turn to Whitman's representation of the poet as the mirror of the nation. In his "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*," Whitman writes, "the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (1329). The poet or the "I" in "Song of Myself" advocates a new doctrine that is distinct from the limitations and sovereignty of antebellum America. The "I" calls for a democracy that abolishes slavery and gives equal rights to women, for example. The "I" is the voice of men, women, slaves, children, and every other American. For Whitman, everyone in the nation is a part of it. Let us examine the following lines in order to highlight the significance of the "I" in relation to the nation:

> I am of old and 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,
> … … … … … …
> One of the nation, the nation of many nations, the smallest the same, the largest the same,
> A Southerner soon as a Northerner,
> … … … … … …
> A novice beginning, experient of myriads of seasons,
> Of every hue, trade, rank, of every caste and religion,
> A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
> A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.
> I resist anything better than my own diversity, (330-349)

The lines above are taken from section sixteen of the last edition in 1891. Whitman's politics surpass the limitations determined by his government. Despite the conflict between the South and the North, the speaker or the "I" expresses above-average tolerance as he speaks of both as one. In the speaker, we can discern both religious and social tolerance. Diversity of race, social hierarchy, and religion are limitations that Whitman's "Song of Myself" redefines under the umbrella of a democratic nation. For instance, while the nation fails to tolerate racial and religious diversities, Whitman's poem does so by situating them in one section. Diversities were united in the poem before they were united in the nineteenth century American nation. Therefore, "Song of Myself" surpasses the nation as

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

limited and sovereign and foreshadows a future nation. For Whitman, the poet seems to have more authority over the nation than its presidents. Again, in his "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*," he asserts that:

> Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man (1317).

Therefore, defining the nation through the use of the "I" or the speaker, Whitman consciously admits to creating a nation that only poets can see. Thus, the poem becomes a constitution by itself.

This constitution is as flexible as the speaker; like his grass, it changes and grows wiser with regard to democracy in future editions of the poem. However, there is a turning point when the "I" or the poet becomes haunted by the horror inherent in the Civil War. In the first three editions (1855, 1856, and 1860) that were published before the Civil War, we read, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," and after the 1867 edition, Whitman substitutes the word "American" with "Manhattan" (497). He writes, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (497). After the Civil War, the speaker changes his politics from being an American to a being a "Manhattanian." Further, the phrase "one of the roughs" is deleted because it projects violence. By replacing the word "American" with "Manhattan," the speaker conveys his disappointment in the horrific Civil War, which became associated with America as a nation. The speaker prefers a local nationality over the national one since the latter is associated with North-South violence. The Civil War became a leadership failure. Martin G. Murray states that:

> Once in Washington, Whitman visited the patients he had accompanied from Virginia and met other injured soldiers... At the war's opening, Whitman, an anti-slavery and pro-Union journalist, was embittered at the failure of the republic's leaders to resolve the regional conflicts peacefully (59).

Therefore, Whitman's use of "Manhattan" may suggest a reconstruction of the nation from local to "kosmos." In other words, the local inspires the poet to imagine a better nation than its leaders did. In his *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman states:

> To-day, doubtless, the infant genius of American poetic expression ... lies sleeping far away, happily unrecognized and uninjur'd by the coteries […] lies sleeping, aside, unrecking itself, in some western idiom, [...] or in some slang or local song or allusion of the Manhattan... (54).

Whitman sought solace in poetry, imagining that it could build and unite the American nation. His poem suggests a peaceful constitution of a nation that is uninjured by leaders of war.

The leading speaker, therefore, transcends national boundaries and suggests limitless democracy in the form of a nation that does not enslave or differentiate among people, regardless of who they are. In her article "The Ecstatic Epistemology of Song of Myself," Janice Law Trecker asserts that:

> Whitman's was an epistemology grounded in ecstasy, and the intense emotions and certainties engendered by his experience forced him to break with conventional forms and conventional spirituality and gave him the confidence to create a radically new epic: non-narrative, 'musical,' and democratic (24).

Although Tecker claims that Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a democratic nation, he does not relate its democracy to the changes undergone by nineteenth century America. Whitman's notion of changing democracy is represented from his first edition in 1855 through to his last edition in 1891, in which the speaker declares:

> 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.
> Through me many long dumb voices,
> Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
> Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
> Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
> And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the father-stuff,
> And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
> Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
> Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung
> (506-15).

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

Oddly, in all the editions, the word "democracy" is mentioned only once. The speaker's nation seems to be more tolerant than antebellum America or even post-Civil War America. However, like the nation, the speaker's democracy has been developed over time. Line five above changes in the last two editions. The word "prostitutes" is replaced with "prisoners." While it used to be the same in the first five editions, it changed in the 1881 edition and remained the same in the 1891 edition. We once again witness the flexibility of the boundaries of the speaker's imagined nation's constitution. This nation grows to include or exclude members. The speaker gives more importance to prisoners than prostitutes now. Yet, the word "prostitute" is still mentioned once in the poem:

> The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
> The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
> (Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;) (304-308).

By keeping the prostitute in the nation in the above lines, we understand that the speaker prefers not to laugh at her. Thus, to quote Kateb, the speaker is a true seeker of "democratic individuality." However, when the word "prostitute" is deleted and replaced by "prisoners," the speaker refuses to be her voice. In other words, he prefers to sympathize with her, but gives priority to the prisoners instead. Therefore, the speaker suggests that the nation may change its doctrines and still maintain its respect for the individual. The nation or the speaker must encourage the public to respect marginalized citizens, such as the prostitute, instead of ridiculing them. The poet's attitude towards constructing the nation is reflected in his tolerance of the other by adjusting his imagined nation's constitution.

In his article "Whitman's Assumptions: 'Song of Myself' in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman," David Bromwich claims that:

> "Song of Myself" has several distinct modalities: invitation, characterization, catalogue, prayer, and rhapsody or sheer exclamation. There are also moments of teaching, of testifying, of self-rebuke or the answer to an imagined rebuke by others ... [sic] (504).

Bromwich arrives at all the above modalities without referring to the numerous editions of "Song of Myself." To better understand any of these

modalities, I argue that examining all the editions of Whitman's poem will result in a much clearer assumption regarding Whitman's transformation as a national poet.

Unlike Bromwich's treatment of modalities, let us examine the limited and sovereign nation, which does not have a fixed definition in Whitman's construction of his poem. Taking the example or modality of freedom, the reader, like the citizen, is perplexed by the flexibility and tolerance of the poet as a leader. Unlike a leader who may subscribe to one national constitution, the poet does not. In Whitman's first three pre-Civil War editions, the word "freedom" is never mentioned. However, in the 1867 edition and all subsequent editions, the speaker becomes a means of reminding the public of their freedom. Examining the differences between the first three editions and the later ones suggests that the poet, like the speaker, imagines a limitless nation. In the first four editions and the last three, we read the following, respectively:

> I am less the reminder of property or qualities, and more the reminder of life,
> And go on the square for my own sake and for others' sakes
> (493-94).
>
> Less the reminders of properties told, my words,
> And more the reminders they of life untold, and of freedom and extrication
> (493-94).

The first two lines are taken from the first edition and appear in the 1856 through 1860 editions with slight changes in format. The second two lines are taken from the last edition of 1891 and also appear with a slight change in punctuation and format as in the editions of 1867, 1871, and 1881. In the first two lines, the speaker offers himself as a reminder of life, which connects him with others. In the other two lines, the speaker turns to the power of words to remind his people of life, freedom, and extrication. The speaker aims to free the individual from the social constraints that may have led to the Civil War. Freedom seems to occupy a significant part of the constitution of the speaker's imagined nation in the wake of the Civil War. This not only refers to equality and the freedom of former slaves but also to the freedom of saying *no*, as he does from the perspective of a leader in response to those who conspire against the nation. After reminding the people of their freedom, the speaker continues:

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

> And make short account of neuters and geldings, and favor men and women fully equipped,
> And beat the gong of revolt, and stop with fugitives and them that plot and conspire (495-96).

The speaker favors men and women who are ready to halt violent revolts against the nation. The speaker's intention resembles that in Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government." In his examination of the relationship between governments and individuals, Thoreau defines any government as "best which governs not at all" (964). When Thoreau makes this statement, he does not mean to reject a government, but rather suggests "*at once* a better government [sic]" (965). Thoreau, here, is like Whitman's speaker who advocates for a better government. The speaker despises the traditional nation that oppresses individuals, such as slaves and soldiers. Thoreau criticizes the American government as being "a tradition" that hinders "the character inherent of American people" (965). As a result, people march to wars "against their will" (966). Like Whitman's speaker, Thoreau calls for an individual's resistance to government doctrines that oppress others, for example, by enslaving Africans. In other words, "unjust law exists" and we shall reject it (970). Therefore, "under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison" (972). The speaker also sees himself "in prison shaped like another man" (948). While Thoreau prefers the prison, the speaker in "Song of Myself" sympathizes with the prisoner. The speaker fantasizes or, to use Anderson's term, *imagines* the nation with a prison that needs a new policy. The prisoner should be respected and treated well. While the prisoner is handcuffed, the speaker imagines himself handcuffed and walking by his side:

> Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail, but I am
> handcuff'd to him and walk by his side;
> (I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one, with sweat on my twitching lips.) (952-53).

Whitman and Thoreau seem to be on the same page. Encouraging the individual to resist civil oppression, Thoreau writes, "I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest" (974). Thoreau sums up his argument by stating that a democratic

government should lead to "a true respect for the individual" or otherwise be disobeyed and resisted (979). When Whitman's speaker escorts the mutineer to the prison, he subscribes to a sort of revolt, and thus, like Thoreau, he rejects the sovereign nation. By rejecting the old doctrine, the speaker suggests a new one that respects the individual who breathes in his own fashion.

Conclusion: Whitman's Imagined Community

With its limitations, the sovereign state is not capable of respecting the individual, and this may influence literature. For the speaker as well as for Whitman, literature is the soul of the nation. In his *Democratic Vistas,* Whitman asserts:

> At all times, perhaps, the central point in any nation, and that whence it is itself really sway'd the most, and whence it sways others, is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems. Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance) of American democracy.
>
> Few are aware how the great literature penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will. Why tower, in reminiscence, above all the nations of the earth, two special lands, petty in themselves, yet inexpressibly gigantic, beautiful, columnar? Immortal Judah lives, and Greece immortal lives, in a couple of poems (5).

As in the example of "Song of Myself," the poem shapes the individual who subsequently represents the nation. For example, Whitman recognizes how important our understanding of Greece is through poetry. Therefore, his representation of the speaker in *Leaves of Grass* glorifies the nation and its democracy. The nation is no longer imagined as limited and sovereign in Whitman's poetry; rather, it is imagined as a community that needs to stand together without divisions. It is a community that is not limited by the boundaries of a sovereign nation. For the speaker, the limitless nation is analogous with leaves in the following lines:

> And limitless are leaves, stiff or drooping in the fields,
>
> … … … … … …

Acta Poética • 42-2 • julio-diciembre • 2021 • 129-145 • doi: 10.19130/iifl.ap.2021.2.18126

> A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
> How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he (96-100).

Metaphorically, these leaves are the leaves of the nation and are accessible to everyone, even a child. The speaker identifies the leaves as free of boundaries. Therefore, when the child asks him about the grass, the speaker does not give an absolute answer that may limit the leaves or the imagined constitution of the nation; rather, he suggests several possibilities throughout section six. By not giving the child, who is part of the nation, a singular answer to his question, the speaker advocates a second opinion, thus promoting democracy. The child is not limited to one answer and is not forced to accept one. The child is that citizen who meets a revolutionary leader and does not believe in imposed limitations and the sovereignty of the nation over the individual.

Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a transparent eyeball that sees through the nation. Whitman's representation of the nation through his style and the persona of the speaker is felt through several ways. First, the free verse that Whitman uses in *Leaves of Grass* is not traditional, and thus, it does not subscribe to the traditional national literature. The movement of lines from one stanza or section to another or even the deletion of several lines is an indication of the limitless imagination of the poet. His speaker grows over time, particularly after the Civil War. As the speaker celebrates and sings for himself, he also sings for the nation. He sings for the people to be tolerant, as demonstrated in the case of viewing prostitutes. The speaker sympathizes with slaves, women, children, men, and everyone that is part of the nation. He appears to understand everything and is ready to lead without causing much pain, as in the case of the Civil War. The speaker in "Song of Myself" is no different from that of Jack Engle who is willing to forgive the man who killed his father and marry that same man's daughter, Martha. For the speaker in "Song of Myself," the nation becomes imagined not as limited or sovereign but as a community "because the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANDERSON, BENEDICT. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

BARRETT, FAITH. "Inclusion and Exclusion: Fictions of Self and Nation in Whitman and Dickinson", in *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 5:2 (1996): 240-246.

BARRETT, FAITH. "Addresses to a Divided Nation: Images of War in Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman", in *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 61:4 (2005): 67-99.

BROMWICH, DAVID. "Whitman's Assumptions: 'Song of Myself' in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman", in *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 85: 3 (2018): 503-519.

DOTY, MARK. "Eros, and the Unspeakable: Whitman's Stanzas", in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 81 (Spring 2005): 66-78.

EMERSON, RALPH WALDO. "The American Scholar" in *The Norton Anthology of American literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007. 243-56.

KATEB, GEORGE. "Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy", in *Political Theory*, 18:4 (1990): 545-571.

LAWSON, ANDREW. "'Song of Myself' and the Class Struggle in Language", in *Textual Practice*, 18:3 (2004): 377-394.

MACPHAIL, SCOTT. "Lyric Nationalism: Whitman, American Studies, and the New Criticism", in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 44: 2 (2002): 133-160.

MURRAY, MARTIN G. "Traveling with the Wounded: Walt Whitman and Washington's Civil War Hospitals", in *Washington History*, 8: 2 (Fall/Winter 1996/1997): 58-73.

RENAN, ERNEST. "What is a nation?", in *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 8-22.

THOREAU, HENRY DAVID. "Resistance to Civil Government", in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007. 964-79.

Trecker, Janice Law. "The Ecstatic Epistemology of Song of Myself", in *The Midwest Quarterly,* 53: 1 (2011): 11-25.

Watson, Hugh. *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*. London: Methuen, 1982.

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself", in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007. 1330-1374.

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself", *Leaves of Grass*. Ed. Folsom and Kenneth M. Price (1855-1881). Available on the Walt Whitman Archive <www.whitmanarchive.org>.

Whitman, Walt. "Preface to Leaves of Grass (1855)", in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007. 1314-1329.

Whitman, Walt. *Democratic Vistas*. Ed. John Valente. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1949.

Whitman, Walt. "Letter from Walt Whitman to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, 29 December 1862", in *The Walt Whitman Archive*. Ed. Folsom and Kenneth M. Price. Available on the Walt Whitman Archive <www.whitmanarchive.org>.

Whitman, Walt. "Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography", in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 34: 3 (2017): 262-357.

Mohammed G. Alghamdi

Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature & Critical Theory and Criticism at King Saud University in Ryadh City, Saudi Arabia. Doctor of Philosophy, Comparative Lit & Critical Theory. Ph.D in English Literature from Middle Tennessee State University, 2015, and Master of Arts in English Literature from Creighton University, 2010. His research interests include American Literature from the 1850's to Modernism, Critical Theory and the relationship between American and Saudi Literatures.