
Self and Nature in Whitman's Poetry

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Walt Whitman is genuinely considered as the poet of the principle of romanticism, of the pilgrimage and progress of the soul, of perpetual effort of amelioration, of the joy of spiritual growth. He reduces beauty and achieved goodness to the rank of camp-followers as he refuses to buy it at the cost of reality. For him reality should be the supreme concern of a writer. So it is inescapable and inapprehensible and used by Whitman to bathe us in the flow of ever-expanding foundation, pouring upon us always the waters of an ever-rising tide. This is the uniqueness of Whitman securing a seat for him with the universal voices. The paper intends to explore the theme of self and nature which is visible through various layers of his poetic works.

For Whitman the society of hills or of trees contained nothing which was not contained in ample measure in the society of human beings; and its virtue was that it revealed, with slow cumulative emphasis, truths which the hum of affairs often obscures from us. He felt no contrast between nature and humanity; he felt merely that certain emotions which give life its unity of tone and are implied in all experience, may come home to the soul more simply and therefore more convincingly under the stars or within sound of the "mystic surf-beat of the sea." His perception of nature was complete only if the external nature was assessed against essential nature of man. Both are interdependent and complementing each other. War, a major subject of thought for him, has been analyzed in the background of human nature. He felt that one of the basic causes of modern war is doubtless not only the competitive nature of industrialism but its deadening of the spirit, and the consequent desire for sensational relief elemental destruction is nearer to creative life than mechanical routine of wage-slavery.

'In the night', he wrote, 'with the mountains on all sides, the precipitous and turning road, the large, bare-armed trees looming up around us, the room half filled with men curiously enwrapped in garments of a fashion till then never seen- and the flickering light from the mighty fire putting a red glow upon most objects, and casting others into a strong shadow - I can tell you these stoppages were not without interest. There was one of the Alleghany inns, in particular, that we stopped at about an hour after midnight. There were some ten or twelve great strapping drovers, reclining about the room on benches, and as many more before the huge fire. The beams overhead were low and smoke-dried. I stepped to the farther end of the long porch; the view from the door was grand, though vague, even in the moonlight. We had just descended a large and very steep hill, and just off on one side of us was a precipice of apparently hundreds of feet. The silence of the grave spread over this apparently hundreds of feet. The silence of the grave spread over this solemn scene; the mountains were covered in their white shrouds of snow - and the towering trees looked black and threatening; only the largest stars were visible, and they glittered with a tenfold brightness. One's heart, at such times, is irresistibly lifted to Him of whom these august appearances are but the least emanation. Faith! If I had an infidel to convert I would take him on the mountains, of a clear and beautiful night, when the stars are shining.'

The sight and sound of insects, magnified by the stillness, pleased him equally well, the long whirring of the locust, monotonous, yet graded by the listening ear 'in distinct whirls' and a gathering crescendo, a 'brassy drone' that had a masculine meaning; or two 'slate-colored dragon-flies, with wings of lace', circling and darting and occasionally balancing themselves in quivering stillness over the surface of the pond, in which water snakes glided or a pike rose with a flues; or white butterflies intensifying the greens of the August foliage.

His favorite occupation was strolling about by himself looking at grass, trees and flowers, with little preference for one kind over any other, listening to birds, crickets, tree frogs, or the wind. Obviously natural objects, sounds and sights, gave him abnormal pleasure, as did his contracts with men, women and children. He was never known to say that he liked anyone, but each who knew him felt that he liked him or her, and even that his touch had an indescribable charm. Wherever he was or whatever he was doing when alone, he had a way of singing, generally in an undertone and usually tunes without words.

Whitman's best poetry arises either from the dramatic (often comic) tensions evoked when the self is shown to be in a state of contradiction or polarity to the not-self or from the lyric harmony, often meditative, retrospective, and "mistrial" which is evoked when the self is felt to be identical with the not-self or some aspect of it. The poems which do not in some way involve the metaphor of the self are more likely than not to be inserting catalogues, empty rhetoric, "cosmic", vague, or in other ways unsatisfactory. The poet, Whitman says, must not content himself with making beautifully contrived verses. He must be a prophet, a seer, a bard, a teacher, and a moralist. Not that, as a moralist, the poet teaches improving lessons or preaches uprightness. He is a moralist in the sense that he speaks for "promulges". His aim is 'To cheer up slaves and horrify despots.' But he is a spiritual leader, too; for the age of religion is past and the poet must assume the role of the priest. He must make himself the most perfect of men the archetype of the spiritually and organically normal.

He rejects no fact of life from his poems; yet he is not a "realist": his poetry "is to be transcendent and new; it is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic." As for the form of poems, they are to be "organic," evolving free metrical patterns" as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush." And it is significant that Whitman uses the phrase "Poems or music or orations or recitation," because his poems often have a musical structure- so much so that sometimes we can follow the patterns of aria and recitative in his poetry as Whitman had learned them from the Italian operas he loved so well. And he thinks too that the poem is in sense an oration, meant to be "sung" or declaimed; Whitman was in fact a would-be orator and made several attempts to become a public speaker or lecturer. It is clear that the Bible had a deep influence on Whitman's style. The opening lines of 'Song of Myself' are :

*"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,
I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at ease observing a spear of summer grass."*

If we compare this with any one of innumerable passages from the Bible, we see one of the main origins of Whitman's mode of versification.

*“What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the
Son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels,
And hast crowned him with glory and honor.”*

The tenderness and yet the danger of comradesly love, or “adhesiveness,” as Whitman calls it, using a chronological word, are better expressed and more convincing in the personal and confessional “Calamus” poems than is the “political” assertion of some of the others that comradesly love is the basis (apparently the only basis as we would gather from “I Hear it was Charged against Me”) of a new democratic society. A more purport of these States is to found a superb friendship, exalted, previously unknown. “Out of the Cradle” is one of Whitman’s most complex and beautiful poems. In form it somewhat resembles an opera, beginning with a rich overture in which the themes are stated and the mood evoked:

*“Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird’s throat, the musical shuttle”*

The main theme of “Out of the Cradle,” although it does not exhaust the meanings of the poem, is the origin of the poet’s genius. Whitman asks for and receives from the sea a “claw” or “word,” and we are led to understand that his genius originated in childhood and its first intuition of the alienation and loss which are the lot of all beings and which culminate in death. “Out of the cradle,” then, is a poem about the origin of poetry and to this extent resembles certain books of Wordsworth’s Prelude. If this is not clear from the poem itself, we have as guideposts the two earlier titles Whitman gave to it: “A child’s Reminiscence and” “A Word out of the Sea.” Is Whitman right in tracing the origin of his poetry as he does? Surely he is only half right, for the world of experience posited in “Out of the Cradle,” whether in its origin or its expressed form, is not that of “Song of Myself”.

The illusion of a universe in which opposites and contradictions are reconciled is sustained only at the very beginning of the poem. There the “musical shuttle” out of “the mocking-bird’s throat” draws into a unity that which is “down” and that which is “up”:

“Down from the showered halo,”

Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they were alive. And at the beginning of the poem the poet can confidently speak of himself as the “chanter of pains and joys, unite of here and hereafter.” The feeling of reconciliation and harmony rises to an early pitch in the aria of the two birds:

*“Shine! Shine! Shine!
Pour down your warmth, great sun!
While we bask, we two together.”*

But the illusion of unity and continuity is not sustained, or is sustained only faithfully, after this aria. For now the she-bird has suddenly disappeared, and the he-bird sings his melancholy dirge pouring out meanings, as Whitman says, “which I of all men know”.

The impulse to get back to nature which we notice in specimen days was incident to Whitman’s gradually failing powers. He had been in uncertain health ever since February of 1873. When, after sitting at his office desk in the treasury building (reading a novel by Bulwer-Lytton), he had

returned to his room at night and sustained his first paralytic shock. He made a slow recovery. Whitman's idea of himself as a philosopher, religious thinker, and national bard is to be found in his description of the destiny of the poet, or, as he is oddly called, the "literate," in Democratic Vistas. In speaking of the need for a moral and spiritual regeneration in America, Whitman allots to the literates a highly important place. His task is to create "archetypal poems" which will give unity of soul and imagination to his people and to exercise the offices of moral and spiritual.

He introduced into his longer poems, like "Song of Myself" either as the beginning or at the end of the different sections, lines destined to be used, according to the individual instance, as an introduction or a conclusion, in order to prepare the transitions and reinforce the cohesiveness of the whole. In other words, he became and reinforces the cohesiveness of the whole.

A poet needs to see the holistic picture of positive emotions balanced in human life. For the poet neither the psychologist nor the physiologist can reveal love's reality. Each is impartially concerned only with one aspect of it. The poet cannot express the truth of love, if he recoils from any of its aspects. Neither can he, if he concentrates entirely on one. And it is by imaginative understanding, as distinct from scientific impartiality, that he redeems the 'infidelism' about sex and shame-faced sully of natural impulse which Whitman rightly deplored. The poet transcends what is partial in the personal not by observing people or things impartially, but by identifying himself with them creatively. We have only to imagine the physical rites of love conducted with the detached curiosity of science. Yet Whitman's gospel of emancipation from the thwarting of civilization represented in too many of the Leaves only a forced alliance between a primitive and a scientific acceptance of the physical. And most of his lines which caused offence were as devoid of poetry as a physiological chart. When the poet is overshadowed by a burden of facts, the construction of reality affects poetic quality.

Quite strange, as it seems, the elimination of such ignorance, which Whitman may certainly be said to have been a pioneer in demanding, has only transferred the problem from the Church, whose priests he rejected, to the minds and hearts of individual men and women, where in reality it always resided. They only, in sensitive submission to what is truest in themselves, can spiritualize the sexual, not in the perverted sense of devitalizing it, but in the true sense of divinely humanizing it. He has exhibited his genius in highlighting divine element in human-beings.

The poem "Children of Adam" nobly affirmed what should be the relation between man and matter, by transgressing which modern man has subjected his humanity to mechanism. 'Nothing endures', he wrote, 'but personal qualities. But these qualities could be nourished in most men only through the craftsman's fidelity to his material, and through 'the muscle and pluck' of manual labor, whether it was the house-builder, whose craft he described with all the detail of personal experience, or the wielder of the axe through history and all over the world. The axe, in his poem, became something more than a tool, a symbol rather of the shaping spirit of man, as he enumerated some of the many forms that it had helped to fashion- barges, scaffolds, coffins, bedsteads, cradles, floor planks, stairs the liquor bar, 'the shape of the sly settee', the step-ladder and doors 'giving many exists and entrances'. And inseparable from the axe were the wielders of it, 'the wood-boys and woodmen with their clear untrimmed faces', their self-reliant actions, their ringing voices and joy in 'the strong day's work'. It was the freedom to travel together 'along the grand roads of the universe', with no inhibitions or 'dark confinements', no 'secret

silent loathing and despair' or attachment to riches or persons, in which he exulted and bid other exult.

The experience of Nature had been his touchstone of reality. He had tested his own work by confronting it with the sea, the hills and the grass of the prairie. For Whitman the society of hills or of trees contained nothing which was not contained in ampler measure in the society of human beings; and its virtue was that it revealed, with slow cumulative emphasis, truths which the hum of affairs often obscures from us. He felt no contrast between nature and humanity; he felt merely that certain emotions which give life its unity of tone and are implied in all experience, may come home to the soul more simply and therefore more convincingly under the stars or within sound of the "mystic surf-beat of the sea." His perception of nature was complete only if the external nature was assessed against essential nature of man. Both are interdependent and complementing each other. War, a major subject of thought for him, has been analyzed in the background of human nature. He felt that one of the basic causes of modern war is doubtless not only the competitive nature of industrialism but its deadening of the spirit, and the consequent desire for sensational relief elemental destruction is nearer to creative life than mechanical routine of wage-slavery.

In a close and smooth communication with nature, Whitman wanted his poems to be as common and nutritious as grass and as innocent of exclusive forms. He may not have succeeded in making them so, even after re-writing them as many as five times. But no title could have better communicated his intention. At the time he was writing this collection he was almost overpowered by the spirit of this great work. It kept him over whelmed throughout. In the second of his articles he naively confessed his inability to decide whether it was likely to prove 'the most lamentable of failures or the most glorious of triumphs in the known history of literature'. But such doubts were no more than shadows which flickered over the sun-warmed rock of his obstinate self- complacence.

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