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“Song of Myself”: Search for the Transcendental in the Immanent

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Abstract:

Being a transcendentalist, Whitman believed that God, nature and humans are interrelated. In “Song of Myself” he advocated a remarkable blend of oriental mystical trends with the American democratic idealism of his times. The self for Whitman is both personal and universal. He took life to be a kind of journey from the outward, the world without; to the inward, the world within. He says that everything must realize its truth as everything exists by divine right. And that everything will have to develop eventually to realize the reason for which it exists. His “Song of Myself” would certainly be the song of everyone’s self. Throughout his singular poem, he conveys his mystical consciousness as an experience of his identification with all life that transformed him into a cosmos.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, love, self, God, nature, soul, mind, body.

Whitman’s famous poem “Song of Myself” had no title in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It was called “A Poem of Walt Whitman, an American” in 1856 and in 1860 it was called “Walt Whitman.” The title changed to “Song of Myself” in 1881 and this change in the title is significant. The poem is a celebration of Whitman’s self, his life and everything that surrounds him. It is circular in movement rather than progressive. It returns upon itself in evocation of ecstasy and confession of identification and recognition, of rapturous union with earth and spirit. It celebrates both the personal and the universal. Louis L Martz states that Whitman’s self in this poem is “a universal consciousness, absorbing all into itself, becoming one with all and all with one” (87). He asserts that through his poetry the poet is uniting all humanity in divinity through a cosmic consciousness present in all things.

“Song of Myself” sets both the poet and the reader free from the restraints of convention by warily exploring and emphasizing transcendentalist beliefs of a common soul. The self celebrated here is not an ordinary, phenomenal self of Whitman but the transcendental ‘I’ consciousness, the mystical self, the cosmic mind. Every person has his own identity and own idea of self; however, the poet also maintains the idea of a unified, universal self, in which everything is interchangeable and interrelated.

Whitman, out of his mystic awareness, expresses the truths that he himself experienced. In fact the transcendentalists of the time were writing about the intrinsic power in man that

transcends the intellect and the senses. James E Miller breaks down the sequence of the poem into sections that directly correlate with Evelyn Underhill’s five phases of mystical experience. He asserts that “‘Song of Myself’ is a dramatic representation of a mystical experience” (Miller 636). His mysticism is nowhere seen more vigorously expressed than in the following lines:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy
Whatever I touch or am touched from. (48; sec 24)

Whitman’s mystic experience is mostly formed through long and solitary meditation. His attention is intently set on a single object until the sense of selfhood widens and the spirit seems abruptly to cross the doorsill of nature. The finite self rejoins the soul of the universe in order to feel the long pulsation, ebb and flow of endless motion. The “boundless vista” and the “horizon far and dim” are all here to point out that ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are eventually merged in the ‘spirit’. The wheel turns on its axis and the ‘spirit’ goes back to ‘thee’. And it is in this state of awakened consciousness that he addresses his soul:

I believe in you, my soul....
Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat...
I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning...
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth... (28-29; sec5)

This deeper insight comes from the depths of his pure being, the wellspring of absolute knowledge of which the self which is now known to him is constituted. He is speaking of inner knowledge of the One Cosmic Presence in everyman. He believed that “in each person there is an inner light which is his duty to heed” (Tilak 13). From the beginning of the “Song of Myself” he celebrated himself as the centre of the universe and of all things, as he has experienced the truth of this wisdom:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs
to you. (25; sec1)

However, he will not separate himself from his fellows: they too are the centre of things. This remarkable message is bolstered by two ideas which quickly appear in the poem: it is not only his soul that is the centre of the universe, but he is also one with all humanity outside. In fact, there is no outside. And, this one self of his is the self of everyman, so he would, like every man, compose his poetry in such a manner as to become the poet of democracy, read by ordinary men everywhere. Though his object is to picture a typical American, he considers the average man divine because “the poet has to come to see, in the simplest of lives, a timeless grandeur of body and soul” (Foster 851). He foresees our moods and questionings due to his oneness with us. While taking everything into himself- his larger, divine self and becoming a magnet, he

irresistibly draws the truth from humanity. He cannot be accepted by anyone, nor can his truth be concealed.

Whitman, like Blake, includes animals also in his divine omniscience. William Blake in his Doctrine of Correspondences states that there is a correspondence between the inner and outer realms; everything that exists in the world around us has its inner reality in man. So if we go deep into ourselves we can correspond symbolically, spiritually with everything that exists. And not only animate but also inanimate objects have an internal analogue. And this insight is found to be shared by every mystic, and Whitman goes up to animals and looks in their eyes:

I think I could turn and live with animals...
 I stand and look at them long, and long...
 So they show their relations to me and I accept
 them,
 They bring me tokens of myself, they evince
 them plainly....
 I wonder where they get those tokens,
 Did I pass that way huge times ago and
 negligently drop them? (55; sec 32)

He gave equal importance to men and women. Irwin MaCoy stresses that “Whitman does not argue the matter, he simply states the fact; he sows the seeds of this truth in the mind of the world, and then continues his message to humanity with woman as one of its prime factors” (23). He does not make any distinction between people as mystics do not do so. He experiences everything therefore from the inside:

I am the poet of the women the same as the man,
 And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
 And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men. (44; sec21)

Whitman, here and everywhere in the poem, does not mean the procreant urge to beget and produce children but to beget other things- new life and new consciousness, to produce new selves. He considers sexuality as basically a symbolic desire for oneness. Asselineau claims that “In spite of the importance of the spiritual element [...] [Whitman] represents [his] mystical state as a form of sexual intercourse” (154). He states that there is only one life that connects all persons together and the procreant urge of the world symbolizes this appealing force in us that wants to unite and cease division, separateness, and difference. The poet submerges himself entirely in his physical existence, discovers the lavish richness of all his senses, and bids welcome to every organ and attribute.

Whitman’s imagination creates artistic symbols that enable the human mind to realize the meaning and importance of life. The spiritual clue the poet receives while loafing in the grass asserts the divine nature of the body and recommends a harmony which extends beyond it. His

approach to transcendentalism differs from most of his contemporaries like Thoreau and others. They did not reject the importance of the material aspect of life but they exalted the spiritual as the highest.

Whitman disagrees with the belief that a perfect society would come from discarding the world. He rejects the Cartesian bifurcation between mind and matter which cannot account for the interaction of the spiritual with material being. He always gives equal preference to matter as well as spirit. He was well aware of the *Hereditary Decent* (a book first published in 1843 by the well-known phrenologist, Orson S Fowler) which suggests that the mind is equivalent to the body. But Whitman took it a step further and equated body with soul and the spiritual with the material. For him the body is necessary for our development, and similarly the self that attaches to it and identifies with it. He does not reject the physical, for it is only through the physical that one can have an insight of the spiritual. Thus he emerges as a poet of both body and soul.

One of the most important themes of “Song of Myself” is love. To him love is an intense emotion of the mystic devotion. In it the rhythm of ‘I’ and ‘thou’ flows in myriad channels of meters. It is the delight of a wonderful sensual splendor arising from the aesthetic knowledge of a feeling of mystery which procures all our delights. For him love is the Christian asset of *charitas* or *agape*, hidden in deep modesty. It is a gracious fervor, inspiring, dynamic and artistic. And as an effect of the summit of love, he arrives at oneness. He believes the principle of unity is the mystery of all mysteries. For him love is the “latent right of insurrection”, the “quenchless, indispensable fire”. It is an urge to know and identify the deep mysteries of life, in order to turn up at the “Ostensible realities”. Love clears “one’s path ahead endlessly”. He considers it a process which initiates with “kindling a fire” in the heart of man. Moreover, he believes that Love enhances and strengthens one’s vision of that fusion of truth and beauty which is the highest and deepest reality. It is the fulfillment of heart’s desire that leads to the rim of the perpetuity where individual is merged in the universal:

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me. (47; sec 24)

To Whitman, lover is a seer. Love offers him an insight into the chasms and recesses of mind and soul. Thus it is a state of endless joy experienced in the divine light of love that the poet develops the great humanitarian feelings. For him love is a “morning- glory” that “satisfies him more than the metaphysics of books” (49; sec24). It creates in man “seas of bright juice”. The dawn of love is likened to “the sun-rise”, which is so “Dazzling and tremendous”. It is the love of the soul, the infinite and the imperishable that makes him a free companion:

I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires,
I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with bride myself,
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips. (60; sec33)

Whitman, as always, eulogizes nature, understands its patterns. Its beauty touches something alike within. Its magnificence re-echoes to the inner splendor that has awakened. The dawn has impressed him, which according to him has energizing symbolism for a mystic. He is an intimate companion of nature. The appeal and considerate intensity of his nature poetry can be traced to his inborn personal experience. His study of nature has been contiguous and fervent. He is a glowing and vigorous lover of nature who learns her very tenderly. He, like Wordsworth, becomes so sensitive that any of nature's divine manifestations become almost too much for him. According to his own description, he is 'a cosmos'. Being a lover of nature, he observes all natural things and, like Emerson and Thoreau, finds God in everything. Emerson in his essay "Nature" emphasizes how in the natural world can be found "a sanctity which shames our religions". But in the same essay Emerson also inclines towards Platonism, stating that nature is "emblematic" of higher truths. According to Whitman, the secret of true personality is the recognition of the microcosm with all things natural and external:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
 Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating drinking and breeding,
 No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
 No more modest than immodest. (47; sec24)

Certainly, Whitman accepts everything and science would be one of the ways that truth manifests itself by exact demonstration. And, that there is a kind of revelation to the scientist when the truth is established and this is what Whitman points to. He like all naturalists celebrates the reality of the scientist's world because it is like a symbol of the truth he has discovered, the truth of his cosmic consciousness. Whitman had decided it earlier to not only sing and celebrate science in his poetry, but also to relate the natural laws of the physical world to poetics. The laws of nature, as revealed by science, would determine the laws of poetry. However, he was not only interested in applying laws of nature to poetry, but also in how we could apply science to arrive at a modified and inclusive idea of the universe. For him the purpose of science is to bring us closer to God. He then aims to merge science (materialism) and religion (spiritualism) and create strong individuals in an ideal democracy. John Burroughs, a nineteenth-century naturalist and a friend of Whitman said, "If we ask where is the modern imaginative work that is based upon these revelations of science, the work in which they are the blood and vital juice, I answer, 'Leaves of Grass', and no other" (250). On his part Whitman says:

Gentlemen, to you first honors always!
 Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
 I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling. (47; sec23)

Whitman's catalogues are very famous. These are the result of the poet's democratic spirit. In fact, his use of catalogues is important because they reveal his basic philosophy of life. No single person is the subject of his song, nor can be; the individual recommends a group and the group a multitude, each unit of which is as appealing as every other unit, and possesses equal

claims to recognition. His unity through diversity and his catalogues form an important relationship which was pursued specifically by critics in his century. Haurihan states:

Whitman’s way, with his long catalogues, is to give the impression that he is itemizing every single thing in the world in order to convince us that he’s serious, that he means it when he says, “Everything comes into my orbit, I exclude nothing”. It’s very impressive once we see what he’s doing. Each of these forms of life he mentions is a facet of him, Walt Whitman. (667)

Whitman’s transcendentalism is also evident from his catalogues. The catalogues ensure the reader’s participation in the poet’s movement from the singular to the cosmic. The poet moves from observation to action, which is essentially an expression intended to awaken not to settle. But the movement is mainly extensive. And his problem is to find the suitable kind of extensive imagery, a means of expanding the ‘I’ into an impressive symbolic figure. However, the expansion of self for Whitman is not easy. He has his own conditions and is well- aware that he is taking a dangerous journey.

Whitman assumes that there is something within us that is far beyond defeat and victory: the *Atman*, the soul. Vice and virtue are inconsequential in face of life’s grandeur. He will embrace both victory and defeat to enjoy them equally:

I am not the poet of goodness only,
I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.
What blurt is this about virtue and about vice? (46; sec22)

The realization of the self has enlightened Whitman about the truth of rebirth. Death, according to him, is expelled after the mystic’s embrace of reality. Mysticism in itself is life, rather a secret name for our discovery of ourselves as we are in reality. So, it becomes difficult for a mystic to conceive of death, as he cannot imagine what death is actually because he knows only life, filled with turbulent energies and ecstasy. According to D H Lawrence:

Whitman would not have been the great poet he is if he had not taken the last steps and looked into death. Death, the last merging, that was the goal of his manhood (17).

Whitman says:

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

(30; sec6)

Whitman is of the view that the life of the greater souls is repeated literally thousands of times in the lives of potential mystics. We should not believe that they were different from the rest of humanity. Rather, we have to see the same principle and pattern operating in our lives. He believed in rebirth and the concept is present in all his thinking:

Births have brought us richness and variety,
And other births will bring us richness and variety. (73; sec4)

To sum up: embedded throughout “Song of Myself” is the necessity of direct experience, immediate intuitive knowledge of spiritual reality and the realization of the self.

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