

Song of Myself : A Democratic Epic

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Abstract:- Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' is one of the most important poems in the American literature, important for both its use of language and its vision of equality. Throughout the poem, Walt Whitman gives emphasis on equality of all men and women. To him all humans are equal and all professions are equally honorable.(Seery, 2011)).

The poem, hence celebrates the theme of democracy and the oneness of mankind, specifically the American people. The purpose of this paper is not to provide a kind of background for Whitman's poetic principles, but try to discuss his democratic leanings in "Song Of Myself". Whitman envisioned democracy not just as a political system but as a way of experiencing the world. In the early nineteenth century, people still harbored many doubts about whether the United States could survive as a country and about whether democracy could thrive as a political system. To allay those fears and to praise democracy, Whitman tried to be democratic in both life and poetry. He imagined democracy as a way of interpersonal interaction and as a way for individuals to integrate their beliefs into their everyday lives. "Song of Myself" notes that democracy must include all individuals equally, or else it will fail.

Keywords:- Celebrate, Democracy, Epic, Grass " I", Sing, Voice, You.

I. INTRODUCTION

First published in 1855 in Whitman's collection *Leaves of Grass*, 'Song of Myself' is one of the best known and most influential poems ever written by an American (Robert Lee, 1985). Running to somewhere around 70 pages and divided into 52 sections, 'Song of Myself' takes the reader on an epic journey through many settings, time periods, viewpoints and personas. Walt Whitman had some radical ideas about America, democracy, spirituality, sexuality, nature and identity. He used 'Song of Myself' to explore those ideas while preaching self-knowledge, liberty and acceptance for all. (Lee, 1985).

With its free-form and loose structure, its compelling rhythms, multiple themes and shifting narrators, 'Song of Myself' is widely considered one of the first truly modern poems. (Williams, 2010). No one had ever read anything quite like it before, and it wielded a heavy influence on 20th century poets like T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg. In fact, some of Whitman's passages are so steamy that they shocked contemporary readers. Emily Dickinson, who wrote poetry around the same time as

Whitman, once said of him, 'I have never read his book, but I was told that he was disgraceful. (Reynolds, 2000.)

Walt Whitman is, without doubt, the American poet par excellence. (Williams, 2010) His 'Americanness' –so to speak– is characterized by his rejection of the conventional, genteel and romantic poetry of the Nineteenth Century. The poet, Whitman says, would not content himself with making beautiful contrived verses. Thus, the great American poet would create both new forms and new subjects for his poetry. So that rhyme would no longer remain primary. Uniformity of stanzaic pattern would be abandoned, it would even turn toward a new content. This does not mean that the poet would totally repudiate past beliefs but, he would incorporate them into new ones, just as Americans are a mixture of many people of many nationalities. To be commensurate with this new American stock, the poet would incarnate the American geography, occupations and the people themselves in a new and transcendent poetic form. In other words, the poet is –as Whitman is to argue in *Democratic Vistas* – a kind of spokesman for his people. He is not only an individual voice but also the voice of his nation.

II. THE MAKING OF THE POET

"Song Of Myself" is the greatest of Whitman's poems and also the most problematic and difficult of his works. This stylistically various poem was a turning point in his career, it also absorbed his efforts for several years. He forged his language instrument and his inclusive, miscellaneous form in order to write it.

"Song Of Myself" marks Whitman's attempt at a democratic epic in which Walt Whitman is the outstanding hero, but behind him all people are celebrated. Through the title of the poem Whitman promises to "sing" a simple and separate self, yet before going further in the reading of the poem, we notice that neither Whitman nor the image that he projects of himself can be described as simple. We discover that this separate self is always merging with other persons. We would expect him to talk about himself, but he still gives us very little concrete information about Walt Whitman (Clark, 1955). His eagerness for democracy, and his need to embrace everything and everybody is highly suggested from the very beginning, thus the poem opens,

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

“Song OF Myself” is one of those modern circular epics that tell the story of their own creation. It enacts Whitman’s birth as a poet. In other words, it records and relates an artist’s struggle to become himself- the making of the poet. (Matt Miller,2010) Unlike , virtually every other poem of the century , “Song Of Myself” does not tell a story or unfold an argument. The material Whitman uses in this poem includes almost everything. It surveys all aspects of nature along with all facets of American life. It includes erotic passages, fantasia of geology and astronomy, a sketch of a sea-battle, another of a wartime massacre, tableaux of a horse, a butcher, a blacksmith at work, a Negro worker, a fleeing slave , a sad lonely woman, also of vivid dawns and sunsets and so forth. All of these come to contribute to the changeable portrait of a man named on line 497, Walt Whitman, who we are told is creating this uninterrupted flow as a form for himself, a celebration of himself.(Zweig,p.229)

The classic epic poems have been masterpieces of inclusion, in the way they have acted as sources and points of reference expanding circles of knowledge.(Britannica) In this sense, “Song Of Myself” is also an epic .It is, too, a masterpiece of inclusion ,although it inverts the familiar epic pattern. It does not tell a story , its hero has not accomplished any valiant or brave actions, or rather his action is , without doubt , the poem itself. Anyhow, like any other epic “Song Of Myself “ accommodates quantities of knowledge and information and provides various tableaux of human life. Its hero is, simply, an ordinary man who has led a remarkably commonplace life.

In writing this epic, Whitman comes out with a new kind of poetry, almost a prose- like verse. The poem is entirely composed of lines he grouped from his earliest notebooks, journalistic articles and books. He picks up fragments and portraits from some newspapers, brackets passages from books and turns them into a poem. He also makes use of some French and Spanish words. The idea behind the mixture of other tongues is , obviously, to suggest that “Song Of Myself” is an Universal poem that celebrates all mankind.

All these cuttings, fragments portraits and borrowed words ... complement and complete each other. They all contribute to a whole effect as the sounds of musical instruments contribute to an orchestra. In that sense, the poem can be considered as an oration meant to be chanted and the speaker is , undoubtedly, the singer. Hence, the title “Song Of Myself. “.

Unlike many other poems, “Song Of Myself is not framed by a single setting , it takes the Universe and all times as its setting . For the poem seems to flow from surprise to surprise , from theme to theme, from scene to scene and nothing seems too peculiar to find a place in it. The poem leaps from subject to subject and hovers among a plurality of meanings and interpretations giving the reader a wide range of scenes, catalogues and tableaux which are in turn intricate bristling and random ; and their randomness is highly suggestive for they can be considered as extended

symbols of a mind that accepts everything and excludes absolutely nothing.

The poet, or more accurately, the singer celebrates here what is ordinary and available to everyone. He draws pictures and tableaux of the ordinary living , of the different aspects of nature , the forms and habits of animals , the sights of cities and the daily activities of common people.(Clark, 1955).

III. THE UNIVERSAL SELF

There is no tightly knit overall structure to “Song Of Myself “, but in general the plot of the poem can be called the universalization of the self(zweig,1986). The first four sections present the leading themes and motifs of the poem, make a personal statement about the age and health of ‘the singer’, affirm the elusiveness and yet the autonomy of the self , which is a mystery not to be discovered by mere “trippers and askers”.

From the very beginning, the poem assumes a dialogue form, as suitable for a prophet-poet, by addressing “You”, that is any man or woman in a perfectly equalitarian life of which “the leaves of grass” are the general symbol. The tone is both that of the potential lover and that of the teacher who both assume a very close position to the scene and show some affection and sympathy for the people and the landscapes which the poem moves through.

Throughout the first sections of the poem , Whitman’s ‘singer’ glories in his anonymity. Apart from few information concerning his age ,health and origin we don’t know him. We don’t know even his name or how he earns his living. His actions of any sort are few, but everything, for the ‘everything’ that is the poem, happens to him. This anonymous singer dominates the whole poem, and he is, in some sort, the poem itself singing, celebrating, reciting and ironizing. Thus, Whitman’s unified setting for “Song Of Myself “is not a place but a voice , various and broad enough to say everything. It is not only an individual voice but it is the voice of all his nation. More than that,, it is a cosmic voice belonging to everybody and to everywhere. In that sense the poem is an Opera in which all the voices are one (Lee,1985).

“ Song Of Myself “ has puzzled its readers because its intricate balancing of themes seems to call out for interpretation. The poem surely “ means “ something ; yet it slides out of reach, hovers amid a plurality of meanings until giving up, then the reader understands that the poem is simply itself: a musical whole spoken by a disembodied voice, in turn playful , mournful, satirical .Despite this seeming elusiveness, Whitman tries, sometimes, to help the reader by inserting some parenthetical comments – a sort of stage directions -by which he claims to tell only the truth: what you are reading here really happened, I did not make it up; this is not literature, but fact,

*I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at even hazard
Nature without check with original energy [L12/13;Sect. 1]*

He is saying that there is no art here – no poem -, there is only ‘nature’, only spontaneous utterance. Don’t look here, in this poem, for second thoughts or cunning echoes, for foreshadowing and formal development. Here is a voice speaking before it thinks. “For good or bad” “Song Of Myself” is no poem? It is a reckless present tense; it is a broad voice becoming naked to us, “I will go to the bank by the wood and became undisguised and naked,” (L19). The poem as a whole claims not to be literature; it wants to be read naively as a window on the truth. In one of his essays, Whitman states, “No one will get at my verses who insists on viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such a performance, or at aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism.” (Lee Robert: p.43)

Now everything is almost clear, the over abundant quantity of images, the vast range of subject matters, the various shiftings and leaps, the startling variety of voices’ tones tend to give an accurate and truthful view of life. All these suggest the arbitrariness and plural significance of life. [Sects.3/4]

“Song Of Myself” is not only a voice, it is a voice that cannot stop singing and reciting, delighted with its own fullness, plunged into its unuttered future. The poem’s present tense is so reckless and hurried, “I speak at every hazard.....” that it seems to have no past and no memory. That is to say, the poem is not about anything anymore than life is about something. It is simply happening, it is about itself, about its own creation. Here again we can see the effect of the poet’s “twoness” or his ability to watch himself act, to know and orchestrate his presence. An important example of this ability occurs in Section Five,

*I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself
to you, And you must not be abased to the other. [L.82/83]*

In this section “the plot” of the poem begins. Here the self is imagined to be engaged in a conversation with itself, as the soul might be imagined to be in a dialogue with the body. This passage seems to record an actual moment of illumination- yet nobody is sure if Whitman experienced such a moment and became a poet because of it. (Zweig.1985)

*Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and
Knowledge that pass all the argument of the
earth, [L.91...100]*

It is one of the rare stanzas in “Song Of Myself” to be written in the past tense. Here, Whitman is memorializing the process by which his corporal body was, as it were, consumed and spiritualized; he describes it vividly as a physical caress of his body by his soul. This swift and sudden transcending of the distinction between the body and the soul is accompanied by a vision of the infinite significance of the details of the created world. The marriage of the soul and the body leads the singer to an ecstatic

moment when he feels himself in complete harmony with all of nature,

*... a keelson of the creation is love, And limitless are leaves
stiff or drooping in the fields, And brown ants in the little
wells beneath them And mossy scabs of the worm fence,
heap’d stones, elder, mullein, and poke-
weed. [Lines:95/98]*

This ‘erotic’ contact of the soul and the body gives way to this triumphant lyric: a song of an illuminated moment when Whitman’s “twoness” dissolves in an act of love.

In the first line of section Six, a child asks “the singer” a question “what is grass”? A very crucial question to which the entire poem will be an answer: It is a ‘hieroglyphic’; it is a bed of love; it is what the earth utters, to remind man that death and life are there. Grass is the symbol of the countless varieties of experience that Whitman or his “singer” catalogues on his world – circling journeys. (Paul Zweig, p.256)

This is the grass that grows wherever the land and water is. This is the common air that bathes the globe. (L.108).

IV. WHITMAN’S DEMOCRACY

Grass is offered, here, an universal significance in the sense that it represents everything in this created World. It is a “uniform” fitting everybody; it is a message to the whole world. It is an ubiquitous figure that travels all around the world like the cosmic “I” that sings the poem. A leaf of grass is a democratic symbol that makes no distinction between regions or between people. It grows in “broad zones and narrow zones,” among black folks as among white, Kannuck, Tuckahoe, congressmen, cuff.” The grass makes all human beings – whatever their nationality is or whatever their position is – equal. Kannuck (French-Canadian), Tuckahoe (Virginian), Cuff (Negro) and congressmen are the same (“Song Of Myself”).

The poem is, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, about its own process of creation; and Whitman’s ‘singer’ is made by his poem. He is a creature of language. The poem is a body and at the same time a literary performance. It is the flesh that is grass, but it is also a meditation on the capacities of language. If we bear in mind, for instance, the double meaning that shimmers in the poet’s scene of love making on the grass which is at once an erotic song, and a commentary on the new poetry Whitman invents and experiments in “Song Of Myself.” “In this act the self and the soul, the watcher and the “singer” combine to give an effective answer to the child’s question “what is grass?”. The answer which will be multitudinous and long: it will be the poem itself.

At this point Whitman’s singer rises from his bed of grass and journeys forth exploring the world. From now on – though by no means in a straight or continuous line – all goes “onward and outward” in the poem until the end. The identification of the self, “I”, not only with the nations and

with all mankind but with the immortal and the Divine, the “Great Comerado” is affirmed,
*And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
 And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
 And that all men even born are also my brothers,
 And the women my sisters and lovers.*[L92/94]

From this point onward, the poem will develop into a rhapsody celebrating the democratic life, the fecund creativity of the self and the benign Universe in which death is overcome by rebirth and reincarnation. “Song Of Myself” is, then, an “open road” going “nowhere” and “everywhere”; a road that Whitman’s singer travels within. The subsequent sections of the poem accord well with Whitman’s democratic aspirations and societal ideals.

The singer journeys forth an exploration of the life he witnesses . He moves from a description of the natural process to the drawing of a catalogue or a tableau of the ordinary life surrounding him : a butcher and a blacksmith at work, a Negro worker, a fleeing slave , a sad lonely woman...

All the remaining sections of the poem are a presentation of the different aspects of the American life beginning with individuals , moving to the crowds and bustle of the city ,”the hurrahs and the mobs” and back again to the singer in the last section.

Somewhere in the middle , the shy solitary self observing “ a spear of grass “ in the first lines of the poem, has “extracted strength” from his long journey around the world, now will shout his name,

*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.*

*Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors
 themselves for their jamba! [lines 497 ... Sect. 24]*

It is the first time in the poem when the singer’s anonymity is broken . He reveals himself as an American from Manhattan . He has eaten and drunk ; he has lain naked on the grass ; traveled along an open road exploring different facets of life. He has also made this poem , and now his name busts from his lips.

The prime function of the epic is to extend and expand circles of knowledge .“ Song Of Myself ” like any other epic accommodates countless images of ordinary life . More than that it takes us to the prehistoric pagan times; grapples into its language all religions ,the geologicalpast , the violence of history, to Jesus’ time in Judea. Whitman’s road opens ever wider,

*Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me, A far down I see
 the huge first nothing, the vapor from the nostrils of death I
 know I was ever there ... I wait unseen and always And slept
 while God carried me true the lethargic mist , ... [sect.24]*

Continuously, “Song Of Myself” circles within an overwhelming scope of contradictions . We find that several times, Whitman sings out about “worship” and “prayer” – he uses the language of church going – but at the same time about “armpits” and “copulation” (sect. 24) . Several times Whitman will push to the edge of his paradox : To be a self with a name and yet to be everything and everyone.

His grass egotism and eager democracy, His defiances and his need to embrace everything blur together. And each time he will spiral into a wider orbit , finding out that his cosmic journey is unbendable ; that his appetite can never be satiated , and the world never completely internalized.(Zweig,1986) Striving to conclude his poem with a climax or a finality , Whitman decides at last that the poem can have no end. Even so there must be some sort of ending however arbitrary , and the solution is a neat one : achieving a final relation of the singer and the reader which is not concluded yet (Lee,1985) “ I stop somewhere waiting for you” the poem , thus openly proclaims that its formal ending is merely arbitrary .

*I depart as air , I shake my white locks at the runaway sun
 I effuse my flesh in eddies , and drift it in lacy jags*

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
 If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged Missing me one
 place search another, Stop somewhere waiting for
 you.[sect.52]*

The poem ends with dusk. But the grass will continue to grow , the singer will be waiting for the reader ; the cycles of death and resurrection , like the cycle of day and night , will continue . The poem’s end will not be a true ending , merely an articulation of endlessness is projected in the continuous present participle , which tries to make the poem “ a grammar of eternal life” achieving a triumph over the threat of death and finality of poetry .(Lee,p.46)

V. CONCLUSION

“Song of myself ” is, then , an epic poem surveying countless quantities of references and knowledge ; offering wide range of tableaux of ordinary living – catalogues of American life - , bringing to the present scene , images of history , of different religions and so forth . All these threads are woven with an incredible skill to serve one purpose and one idea on which Whitman’s mind is focused: the possibilities for human happiness within an ordered, equal democratic society,

*And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them
 And such us it is to be of these more or less I am,
 And of these one and all I weave the Song Of Myself.[sect.15:
 L 327/329].*

“Song Of Myself” , like Ulysses , presents a puzzling and overwhelming number of information and facts . The reader has to follow the shifting images and tone, the rising

and falling cadence, the casual leap from theme to theme, as one follows the rhythms of voice speaking its mind “ I permit to speak at every hazard “. Yet, this voice never lets one down, for there is always a flow, an explanatory reaching for the next thought, idea and image. Consequently the reader’s mind must move like that; it must veer and amble forward; it must change moods unpredictably, avoid statements in favor of suggestions and abstractions in favor of physical and concrete images.

In short, in “song of myself”, Whitman emerges as the champion of equality and democracy. His art is one mode of the totality of American discourse; thus, in asserting a new democratic identity through poetry, Whitman actively asserts a new democratic identity for American politics and culture.(Serry,2011)

Unfortunately, he didn't succeed in making all of his fellow Americans see the common bonds between them: the Civil War started five years after this poem (included in *Leaves of Grass*) was first published. But Whitman was endlessly optimistic, and he believed that the real "America" and the real "democracy" were still around the bend. As the end of the poem states, Whitman is still out there, somewhere, waiting for the rest of Americans to catch up with him,

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles. You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I Shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fibre your blood. Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you. [Lines 1339/1346 Sect.52.]

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