



ANALYTICAL ASPECT OF WHITMAN'S *THEORY OF POETRY*

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ABSTRACT

Whitman's optimism can be best understood after one learns about his theory of poetry. Whitman had a very lofty concept of a poet whose business is to represent reality. A great poet according to Whitman exhibits the pinnacles that no man can tell what they are for or what is beyond. A poet reveals the hidden possibility. A poet also brings to the surface the riches playing somewhere in the racial memory, in the collective unconscious. The poet is seer the eye of the universe. He is capable to see the core of the universe and potential to realize the presence of the eternal. Such a poet is bound to be an optimist.

Above all, the poet is a person who guides those who are in the clutches of the grief.

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INTRODUCTION

Whitman was a conscious artist, a poetic theorist and a rebel against the poetic creed of the olden days. This is why he formulated his own theory of poetry. He was not only frustrated with the practice of the American poets but also was annoyed. He took no time to discard old things and tried his best to give a new life to American poetry.

Whitman was sure that the future of American poetry will glorious because whatever he had expressed was not only correct but in the interest of American literature.

Whitman wrote poetry after he had made appreciable efforts to understand the complication of life. This is why, there is so much depth and meaning in his poetry.

Analytical Aspect of Whitman Poetry

The truth is that the poets are not theoreticians and they are not expected to propound a theory of poetry. Shakespeare did not theories nor did Milton. It was William Wordsworth in the romantic age of the nineteenth century who came with his, theory of poetry in his Preface to

Lyrical Ballads. After Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold also was very vocal on this issue and called poetry "the criticism of life". The man who was as good a critic as a poet was T.S Eliot who also came out with his own theory of poetry. No Indian English poet including Nissim Ezekiel, Shiv K Kumar and Jayant Mahapatra has given a theory of poetry. They have written wonderful poetry but they never considered it their concern to point what is poetry and what a poet is expected to do. But it does not mean that a poet is not guided or governed by some principles through which he proceeds. It is said that a poet may so be a pure artist without knowing why he is writing poetry but there is very little truth in such an observation. Even a great artist like John Keats wrote poetry with some design in his mind. He wrote poetry with the realization that poetry which shies away from the vital concerns of life would be only a nine-day wonder, Even Eliot has observed that Keats had a philosophic mind and that he was occupied only with the highest use of poetry. For Keats who has been considered an escapist, poetry was bound up with human life.

The first illustrious poet who enunciated his theory of poetry was William Wordsworth. His Preface to Lyrical Ballads includes the concept of poetry and also the concept of poetic diction. Wordsworth, in this direction, was followed by Matthew Arnold in the Victorian age. Eliot's concept of poetry has not only been hailed but also adopted by innumerable poets in the whole world.

William Wordsworth was critical of the pseudo-classical poetry of the age of Pope. He put forward his own theory of a new kind of poetry inspired by imagination and fed up by emotions. Just like Wordsworth, Walt Whitman was also critical of the old, English poetry and its imitators in America.

Whitman was of the view that the people were living in a new age, the age of science and democracy and as such, the nation needed a new kind of poetry. Like Wordsworth, Whitman also chose a preface through which he enunciated his theory of poetry. The views about the nature of poetry were expressed not only in the Preface of the 1855 edition but also in various articles and essays, Democratic Vistas and A Backward Glance.

Whitman was concerned about the close affinity between the poet and reality and the proper province of poetry. He discussed the various attributes of the poet. He also dealt at length with the various elements in poetry and the problems of composing poems. Whitman was of the view that good poetry ennobles and offers a chance to the readers to understand the realities of life. Poetry, Whitman considered, is not merely putting ideas in a particular manner, it is an emotional exercise which contributes to the growth of personality.

Whitman was a very vehement critic of the American tradition of poetry which he wanted to finish. He was not only frustrated with the practice of the American poets but also annoyed. He took no time to discard old things and tried his best to give a new life to American poetry. In one of his anonymous reviews of his poems of 1855, he very candidly wrote

The theory and practice of poets have hitherto been to select personages, and then describe them in the best manner they could, always with as much ornament as the case allowed. Such are not the

theory and practice of the new poet. He never presents for perusal a poem ready-made on the old models, and ending when you come to the end of it but every sentence and every passage tells of an interior not always seen..... If Walt Whitman's promises are true, then there is a subtle range of poetry than that of grandeur or acts and events, as in Homer or of characters, as in Shakespeare- poetry to which all other writing is subservient.¹

Whitman had expressed was not only correct but in the interest of American literature. He enthusiastically wrote:

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors.... They shall be kosmos ---- without monopoly or secrecy--- glad to pass anything to any one.... hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege... they shall be riches and privilege.... The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most..., and not for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern.²

Whitman wrote poetry after he had made appreciable efforts to understand the complications of life. This is why, there is so much depth and meaning in his poetry. The lines below are an example of the wonder of his imaginative flight:

Divine as I inside and out
And I make holy whatever I touch or am
touched from
the scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer
than prayer
This head is more than churches or bibles
or creeds.³

Whitman had realized the oneness among all. He was pure enough as a poet to find little difference between one man and the other. This is why he wrote:

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.⁴

According to Whitman's concept of poetry, the new poet must sing of the democratic ideals. By doing this, he should try to arouse the readers from slumber and sloth to spiritual consciousness. The new poet does not want his readers to follow him but to go ahead of him. He should not lead a safe and timid life but live dangerously and enthusiastically. This is how the poet sings about himself in Song of Myself :

Long enough have you dreamed
Contemptible dreams
Now I wash the gum from your eyes
You must habit yourself to the
dazzle of the light and of every moment of
your life.⁵

Whitman, giving his theory of poetry, laid emphasis on the poet's faithfulness to reality and Whitman saw that reality consisted of science and democracy. The mediocre poet will mirror the surface of reality while the profound poet will discover the interior or spiritual life. Whitman asserted over and over again the transcendent importance of what he called the religious element in poetry. Whitman was of the opinion that the true poet draws his material from nature unites the past, the present and the future in a harmonious sequence. A good poet, Whitman said, must be commensurate with his nation and must incarnate it historically, geographically and also biologically. He is the genius of America. He must be endowed with organic health and a perfect sense of the unity of man and nature and his personal character must be representative of the national character. It is significant that the qualities of American character which Whitman names are the qualities that pre-dominate his own personality.

Together with 'Democratic Vistas' and 'A Backward Glance', the Preface to Leaves of Grass is an important document in respect of the New American poetry. In the preface, Whitman dealt with the themes of the poet, his qualities, the features of poetry and the relation of the public to poetry. In the Democratic Vistas, Whitman pleads for an American imaginative literature which must reveal the grand and archetypal models so that there may arise a new and greater nationalism.

Whitman laid great stress on the realistic feature of poetry because the value of a poem depends upon its ability to portray life. This does not and should not mean that poetry merely copies and reflects life. In the poem, we have the poet's mirror which reveals the inner life or meaning of things, thereby offering the true realities. Whitman observed in Democratic Vistas:

I say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it finds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists or that has been produced anywhere in the past under opposite influences.⁶

Walt Whitman wrote poetry in a very dedicated manner. He could do this only because he had his own conception of poetry which he developed after great thinking and also a reasonable reading. This is why, he has been, by various scholars and critics, regarded as the greatest poet of America. No other American poet got that much of honor and fame that was received by Whitman. There is no need to say that the more we study the poetry of Whitman, the more we grow in love with him. His intellect, his thinking, his understanding and his expression have a magical effect. The truth is that Whitman's poetry is superb and each poem written by him strikes a chord somewhere and each poem brings us closer to life. Each poem written by Whitman is like a journey of self-discovery, of life and the jewels of thought that are found embedded here and there among the seemingly simple poems are so profound that they catch us off guard. Whitman's conception of poetry and practice are not casual or occasional. His views in this direction were the result of very substantial thinking. They were also available in his essays, articles and public speeches. If a series of his letters are read, it can be estimated that his poetry seems to be defined in many ways. Whitman was always primarily a poet, secondly a critic or the writer of prose. He never valued his prose highly. His greater emphasis was on poetry. In contrast to Wordsworth, Emerson and its writers, Whitman thought of himself theorist, a more original poet which America had not yet produced.

From the observations made there, we can gather that Whitman had a very clear and candid

idea about the purpose poetry and, throughout his career as poet; he put those ideas into practice. He was highly conscious artist. He believed that poetry must have substance and no more journey into the world of fancy. He was of the view that poetry, to be great, must deal with worthwhile themes. Whitman also believed that a poem must have a beautiful shape or form in which all the elements are properly harmonized and integrated.

Whitman was of the view that Poetry must not reflect the dead past or the unborn future. It should reflect only what is living and present. Contemporary life should be the subject of the poet because he writes from his experience of life. Whitman gave importance to Science and democracy. He did not incorporate myth, fable and feudalism. He took up the challenge and proved his worth. This is why Whitman has been hailed as the poet of science and the poet of democracy but, above all he is the poet of religion and spirituality. It is spirituality which underlines his Leaves of Grass and gives it unity and diversity.

Whitman firmly believed that the highest poetry evokes emotional responses which are lasting and profound. It can cheer up doves and horrify tyrants, transform the character of a nation.

Poetry is written not only with the help of a powerful fancy; it requires information. Whitman was possessed by the passion for humanity. He was a man of the crowd. In his craving for knowledge of things human, he was packing his mind with almost limitless acquisition of material- material not so much analysed and classified as absorbed. Whitman's personality was singular and typical and such a personality suited the production of verse. According to George Rice Carpenter:

Whitman was cool, never flurried; curiously deliberate in all his actions, reticent to the point of stubborn reserve, gentle and conciliating in intercourse with others, plain in his way of living, and abstemious in food.... His chosen medium was an unrhymed species of free verse- at first recognizable as verse only because it was printed as such- without an obvious metrical pattern but containing at intervals brief phrases or passages which the

attention at once seized as regularly iambic or dactylic.⁷

The greatest contribution made by Walt Whitman to the growth of American poetry is his overall change in the existing poetic form and his use of free verse. In his Song of the Exposition, Whitman wrote not only his own credo but the very manifesto of the new generation, particularly so in the lines:

Come Muse, Migrate from Greece and Ionia
Cross out please those immensely overpaid
accounts. The matter of Troy and Achilles'
wrath And Aeneas Odysseus wanderings
Placard "Removed" and "To let" on the
rocks of your snowy Parnassus For know a
better, fresher, busier sphere a wide,
untried domain awaits, demands you.⁸

As a poet, first of all Whitman did away with the traditional poetic form. His belief was that a new subject matter (the common man) and a fresh outlook upon life required a new and original type of verse form. The old types were only fit for the old forms of poetry dealing with myths, religions, feudal wars and aristocracy.

He had a mission to deliver a message to say. He was the representative spokesman of America. Hence, he turned his back upon the old poetic credo and embellishment and revolutionised the technique of writing poetry. Whitman fathered free verse but he did much more. he also widened the gamut, extended the subject matter and liberated the spirit of modern poetry. Whitman anticipated by many years the modern mode of inner revelation with its broken sequences, its irrelevant changes, its final move into the realm of soliloquy. Whitman introduced a new pattern of rhythm into his poetry. His rhythm is born of a balance between the short and long lines. Whitman discarded rhyme and meter, the two traditional elements of poetic style. The style he evolved is vital and vigorous. At best, his rhythm is the rhythm of prose verse. In fact, Whitman was the first American poet to make it a subject of metrical study. Whitman was a modern poet with a revolutionary spirit. He was the poet who brought revolution in the field of poetry by his creed, his technique and his conception of poetry. He had also assigned certain duties to the poets which were, after some time,

accepted by the American post and critics.

According to the observation made by Walter Blair, the poems of Whitman, in their form, resemble oratory. The poet, the critic is of the view, evidently hoped that the impact of the book would be comparable to that of the dynamic presence of a great orator, that it would possess more than any other honk the magnetism of living flesh and blood. Whitman's frequent use of 'I' and "you" is intended to produce oratorical effects. Whitman, as a theoretical not only broke away from some of the conventions of versification, he also broke away from some of the conventions of style. His dislike for what he called "drawing room poetry" led him, in general, to use relatively simple words and to avoid an excess of figurative languages. His feelings about common speech led him to interject it into a style not then thought hospitable to it.

As a poet and artist, Whitman certainly suffered from his too urgent sense of the importance of his self-appointed mission. His transcendental belief in the worth of original inspiration made him leave many a line in its first crudity perhaps because he felt that what had come to him was inspiration. However, Whitman shall continue to be regarded as one of the most important theorists in the history of American poetic literature. It is note-worthy that he raised his voice of revolution when there was no occasion to have stood against the well accepted poetic tradition It was a very daring step taken by Whitman that he made his declarations in an atmosphere when people were not at all prepared to listen to him. What else does a poet need when he had a strong faith to declare:

"Ana I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own And that all the men ever born are also my brothers and the women my sisters and lovers And that a kelson of creation is love".

Conclusion

Whitman wanted to write in a franck, crude and realistic manner free from all ornaments and artistic effect after which the old poetry ran. He had no truck with the polish and glitter of the old poets. He wanted to speak plainly and boldly to the people and the readers. He also give lessons to the poets to

make use of the people the richness and beauty of colloquialism and colorful ness of the slang

The world wanted a prophet of democracy and Whitman was there. It offered him the grass as a symbol and he accepted it with all gusto and zeal. He made it the banner of a crusade for the establishment of a new order of society in which all should be equal, un- harassed and great. Whitman does not, however, abnegate his own important role as a seer and as an American spokesman.

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