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WHITMAN AND HIS ANTI-RATIONALISM

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Abstract:

Man is a psycho-physical-spiritual being. He is a combination of body, mind and soul. A perfectly harmonized personality implies a balanced functioning of body, mind and intellect. Whitman as a staunch supporter of individualism desired the man to come out as a complete man with well-rounded personality which was possible only when all these above mentioned faculties were developed in a judicious proportion. If any one of them were over-emphasized, man's over-all growth would have been faulty and one-sided. This led Whitman to have a perfect union of mind and heart, that is, the blending of reason and passion. He found the excesses of the Rationalism of the Eighteenth century which distrusted the natural emotions, quite harmful for spontaneous and free development of the individual. Therefore he discouraged the too rational outlook of viewing the things. Because it was cold and callous logic which impaired the proper understanding of the things and objects, he distrusted it and was accused with anti-rationalistic views.

Keywords: *Impalpable, Intuitive, Puritanic, Rationalism, Romanticism, etc.*

“Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,
Disorderly, fleshy and sensual...,
Eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist...no stander above men or women
Or apart from them...no more modest than immodest” - Song of Myself

Walt Whitman was born into a farming community near Hutington, popularly known as ‘aumanok’ or ‘fish-shaped island’ of Whitman’s poems. Whitman has a chequered career. Whitman as a staunch supporter of individualism desired the man to come out as a complete man with well-rounded personality which was possible only when all the faculties, body, mind and intellect were developed in a judicious proportion.

It was natural for Whitman to follow spontaneous emotions more than to be guided by the dull drab light of reason. He was a child of American Romanticism, which itself was influenced by the Romanticism of European writers. The European Romanticism was: “A reaction against the rather narrow rationalism of the Enlightenment. Writers like Rousseau in France and Wordsworth and Coleridge in England emphasized the emotional, intuitional and instinctive Elements in human personality and asserted that man should Trust his feelings rather than his intellect. Whereas enlightenment regarded man as normally reasonable and self-controlled, the Romanticists saw him as a creature of intense passions and aspirations. And whereas the Enlightenment had supposed that ultimate truth could be discovered through intellectual inquiry, the Romanticists believed that spiritual intuition had a higher validity” (Parkes, 16).



Such ideologies of Romanticism of Europe were developed by Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Thus, Whitman maintained anti-rationalistic characteristics in his poetry.

Whitman's anti-rationalism was also a revolutionary reaction against his aversion to excessive Puritanic inhibitions. He felt that Puritans suffocated the true spirit of religion by their natural distrust of emotions and by not allowing themselves to be spontaneous. This type of Puritan element becomes unbearable to Whitman. According to his belief, it thwarted not only the normal development of individual but also the nation's civilization and art.

Besides, Whitman, along with the other American Romanticists had felt that Rationalism of Enlightenment had been an utter failure: "Rationalism, as in case of Hume and Holbach, had run into skepticism, and thence into materialism and atheism; and the excesses of French Revolution... were proof that godlessness might also end in a blood bath" (Jones, 33).

Hence, Whitman was sure to discard such Rationalism which did not agree with his natural temperament. Rationalism, as an ideology had an entirely different manner of approaching the reality in which reason and logic took upper hand. While Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville had different attitude towards understanding the reality. Enumerating, their assumption regarding the cardinal principles of Romanticism as differentiated from Rationalism, Spiller has written: "The assumption common to the five writers is that intuition and imagination offer a surer road to truth than abstract logic or scientific method. It is a corollary to their belief that nature is organic and corresponds to the technical distinction between reason as intuition and the understanding as logical analysis" (Spiller, 354).

Whitman was an ardent follower and admirer of Emerson, who introduced 'Transcendentalism' in American thought. Emerson believed in the concept of 'reason' and 'understanding'. But by 'reason' he meant intuition and by 'understanding' he meant the faculty employed in logical argument and scientific inquiry. As a transcendentalist he advocated the application enquiry. As a transcendentalist he advocated the application of intuition rather than discursive logic. In this way, "denying original sin, he affirmed that all men, and not merely a few, might achieve a state of grace by casting off external authority and responding to their own spiritual intuition" (Parkes, 23).

It was by virtue of his spiritual intuition, the individual was supposed to be endowed with immense potentialities. Under the impact of this Emersonian transcendentalism, Whitman, systematizing the Romantic distrust of the intellect and exaltation of intuition, affirmed that one could comprehend reality by direct spiritual insight.

While speaking of the idea of immortality he wrote: "What the world calls logic is beyond me: I go about my business taking on impressions – reporting impressions – though sometimes I imagine that what we see is superior to what we reason about – what establishes itself in the age, in the heart, is finally the only logic we can boast of, the only real verification" (Teller, 125-26).

Whitman declares that he does not possess logic as such or the logic as it is understood commonly by people. The only logic, according to him is, that our perception based on reasoning is inferior to the one based on intuition. Whatever is more appealing to heart rather than to intellect is the true logic. The objects that we experience directly comprise a greater reality.

Whitman as an anti-rationalist is close to Shelley who also makes a clear distinction between 'reason' and 'imagination' in his 'A Defence of Poetry': "Reason is the principle of analysis, and its action regards the relation of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity..." (Ingpen, 109) and about imagination, he asserts that it "is the principle of synthesis which enables the poet to participate in the Eternal Infinite and the one" (Ingpen, 107).



Like Shelley, Whitman believed in the supremacy of emotions and intuitive perceptions which have got a synthesizing power. Purely rational approach, because of its lack of integral unity fails to interpret the objects and thoughts perfectly. Like Wordsworth, Whitman endowed the material objects with a spiritual power and thus could catch the soul of reality in a better way. In his poem “Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances” he (Whitman) places high emphasis on intuition. Talking about the appearances which seem uncertain and doubtful, he thinks: “May be the things I perceive, the animals plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters. The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms may be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions, and the real something has yet to be known” (Whitman, 165).

The poet is confused whether the objects appearing real are not fully known to him and he lacks somewhere in his comprehension, since “the real something has yet to be known.’ At times he feels mocked and confounded by these objects as he says, “neither I, know, nor any man knows aught of them”. Thus, he finds that all the objects of this material world may not be fully comprehended by logic alone. Sometimes logic fails to make us perceive the reality behind the things. But, when the same objects are viewed with a tinge of emotions they may reveal themselves better. When the poet, in the company of his friends, looks at these objects, he enjoys them more and gets the answer to the question. It is in the atmosphere of perfect intimacy and familiarity, when he is surrounded by subtle air, he feels overpowered by some ‘impalpable, sense, which is not within the reach of reason, he comes to realize what really these objects are:

“To me these and the like of these are curiously
answered by my lovers, my dear friends
When he, whom I love, travels with me or sits a
long while holding me by my hand,
When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense
that words and reason hold not, surround
us and pervade us.
Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom
I am silent, I require nothing further” (Whitman, 165-66).

In these lines Whitman talks about his being held and surrounded by an impalpable sense that “words and reason hold not”. These lines are fine example of his belief in the supremacy of emotions. This is nothing but intuitive perception, in the light of which, nothing remains unknown and hidden. It endows us with the wisdom that focuses all untold and the untellable. The dull drab light of reason is not sufficient for proper understanding of the reality.

Life, for Whitman, has to be seen as a harmony, a wedding of head and heart. In this respect he can be compared to Alexander Pope who said:

“On life’s vast ocean diversely we sail,
Reason the card but passion is the gale” (Pope, 17).

The metaphor here shows that the boat of life cannot move unless it is aided and supported by the wind of passion.

The absence of emotional approach is like the atrophy of the heart. The excess of purely logical approach is as callous as anything. Although, the combination of reason and passion is accepted by both, Whitman and Pope, but with some differences. Pope is purely rational and he distrusts passion while Whitman loves passion and imagination. For him, imagination transcends the limits of discursive logic which can deal only with the concepts within the perceptible world. The



realm beyond the empirical world, which lies outside the pale logic, comes within the purview of intuition. Logic, which operates only in the arena of senses is subordinated to intuition which, as defined by Dr. Radhakrishnan is “the extension of perception to regions beyond the senses” (Radhakrishnan, 11).

In Whitman’s poetry there are various concepts which are quite abstract and hence cannot be understood by merely sensual perception. For example Death, Soul and Immortality etc. are so abstract that physical eye cannot comprehend them. They demand intuitive perception. The concept of the soul for example is often an object of contradiction and is considered to be an abstract idea. But Whitman presents it as one who had an immediate experience of the existence of the soul. The soul being something ethereal is an object of intuitive perception and hence cannot be subjected to reasoning and argumentation. One has to undergo an endless subjective experience to know the soul. Whitman’s reply to those who question about the existence of the soul is very clearly stated:

“Was somebody asking to see the soul?
See : Your own shape and countenance, persons
substances, beasts, the trees, the birds,
the running rivers, the rocks and sands” (Whitman, 22).

The soul is to be realized not as an independent physical entity but within its various manifestations. Any theory regarding the soul cannot be established and propounded. In this respect Whitman’s views reflected in his conversation with Horace Traubel are worth mentioning: “You cannot make the rules of diet or rules of anything else to suit everybody. I am more likely to have feelings than theories about things: I was never a man to drive doctrines to death – to take up with fads, special providences whims or diet or manners” (Teller, 176).

It implies that everything cannot be justified any analysed by logic alone. Certain things ought to be understood emotionally, that is, with the help of feelings and emotions. By saying that “I am more likely to have feelings than theories about the things” Whitman maintains that reason and emotion should be proportionately wedded in our approach. His inclination towards feelings does not mean an outright opposition of reason but it demands that our approach should have a humane perspective and it should be rooted in faith. If doctrines are followed in the dull light of reason, their true spirit is crushed. Whitman’s distrust of relentless reason is justified in case of truths that are self-evident. They cannot be comprehended with the help of logic and sermons but only with intuition. He says:

“All truths wait in all things,
They never hasten their own delivery not resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,
The insignificant is as big to me as any,
(What is less or more than a touch?)
Logic and sermons never convince
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul” (Whitman, 328).

It shows that the facts that are true and self-evident need not be convinced with the help of sermons lectures etc. but they are subjected to personal and intuitive perception. The high premium placed by Whitman on intuition should not lead us to consider that he is an irrational being who suppresses the faculty of reasoning.

He calls for a judicious harmony of head and heart. He does not negate intellect but is aware of its limitations. He uses logic within its own realm. It appears rather paradoxical that on one hand



Whitman opposes reason, which is the very basis of science, on the other, he accepts and exults in the explorations of science. On one side he signs of the inventions of modern science and on the other he becomes an impassioned supporter of romanticism. His belief in the theories of science, for example his faith in the Doctrine of Evolution is revealed in the following lines:

“I am the acme of the things accomplished, and
I am the encloser of the things to be.
My feet strike an apex of the aspices of the stairs
on every step, bunches of ages” (Whitman, *SoM*, 346).

As a result of the long process of evolution, man comes out as the highest of all creation and the process still goes on. In “Song of the Open road” Whitman expresses or rather anticipates the Darwinian theory of ‘The struggle for existence. He says:

“Have the past struggles succeeded?
What has succeeded? Yourself? Your Nation? Nature ?
Now understand me well – it is provided in the
essence of the things that from any
fruition of success, no matter what,
shall come forth something to make a
greater struggle necessary “ (Whitman, *SoR*, 365).

Whitman’s faith in the principles of science leads him to perceive a greater reality. Like a scientist he does not believe that nature is merely a mechanical process with no intelligence or moral being to guide its processes and movements. For him objective realities of science serve as a starting point to reach the higher subjective realities. He reconciles the religion and spirituality with principles of science. Thus, repudiating the concept of universe as a vast machine and regarding Nature as an embodiment of a divine-spirit, he finds everything and each object of earth quite ‘illustrious’ and wonderful. In “Song At sunset”, on the basis of intuitive perception, he experiences something more beyond the objects and processes of nature. This invisible power behind them is definitely ‘some living soul’ -

“Wonderful how I celebrate you and myself;
How my thoughts play subtly at the spectacles
around;
How the clouds pass silently overhead:
How the earth darts on and on:
How the water sports and sings: (surely it is alive)
How the trees rise and stand up, with strong trunks
With branches and leaves;
(Surely there is something more in each of the
trees, some living soul.) (Whitman, *SAS*, 197).

It is noticeable here that the poet’s cognizance of the living power behind the objects of nature is the outcome of intuitive perception only, and it is very much similar to William Wordsworth’s ‘pantheistic’ perception of nature. Whitman also confers the natural objects with a spark of divinity which he calls ‘divine average’. Such vision of ‘transcendental reality’ comes within the purview of intuition which is beyond the reach of rational analysis.



Moreover, Whitman was hostile to abstract reason and he abandoned the habit of mind which viewed the material world as separable from ideas and emotions. He believed that the objects of the physical world of eye and ear have a reality of their own and the objects of the world of emotions and feelings also have a reality of their own. The former is the objective reality perceived by all alike and the latter may be called a subjective reality, differing from individual to individual because of the subjective differences in their perceptions. The ultimate reality comprises the both. Therefore, Whitman advocates a blending of rational approach and emotional approach. Therefore, his anti-rationalism may not be taken to be a one sided approach. The famous poem of Whitman entitled "Passage to India" propagates his approach which does not negate the objective facts in the form of scientific discoveries and nor does he neglect the myths and fables of the romances. In it he celebrates the great achievements of the present which could not have been possible without the modern scientific and technological advancements. Herein he fuses the spirit of science and modernity with the myths and fables of the world of romance. He says that the soul during her passage through India, has not only to journey through the 'proud truths of the world' but it also has to encompass the 'myths and fables of the eld'. This fusion is nothing but an attempt at balancing the spirit of scientific reason and that of the romantic imagination. He wishes the soul of 'eclaircise' the 'asiatic myths' and primitive fables:

"Passage O soul to India:
Eclaircise the myths asiatic, the primitive fables
Not you alone the proud truths of the world,
Nor ye alone, ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of the eld, Asia's, Africa's fables
The far darting beams of the spirit..." (Whitman, *PTI*, 255).

His exultation over 'the proud truths of the world' i.e. the 'Suez canal' 'mighty railroad' and the 'eloquent gentle wires' is equal to his yearning for the 'myths and fables' and the 'far-darting beams of the spirit'.

In the same poem his desire for the circumnavigation of the world along with his soul through 'reason's early paradise' and 'innocent intuitions' exposes his attitude of harmonizing reason and intuition. He says:

"O soul; repressless, I with thee and thou with me,
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions" (Whitman, *PTI*, 262).

It shows that man's mind voyages through the world, beginning from the realm of reason, and ultimately it comes back to 'innocent intuitions' which are the origin and bedrock of wisdom. No doubt, man has to follow the path of reason for progress in material achievements but if he wants to enjoy the peace and joy of life, he has to take recourse to emotional approach and has to reach the world of emotions where love, sympathy, mercy, understanding etc. prevail.

Whitman's anti-rationalism encourages him to despise the cold logic and to maintain that 'innocent intuitions' and not the intellect alone will enable the man to understand the realities of life better. His "Leaves of Grass" in this respect is a strong denunciation of all logical processes and a glorification of intuitive perceptions. As a pioneer of anti-rationalism only Whitman idealized the simple natural phenomena as a 'Leaf of grass' and 'a grain of sand' against the oppressive tyranny of



logic and intellect. Moreover, if we want to have the experience of reality, we find that “it is not an inference of the ratiocinating mind but an intuitive certainty” (Chari, 83).

Whitman had a healthy attitude towards life, his ideology was positive. Hence he was opposed to nihilistic philosophy of negation and reflection as reflected in pure relentless logic divorced from the reality of everyday existence. In fact the abstract concepts cannot be analysed by reason. They are subjected to personal experience which may either depend on sense perception or may be understood intuitively. In the poem entitled *A Song of the Rolling Earth* he has written -

“Facts, religions improvements, politics trade
are as real as before,
But the soul is also real, it is too positive
and direct,
No reasoning, no proof has established it,
Undeniable growth has established it” (Whitman, ASRE, 131).

In these lines Whitman states the facts that all the objects and concepts are real but this reality may be comprehended only by intuition. In the long continuous process of existence called life, everything that is or that exists, is real. For example facts, religion politics, trade etc. are all real only if we have faith in them or if we have an inclination to accept them as independent entities. And this acceptance of their being real is possible only when we do not apply logic to them.

So far as Whitman’s concept of poetry is concerned, it needs a relatively emotional approach for its evaluation. It is the poetry of flesh and blood that he speaks of. He does not wish poetry to wander into purely metaphysical abstractions and vague speculations. It has to be primarily the poetry of the earth and of this world. Concerning his composition of “Leaves of Grass”, he clearly stated in his “Preface” to 1876 Edition of “Leaves of Grass” – “...it is imperatively and ever to be borne in mind that Leaves entirely is not to be construed as an intellectual or scholastic effort or a poem mainly, but more as a radical utterance out of the abysses of the soul, the emotions and the physique, an utterance adjusted to, perhaps born of Democracy and modern science...” (Stovall, 733).

Hence, the poetic outcome is not a conscious effort. It is something like Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and Whitman calls it “a radical utterance out of the abysses of the soul, the emotions”. It is something which reflects the tendencies of time through its emotional appeal. In case of Whitman, poetic content does not only reflect the social reality but diverse modes of emotional involvement with such reality. One has to analyse and appreciate poetry emotionally because all its beauty comes out of “beautiful blood”. We may sometimes miss the true idea behind the poem if we apply the touchstone of logic and reason to it. For example Othello’s act of killing Desdemona is not justified on rational terms. But, when viewed emotionally, it may be justified on the grounds that it was an act, performed to immortalize his love. Examples of this sort and similar ones may be multiplied from Whitman’s poems.

In his poem *On the Beach At Night* he gives an expression to something invisible and suggestive beyond the apparent meaning. In this poem, a child expresses her fear and doubt about the existence of the stars to her father. Her father, who stand for maturity and experience, points towards ‘something there is’ which is even more immortal. He says:

“Something there is,
(With my lips soothing thee, adding I whisper,
I give the first suggestion, the problem and Indirection,)
Something there is more immortal even than the stars,
(Many the burials, many the days and nights, passing away)



Something that shall endure longer even than lustrous Jupiter,
Longer than sun or any revolving satellite,
Or the radiant sisters, the Pleiades” (Whitman, *OBN*, 381).

The child represents the modern generation that tries to prove everything rationally and scientifically. In the opinion of her father some stars are temporarily not seen, while others will arise and still shine. Probably his belief in the durability of some stars springs out of his involvement and faith in the existence of these objects. The idea of the poem is that existing and apparent world is as real as the one that seems non-existing temporarily. It also reveals Whitman’s faith in the supreme-reality that works behind the things and governs them.

Another effect of anti-rationalism on Whitman’s poetry is that imagination plays an important role. His poem becomes not only a replica of the matter-of-fact objects, but, like that of English Romantic poets it represents the mundane reality with an additional glow by virtue of the poet’s supra-logical aptitude. In “song At Sunset” the poet, even in the ‘candle light’ of his life, partakes the delight of nature which, because of his spiritual and emotional involvement becomes thrilled with pleasant surprise. He says:

“O amazement of things – even the least particle:
O spirituality of things:
O strain, musical, flowing through ages and
continents now reaching me and America;
I take your strong chords, intersperse them and
cheerfully pass them forward.
I too carol the sun, usher’d or at noon, or as now setting
I too throb to the brain and beauty of the earth
I too have felt the resistless call of myself” (Whitman, *SAS*, 197).

Whitman feels that even the smallest particle is filled with wonder. Having realized the ‘resistless call’ of death for himself he wishes to share the delight, caused by the ‘spirituality of things.’ Thus, Whitman’s subject matter of poetry was such that he had to distrust pale logic to some extent and encourage emotional approach. Roger Asselineau has given an appropriate justification by saying that “Leaves of Grass”: as a work of art need not necessarily be taken as a rational process: “This was hardly a rational process, or the one that could be defined in rational terms. However, his subject being otherwise impossible to grasp, it was the only method that offered itself to him” (Asselineau, 12-13).

Thus, Whitman’s rebellious attitude is reflected in his opposition to ‘reason’ because it crushes the spirit of things because of its lack of humane attitude. His disapproval of logic is rooted in his faith in the immense worth of intuition. He recognizes the limitations of logic and reason and believes primarily in the supremacy of intuition in the quest for truth. His anti-rationalism signifies a balanced approach in life and literature by harmonious blending of reason and emotions.

If the intellect predominates over the imagination, the man becomes a philosopher achieving peace of mind in proportion to the universality of his analysis of the world he has known. He discards, what cannot by his scientific method be reduced to a semblance of form. But, if he be a man of imagination sensitive to much that can never pass through the conscious mind to be dissected by the blunt scalpels of reason, he becomes a poet.

Whitman, viewed in the light of the above statement, can be evaluated as a man who was a great philosopher and a poet as well, because he approves the fusion of both reason and emotion. To conclude, in moving from reason to intuition, Whitman was not moving in the direction of the unreason but launching himself and his poetry on the inward odyssey of the soul, whose ultimate



anchorage is ultimate unity. The greatest creations of art, music, literature and philosophy and even the discoveries of science owe their existence to such intuitive moments.

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