

Walt Whitman as a mystic poet

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Abstract

It is an established fact that the word 'mystic' connotes something that is unfamiliar and unknown to us. But, when it is considered as an 'ism' in literature, then it can be hailed as spiritual doctrine which illustrates the presence of one immortal supreme or central soul speaking itself through the natural objects. Without any shadow of doubt, mysticism is generally considered as the highest stage of religious or spiritual thoughts. In Indian, scriptures, we come across a number of allusions related to mysticism and the ancient sages have also claimed to have mystic experiences.

Keywords: mystic, experience, divine, spiritual, benevolence, soul

1. Introduction

It is an established fact that mysticism is really a coherent philosophy of life, but mere a temper of mind. A mystical experience according to Bertard Russell, "involves insight, a sense of unity and unreality of time and space, and a belief that evil is mere appearance." A mystic vision is intuitive, as he feels the presence of divine reality behind and within the ordinary world of sense perception. He feels that God and supreme soul animating all things are identical. He sees an essential identity of being between man, nature and God. He believes that: "all things in this world are but forms and manifestations of the Divine life, and that all these phenomenon are changing and temporary, while the soul that informs them is eternal." Transcendentalism is closely connected to mysticism for it emphasizes the intuitive and spiritual above the empirical.

A vein of mysticism runs through the poetry of Whitman. He was deeply influenced by Emerson, the American transcendentalist. His thought was intuitive and not systematic like a logician's as he wrote like a mystic when he asserts the fact that "wisdom of the soul is not susceptible to proof, is its own proof. Applies to all stages and objects and qualities, and is content."

It goes without saying that Whitman believed the soul to be immortal. He felt an identification with all animate and inanimate things around him. Comparing Whitman's mysticism with that of the other mystics, Scyberg writes: "the most interesting thing about Whitman as a mystic poet is that in his book we can find the typical characteristics absolutely all the various mystic doctrines."

Without any shadow of doubts, Leaves of Grass has several poems with mystical under-currents. Leaving aside Song of Myself, and Passage to India which are clearly mystical, we have "when hilacs in the Dooryard Bloom'd which ends on a note of mystical affirmation." By the end of the poem, the poet has acquired a mystical insight by hearing the bird's song. Death's outlet song of life acquires a new significance. Death is no longer seen is only a cruel depriver of life, it is also a deliver into spiritual life. The universal necessity and benevolence of death is clearly indicated

Come lovely and soothing death
Undulate sound the world serenely arriving
In the day, in the night, to all, to each
Sooner or later, delicate death

The poet has understood that death is universal; he is able to rise above personal sorrow. He has also realized that the dead are not the sufferers while

The living remain'd and suffer'd

Out of the cradle endlessly reeking provides vital information about the meaning of death. Crossing Brooklyn Ferry presents a world perceived through all the senses that used to spiritual assertion.

Whitman has throughout in his poetry has shown his firm faith in the unity of the whole, or oneness of all. This sense of essential divinity of all created things is an important aspect of mysticism and is closely associated with Whitman's faith in democracy calling for equality and fraternity. Song of Myself is replete with lines proclaiming this oneness. He knows:

".....that all men ever born are also my
brothers....and
And the women my sisters and lovers

In One's Self I Sing, the poet says:

One's self I sing, a sample separate person
Yet utter the word democratic, the word En-masses
The modern man I sing"

The 'I' assumes an enlarged universal connotation embracing the smallest and greatest thing in the universe as perfect and of great value. Whitman equates all opposites, and accepts evil as much as good as poet of reality.

In Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, the poet has achieved the unity of all mankind: "the simple, compact, well joined scheme myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated yet part of the

Scheme.” In *Passage to India*, east is fused with the west- and the old with the new. Time becomes one in Whitman’s poetry. Past, present and future are merged into a spiritual continua. Thus, in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, he says:

It avails not, time nor place-distance avails not
I am with you, you men and women of a generation
Or ever so many generations hence.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that Whitman is not a pure mystic in the sense of oriental mysticism. Like all mystics, he believed in the existence of divine spirit, in the immortality of human soul, and in the capacity of a human being to establish communication between his spirit and the divine spirit. But, he differs from the oriental or traditional mystics in that he does not subscribe to their belief that communication with the divine spirit is possible only through denial of senses and mortification of the flesh. Whitman feels that spiritual communication is possible indeed desirable, without satisfying the flesh. To Whitman, the mystical state is achieved through the transfigured senses rather than by escaping the senses. Both, the lady and the prostitute enjoy equal position in his poetry, for the inner reality, the soul has been created by the same God.

Whitman does not reject the material world. He senses the spiritual through the material. He does not subscribe to the belief that objects are illusive. There is no tendency on the part of the soul to leave the world for good. In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, we find the soul trying to play a significant role in the administration of this world of senses, sights, sounds etc., Whitman does not belittle the achievements of science and materialism. In the poem, *Song of Myself*, he accepts the reality of materialism and says:

Hurrah for positive science!
Long live exact demonstration!

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