CHAPTER - I

WHICH WHITMAN ?

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In 1884 Whitman wrote in A Backward Glance on My Own Road:

> The prevailing range of criticism on my book has been either mockery or denunciation -- and ... I have been the marked object of two or three (to me pretty serious) official buffetings.

Again, three years later he wrote in My Book and I:

> After thirty years of trial, public criticism of the book and myself as author of it shows marked anger and contempt more than anything else.

Down to the time of the poet's death the prevailing American opinion was that Whitman was a third-rate poet and an immoral man. The year of his death, 1892, however, saw the beginning of confrontations of Whitman with the poets to come. E.A. Robinson addressed a poem to Whitman in which he wondered if poetry were no longer possible except as Walt Whitman had made it possible. A few years later Ezra Pound wrote a poem in which he made a "truce" with Whitman. T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams have all admitted their debt to the sage of Camden. This change

in Whitman's reputation represents a triumph of external, cultural forces over the current taste and the modes of criticism.

Whitman spoke for his nation ceaselessly. He gave voice to the American personality and shaped its character. When Lucien Price asked Alfred North Whitehead what, if anything, original and distinctively American this country has produced, the philosopher answered without hesitation, "Whitman."

Although Whitman had suffered a lot of hostile ~~xtk~~ critical attacks, there were many who knew that he was really the singer of American democracy and nation. Perry Miller has remarked:

> ... Whitman being what he was, we are apt to come not from a heightened sense of form or from a quest for more precise language, but simply out of his constantly changing sense of the American destiny.[1]

The first quarter of the twentieth century saw the rise of Whitman, Mark Twain, and Melville to fame. George Santayana singled out Walt Whitman for praise. He said quite significantly:

> The one writer who has left the genteel tradition entirely behind is perhaps Walt Whitman ... . For this reason educated Americans find him rather an unpalatable person, who they

1. Perry Miller: The Shaping of American Character, New England Quarterly, XXVIII (1955), P.435.

> sincerely protest ought not to be taken, for a representative of their culture; and he certainly should not, because their culture is so genteel and traditional. But the foreigner may sometimes think otherwise since he is looking for what may have arisen in America to express, not the polite and conventional American mind, but the spirit and the inarticulate principles that animate the community, on which its genteel mentality seems to sit rather lightly. When the foreigner opens the pages of Walt Whitman, he thinks that he has come at last upon something representative and original.[2]

Van Wyck Brooks noted in his great work America's Coming of Age that Whitman alone of them could personally move the modern reader. Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, and Hawthorne, though priceless possessions, were powerless to sway his conduct, nor had they moved their readers in their own day, if their abortive attacks upon American materialism be any criterion. They were equally unable to adapt themselves to novel situations; consequently they left no successors to speak for subsequent generations.

To Brooks, the significance of Whitman lay in the fact that he combined the two traditions of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin

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2. George Santayana : Winds of Doctrine (London, 1913), p. 202.

Franklin in himself. Brooks says:

> But it happens that we have the rudiments of a middle tradition, a tradition that effectively combines theory and action, a tradition that is just as fundamentally American as either flag-waving or money-grabbing, one that is visibly growing but which has already been grossly abused; and this is the tradition that begins with Walt Whitman. The real significance of Whitman is that he, for the first time, gave us the sense of something organic in American life.[3]

Whitman thus provide to America a focal centre in the consciousness of its own character.

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Whitman presented unpurified, unsublimated American life. He has sung mostly about three themes: (1) American people and American democracy, (2) sex and sense, (3) death. He was pre-eminently the poet of American people and democracy. He was aware of the defects of democracy, yet he exalted it for his countrymen to preserve it to make a great future. He could foresee a noble destiny for America. He anticipated the emergence and growth of

3. Van Wyck Brooks : America's coming of Age (New York, 1958), p. 59.

a proud and ambitious race. This great race, which was already in the making, required a literature that should celebrate the democracy of America. That is why Whitman did not sing of kings and nobles and priests engaged in their different occupations. As he says in A Song for Occupations:

> In the labor of engines and trades, and the labor of fields,
> I find the developments,
> And find the eternal meanings.

Whitman, in his poems, painted the social, political, and specious scenery which moved him most. American men and women crowd up his pages vividly. The blacksmith Negro teamster, the butcher, the farmer back from the fields, the mother sewing, the soldier watching the battlefield, the cavalry crossing the ford, the prostitute, the pioneer, and diverse others — all move in a crowd with life and energy.

Whitman wanted America to have a poet of her own, and when he found none, took up that task himself. He found a peculiar identity between his personality and that of America. He also realized that America was making rapid progress in all walks of life as a new nation and he became the spokesman of the new experiments in science, religion, and democracy in a comprehensive manner. He held that the poet was also a seer and guide, and he came forward in those roles. He was a patriotic poet who wished to see

his country enjoy honour and prestige in the eyes of the world. Unto his day, the Americans used to look up to Europe for their poetic modes and practice, but Whitman turned the table — American poet for America. Through the rude force of everyday folk Whitman saw shining an ideal America. Whitman's thinking did not measure up to his intentions, yet among the nineteenth century American authors he stood alone in pointing to men the path between reality and their own souls.

In the literature of America, Whitman created a tradition by himself. Owing to his influence in the 1920's Whitman escaped the decade's general censure of the past. He was seen as a rebel against tradition, a lyrical celebration of "these United States", offered a challenge that could not be overlooked. He appeared as a modern in ways that Emerson could not be; he offered a vision of democratic man that could survive all the critical and cultural onslaughts. Being closer to the 1920's, Whitman's work appeared to be less implausible and more assimilable than Emerson's. Poets who came much after him carried much of his message and many of his innovations of style into the twentieth century. Many magazines, such as The Soil and Poetry, testified to his influence.

Yet critics were not insensitive to the limitations and short-comings of Whitman's personality. Brooks says:

> Perfectly right in all his instinct, he was lost on the plane of ideas. He lacked a sure sense of his own province and limitations ... The raw materials of a racial norm Whitman provided, but -- and in this he resembled Emerson -- he was too passive to go further. He assembled in himself and his writings the characteristics of America -- with him orginated the most contagious, the most liberating, the most unifying native impulses; but he failed to react upon them, to mould them, and to drive them home. He had no ideas, and he was satisfied to have none. He lacked, above all, intensity. He was too complacent. He was incapable of discipline and he did not see that discipline is, for Americans, the condition of all forward movement.[4]

Santayana has pointed out the samething when he says:

> In him [Whitman] Bohemia rebelled against the genteel tradition but the reconstruction that alone can justify revolution did not ensure. His attitude, in principle, was utterly disintegrating, his poetic genius fell back on the lowest level, perhaps to which it is possible for poetic genius to fall. He reduced his imagination to a passive sensorium for the regis-

4. Brooks : Ibid, p. 66.

tering of impressions. No element of construction remained in it, and therefore no element of penetration.[5]

Whitman's inability to operate on the level of intellect, of ideas, was responsible for many of the short-comings in his attitude towards America of his times and its literature and art. In his ideas he was just an old-fashioned Jacksonian democrat who never questioned the old institutions. He took for granted the unformed and nebulous state of many things, not yet permanently settled, but agreed on all hands to be the preparations of an infinitely greater future. It was inevitable, that he should, in Emerson's phrase, have swallowed the universe like a cake, inevitable that he should have been undiscriminating, confused and a little fatuous. To affirm sufficiently, he had to affirm everything.

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Whitman's experience about life was colourfully varied. He sipped at every fountain-head of life. He lived zestfully and often recklessly. His multifaceted experiences made him see life steadily and see it whole. Certain admirers of his genius have done him great wrong in attempting to forge his contradictions into

5. Santayana : Ibid, p. 203.

an arbitrarily unified pattern. They have tried to offer elaborate justification for his moral and social aberrations. But Whitman often felt embarrassed at these enthusiastic defences, since he was never ashamed of acknowledging his "baffling complexities." "Yet of contradictions made," he was only too human — "a Kosmos, of Manhattan the son," and as asserted in Song of Myself:

> Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and
> breeding,
> No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or
> apart from them,
> No more modest than immodest.

Whitman never wanted to be invested with any halo of divinity; he never refrained from exclaiming:

> I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the
> wise,
> Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
> Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a
> man,
> Stuff'ed with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd
> with the stuff that is fine.

At least in his own mind, there were no reservations, no sense of guilt. He had achieved complete self-realization. As he says in Song of Myself:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes)

Whatman was there, whitman wondered, who did not feel in the deeper recesses of his soul dark impulses and inscrutable urges running crisk-cross. His concept of experience was that it should be truly cosmic in amptitude, excluding nothing, denying nothing. So he said in his poem You Felons on Trial in Courts:

Lusts and wickedness are acceptable to me,
I walk with delinquents with passionate love,
I feel I am of them - I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
And henceforth I will not deny them - for how can I deny myself?

Consummation of experience - that was his ideal. Real truth, according to him, was all-inclusive and he did not shut out any element as alien. So he says:

And henceforth I will go celebrate anything I see or am,
And sing and laugh and deny nothing.

It is surprising how a poet who was never tired of asserting the common bonds of humanity should be accused of being one of the greatest egotists in literary history. If Whitman projected experience through the filament of his ego, he was not transgressing

the canons of aesthetic communication. The 'I' in Whitman's poetry does not signify the circumscribed self of any particular individual; it symbolizes man in his universality. Whitman always sang in his symbolic role as a poet of humanity. Therefore, between his seemingly "egotistical" utterances and the basic universality of his self there is no difference. Perhaps the only difference between the artist and the common man is that whereas the former can articulate his innermost feelings and urges, the latter remains mute. Otherwise, the poet, the sage, and the man in the street, all carry the same spark of immortality in them. This he says in Song of the Universal:

> It is I who am great or to be great, it is you up there,
> or anyone, ...
> ... I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores
> individuals ...
> The whole theory of the Universe is directed unerringly to
> one single individual — namely
> to you.

I and You, as points and counterpoints of the same Divine Self, must invariably remain linked to each other. Whitman was not an egoist, therefore, in any ordinary sense of the word. He had transcended the ramifications of his individual self to seek identification with the universal, the divine. To quote again from Song of the Universal:

Come, said the Muse,
Sing me a song no poet has yet chanted,
Sing me the universal.

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A poet according to Whitman is not a mere visionary or a dreamer, living in an ivory tower, divorced from the grim realities of everyday existence. On the other hand, he is destined to play a significant role in shaping the course of human history. If Shelley thinks that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,' Whitman considers a truly great poet to be 'the arbiter of the diverse,' 'the equalizer of his age,' 'the great emancipator.' In his Memories of President Lincoln, he elaborates his ideal poet:

Of these States the poet is the equable man,
Not in him but off from him things are grotesque,
eccentric, fail of their full returns
Nothing out of its place is good, nothing in its place is bad,
He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportion,
He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the Key,
He is the equalizer of his age and land,
He supplies what wants supplying, he checks what wants checking ...

He is no arguer, he is judgement (Nature accepts him absolutely,)
In the dispute on God and eternity he is silent ...

Whitman always regarded himself as the national poet, projecting through his poems the great ideals that have moved his countrymen. No wonder America has now come to consider him as her authentic voice. Whitman knew that to be representative of one's country, a poet must assiduously study "out the land, its idioms and men" —

Who are you indeed who would talk or sing to America?
Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men?
Politics, geography, pride, freedom, friendship of the land, its substratums and objects?
Have you consider'd the organic of the first day of the first year of independence, sign'd by the commissioners, ratified by the states, and read by washington at the head of the army? ...
Are you faithful to things? do you teach what the land and sea, the bodies of men, womanhood, amativeness, heroic angers, teach?

Whitman had himself served his period of apprenticeship, assimilating different aspects of the national culture before he began to sing. He did not feel discouraged when the early years

of his poetic career brought him little recognition. He was prepared to wait, since, as he said in Memories of President Lincoln, "the proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he had absorb'd it."

Among later poems throwing light on his conception of his role as a poet are : Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand, in which Whitman sees himself propagating a new religion of love, of comradeship, and supported by admiring followers; Starting From Paumanok, emphasizing again the need of comradeship as the binder in the social organism; Passage To India, which envisages a time when the poet he dreams of shall assemble a new Trinity : God, Nature, and Man; To Thee Old Cause, tying his book to the world-shaking effects of the Civil conflict; and last but not the least, The Mystic Trumpeter, which proclaims the role of his ideal poet as exponent of a new universal freedom.

Indeed, the cycle had come full circle. Whitman is to-day not only the greatest poet of America, but one of the foremost poets of the world. He is the full-grown poet whose work is a perfect synthesis of the Soul of Man and Nature. As said in When the Full-Grown Poet Came:

> When the full-grown poet came,
> Out spake pleased Nature (The round impassive globe,
> with all its shows of day and night) saying, He
> is mine;

But out spake the Soul of Man, proud, jealous, and
unreconcil'd, Nay, he is mine alone;
— Then the full-grown poet stood between the two, and
took each by the hand;
And to-day and ever so stands, as blender, uniter,
tightly holding hands,
which he will never release, until he reconciles the
two,
And wholly and joyously blends them.

Such a full-grown poet was, indeed, Walt Whitman himself.

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Whitman had a disgust for cold logic. In his view 'Innocent Intuitions' and not intellect will enable man to understand the riddle of life. Leaves of Grass, in this respect, is a strong denunciation of all logical processes, and a glorification of intuitive perceptions. Whitman distrusted all schools of thought, all sects, — in brief, all that divided man from man. Nor would he like to be associated with any school, dogma, or creed. Free as the air he was; he also wanted his fellow human beings to partake freely of the bounties of Nature. In a poem entitled Myself and Mine, he warns the readers:

I charge you for ever reject those who would expound
me, for I can not expound myself,
I charge that there be no theory or school founded out
of me,
I charge you to leave all free, as I have left all free.

Whitman beckoned everyone to seek the ultimate reality "without edifices or rulers or trustees or any argument", as said in I Hear It was Charged Against Me. He seems to be one of the pioneers of the movement of anti-rationalism that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century. Whitman anticipates Bergson's intuitionism in Song of Myself:

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul,
I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey
-work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of
sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses
any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions
of infidels.

It was a strong reaction against the oppressive tyranny of logic and intellect that Whitman idealised such simple natural

phenomena as a leaf of grass, a grain of sand, the running blackberry, etc. His love of animals also emerged from the same distrust of sophisticated modes of living and thinking. Animals symbolised for him the innate goodness, simplicity and kindness of all creation. Unlike the world of man which wallowed in greed, lust, duplicity, and brutality, the world of animals still retained the pristine happiness and placid contentment of the Garden of EDEN.

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Whitman was not widely recognised in his own country until after his death. But in his last years, he had a gratifying international reputation that helped make up for the neglect at home. In England, France, and Germany, he was increasingly hailed as one of the great makers of a new literature. Although many critics continued to assail his poetic talent in scurrilous terms, Whitman was henceforth not without friends and admirers. From across the Atlantic, he was hailed as a pioneer. In the opinion of William Michael Rossetti Whitman breaks with all precedent. He thinks, sees, invents, executes, and initiates entirely out of his own personality. He brings a glowing mind into contact with his own time and people; and the flame from which it catches fire is Americanism.

Whitman has done his utmost to sing the glory of America and the Americans throughout his writings and as such he

deserves warm thanks from his countrymen. He considered himself the spokesman for mankind. He realised the inherent divineness of man and his role in the mysterious cyclical patterns of life. Whitman's lines never seem finished and fixed, but are always suggesting something beyond and his purpose was mainly to put a person, a human being, freely, fully, and truly on record. Yet, despite all his noble intentions, he has often been harshly criticised for his allegedly indiscriminate optimism, hollowness of perception, transcendental pretensions, flamboyant patriotism, and laughably doubtful enthusiasm.

But if we approach Whitman from a sensible and understanding point of view, the matter with him will not appear as cheap and hollow as that. Whitman lived through the Civil war, a time when the country was on the brink of domestic collapse, being torn between the opposing interests of the whites and the Negroes. From the time he began writing poems, he recorded what he saw at the next door; he recorded the entire life or movement of America. Hence his poems are a very faithful picture of the history of Americans during those momentous thirty years (1855-1885). Whitman, however, concentrated his attention on the common, average American, since he thought that the most important feature of the emerging American nation was that it comprised common people, with their potentialities and distinct individualities. He became their willing spokesman. In the famous Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass Whitman mentioned this peculiar American feature,

which only genius was needed to truly express:

> Other states indicate themselves in their deputies, but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors, but always most in the common people. Their manners, speech, dress, friendship, ... their curiosity and welcome of novelty — their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy ... the fluency of their speech — their delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul — their good temper and openheartedness ... these are unrhymed poetry. It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it.

In his review of his own poetical work, Whitman observed in A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads (1888) that what he had been doing all those thirty years (1855-1885) was to give a faithful record of the hopes and achievements of the commonalty of his nation and that he was the poet of the masses, of America.

> Leaves of Grass is, or seeks to be, simply a faithful and doubtless ... record. ... I would sing ... quite solely with reference to America and to-day. ... For grounds for Leaves of Grass as a poem I abandoned the

conventional themes; ... none of the stock ornamentations, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages, ... nothing ... for beauty's sake — no legend, or myth, or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme. But the broadest average of humanity and its indentities in the now ripening nineteenth century, and especially in each of their countless examples and practical occupations in the United States to-day. The movement of the verses is the sweeping movement of the great currents of living people ... courts, commerce, manufactures, arsenals, steamships, railroads, telegraphs, cities, ... police, and gas, — myriads of travellers arriving, departing — newspaper, music, elections, and all the features and processes of the nineteenth century, in the wholesomest race and the only stable forms of politics at present upon the earth. Along [the] words [of the poems] spread the broad impartialities of the United States. [The poet] appears in his poems surrounded by women and children, and by young men and by common objects and qualities [and] gives to it just what belongs to it, neither more nor less.

In one of his pamphlets,[6] W.D. O'Connor observes that the reader will behold in Leaves of Grass the immense and absolute

6. Vide The Good Gray Poet (New York, 1866).

sunrise. It is all America's own. In form a series of chants, in substance it is an epic of America. It is distinctively and utterly American. Without model, without imitation, without reminiscence, it is evolved entirely from one polity and popular life. It celebrates and contains the essences, the events, the objects of America, the varied landscapes, the teeming and giant cities, the generous and turbulent population — the whole gigantic epic of the United States in all its magnificant reality in these pages. One must study Leaves of Grass in order to understand America, just as one has to study the Iliad and Odyssey for understanding Greece.

Whitman wrote about the American people in his poetry with all care, sincerity, and warmth. He also wrote about their emotions and ideals as the most accomplished spokesman of the people and the country. In the opinion of Van Wyck Brooks Whitman precipi-tated the American character. Every strong personal impulse and the co-operating and unifying ones, everything that enriches the individual, everything that impels and clarifies in the modern world, owes something to Walt whitman. Of all the American writers, Whitman alone, it seems to him, has pitched his tone to the real spring of action.

Whitman's poems undoubtedly show his profound love for America. When he says : "America isolated I sing," it indeed shows that to the poet love of his own country meant all and no other consideration was more important or sacred than that of singing the glory

and greatness of his land as the truly representative poet of his country. In Song of Myself, there are many references to American men, women, scenes, and animals. Section 8 of the poem has pictures of the heavy omnibus, the clank of the shod horses, the excited and angry crowd, the busy policemen. Section 10 has pictures of the Yankee Clipper, the boatman, clamdiggers, and the runaway slave. These are distinctly American flavours. In Section 33 we get a moving description of the bombardment, the attacking cannons and mortars, and a picture of the war-torn country. In Song of Banner at Day break, Whitman expresses the wonder of the child on seeing the American flag which "covers the whole sky," thereby signifying the vastness of America's strength. In The Wound Dresser the poet recalls the days when he moved about the hospitalbeds nursing the soldiers wounded in the Civil War and expresses magnificently the mood experienced by the whole of the American nation. In poems like O Captain, My Captain and When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd Whitman glorifies like an honest and representative patriot the great qualities of the dead President Lincoln who steered the country through all dangers and strains of Civil War days to safety and prosperity. He glorifies his sprawling, democratic land in the most nostalgic and bucolic pictures. He reveals here the most representative feelings of the American humanist. To him Lincoln had become a symbol of democracy.

Again, equally significant are poems like One's-Self I Sing, I Hear America Singing, and A Song for Occupations. In the

third poem mentioned, Whitman elevates to dignity every kind of human being. He pays due regard to all — a thief, a drunkard, a prostitute, a scholar, a common man, a soldier, and a President — people who form the American nation, people whose spokesman Whitman himself is. One's-Self I Sing strikes at once the Keynote of much of Whitman's poetry. Singing of Democracy and holding up a true, representation of En-Masse — Whitman's Chief ambition as a poet of American commonality — have been clearly expressed here and the poem stands as a fitting introduction to Whitman's objective as the American spokesman. The second poem, I Hear America Singing, is another remarkable example where the poet, in the most perfect manner of the true representative of his country, presents an image of America, proud and healthy. Mechanics, carpenter, mason, boatman, deck-hand, shoe-maker, hatter, wood-cutter, ploughboy — all form part and parcel of the robust America and reflect a genuine joy through the lines of the poet about the achievements and dreams of the present and the future. It is thus a truly representative poem, again establishing firmly Whitman's claim to being the American spokesman, as Tennyson is universally acclaimed as the most representative poet of the Victorian era in English literature or T. S. Eliot that of the modern man's feelings in the complicated, frustrating, and disillusioning waste land of the life of to-day.

D. H. Lawrence, who recognised in Whitman a kindred soul, placed him in the foremost rank amongst creative writers. He considered Whitman to be ahead of all poets, pioneering into the

wilderness of unopened life; and beyond him, none. Barnard Shaw's cryptic comment about Whitman being a classic is no less adulatory. He thought that it was curious that America should be the only country in which this is not as obvious as the sun in the heavens. When on his death bed Whitman signed the last (1892) edition of Leaves of Grass, he was scrawling his name on --

> A scented gift, and remembrancer, design'dly dropt,
> Bearing the owner's name some way in the corners,
> that we may see and remark and say 'whose' ?

There is no question about whose. Few writers have so unmistakably identified themselves in their times, their nations, their selves as has Walt Whitman. His endless love for the common masses, his sincere zeal to serve as their spokesman idenfatigably, and his magnificent attitude of equality towards all in a spirit of divine nobleness will forever keep him as one of the most memorable personalities in American letters. He was one who was in truth like an Indian Sanyasin in thought, belief, philosophy and action, the great equalising spirit and soul of an Indian Yogi born in America with an Yankee name.