

The Idea of Self and Transcendence, Gender Equality in Walt Whitman's Poetry

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Introduction

The term Transcendentalism is associated with a group of ideas in literature that emerged in New England in the early to middle nineteenth century. As David Bowers has pointed out some fifty years ago, "its vitalizing effect upon American art and literature and, indeed, upon the development of American democracy as a whole, remains unrivaled". (Bowers, 346) Chiefly this idealistic and philosophical movement was pioneered by figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and others who basically got influences from eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant; Hindu philosophy of '*Ātman*' and '*Brahman*'; and Jainist philosophy of '*Moksa*', moreover, British Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge too had influence on them.

The basic assumption of Transcendentalism lies in the intuitive faculty instead of the rational. This intuition is the conscious union of the individual psyche (*Ātman*) with world psyche (*Brahman*) or in Emersonian term 'Oversoul'. Transcendentalism as a literary term is not well defined, therefore, the basic tenets of Transcendentalism is not the same creed to all the transcendentalists. Thus, the main traits of Transcendentalism differs one to other and the term remains elusive and problematic till today as when it first gained circulation in America in the 1820's. Even as Charles R. Crowe points out "there were almost as many Transcendentalisms as there were Transcendentalists". (Crowe, 495)

Elements

The trait of Transcendentalism was there in Whitman in the form of individualism, self-reflexivity and in the idea of democracy as propagated in his poems. The idea of self and transcendence in Whitman's poetry is so organic that they cannot be separately discussed but it is through one that other can be understood. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* celebrates the beauty of one's self and forms a unified whole, each leaf of grass has its own distinct beauty and individual identity, intensified with a sense of togetherness. The idea of self in Whitman's poem is very much interesting, an individual is the spiritual center of the universe and through the self-knowledge an individual can get the clue to explore nature, history and ultimately, the cosmos itself, therefore, the idea of correspondence between the individual soul and "Oversoul" is something that is dealt in Whitman's poetry. His poem "One's Self I Sing" celebrates this ideal of individualism but at the same time looks beyond an individual existence. Words like "en-masse" i.e. all-togetherness or the phrase like "the form complete is worthier far" celebrates this idealism. His poem "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" also celebrates the same ideal metaphorically. Human crowd is compared to an "ocean" and the "drop" is an individual entity. Phrases like "I too am part of the ocean my love, we are not so much separated" becomes the keyword of conscious union of an individual psyche with the world psyche and the phrase "cohesion of all" in this poem also serves the same purpose.

The poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is a public poem of private mourning; this private can be identified with a single soul and public or crowd with universal soul— thus, one transcends from egotistical existence to a more sublime and expansive

existence. Actually the basic idea was that individual virtue and happiness depends upon self-realization, this self-realization stands upon two basic psychological premises— one, to embrace or be united with the “Oversoul” and the other, to withdraw from the world (i.e. the egotistical existence). The transcendentalist expectation is to move from the contracting to the expansive. This duality has aspects of Hindu philosophy of ‘*Ātman*’ and ‘*Brahman*’. Therefore, in Whitman’s poetry the ‘self’ and the ‘democracy’ is nothing but two psychological drives and the transcendence of an individual self to democratic self is almost identical to the transcendence of a singular soul to universal soul or in Emersonian term the “Oversoul”.

Intertextuality and Difference from Wordsworthian Poetry, Whitman and the Puritan Ethos of Symbol Making

Another important characteristic in Whitman’s poetry is also similar with the chief features of Transcendentalism, i.e. the representation of Nature as a living mystery. The British Romantic poets too have acknowledged the symbolic representation of Nature in their poems but the grossly physical aspects of Nature also inform Romantic Poetry. In Wordsworth’s poem “Tintern Abbey”, as Wordsworth expresses, Nature in his childhood days was “all in all”; the gross physical sensation of Nature “haunted” him “like a passion”:

“For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by,
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite...” (Tintern Abbey lines-74-81)

This British Romantic view of Nature was somewhat changed in the representation of Nature in New England. The puritan ethos in the new land shaped the very representation of Nature and presented Nature in a more symbolic and mystic way. Richard Chase has pointed out Whitman’s capacity of seeing symbols:

There is no doubt that Whitman had in abundance the symbol-seeing capacity of the Puritan-transcendentalist mind. Relatively speaking, one finds a larger number of real toads in his imaginary garden, yet he could not help seeing what he called in *Democratic Vistas* “the shows and forms of Nature” as well as nature itself. (...) his view of symbols is not confined to a semantic view; he is not content to understand symbols as mere static signs. Words are spontaneous and creative agent. (Chase, 95)

In Whitman’s poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” Nature sympathizes with human sorrow— the springtime lilacs, the hermit thrush and Nature serve the purpose of symbolic mourning. Death is presented more like a liberating agent that makes man’s soul to transcend his mortal boundaries.

The symbolic representation of natural phenomena is one of the common characteristic features of Whitman’s poem. In his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as Miller points out:

The presence of the non-finite verb “crossing” suggests neither past nor future but an eternal present. The ferry connotes not only the progressive movement forward but,

most importantly, cyclic movement, a going and a return, a beginning and an end, and a new beginning. (Miller, 81)

The ferry has been used as a major symbol. It symbolizes a continual movement, backward and forward, broadly speaking, a universal motion in time and space. Both land and water are considered here to be the necessary part constructing the total image of the crossing ferryboat. These two elements form a duality symbolic of the physical and spiritual, body and soul, life and death. It is only through this dualistic nature of the universe, recognition of the existence of transcendent spirituality, that the poet evokes a sense of unity in the readers. To Whitman the only way to overcome this duality of this universe is to fuse body with the spirit through which mortal human beings can transcend time and space. The ferry symbolizes this spatial and temporal movement. It is also associated with those men and women who ride it, have ridden it or will ride it. Therefore, the coming together of these men, from scattered points to the ferry, that particular moment of crossing, symbolizes the spiritual unity of human beings in the world.

Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of
the ebb-tide. ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Lines- 17-19)

The ever changeless natural surroundings make a unity between the bygone generations with Whitman's time and a bond with upcoming generations. Therefore, the ever constant natural objects form a timeless bond between generations and moves beyond the barriers of time.

Elements of Duality in Universe, Whitman and the Chinese Philosophy

The dualism becomes much more prominent in the second section of the poem. The men and women become the eternal "impalpable sustenance" of the poet. He thinks of the "simple, compact, well-joined scheme" of the universe and believes himself to be "disintegrated yet part of the scheme." This primary disintegration is the marker of the egotistical self and the final integration is the expansive self, therefore, this duality serves as a means of transcendence in Walt Whitman.

Section five of this poem records the quest of the poet for his own physical and spiritual identity and endeavors to unite his own sensibility with that of the reader. His experience now transcends the limits of the Brooklyn ferry and becomes universal. Wishing to suggest his union with the reader, he gives us the quality of the spiritual union by the use of a metaphor of chemical solution. "I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution," — he suggests it to be the infinite ocean of spiritual life containing the potential of all life. This spiritual solution is the source of one's being; this is the marker of the existence of duality in Nature, much like Taoist Yin and Yang philosophy. The Taoist believed that Taijitu, the symbol of Yin and Yang are:

...the two poles of existence, which are opposite but complementary. The light, white Yang moving up blends into the dark, black Yin moving down. Yin and Yang are dependent opposing forces that flow in a natural cycle, always seeking balance. Though they are opposing, they are not in opposition to one another. As part of the Tao, they are merely two aspects of a single reality. Each contains the seed of the other, which is why we see a black spot of Yin in the white Yang and vice versa. They do not merely replace each other but actually become each other through the constant flow of the universe. (Hoopes, 25)

Section eight of the poem deals with the mystical union of the poet with the readers. The expression becomes clear with the reference to “fusion”: “Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” line-97)

Therefore, the journey in the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” has both physical and spiritual dimension. The physical existence of men is like a ferry plying between the two shores of mortality and immortality. He and his imagination use objects to express the idea of the search for the eternal. The search, or the function of imagination, is exemplified by the ferry ride which moves from a point in the physical world to a destination in the spiritual world. This quest for the spiritual life is not alienating physical existence, but it is through one’s existence that the other can be achieved.

The poem, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is an elegy based on the intensely personal experience of the poet asserting the triumph of the eternal life over death. The meaning of the poem is rather implicit and springs out from a recollection of the narrator’s childhood days. Whitman imaginatively recreates the childhood experience of the lad and shows us how he becomes a man, and the man, a poet. This time sequence is as much the essence of the poem as is the growth of the consciousness of the poet. The poem mainly deals with the boy’s experience in his childhood. The reader is not allowed to forget the experience which kindles the poetic spirit in the boy. The boy, now a grown up man, recollects the experience of his childhood and recreates it as an art form. Therefore, the experience had a greater significance to the man, now a poet. As Miller points out:

The boy is not just an ordinary boy but an ‘outsetting bard’. The man recalling the boy is the accomplished bard. The ‘meaning’ of the poem, if it is to have a meaning separate from the drama, is the ‘meaning’ of the experience of the poet’s songs. (...) ‘meaning’ is nowhere explicitly stated but is imaginatively and emotionally evoked. The reader, like the boy in the poem, lives the experience and through that experience come intuitively to *know*. (Miller, 105)

Primarily the opening duet of bliss and he-bird’s lament introduce a series of opposite suggestiveness of the duality in nature: day and night, sun and moon, land and sea. “These pairs indicate not only a dual but also a rhythmical universe, a universe whose patterned unfolding must be the result of some unrevealed purpose.”(Miller, 109) The use of the two sets of symbols gives this poem a different charm; the sun, day, and land are associated with fulfilled life of the birds whereas the moon, night and sea are associated with unfulfilled lonesome love. In a nutshell, one set of these symbols are associated with physical love and the other with spiritual love. Out of these associations comes the mystic suggestiveness that life and death too, like night and day, are merely a part of the ‘rhythmical’ evolution of the universe.

Walt Whitman: Exploration of Sexuality and Gender Equality in the Victorian Era

Whitman is considered to be the pioneer to present the theme of transcendence through the exploration of sexuality. Victorian period is typically known for its repression of sexuality. “On the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (Foucault, 3). In short, discourse on sexuality has been controlled and confined in this period. But it is in that time Whitman explored the subject of sexuality in his poems. Whitman believed that one can explore the mystery of the universe through the exploration of his own self. One’s sexuality too, therefore, becomes the mean to explore the universe, as one’s sexuality is also the part of his self. Female sexuality was equally considered to be the part of the scheme in Whitman’s poetry as the male. The representation of sexuality in his poems conveys the notion of gender equality in Whitman.

Some of the major traits of transcendental idealism can be found in Whitman's "Song of Myself". The representation of sexuality too can be a means of transcendence in Whitman's poems. The section eleven of "Song of Myself" is notable for its representation of male sexuality in graphic details. This section presents nude male bathers in a river where the voyeur is a female. These bear a childlike innocence and at the same time a sexual undertone. Perhaps Whitman's notion of sexuality may not be seen merely in terms of 'homo-' or 'hetero-' sexual but by looking into it as sexual. By negating the traditional gender role, Whitman brought democracy to poetry. This transcendence of sexual limitations can be said to be the marker of transcendental idealism in Whitman's poetry.

Elements of Self Reflexivity in Whitman

The feature of self-reflexivity which is one of the chief characteristic features of Transcendentalism can be found in Whitman's poem "As I Ponder'd in Silence". Certain intertextuality can be drawn with Coleridge's poem "Dejection: An Ode" as "Dejection: An Ode" deals with the composition of the poem itself. Here Whitman, in this poem, tries to justify the subject matter of the poem in front of the "phantom" i.e. the manifestation of poetic creativity in Whitman's poem. The phantom asserts that poets must celebrate war and battles in their poetry as the classical epical poets did but Whitman, in his turn, gives argue that he celebrates battle "for life and death, for the body and the eternal soul". This spiritual battle is the typical transcendental quality and thus Whitman defends him in this poem and the poem becomes self-reflexive. Whitman's wars are eternal and the battlefield is life, the victory is the triumph of the spirit over matter. Thus, through the theme of self-reflexivity the mark of transcendence comes through the poem.

Conclusion

Transcendentalism in America was inspired by dissatisfaction with the emotional and spiritual sterility of Unitarianism, a sterility attributed to the Unitarian acceptance of Lockean "sensationalism". To renew this religious idealism of their Puritan past, the American transcendentalists turned to contemporary German philosopher, particularly Immanuel Kant. As explained by Emerson in his famous lecture "The Transcendentalists,"

...the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms. (Emerson, January, 1842)

The impact of the German philosophy was also there in the British Romantic poetry. The transcendentalists were also influenced from the Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, therefore, the influence was twofold. Romantic poetry was considered to be a journey from phenomena to noumena or the world of external realities to the world of ideas. Transcendentalism, in its turn, is quite similar with this philosophical notion as in Transcendentalism the egotistical existence broadens into sublime or expansive existence.

Transcendentalism, in America, doesn't simply remains to be a philosophical movement only. As F. I. Carpenter has observed, "American Transcendentalism was primarily religious rather than philosophical." It will be difficult to say whether Transcendentalism was philosophical or religious but one thing is sure to say, the basic premises of

Transcendentalism were not same to all the transcendentalists, therefore, the transcendental experiences that is found in the literary artifact of each poet is remarkably different experiences from other. That's why the famous "transparent eyeball" passage in Emerson's *Nature*, the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*, and Section Five of "Song of Myself," presents comparatively the different brands of Transcendentalism. The most interesting comparison of the three selections is that in each, one of the five senses initiates the transcendental experience: for Emerson, sight; Thoreau, hearing; and Whitman, touch. But ultimately it matters a little which sense has initiated the experience because the transcendence from soul to "Oversoul" or the mystical reunion of body and soul remains the same.

Whitman's contribution to both Transcendentalism and American democracy was the basic assumption that lies within individual choice. Whitman's belief of reclaiming American voice and individual identity in a landscape of growing materialism was something that fit perfectly into Transcendentalism. The poems of Walt Whitman are not of direct manifestation of intuitive faculty and God; he describes his transcendence not only in terms of his relationship to God, but also his relationship to men, women, and even the most common natural objects such as leaves, weeds, moss, stones and ants. In other words, his Transcendentalism as expressed in most of his poems is less vague, less formless, less other-worldly, and more attentive to mankind. As F. O. Matthiessen has pointed out, "Whitman's Transcendentalism resembles a kind of 'material identity,' and during his moments of transcendence he bridges the gap between the concrete and the abstract, the material and the ideal, in a way that Emerson and Thoreau did not." (Matthiessen, 521) The idea of Transcendentalism in Whitman is not the simple manifestation of intuitive faculty and God but rather achieved through the ideal of self and democracy. To Whitman, democracy is the transcendence from individual self to the collective; that is to say from egotistical existence to the expansive. Therefore, the ideas of self, democracy and transcendence are not divergent in Whitman's poetry but interconnected in such a way that one idea can be explored through other; finally they do not remain different ideas but becomes one.

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