

Mysticism in the Poetry of Walt Whitman

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Abstract- Mysticism is not really a coherent philosophy of life, but more a temper of mind. According to Russell, a mystical experience involves insight a sense of unity and the unreality of time and space, and a belief that evil is mere appearance. Russell's vision is intuitive, he feels that the presence of a divine reality behind and within the ordinary world of sense perception. Mysticism is "the science of union with the Absolute"(Underhill 1912,86). A mystic feels that God and supreme soul animating all things are identical. He sees an essential identity of Being between Man, Nature and God. In Whitman's poetry, we can see the elements of mysticism. His thought was intuitive, he wrote like a mystic. Whitman believed that the soul is immortal. He felt an identification with all animate and inanimate things around him. He believed in the existence of the human soul, and in the existence of the Divine Spirit, in the immortality of the human soul, and in the capacity of a human being to establish communication between his spirit and the Divine spirit. Whitman believed that this communication is possible not possible without sacrificing the flesh. Therefore, there is a great deal of sexual element in Whitman's poetry. In "Songs of Myself" "the sexual connotation is inseparable from the mystical experience. Whitman believed that the mystical state is achieved through the transfigured senses rather than by escaping the senses.

Index Terms- Nature, Divinity, Unity, Love and Symbolism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Poetry is one of the most useful expressions of a mystic's inner experiences. By nature, a mystic is able to access a state of consciousness that is beyond the usual awareness of humanity. At a certain stage mystics and great seekers have said it is impossible to describe the consciousness they have attained. However through poetry it is possible for the mystic poets to give a glimpse of higher worlds, like a finger

pointing to the moon there inspiring utterances offer a poetic description of their elevating experiences.

Mysticism is the practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them.[1] It may also refer to the attainment of insight in ultimate or hidden truths, and to human transformation supported by various practices and experiences[2] The term "mysticism" has Ancient Greek origins with various historically determined meanings.[1] [2] Derived from the Greek word μυσω, meaning "to conceal",[2] mysticism referred to the biblical liturgical, spiritual, and contemplative dimensions of early and medieval Christianity.[1] During the early modern period, the definition of mysticism grew to include a broad range of beliefs and ideologies related to "extraordinary experiences and states of mind"[2.]

In modern times, "mysticism" has acquired a limited definition, with broad applications, as meaning the aim at the "union with the Absolute, the Infinite, or God".[1] This limited definition has been applied to a wide range of religious traditions and practices,[1] valuing "mystical experience" as a key element of mysticism.

Broadly defined, mysticism can be found in all religious traditions, from indigenous religions and folk religions like shamanism, to organised religions like the Abrahamic faiths and Indian religions, and modern spirituality, New Age and New Religious Movements.

Since the 1960s scholars have debated the merits of perennial and constructionist approaches in the scientific research of "mystical experiences".[3][4] The perennial position is now "largely dismissed by scholars",[5] most scholars using a contextual

approach, which takes the cultural and historical context into consideration.

"Mysticism" is derived from the Greek *μύω*, meaning "I conceal", [2] and its derivative *μυστικός*, *mystikos*, meaning 'an initiate'. The verb *μύω* has received a quite different meaning in the Greek language, where it is still in use. The primary meanings it has are "induct" and "initiate". Secondary meanings include "introduce", "make someone aware of something", "train", "familiarize", "give first experience of something". [3] The related form of the verb *μυέω* (*mueō* or *myéō*) appears in the New Testament. As explained in Strong's Concordance, it properly means shutting the eyes and mouth to experience mystery. Its figurative meaning is to be initiated into the "mystery revelation". The meaning derives from the initiatory rites of the pagan mysteries. [4] Also appearing in the New Testament is the related noun *μυστήριον* (*mustérion* or *mystérion*), the root word of the English term "mystery". The term means "anything hidden", a mystery or secret, of which initiation is necessary. In the New Testament it reportedly takes the meaning of the counsels of God, once hidden but now revealed in the Gospel or some fact thereof, the Christian revelation generally, and/or particular truths or details of the Christian revelation. [5]

According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon, the term *μυστήριον* in classical Greek meant "a hidden thing", "secret". A particular meaning it took in Classical antiquity was a religious secret or religious secrets, confided only to the initiated and not to be communicated by them to ordinary mortals. In the Septuagint and the New Testament the meaning it took was that of a hidden purpose or counsel, a secret will. It is sometimes used for the hidden will of humans, but is more often used for the hidden will of God. Elsewhere in the Bible it takes the meaning of the mystic or hidden sense of things. It is used for the secrets behind sayings, names, or behind images seen in visions and dreams. The Vulgate often translates the Greek term to the Latin *sacramentum* (sacrament). [5]

The related noun *μύστης* (*mustis* or *mystis*, singular) means the initiate, the person initiated to the mysteries. [5] According to Ana Jiménez San Cristobal in her study of Greco-Roman mysteries and Orphism, the singular form *μύστης* and the plural form *μύσται* are used in ancient Greek texts to mean

the person or persons initiated to religious mysteries. These followers of mystery religions belonged to a select group, where access was only gained through an initiation. She finds that the terms were associated with the term *βάκχος* (Bacchus), which was used for a special class of initiates of the Orphic mysteries. The terms are first found connected in the writings of Heraclitus. Such initiates are identified in texts with the persons who have been purified and have performed certain rites. A passage of the Cretans by Euripides seems to explain that the *μύστης* (initiate) who devotes himself to an ascetic life, renounces sexual activities, and avoids contact with the dead becomes known as *βάκχος*. Such initiates were believers in the god Dionysus Bacchus who took on the name of their god and sought an identification with their deity. [6] Until the sixth century the practice of what is now called mysticism was referred to by the term *contemplatio*, c.q. *theoria*. [7] According to Johnson, "[b]oth contemplation and mysticism speak of the eye of love which is looking at, gazing at, aware of divine realities." [7]

II. LITERARY WORK

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century mysticism came to be used as a substantive. [1] This shift was linked to a new discourse, [1] in which science and religion were separated [3] Luther dismissed the allegorical interpretation of the bible, and condemned Mystical theology, which he saw as more Platonic than Christian. [2] "The mystical", as the search for the hidden meaning of texts, became secularised, and also associated with literature, as opposed to science and prose. [3] Science was also distinguished from religion. By the middle of the 17th century, "the mystical" is increasingly applied exclusively to the religious realm, separating religion and "natural philosophy" as two distinct approaches to the discovery of the hidden meaning of the universe. [4] The traditional hagiographies and writings of the saints became designated as "mystical", shifting from the virtues and miracles to extraordinary experiences and states of mind, thereby creating a newly coined "mystical tradition". [2] A new understanding developed of the Divine as residing within human, an essence beyond the varieties of religious expressions [1]

III. MYSTICISM IN WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY

Whitman does the materialist world, he believed that we can gain the spiritual happiness through the physical happiness. He doesn't subscribe to the belief that objects are illusive. There is no tendency on the part of the soul to leave this world for good. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, we see 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 and says:

Hurrah for positive science!

Long live exact demonstration!

Whitman accepted the Theory of Evolution but could not believe evolution to be a mechanical process. In the slow process of growth, development and change that science was revealing, Whitman saw God making Himself evident and unmistakable to man. The soul of man finds full satisfaction only in seeking out the reality behind the manifestations. As he says in "Passage to India":

Bathe me O God in thee, mounting thee,

I and my soul to range in range of thee.

At the end of the journey the soul meets with God – or the "Great Comerado" as he says in "Song of Myself."

Whitman's sense of Unity of the Whole : His cosmic Consciousness:

Whitman has throughout his poetry shown his faith in the unity of the whole, or "oneness" of all. This sense of the essential divinity of all created things is an important aspect of mysticism and is also closely related to 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 all the women my sisters and lovers,

And that a keelson of creation is love.

He praised, not only merely life, but the absolute worth of every particular and individual person, every real existing being. Thus his "cosmic consciousness is the result of the expansion of the ego. The "I" assumes an enlarged universal connotation embracing the smallest and the greatest things in the universe as perfect and of great value. Whitman equates all opposites, and accepts evil as much as good as part 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 West, and the Old with the new- "As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand". continuum. 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.

Images and Symbolism:

The mystic quest for Reality and communion with the Divine easily lends itself to be represented in terms of the voyage image. The "Open Road" form a basic image in Whitman's poetry as done the open sea. "The Song of the Open Road" is a poem whose theme is a journey symbolic of an exploration of the spiritual as well as the physical universe. "Passage to India" is famous for symbolizing the mystic quest for Reality and the ultimate discovery of the meaning of life-a passage to more than India. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" as well "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" use symbols and images designed to affirm the importance of Death. Death is seen as a deliveress because it leads to new life, and the poet having had the mystical experience of this truth, seeks to be a "uniter of here and hereafter". In Passage to India, the imagery of the soul in flight and the symbolism of immortality recur. The poet and his soul flout through Time and Space and Death, mounting to God-

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,

At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,

But that I, turning, call to thee O Soul, thou actual Me,

And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,

Thou master Time, smilest content at Death,

All fillest, swellest full the vastness of Space.

As G. W. Allen points out the "attempt to indicate the path between reality and the soul very nearly sums up Whitman's whole intention in "Leaves of Grass". The mysticism here is obvious. The cosmic "I" of Whitman's poems is on a perpetual journey. His soul is but a fragment of the worldsoul. The mass of images which race through his poems symbolize the

unity and harmony in himself and all creation. The spear of grass assumes mystical significance through its symbolic value- celebration of individuality and the en-mass, exclusion of none, exception of all, In some parts of his poetry the indirection and symbolism- inseparable with the techniques of communication of a mystic- are only too obvious. In “Song of Myself” Whitman speaks of God as his beloved and his “bed-fellow” sleeping at his side all night. The mystical experience is conveyed in terms of highly charged sexual imagery.

Whitman seldom lost touch with the physical reality even in the midst of mystical experience. Physical phenomena for him (as for the Transcendentalist) were symbols of spiritual reality. He believed that “the unseen is proved by seen “; thus he makes use of highly sensuous and concrete imagery to convey his perception of divine reality. He finds a purpose behind natural objects-grass, sea, birds, flowers, animals, -for,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death.....

And

.....a leaf of grass is no less than the journey – work of stars...

Indeed, one might say that mysticism constitutes the very poetic form of Whitman’s poems. He looked upon the universe as constituting a unity of disparate objects, unified by the Divine Spirit ; thus his poems are “Leaves of Grass” signifying at once separateness and unity. Whitman’s dominant metaphor of grass presents a case for unity and harmony, a basic component of structure.

IV. CONCLUSION

Whitman is a mystic as much as he is a poet of democracy and science , but a” mystic without a creed.” He sees the body as the manifestation of the spirit which is “delivered” by death into a higher life. A spear of Grass is not an insert substance for him but God’s handkerchief, “the flag of my disposition”. Often in his sensibility , matter is dissolved, trees become “liquid” and contours “fluid”. The real is transmuted and he has cosmic visions. He becomes a comet travelling round the universe with the speed of light :

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,

I refuse my flesh in eddies,

And drift in lacy jags.

If “Leaves of Grass” has been called a “Bible” of America , it has a great deal to do with its mystical strain. True, Whitman’s brand of mysticism is not identifiable with the selflessness of the Christian variety or the passivity of the Oriental. What we may call Whitman’s mysticism is “democratic “ mysticism – available to every man on equal terms and embracing contradictory elements. But it is undeniable that mysticism is central to the meaning of “Leaves of Grass”.

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