

Dr Fadhila SIDI SAID
Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Comparative Literature
Department of English
Faculty of Letters and Languages
Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi Ouzou, Algeria
Email: fadhilas@hotmail.com

Title: Troubadours' Poetry for the Quest of 'Liberty'

Introduction

Whitman was the second of eight children born to an alcoholic father. The family was often in economic difficulty and moved several times between the city of Brooklyn and the country around Huntington, Long Island. Whitman joined the work force early, no doubt to help care for and feed his large family. The poet's eldest brother spent his last years in an asylum. The youngest brother spent his life mentally retarded and physically handicapped. A third brother died early of alcoholism and tuberculosis.

Leaves of Grass in its final rendering is structured to reflect the poet's life. It Begins with 'One's –Self I sing' and ends with 'Good-Bye My Fancy'. They are strategically placed between poems reflecting two traumatic periods in Whitman's personal life, the loneliness of the years 1857-60 when he sought personal love, and the Civil war, when the poet witnessed the carnage of his 'divine average'. He states:

I went down to the war fields in Virginia (end of 1862), lived thence forwards in camp - saw great battles and the days and the nights afterward – partook of all the fluctuations, gloom, despair, hopes again arous'd, courage evoked – death readily risk'd – the cause, too – along and filling those agonistic and lurid following years, 1863 – '64 –'65 – the real parturition years (more than 1776 – '83) of this hence forth homogenous Union. Without these three or four years and the experiences they gave, "Leaves of Grass" would not now be existing. (1990: 434)

As a poet he emerged in the 1850s to assert a truly American voice, one that celebrated the American landscape, the American people, their speech and democratic form of government. In 1848, he took a trip to the southern city of New Orleans, at the mouth of the Mississippi River, that great waterway flowing through the heart of the country. There Whitman gained a new vision of America and began writing poetry that would embody this vision. In 1855, he published a ground-breaking book called *Leaves of Grass*.

The poet lived a long bachelor life where poetry was a vital element in their lives. In the case of Whitman, it was a quest for ‘nationality’. Whitman considered his trip round the States as a revelation for him as an American. His trip to New Orleans, Chicago and the Western frontier gave him a new vision of America. It was the first time that he saw the American Continent. This experience provided him with a sum of visual and auditory memories, pictures and emotions that fed his imagination and that he later expressed in his work. So, he began writing poetry that would embody this new American vision. The experience was regenerative for him. Thus, the Whitman who returned was no longer a mere newspaper editor but he was the poet of *Leaves of Grass*.

He considered himself as a seer and a prophet; he was convinced that he had revelation from God. He describes himself in one of his poems entitled “So long”:

Screaming electric, the atmosphere using

.....

Curious envelop’d messages delivering;

.....

Myself Unknowing, my commission obeying, to question it never daring

As he considers himself as God’s voice, his poems are just songs that show his wonder towards the magnificence of the world. His ‘cosmic Spirit’ gives him the ability to see things

as part of the whole universe. This ‘cosmic Spirit’ can be detected in all his poems especially in “*Song of Myself*”.

Whitman’s Transcendentalism

Whitman refers to God in his poetry and task is to transform the traditionally unknowable images of the Divine into humanistic and mystic one. God is addressed as “the Divine Beloved” and “the Great Camerado” by Whitman. So the poet introduces the notion of ‘liberty’ in his relation with God. We think that the poet is influenced by Mysticism. The latter is not a religion in itself, but is rather the most vital element in all religion, rising up in revolt against old formality and religious torpor. The aim of most mystics is to establish a conscious relation with the Absolute, in which they can find the personal object of Love. Whitman is influenced by transcendentalism, i.e., the sacred in nature and in humanity . As Transcendentalism and Sufism both espouse the view that the Divine permeates all objects (animate/inanimate) and the purpose of human life is union with God, we can then draw a parallel between the two poets in relation to Mysticism.

The title of the book “*Leaves of Grass*” has its importance in symbolizing ‘universality’ and ‘eternity’ of life. As he said in *Song of Myself*:

Or I guess it is Uniform Hieroglyphic

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves

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

The plant ‘Grass’ symbolizes life, so for the poet his book has this power of eternity which is expressed through the vivacity and the freshness of his poetry. According to Whitman, man is a part of the universe. Man is eternal because life is endless. He declares in *Song of Myself*:

My embryo has never been Torpid, nothing could overlay it.

Vast vegetables gave it sustenance...

The poet speaks about the divine and miraculous character of life using natural exhibitions. This can be seen in section 6 to section 9 of "Song of Myself". For Whitman, God is synonymous with life, an irresistible and indestructible power that animates the universe. Everything is God; and God is everywhere even in the smallest inanimate object, "They are but parts, anything is but a part" (*Song of Myself*). Everything is eternal, composed of unchangeable atoms that produce all the varieties in the substances constituting "the great material whole, of which we form a part". The atoms may form part of a vegetable today, and an animal tomorrow, which in perishing forms other vegetables and animals. This is the same doctrine the poet of *Song of Myself* voices near the end of the poem:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, if you want me again look
for me under your boot-soles.

No separation between the soul and the body. Man exists now and forever and his body is just a part of the universe. He declares: "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern".

The originality of his faith is that the 'body' is equally important as the 'soul'. The word body is worshiped and loved in his poems. The reader discovers the beauties of the physical world and that life is a miracle: "Seeing, hearing, feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle", (*Song of Myself*). He continually oscillated from 'body' and 'soul', from 'visible and invisible'. His poetry is a tentative reconciliation between 'spirit' and 'matter'. *Song of Myself*: "I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul." His mystic and sensual egotism made him feel this duality and express it in his poetry: "The pleasures of Heaven are with me and the pains of Hell are with me".

The image of the Divine in Christianity is presented with certain human emotions such as kindness, affection, and mercy. In other words, there are many passages in the Bible in which God is described in terms of human emotions in order to be more understandable to humanity. It is clear that the relation between human beings and God is the main concern in these Holy Book. Therefore, the noble task of Whitman is to transform the traditionally unknowable images of the Divine into a humanistic and mystic one; God is addressed as “Divine Beloved” and “the Great Camerado”.

For Whitman it is the “central urge” in everything as he says in *Song of Myself*:

Allah is all, all, all – is immanent in every life and object
It is the central urge in every atom
(Often unconscious, often evil, down fallen,)
To return to its divine source and origin, however distant,
Latent the same in subject and in object, without one exception
(1990: 419)

Theme of political protest

The Civil war is another theme in Whitman’s poetry. He produced his volume of war poems in 1866. In these poems, ‘Beat! Beat! Drums!’ to ‘Vigil Stranger I Kept on the Field One Night’ and ‘A Sight in Camp in the Day break Gray and Dim’, he reflects “on both the war’s early excitement and its ultimate pathos.” (1990: xvii). He speaks about the American Civil War. His experience came through the war’s bloody consequences, which he mainly encountered in the wartime hospitals where he served as a volunteer male nurse.

Beat! beat! drums! - blows! bugles! blow!
Make no parley-stop for no expostulation,

Mind not the timid-mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the
 hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums - so land you bugles blow

When Whitman learned that his beloved brother George was wounded and was in an army hospital, he went to care for him, and then for the others who were stricken by the war. There is a mood of depression and resignation in the new poems of the second edition where the poet added the poems referring to the American Civil war. With the coming of sorrow, love for his fellows became more and more an impersonal bond with humanity, a principle of life closely associated with death. In the poem "Come up From the Field father":

Come up from the field father, here's a letter from our Pete
And come to the front door mother, here's a letter from thy dear
 son.

.....

Cool and Sweeten Ohio's villages with leaves fluttering in the
 moderate wind,

Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis'd
 vines,

.....

Down in the field all prospers well,
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,
The only Son is dead. (1990: 237)

Whitman builds a strong contrast between the peacefulness of the prosperous farm and the peace-breaking news of the letter. With simple words, the poet shows death as a consequence of war, we even share the emotion that the soldier's death has on his family. The mother's despair and dignity in this poem can be applied not only to an American mother but also to all mothers who have lost a child because of war.

Conclusion

Whitman is a rebel, expressing his sensibilities through unconventional patterns. In Whitman's poems, there are no rhymes and no metrical patterns. What matters is the rhythm and what he called "Vocalism": conveying the impression of a human voice which unites body and soul. Whitman's poetry addresses the common man. His poetry is Lyrical or Satirical depending on the poet's mood. He chants both his sadness and happiness; his poems bless or curse, he expresses both his love and hate, he wonders or raises his voice towards God to implore His Clemency. This recalls Whitman's saying "we know that Sympathy or Love is the law over all laws, because in nothing else but love is the soul conscious of pure happiness which appears to be the ultimate place and point of all things" (1990).

Notes and References

- 1- GRELLET Françoise, *An Introduction To American littérature*, Paris 1987.
- 2- GOODY Jack, *Entre l'oralité et l'écriture*, PUF, 1994
- 3- NICHOLSON Reynolds, *The Mystics of Islam*, New York 1975.
- 4- ONG Walter, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982)
- 5- WHITMAN Walt, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Ed. Justin Kaplan, New York: library of America, 1982.

6-, *Leaves of Grass*, Oxford, 1990.