

RADITIONIN THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN WESTERN MYSTICAL T

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ABSTRACT: *Various mystical elements in his poetry. Mystical poets often deal with such subjects as blessings of the master, renunciation of the ego, resignation to the will of God, Self and Non-self and Walt Whitman's poetry is replete with mystical elements. In this article, an attempt has been made to identify Pangs of separation from God.*

Introduction: Mysticism and God appear to be an inseparable conception. The attitude of the genuine mystic is determined by the fundamental experience of the inner self which enters into immediate contact with God or the metaphysical reality. Rufes Jones asserts that mysticism is religion in its most acute, intense and loving stage.¹ Scholem G. Gersham also shares his view when he says that mysticism is Knowledge of God² through experience (cognition and experimental). This act of personal experience is of a highly contradictory and even paradoxical nature. The descriptions given by mystics of their experience of God whose presence they have experienced are full of paradoxes of every

kind. It is not the least baffling of these paradoxes -to take an instance which is common to Jewish and Christian mystic- that God is frequently described as the mystical Nothing. This fundamental experience is known as 'unio mystica' or mystical union with God. Numerous mystics, Jews as well as non-jews have represented the essence of their ecstatic experience the tremendous up rush and soaring of the soul to its highest plane, as a union with God. The earliest Jewish mystics speak of the ascent of the soul to the Celestial throne where it obtains an ecstatic view of the majesty of God and the secrets of His Realm. He who is granted this supreme experience loses the reality of his intellect; he finds it full of divine and inflowing splendor.³

JEWISH MYSTICISM

Jewish mysticism in its various forms represents an attempt to interpret the religious values of Judaism in terms of mystical values. It concentrates upon the idea of the living God who manifests himself in the act of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. Pushed to its extremes,

the mystical meditation on this idea gives birth to the conception of a sphere, a whole realm of divinity, which underlies the world of our sense-data and which is present and active in all that exists.

The attributes of the living God are conceived differently and undergo a peculiar transformation when compared with the meaning given to them by the philosophers of Judaism. Among the latter, Maimonides argues that the words, 'God is living' can only mean that He is not dead, that is to say that He is the opposite of all that is negative. He is the negation of negation. Every cognition of God is based on a form of relation between Him and His creation i.e. on a manifestation of God in something else and not on a relation between Him and Himself. It has been argued that there is a difference between God in Himself and God in his appearance

⁴. The mystic forestalls the process of history by anticipating in his own life the enjoyment of the last age.⁵ this eschatological nature of the mystical knowledge becomes of paramount importance in the writings of many Jewish mystics.

Eschatology - The part of theology concerned with death and judgement. The consensus of the Kabbalistic (Kabbala means literary tradition) regards the

mystical way to God as a reversal of the procession by which we have emanated from God. To know the stage of the creative process is also to know the stages of one's own return to the root of this existence. In this sense, the interpretation of the esoteric doctrine likely to be understood or enjoyed by only a few people with a special knowledge or interest of creation has always formed one of the main preoccupations of Kabbalism. It is here that Kabbalism comes nearest to the Neoplatonic thought, of which it has been said with truth that, "procession and reversion together constitute a single movement, the diastole-systole which is the life of the universe." ⁶

There is a very striking instance of the link between the conceptions of Jewish mysticism and those of the historical world. The very term Kabbalah is derived from the historical conception. Kabbalah means literary tradition, in itself an excellent example of the paradoxical nature of mysticism. The very doctrine which centers about the immediate personal contact with the Divine, that is to say, a highly personal and intimate form of knowledge is conceived as traditional wisdom. The fact, however, is that the idea of Jewish mysticism from the start combined the conception of a knowledge which by its very nature is difficult to

impart and, therefore secret, with that of a knowledge which is secret tradition of common spirits or adepts. Jewish mysticism therefore is a secret doctrine in a double sense, a characteristic which cannot be said to apply to all forms of mysticism. It is a secret doctrine because it treats the most deeply hidden and a fundamental matter of human life, but it is secret also because it is confined to small elite to the chosen who impart the knowledge to their disciples. The Kabbalist does not regard mystical knowledge as his private affair which has been revealed to him and to him only, in his personal experience. On the contrary, the purer and more nearly perfect it is, the nearer it is to the original stock of knowledge common to mankind. To use the expression of the Kabbalist, the Knowledge of things human and divine that Adam, the father of mankind, possessed is therefore also the property of the mystic. For this reason, the Kabbalah advances a claim and an hypothesis that its function was to hand down to its own disciples the secret of God's revelation to Adam.⁷ The very fact that such a claim was made appears to be highly characteristic of Jewish mysticism.

Reverence for the traditional has always been deeply rooted in Judaism, and even the mystics, who in fact broke away from

tradition, retained a reverent attitude towards it ; led them directly to their conception of the coincidence of true intuition and true tradition. About philosophy, most of the mystics seem to think: " You ought to know that these philosophers whose wisdom you are pressing end where we begin" ⁸ On the one hand, it means that the Kabbalists are largely concerned with the investigation of a sphere of religious reality which lies quite outside the orbit of medieval Jewish philosophy or, on the other, that they stand on the shoulders of the philosophers and it is easier for them to see a little farther than their rivals.

Allegorization was also a constant preoccupation of the Kabbalists. They paid great attention to symbol, a form of expression which radically transcends the sphere of allegory. In the mystical symbol, a reality which in itself has, for us, no form or shape, becomes transparent and, as it were, visible, through the medium of another reality which clothes its content with visible expressible meaning , as for example, the cross for the Christian. The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original content. It does not become, so to speak, an empty shell into which another content it poured. If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something

by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something, which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us.

For the Kabbalist too, every exiting thing is endlessly correlated with the whole of creation; for him, too, everything mirrors everything else. But beyond that, he discovers something else which is not covered by the allegorical network; a reflection of the true transcendence. The symbol signifies nothing and communicates nothing, but makes something transparent which is beyond all expression. While deeper insight into the structure of the allegory uncovers fresh layers of meaning, the symbol is intuitively understood all at once or not at all. The symbol in which the life and the Creation become one, is a beam of light which from the dark and abysmal depths of existence falls into our eye and penetrates our whole being. It is a momentary totality which is perceived intuitively in a mystical 'now', the dimension of time proper to the symbol.⁹

The world of the Kabbalist, nay the whole world, is full of such symbols and the world is a 'corpus symbolicum' for a

Kabbalist. Out of the reality of creation, without the latter's existence being denied or annihilated, the inexpressible mystery of the Godhead becomes visible. The infinite shines through the finite and makes it more and not less real.

The philosophers of Judaism consider the idea of evil in the world as something meaningless in itself. But to the Kabbalists, the existence of evil is one of the most pressing problems which keep them continually occupied with attempts to solve it. Instead of trying to evade it, they try to enter into its depths, Jewish folklore stands as a living proof of this contention. However, it cannot be denied that the Kabbalistic thought lost much of its magnificence where it was forced to descend from the pinnacles of theoretical speculation to the plane of ordinary thinking and acting. Jewish philosophy had to pay a high price for its escape from the pressing questions of real life. But Kabbalism too has had to pay for its success.

MYSTICAL TRADITION OF THE EASTERN CHURCH

Religion and mysticism have often been regarded as signifying two conflicting states of mind. Theology has been regarded as the 'statis religion', of the churches while mysticism has been

regarded as dynamic religion ' of the mystics; the former social and conservative in character, the latter personal and creative. On the other hand, one often hears expressed the view which would see in mysticism a realm reserved Imposed from without, as to a coercive authority. Thus the mystics are set up against the theologians, the contemplatives against the prelates, the saints against the churches.¹⁰

The eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology, between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the church. There is therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology. Mysticism in fact is the crown of all theology, as theology par excellence.

Gnosticism treats knowledge as something for its own sake but Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge sub serving an end which transcends all knowledge.¹¹

By his will alone, but he cannot save him without the cooperation of the human will. The church emerged triumphant from the iconoclastic controversy, affirming the possibility of the expression through a material medium of the divine realities- symbol and pledge of our sanctification.

for the few. an exception to the common rule, a privilege vouchsafed to a few souls who enjoy direct experience of the truth, others meanwhile have to rest content with a more or less blind submission to dogmas

This ultimate end is the union with God or deification. Thus, we are finally led to a conclusion which may seem paradoxical enough: that Christian theory should have an eminently practical significance; and that the more mystical it is, the more directly it aspires to the supreme end of union with God.

The Church struggled against the Gnostics in defense of the same idea of deification as the universal end; "God became man that men might become gods' It affirmed the dogma of the consubstantial Trinity: For it is the word 'The Logos', who opens to us the way to union with the Godhead; and if the incarnate world has not the same substance with the Father, if he be not truly God, our deification is impossible.

The main preoccupation, the issue at stake, is the question which successively arises in respect to the Holy Spirit , grace and the Church herself-is al-ways the possibility, the manner, or the means of our union with God.

It is said that it is spirituality which matters. The dogmatic difference is of no consequence. Yet, spirituality and dogma, mysticism and theology are inseparably linked in the life of the Church. As regards the Eastern Church, she makes no sharp distinction between theology and mysticism, between the realm of the common faith and that of personal experience. Thus, if we speak of mystical theology in the eastern tradition, we cannot do otherwise than consider it within the dogmatic setting of the Orthodox Church¹².

We have become different men. We have the same God but before Him we are different men, unable to agree as to the nature of relationship with Him. In fact, it is never possible to understand spirituality if one does not take into account the dogma in which it is rooted.

MYSTICISM IN AMERICAN POETRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EMERSON, THOREAU AND WALT WHITMAN

The mystical tradition of America has its origins in a sacred source which is transcendent to the limits of the phenomenal world. There are three basic premises common to the transcendent thought: [1] purification of all that man is, i.e. body, soul and spirit' [2] spiritual

expansion in which man realizes his totality, his relation to all that is and [3] identity or a final realization of unity a state of oneness with the ultimate principle. These three premises are common to almost all the streams of mystical thought. Emerson's mystical quest always cantered round the basic question: 'What is man?' and he always despite gnawing inner doubts, gave the Biblical and classical answer: 'Thou has made him little less than God and does crowns him with glory and honour (Psalm 8)'. Emerson took his Biblical conceit that man is made a little less than God with high seriousness and this was the truth he wanted to preach and for this purpose, he left the pulpit because obligation to engage in Church rites, he felt, obscured the truth and the way. Man was a failure precisely when the human record was put against the divine expectation, desire and plan. In the Bible, there is stress on man's failure as there is on the ideal vision and it is this tension between the ideal and fact that makes the Bible so compellingly true. It reveals man to himself as a being who is at one and the same time an ideal self and a phenomenal self. If man follows the 'worse path' it has a meaning too because it is the 'worse' which shows the presence of something 'better'. It puts Emerson in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and of

Sophocles and Socrates. However, there is one marked difference. More than on the tradition out of which Emerson speaks, his eye was on man as he could be or become rather than on man as he was or is. It was an eschatological stance: he kept his eye on the promise, on the blessing to come, on the hope. A significant aspect of Emerson's ideal view of man was his consuming interest in man's record, in becoming aware of how much of the idea has already been achieved. For, man is fulfillment as well as promise. For Emerson, there could be no complete catalogue of what man had wrought' even less, of what man might yet accomplish. For everything, he believed, teaches the infinitude of man, of everyman¹³.

Emerson believed in the growth of the mind. 'Speak what you think now in hard words', he asserts, 'and tomorrow, speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again though it contradict everything you said today'¹⁴. It follows that a "foolish" consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" and that "with consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do"¹⁵. For only "Soul is light: where it is, is day, where it was, is night"¹⁶. A man, thinks Emerson, must obey the first commandment: "I must be myself"¹⁷.

Henry David Thoreau too was a major figure of the 19th century transcendental movement which "celebrated the individual rather than the masses, emotion rather than the reason, nature than man"¹⁸. It gave preference to intuition over tuition and asserted that the reality of the spirit transcended the reality of matter. It insisted that reforms should begin with the individual, not the group or the organization.

Thoreau often complained, "My life is almost altogether outward, all shell and no tender kernel"¹⁹. Thoreau became an activist when the transcendentalist in him waned. He believed that man must follow his conscience regardless of cost; his life was too dear to be wasted in making a living, and that the world of woods and streams was good, while the world of streets and crowds was bad²⁰. His night in jail for civil disobedience and his two years in the Cabin at Walden Pond show that a man could be his own master, and that doing so could be richly rewarding.

Walt Whitman is the poet of America. The mystical streak in him is the most pronounced. His most important compositions are 'Song of Myself' and 'Leaves of Grass'. The greatest influence on Whitman was his own mystical experience which he underwent in the

early fifties of the last century and which inspired him to write 'Leaves of Grass'. There were some historical reasons as well which provided him the milieu and atmosphere to create such unconventional poetry which Marc Van Doren damns with ironic praise, "In an age which produces intelligible poems, the 'Song of Myself' for instance ranks high"²¹ It was an age of America's physical and spiritual expansion. It was the age of America's renaissance which saw the development of America's own literature which was not an imitation of the "courtly muses of Europe"²². Moreover, Whitman was influenced by the writings of a large number of writers who can be broadly placed under the Romantic Idealist tradition which found its expression in the American Transcendentalism, British Romanticism and German Idealism. However, Emerson is his greatest influence so much so that we can find parallels between most of the sections 'Song of Myself' and the paragraphs of many of Emerson's essays. Carlyle was the second great influence on Whitman and there are several similarities between the former's conceptions of the hero and the latter's idea of the poet.

Gay Wilson Allen remarks that the fundamental ideas found in Whitman's poetry are mysticism, pantheism, the Great

Chain of Being, the organic principle and the synthesis of all these ideas in his own term 'personalism'. An idea which informs most of his poetry is that expanding consciousness of the self results in the reconciliation of opposing forces like life and death, good and evil etc. Such a sentiment is based on the belief that there is unity among God, man and nature. The prevalence of a divine spirit implies that these are not opposing forces. The knowledge of this is available only to that person who has undergone the expanding consciousness of the self. Poets are such persons who can experience such expansion and they know that other persons too have the potential to be divine. It is their function to help their readers realize this. In 'Song of Myself', Whitman shows the dramatic representation of a mystical experience where the expanding consciousness of the self leads to the reconciliation of opposing forces. The poet depicts the process by which the self gets into harmony with the universe or becomes integrated with it. The enlightenment of the self now makes it possible for it to identify itself with life in such a manner that it seems to merge with it. Such an experience would seem very natural if we keep in mind that Whitman was a seer, a visionary, a sage, a prophet from whom it

is natural to expect poetry of affirmation and optimism.²³

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