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Poet of Consciousness

"Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth. And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own. And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own. And that all men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters. And that a kelson of the creation is love."

In this passage from Song of Myself, Walt Whitman, a 19th century American poet, shares his personal encounter with consciousness. Hindus would acknowledge this experience as Satchidananda (existence, consciousness, bliss).

In Maha Yogi Walt Whitman K. Nambiar elaborates a Hindu perception of this mystic adventure: "A revolutionary transformation came over Whitman. A hackwriter and a middling sort of poet transformed into a pet-prophet with a grand vision and voice of power. At 27 his poetry was banal, sentimental and mechanical. The change came presumably when he was 29, for we find strange thoughts and phrases, mystical and axiomatic, the very stuff of Leaves of Grass, beginning to appear in his note books of this period. We may surmise that it was during this period, on that 'transparent summer morning' when Whitman 'loafed on the grass,' that he has described in Song of Myself. The experience emancipated him from all that he had been before."

Later in the Song of Myself, Whitman states that "All truths wait in all things. They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it. They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon. The insignificant is as big to me as any." Whitman's mystic illumination, which seems indisputable, was spontaneous. Apparently, no one lead him to it. Even when it occurred, he did not seek to reconcile it with an established

spiritual tradition. Instead, he set it to verse, the content and style of which changed the course of American literary history, rippling effects still further around the world. The illumined Whitman accepted existence wholly and completely, cherishing the lessons he found hidden yet obvious everywhere. Life to him was perfect. This is what he tried to broadcast in his poetry.

"Pleasant and well-suited I walk. Whither I walk I cannot defines, but I know it is good. The whole universe indicates that it is good. I swear I think there is nothing but immortality. That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is for it! And all preparation is for it - and identity is for it - and life and materials are altogether for it!" Whitman's work eventually gained enormous popularity in the West, but it was applauded first by Eastern minds. Sri Aurobindo had great respect for Walt Whitman and extolled him in his essay, Future Poetry. Tagore admired him and even translated one of his poems. Swami Vivekananda paid tribute to Whitman as a "spiritual genius." George Bernard Shaw wrote, "Whitman is a classic. Curious that America should be the only country in which this is not as obvious as the sun in the heavens."

O.K. Nambiar again provides a Hindu perspective: "It is a curious fact that the Hindu mind has shown an instant capacity for responsive incandescence when brought into contact with Whitman's works. I remember one occasion when I read out passages from Leaves of Grass and translated them for the benefit of a Brahman pundit. The pundit's eyes lit up with a flash of recognition, and he exclaimed from time to time: 'He is a realized soul.' 'That is the cream of Vedanta' 'Those are signs of Bhava Samadhi.'"

Whitman and America

Walt Whitman was strongly influenced by the broadening democratic concepts that were brought to a zenith in 1829 with Andrew Jackson's inauguration as president. Whitman was a believer in "Jacksonian democracy" and "the splendor of the common man." He was especially fond of President Abraham Lincoln and for three years of his life lived only blocks away from him in Washington D.C. He writes in Personal Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln that "Abraham Lincoln seems to be the grandest figure yet, on the crowded canvas of America's Nineteenth Century." According to Henry B. Rankin in Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln also liked Whitman. Rankin contends Lincoln requested that a copy of Leaves of Grass be left on his office coffee table for all guests to read freely and that time

again Lincoln himself would leisurely read passages of the book aloud to all present even though at this time Leaves of Grass was not being well accepted by the public.

His Enduring Legacy

Whitman continues to hold a captive readership generation after generation, primarily because he offers the welcome conviction that man is essentially a spiritual being and that the world is essentially a spiritual place. He conveys this conviction with timeless and unearthly power. All of this makes his work hard to ignore. Even the recent movie, Dead Poet's Society, nominated for several 1990 Academy Awards, refers to Whitman throughout and is based on the very spirit of his outspoken and unabashed love affair with consciousness unveiled. Today, Walt Whitman is properly considered one America's greatest poets.

In Out the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, a masterful poem written a short time before the end of his life, Whitman confronts death. He is standing by the sea, listening to the waves. "Whereto answering, the sea, delaying not, hurrying not, whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak, lisp'd to me the low and delicious word, death. And again, death, death, death, death. Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart. But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet, creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over, death, death, death, death, death."

As for as the depth of his own experience is concerned, Whitman himself attests: "And I said to spirit, when we become the enfolders of those orbs, and the pleasure and knowledge of everything in them, shall we be filled and satisfied then? And my spirit said, 'No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.'"

The Whitman Chronicle

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was born on Long Island, New York. Having left school at the age of eleven, he was mostly a self-educated man. He worked as a typesetter, a journeyman printer, a school teacher, an editor, a stationer, a

journalist, an essayist - and finally a poet.

Whitman lived in New York City for 36 years. As a journalist, he had access to free theater tickets, and a wide sidewalk acquaintance in Brooklyn. He visited the theater often and especially loved opera. "But for opera," he once remarked, "I could never have written Leaves of Grass."

In 1855 he wrote Leaves of Grass, Which he revised and published a total of nine times throughout his lifetime. Although the radical form and content of this poetry eventually marked him as a revolutionary of American literature, he was, during his life, known more for his influence as a prophet of democracy and "an enthusiast of the common man." Because Whitman's style of writing was rich with frequently sensual metaphor, many critics considered him immoral. He was even discharged as a clerk in the U.S. Department of the Interior because of the alleged obscenity of Leaves of Grass. Yet the Transcendentalists - the Occident's most oriental poet/philosophers - loved him from the start. He exemplified their very American resistance to conformity in pursuit of individual mystical experience. They gave his work credence.

He became prominent among the bohemian element of New York before moving to Washington, D.C. (1862-73) during the Civil War. He visited both Union and Confederate soldiers in war hospitals and worked for a time in the office of the U.S. Attorney General.

In the late 1860's Whitman's work received overdue recognition as the early reactions of some American critics began to be overshadowed. In 1870 Whitman wrote Passage to India. This poem moved beyond America, beyond humanity, to death and "the hereafter." In January, 1873, Whitman had his first stroke which left him partially paralyzed. Shortly after this he moved to Camden where he spent the last years of his life.

Whitman was, in his own words, "Garrulous to the very last." Facing his final days with joy, he wrote Proudly the Flood Comes In, a wondrous contemplation of death. He died March 26, 1892.

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