

## Review Essay

# Circumference as the Center towards an Understanding of the Dynamic Self

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Dr. V.K. Chari, *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964, pp. 176.

*The day of days, the great day of the feast of life is that in which the inward eye opens to the unity in things. (Emerson)*

From Emerson's "Oversoul", "Compensations", "Illusions", "Plato" and "Brahma" to Whitman's "Song of Myself" through Thoreau's "Walden," Transcendentalism in America has been profoundly influenced by the Vedantic doctrine that the immutable self (*ātman*) is identifiable with the Universal Brahman. To Emerson, the fundamental unity entails the ecstasy of losing all being in 'one Being' (Plato), whereas Thoreau emphasizes contemplation, characteristic of an Indian yogi, as the key with which one realizes how the Divine absorbs the human (Walden). Whitman develops, after the Vedantic doctrine, the concept of 'self' towards discovering the circumference in the 'centre' and 'as the centre.' Prof. V.K. Chari's book "Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism" is a significant contribution to comparative criticism in which Whitman's poetry and philosophy have been discussed in the light of Vedantic doctrine of non-dualism (*advaita*). While tenaciously trying to make a mystical correlation of Whitman's poetic thought and belief with Vedantic philosophy, the author has tended to discover a unifying principle behind the poet's preoccupation with the problem of the 'self.' His objective is obvious from the preface:

I have attempted in this study to give a consistent account of Whitman's poetic thought and belief, proceeding from the central standpoint of the self in which I have sought to discover the key to Whitman's meanings. (p. xi)

The hypothesis the author has tended to establish is that mysticism constitutes the clue to Whitman's democratic idealism and that his idea of democracy can not be separated from his conception of self-hood, which in fact forms the core of Vedantic mysticism. While so doing, Prof. Chari has thoroughly surveyed Whitman criticism in chapter one ("Introduction: Our Approach to Whitman") right from Thoreau's significant remark that Whitman's poems are 'wonderfully like the Orientals' down to the recent Whitman scholarship of William Norman Guthrie, Edward Carpenter, Dorothy Mercer, Malcom Cowley, James E. Miller and Gay Wilson Allen. Prof. Allen's precise but thought-provoking foreword to the book under review, testifies to the author's original contribution to comparative Whitman-criticism:

Before Dr. Chari, the fault with all studies of Whitman's relation to India has been that they were undertaken by occidentals who did not know enough about Vedantic literature. But that deficiency has now been remedied by a very well informed and perceptive Indian scholar, the author of the present

volume. This study has taught me more than all previous writers on the subject. (p. viii)

The above observation points to the fact that occidentals were either inadequate with information or critical of Whitman's first hand knowledge about Vedanta and its influence on him. In his biography of Whitman, Prof. Allen himself suspects "whether Whitman had read any oriental literature." This is a delicate question which "the most diligent search of scholars has not yet determined." (Allen, 1955) On the other hand, Malcolm Cowley ("Introduction," 1959) locates some striking similarities between Indian Tantricism and Whitman's concept of religious democracy on the common ground that everything is full of consciousness which is an all-pervading manifestation of the cosmic energy (shakti) and that spiritual realization consists neither in rigorous asceticism nor in negation of the world but in acceptance of both body and soul. He also doubts whether Whitman read the *Bhagavad Gītā* or Indian philosophy. After the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, when Thoreau wanted to know whether he knew oriental philosophy, Whitman's answer was in the negative "No: tell me about them." Having said this, and while locating Hindu thought in "Song of Myself," Cowley hazards to guess that Whitman breathed Hindu philosophy either from the transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau or in a state of mystic realization called absorption (*bhāva-samādhi*). However, there are reasons to believe that before the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, *The Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*, and the lectures of Raja Rammohan Roy on the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta had vibrantly captured the American mind. Romain Rolland observes, in this connection, that the Indian origin behind Whitman's inspiration can be attributed partly to the poet's own subjective realization and partly to the predilections of his background and culture (*Prophets*, 1944). Therefore, Whitman might not have missed the opportunity to seize upon Indian thought from them. It is also possible that published four years before *Leaves of Grass* saw the light of the day (1855), the book *The Philosophies of India* (Zimmer, 1851) which accommodates some substantial discussion on 'Sankhya,' 'Brahmanism,' 'Buddhism' and 'Tantra' with the opening chapter under the title 'The Meeting of East and West' might not have been left unnoticed by the American bard of democracy.

Mysticism constitutes the essence of Whitman's poetry, and it is a way of embracing the 'other', of finding the world in the self and as the self. To Whitman, it is a dynamic concept that entails power to enter upon all and that incorporates all into the individual self thereby negating the opposition between 'me' and 'not-me.' This unified point of view achieved in *Leaves of Grass* lends consistency and coherence to Whitman's poetry and philosophy. Prof. Chari has rightly chosen the concept of 'self' as the powerful key to understand Whitman in the light of Vedantic mysticism. No doubt, Whitman was aware of the doctrines of the German transcendentalists like Kant, Schelling and Hegel. But these idealists expounded a theory of consciousness which is essentially dialectical. The western sensibility is as such dialectical or dualistic, and the bi-polar logic of being and becoming,

love and strife, harmony and discord, attraction and repulsion characterizes the occidental sensibility right from the time of Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato down to the times of Kant, Hegel and others. Kant distinguishes understanding from 'reason' in that the former depends on the material of 'senses' for its operation, whereas the latter points to the truth and universal 'power above sense'. The post-Kantian idealistic doctrine of dialecticism tends to unify the opposites by the process of meditation. In Hegel, contradictions are sought to be resolved by synthesizing them into unity. But, in actuality, the contradictions are avoided rather than resolved. The author therefore cogently argues that Whitman's poetry and philosophy are more akin to the Vedantic doctrine of mystical intuition than to the German doctrine of dialecticism. "The whole spirit and formation of Whitman's poetry," Prof. Chari observes, "is opposed to the dialectical principle." (p. 25)

Intuition is knowing by 'being' and it arises by an intimate fusion of the knower and the known, and Whitman's mysticism is grounded upon the principle of intuition—a method that does not synthesize the opposites but annuls them. The idea is admittedly Vedantic, because the Upanishad reads that the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman, and that one can know Brahman only by being Brahman. True knowledge, according to Vedanta and Whitman, is the non-dual knowledge of the real. It is intuitive perception of the fact that self is identical with the Reality. Intuition is knowledge by identity, and intuitive experience involves a form of mergence of the object and the subject, the knower and the known and the act of knowing thereby dissolving dualities. It is a vision of the reality in terms of totality, and the idea is forcefully pronounced in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (II. 4. 3.):

As a lump of salt in water becomes dissolved in water and there would not be any of it to seize forth as it were, but wherever one may take, it is salty indeed, So, verily, this great being, infinite, limitless, consists of nothing but knowledge. (in Chari, P. 27)

The Upanishad emphasizes the self as the dearest of all things on the ground that it is pure bliss, the origin of happiness. If some one worships Brahman thinking that Brahman is different from his "self", he is not a possessor of true knowledge. The self, according to *Brihadaranyaka* (I. 4.8; IV. 5.6) is dearer to us than a son, dearer than wealth and anything else. One who worships the self alone as dear is a true mystic whose *sādhana* will never perish. There is a direct echo of the Upanishadic idea of self in Whitman:

From the eye sight proceeds another eyesight and from the hearing proceeds another hearing and from the voice, proceeds another voice, eternally curious of the harmony of things with man. (Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855)

Whitman also realized that there is a miraculous power above intellect which gives a direct insight into the harmony underlying the world of multiplicities, and that this power is a perception by the soul. The idea is Vedantic, as the *Gītā* speaks of a divinely illumined eye (*divyacakṣu*) and reminds us of the Upanishadic proclamation that seers see only with the eye of enlightenment (*jñānacakṣu*). Whitman is a Vedantic-mystic in his profound

conviction that truth springs forth out of a region far deeper than either the senses or the intellect. ("Song of Myself," 5; "Of the Terrible doubt of "Appearance," in Calamus). And this corresponds to *Kena Upanishad's* emphasis on the ineffable efficacy of the Spirit which is distinct from the known and above the unknown, and which, neither the eye nor the speech nor even mind can comprehend. Whitman realizes the oneness of the universe in Vedantic terms and recognizes the absolute being as at once the support and the essence of the world.

What is "over-soul" to Emerson is no other than one's own self to Whitman. Therefore, he celebrates the 'self' ("I Celebrate Myself") not in narrow sense of the term, but as 'All': "I contain multitudes." Like Emerson's 'over-soul,' he conceived the concept of 'Kosmic spirit', 'ensemble' and 'Enmasse'—all of them pointing to a permanent and immutable force that pulsates and rolls through all things:

"...all spirits throbbing forever, the eternal beats, eternal systol and diastole of life in all thing ("Democratic Vistas")

Duality is also denied in Whitman's poetics in which one marks enactment of the intuitive activity. Whitman envisages the poet as a joiner, a uniter and a 'full grown fellow' who tightly holds the hands of nature and soul, which he will never release "until he reconciles the two" and blends them 'wholly and joyfully' ("Good Bye My Fancy"). Once again it is the self that acts as a fusing tie between art and life, between subject and object. This state of identity is not possible on the basis of dialectics but through intuitive perception and, in poetry, through paradoxical presentation. Prof Chari observes: The paradoxical form is the only way in which the intuition of unitary self can be affirmed (p.35). The emphasis on paradox in Whitman's poetry not only reminds us of Cleanth Brooks' powerful remark that the language of poetry is essentially one of paradox, but also points to the paradoxical use of language in (*Kena Upanishad*, 2.3):

To whomsoever it is not known, to him it is known, ;to whomsoever it is known, to him it is not known , unknown to those who know and known to those who do not know.

In much the same way, Whitman celebrates paradoxically his self which is the self of all and this shift from 'self' to 'other' is made by an intuitive leap which is also evident in the following: "A shroud I see and I am a shroud / I wrap a body and lie in the coffin" ("The Sleepers", 2). In "Song of Myself (32)," 'I' contains 'multitudes' and 'I' becomes the 'clock' myself ,whereas elsewhere the poet's intuitive mind tends to annihilate all illusory mental barriers that seem to separate the self from the world of objects ("There was a Child Wentforth"). At the same time, emphasis is also laid on the poet's cosmic expansion through trials and turmoils, after surmounting which the poet gets a glimpse of the 'kernel 'behind the husk-the first principle. It is at this state that the poet becomes a seer, a knower (*tathagata*), a time binder, complete in himself, a great lover and benefactor of mankind, a true son of God, born to bind Time—past, present and future. The Greatest poet, according to Whitman, is a poet of the cosmos who hardly knows triviality and who embraces humanity in totality. Neither suffering and darkness, nor fear and death can jar

him. He becomes a "Cosmic Man": "The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet". (Preface to *Leaves*). It is in this expansive stage that the poetry and the poem are literally identified. Whitman's aesthetics, apart from his poetry and spiritual philosophy, is also conditioned by the Vedantic concept of unity: "I will not make poems with reference to parts." ("Starting from Paumanok." 12). Even in his preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), the poet postulates his Vedantic theory of art that art, like life and trees, experiences a natural growth of freedom unhampered by artificial restriction or conventions.

Dynamism is the essence of Whitman's poetic vision and the chapter entitled "Emergent Ego" which comes to a close with the realization of the self leads the poet to an ineffable sense of fruition, fullness and relish- a stage in which dissatisfaction is thrown out in favour of ecstasy (*ānandam*). "I am satisfied" ("Song of Myself", 3) The poet now feels that he is limitless and the highest stage of self-realization begets self-fulfillment: "I exist as I am; that is enough, I sit content" (Song of Myself 20) The poet-mystic takes delight in his self (*ātma rati*), becomes content, experiences union with self and becomes autonomous (*svārt*): "o soul thou pleasest me, I thee" (*Passage to India*, 8). This realization of the real glory of the self logically leads to the expansion of the 'Dynamic Self' (ch.IV) where self knowledge points to the knowledge of the identity of the individual self and opens a career of infinite creative expansion through a centrifugal movement. It is a state of internal dynamism and limitless energy from within that not only finds an outlet in creative activity, but also marks the return of the spirit into the world of dynamic activity. *Leaves of Grass* is the outcome of this creative phase—grown out of an irresistible impulse and cosmic urge from within. Here the creator and the creation, the poet and his poetry become identical:

Comerado, this is no book/ who touches this touches a man ('so long' in  
"Song of Parting")

The dramatization of the activity of the dynamic self is further extended in ("The Paradox of Identity" (Ch-V) where the self experiences a centrifugal and centripetal movement through the power of intuition – now going out to negotiate with the cosmic manifold and the next moment with drawing into itself, like the snail hiding itself in the shell. This drama is shown in "I sing the Body Electric" ("Children of Adam") and "Song of Myself" (19) through the idea of sexual union. Chapter –Six ("The Self and Reality") once again recalls the dialectical method of the German idealists who failed to dissolve dualities. By saying that the whole cosmic existence is contained within the self, Whitman comes closer to the metaphysical position of Vedanta. He is a poet for whom the earth is real ('I accept Reality and dare not question it,' Song of Myself, 23). But he denies ultimacy to the world and recognizes the vast spiritual realm which is the 'real real'. Spirituality is the culmination of the world process. In this connection Prof. Chari rightly observes; "Whitman's idealism, as also the Vedantist's is more correctly characterized as mystical or transcendental realism." (p.143) To be precise, Whitman's cosmic consciousness is the consciousness of the self that is the cosmos, the one that is all, the *ātman*, the internal

principle which is also the mighty universal Brahman, complete from all sides and in all aspects. This central thesis that self is the reality and that to be one's self is to establish unity with the all has been established by Prof. Chari with full evidences, assertiveness and confidence that has silenced all suspicion about Whitman's indebtedness to Vedantic thought.

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