CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Whitman emerged on the international literary scene with a highly developed sensitiveness to modern malady—always a background of indecision and soulless mercantile surroundings. It was a period of decadence and of the promises unfulfilled. He diagnoses the symptoms of a diseased individual as well as of disintegrated civilization in an age of psychic ailment and spiritual distress and portrays a land of unpoetical cultural values and of mental restlessness and emotional frustration. The tormenting sense of emptiness, religious idiocy, rootlessness, isolation, and the conflict between conscious and unconscious are the results of man's alienation from man, from society, from nature and from religion. He finds himself like a man inadequate to the conditions that life including nature, time and fate impose on him. For a while, the whole world seems to be tottering towards chaos. It creates in him anguish and emotional tension leading to multi-dimensional estrangement. The baffling complexities of life create in him a sense of alienation from the ineradicable absurdity of existence. The image of man that emerges from his poetry is one that has undergone a terrible diminishment. Thus, through a startling conjunction of ideas and images, he portrays a general human
predicament—involved, obscure or painful states of mind and desolation of values.

Whitman feels "The long pulsation, abd and flow of endless motion/ The tones of unseen mystery,"¹ the vague and vast suggestions of the briny world. The "sweat creaking of the cordage,"² and the "melancholy rhythm"³ create in him a sense of weariness. The "New World"⁴ is a "puzzle"⁵ to him. He finds "throes and convulsions"⁶ reflected in "countless dissatisfied faces."⁷ Man "given up to literature, science, art, amours"⁸ is unaware of the "ostensible realities".⁹ He feels that it is "a painful thing to love a man or woman to excess".¹⁰ To him the "atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless".¹¹ The "ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exultations/ Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events"¹² pose a threat to him. The "vacuums"¹³ and the "swallow of filth"¹⁴ of life create in him emotional

2. Ibid., p.5
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p.14
7. Ibid., p.16
8. Ibid., p.17
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p.25
12. Ibid., p.27
13. Ibid., p.39
14. Ibid.
tension. He listens to the "dumb voices" \(^1\) of "the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves" \(^2\) with concern. Likewise the voices of "the diseased and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs" \(^3\) make him sad and gloomy. He says:

> Agonies are one of my changes of garments, I do not ask the wounded person now he feels, I myself become the wounded person, My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe. \(^4\)

Whitman comes across:

> Down-hearted doubters dull and excluded, Frivolous, sullen, moping, angry, affected, disheartened, atheistical. \(^5\)

Whitman feels the "hungry gnaw" \(^6\) eating him "night and day". The "bashful pains" \(^8\) torment him. That's why he feels that the "way is suspicious" \(^9\) and the result "uncertain"; \(^10\) perhaps "destructive". \(^11\) He, therefore, finds himself "solitary". \(^12\) He is struck with the "terrible doubt of appearances". \(^13\)

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 55
4. Ibid., p. 65
5. Ibid., p. 76
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 94
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 96
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 96
13. Ibid.; p. 97
A complex man and artist, Whitman exhibits many seeming contradictions. He voices a personal religion at the same time as he hails science and materialism. He celebrates peace but at the same time regards his book as an instrument of humanity's struggles. Like the transcendentalists, and in particular Emerson, he disowns a foolish consistency. In his leading poem Song of Myself, he characterises himself as, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshly, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding."¹ He continues: "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from."² From this time on throughout his life he attempts to dress the part and act the role of the shaggy, untamed poetic spokesman of American Society. The poetic "I" of Leaves of Grass annihilates time and space, binding past and present and intuiting the future, illustrating Whitman's belief that poetry is a form of knowledge, the supreme wisdom of mankind.

The highest expressions of his individualism and of his desire that all men should share that heroic self-hood are deep and inspiring:

None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to me.³

But the self that men are asked to assume is indeed heroic, for:

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 43
2. Ibid., p.44
3. Ibid., p.
My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,
He going with me must go well-arm'd,
He going with me goes often with spare diet, poverty, angry enemies, desertions.

And this tonic note occurs again and again and finds another perfect expression many years later in *Autumn Rivulets*:

For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over,
And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind him,
And stakes his life to be lost at any moment.

Whitman has failed to make the distinction between freedom from and freedom for. To liberate oneself from a painful yoke is of great importance, if the light of a new ideal is already visible. Otherwise the end is apt to be mere chaos. All thinking is choosing among thoughts, all action is a selecting of a certain action among all possible ones. Life when sane in the higher sense is always guided. But Whitman proposes no new principles of guidance. And that is still another reason why he has failed to establish a rapport with humanity in general. He writes:

Yet O my soul supreme!
Knowest thou the joy of pensive thoughts?

America has had to pay a heavy price for her most highly endowed poet being a man of hopelessly eccentric personality.

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Not has this common man's voice been able to reach the common people whom he loved. Nor do his utterances about freedom evoke the same response which in the early years of this century they evoked.

In Whitman's *Song of Myself* is found a radically different orientation of the poet in respect to himself, to the physical setting, and to the traditional artfulness which he employs:

One's self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word *En-Masse.* 1

"One's self I sing" 2 and "celebrate myself" 3 says Whitman. We cannot imagine Arnold or Tennyson using the word "'one" 4 to refer to themselves either in *Dover Beach* or in *In Memorium* or anywhere else. This is how Whitman opens his poem:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. 5

The colloquialness, the ease of speech, is one thing. The poet's relation to traditional artfulness is obviously different from Tennyson's or Arnold's, but his attitude to himself is also somewhat different.

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1. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.3  
2. Ibid., p.3  
3. Ibid., p.24  
4. Ibid., p.3  
5. Ibid., p.24
In spite of the driving egotism, the self is somehow transmuted from the beginning, as it is in the first world of the opening inscription, 'One's-self I sing'. Whitman is concerned to build up in his own special way a picture of the relationship to his self, first to other selves, secondly to the external world of nature and thirdly to other moments in time than the moment which he is experiencing now. The relationship of the poet to external nature is not one simply of a poet who gets from nature certain scenic assistance, as though nature is the great backdrop for human emotion. Whitman is different:

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life
or the ward and city I live in or the nation;¹

This is a most complex situation. The poet is observing other people: he is surrounded by other people. He is concerned with daily things of life — 'My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues.'² At the same time that he is aware of them, he is aware of his relationship with them. He is cultivating deliberately a pose of awareness in the light of which his response to what he sees can be more than merely elegiac, or merely traditional, merely the report of something, merely the

¹ Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 27.
² Ibid.
register or individual emotion about something.

The mosaic of ideas in T.S. Eliot, the stream of consciousness in the modern novel, and all those extraordinarily subtle devices through which the modern novelist and poet have tried to explore ways in which an individual sensibility can be modulated into an inclusive consciousness, are in the tradition of Whitman. How to escape the prison of the self and cultivate simultaneously self-consciousness and sympathy, using the sense of self-identity as a means of projecting oneself into the identity of others— that is Whitman's most valuable legacy to modern literature.

The crisis of his own middle age continues to be more real for him as a poet than the great national crisis of the Civil War, and at the centre of that personal crisis is a crushing sense of loneliness, of being unloved. In the years between 1855 and 1860, he apparently came to realize more and more clearly that not only would he never get married, but that there would never be for him any stable, continuing relationship either with male or female. This terrible truth his heart had guessed even as a child; for him there would be no love, not intimately blended with death.

His hero in his poetry is himself. He is, in this sense, the first truly modern poet with epic ambitions, the first author to portray himself as the mythic representative
of his people and his time. His Odysseus is Walt Whitman; his
descent into the underworld, the plunge into the darkness of
his own mind. The irony of this, the absurdity of treating
heroically such anti-heroic matter, does not escape him. It
is not out of simple vanity, nor without self-mockery, that
Whitman attempts in *Leaves of Grass* his odd autobiographical
epic, his mythicized Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged
Hero.

Whitman has little sense of relative values. But he has
at his best the poetic vision which illuminates the sordid and
common-place, and his robust optimism does not blind him to the
uglier aspect of modern society. In his prose work, *Democratic
Vistas* (1871), influenced by Carlyle, he warns America against
a soulless materialism.

Whitman's poetry, which is chaotic and rhapsodical,
appeals by the breadth and serenity of its outlook, and an
emotional tenderness which is usually manly and wholesome.
The extreme lack of reticence in certain poems creates a
violent prejudice, and the poet of democracy has never been
popular, though he has fervent admirers and his indirect
influence is for long considerable.

Although Whitman regards himself as the poet of his own
age and his native America, there are poems which are so
representative of human nature in all ages that they approach
universal significance. Among the best of these is the Passage to India, in which the ancient search of the explorer becomes a symbol both of the human soul's exploration in search of God, and of the vast unfolding of cosmic purpose. In loftiness of thought, in majesty of utterance, the Passage to India is among the noblest of American poems. Line after line is Miltonic in its sublimity:

We too take ship, O soul! 
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas! 
Fearless, for unknown shores, on waves of ecstasy to sail 
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, 
I thee to me, O soul,) 
Carolling free, singing our song of God.... 1

In When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd, he suggests his own and the nation's sorrow, combines the memory of Lincoln with the brood and ample beauties of the American continent, and celebrates death as an escape from suffering to rest:

And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veiled Death 
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee. 2

The course of his development is marked by two major crises, one of which belongs to the years 1847-55, and the other to the period of the Civil War. In the first through the elevation of self, he attains freedom for the body and the mind: the second,

2. Ibid., p.265.
through the abnegation of self he attains freedom for the heart
and the soul. The direction of his evolution is always from
the real to the ideal and from the material to the spiritual,
and it is his conviction that such is also the direction of
evolution in nature.

There is something transcendent about Whitman— the
splendid exultation of his manhood, the serene content of his
old age. And Whitman speaks to the world in a new way. He
raised a new voice at a time when the American poets of culture
were singing old songs and dancing to the music of foreign
pipers. Though he is bluntly direct in particular statements,
yet his poems are not so when taken as a whole. He is the
musician who, out of chords and discords, builds up his symphony
of human experience. In To You he says:

whenever you are, I fear you are walking the walks of dreams,
I fear these supposed realities are to melt from under
your feet and hands,
even now your features, joys, speech, house, trade, manners,
troubles, follies, costume, crimes, dissipate away from you
Your true soul and body appear before me,
They stand forth out of affairs, out of commerce, shops, work,
 farms, clothes, the house, buying, selling, eating, drinking,
suffering, dying.

whenever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you
be my poem,
I whisper with my lips close to your ear,
I have loved many women and men, but I love none better
than you. 1

Despite his disgust with the prevailing conditions in society he places great confidence in the serenity of human soul. He continues:

O I have been dilatory and dumb,
I should have made my way straight to you long ago,
I should have blab'd nothing but you, I should have chanted nothing but you.

I will leave all and come and make the hymns of you,
None has understood you, but I understand you,
None has done justice to you, you have not done justice to yourself.
None but has found you imperfect, I only find no imperfection in you,
None but would subordinate you, I only am he who will never consent to subordinate you,
I only am he who places over you no master, owner, better, God, beyond what waits intrinsically in yourself.

There is in all his work a subtle unity and interdependence. At his best, he can express his central doctrine in striking fashion:

Whoever you are! claim your own at any hazard!
These shores of the East and West are tame compared to you,
These immense meadows, these interminable rivers, you are immense and interminable as they,
These furies, elements, storms, motions of Nature, throes of apparent dissolution, you are he or she who is master or mistress over them,
Master or mistress in your own right over Nature, elements, pain, passion, dissolution,
The hopples fall from your ankles, you find an unfailing sufficiency,
Old or young, male or female, rude, low, rejected by the rest, whatever you are promulgates itself,
Through birth, life, death, burial, the means are provided, nothing is scanted,
Through angers, losses, ambitions, ignorance, ennui, what you are picks its way.

2. Ibid., p.192.
Despite his undoubted passion for America, Whitman was not essentially an American. His position in society was of the most shadowy; he wrote a section of his poems to celebrate the physical act of fatherhood, but not two pages about the obligations involved; he dreamed of the future of the race through the rising generations, and deserted his own children. To him the solid world of commerce about him was but a part of these shows. Political ties did not long hold him, in a day of intense party loyalty. He could not bring himself to enlist in the army, when the call was irresistible to others. Despite his frequent acts of love and mercy, one of which was sufficient to transform his later life, he was to the last unwilling to assume any abiding responsibility. His was the life of the nomad. He was a genial vagabond from his youth up; a venerable-looking street Arab in later life; a Haroun-al-Raschid in blue flannels, questing Manhattan by night to observe the doings of men. In his writings is nothing of humor, little of what is commonly called sentiment. The glories of the Old World's art he sweeps contemptuously aside as the small theatre of the antique and the aimless sleep-walking of the middle ages which has served its day long since, and has been:

Blazoned with Shakespeare's purple page, 1
And dirged by Tennyson's sweet sad rhyme.

He calls Americans to a new vision:

Long enough have you dreamed contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and
of every moment of your life.

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to
me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.1

As he differs from former poets in his view of life, so
he rejects their works as being unfit models for Americans:

America isolated I sing:
I say that works made here in the spirit of other
lands are so much poison in these States.2

His faith in his own soul had been confirmed by reading
Emerson, and it remained the polestar of his mystical speculations.
His belief in the peculiar powers of uneducated persons, perhaps
a legacy from Rousseau, but likely enough the result of association
with half-illiterate people from childhood, is expressed force-
fully. He believes that there is that indescribable freshness
and unconsciousness about an illiterate person that humbles and
mocks the noblest expressive genius.

But more than upon the illiterate, as well as the book-
worth. He declares that society depends upon the "divine

2. Ibid., p. 79.
average," 1 Just what he means by this is not clear, nor amid his rhapsodies does he stop to explain, unless it be to dilate on the freedom of his ideal men and women, and their physical soundness. He pictures himself as the typical democrat in these words:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshly, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest. 2

He continues:

whoever degrades another degrades me. 3

In the later years of his own life, when he had been through the period of service in the hospitals and had become an invalid and an old man before his time, he insisted less and less upon physical attributes and increasingly more upon the spiritual qualities of soul. In An Old Man's Thought of School he says:

And these I see, these sparkling eyes,
These stores of mystic meaning, these young lives,
Building, equipping like a fleet of ships, immortal ships,
Soon to sail, out over the measureless seas,
On the souls voyage. 4

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2. Ibid., p. 43.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 312.
Again in *Wandering At Dawn* he yearns for a union with the divine grace:

> Wandering at morn,
> Emerging from the night from gloomy thoughts, thee in my thoughts,
> Yearning for thee harmonious Union! thee, singing bird divine!¹

In *Proud Music Of the Storm*, he seems to have "found the clue",² he "sought so long"³ in his life:

> Let us go forth refresh'd amid the day,
> Cheerfully tallying life, walking the world, the real
> Nourish'd henceforth by our celestial dream.⁴

In *Beautiful Women*, he insists upon the qualities of fortitude and devotion:

> Women sit or move to and fro, some old, some young,
> The young are beautiful — but the old are more beautiful
> than the young.⁵

Furthermore, it is certain that Whitman was not unusually strong. His large muscles were flabby, and his descriptions of action do not ring true; his is the turgid applause from the bleachers, and not the crisp conversation of the field. He glorifies the

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2. Ibid., p.320.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.224.
body like a visionary poet, and not at all like an athlete. At bottom, it is not gigantic strength that Whitman is speaking of, but health and independent manhood and the enjoyment of life. He sings not arma virumque, but the contented man whom neither sickness nor poverty can deprive of happiness or of his faith in himself and in the universal order of things. Despite the fact that he exalts the body, he does not slight the importance of the soul, but rather seeks a more perfect adjustment of the two:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body, And I have said that the body is not more than the soul, And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is, And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral dress in his shroud. And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth, And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod confounds the learning of all times, And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero, And—there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe, And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.¹

Here we have the central expression of his democracy, his unbounded faith in the possibilities of each individual. It is by the perfecting of individuals that reforms are to come about, for society is made up of units:

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the muse.  

This is similar to Emerson's idea that the individual alone is significant, and that social problems are not to be settled by agitation but by keeping one's self right. However, these individuals are not to be bound together and directed, as Emerson thought, by a patient Daemon, a Destiny, but by the love of comrades. An entire section of Whitman's Calamus, is devoted to proclaiming his ideal friendship:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all
the rivers of America, and along the shores
of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms
about each other's necks,
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you
ma femme!
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.  

Whitman does not shrink from including in his democracy the outcasts of society. Recognizing the divinity that is dormant in them, he exclaims:

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.3.
2. Ibid., pp.95-96.
Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters of refuse to glisten for you
and the leaves to rustle for you, do my
words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.\textsuperscript{1}

In a similar vein he writes to a President:

You have not learn'd of Nature - of the policies of
Nature you have not learn'd the great amplitude, rectitude, impartiality,
You have not seen that only such as they are fit
for these States,
And that what is less than they must sooner or
later lift off from these States.\textsuperscript{2}

He takes delight in observing the brutes, with their utter
freedom from restrictions of conscience. Such a life seems to
him saner, more natural, and in the end more religious than the
eccstatic visions of Swedenborg or the tearful prayers of
Augustine:

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.\textsuperscript{3}

There can be no question that he experienced mystic
revelation, at some time between 1850 and 1855, by which his
whole future life was directed, and that this experience was
sustained and supplemented by others. To him all things were
well; the cosmos was self-sufficient; one need not worry about

\textsuperscript{1} Whitman, Walt, \textit{Leaves of Grass}, p.78.
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.}, p.222.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ibid.}, p.49.
God; all doubts were eased by the mystic revelation of universal love and the fraternity of men.

To those who are able to follow him in his mysticism, as Bucke, Symonds, Edward Carpenter, Traubel, and the rest, he is a prophet, the oracle of democracy or of benevolent pantheism comparable only with the greatest names of sacred history. To the half-mystics, as Emerson and Tennyson, he remains somewhat of a problem. To the European who looks to America for the declaration of a new faith, as Swinburne, or the Socialist or Feminist who reads literature with a partisan eye, he offers a comfortable doctrine. To the lover of poetry he is, at best, a real poet, a maker of subtle rhythm and glowing language, a singer of eternal verities and a new and vital force in literature. To the simple souls who knew him and loved him only as a friend and brother his poetry is unknown, and his personality has become crystallized into a fixed tradition. To the idle public, the people who came occasionally to see him this extraordinary man offers some degree of interest. But his poetry is bound together by one unchanging conviction, the desirability of intense, unified and imaginative consciousness. Whitman considers it the first duty of the poet to invade the province of the intellect as well as of the emotions. Neither the intellect nor the emotions can be satisfied to remain in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts; they demand the more solid fare of affirmations.
Thus a sense of protest which rings through Whitman's work is a proof that man is put to utter disgrace, humiliation and waste. It is an inevitable consequence of the mental, moral and social condition of mechanised America of 19th century. Everlasting protest shows his strong sense of alienation from a society which, he thinks, is rotten at the core.

In the following chapter attention is focused on the theme of social alienation in the poetry of Walt Whitman.