CHAPTER V

The Summing Up

"The sum of all known reverence I add up in you." (179)
--W.H.

The present study in which Whitman's deep concern for the national crisis of the Civil War has been seen as causative to the production of his war-poems called "Drum-Taps" (Chapter I), and in which the American bard's long-foreground has been traced as appropriate for the production of war-poetry (Chapter II), and in which all the poems of "Drum-Taps" have been critically analysed (Chapter III), and it has been found that there is a systematic evolutionary structure in them as a single unit which is corresponding to seven stages of the poet's experiences with war (Chapter IV), proves that Whitman had in him all the potentialities of a war-poet. The facts of the poet's life also reveal that the poet was destined to 'fight' with circumstances at all stages and levels of his life. As a child, belonging to a very large family of his poor and struggling mason-father, Walt was
destined to fight the family poverty by taking up odd jobs here and there; as a young man he had to fight against the existing system to carve a career for him; in order to become a poet of Emerson's dreams he had to fight with his own self, body and soul, to establish himself as a new poet of the new world; and his last words: "shift wary" uttered by him at the time of his death also show that even while breathing his last Whitman was at war with his own soul. This clinches that Whitman's spirit was cut and cut a wary spirit and so he was temperamentally suited to write the poetry of struggle and strife.

Whitman wrote only one book—Leaves of Grass. But he took a life time to write it and revise it, in accordance with the ascending and descending curve of his own experiences, which undoubtedly tallied with the curve of his nation's. In peace time, he sang of peace and sounded his "barbaric Yawp" over the roofs of the world, singing of his own self, which was the "self" of all, uttering in all positive and optimistic overtones the "word Democratic, the word en masse"(3). And in war-time his optimistic tone got ruffled by the clams of cannon and muskets of the war field. In the face of the reality of war he suspended all his earlier idealism and joined the teeming crowds
of his nation led by the drum-taps of war. Though Whitman's war-poems are a natural outgrowth of his actual immediate experience with the Civil War, his need for including a cluster of war-poems in Leaves of Grass arose from his desire to grant epic stature to his book. But a true American bard of the New World, Whitman did not like to merely imitate the "poems of the antique--rich fund of epics, plays, ballads" but the poems of "realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality". Whitman was so true to his conviction for writing the poems of reality and science that Thoreau praised Leaves of Grass as "the very brave and American." Rossetti found in it the "fire of Americanism", while O'Connor hailed it as a "modern epic of America". O'Connor asserted: "to understand Greece study the Iliad and Odyssey, study Leaves of Grass to understand America."

Leaves of Grass is an epic of America in that it is a long narrative expression in various parts on a subject of vast scale; also in it Whitman follows almost all conventions of an epic. But it is certainly not a traditional epic in which the hero is supposed to be "quasi-divine figure" or a demi-god "on whose
actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the entire human race." or the contrary, its hero is an average American, the "Human Being, towards whose heroic and spiritual evolution poems and every thing directly or indirectly tend, Old World or New." 

In the first section of Leaves of Grass called "Inscriptions" Whitman launches his epic with an introduction of the hero who is the poet himself, one who after a mystical experience has realised himself as one with every other creature and whose expression 'I' is the expression of any individual, not only of America but of the whole universe. The very opening assertion: "I sing" offers a typical introduction to the epic theme--"One's self I sing," which is further extended to "of physiology from top to toe I sing," and "The Female equally with Male I sing," and "The Modern Man I Sing." In all these assertions he presents the "Form complete" of his hero which he feels "alone is worthy of the Muse," another essentiality of an epic.

The epic poet then invokes the muse, in the second poem "As I pondered in Silence":

A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age and power,
The genius of poets of old lands(p.3)
The phantom that arises before him is the Muse, "the
genius of poets of old lands," who shakes this poet's
complacent spirits and indicates to him the importance
of the epic theme of war. The Muse asks the poet:

... what singest thou? it said,
Know'st thou not there is but one theme
for ever-enduring bards?
And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers (p. 2).

We notice that the muse of the old world epics desires
the modern poet to sing the theme of "Wars", with 'W'
capital. But the poet's conception of war is different
from that of the old world phantom. He uses 'W' small
for war, because his war is not of a mighty stability,
like the wars of kings and feudal lords, but his war
is based on democratic principles; it is a war of
"varying fortunes":

Be it, so, then I answer'd
I too haughty shade also sing war... .
... with varying fortune, with flight, advance
and retreat, victory deferred and wavering,
... chanting the chant of battles,
I above all promote brave soldiers (p. 3-4)

And in all other section of Leaves of Grass, preceding "Drum
Taps," --"Children of Adam," "Calamus," "Birds of Passage,"
"Sea-Drift," "By the Road Side"--Whitman solely
concentrates on the promotion of brave soldiers the
services of which he actually utilizes in the war-field
of "Drum-Taps."
In the first eight poems (1-8) of the "Drum Taps" cluster, the epic poet sings a prelude to the war. He hails war with great enthusiasm. He sings about the beautiful city of Manhattan which is ready to march forth to the call of the epic poet. Whitman sees this war as a 'cause' of great importance, because he thinks it will unite all states of America to face the crisis and danger that looks in the face of his motherland. Earlier in "Calamus" poems he sang of sweet love of comrades on the principle of adhesive-ness, but in this section he sings of "manly life in the camp." This certainly indicates his transformation from the earlier reality of peace into the present ideal of war.

In the next five poems (9-13) the poet under the impetus of the ideal of war as indicated by the first eight poems extends an invitation to all grades of workers of America to leave all their respective trade activities and to physically participate in the war to save the Union from the sinister designs of the enemy. He paints beautiful pictures of the army regiments and tells the workers old stories of war and bravery in order to allure them to join the
army. He eternalizes and universalizes the theme of war by connecting the century old war time experience of the centenarian with the experience of the young recruits of the contemporary America. He blends past with present and indicates towards a fruitful future to emerge from this war. With this the war theme stands elevated to epical heights.

But we find that in the next seven poems (14-20) the high theme of war gets shot down to the earth of reality amid the polluted environment of the warfield. The war does not have the desired effect on the mind and psyche of the poet; he finds himself gripped by the sad experiences of war. In these poems the poet remains under the sway of the throes of war. This group of poems presents before us tragic and pathetic pictures of the mourning mothers and kins of the deceased, who have lost their dear ones in the battle. Never before had Whitman expressed with such simplicity and power his feeling, his perturbation, and shock.

After seeing so much of death and suffering the poet has learnt a lot. He now sets himself up as a one man red-cross in the next six poems (21-26), to care for the wounded and the sick. He becomes a
'wound dresser' dressing the wounds of both the body and the soul of the ailing soldiers as also of the wounded nation. He nurses and soothes the suffering soldiers and teaches them and the people of the nation new lessons of love and hope; he talks of the "manly-affection" which he feels will bind America in a strong bond of unity.

Now that the war is over and the poet has already learnt a sad lesson from it, a lesson contrary to his expectations, he must bear with the present reality. He is left with no other alternative than to forget the wounds and cries of the soldier comrades and to keep his mind engaged with the theme of victory and with the panaroma of the retreating soldiers. Therefore, the next six poems (28--33) are devoted to this new phase of Whitman's evolution. In these poems, where he zealously welcomes the retreating victors of his nation, he sends his bardic message to the entire world: that with the abolition of slavery in America all the slaves of the world would now set freedom.

Symbolically speaking, Whitman grants in this set of poems universal dimension to the ideal of American democracy.
With the ideal of American democracy extending to the entire universe, as envisaged in the above six poems, in Whitman's mind, his soul now in the next two poems (34-35) sings of the divine message of oneness of all human beings on the principle of brotherhood of man. In the intoxication of the mystical wine Whitman does not find any difference between him and his enemy. Looking at the dead body of his enemy he forgets everything about war and its corollaries, whatsoever, and identifies himself with the dead enemy. He says: "... my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead."

Having realized such a high state of experience of non-difference between him and his enemy, between subject and object, the war poet who has now become mystic again of the earlier sections of Leaves of Grass (prior to "Drum-Taps") is in the last eight poems (36-43) solely interested in the reconstruction of his war-torn nation. He thinks of going back to his north-American nativeland. He is nostalgic about his homeland prairies and trees which he will return to, but more ripened now in his mind with variegated experiences of the war. Evidently, he will sound again his barbaric yawp in the forthcoming sections of

Although concentration on other sections of Leaves of Grass than "Drum-Taps," is outside the scope of the present thesis but it will be appropriate here to point out that in the section preceding "Drum-Taps," Whitman "promotes brave soldiers," in "Drum-Taps" he uses them in war, and in the post sections to "Drum-Taps" he sings the glory of these soldiers by highlighting the 'spirit' of war in one way or other, which is an eternal spirit behind the body of Leaves of Grass. This clinches that though "Drum-Taps" cluster appears to be an independent unit in itself having a unity of structure within itself, it is at the same time a part and parcel of the structure of Leaves of Grass as a whole, solely on account of its war-theme.

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