

Technical Innovations in Whitman's Poetry

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Abstract

This study throws light on Walt Whitman's experimentation with poetic technique and the language of poetry with special reference to his major work Leaves of Grass particularly "Song of Myself". The attempt aims at exploring the various aspects of the innovation in poetic technique and the language used in the work. I also contend that Whitman rejected the traditional way of writing poetry by using vernacular language for poetic expression, and dispensing with gaudy poetic diction, meter, rhyme and stanza form used by his predecessors and the English Romantics.

Whitman took a bold intellectual step in deviating from the traditional mode of writing poetry or what James ParrinWarren calls Whitman's "an absolute discontinuity with the traditions of English verse" (p. 46). He completely rejected the time-hollowed and stereo-typed language used by his predecessors and dispensed with cramping limitations of poetic metre, rhyme-scheme, stanza-pattern, elaborate similes and puerile drapery in his poetry. He preferred the use of the vernacular language of the common Americans over the complex and artificial one of the elite class. Adopting colloquial style and deliberately avoiding complex Biblical and remote classical allusions, myths and parables, he brought the language of poetry closer to reality and made it easily comprehensible to even common readers of poetry.

No doubt that the English Romantic poets i.e. Wordsworth and Coleridge took the first step in liberating English poetry from the cramping limitations of its techniques, its artificiality, inane phraseology and gaudy poetic diction used by their 18th century predecessors, and pleaded for the "language really spoken by men {common people}" (Preface to Lyrical Ballads), yet Whitman left no stone unturned in freeing American poetry from the technical chains and bringing its language closer to the real language of people instead of using a specialized literary language of 18th century poets of the neo classical age. Not that the technicalities or structural embellishments are not important; but it too is a fact that to be over conscious of technicalities retard the natural flow of poetic creation. Wordsworth's well-known definition of poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Preface to Lyrical Ballads, emphasis mine) perhaps points to this situation. Both language and structure of "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman seems to have taken the message of technical change from Wordsworth in letter and spirit and further pursued it daringly to the extent of extinction of stylistic boundaries between prose and poetry. This contributory step of Whitman has given a touch of freshness and novelty to American poetry. It also implies that Whitman, in the over throw of technical compulsions in writing poetry, expresses, like Wordsworth, a revolutionary spirit which was a part of his romantic temperament in particular and a romantic tradition in general. In his Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) Whitman says, "The art of art, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity...." This implies that simplicity of language and expression is the very luster and charm of his poetic creation; and avoidance of complex and riddled expressions are the hallmarks of his poetry. Nothing is simpler in language, but profound in thought, than the opening lines of "Song of Myself" from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. He says:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (356, 1-3).¹

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Cataloging is one of the prominent characteristics of Whitman's poetry, though it was used in epic poetry as a prerequisite. Whitman employed this method effectively particularly in the "Song of Myself", coordinating his material as if to reflect equality of all things or the complex miscellaneity of modern life. His listing and cataloging of things, people or attributes draw the reader to peep in and to discover the true meaning behind his words. He weaves a web of things in such a way that it impels the reader to feel that all things of the cosmos are the diverse faces of one being, and that essentially we are different parts integrating one another into one bigger whole. ²One of his most impressively extended catalogues makes the Section 15 of the "Song of Myself. Following are the last lines of this section which show the poet's movement from individual to a cosmic or holistic vision as if making a bridge between the self and the other:

The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,
The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps
by his wife;
And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

One of the most obvious literary devices in Whitman's poetry is anaphora, which is employed with great enthusiasm and vitality for greater emphasis and to add beauty and dignity to his style. Almost every section of "Song of Myself" he repeats the same poetic device which is a powerful and effective weapon of public oratory:

In vain the speeding or shyness,
In vain the plutonic rocks send their beat against my approach,
In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powdered bones
In vain objects stand league off and assume manifold shapes,
In vain the ocean setting in bellows and the great monsters lying low,
In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,
In vain the snake slides through the creeper and logs,
In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,
In vain the razor-bill'd auk sails far north to Labrador
I follow quickly; I ascend to the nest in the fissure of the cliff,
(*"Song of Myself,"* 674-83)

Also we come across a condensed form of expression in which elements customarily joined by conjunctions are presented by Whitman in series without conjuncts called asyndeton. This figure of speech used along with anaphora brings fluidity and spontaneity to his expression: e.g. "I am there, I help, I came stretched a top of the loud (*"Song of Myself,"* 179).

Whitman's use of language and imagery are unmistakably sensual, fleshly or carnal through which the poet displays his voluptuous feelings: section 11 of "Song of Myself" is almost totally sensual and homosexual in tone, language and imagery:

Twenty eight young men bathe by the shore
Twenty eight young men and all so friendly
Twenty eight years of womanly life
The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it rained from the long
hair
Little streams pass'd over their bodies
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
(*"Song of Myself,"* 199-201, 210-13)

Keeping in view the whole technical get up of the poem, "Song of Myself," one can confidently say that "To the bold, independent mind of Whitman, this stylized romantic verse seemed anything but an inevitable expression of modern democratic America. Sticking rigidly to the rules of versification and rhyming keep us stay closer to rigid classical restrictions which further encourage feudal, non liberal and non democratic systems.

Perhaps that is why Forester states that rhyming, for example, which is “venerable and humanly form of chiming versification” Whitman “regarded as fitting for the feudal order, not for the democratic” (483). Whitman felt as he declared in his preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the genius of the United States lay in the “common people”. To simplify his medium of communication a new and free form of expression was needed. Therefore, he adopted a mode of free verse, and dispensed with all conventionalized forms of writing poetry. The result is free, easy and unadorned poetry; aesthetically, the results were not good but the purpose of conveying his genuine emotions was surely achieved through simplicity giving a new form to American romantic poetry. That was why most of the succeeding poets like Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg and T. S. Eliot were influenced by his poetic technique and language more than his vision of life.

Notes

¹ Norman Forester et al. Ed. *American Poetry And Prose*, Vol.II (Houghton: New York, 1970). This and all other textual references are to this edition and are parenthetically shown in the text of this work followed by title of the poem and line number unless otherwise indicated.

² Following lines from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* VI (1850) illustrates the idea:

The brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy strait,
.....
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light--
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (621, 635-40)

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