

WALT WHITMAN – "A KOSMOS"

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Walt Whitman, whose name and poetry have become almost synonymous to the idea of democracy, continues to challenge our mind by the profound and, at the same time, direct message of his poems.

His poetry is a sincere invitation to explore the world we live in, as a condition to develop the ability to understand the whole Universe, conceived not only as a "vast surrounding", a multitude of similar worlds, but also as an inner "kosmos". This comes from his immense respect toward the individual. To him, as to Ralph Emerson, the individual was supreme, and he saw America as a nation of free individuals. From Emerson, Walt Whitman adopted the idea of the need for Americans to be independent, self-sufficient, democratic:

"I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy" [1].

Referring to Emerson's importance in his way of thinking, the poet confessed: *I was simmering, simmering. Emerson brought me to the boil.* Whitman's most popular volume of poems, **Leaves of Grass**, clearly supports this fact, being illustrative of Whitman's philosophy of life, of his poetic powers whose expression has imposed a new way of writing poetry. This book that traces the life of a man, the maturity of a nation, and the passing of Man from youth to old age is also relevant for Whitman's inclination and ability to investigate hidden zones of the human nature. Thus, **Song of Myself** in which the poet announces himself as a "kosmos" (*"Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos...."*) is less a poem of Walt Whitman than a poem of the **self** – yourself, myself (*"What I assume, you shall assume"*) [1]. Starting from this point, the poet focuses on the meaning of existence, the inseparable quality of the self - the individual man and woman – (*"And nothing [...] is greater to one than one's self is"*) [1], the inseparable quality of body and

soul (*"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"*) [1], the journey of the soul through birth, life, death and rebirth. As poetic action, this seems natural to Walt Whitman, the perseverent, keen observer of life, who particularly liked the changing panorama of crowds of people in a big city like New York. For him, the tides of humanity were streams of *"never fading poems"*.

Whitman possessed an extraordinary ability to identify himself with all sorts and conditions of man. He associated with all types of people, their needs, preoccupations and interests became his:

"I see male and female everywhere

I see the serene brotherhood of philosophers,

I see the constructiveness of my race

I see the results of the perseverance and industry of my race

I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilisations, I go among

them, I mix indiscriminately,

And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth." [2].

The communion achieved this way appears as a grace of divinity:

"My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole earth,

I have look'd for equals and lovers and found them ready

for me in all lands

I think some divine rapport has equalised me with them" [2].

Whitman's dream of democracy goes beyond the borders of his country, turning into a call for physical, intellectual and spiritual unity of all nations of the world:

"Passage to India!

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,

The races, neighbors to marry and be given in marriage,

The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near, The lands to be welded together." [3].

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It has often been said that Whitman's poetry seems to be characterised by the same vastness as the American territory, as he himself once confessed: "*I am large. I contain multitudes*" [4]. But this may also come from his declared philosophy that the poet should uncritically accept life in its totality and then look inward to his consciousness through friendliness and love.

Whitman's poetry indicates some clear influences including Goethe's model of man surveying the universe in terms of himself, or Hegel's idea of a cosmic consciousness evolving through conflict and contradiction toward a definite objective.

Whitman has a vision of man and universe as one. This particular view helps him to perceive the harmony of the universe where everything and everyone have their own, well-defined place. It is an overwhelming feeling when, "*on the beach, at night, alone*", beyond the "*husky song of the old mother*", the poet discovers, the organic structure of the universe ("*the clef of the universes*"), achieved by the "*vast similitude*" that holds together "*All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large*", "*all distances of place*", "*all distances of time*", "*All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future*" [4]. The poet takes part in the universal harmony together with the whole mankind ("*and men and women – me also*"). [4].

If in such poems as **On the Beach, at Night, Alone**, the poet feels somehow integrated in the vast universe, sharing some of its greatness with numberless people around, in "**A Noiseless, Patient Spider**", he seems to be painfully aware of how small and vulnerable a human being is, as compared to "*measureless oceans of space*". However, this feeling never turns into sadness and, like "*the noiseless, patient spider*" exploring the "*vast vacant surrounding*", the poet's soul is ceaselessly seeking "*the spheres*" to be bridged. No matter how fragile this connection may be ("*gossamer thread*"), the poet strongly believes that it will "*catch somewhere*".

The whole poem is dominated by parallelism, skilfully used to reveal the main double metaphor: the poet's soul like a "*noiseless, patient spider*" and poetry like a "*ductile anchor*" and "*gossamer thread*". The similitude between the spider's work and the poet's focuses on two essential aspects of their destiny: permanent investigation of the unknown and the great risk it involves. There are differences in variety and refinement between the two types of work. While the

spider always produces "*filament, filament, filament*" (repetition of the same word may mean lack of change), the result of the poet's work is, in turn, "*bridge*", "*ductile anchor*" and "*gossamer thread*", indicating evident progress as regards artistic achievement. The series of verbs used to describe activities also illustrate functional differences ("*unreeling*" and "*speeding*" - for spider; "*musings*", "*venturing*", "*throwing*", "*seeking*", "*to connect*" - for poet). The message of the "builder" is also different. Unlike the spider's unprecise work (its web may take any direction and the purpose may also change; the web may be a house but also a trap), the poet's purpose of creation is clear. He wants to communicate. He wants to build a bridge between him and the other people. That is why the "*anchor*" is "*ductile*", to let the whole richness of his inner world pass on toward the people around. There is another fundamental difference: no attitude is obvious in the case of spider ("*It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, /Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them*"). The poet, instead, does everything with a great hope that the "*gossamer thread*" will "*catch somewhere*", that his poetry will find its way toward other people's mind and soul.

However, the two creators are similar in the tragism of their destiny: their work is extremely vulnerable. It can be easily destroyed: the web, simply, by a stronger wind; poetry, by people's indifference, lack of understanding, lack of receptiveness.

A particular atmosphere is created within the poem, by unexpected associations through which the poet puts together words opposing in meaning, but associating in artistic effects, words capable of generating impressive images. Thus, on the one hand, words like "*bridge*", "*anchor*" signify something heavy while, on the other hand, "*gossamer thread*" reminds us of fine, soft, silky materials. Correspondingly, the verbs used with these nouns (with or without adjectives) are "*hold*" in the first case, and "*catch*" in the second one. And yet, under Whitman's pen, all these words do not reject each other, but intermingle subtly and, finally, give an image of extraordinary suggestive power. So do many of Whitman's poems.

And every new analysis of the volume leads, almost inevitably, to the same conclusion: **Leaves of Grass** is indeed a challenge to the entire concept of poetic ideal, showing that Walt Whitman's verses have a magnetic force and a passionate quality that excite imagination and earn a strong response. As the Cosmos itself.

REFERENCES

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3. - Walt Whitman, **Poetry and Prose**, edited by Abe Čapek, Seven Seas Publishers, Berlin, 1958, p.255;
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