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PREVIEW

University of Texas at El Paso
Thesis no. 105

Author: Osikowski, John

Title: *An examination of
Whitman's ethics*

OCLC# 2338253

AN EXAMINATION OF WHITMAN'S ETHICS

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AN EXAMINATION OF WHITMAN'S ETHICS

THESIS

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
of
TEXAS WESTERN COLLEGE
of the University of Texas

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
of
MASTER OF ARTS

BY
JOHN OSIKOWSKI
MAY, 1952

PREFACE

Many books have been written about Walt Whitman's life, yet there exists a great disagreement among the authors concerning some of the poet's ideas. For example, his book Leaves of Grass, in spite of the poet's statement that who touches it touches him, does not present his whole experience. Whether Leaves of Grass portrays the poet's actual impressions or is predominantly a poetic creation offers no small difficulty in understanding his mind. If the reader decides to take his book, particularly the poems reflecting the author's ethical concepts, as based on an actual experience of the poet, then in the light of Christian ethics Whitman would appear a disreputable individual trampling upon the traditional Christian morality. If, however, Leaves of Grass is taken as a purely poetic work, then the author merits better understanding. Examining Leaves of Grass and other writings from the latter viewpoint, we find that the ethic of Whitman is not anti-Christian but rather non-Christian, and deserves to be termed naturalistic. Whitman in the field of ethics was more imitator than originator. Like Thoreau, he tried to put in practice the teaching of others, notably Emerson.

Whitman is branded as pagan. This definition cannot be accepted as it stands; it requires clarification, for

he could with an equal right be termed a Christian pagan, if such a thing exists. He rejected all Christian dogmas and retained, at least tried to retain, the Christian ethic. He was like a man who ordered a pure soup for his meal. When he saw pieces of meat floating in it, he called the waiter and told him to take the soup back, for, he said, he did not want any meat only soup. The waiter passed the soup through a filter and brought it back. The guest started to eat it with gusto, believing that the soup was free of all contamination of meat. Whitman did something similar. He strained the Christian ethic through the transcendental sieve in order to eliminate all dogma, being convinced that it was possible to have a pure ethic without the props.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one presents several ethical views in order to orient the reader in the shifting thoughts of Whitman.

Chapter two attempts to show that Whitman, though only slightly equipped with a formal education, acquired extensive information through reading. The selection of books was dictated by his work as editor of journals and contributor to various papers, and by his poetical aspiration.

Chapter three considers the influence of Quakerism upon the poet. Although the father and mother, religiously lukewarm, did not seem to have a great influence on their

son; yet religious meetings and the teaching of Quakerism left enough traces in the receptive mind of Whitman to make him, later in life, cleave to many Quaker tenets.

Chapter four deals with the teaching of Whitman both before and after he became a disciple of American Transcendentalism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. THE METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND.	1
II. WHITMAN'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH PHILOSOPHY . .	22
III. THE QUAKER BACKGROUND OF WHITMAN'S MORALITY.	31
IV. ETHICAL TEACHING OF WHITMAN	45
V. CLOSING REFLECTIONS.	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	90

CHAPTER I

THE METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND

No man comes to this world with a ready-made moral code. He acquires it from his family and from study. The more he reads about social, ethical, and religious problems, the more cosmopolitan becomes his outlook; his local narrow ethical code widens. Walt Whitman through reading many philosophical books not only enriched and widened his Quaker ethical code, but in a great measure he modified it. To understand Whitman's transition from the Quaker code to the pantheistic interpretation of moral problems, it is necessary that the reader be familiarized with those ethical teachings which seem to have had the greatest influence upon the poet. The Israelites received the Ten Commandments as their moral code; they also believed in a personal God, the author of the Ten Commandments. Other peoples, like the followers of Moses, had their great poets and philosophers who tried to think out some moral criterion or norm. Generally they agreed that human nature is the norm of morality, but they differed in their notion of how human nature should be understood.¹ Some wished to consider man in isolation; others viewed him in relation to the world. To some he appeared no more than a mere animal; others wanted to see in him a spiritual being. Some believed that

the present life is the only life; others maintained that the present life is the vestibule of another. Some held that man is the only arbiter in matters of morality; others thought that there exists a universal norm which they interpreted either as a moral law of nature or as the divine reason. All those various theories taking human nature as a moral norm can be reduced to two categories, namely "Eudemonism" and "Utilitarianism," whether individual or social.² Several norms related to the subject of this paper are examined in some detail. With the question, "What makes our acts morally good or bad?" we will approach each theory and hear the answer.

According to the Socratic school man fundamentally is good; his nature is not by its constitution ordained to evil. Evil actions are caused by ignorance. "It is the same thing to know what is just and to be just,"³ was the teaching of Socrates. Man does not need to look for the moral norm elsewhere; he himself is the norm. "Know thyself" was the dictum of the famous Delphic oracle which Socrates endeavored to put in practice among his students. Man by education and training must free himself from all prejudices and evil propensities, and then he will be able to act ethically. Human nature properly educated is the moral norm and any action harmonizing with such a nature is morally good.

Plato took this premise of Socrates as the basis of his reasoning and arrived at an idealistic norm. For him the act is morally good if it elevates us to the ideal; but if it attaches us to the things of the senses, it is morally bad. Beauty and goodness found in visible things should not keep us here; they should rather direct our desire to the super-sensitive beauty and goodness.

"Through the sensitive, relative, finite, and temporal purposes man can reach the ideal, absolute, and eternal end."⁴ The character of the Platonic ethic is progressive and hierarchical. From the visible beauty and goodness man should ascend to the invisible. Here human nature is not the norm of morality, but the idea-substance of goodness in the world is. It is the beauty diffused in nature and the beauty of moral life that inspire man to become better morally and to develop in himself ideal goodness. Plato's conclusion is that action is morally good if it tends towards ideal goodness.

Human logic is very strange. Two people may take the same premises and come to different conclusions. Plato took the ethical teaching of Socrates as a starting point for his reasoning and arrived at an ideal norm; Aristotle inverted the process of his master and found the norm of morality in the material world. The Old Stagirite believed that the highest happiness in this life, called by him

"Eudemonism," is accessible not through the activity of the senses but through the function of rational faculties. A man who lives according to his reason, subjugates all lower appetites to it, is the man who lives a good moral life. The ethic of Aristotle is called naturalistic, and rightly so. Every other living being possesses at its disposal the means to satisfy fully its desire. Why should man be denied the same right? If one believes that man is something more than he appears and that his happiness lies in the ideal world, he cannot expect to find a full satisfaction through his activities; he needs other means besides the ones based on senses and reason. However, putting aside such idealistic speculations, man, according to Aristotle, finds in the present life either heaven or hell, as he follows either his reason or senses. This brings us to Aristotle's answer: that the moral norm is the human reason.

Some of the successors of Plato, influenced by the Oriental system of philosophy, deviated in their speculations towards a pantheistic concept of the universe. The world-god evolves itself according to a certain purpose. When the evolution has reached the highest degree, then a general conflagration reduces all things to their primitive state to begin a new evolution along the old lines. This periodical destruction and rebuilding of things suggests that man could have lived many times before and makes him think of being eternal--if not continually, then at least

periodically.⁵ The Stoics created the most complete form of pantheism in antiquity. The world is a dynamic, living, and rational entity. All is reduced to the difference of degree effected by the pitch of tension of the divine pneuma.⁶ Its action can be compared to the action of a violin string whose quality of tone depends on the tension; the greater the tension, the higher the note. In a similar way the pneuma creates various types of life and perfection. Thanks to the introduction of the concept of pneuma, Marcus Aurelius could say, "The universe is one and God is in all; one substance and one law. The mind is common in all rational beings; one truth and one purpose for the beings of the same class."⁷ The human reason could be thought of as individualisation of the universal pneuma. Consequently, he who is guided by his reason is guided by the universal law, the pneuma. The criterion of truth and morality is founded upon the universal reason, because "to live happily and to live according to nature is the same thing."⁸ Therefore the ultimate norm of morality is the universal mind permeating the universe and guiding its destiny.

To understand Whitman one needs to add to the ethical theories already discussed some account of the teaching in Western Europe, notably in Germany. Emanuel Kant in The Critique of Pure Reason found innate principles called categories of logical procedure: in The Critique of

Practical Reason he discovered an a priori moral sense, popularly known as the "categorical imperative." Every man in the field of morality is independent of all external dictates, for he has a moral law within himself. Although this moral law exists and operates individually in every person, it is right to say that all men are guided by one common law. It works like a certain number of clocks. One clock does not depend on any other clock within, let us say, a particular city; still all of them indicate the same time. Similarly the "categorical imperative" is something personal but by the very fact that it works in all men, in all times uniformly, its value is universal. Morality of action based on such motives as pleasure, fear of punishment, hope of remuneration, love of virtue or religious feeling is external and conditioned. The only absolutely good action is the one which is performed in the obedience to the inner sense of moral duty.

For the categorical imperative to function unerringly, good will is indispensable; it is the sine qua non, because there is no other sanction except the dignity of man himself. In the present circumstances, however, where man is exposed to so many difficulties and temptations, it is in the interest of the human will to be helped by training in love of duty. Man must be educated, made aware that it is his duty to follow the law of his conscience.⁹ Action, therefore,

is morally good when in its final analysis it appears as vested in a universal value.

Emanuel Kant in his gnoseological considerations left one window open through which the human mind by means of the empfindung could still look into the dark world of noumena. Fichte closed that window and began spinning the world out of the absolute ego. The Absolute evolves itself in a triple manner by thesis, antithesis and synthesis. By using this triple process Fichte thought himself able to eliminate many difficulties. Having unified the two worlds, he also disposed in a similar way of the notion of God. The Kantian god was not the Christian God upon whom morality depends, who assists man in every way to save himself. Kant granted to God rather the unimportant role of witnessing man's struggles and, after death, of handing him either a reward for having lived up to the categorical imperative, or punishment for violating it. Fichte went further. He removed God entirely. The categorical imperative was the sole absolute and sovereign in matters of morality. It was through religious speculations of the theologians that the imperative was personified as a divine entity.¹⁰ In his later years Fichte modified his opinion in favor of a pantheistic deity, whose function in the universe was similar to the function of the Emerson's "Oversoul."¹¹

Kant reasoned that moral action prompted by external motives, such as fear of punishment or hope of reward, possessed no real moral value. Moral action should be free from such considerations. Fichte surpassed his master in this matter; for him freedom of moral action was indispensable. The idea of freedom occurs throughout Fichte's philosophy. In the doctrine of the state, he defended the liberty of individuals against the state whose duty it was to protect them, its "highest aim to make itself superfluous."¹² In the evolution of humanity he saw the progress of the Absolute towards liberty; and in the free actions of nations and of men, he contemplated the manifestation of divinity.¹³ Man as an organ of the Absolute must assert the spontaneity and freedom of his universal Prototype, for he is not an instrument but the cause of action. Hence the first fundamental right of man is liberty.¹⁴

After laying stress on the freedom of man as the basic truth, Fichte had to place some restriction on it. Man as a social being possesses the right of preventing others from violating his liberty, but at the same time he is expected to resign certain privileges for the benefit of others. It is, therefore, by a mutual agreement that man gives up some liberties.¹⁵

Another limitation of freedom occurs in the field of ethics. The Christian dogmas found no room in Fichte's

system. He believed that he was able by thesis and anti-thesis to arrive at the same conclusions which the Christian moralists maintain, namely that there is no virtue without a struggle. As the Absolute progresses by thesis and anti-thesis, so man grows morally by overcoming difficulties and adversity.¹⁶ Hence a moral action is not the one which is performed under the pressure of any external motive, but the action spontaneously issuing from man and realized for the sake of law. "Fulfill thy vocation as a man" is the precept of the moral law.¹⁷

Fichte brought down the Kantian world of noumena and phenomena to the absolute ego unfolding itself by thesis and antithesis. Schelling, not content with Fichte's subjective Idealism, wished to correct it by proposing his objective Idealism. For Fichte "the ego is everything," for Schelling "everything is the ego."¹⁸ The two aspects of the world signified by thesis and antithesis Schelling tried to reduce to one common principle. This common principle, call it the principle of identity, or indifference, or "oversoul," or with Coleridge "The universal reason," or "the infinite Divine Presence" with Wordsworth, reveals itself by constant oppositions.¹⁹ Its process can be illustrated by the polarity of lodestone. The magnetic activities of lodestone beam from the center and attract to the center. Their apparently opposite character is unified in the

center. The absolute ego should be thought of as a center in which all contrasts and oppositions are being generated and in which they are one. Preoccupied with this idea, Schelling saw everywhere in nature the verification of polarity. Life and death, male and female, light and darkness, virtue and vice, contrasting activity of magnetism and electricity-all appeared to him the polaric evolution of the Absolute.²⁰

The essential character of the Absolute is neither chemical nor mechanical but organic and vitalistic.²¹ In fact, any chemical or mechanical activity should be looked upon as a detour from the normal and natural unfolding of the Absolute.²² The philosophical speculations of Schelling are tinged with the study of art. This was due to the influence of the romantic trend, which began to be felt in Jena at the time when Schelling held the cathedra of Philosophy there. Owing to this influence, he believed that the Absolute's development had reached a higher degree of perfection in art than in any religion including Christianity.²³ His artistic bias permeated also the ethical questions which he treated conjointly with esthetics. True to his assumption that liberty constituted the principal characteristic of the Absolute, Schelling believed that freedom was the inalienable right of man. Consequently "evil is man's choice, and every creature falls by its own guilt."

Hegel observed that neither Fichte nor Schelling had overcome completely the dualism of subject and object. The fact that Schelling assumed the principle of identity or indifference as the substratum of the universe did not do away with the parallelism of thought and its object. He, then, chose the pure thought as the basic principle of the world. After all, he reasoned, it is the thought that causes creative action and not vice versa.²⁴ Since the basic principle of the world is logical, the universe unfolds itself dialectically, necessarily, and rationally.²⁵ The Absolute should be viewed as a growing organism progressing towards full development of consciousness. One of the chief characters of the Absolute is its organic nature. Therefore all conflicts, discords, strifes, which appear to us so troublesome, can be harmonized, justified, and understood. They no longer impede one another; they serve as reciprocal completion. The Absolute still evolves itself according to the Fichtian thesis and antithesis but they have lost their antagonism; they belong to one organic process of the world. Thus, for instance, life and death, two most widely separated manifestations of being, are indispensable to existence. It is the nature of organic life that every moment something perishes or changes, and something new sprouts. The moment life is conceived, the same instant death sets in.²⁶ In this matter Hegel preferred Heraclitus

and Aristotle to Parmenides and Plato; the former defended mutability of being, the latter favored unchangeableness of substance.²⁷ Contrary to the general belief in the immutability of the Absolute, Hegel maintained that it is subject to evolution.

Considering the historical unfolding of the Absolute in humanity, Hegel distinguished various stages, each succeeding one more perfect than the anterior.²⁸ In religion, for instance, the first stage was marked by sorcery; man worshiped various objects and natural forces. The second stage came about with the Hebrew religion when the Absolute (Godhead) was worshiped as an individual spirit. The Christian religion, marking the arrival of the third and superior stage, united God with man in Christ (synthesis). Finally through the Christ's death (antithesis) the Holy Ghost descended and dwells with men.²⁹

Similar steps in the progress of the Absolute are traced in the history of humanity. Here the steps of evolution are noted by the degree of freedom gained. During the Oriental period liberty was enjoyed by only a few privileged persons, notably the tyrants; in the Graeco-Roman times liberty reached wider application; the patrician class enjoyed it. Then in the Germanic age liberty was possessed by individuals.³⁰ In this evolution of humanity one nation held the scepter of leadership over

all others as long as its mission required it. The evolving Absolute reached the greatest perfection in attaining self-consciousness in man, particularly in the national heroes and geniuses. They always were held as the guiding force of nations on the way of perfection.³¹

How does the ethical system stand in the idealistic world of Hegel? The original sin of Adam is interpreted as a step in the historical evolution of man. Adam's fall, which Christianity and Judaism blame for all human misfortunes, is, according to Hegel, a mythical explanation of man's transition from the natural state (the state of innocence) to sin, which eventually leads to virtue as its antithesis. Thus sin and virtue are two complementary agents in the field of ethics. Good and evil, therefore, are necessary in the progress of life.³² Sin as understood by the Christian theologians is an offense against God; it is the violation of His will. Hegelian ethics has no room for a personal God, for thesis, antithesis, and synthesis make His existence superfluous. The Father (thesis) objectivates Himself in the Son (the visible nature, antithesis). Then the Father and the Son find themselves united in the Holy Spirit (synthesis). In such a manner the Christian Trinity dissolved itself in metaphysical speculation. The notion of God is nothing more than a religious interpretation of the historical evolution of the Absolute.³³ Nevertheless there are