

IV - WHITMAN: THE NEW ADAM PREACHING THE ANTI-PURITAN THOUGHT

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R.B.Lewis in his essay "Whitman: the New Adam"¹ suggests that Whitman was blindly searching for new words, new experiences and inventiveness in his poetry. Lewis says that this fact makes the poet the "New Adam" who went far backward to the beginning of time to start a new life in a new world. By erasing the past Whitman, the new man, was free for a new start without any influence from predecessors. The past did not exist in the poet's mind, so he could face the future innocently. Lewis also states that Whitman burnt out the past in order to reestablish the natural man. In this paper I wish to focus especially on the presence of Puritanism in America as part of this past that, according to Lewis, Whitman wanted to erase from American mind. My intention is, thus, to show that some lines from "Children of Adam" and "Song of Myself" can be read as reaction against the puritan doctrine. Looking back to the past might mean, for Whitman, feeling the laws of the Puritans who considered joy and laughter as symptom of sin.

In order to make my argument clear I suppose something has to be said about Puritanism in America. I do not think it is possible to present here either the history of Puritanism or all the relevant facts about presence in the New World. However, a brief description of the ideas cultivated by the Puritans will help me to justify the belief that it is possible to identify a reaction against Puritanism in Whitman's poetry.

The term Puritanism was an epithet of contempt during the XVI century and was applied to people who sought a "pure" reformation of the Church of England. They broke from the Church because they did not accept some reduction in strictness and severity in the community. Consequently the term Puritanism refers to a form of Protestantism among English speaking peoples mainly in the XVI and XVII centuries.

One aspect of the puritan doctrine is the manicheism which has its origin in the Dualism introduced by Socrates and Plato and developed by Saint Paul ("The Spirit do mortify the deeds of the flesh." - Rom, 8,13). These ideas were taken by St. Augustin, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. They taught that man alone can do nothing because God only has the power. In puritan thought the dualism is already very clear and one can easily see an opposition between body and soul, flesh and spirit, Hell and Heaven, Devil and God and so on.

In New England the Puritans had their chance to put in practice their theology discussed in old England. They wanted practical life in their "Zion" or "Promised Land". Puritan doctrine was taught mainly through sermons, which were a kind of institution of puritanism. Preachers wanted to bring God's discipline to their own world. They preached that everybody had to reject the flesh and live only for his or her

¹ In: Whitman: A collection of critical essays. Roy H. Pearce ed. N.Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963.

soul. The sin in which all human being were born² had to be erased through a severe discipline. As an example I would to quote Jonathan Edwards, one of the most famous and greatest puritan preachers. The following lines are from "Sinners in the hand of an angry God", one of his most important writings:

***The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire...
O sinner: consider the fearful danger you are in; it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over on the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked...***³

This short fragment of a sermon is, insufficient to show the whole the body of the puritan doctrine, but it reveals how strongly preachers stressed the dislike God had for men. Not only in sermons but also in poetry Puritans displayed their preoccupation in teaching the doctrine. Here the dualism is visible too:

**Spirit: (talking to to flesh)
Be still thou unregenerated part
disturb no more my settlend heart

For I have vowed (and so will do)
Thee as foe still to purse.**⁴

The puritan poet declares that the spirit faces the flesh as an enemy. Puritans believed that the flesh and everything related to the body was begot by the "old Adm" while the Spirit was generated by the father.

However, it seems to be truth, that in XIX century American literature there is revolution against the puritan concept of life. Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman preached the innocence of man. They wanted the world to be just beginning, so they would not have a past to behold or a sin to feel guilty of. They tested new possibilities in art and in morality as well. Whitman went farther than Emerson and Thoreau. He went back to the origin of time. I believe that it is possible to say that the myth of the innocent and natural man was forstered and refined by Whitman. Through his poetry Whitman preaches the innocence of the new man who is in fact the new Adam without anything behind him. He does not believe in sermons as way to convince people. To get close to God one must feel nature instead of listening to sermons: "Logic and sermons never convinces/the damp of the night drives deeper into my soul," he says in chant 30 of "Song of Myself."

As lewis suggests, Whitman's New Adam is clearly present in Leaves of

² See "New England's Primer": "In Adam's fall we sinned all."

³ In: Anthology of American Literature I Michael. G. Ed. New York: MacMillan, 1974. p. 250.

⁴ Anne Bradstreet, an authentic puritan voice, in "The Flesh and the Spirit" In: Anthology of American Literature op.cit.

Grass. In addition, it is possible to say that Whitman consciously fits Leaves of Grass within the tradition of biblical prophecy. This makes clear that he is exposing his new "religion" through his art. In the following lines taken from "Children of Adam" the poet-prophet announces himself as Adam in Paradise just ready to begin his life:

**To the garden the world anew ascending
Potent mates, daughters, sons preluding
The love, the life of their bodies meaning and being
Curious here behold resurrection after slumber...
By my side or back of me Eve following.⁵**

Whitman is the new Adam refreshed from sleep. He is also the prophet of the new world.

James Perrin Warren says that by using the syntax of the English Bible "Whitman connects himself with the impassioned voices of the Old Testament prophets."⁶ In the position of a prophet Whitman can preach his doctrine against Puritanism without any restriction. He does not want any mark from the past in order to feel fresh, nude and happy among the mates:

**As Adam early in the morning walking forth from the
bower refresh'd with sleep
Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach
Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass
Be not afraid of my body.⁷**

Whitman emphasizes that he is the new Adam and the prophet who tries to peel off every possible weight from what existed before him. Therefore the wrath of the great "King of the kings" does not reach him. The poet loves, sings and walks without shame or fear. Moreover he wants to have his followers. The founder of a new congregation invites the newborn people to join and to believe in the new era: "Come, my children, Come my boys and girls, my women, household intimates."⁸ The Adamic prophet sees things that common people do not see. That is reason why he wants people to hear his voice, touch his body and then have faith in the new and innocent world. To convince people he does not have sermons, he not threat them but gives words of encouragement. The poet-prophet does not call his brothers "sinners" but rather, "fellowso" or "comrades".

As a divine man the Adamic prophet has the power to attract everyone with friendly words. For him "all things please the soul" and the evil is the past.

It seems to me that Whitman has a real ambition to reestablish the

⁵ Walt Whitman, "to the Garden the world" from "Children of Adam" in The Complete Poems. Penguin, 1979. (Hereafter to be cited as CP) p.125.

⁶ In "The free growth of Metrical Laws: Syntactic parallelism in "Song of Myself." Style-Poetics vol.18, n° 1 Winter, 1984. p.28

⁷ Whitman, "As Adam early in the morning" in "Children of Adam." CP p.145.

⁸ Idem. In: "Song of Myself" ch.42. CP 111.

natural and "unfallen" man. The new man should not be afraid either of God or of the sin of the body. The sin preached by the puritans does not exist anymore and God is very close to man. Thus the unfallen man does not have to consider any "fearful danger" as asked Jonathan Edwards. He does not regret at anything and is completely satisfied starting life from the very beginning: "I am satisfied I see, dance, laugh, sing", the poet says in "Song of Myself".

As Lewis states, Whitman's new man stands fresh without the original sin and is "amused, complacent, idle and compassionating." The poet goes farther when he proclaims that he is divine and more important than church, the bibles and creeds.

***Divine am I inside and out I make holy whatever I touch
or am touched by
The scent of these arm-pits arome finer than prayer
this head more than churches, bibles and all the creeds.⁹***

This disposition of God may be an answer to the puritan doctrine and especially to Edwards' sermon "Sinner in the Hands of an angry God." For the adamic man, God is not angry, but joyous and compassionating. There fore to contact God man does not need prayers and churches but, rather, a natural and spontaneous life. Everything that belongs to the puritan dualism must be erased because the God of the new man does not want repression and fear. Once again in "Song of Myself" Whitman, the preacher of this new religion declares that the flesh is not something opposite to the spirit: "I belive in the flesh and the appetites. Seeing heaving, feeling, are miracles...;" Body and soul do not live asunder anymore. The body is also sacred and must be worshiped. Against Amos, the ancient prophet, Whitman the new one can sing idle songs and drink "Wine in bowls."¹⁰ Whitman emphasizes this thought in the following lines:

***I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the soul
The pleasure of heaven are whit me and the poins of hell
are whit me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I
translate to a new tongue.¹¹***

Hell, so horrible according to the puritan cread, is now translated into a new language. Hell now means something not so different from Heaven and can be grafted to humanity. For the Adamic man puritan doctrine is, therefore, a corpse. At least this is Whitman's desire.

This short comment on some lines of Whitman's "Song of Myself" and "Children of Adam" is not of course, an analysis of Whitman's poetry. It is, rather, an attempt to show that "The poet of the Cosmos" reveals a preoccupation with the American puritan past. To erase this uncomfortable past he transformed himself in to a prophet of the new world, inviting everybody to start a new life, "as Adam early in the morning."

⁹ Whitman "Song of Myself" ch.24 CP p.87

¹⁰ See Amos ch.7.

¹¹ Whitman "Song of Myself" ch.21 CP p.83.