

# Whitman's Mystic Vision in "Song of the Broad-Axe"

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## I

Walt Whitman has been labelled variously as poet of mysticism, poet of democracy, bard of America, or prophetic seer. "Song of the Broad-Axe" is one of the poems which show these multi-faceted Whitmanian attributes at their best. For the better understanding of this poem, therefore, it would be necessary for us to be equipped with a basic knowledge of some key concepts which are closely related to these attributes.

First comes the concept of mysticism. Although Whitman seems at the first glance a poet who celebrates the physical world and emphasizes its significance, he is no less, if not more, deeply concerned with the spiritual world. What Whitman is ultimately aiming at is to bring the physical and the spiritual together into a balanced harmony and unite them in an all-inclusive whole. Therefore, in Whitman's mystical world there is a fusion of such seemingly opposite things as body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, Me and Not Me, which enables him to see one identity in everything. One characteristic of Whitman's mysticism is that it insists that nothing be subjugated to anything, spiritual or physical. As Martin S. Day indicates, "All that has been created shares a common origin in some amorphous substance—a reservoir out of which the material for the cosmos is derived and to which it will ultimately return to be born again."<sup>1)</sup>

Another characteristic is that in Whitman's mystic world a cycle is continuously working. The primary law of Whitman's world is the law of successions. It is this law that makes it easy for him to transcend the time barrier and establish the close relationship between the past and the present, the present and the future. According to this law, the present is but a growth out of the past and the future is an inevitable aftergrowth of the present. In other words, the law of successions works as a catalyst for the evolutionary process which promises the progress of mankind.

The second is the idea of democracy. Kenneth Rexroth is quite right when he asserts Whitman's democracy, utterly different from the society of free rational contractual

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1) Martin S. Day, *History of American Literature* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p.180.

relationships inaugurated by the French Revolution, is a community of men related by organic satisfactions in work, love, play, comradeship.<sup>2)</sup> He goes on to say that Whitman's democracy is a social order whose essence is the liberation and the universalization of self-hood. "Song of Myself," which starts and ends with the celebration and universalization of the self, demonstrates this idea to the full extent. What is most precious in Whitman's democratic society is the spirit of equality, freedom, and creativity. The realization of democracy depends on the creative use to which people put their freedom. Whitman believes democracy on a grand scale will be possible, and that the self-reliant citizen will take his place in a free creative society. To Whitman the ideal place for this democratic freedom and creativity is The United States of America, which "themselves are essentially the greatest poem,"<sup>3)</sup> although he later became somewhat disappointed with the degraded New World democracy.<sup>4)</sup>

The third key concept is that of the poet. As Whitman himself affirms in the Preface of 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and reaffirms in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," the poet is "the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land.... He is no arguer.... he is judgement. He judges not as the judge but as the sun falling around a helpless thing. As he sees the farthest he has the most faith. His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things.... He sees eternity in men and women."<sup>5)</sup> In this sense, Whitman shares Emerson's view of the poet as an inspired seer, or the prophet-seer. Whitman suggests that the poet should depend for his utterance upon his moments of inner illumination. However, in order to be equalizer and the inspired seer of his age and land, the poet should also be faithful to reality, the concrete world, although he must not be contented with the mere faithful description of reality. In his prose works Whitman is constantly concerned about the proper relationship between the poet and reality. Whitman seems to have a notion of the poet as a magician who orders reality by his use of language, not merely discovering but creating a world of order and

2) Kenneth Rexroth, "Walt Whitman," ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Norton & Co. 1965), p. 977.

3) John Kouwenhoven ed., *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 441.

4) See *Ibid.*, p. 468. "I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results." (from "Democratic Vistas")

5) *Ibid.*, pp. 444-5.

meaning; in a sense, "the vicar of God who has the mystical vision of newly created totality."<sup>6</sup> So Whitman says, "If [the poet] breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer.... he is complete in himself.... He does not stop for any regulation.... he is the president of regulation."<sup>7</sup>

These three basic concepts of mysticism, democracy, and the poet, which, being interlocked almost inseparably, establish an organic whole of Whitman's world, are elaborately knitted into three major themes of "Song of the Broad-Axe": the mystic evolution of the human world, the celebration of America as a new democratic society, and the importance of the role of the poet in building up such society. The broad-axe which furnishes the central symbol of this poem, just like the grass in "Song of Myself" and the ferry in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," is suggestive of all these principal themes. Its commonness makes it stand for democracy, and its vitality, for pushing forward of life. It embodies the constructive and creative spirit of the pioneers, their great zest and initiative. It also implies the mystic growth of man and the world, the process of the mystic evolution. The symbol of the broad-axe, in this evolutionary procession, becomes the symbol of the emergence, the growth, and the development of American democracy. The broad-axe also embodies the unity in diversity, which is a significant quality of America as well as any democratic society. Now let us analyze this poem in some detail and see how the symbol of the broad-axe functions thematically as well as structurally.

## II

The first section is a kind of overture in which the broad-axe is introduced. The various aspects of the broad-axe are presented in elaborate and quick succession:

Weapon shapely, naked, wan,  
 Head from the mother's bowels drawn,  
 Wooded flesh and metal bone, limb only one and lip only one,  
 Gray-blue leaf by red-heat grown, helve produced from a little seed sown,  
 Resting the grass amid and upon,  
 To be lean'd and to lean on.

Strong shapes and attributes of strong shapes, masculine trades, sights and sounds,

6) R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 52.

7) John Kouwenhoven ed., *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, p. 445.

Long varied train of an emblem, dabs of music,  
Fingers of the organist skipping staccato over the keys of the great organ.

The broad-axe is first presented as a physical object, a shape of "weapon." Next, it takes a human form, with its "head" drawn from the "mother's bowels." And then it is identified with a plant, a living part of nature ("leaf", "seed"). In the fifth and the sixth lines, the image of the axe leaning on the grass ("To be lean'd and to lean on") is suggesting the primary function of the broad-axe. The first part of this section has a subtle pattern of imagery in which a physical object becomes personal and alive. In the second part Whitman uses the complex imagery of various senses: visual, tactile, and auricular. The complex images employed here seem to suggest the complex qualities of the broad-axe.

In section 2, the poet hails lands of all kinds:

Welcome are all earth's lands, each for its kind,  
Welcome are lands of pine and oak,  
Welcome are lands of the lemon and fig,  
Welcome are lands of gold,  
Welcome are lands of wheat and maize, welcome those of the grape,  
Welcome are lands of sugar and rice,  
Welcome the cotton-lands, welcome those of the white potato and sweet potato,  
Welcome are mountains, flats, sands, forests, prairies,  
Welcome the rich borders of rivers, table-lands, openings,  
Welcome the measureless grazing-lands, welcome the teeming soil of orchards, flax, honey, hemp;  
Welcome just as much the other more hard-faced lands,  
Lands rich as lands of gold or wheat and fruit lands,  
Lands of mines, lands of the manly and rugged ores,  
Lands of coal, copper, lead, tin, zinc,  
Lands of iron—lands of the make of the axe.

The poet welcomes lands on which grow all kinds of fruits, vegetables, and grains. He welcomes not only the fertile lands but also barren lands. He also welcomes the lands of mine, "lands of iron—lands of the make of the axe." In this section the relationship between the axe and the earth is strongly suggested, and the description of diversity of lands also implies the unity in diversity. The barren lands as well as the fertile lands are all part of the earth. Here we are invited to share the poet's all-inclusive, all-embracing vision, which is most characteristic of Whitman's mysticism.

In Section 3 the poet extends various uses of the broad-axe. The axe builds "a sylvan

hut" and also helps to build "cities." In line 8 to 16, the poet presents the more active pioneer's life on the American continent:

The embarkation, the founding of a new city,  
 The voyage of those who sought a New England and found it, the outset anywhere,  
 The settlements of the Arkansas, Colorado, Ottawa, Williamette,  
 The slow progress, the scant fare, the axe, rifle, saddle-bags;  
 The beauty of all adventurous and daring persons,  
 The beauty of wood-boys and wood-men with their clear untrimm'd faces,  
 The beauty of independence, departure, actions that rely on themselves,  
 The American contempt for statutes and ceremonies, the boundless impatience of restraint,  
 The loose drift of character, the inking through random types, the solidification;

The pioneer symbol is expanded to embrace the whole of mankind in its infinite diversity of creative struggle. The axe is of various use to various kind of people; the butcher, raftsmen, lumberman, housebuilder, fireman, forger, welder, temperer, mechanics, architects, engineers, and what not. The poet also describes how the broad-axe is made. Then he goes back to the past, when primitive workers used the axe for building and the warriors used it in combat or at the siege of cities:

The shadowy processions of the portraits of the past users also,  
 The primal patient mechanics, the architects and engineers,  
 The far-off Assyrian edifice and Mizra edifice,  
 The Roman lictors preceding the consuls,  
 The antique European warrior with his axe in combat,  
 The uplifted arm, the clatter of blows on the helmeted head,  
 The death-howl, the limpsy tumbling body, the rush of friend and foe thither,  
 The siege of revolted lieges determin'd for liberty,  
 The summons to surrender, the battering at castle gates, the truce and parley,  
 The sack of an old city in its time,  
 .....

The axe symbolizes "the hell of war, the cruelties of creeds" and "all executive deeds and words just or unjust." This dual use of the axe exemplifies the dual aspects of life; just and unjust, good and evil. This section is a good example of Whitman's extensive use of the catalogue. In a series of pictures both of the past and the present we can see a spectacular pageant of the users and the uses of the axe which is destructive as well as constructive. Whether it is used to construct or destroy, the axe is significant insofar as it sets the world in motion and in this way participates in the process of the mystic

evolution of the universe.

This section is also a fine example of Whitman's rich and almost indiscriminate use of language. Whitman seems to believe that any kind of language can be, rather should be, the language of poetry. Whitman's rich and varied vocabulary is well demonstrated by his use of more than thirty technical terms of carpentry, masonry and engineering and more than twenty five agent nouns in this section alone.

In Section 4 the poet poses a crucial issue in the form of a series of rhetorical questions:

What do you think endures?

Do you think a great city endures?

Or a teeming manufacturing state? or a prepared constitutions? or the best built steamships?

Or hotels of granite and iron? or any chef-d'oevres of engineering, forts, armaments?

His answer is that what endures is not the "muscle and pluck" but the personal qualities. Nothing endures but a "great city which has the greatest men and women." In this section there is a shift of emphasis from the material to the spiritual. The axe is not mentioned in this section, but it is indirectly associated with the physical action. What Whitman suggests in this section is, therefore, that only the action of the greatest men and women will endure:

A great city is that which has the greatest men and women,  
If it be a few ragged huts it is still the greatest city in the whole world.

This suggestion of the greasest men and women seems contradictory to Whitman's belief in the common man. But we should understand that the greatness Whitman envisages is to be sought not in "President, Mayor, Governor" but in "the citizen,"<sup>8)</sup> who is undoubtedly the collective entity of the common man.

In Section 5 the poet enumerates the qualities and characteristics of a great city which will endure. A great city is not merely made of "the tallest and costliest buildings" and "the best libraries and schools." Nor is it "the place of the most numerous population." The real great city is a city which has "the brawniest breed of orators and bards," and which "is belov'd by these and loves them." The great city is also a place where "thrif" and "prudence" are in their place, where the "slavery ceases," where "common words

8) "Song of the Broad-Axe," Section 5, l. 15: "Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and President, Mayor, Governor and what not, are agents for pay,"

and deeds" are respected, where "the populace" and "the citizen" are the head, where children are taught to be self-reliant, where the strong men and women pour forth, where women are treated equal as men, and where the soul and the body are equally encouraged. In enumerating the constituents of a great city Whitman is pouring forth what he believes to be the ideals of a democratic society. The great city is no other place than where democracy is in full bloom. "The brawniest breed of orators and bards" is, no doubt, a new kind of democratic poet of which Whitman asserts the United States stand in most need.<sup>9)</sup> "The brawniest breed" subtly symbolizes the spirit and power of the broad-axe.

Section 6 opens with the celebration of the "defiant deed" of strong men and women who are the citizen of the great city, the ideal democratic society:

How beggarly appear arguments before a defiant deed!  
 How the floridness of the materials of cities shrivels before a man's or woman's look!  
 All waits or goes by default till a strong being appears;  
 A strong being is the proof of the race and of the ability of the universe,  
 When he or she appears materials are overaw'd,  
 The dispute on the soul stops,  
 The old customs and phrases are confronted, turn'd back, or laid away.

Arguments become trivial and the material gains are belittled beside the defiant deed. Whitman also celebrates new things and the "strong being" who is "the proof of the race and of the ability of the universe." After the celebration Whitman again asks a series of rhetorical questions which are summed up as the prime question 'what is the use of the petty traditional old things now?':

What is your money-making now? what can it do now?  
 What is your respectability now?  
 What are your theology, tuition, society, traditions, statute-books, now?  
 Where are your jibes of being now?  
 Where are your cavils about the soul now?

The "strong being" is, in my opinion, no other than the new democratic poet, "the brawniest breed," whom Whitman visualized in the previous section. Whitman seems to

9) See *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, p. 463. "Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literatus of the modern. At all times, perhaps, the central point in any nation, and that whence it is itself really sway'd the most, and whence it sways others, is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems." (from "Democratic Vistas")

assert that it is the strong democratic poet who should be the spiritual leader of this great city.

In Section 7, Whitman returns to the axe again. After having described the mine where the axe is produced, he explains how the axe has served men over the centuries. It has served the Greek, the Hebrew, the Persian, and the most ancient Hindustanee as well as the hardy pirates of the Baltic and the venerable men of Ethiopia. It has served all great works not only on the land but on the sea. It has also served for both the good and the bad, the living and the dead. In this historical view the axe becomes a symbol of unity. It unites the ancient age with the modern age, and the world of the living with that of the dead. Whitman emphasizes here the unifying role of the broad-axe in the process of evolution.

In Section 8 the speaker "I" comes to the front stage for the first and only time in this poem. Quite properly there is a shift into a more subjective, personal point of view and the tone becomes more introspective and meditative:

I see the European headsman,  
He stands mask'd, clothed in red, with huge legs and strong naked arms,  
And leans on a ponderous axe.

(Whom have you slaughter'd lately, European headsman?  
Whose is that blood upon you so wet and sticky?)

I see the clear sunsets of the martyrs,  
I see from the scaffolds the descending ghosts,  
Ghosts of dead lords, uncrown'd ladies, impeach'd ministers, rejected kings,  
Rivals, traitors, poisoners, disgraced chieftains and the rest.

I see those who in any land have died for the good cause,  
The seed is spare, nevertheless the crop shall never run out,  
(Mind you O foreign kings, O priests, the crop shall never run out.)

In his imagination the poet sees an European headsman leaning on "a ponderous axe" which is dripping with the blood of its victims. Envisioning the martyrs and those people who have died for the good cause throughout the human history, the poet affirms his belief that their sacrifice will never be unrewarded. Man's advance toward democracy entails intense struggle in which many valiant fighters lose their lives. To die is, then, not to lose identity, but to be born again into a new identity. Death is merely a part of the life process of a progressive universe. The broad-axe becomes the symbol of this cyclical evolutionary process. Seeing "the headsman withdraw and become useless," the

poet envisages the axe, the "mightly and friendly emblem of the power of [his] own race, the newest, largest race." This vision leads to the revelation in next section. But this transition is rather abrupt, and I feel Whitman becomes here too much elated and even patriotic.

However, in the opening of Section 9, Whitman seems to say he is not too much patriotic: "(America! I do not vaunt my love for you,/ I have what I have)." Now a series of declamatory incantations start with "The axe leaps!" which is followed by a long list of surging catalogues. There are as many as fifty five different items pouring out of eight lines (ll. 6-13). Out of this heap of words, "the shapes arise": the shapes of the "using" and the "users" of the axe. This section is divided into three parts and in each part Whitman emphasizes respectively the constructive and creative role of the axe, the diversity of the users of the axe, and the various products of the axe. It is worth noting that most of these products are to serve for communication and transportation (bridges, tracks of railroads, fleets of barges, lake and canal craft, river crafts, ships—all these are means of communication and transportation).

In Section 10, Whitman continues to describe the shapes formed by the axe:

The shapes arise!

The shape measure'd, saw'd, join'd, stain'd,

The coffin-shape for the dead to lie within in his shroud,

The shape got out in posts, in the bedstead posts, in the posts of the bride's bed,

The shape of the little trough, the shape of the rockers beneath, the shape of the babe's cradle,

.....

The image of "coffin" is followed by that of "bride's bed," and then of "babe's cradle." The role of the axe characterizes the whole cycle of life and death, from the cradle to the marriage-bed, and to the coffin. The axe creates "the plank of the family home" and the "roof of the home of the happy young man and woman." On the other hand, the liquor bar, the gambling board, and the couch for "the adulterous unwholesome couple" are also products of the axe. The image of the chaste husband and wife is sharply contrasted with that of the adulterous unwholesome couple. The axe symbolizes here the coexistence of good and evil. And the door admits bad news as well as good news. The last two lines of this section ("The door whence the son left home confident and puff'd up,/ The door he enter'd again from a long and scandalous absence, diseas'd, broken down, without innocence, without means.") evoke a kind of religious, biblical

image. In this way the axe functions as a complex moral symbol.

In Section II, a shape of a woman arises:

Her shape arises,  
 She less guarded than ever, yet more guarded than ever,  
 The gross and soil'd she moves among do not make her gross and soil'd,  
 She knows the thoughts as she passes, nothing is conceal'd from her,  
 She is none the less considerate or friendly therefor,  
 She is the best belov'd, it is without exception, she has no reason to fear and she does not fear,  
 Oaths, quarrels, hiccupp'd songs, smutty expressions, are idle to her as she passes,  
 She is silent, she is possess'd of herself, they do not offend her,  
 She receives them as the laws of Nature receive them, she is strong,  
 She too is a law of Nature—there is no law stornger than she is.

She moves among "the gross and soil'd" but she is not soiled by them. She is considerate, friendly, and "the best belov'd." As she is self-possessed she does not fear. She is strong because she is a law of Nature—the strongest law. Who is "she," then? It may be that this striking figure literally means the ideal type of the strong new woman who should be a citizen of a new democratic world. Throughout the poem Whitman has shown his deep concern with the issue of what you might call the woman's right or woman liberation.<sup>10)</sup> However, it is more likely that, in this penultimum section, Whitman presents this strong woman as the symbol or incarnation of Democracy itself, which is the strongest law of Nature. She is "less guarded than ever" because she (Democracy) is freer, yet "more guarded than ever" because she (Democracy) is stronger. Through the emergence of this symbolic figure, the function of the strong broad-axe as a symbol of the mystic evolution is strengthened.

So now, in the last secton, the "main shape" arises:

Shapes of Democracy total, result of centuries,  
 Shapes ever projecting other shapes,  
 Shapes of turbulent manly cities,  
 Shapes of the friends and home-givers of the whole earth,  
 Shapes bracing the earth and braced with the whole earth.

10) For example, see Section 5, 11. 19-25:

"Where women walk in public processions in the streets the same as the men,  
 Where they enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men;  
 Where the city of the faithfulest friends stands,  
 Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,  
 Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands,  
 Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,  
 There the great city stands."

This is the culmination of Whitman's vision of the axe, of the role and function of the axe as the symbol of the total and full democracy. The repetition of the word "shape" in this final section is very effective and significant, for the concept of shape is sharply contrasted with that of formlessness and it is Whitman's aim to create some shapes out of formlessness. It is worth comparing here the image of the last of this final section ("Shapes bracing the earth and braced with the whole earth") with that of the axe in the first section ("Resting the grass amid and upon,/ To be lean'd and to lean on."). These two images are associated in a wonderful harmony, enveloping the whole poem in the cyclical unity.

### III

R. W.B. Lewis has neatly summed up how the process works in Whitman's poem: "Whitman skilfully brings into being the small world of the particular poem by introducing a few items one by one, linking them together by a variety of devices, running back over them time and again to reinsure their solidity and durability, adding further items and quickly forging the relations between them and the cluster already present, announcing at the end the accomplished whole and breathing over all of it the magical command to be."<sup>11</sup> This is exactly what Whitman does in "Song of the Broad-Axe" as in any other of his major poems. The accomplished whole that Whitman announces at the end of this poem is the vision of the total Democracy in which contradictory and even antagonistic ideas are reconciled in the state of happy coexistence and in which unity in diversity is finally attained. In Whitman's poems, the effect of unity in diversity and the reconciliation of conflicting ideas is easily achieved by means of cataloging and parallelism, which are the hallmarks of Whitman's poetry. In "Song of the Broad-Axe" Whitman makes the most extensive use of cataloging and parallelism. With the only exception of the first section, Whitman depends heavily, almost exclusively and indiscriminately, upon these two devices for the development in the imagery and the structure of this poem. This is why this poem sounds rather monotonous and mechanical and why we feel that something is overdone and that there is something that is too much in this poem as D. H. Lawrence might have done.

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11) R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam*, p. 52.

The vagueness, the diffuseness, the lack of inner structure, and the excessive assertions which characterize much of Whitman's verse are partly due to his heavy leaning toward the devices of cataloging and parallelism and partly due to his conception of the poem as a kind of oration meant to be sung or declaimed (Whitman was, in fact, a would-be orator or public speaker). As Roger Asselineau suggests, Whitman's poems are composed like mosaics and, as in mosaics, a number of lines and passages are interchangeable. Asselineau says, "This method of composition explains the looseness and desultoriness of so many of his poems, but it enables him to gather all the insights that a poetic idea gave birth to in his mind and to respect the slow organic growth of his work."<sup>12)</sup> It is the devices of cataloging and parallelism which this mosaic composition and the organic growth of Whitman's work are mainly based on. Sometimes, and in "Song of the Broad-Axe," too, Whitman seems an uncomplicated, optimistic, basically unquestioning celebrant of the progress of the human society and the cosmic union. Whitman does almost indiscriminately affirm everything, accept everything, and relish the personal and human elements in everything. Whitman's instinct for all-embracing, uncompromising, passionate acceptance seems to have found the most suitable forms of expression in the devices of cataloging and parallelism.

However, the particularity of Whitman's poetry may be best explained in what Denis Donoghue calls Whitman's law of "equation."<sup>13)</sup> Donoghue's remarks are worth reproducing here at length:

[Whitman] can put [the law of his equation] in at random—or seems to do so—because once in, it will take its proper place. And in this equation it doesn't matter, mathematically, whether you put M before or after N; the equation persists. The great advantage of the equation is that while it is at any moment true and valid, you can add further items to the right-hand side without disrupting it; the  $x$ , the self, is "growing" at the same rate.... The equation would also allow for the incorporation of any and every kind of experience.... And he can evade one of the perennial problems, that of appearance and reality, simply by declaring their identity.... Because equations were designed to include everything, like and unlike, city and country, they could

12) Roger Asselineau, "Style—From Mysticism to Art," ed. Francis Murphy, *Walt Whitman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 406.

13) Denis Donoghue, "Walt Whitman," ed. Francis Murphy, *Walt Whitman*, p. 429: "[Whitman] begins by saying, Let  $x$  equal the self. Then  $x$  equals  $A$  plus  $B$  plus  $C$  plus  $D$  plus  $E$ , and so on, where each letter stands for a new experience contained and possessed, and the self is the sum of its possessions. This is the law of Whitman's lists. If you say that the self— $x$ —is the sum of its possessions,  $A, B, C, D$ , and so on, then the more you add to the right-hand side of the equation, the more you enrich the left, and you do this without bothering about the 'nature' of the  $x$ ."

also include evil.<sup>14)</sup>

But Donoghue points out that there is also the risk entailed in Whitman's devotion to his own equations, the risk of facility, and that the difficulty in Whitman's equations is that once the equal sign is inserted, the transaction is finished, and can only be succeeded by another in the same form. Donoghue adds, "Perhaps the trouble is that Whitman's equations virtually eliminated the quarrel with himself. To write poetry at all, Whitman had to trust himself; doubts, hesitations, scruples would have killed the poems even before they were properly born. And to write his own particular kind of poem, Whitman needed to trust himself in all weathers—totally."<sup>15)</sup>

Indeed, it seems that Whitman's self-trust and self-confidence are sometimes too strong to allow him to struggle with himself and test his own insights. This is perhaps why his poetry tends so often to slip into a mere rhetoric, a windy and vague oration. And this may also be the reason why, with all his colossal effort to resolve the contradictions of life and puzzle out the mysteries of the universe by finding a new unity, he more often than not fails to penetrate into the heart of the mystery and the complexity of life. "Song of the Broad-Axe" is one of the few poems in which Whitman succeeds in tiding himself over these difficulties.

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14) *Ibid.*, pp. 430-32.

15) *Ibid.*, p. 446.

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