Walt Whitman: Orientalist or Nationalist?

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No major poet in English is more difficult to come to terms with than is Walt Whitman. The gap between his finest poetry and his slovenly verse seems unbridgeable. His treatment of English syntax is often scurrilous, and his hospitality to argot and to his own odd coinages in diction is baronial. His followers see him as "cosmic," to use his own word, cosmopolitan,[1] and universal. A less numerous school of skeptics sees Whitman as national at best, nationalistic at worse, local and even provincial. Those readers who would like to forgive or to ignore Whitman's faults tend to fall back on his content, finding there democracy or brotherhood, or most frequently among oriental scholars, an affinity for their native varieties of religion. I should like to begin by reviewing Whitman's reception by orientalists, then go on to try to establish why a western reader must be sceptical of efforts to canonize Whitman according to Hindu or Taoist ritual.

Although Whitman typically denied *and* asserted that he had read the oriental mystics before writing *Leaves of Grass,*[2] efforts persist to read him as a mystic in the oriental pattern. Whitman becomes available to such interpretation particularly in those poems in which questions of identity, statements of love, of immortality, and of universality appear, notably in "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers," and in the many poems concerning nature and death. A representative interpretation of Whitman by an Indian scholar is that of Raman K. Singh, who in an article entitled "Whitman: Avatar of Shri Krishna?", answers his question by finding "an incredible proximity of thought between the two." Whitman's thought was an "incarnation" of Krishna's philosophy, to the degree that if Whitman had been born in India, "he would have been sanctified."[3]

In a book-length study, V.K. Chari goes to the Upanishads in order to

interpret Whitman's verse. Chari does not assert influence, but the implication of influence is enormous and unavoidable. He answers the common objection that the Vedas counsel stasis, while Whitman urges dynamism with the statement that ". . . the Vedantic conception is essentially a dynamic vision like Whitman's own and admits of a phase of dynamic activity in its cyclic course from self-emergence, through cosmic expansion, to a final return to its own center. But though, thus, this dynamism is the essence of Whitman's poetic vision, it is a purely symbolic activity, and is in the inner realms of the mind. Its engagement with the outer reality is a certain exercise of the spirit, free from the encumbrance of . . . worldly ties. These and other aspects of Whitman's poetry are defined and illumined for us by these comparisons with the dynamic 'I' envisioned in the apocalyptical verses of the Upanishads."[4] Chari thus solves to his satisfaction the vexing question of the multiple "I" in Whitman's verse, a satisfaction that not all readers share.

Of considerable interest and pertinence is an ambitious essay of Alfred S. Wang, "Walt Whitman and Lao-Chuang." Wang begins with the statement that the orient "gave a fresh impetus to the progressive thought of American writers in the nineteenth century: Emerson in his gnomic wisdom and transcendental insight; Thoreau in his rural ideal and practical individualism; Whitman in his democratic chant and cosmic vision."[5] Wang notes that Emerson had read Confucius and Mencius in translation, and rather chides him for not having been acquainted with Taoism, a system that would have been more congenial to him than Confucianism. Wang believes that Whitman's alleged affinity for Chinese thought was extended by his reading of Emerson; then Wang writes that in temperament, thought, motif, "even diction," Whitman was "more at home with the poetic soul of Lao-Chuang (that is, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu), chief exponents of Taoism."[6] Despite the absence of evidence that Whitman knew Lao-Chuang before 1855, when *Leaves of Grass* was published (if ever), he insists that "Both Whitman and Lao-Chuang used the same motif, instinctively and spontaneously, with mystic vision." Wang's central text is section 50 of "Song of Myself," which I must quote:

> There is that in me — I do not know what it is — but I know it is in me.
>
> Wrench'd and sweaty — calm and cool then my body becomes,
> I sleep — I sleep long.

I do not know it – it is without name – it is a word unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,
To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.

Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan – it is eternal life – it is Happiness.

Whitman's verse here corresponds to the doctrine of Taoism, according to Wang, that "Tao is unnamable; at the same time, it is a 'name' with which all things in the universe are identified. It is like Whitman's 'untranslatable' self.... Tao stands for the totality of all things."[7] Both poets, he continues, are individualistic, democratic, and sympathetic. Whitman's blending of contraries, male with female and all the rest, suggests the Taoist principle of relativity, of time, of space, of magnitude; birth and death are equivalent. With reference to section 32 of "Song of Myself," beginning "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd/I stand and look at them long and long," Wang comments on the benevolence of the primal state and the desirability of man's remaining as close as possible to that state in the work of Lao-tzu. Finally, he remarks that "Taoists knew long ago how to loafe [sic] and invite one's soul, for their philosophy is rooted in a 'nature mysticism.'"[8]

However interesting the affinities between Whitman's poetry and the sacred books of the orient, I should like to suggest that the sources of Whitman's so-called mysticism are closer to home and more readily demonstrable. We need to look to Whitman's historical milieu, to the ideas that he expounded and affirmed not only in the verse, but also in his abundant prose. Whitman, I think, was both a patriot and a nationalist; born in 1819, he came to maturity in a period of rabid American nationalism, an impulse which he put to most interesting use in much of his best and worst work.

Allow me to slide obliquely into the subject with an episode from a novel of R.K. Narayan, *The Sweet-Vender* (1967). The scene is rural Madras, and Jagan, the sweet-vender of the title, discusses the resolution of his hippie son, Mali, to go to the United States in order to perfect a machine for the

automatic invention of short stories and narratives. Jagan asks his cousin,

> 'America! Why America? What has happened to his book? Has he written it? Hasn't he written it?'
> 'He thinks he will have to learn the art in America.'
> Jagan was furious at this notion; it was outrageous and hurt his national pride.
> 'Going there to learn story-telling! He should rather go to a village granny,' he said, all his patriotic sentiments surging.
> 'Exactly what I told him,' echoed the cousin.
> 'Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to write his Ramayana?' asked Jagan with pugnacity. 'Strange notions these boys get nowadays.'[9]

In comic terms, Narayan raises the question of definition, of what it is one means by literary nationalism, and of whether it is distinct from patriotism. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* I believe, marks an important historical change in literary history. It both subsumes a history of nationalism and anticipates a contemporary aesthetic in poetry; along the route, the argument against Whitman's Taoism or Hinduism becomes clear. Narayan's artful confusion between patriotism and nationalism calls for a distinction easy to make. Patriotism in literature is always naive, direct, celebratory, usually sub-literary, and allied to national fervor. It is the lyric affirmation of "Rule! Brittania" that Britons never never shall be slaves; it is the Deutschland that will be forever über Alles, or the banner over Fort Sumter well and truly star-spangled. Santayana compared it to love: "... there are two stages in patriotism as there are two in love. In the first we are proud of our country or our mistress for what we claim her superlative beauties and unrivaled virtues; in the second, we prefer her to all those who outshine her, simply because she is our own."[10] Literary nationalism is only sometimes naive, often subtle, and habitually insidious. It, too, in its early state is allied to national fervour, but in most tangled ways.

Although literary nationalism relates by definition to a nation, it is not to be confused with the literature of place. Wordsworth's evocation in *The Prelude* of the landscape of his boyhood is poetry of place, as is Hardy's insistence in his verse on grass, stones, the hard, natural facts of region, another version of which appears in the prose of his Wessex novels. Poetry of place resides in Emily Dickinson's New England, in Donald Davie's old

England, and Seamus Heeney's Northern Ireland. In the very possibility of confusion between the literature of place and literary nationalism, we are reminded that literary art, indeed any art, is never pure, that when art attempts to divorce itself from its surroundings, it becomes either anti-art or non-art. Mallarmé's effort to purify diction implies the impurity, and the blank canvas of minimal art signifies only blankness.

Literary nationalism, then, is allied to national identity, or to its absence. It is therefore most obvious in new nations, those in course of dissociation, or those newly aspiring to dissociation. In the case of the United States, literary nationalism swiftly passed beyond the patriotic invocations of the Revolution to embrace an ideology. Let me say at once that I regard "ideology" as a pejorative term to define the condition of a people reacting irrationally and only half-consciously to a complex set of stimuli. This may better be seen in the first issue of Matthew Carey's *American Museum* of January, 1787, a journal formed, Carey wrote, to "promote the cause of liberty, religion, and virtue," the same issue in which Benjamin Rush, M.D., printed his "Address to the People of the United States": "PATRIOTS of 1774, 1775, 1776, HEROES of 1778, 1779, 1780! Come forward! your country demands your services! Philosophers and friends to mankind, come forward! your country demands your studies and speculations! Lovers of peace and order, who declined taking part in the late war, come forward! Hear her proclaiming, in sighs and groans, in her governments, in her finances, in her trade, in her manufactures, in her morals, and in her manners, 'The Revolution is NOT OVER.'"[11] American literary nationalism, born of the defensiveness that bears aggressiveness in its turn, promptly became an ideology embodying the notion of the uniqueness of America, its moral superiority under God to Europe and particularly to the corrupt British, its virtual strangle-hold on the idea of human liberty. In literature, Benjamin Rush's exhortation was preceded, and possibly caused by some of the sub-literary work of the Connecticut Wits: Timothy Dwight's epic, "The Conquest of Canaan" was written between 1771 and 1773, and published in 1785. John Trumbull's satire against the British, *M'Fingal,* was published in 1782, while "The Columbiad" of Joel Barlow (not a Wit) appeared in the same year as the new *American Museum,* 1787.

Perhaps the most interesting of the Connecticut Wits, Colonel David Humphreys, Aide-decamp to General Washington and indefatigueable verse-maker, shows the distinction between mere patriotism and the ideology

of nationalism in nascent stage in the difference between "Poem on the Happiness of America" (1780), and "Address to the Armies of America," written in 1782. The "Address" is familiar war-time stuff:

> Why, Britain! in thine arrogance and pride,
> Did'st thou heav'n's violated laws deride,
> Mock human misery with contemptuous sneers,
> And fill thy cup of guilt with orphan's tears?
> . . . . . .
> And did'st thou think, by cruelty refin'd,
> To damp the ardour of the heav'n-born mind
> . . . . . .
> Make countless freemen – then no longer free –
> Shrink at thy frown, and bend the servile knee?

The "Poem on the Happiness of America," all 1094 lines of it, remains a libel on the Augustan heroic couplet, but Humphrey's purpose takes him well along the road to an American national ideology. It begins,

> Oh happy people, ye to whom is giv'n
> A land enrich'd with sweetest dews of heav'n!
> Ye, who possess Columbia's virgin prime,
> In harvest blest of ev'ry soil and clime!
> Ye happy mortals, whom propitious fate
> Reserv'd for actors on a stage so great!
> Sons worthy sires of venerable name,
> Heirs of their virtue and immortal fame;
> Heirs of their rights, still better understood,
> Declar'd in thunder, and confirm'd in blood:
> Ye chosen race, your happiness I sing,

American women, mark well, are

> Ye blooming daughters of the western world,
> Whose graceful locks by artless hands are curl'd,
> Whose limbs of symmetry, and snowy breast,
> Allure to love, in simple neatness dresst;
> Beneath the veil of modesty, who hide
> The boast of nature and of virgin pride –
> (For beauty needs no meretricious art
> To find a passage to the op'ning heart)

Oh make your charms ev'n in my song admir'd,
My song immortal by your charms inspir'd.

Humphrey's apostrophe to Americans as a chosen race is a characteristic of nationalist ideology wherever it occurs. It was to take a peculiarly American form, as we shall see, when it became allied to American Romantic thought and expression. The anonymous "An Address to the Genius of Columbia" of 1787, still uses the diction of Augustan pastoral, Swains – American farmers – tend their flocks – cows and hens – in transatlantic freedom:

The swain, with bliss to Europe's climes unknown,
His wife, his house, his lands, his flocks, his own,
Treads independent on the subject soil,
Prepar'd for ev'ry danger, ev'ry toil;
. . . . . .
For now each fair improvement of the mind,
Each nobler effort lifts the human kind;
Vast means of bliss mechanic arts combine;
All lib'ral arts the rugged soul refine;[12]

By 1818, John Knapp precisely identifies for us the point at which patriotism turns specifically into ideology. Knapp's article, "National Poetry" urges the writer to take up American themes, to look to the American landscape, to mine the national emotions resulting from the fact that the recent wars had been fought on American soil, by Americans rather than by armies on foreign soil often in the presence of "females" and our "sisters" who were "exposed to the dangers and often heard the tumult of the contest. . . ." "If men's minds are influenced by the scenes in which they are conversant," Knapp wrote, "Americans can scarcely be denied a claim to be inspired with some peculiar moral graces, by their grand and lovely landscapes." Like other prophets of the preceding decades, Knapp believes that providence will work to the full realization of American principles, even though his prophecy takes the form of a threat: "It is no idle forecasting to consider, whether, in the course of providence, it may not be necessary for this nation to avail itself of the full strength and operation of its patriotic attachments and principles." Finally, Knapp describes a subject that was to be of enduring interest to the romantics and post-romantics, from Fenimore

Cooper and Thoreau, to Faulkner and the current back-to-nature movement in the United States: that subject, Knapp wrote, is "the earlier native," the red Indian. The dominant tone is elegiac, here, as it was to be in the Leatherstocking series, in Faulkner's "The Bear," and in Hemingway's early short fiction of Michigan:

> Already are the hills surmounted, and the rocks violated by the iron hammer, which the Indian regarded with distant awe, as the barriers of his 'humble heaven.' – And why should not these vast and magnificent regions have been the haunts of majestic spirits, such as imbodied themselves with mist, and shaped them from the clouds, so as to be seen of heroes and bards of other days? Our tall, dense forests are fitter for the mysterious abodes of the shadowy powers, and our hills lead farther into the sky; – our mountains present a firmer pathway through the clouds, for the descent of the rushing hosts that deign a concern for the affairs of mortals. In every place, wherever we rest or walk, we may feel, in fancy, the animating spirit, declared by ancient philosophers and poets to pervade the stupendous frame of nature; – we may feel its life-breathing motions, perceive its immortal complacency in the gleamings which break from out the hill-side and the plain; and listen to its supernatural promptings.[13]

The call to resist Europe, recessive in Knapp's article of 1818, became dominant between that date and 1837, when it reached its classical form in Emerson's address, "The American Scholar." In the *American Athenaeum* for April, 1825, for example, a review appears of one W.S. Cardwell's Story of *Jack Halyard the Sailor-Boy; or, the Virtuous Family.* Here it is noted that foreign writers for children describe farm houses thatched with straw, that the farmers, "half-way between brutes and human beings – [are] unable to speak tolerable English." American children know nothing of the thorn hedge or the stile. The implication is strong: give us American farmers in good New England salt-boxes, their farms fenced by honest granite boulders. Jack Halyard's letters to his mother are singled out for "elegant simplicity of style, with deep views of national concerns, civil, moral, and religious. . . . the style frequently [rises] to a high order of eloquence, and in a few instances, [approaches] the sublime."

One year later, in May, 1826, *The American Athenaeum* published an anonymous editorial on "American Literature," in which gratification at the increase in American literary production is expressed, "The title page of a

native production is no longer sufficient to make it despised, and we no longer hear the silly question 'Who reads an American book?'" American works at least are now read before they are condemned. When England is weighed with us in the scale of literary excellence, of course we suffer by the comparison: she can boast her Shakespeare, her Pope, her Sterne, her Goldsmith, and her Fielding, while we possess but a few who compose treatises for amusement while they calculate accounts for bread, and write poetry with one hand while they make breeches with the other." Foreign writers who decry America are accused, in a romantic vocabulary, of deficiency of head and heart. From their accounts, the uninformed reader must gather that Americans are either "a mob of mad democrats, or cheated slaves. . . . They would strip from us every common quality of nature, and describe the paradise of the West as a gloomy desert, which Providence had neglected when he beautified the rest of the world, and bestowed not one soothing smile upon its murderous, barbarous, cruel, uncivil, terrific, humble, eternally wretched, and tremendously disgusting, pig-stealing inhabitants. . . ."

That polemic is notable not only for making Providence masculine, but also because it represents a characteristic attitude in the discourse of American romanticism before transcendentalism became dominant: it is aggressive in its defensiveness, and it brooks no doubt that American writing of highest aesthetic merit will be forthcoming, once poets can stop making breeches with one hand. In the meantime, no matter how long that mean time may be, editors will review foreign and domestic work from the standpoint of a growing American ideology that declares or implies the uniqueness of the American landscape, its special place in the regard of Providence, whether male, female, or neuter; and the absolute belief that American nature cannot fail to produce great, sublime work.

By 1830 and W.E. Channing's "Remarks on National Literature," the ideology of literary nationalism may be said to have taken full form. Channing no longer is merely fighting off the British, as the *North American Review* and the other early journals had done. Although he adds little new to the statement of a national position, his tone is quite different, and it is in tones rather than in statements that the ideology of nationalism lies. The topic, Channing writes, "seems to us a great one, and to have intimate connections with morals and religion, as well as with all our public interests." A good logician, Channing begins with definition: national literature means "the expression of a nation's mind in its writing. We mean

the production among a people of important works in philosophy, and in the departments of imagination and taste. We mean the contributions of new truths to the stock of human knowledge. We mean the thoughts of profound and original minds, elaborated by the toil of composition, and fixed and made immortal in books. We mean the manifestation of a nation's intellect in the only forms by which it can multiply itself at home, and send itself abroad. We mean that a nation shall take a place, by its authors, among the lights of the world."[14] A country's great distinction, Channing went on, "is, that is produces superior men," in anticipation of Emerson's *Representative Men.* A great national literature is allied to the ideal of freedom, political freedom, but "The only freedom worth possessing is that which gives enlargement to a people's energy, intellect, and virtues." A national literature is far more than the work of a mere individual, for it expresses the mind of a people. A national literature "is a much higher work than the communication of a gifted intellect in discourse. It is the mind giving to multitudes, whom no voice can read, its compressed and selected thoughts in the most lucid order and attractive forms. . . ." "Such being the nature of literature, it is plainly among the most powerful methods of exalting the character of a nation, of forming a better race of men; in truth, we apprehend that it may claim the first rank among the means of improvements." It is no less than "the ordinance of God. . . that the human race should be carried forward by impulses which originate in a few minds, perhaps in an individual. . . ." Channing next asks whether America indeed has a national literature? and decides that aside from Franklin and Jonathan Edwards, not much, that too much space is devoted to the merely utilitarian. Unlike earlier commentators, he defends foreign writing: "The more we receive from other countries, the greater the need of an original literature." But, "It were better to have no literature than form ourselves unresistingly on a foreign one."[15]

Emerson's address at Harvard in 1837, "The American Scholar," needs no detailed review. It is widely, and properly, seen as the definitive statement of American intellectual independence from Europe, and as the single document, if there be such a document, pointing to the direction of American writing in the future. The address has commonly been regarded as a buoyant, optimistic review of past and present, an almost theological appeal to romantic individualism, to self-reliance. It may be only hindsight that causes one to detect in Emerson's tone the shrillness and defensiveness of many of his predecessors. I would further suggest that in giving definitive statement to

American nationalistic ideology, Emerson in "The American Scholar" whelped a beast the monstrosity of which only now we may fully realize.

At work in the address one can see that dialectical manner of thought that Emerson named "polarities." Polarity might be supposed to produce an Hegelian synthesis that Emerson called Unity. To the neutral reader, however, Emerson's polarized thought looks like an effort to have things, virtually all things, both ways. He spurns Europe, he asks for a literature based in common, American, democratic reality, but at the same time he defends "the age of Introversion" and the necessity for abstract thought. He has in mind the grand, European, nineteenth-century ideal of Culture, but he will reform American materialism by "the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture." He would spurn the "sublime and the beautiful" for "the near, the low, the common." Emerson, who on the evidence never embraced much of anybody, proclaims, "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low." Of course he is really referring to diction, and if "The American Scholar" has enduring validity, it derives from the pronouncement here, as in *Nature* of 1836, of the existence of an American diction and syntax worthy of literary exploitation.

"The American Scholar," however, worked frightful mischief when Emerson said that if "the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him." We have seen that from the outset, writers commenting on the American literary landscape confused literary judgment first with patriotism, then with the idea of political liberty, then with religion. Emerson confuses, or should one say infuses? into his literary conception all the foregoing, plus what we should now call a sociological factor, all components of his transcendental philosophy. In the process, Emerson goes far beyond the logic of European or English romantic theorizing. In the Prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads* where Wordsworth recommends the language of common men, he is not for a moment suggesting that he, the poet, is going to make himself into a common man, or that common men are going to turn themselves into poets, in mystical union with all other men, because they perceive "The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat: . . . " Even in Germany reeling before the Napoleonic invasion, Fichte in his "Reden an die deutsche Nation" (1807-08) does not confuse his call to national consciousness, his assertion of the special advantages of belonging to the *Urvolk* with specifically literary matters. Subsequent German literary

history, with the exception of the Nazi period, does not reveal anything like the evolution of the American ideology after Emerson.

By such a route we arrive again at the figure of Whitman as the offspring, both legitimate and illegitimate, of Emerson. I cite Whitman rather than, say, Hawthorne or Melville not only for Whitman's recognized debt to Emerson, but also because I am convinced that Whitman more than any other writer of the nineteenth century was the transmitter and the transformer of the national literary ideology. When Emerson called for a literature of, and by implication by, the low, the common, the democratic, in Whitman he got it, with a vengeance. You may recall the famous incident of Emerson's reception of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass:* "I greet you at the beginning of a great career. . ." which phrase Whitman had printed on the binding of the second edition (1857) a year later, without Emerson's knowledge or permission. Emerson then drew back in something like horror, not only at the use of his name and reputation, but also, one gathers, at his realization of the range and nature of Whitman's unambiguous sexuality.

One recalls that as one of nine children born to a failed carpenter, Whitman completed his formal schooling at age twelve to become a printer, thus fulfilling an Emersonian prediction that poets need not be aristocrats or educated men. At the same time, Whitman was the progenitor of that great American bore, the self-made intellectual, of whom Theodore Dreiser and H.L. Mencken were the epigones. As reporter and editor, Whitman was unabashedly nationalistic in politics, as he was to be in his verse. His literary nationalism was unlike any that preceded him, even though it reflects *all* that preceded him. It may be seen most lucidly in the Preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). That Preface, lacking even the slight control of the poet's free verse, reads like the fulminations of a man far gone in drink or drugs. It is incantatory rather than logical, and I must quote it because of what it tells us about Whitman's verse and about a central evolution in later American literary practice. If the Preface, much toned-down in the second edition, has one theme, it is the familiar romantic theme that the poet is the greatest figure in nature because he most fully takes his impulses and has his being in nature. Where Emerson and the transcendentalists hinted in a gentlemanly manner that the American poet was pretty well up on the rest because of the wonders of American nature, Whitman sings out loud and clear, like a sailor in a fog:

> The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . . [*sic*] Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women.

That is one paragraph. Whitman next identifies excellence in the United States not with its "great" men or institutions, but with "the common people." In the U.S., he notes, the President tips his hat to the people, "not they to him," and that is proper. "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen," and it is the poet who encompasses and gives voice to that "largeness." "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. . . . To him [the poet] the other continents arrive as contributions [Whitman means that people immigrate] . . . . His spirit responds to his country's spirit. . . [*sic*] he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him." Whitman then wanders about the States and territories, as he did so often in his verse catalogues. I resume the paragraph: "When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north and south . . . . On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and live oak and locust and chestnut and cypress and hickory and lime tree and cottonwood and tulip tree and cactus and wild vine and tamarind and persimmon . . . . To him enter the essences of the real things and past and present

events... the tribes of red aborigines—... the rapid stature and muscle — the haughty defiance of '76, and the war and peace and formation of the constitution... [*sic*] the union always surrounded by blatherers and always calm and impregnable... the noble character of the young mechanics and of all free American workmen and work-women... the general ardor and friendliness and enterprise — the perfect equality of the female with the male [!]... the large amativeness.... For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new.... Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and let their ears and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista....

"Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest." The United States is superior because close to nature. In Whitmanese, this comes out "These American states strong and healthy and accomplished shall receive no pleasure from violations of natural models and must not permit them." Concerning language, Whitman says that "The English language befriends the grand American expression," but he means the reverse, that American enhances English, for "it has attracted the terms of daintier and gayer and subtler and more elegant tongues...." Above all, "it is the dialect of common sense." Whitman ends the Preface as he had begun it, on the nationalistic note: "An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb nation. The soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation may go half-way to meet that of its poets. The signs are effectual. There is no fear of mistake. If the one is true the other is ture. The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

By concentrating on Whitman's nationalism I do not challenge the conventional judgment of him as a fine and sometimes great poet; that judgment no longer needs demonstration. I do mean to suggest, however, that Whitman might have been an incomparably greater poet had his mind not been cluttered with the nationalistic rag-tag on which he grew up. When he is good, as in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," parts of "Song of Myself," or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" his nationalism is absent. When nationalism is present, it dominates and produces some of the most curious effusions ever honored as poetry: have a look at "Our Old Feuillage" or at "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

What is interesting and finally alarming about Whitman's awsomely bad verse is that he turns the public, nationalistic tradition, allied to romantic individualism in upon itself so that we are left with an inverse identification between self and nation, in which the nation remains unstated although still present.

That confusing process may be seen in the successive titles to the sequence we now know as "Song of Myself." In the first edition of 1855, the poem was untitled. In the 1856 edition it became "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American." Here individual, poet, and American are equated; they are in balance, and American and Poem are to be understood in terms of Whitman's Preface to the first edition. By 1860, the poet has become his full, vatic self, and his poem is simply, majestically entitled "Walt Whitman." That title still allows for some measure of ironic distance between poet and poem, although Whitman's strength rarely lies in irony. Full exception for that great line in stanza 31 of "Song of Myself": "I find I incorporate gneiss." By 1881, when the poem has become "Song of Myself," an important change has taken place, a change that is accurately signalled to us by the change in title. The Whitman who originally wrote "Song of Myself" was a pantheistic San Juan de la Cruz conceiving a mystical progression that moved from awareness of self, through purification, despair, and mystical union, to a return from the mystical state. Unlike the Christian, Vedic or Taoist mystics, however, Whitman does not honor humility nor wish to attain humility. His quasi-mysticism produces celebration of the self rather than abandonment of the self, and his unity is not with the Godhead, but the attainment of personal divinity through sex. Along the way, Whitman's patriotism and nationalism are subsumed into the self, as in "Myself" of the title; therefore what we see is not true mysticism, but the poetry of confession. When the poem succeeds it is because Whitman had the wit or genius to perceive that his sort of intuition could not fit traditional forms. His poetry becomes poetry as process, requiring and enforcing the apparent liberty of "free" verse.

Whitman was not alone in conceiving of poetry as process, for Emerson too had done so. Emerson's transcendentalism conceives of all life as process, as becoming. His free verse is inadequate to the transcendental conception, if only because Emerson was marginally a poet, if a poet at all. In a dialogue of 1890 entitled "Walt Whitman," George Santayana wrote, "The reason why Walt Whitman is ridiculous is that he talks of real objects as if they

could enter into poetry at all. It isn't art to point to objects, nor poetry to turn out 'chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota.'"[16] Santayana's hostile remarks go directly to the circumstance that poetry conceived as process tends to be all-encompassing, and since mortal men cannot be all-encompassing, they return like Whitman to self, to confession, to the warm bath of public exposure: literary flashers, one might say. Nationalism in the case of Whitman becomes confession, and confession when it ceases to be a sacrament, when it is removed from any aura of the sacred, becomes at best auto-psychoanalytic, at worst auto-erotic, or in one of Whitman's favorite words, onanistic. It becomes, indeed, literary ideology.

As a force, as an influence in later literature, Whitman strikes me as at best dangerous, at worst disastrous. What Richard Chase wrote of that influence, the "notion that America is exempt from historical tragedy; that history stops with 1776, and what remains is unfolding, revelations, realizations"[17] seems absolutely accurate. At its worst, Whitman's example gave us mere chanters like Vachel Lindsay or Carl Sandburg. That example produced the insidious and enduring American notion that any man can not only be a writer, but a great writer; what is required is to feel greatly and to express that feeling formlessly. Whitman directly produced Thomas Wolfe and his imitators, writers not only of confession, but of confession in "poetic" prose. For Wolfe that meant the calculated spontaneity of catalogues of vegetables or drink or whatever, and incantation upon vague, sad themes such as autumn, or death, or a generalized sense of loss. Whitman directly produced the procedures of the American Beat movement, a procedure that said whatever is on the typewriter is right, because the writer must love himself, trust himself, tell all, and change nothing. Whitman is of course embraced, indeed howled at, by the versifier Allen Ginsberg, whose regard for Whitman is a cocktail composed of one part prosody to two parts homosexuality. John Berryman's *Dream Songs* are in the master's dullest tradition.

An aesthetic, if that be the word, very like Whitman's is evident in much current work by native black and Hispanic writers in the United States, and by some women who self-consciously write as Women rather than as writers. Each of these groups pays allegiance to a form of literary nationalism. The black and Hispanic groups stridently write street-argot rather than standard American, nor do they apparently revise. Revision is honky and elitist. Black, Hispanic, and Liberated Women writers alike reflect the over-

heated, irrational fervour about themselves and their surroundings that we may read by the meter in Whitman at his worst.

In 1909 Ezra Pound wrote of Whitman, "He *is* America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it *is* America. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with his time. He *does* 'chant the crucial stage' and he is the 'voice triumphant.' He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission."[18] Pound further remarked that Whitman is the "Dante of America." There resides in Pound's statement, I think, an unconscious equivocation that speaks directly to my theme: it is that Pound himself is indebted to Whitman, that Pound accepts Whitman's literary nationalism, unaware, like other victims of ideology, that ideology is at work. Pound would escape Whitman, but his entire career could not effect that escape.

Such are the careers of several excellent American poets in whom we may see Whitman's influence at its ambiguous best: in Hart Crane, whose attempts to re-write Whitman may have helped to end his life; in Archibald MacLeish, whose "America Was Promises" is merely the underside of Whitman's optimism; in William Carlos Williams's odd struggles against the cosmopolitanism of T.S. Eliot. And most recently, in the late, confessional verse of Robert Lowell, whose fervour about self betrays dryness, whose tone becomes vatic, portentous, Whitman-like.

That splendid Spanish writer, Miguel de Unamuno wrote concerning nationalism, "A nation needs to conceive the idea of why it exists; it must feel its ideal of acquiring consciousness of itself; and this consciousness is incarnated in a political organization!"[19] These words may remind us forcibly of the wisdom of separating the political impulse from the literary one, an order of wisdom that Whitman either disregarded or remained unaware of. At the other end of the scale from politics, the literary end, is the temptation to read into the poet's work a frame of mind and a manner of expression quite foreign to him. Whitman was not an intellectual poet; even if he had read the Taoist writers before *Leaves of Grass,* one must question his ability or disposition to use such material. To the end of his days, Whitman remained a romantic naif, I believe, an unreconstruced nationalist, by turns a hero and a horror.[20]

Notes

1. E.g., Clarence Gohdes, "Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," *Walt Whitman Review* (Vol. 5, no. 1, March, 1959), 3-7.
2. In 1856 Whitman told Thoreau that he did not know the Hindu works: "What are they?" he asked. In 1885 in "A Backward Glance," Whitman asserted that he had read "the ancient Hindu poems" before writing *Leaves of Grass*. Gay Wilson Allen, Foreword to V.K. Chari, *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. iv.
3. Raman K. Singh, "Whitman: Avatar of Shri Krishna?" *Walt Whitman Review* (Vol. 15, no. 2, June, 1969), 97-102.
4. Chari, p. 170.
5. Alfred S. Wang, 'Walt Whitman and Lao-Chuang," *Walt Whitman Review* (Vol. 17, no. 4, December, 1971), 109.
6. Wang, 110.
7. Wang, 111.
8. Wang, 117.
9. R.K. Narayan, *The Sweet-Vender* (London: Bodley Head, 1967), p. 51.
10. George Santayana, "What Is a Philistine?" Harvard Monthly (Vol. 14, May 1892), 89.
11. Benjamin Rush, "Address to the People of the United States," *American Museum* (Vol. I, no. 1, 1787), 11.
12. *American Museum* (1787), p. 564.
13. John Knapp, "National Poetry," *North American Review* (Vol. VII, 1818).
14. W.E. Channing, "Remarks on National Literature," *Christian Examiner*, 1830, under the title "The Importance and Means of a National Literature." "Remarks on National Literature" is the title in *Complete Works*, Boston, 1849. Reprinted in C.A. Brown, *The Achievement of American Criticism* (New York: 1954), pp. 126-145.
15. Channing, p. 143.
16. George Santayana, "Walt Whitman: A Dialogue," reprinted in ed. Richard Colton Lyon, *Santayana on America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), p. 287.
17. Richard Chase, *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (New York: 1955), p. 160.
18. Quoted in R.H. Pearce, *Whitman* (Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 8-9.
19. In Hernán Benítez (ed.), "Cartas inéditas de Miguel de Unamuno y Pedro Jiménez Llundain," *Revista de la Universidad de Buenos Aires* (Vol. II, no. 9, Jan.-March, 1949), 117.
20. Particularly in Mexico. See Mauricio González de la Garza, *Walt Whitman: racista, imperialista, antimexicano* (México: Colección Malaga, 1971).