

ORIENTAL SYMBOLISM IN THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN

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I

This study is an attempt to examine the oriental elements, especially the Buddhistic symbolism, in the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) who was actually a transcendental Christian, thereby demonstrating the homogeneous literary creativity between the West and the East. Whitman couldn't actually be considered as a definite orientalist, but, by pursuing his artistic devices and motif that match oriental ones, we may fulfill a sort of aesthetic entertainment and academic development of comparative studies.

To start with, we may notice with our universal knowledge the compatible personality of Whitman to that of Buddha Sakyamuni, the representative sage of the Orient. As Buddha is widely known as a great liberator, Whitman has also been regarded as the poet of liberation in America and all over the world. They were both searching for a way to free themselves and others from the substantial realities of pain and suffering. They were, thus, similarly "compassionate contemplatives concerned about the painful illusions of life,"¹⁾ as Morgan Gibson explicated, and both tried to resolve "the traumatic problems of mankind." With such identical personal dispositions both men upheld the analogous principles of salvation and protection which led them to a similar transcendental and religious exhortation. As Buddha explored the true wisdom (sutra) from the worldly realities through his ascetic practices and meditation, Whitman also struggled with the common bitterness having attained finally the transcendent awakenings, which led him and then his people to the region of love, liberty, and eternal life. The ideas of man and worldviews of both men were, therefore, substantially identical for their common ideologies of freedom, compassion and salvation, which were actually practised through all their lives.

Moreover, considering that Buddha's teachings have been spread all over the world for twenty five centuries, we may imagine that Whitman may have followed the path of this

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1) Morgan Gibson, "Whitman and the Tender and Junior Buddha," *The Rising Generation* (英語青年) vol. CXXII. No. 6. (Tokyo: 1976), p. 8.

oriental sage and transplanted the old wisdom into his own American soil. That is, Whitman transformed Buddha's laws into Democratic ideology through his poetic creativity. Thus Whitman tried to establish his self-image as Buddha with resolution, and at the same time, to symbolize his poetry as the Buddha's sutras. In order to discover, now, the foregrounds of the Buddhistic symbolism in Whitman's poetry we have to examine first his thoughts and attitudes toward Buddha. In *Leaves of Grass* the poet shows his concern with Buddhism as one of his spiritual or religious ideals with which he expands his own Unitarian Christianity into universal transcendentalism. He thought of Buddha as one of the gods with whom he seems to identify himself, a disciple of the Oriental saint. In the forty-first poem of *Song of Myself*, for an instance, Whitman poses as Christ or Buddha by being so compassionate to the sick or the common people, and then becomes a mystic pan-theist who transcends beyond any definite religious dogmatisms:

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,
 And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.
 I heard what was said of the universe,
 Heard it and heard it of several thousand years;
 It is middling well as far as it goes—but is that all?²⁾

We notice Whitman illumines himself as a godly man, a magnificent figure encompassing all the diverse religions and histories all over the world as one unit of totality:

Magnifying and applying come I,
 Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
 Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
 Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,
 Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
 In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved,
 With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image,
 Taking them all for what they are worth and not a cent more,
 Admitting they were alive and did the work of their days,
 (They bore mites as for unfledg'd birds who have now to rise and fly and sing for themselves.)³⁾

Transcending, expanding and deifying his self as the divine figures of east or west, Whitman was concerned now with his American people, encouraging them with his enlightened power

2) Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" 41. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*, ed., James E. Miller. (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1959), p. 58.

3) Ibid.

to create a democratic and prosperous country:

Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself, bestowing them freely on each
man and woman I see,
Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a house,
Putting higher claims for him there with his roll'd-up sleeves driving the mallet and chisel,⁴⁾

In the next poem, forty-two, the poet calls his people with his deific and compassionate voices (poem) like Buddha appearing to his disciples with his charity and divine love, which may unify all the peoples of the world into one family. Thus, Whitman shows here his resolution to symbolize his poetry (reeds) as the teachings of gods:

A call in the midst of the crowd,
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.
Come my children,
Come my boys and girls, my women, household and intimates,
Now the performer launches his nerve, he has pass'd his prelude on the reeds within.⁵⁾

Whitman again draws his self, in the next poem, as an image of a divine poet who praises all religious rituals, especially Oriental mysticisms like Hinduism, Vedanticism and Buddhism.

As an Emersonian transcendentalist he worships brahmin or llama, and makes his imaginary pilgrimage to the temples in the Orient, thereby attaining the cosmological or mystic visions which would enrich his insights of the mysterious order of the Universe and poetic imagination. And he may have a faith in Universalism and cosmic totality that extended to the real world:

I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over,
My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern,
Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,
Waiting responses from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun,
Making a fetich* of the first rock or stump, powwowing with sticks in the circle of obis,*
Helping the llama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols,
Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession, rapt and austere in the woods a
gymnosophist,*

4) Ibid.

5) Ibid., p. 59.

Drinking mead from the skull-cup, to Shastas and Vedas admirant,* minding the Koran,⁶⁾

The poem reveals Whitman's belief in the Buddhistic notion of the transmigration of souls, the cycles of life. Like an oriental zenist, the poet intuitively perceives his rebirth of metempsychosis "after five thousand years" during his meditative trip to the mystic world. There is no obvious division between life and death except the eternity in the circuit of time and space. Thus he applies this experience to his American people and nation of eternity:

It cannot fail the young man who died and was buried,
Nor the young woman who died and was put by his side.⁷⁾

Here we see that Whitman intuites the cosmic plan that harmoniously unite past, present, and future, which is commensurate with the very Buddhistic notion of Nothingness or the contemplative Void.

The clearer notion of Whitman's orientalism that constructs his Universalism is viewed in "A Broadway Pageant" in which he indicates the union of east and west by portraying the marching procession of the visiting envoys from Japan along the streets of Manhattan. When Whitman joined the crowd welcoming these foreign guests he was exulted to behold "Libertad" from them. He felt uncontrollable joy since Japanese envoys are the very messengers of peace and liberty to America, the Western world. then he foresees the communion of "Libertad" between the two different speres, the unification of the antipodes with the same spirit, and finally sings a song of the world of "Libertad":

Over the Western sea hither from Niphon* come,
Courteous, the swart-cheek'd two-sworded envoys,
Leaning back in their open barouches, bare-headed, impassive,
Ride to-day through Manhattan.
Libertad! I do not know whether others behold what I behold,
In the procession along with the nobles of Niphon, the errand-bearers,
Bringing up the rear, hovering above, around, or in the ranks marching,
But I will sing you a song of what I behold Libertad.*⁸⁾

Whitman senses, at the same time, the union of cultural, racial and geographical or physical polarities between east and west through this diplomatic contact, out of which a new America is born:

6) Ibid., p. 60.

7) Ibid., p. 61.

8) Ibid., "A Broadway Pageant," I. p. 177.

Superb-faced Manhattan!
 Comrade Americanos! to us, then at last the Orient comes.
 To us, my city,
 Where our tall-topt marble and iron beauties range on opposite sides, to walk in the space between,
 To-day our Antipodes comes.

The Originatress comes,
 The nest of languages, the bequeather of poems, the race of eld,*
 Florid with blood, pensive, rapt with musings, hot with passion,
 Sultry with perfume, with ample and flowing garments,
 With sunburnt visage, with intense soul and glittering eyes,
 The race of Brahma comes.⁹⁾

Whitman portrays now his America as an image of a nation in exuberance fruited from all the diverse spiritual power of “the Asiatic continents,” which was “the envelope mysterious, old and unknown hive-bees” to her. Being an ecstatic American mystic, Whitman beholds a renewed America fused with all religions, races, ages, occupations, ranks over the world, that is also fed and grown with comradeship and “Libertad”. And he finally worships and chants his America melted with all the Oriental spirits and matters:

Geography, the world, is in it,
 The Great Sea, the brood of islands, Polynesia, the coast beyond,
 The coast you henceforth are facing – you, Libertad! from your Western golden shores,
 The countries there with their populations, the millions en-masse* are curiously here,
 The swarming market-places, the temples with idols ranged along the sides or at the end, bronze,*
 brahmin, and llama,
 Mandarin, farmer, merchant, mechanic, and fisherman,¹⁰⁾

Moreover, Whitman sets sail imaginarily for journey to the Orient where he meets the ancient poets, saints like Confucius, the castes like Bramin or Buddhism, who lead his world view newly awakened:

Confucius himself, the great poets and heroes, the warriors, the castes, all,
 Trooping up, crowding from all directions, from the Altay mountains,
 From Thibet, from the four winding and far-flowing rivers of China,
 From the southern peninsulas and the demi-continental islands, from Malaysia,
 These and whatever belongs to them palpable show forth to me, and are seiz'd by me,
 And I am seiz'd by them, and friendly* held by them,

9) *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

10) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

Till as here them all I chant, Libertad! for themselves and for you. ¹¹⁾

It is very interesting to see Whitman's resolution to identify his self with Confucius and other ancient oriental saints or sages, thereby justifying and symbolizing his status as western "Libertad" in his own sphere. Whitman's thought is, as a result, cosmological, national, and cosmopolitan, which is ultimately commensurate with American democracy.

Asia is, therefore, metaphorized and symbolized as "mother" of the west, namely, America, who gave spiritual birth to the nation of the poet. With her maternity Asia creates a "Young Libertad" in the new land, of which new and supreme power would also feed his own vision and creativity of art and life. Whitman thus calls the Orient the "all-mother" with a voice of venerability and humility, and advises his people to be humble to her:

Young Libertad! with the venerable Asia, the all-mother,
Be considerate with her now and ever hot Libertad, for you are all,
Bend your proud neck to the long-off mother now sending messages over the archipelagoes to you,
Bend your proud neck low for once, young Libertad. ¹²⁾

Being so sensitive to the debt of his country and his art to Asia, Whitman is seemingly awakened, and he is extended, elevated, and enlightened to hold a view of the unity of the world. As proved in the numerous oriental allusions in the poems, Whitman is intimate with the Orientalism out of which his idea of cosmic consciousness evolved. His philosophies of transcendental pantheism, eclectic religious thoughts, and cosmological Universalism are, therefore, derived from the Oriental mysticism, by which his literary creativity was stimulated and shaped. Accordingly, Whitman portrayed his identity as a symbolic pilgrim of such ideals, and a singer of the other world that is harmoniously unified with his own nation, America.

II

There is a more significant oriental allusion that reveals a similar theme and spirit of communion between east and west. In "Passage To Inida" Whitman looks up the Orient again as the "All Mother" and the "Originatress" who delivers all the ancient wisdoms that

11) Ibid.

12) Ibid., p. 179.

impelled the modern science and technology of the western world. The poet thus celebrates exultingly the integration of eastern spirituality and western materiality prophesizing a new world of totality:

Passage to India!
 Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
 The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
 The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
 The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
 The lands to be welded together.¹³⁾

On the path of journey to India the poet of pilgrimage sees the geographical union, as illustrated in *Song of Myself*, the "marriage" of the two lands being crossed by the bridge over the seas, which brings a new comradeship or brotherly bond. The symbolic words like "connected," "neighbours", "marriage," and "welded" suggest the strong imagery of the communion of the physical and the soul between the spheres of east and west, according to the idea of God, from which the unity of social, cultural, scientific and political diversities is accomplished. The most striking interest in the Orient is illustrated in the sixth poem, in which the poet traces the original roots of the literature and religion of the present western civilization in India. Here Whitman goes far back to old Braminism and Buddhism, where he discovers "the flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes" that procreated the current modernity of the West, which also developed his ultimate Cosmopolitanism:

The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,
 Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and junior Buddha,
 Central and southern empires and all their belongings, possessors,¹⁴⁾

Additionally, we notice the Buddhistic allusion in the worlds of "tender and junior Buddha" which may confirm Whitman's faith in the charitable and innocent personality of the young Buddha. This expression proves his sensitivity to the universal condition of pain, suffering, aging and mortality of human beings just as Buddha felt it. Being compassionately hurt by beholding this pitious, ephemeral and illusive fate of all living existences, the poet meditates, ponders, keeping the ascetic course of the oriental god, to liberate them from those plights. And finally being enlightened, as the young Buddha was

13) "Passage to India," I. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

14) *Ibid.*, p. 291.

awakened under the Bodhi tree, Whitman emerges to the world of common people illuminating the congenial tenderness and sympathy with that of god. In "Out of the Endlessly Rocking," the poet appears as a "boy" like the "tender and junior Buddha," who shows a deep compassion for a "bird" that lost its mate. We may see, in the poem, Whitman's identity as portrayed as an image of the young Buddha, who is on his ascetic pilgrimage out of his "home":

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
 Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
 Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
 Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child leaving his bed wander'd alone,
 bareheaded, barefoot,¹⁵⁾

Hearing the cry of a bird in the calm midnight by the seashore, the young wanderer is instantly awakened to sense the long parting or death of one of the bird couples, which thus arouse some uncontrollable pain in his heart as if he lost his own lover:

Till of a sudden,
 May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,
 One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on the nest,
 Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next,
 Nor ever appear'd again.¹⁶⁾

Whitman, a sympathetic boy, broods further in solitude providing company for the bird until he attains finally, through a whisper of sea, the universal mortality of all living beings:

I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
 Listen'd long and long.

 Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
 Death, death, death, death, death.¹⁷⁾

With such themes of life, love and death the poet reveals his personality analogous to that of Buddha, the compassionate contemplative concerned about the limitations of all mean and other natural things, by which his creativity of poetry are actually generated as Stephen E. Whicher clearly explicates: ". . . in the boy's awakening Whitman has fused all

15) "Out of Cradle Endlessly Rocking," *ibid.*, p. 180.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 181.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 184.

his own awakenings together, with the result that his poem moves in one night over a distance which he has taken forty years of his life to cover."¹⁸⁾

Whitman portrays, as a result, a symbolic image of himself as "the tender and junior Buddha" as is projected in *Passage to India*, and further as an awakened mature humanist who sustains a deep sympathy for the inevitable sufferings and mortality of all humanity, for which he strives at last to find a certain definite answer.

The clearer symbolic Buddha image that constitutes a pathetic pity for all mortals is drawn in "I Sit and Look out" in *By the Roadside*, in which an oriental zen Buddhist records his intuitive experiences directly after being enlightened during his meditative pondering:

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame,
 I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds
 done,
 I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected, gaunt, desperate,
 I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer of young women,
 I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be hid, I see these sights on the
 earth,
 I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see martyrs and prisoners,
 I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be kill'd to preserve the lives
 of the rest,
 I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers, the poor, and
 upon negroes, and the like;
 All these -- all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon,
 See, hear, and am silent.¹⁹⁾

Showing his posture as a contemplative zenist, Whitman beholds indirectly the traumatic phenomena of all absurd realities around him and examines the substantial nature of them in "silent." As a simple observer the poet witnesses and perceives with his eyes and ears "the sorrows," "oppression and shame," "sobs," and diseases, wars, poverty, and all depravity of morals or politics. He falls in silence reasoning out the real substance that causes such problems, but he finally realizes, by his intuition rather than senses, that all diverse pain and suffering results from illusions, pretence, desire, and attachment to secular

18) Stephen E. Whicher, "Whitman's Awakening to Death," *The Presence of Walt Whitman*, ed., R.W.B. Lewis, (New York and London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1962), p. 22.

19) Whitman, "I Sit and Look Out," *By the Roadside*, *ibid.*, p. 197.

pleasures to escape from pain, thereby causing more and more disillusionment and brooding and meditation, however, the zenist poet is awakened and enlightened freeing himself from any confinement to outer phenomena and matters by transcending all his finite conditions, and then comes out to teach people to save with his attained wisdom recorded in his poetry:

As I sit in twilight late alone by the flickering oak-flame,
Musing on long-pass'd war scenes -- of the countless buried unknown soldiers,

.....
You million unwrit names all, all -- you dark bequest from all the war,
A special verse for you -- a flash of duty long neglected -- your mystic roll strangely gather'd here,
Each name recall'd by me from out the darkness and death's ashes,
Henceforth to be, deep, deep within my heart recording, for many a future year,
Your mystic roll entire of unknown names, or North or South,
Embalm'd with love in this twilight song.²⁰⁾

He is no longer pondering and sad when he is detached from the troubles of the world. When he is released from his own egocentered prejudice he experiences ecstasy, so-called "nirvana", intuitively and opens his heart to others. Then he is ripened to see the invisible things or soul beyond the material, the equality of matter and spirit, the oneness of life and death, and attains godly love or affection to every individuals. In the poem, thus, Whitman changes his attitude to dead soldiers, praising and illumining their "unknown" and "unwrit names" with his elaborate psalm. Removing his compassionate and sympathetic elegiacal voices to the "buried unknown soldiers" the poet sings a song of celebration when he intuits the sublime eternity from their deaths. The poetry of Whitman is, as a result, a dedicated inscription for them, which is thus regenerating their lives of eternity. The poet resolves the pitious sterility or futility of the sacrificial deaths with this "mystic" verse, which as he says himself, would give "flash" and "embalm" to them with godly love, thereby his own life and art were justified and accomplished as Buddha's life and disciplines completed just with such godly love and supernatural light.

Moreover, Whitman, like a traditional Taoist or Buddhist, conceives death as a gateway to liberation at the moment of enlightenment, being unified with the cosmic order, the natural cycle of birth, death, and rebirth of the Universe, and the Nothingness or Void. In his late work "Twilight", Whitman illumines a zenistic Nirvana and feels equanimity after his own death coming:

20) "A Twilight Song," *ibid.*, pp. 378-379.

The soft voluptuous opiate shades,
 The sun just gone, the eager light dispell'd -- (I too will soon be gone, dispell'd,)
 A haze--nirwana--rest and night--oblivion.²¹⁾

Describing the Buddhistic word "nirwana" the poet expresses his perception of ecstasy attained by his transcendent insights of death which would bring to him "rest and night" of "oblivion", the complete liberation from his consciousness. The "oblivion" that is attained after the mystic journey into death, signifies the contemplative Void or Nothingness that Whitman achieves. Accordingly, Whitman's poems are, on the whole, the songs of celebration not only of life, but also of death, being aimed at achieving complete "oblivion" from his egocentricity, which thus frees others from their bondage, thereby projecting a symbolic unity of all people and all nations. Whitman reveals, as a result, his consciousness of debts and the beneficences of his own transcendent imagination and mystic creativity, and of the present civilization of the west to the Orient. The *Leaves of Grass* of Whitman is therefore metaphorized and symbolized as the spirits of the East, especially the old teachings of Buddha, as reflected implicitly or explicitly with a number of Buddhistic or other oriental mystic allusions and its symbolic images, the ultimate goal of which is the congenial completion of the self through being unified with others in charity, compassion, and love.

Whitman also attempted to create his self-image as the symbol of the divine ferryman. We can find the numerous parallels in the Buddhistic thought in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", for an instance in the context of theme and symbolic diction. In this poem the ferry is indicated as the "vehicle" or "the ferryboat" which symbolize the ship that carries the teachings or wisdom of Whitman's Buddhistic philosophy. With the metaphorical word "Ferry" Whitman illustrates his idea as an instrument to communicate his insight into the opacities of transcendental experience.

The 'Ferry' has generally been used in the instruction and guidance of disciples, for it outlines and points the way along the path that the Buddhists have taken in their quests for enlightenment and salvation. In this perspective Whitman, as the Buddhistic teacher, enacts the role of the ferryman, inviting the people on the bank of the river of life to enter his boat and to cross the waters to the wisdom of the other shore "on the Heavenly Palace."

Curiously enough, the peculiar in educational value of this symbolic vehicle of the

21) "Twilight," *ibid.*, p. 366.

Brooklyn Ferry, resides in its ordinaries. The ferryboat has traditionally played an important symbolic part in Indian life, providing an indispensable means of transportation in a land traversed and crossed by many wide rivers almost devoid of bridges. To reach the goal, in other words, journey requires passage by ferry, and thus the crossing of this streams is the one common path that should be crossed by the people. Through the ages the Buddhist sages have equated the river or the sea with the rushing, turbulent movement of samsara (the endless cycle of birth, life and death), on the unknown other side of which lie the banks of enlightenment offering a release from all the desolating confinements of existence. Under the same inspiration and motif, Whitman obviously might choose the East river to practise the similar aspect of oriental education and salvation to his American people and nation in his own day.

The opening lines of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", significantly, express the need for a fearless confrontation of the antinomies of life and death:

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west-sun there half an hour high-I see you also face to face.²²⁾

Whitman sees the river of life is at "flood tide," death is forever imminent ("Clouds of west"), with only the fleeting hope that the sun or eternity will reduce these dislocating antithesis. In effect, Whitman seems to pose the question: What is real, indestructible, permanent life, the life without death? But his answer is not self-evident. Man will not and, with his evident consciousness, can not deny the solidity of the earth underfoot. The poet sets out, thus, to clarify the ambiguities of this vision, and in the next passage literal reality begins to dissolve into the symbolic reflection of the countless multitudes who have in the present and will in the future cast off from this anchorage:

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
In the ferryboats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me
than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.²³⁾

We see the metaphorical or symbolical implications on this return "home", which is the final goal of everyone. Whitman indicates that he is primarily concerned with finding meaning in the immediate crossings that will enable him to communicate with posterity.

22) "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," I. Ibid., p. 116.

23) Ibid.

And so he commences to transform his poem into a ferry and himself into a ferryman, a symbol of a pilot, a teacher, prophet, and a saviour. Thus, we may confirm such Whitman's undertaking the role of god or Buddha more clearly in the next passages:

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the women or men that looks at my face?
 Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?
 We understand then do we not?
 What I promised without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
 What the study could not teach-what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is
 it not?²⁴⁾

We see in the poem that Whitman achieves his true awakened selfhood (atman) that transforms him into an symbolic preacher with an oracle of divinity. In his overflowing love of all mankind he illumines his "subtle" acquisition of egolessness or complete void of self. Being able to transcend his illusive egocentered world he liberated himself, and so he now liberates others. Then he becomes a divine ferryman teaching that anyone who aspires to reach the wisdom of the other shore (nirvana) will immediately recognize him.

Finally, Whitman, the enlightened ferryman, raises his strong voice to address all the passengers (Americans) who crowd the shores of the river of life:

Flow on, river! flow with the river-tide, and ebb with ebb-tide!
 Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
 Gorgeous clouds of sunset! drench with you splendor me, or the men and women generations
 after me!
 Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!²⁵⁾

We can see in the poem the image of pilgrim who attained the free world in which the one is in all or all in one. Enacting the role of the sacred pilgrim or Buddha for himself and of all other common people Whitman journeys across the river of ordinary life. So his poem is transformed into a ferryboat and he naturally into a ferryman. Poetry dissolves thus into mythology, and the poet is symbolized as the prophet and wise man reincarnated with God. So the wisdom of Whitman, the Buddhist guard, illumines the light of the divine power and the holy spirit of salvation to the universal beings: "A guard I would be to them who have no protection, a guide to the voyager, . . . a bridge for the seeker of the Other Shore."

24) *Ibid.*, No. 8. p. 119.

25) *Ibid.*, No. 9. p. 119.

III

There are two other major symbols which are in parallel with Buddhism and other Indian philosophy and religions: mother and sea. Whitman's veneration (mystical) of motherhood may be traced to his deep attachment to his own mother, and the mother image symbolizes, in different mystical, racial and national guises. The sea image is also prominent symbol in Whitman for the poet's treatment in his psychological, mystical perspective. In this poetry there are numerous ships which are treated as associate images and often inseparable from the sea image. Sea and ship together symbolize the long journey motif in the *Leaves of Grass*. The sea also symbolizes the mother principle. Whitman, the cosmic poet, looks upon woman, first of all, as sacred as man and speaks of divine maternity. As poet of the human body, which he primarily admires for its perfect symmetry, he sees the female form as exhaling a divine "nimbus from head to foot." Whitman's devotion to the mother figure has all the familiar features of an oriental or Buddhistic mystery religion. He goes into ecstatic bliss whenever he describes the mother. In mother and her daughters he sees the divine mystery for their body and soul. In his deliberate mystification of mother-worship, "She is all things duly veiled." Being a goddess, she is "not only herself.. . she is the teeming mother of mothers,/ She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers."²⁶⁾ Like the earth goddess of ancient myths, she is fecund and passes on her fecundity to her daughter and her daughter's daughters. The cult of the mother assumes the proportion of a universal religion when he declares that she is "exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth." Being of all nations and all places, she transcends time and place; yet she is of the world. Like the true God, she both immanent and transcendent. So the mother is the symbol of the goddess of fertility, power and beauty, which would recreate nationality of American and feed her American and Democracy.

Whitman's another mother image in "Song of Myself" symbolizes the myth of the corn goddess. And she is a symbol of fertility again, the "nine months gone... in the parturition chamber" "the one year wife recovering and happy" after her first child is the imagery rebirth. That the birth of life is sacred and mystical, is indicated by the use of the symbolical number 9 which, curiously enough, is also a physical symbol of the ripener of maternity:

26) "Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood," *ibid.*, pp. 318-319.

Emblem of general maternity lifted above all,
 Sacred shape of the bearer of daughters and sons,
 Out of thy teeming womb they giant babes in ceaseless procession issuing,
 Accessing from such gestation, taking and giving continual strength and life,
 World of to real-world of the twain in one, ²⁷⁾

That birth is also a ritual is hinted at in “faintless and pain”-physical and emotional sufferings of a votary during ritualistic participation.

In another symbolic conception of Whitman’s, she is presented as the mother of the savior of mankind. She gives birth to a new religion, a higher life that promises to man redemption from his sins. Being an Oriental or Christian mystic, Whitman sees the divine in the human. To him “the mechanic’s wife with the baby at her nipples” becomes the Virgin Mother interceding for every man born. The mother is now mediator between the sinner and his irate God who has turned him out of Paradise of Faith and Immortality. Through her divine child she saves her human offspring and restores them to primal innocence.

“The world-generating spirit of the father passes into the manifold of earthly experience through a transforming medium or symbol-the mother of the world.”²⁸⁾ In the world of *Leaves of Grass* it is poetry itself at work through the mystic poet bringing forth a new democracy through a transforming medium a symbol of mother, a strong and virile woman. So Whitman sets up the great symbol of ideal motherhood as generating “bigger and nimbler babes,” and as the true citizen of the Whitmanian political democracy. The mother is the symbol of the Divinity, the symbol of fertility, of the nation, and of Buddhistic Immortality.

Whitman’s attachment to the sea was lifelong and it began during his childhood association with his beloved Mannahatta which developed his mystic inspiration. In India the sea is a traditional image or symbol as samsara sagara or the sea of life which every pious Hindu or Buddhist attempts to cross through the practice of yoga or meditation and reach the shores of eternity. To the Indian sea is evocative symbol of the virgin goddess who stands guard at their territory.

And the sea stands for “the region infinite.” In his sensitive consciousness Whitman conceives the sea as the One in Many, an all-pervasive phenomenon that stands for the religion of the whole humanbeings over the world.

27) Ibid.

28) Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Meridan Books, 1956), p. 297.

I see the huge dreadful Arctic and Antarctic icebergs,
 I see the superior oceans and the inferior ones, the Atlantic and Pacific, the sea of Mexico, . . .
 The waters of Hindustan, the China sea, and the gulf of Guinea, and the sea of Peru,
 The Japan waters, the beautiful bay of Nagasaki land-lock'd in its mountains,

 The White sea, and the sea around Greenland.²⁹⁾

The Sea is also a symbol of the Divine World and in its vastness and infinite surface of waters all contraries and polarities meet. The home of the sea-whale who swims the deep with her calves is also the dwelling place of the ground-shark whose "fin cuts like a black chip out of the water" and causes destruction of life with the sharpness and suddenness of Death. Sometimes Whitman's ship, a symbol of a man of war, survives the tempestuous fury of the sea. Perhaps the warship as an image is suggestive of the indormitable will of man that triumphs over the most adverse circumstances.

The voyage of the soul is thus a profound image in Whitman. When the poet grew in years his hitherto unknown destination was gradually disclosed to him by his mystical insight. He was a voyage of the soul in search of the Transcendent knowledge of life and death through Nature, Time and Space:

Gliding o'er all, through all,
 Trough Nature, Time and Space,
 As a ship on the waters advancing,
 The voyage of the soul-not life alone,
 Death, many deaths I'll sing.³⁰⁾

He was, however, overcome by a sense of despair with his spiritual. He overcame with the passage of time his despondent state and so urged his soul to sail for the deep waters only as in the concluding section of "Passage to India." In this context Haruo Shimizu explicates the spiritual growth of a poet:

I interpret *Leaves of Grass* as a psalm of eternal life. Whitman tries to picture the growth of humanity toward perfection, consummated in eternal life. This is traced through the imagery of the soul. The major images appear in the course of that pilgrimage, as aids to the soul's progress³¹⁾

It is not the journey of the human self vicariously presented in *Leaves of Grass* but the

29) Whitman, "Salut au Monde!" p. 101.

30) "Gliding o'er All," *By the Roadside*, *ibid.*, p. 199.

31) Shimizu Haruo, "A Study of Whitman's Imagery," *Walt Whitman Review* Vo.V. No. 2, June, 1959, p. 27.

mystical experience of the poet in terms of the voyage of the soul. Realization came to him that the transcendent God could be reached only if one crossed the "cycle of life and death in Time"³²⁾ and he expressed this idea through the "Long Journey" symbolism. By achievement Whitman became a Buddhistic mystic and by aspiration he remained a Transcendentalist.

The sea and the mother images coalesce in many poems like "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in which, Whitman as a mother-worshiper frequently symbolizes the mother principle as the sea, which signifies both death and rebirth. In "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of life." for an instance, the sea is a symbol of "Mystic Death,"³³⁾ and in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the sea is symbolized as the mystic affirmation of death. When the poet emerges from the Cave of Darkness after the loss of his beloved, the sea like the mother offers the consoling message of death which is rebirth. The vision of the Beloved is not lost forever. There is a promise of its recurrence in the whisperings of the mother who is "like some old crone rocking the oradle, swarthed in sweet garments."³⁴⁾

IV

I have examined the Oriental elements, especially Buddhistic allusions as they are reflected symbolically in the poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman was not actually the Buddhist, but he, I consider, may be accounted for the great artist for his uses of various symbolic images which are in parallels with ideas of Buddhism and other Mysticism of the Orient.

The most prominent symbol of Whitman's Buddhistic ideas is the "boy" who is illustrated as the young poet, Whitman himself. Like the Buddha this boy is awakened to suffering and death, and after this enlightenment he sustained a deep compassion for the others and finally tried to save self and other, by writing poetry, from the worldly bondage. The most dominant theme in the poetry is, therefore, the theme of selfhood and love. The self that Whitman was attempted to achieve was the divine selfhood. And Whitman's love is considered as the divine love like that of God or Buddha. The charity and benevolence

32) Sister Mariam Clare, "The Sea and Death in Leaves of Grass," *Walt Whitman Review*, No. 1, March, 1964, P. 16.

33) V. Sachithanandan, "Mysticism in the poetry of Whitman and Bharati," *Whitman and Bharati* (Madras: The Macmillan Co., 1978), p. 26.

34) Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rockong," *Sea Drift*, p. 184.

of Buddha is the very Whitman's compassion, sympathy, and love for self and other, which runs through works of the poet. So the boy symbolizes the poet, the lover who is identical to the Buddha. Whitman proves this idea by calling the Buddha with "tender and junior."

The poetry is, in this sense, not only the art of seeing but also the spiritual, moral, religious or philosophical teachings for the way from bondage to freedom, that is the doctrines of the Buddha. Like the Buddha's disciple Whitman follows the way of pilgrim searching for self-realization, love of man and of Nature, love of the beloved and of God, love of country and of the world. Being awakened Whitman reveals the wisdom of the mature Buddha with symbolic words through the poems. In a word, the poetry is the symbol of Whitman's self and his ideas that is pervasively identical with Buddhism which is one of the sect in his Transcendentalism.

Another significant symbolic image is the "ferryman" who carries the ferryboat that symbolizes a vehicle in Buddhism. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Whitman achieves his self-identity, as I mentioned earlier, as a divine ferryman who symbolizes a savior, a prophet, or Buddha who guides to the path of wisdom or "nirvana."

Moreover, I have examined three mystic symbols which are suggestive of Buddhism and other Indian mysticisms. At first, the mother image signifies various associations; mother as a Time symbol, as symbol of Mystic Birth and Death (immortal fertility), and as a political symbol of Nation, Democratic America. And Whitman shows variety in his treatment of the sea symbol along with the associative image of the ship. Using the sea image as an aesthetic symbol Whitman achieves the double image of sea-mother which confirms his deep interest in Buddhism and Vedanticism.

Here I can notice that Whitman employed such symbols or metaphors, for his mystical expressions, of which devices influenced upon modern symbolists. Whitman uses the abstract languages and structures of normal thoughts which are inconsistent, self-contradictory, and even meaningless; and as a consequence he has relied upon metaphors, allegories, and similes to communicate his internal insights into the opacities of transcendental experience. For only in symbolic images is it possible to render mystically and clearly the paradoxical character of translogical reality, and so poetry becomes a form of mythology or mythology a form of poetry. In the case of the ferry trope, it has always been symbolized in the guard or guide for the path to Buddhistic nirvana or enlightenment. In this sense, Whitman is a archetypal western symbolic poet in the thematic and technical perspective. The fact that Whitman can be treated as a modern symbolist is obvious when one reads the following paragraph which Anna Balkian remarked:

In truth, if any Americans were to set examples for the renovation of French verse, it was not be those two hard-working versifiers (Francis Viele Griffin and Stuart Merrill), but one already dead, who, without ever having heard of symbolism, was able to convey, even through translation, the breath and power of verse mutation which echoed the wild rhythms of his savage heart: Walt Whitman, who in terms of his publication in France was a contemporary of the symbolists translated by Jules Laforgue (thirteenth poems in *La Vogue*, June, July, August 1886), his *Leaves of Grass* appeared at the same time as the works of symbolist cénacle, to prove, by deed rather than by word, that irregularities and deviations in verse ring true only when they represent the individualism of the poetic spirit.³⁵⁾

The literary symbolism of Whitman, on the other hand, seems to be exemplified in the old Oriental cultures, especially those of China, Japan, Korea and India, that were concerned with “nothingness” (無) or “timelessness” (空), which led to an Buddhistic nirvana. The old Oriental literature gave, traditionally, notions of calm and tranquility, of non-attachment and seclusion rather than challenging reality, which were rooted in Buddhism and other mystic religions like Taoism. Such religions and meditative notions were expressed appropriately only by the symbolic devices of mysterious words, tone and style. Thus it was that symbolism was a predominant technique that the most poets adopted in the Orient. In-Sop Zong, a Korean literary critic, illustrated such traditional symbolic movement in Asia:

The harmony was with the nothingness or timelessness that led to an ecstatic feeling. They tried to appreciate the seeming stillness that was at the centre of the spinning top that was reality. And so it was that symbolism became a dominant factor in oriental art and literature. Simplicity and mystery were preferred. A graceful gloom, an elegant harmony pervaded the literature. These traits are exemplified in the poem of Omar Khayyam of Persia, Tagore of India, Tupao of China, classical poems of Korea called Sizo, and others.³⁶⁾

Relying on this statement, it is noticeable that Whitman's symbolic artistry is parallel to the Oriental tradition. He created his poetry that combined with mystic and transcendent notions of seclusion and contemplation. His works of art can be, thus, interpreted properly, as having been proved already, through such Oriental philosophy and mystic symbolism. Like those of zen poetry the poetic dictions were formulated with “simplicity” but “mystery”, which explore the transcendental “nothingness” or “timelessness” that the poet attained as he was enlightened in his deep zen meditation.

35) Anna Balakian, *The Symbolic Movement: A Critical Praisal* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 93.

36) In-Sop Zong, *A Guide to Korean Literature* (N.Y. & Seoul: Hollym Int'l Corp., 1982), p. 18.

In the context of Oriental symbolism, in conclusion, Whitman created a literary variety, particularly of themes, dictions and tone, with Buddhistic sensitivity, of symbolic personal of himself-the transcendental poet of Democracy, the metaphysical Poet of Body and Soul, a god identified with the other gods. All his effort and attempts were to create an immortal symbol, the heroic self through his mystical experiences. The Poet who could observe the things with detachment and stillness was the symbol of such Buddhistic monks, and as a young god he became "the tender and junior Buddha." Whitman was so strongly conscious, therefore, of the devices of Oriental symbolism with which he successfully manifested his ideas based on his Oriental cultures, religions and philosophy, which was collectively consecrated to American Democracy.

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概 要

Walt Whitman 은 19세기 美 New England Transcendentalism (뉴 잉글랜드 超絶主義)에서 그의 宗教·文藝·倫理·政治思想을 구축하고 특히 東洋의 神秘的이고 形而上學的 超越的 宇宙觀 (macrocosm)을 체득하고 모든 自然의 個體의 神聖性 (Divinity) 崇嚴·自由·獨立·平等의 一元論의 世界觀을 취했다. Whitman 은 神과 神, 神과 人間, 心과 物, 時間과 空間 自我와 他我, 精神과 肉體의 一致 (oneness)를 믿고 宇宙의 本質이 사랑에 있음을 발견하였다. 이 사랑·自由·平等의 원리를 社會의 道德·倫理·政治의 理念으로써 民主主義의 新 國家建設에 실체화 하려했다. 따라서 Whitman의 사상은 神秘的이고 명상적 超越性 (cosmological)과 政治的 現實性 (national)의 역설적 合一 (paradoxical combination)의 特性을 보이고 특히 強한 國家主義 및 國民主義 (nationalism)의 變증법적 詩學을 그의 藝術에 具像化하였다. 특히 東洋的 Image를 통한 象徴主義的 表現美學을 보이고 있는 Whitman은 東洋的 명상과 사색에서 체득한 靈感과 眞理를 自然의 事象에 metaphor化 하여 암시적으로 表現하였다. 따라서 그의 예술은 그리스도·석가의 說教와 戒示이며 구원과 해탈의 自證이며 기도요·사랑의 고백이며 나아가 倫理와 道德, 政治的 ideology의 詩的意匠이다. 이 汎神論的 思想과 情緒를 表出한 가장 代表的·상징적 image의 object은 바다 (sea) 배 (boat) 풀 (grass) 그리고 慈母 (mother)이며 이들은 그의 詩의 主題와 구조의 全體的인 골격을 이루고 있다. 따라서 研究의 方法은 Whitman이 구사한 상징적 imagery (心像)의 구조를 분석하고 특히 東洋的 要素와 對比하는 比較文學的 研究으로써 Whitman의 詩學의 새로운 地平을 구축하리라 믿는다.

