road that winds through fields and cities, but Whitman is doing more than inviting us to shoulder our duds and go hiking along it. The real journey is toward spiritual vision, toward reunion with the Divine Ground; and thus the Open Road becomes Whitman's equivalent for all the other roads and paths and ways that appear in mystical teachings. It reminds us of the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddhists, and the Taoist Way; it suggests both the *bhakti-marga* or "path of devotion" and the *karma-marga* or "path of sacrifice"; while it comes closer to being the "big ferry" of the Mahayana sect, in which there is room for every soul to cross to the farther shore. Whitman's conception, however, was even broader. He said one should know "the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls."

I am not pleading for the acceptance of Whitman's ideas or for any other form of mysticism, Eastern or Western. I am only suggesting that his ideas as expressed in "Song of Myself" were bolder and more coherent than is generally supposed, and philosophically a great deal more respectable.

V. K. CHARI

Whitman and Indian Thought†

On reading the first edition of the *Leaves of Grass*, Thoreau remarked that the book was "wonderfully like the Orientals." Emerson found in it a curious mixture of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the New York *Herald*. Since then scholars, both Western and Indian, have steadily attested to the striking resemblances in Whitman's poetry to the ancient Hindu teachings. Recent research on Whitman, both Indian and American, has confirmed these resemblances. Whitman, along with his Transcendentalist companions, has come to be studied more and more in the light of Vedantic thought. But the absence of any established evidence that Whitman studied the Hindu books has remained a serious hurdle in Whitman research. Even Whitman's published notebooks and manuscripts do not seem to throw much light on Whitman's Indian sources. Professor Gay Wilson Allen, who besides being an authority

† From the *Western Humanities Review*, XIII (1959), 291–297. Reprinted by permission of the *Western Humanities Review*.

on Whitman has had the good fortune of inheriting some valuable manuscript material from the Furness Collection, says in his recent monumental Whitman biography: "Whether Whitman had read any Oriental literature . . . the most diligent search of scholars has not yet determined."[1]

Whitman's references to India are altogether of a superficial nature, and his poem "Passage to India," which might have been the only direct evidence of Whitman's enthusiasm for India, reveals no precise knowledge about India and is the least Indian of his poems. But then it is to be wondered how without reading the Hindu books Whitman came unwittingly to exhibit such marked affinities with Hindu Vedantic thought. Romain Rolland, who doubted the Indian origin of Whitman's inspiration, was quick to perceive these affinities; but he attributed the poet's mystical experiences to his own subjective realization and partly to the predilections of his background and culture. Rolland's appraisal of Whitman completely underrates the importance of the role of books in the making of the poet. That Whitman was an indefatigable reader and that he passed through a long period of self-instruction before "making" his poems is clear from his preparatory reading and thought. Books had a great deal more importance in Whitman's mental growth than has generally been estimated. They clarified his native visions and confirmed his intuitions; further they opened out to him new horizons of experience. The range of Whitman's knowledge was extraordinary to judge from his manuscript notebooks. Moreover, the comprehensive duties of an editor compelled him to read almost all important publications of his time and review them in his papers. Thus all the contemporary journalistic literature, the best plays, operas, sermons, lectures and articles were accessible to him.

In the years during which the *Leaves* were in the making there was a considerable vogue in America for Hindu religious ideas, particularly through the enthusiasm of the New Englanders. And the English and American periodicals of the time contained much Vedantic material, through the interest created in it by the "Roy" literature. Miss Adrienne Moore in her interesting study[2] has shown how Rammohan Roy was the medium through which Hindu philosophy of the Advaitic (non-dualistic) Vedantic brand reached New England and how he was influential in stirring in the American mind an interest in Indian thought. Whitman, who read almost everything that came his way, could not have escaped some contact with these ideas, though here we

[1] Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York, 1955), p. 141.
[2] Adrienne Moore, *Rammohan Roy and America* (Calcutta, 1942).

are up against a difficulty in making a positive affirmation. Whitman's knowledge of the Vedanta, if he possessed any knowledge of it at all, may have been indirect, derived through the Transcendentalists, and mainly through the writings of Emerson, which surely influenced him during his formative years.

Both Emerson and Whitman felt the need for a new, impersonal "doctrine of the soul." Hence they were attracted to the German doctrines of Self and Emerson took avidly to the Neo-Platonic conception of the Oversoul and the more strikingly developed doctrine of Self in the Atman-Brahman concept of the *Gita* and the *Katha Upanishad.* Emerson's contact with Indian literature probably began during his Harvard days as suggested by his reading lists and marginalia, and he probably gathered a fairly intimate acquaintance with Indian thought even before he published the first of his writings in 1836. This probability is considerably strengthened by internal evidences. Traces of Hindu influence can be discovered in *Nature*, the essays on "Oversoul," "Spiritual Laws," "Intellect," and "Compensation," besides the more deeply Indian of his essays, "Plato," which contains the kernel of Emerson's orientalism. The theme of these essays is the spiritual oneness of Being and intuitive identity, of which the poem "Brahma" is the classic expression. In his essay on "Intellect" Emerson develops systematically a theory of "intellectual intuition" which bears a close resemblance to the Vedantic doctrine. Emerson's essays might have been a channel through which Indian ideas were transmitted to Whitman. It is a significant fact that Whitman reviewed Emerson's "Spiritual Laws" in 1847, and passages in that essay affirming the identity of spiritual being and those that say that the soul is the "one Bottom," the identity underlying differences, that "it is only the finite that has wrought and suffered, the infinite lies stretched in smiling repose," might have aided his spiritual "conversion." The year 1847–48 was crucial in Whitman's spiritual development as it marked the culmination of a long process of subconscious incubation. In that year Whitman experienced a remarkable accession of power, a new birth. Whitman recorded this in his manuscript notebook for 1847–48, which contains a clear, though half-articulate, adumbration of the "Song of Myself."

Whether impelled by native or foreign influences or by his own innate disposition, Whitman came to express in his poems a body of mystical beliefs which are also the fundamental assumptions of the Hindu Advaita Vedanta. The *Leaves of Grass* is to be studied and understood rather as a body of mystical verse comparable to the apocalyptical utterances of the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* than as a finished work of art. In respect to some of his fundamental beliefs Whitman

approximates the Advaita Vedantic philosophy. In fact, the affinities are so deep that Whitman's writing lend themselves to a consistent interpretation in the light of the Vedanta. Whitman, like the Vedantist, recognizes intuition, a form of supra-sensuous, supra-rational mode of knowing-by-being or knowledge through self-immediacy. The Transcendentalists found out the inadequacy of the rational approach and turned to intuition as a real source of knowledge. In this they could have been aided by Neo-Platonic conceptions and by Schelling's idea of immediate cognition. But it was in the Vedantic philosophy that one came across a systematic and comprehensive doctrine of "intellectual intuition."[3]

Emerson had a deep distrust of human thought and protested against its exclusive sway in life: "What help from thought? Life is not dialectics." Emerson believed that thought works a division between man and the world, and causes an internal fissure. Thought being dualistic by nature cannot take us beyond differences. There is an inner nature in thought, "the felt unity," which is the immediate centre of all mediate experience. This inner nature of thought is the Self which is identical with Reality. This principle of unity is the indifference-point of subject and object and can be known in a state of pure immediacy. Such is the central doctrine of the Vedanta, Whitman calls this faculty the "soul-sight" or the "root-centre" of the mind. Emerson calls it the "intellect receptive" which is a unitive, non-dualistic vision, that gives us a "perception of identity" by establishing the "union of the knower with the things known." The intellect is an integral vision of the whole. "The intellect is a whole and demands integrity in every work," says Emerson; "we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles; we see the world piece by piece." "While the world will be whole and refuses to be disparted, we seek to act partially, to sunder, to appropriate." Whitman realized the intuitive identity of the universe and rose to the conception of an absolute Being or Substance, which is at once the support and essence of the world.

> Ethereal, pervading all. . . .
> Essence of forms, life of the real identities, permanent,
> positive. . . .
> I, the general soul. . . .[4]

This soul is the "only certainty" and "final substance." Emerson speaks of "the aboriginal abyss of real Being" which lies "under all this running

[3] "Intellectual" because it is a knowing function, *jñāna;* "intuition" because it is immediate.
[4] "Chanting the Square Deific," lines 41–44.

sea of circumstance."[5] The thought of the Oversoul as the substratum of the universe is common to Emerson and Whitman. For Whitman this oversoul or "Kosmic spirit" is no other than one's own self. In the "Song of Myself" is expressed this cosmic vision, the exalted sense of mystic self-expansion which is the highest achievement of the intuitional sense. As a result of this cosmic consciousness the poet, freed of all impediments, becomes perfectly fluid and diaphanous and reflects within himself the cosmic existence. In an attempt to embrace the Infinite, Whitman goes on endlessly inventorying; and his catalogues emphasize the spiritual unity of the world, not its multiplicity. In Whitman's paradoxical style (reminiscent of Emerson's "Brahma" and the verses of the *Gita*) opposites constantly meet and dissolve; all tends to the dissolution of distinctions. Santayana's criticism that with Whitman the surface is absolutely all and that for him the world has no inside is unjustified, for Whitman's vision not only embraces the All but penetrates beneath the surface to "the depths of qualities and things," to "first principles."

> Only the kernel of every object nourishes;
> Where is he who tears off the husks for you and me?
> Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelopes for you and me. . . .[6]

> I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,
> My course runs below the surroundings of plummets.[7]
> I force surfaces and depths also. . . .[8]

The "intellect," in the words of Emerson, "pierces the form" and penetrates the material husks of reality to its core. "It is an organ for burrowing," says Thoreau. To Whitman as to Emerson subject-object differences are not real. Whitman often expresses the consciousness that all is one and all is self. "All these I feel or am." The mystic's unifying vision obliterates distinctions and attains at-oneness with the All, *Sarvātmatva.* This vision emancipates the poet from the attachment to the particular and the finite and leads to a remarkable enlargement of sympathies. Whitman's love is largely anonymous in character and he sings of human beings in the mass. It has been stated that Whitman's attempt to see life without distinctions results in formlessness in his poetry. "Sing me the universal," Whitman says to his muse. He sets

[5] "Compensation."
[6] "Song of the Open Road," lines 88–90.
[7] "Song of Myself," lines 800–801.
[8] *Ibid.*, line 988.

to himself an unlimited subject whereas particular things are the stuff of poetry. But where Whitman has lost as a poet he has gained as a mystic. For, in escaping the particular he has escaped the binding quality of things, of *nāmarūpa*, or name and form. He has, according to the Vedantist, attained *Mōksa* or release.

From this supreme realization emerges the Transcendental Self, the immutable identical substance underneath the changing world of phenomena. In his essay "Oversoul" Emerson develops the concept of a transcendental self, the soul within man, the vast spiritual background and the substratum of all functions and states of consciousness. The resemblance between this idea and the Upanishadic concept of *Atman-Brahman* is unmistakable. Whitman is conscious of himself as two, as "my soul and I." Emerson speaks of the "distinction of the outer and the inner self; the double consciousness that within this erring passionate mortal self sits a supreme calm immortal mind. . . ." Thoreau too is aware of "a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another . . ." a "spectator sharing no experience . . . that is no more I than it is you." Beneath the flood of "ego" phantoms is the true self, "the background of our being" which is the self of all. Whitman calls this "the mystical identity, the real Me or You." This self is not to be identified with the not-self, the name and form. Ignorance or *Avidya* consists in the superposition of the not-self on the Self (*Ātmani anātmādhyāsa*). Discrimination between the two is the starting point as well as the end of all knowledge. Whitman conceives of his role as that of a spectator unattached to actions and their consequences, sharing all experience, yet detached from it, standing apart and watching the masquerade of life:

> . . . depressions and exaltations
> Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events;
> These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
> But they are not the Me myself.
> Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
> Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary . . .
> Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.[9]

This self is the transcendental witness in us, the spectator (*Sāksi*) or detached percipience. The *Upanishad* describes two birds perching on the self-same tree, one of which feeds on the delicious fruit, while the other, not tasting of it, looks on. Whitman sits and looks out on the

[9] "Song of Myself," lines 71–79.

world of misery, evil, and suffering with supreme indifference and detachment. This distinction between his real nature, the "mystical identity the real I or You or Me"[1] and the phenomenal strata of his mind is constant in Whitman. And this self being the very root is also the self of all. Hence does Whitman "celebrate myself and sing myself" and assume that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Whitman's self is not the dialectical being of the Germans, torn by an inner differentiation and caught in an endless web of relationships. It is not the many-in-one of Hegel but an "identity" transcending the relational existence:

> To these proud laws of the air, the water and ground, proving my interior soul impregnable,
> And nothing exterior shall ever take command of me.[2]

Emerson says: "There is a deeper fact in the soul than compensation, to wit its own nature. The soul is not a compensation, but a life. The soul is."[3] Whereas the world is governed by the laws of compensation, the soul is independent of such laws and subsists in its own right; it follows out its own laws and standards and is never the object of external will. The self thus separated from the phenomenal modes is neither like the *Pour-soi* of the Existentialists, which constitutes itself by self-negation, but is felt as a being in its plenitude, positive and self-certain.

> To feel the puzzle of puzzles
> And that we call Being.[4]

As a result of this self-realization Whitman experiences an inner liberation, a release from all earthly ballasts:

> . . . loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
> Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
> . . . divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.[5]

In a process of dynamic self-expansion Whitman's soul, like the *Viswarupa* (Cosmic Form) of the *Gita*, enters into all and becomes all. "The universe is in myself; it shall pass through me as a procession." He contains multitudes and contradicts himself, for he has known the

[1] See "I Sit and Look Out."
[2] "A Song of Joys," lines 137–138.
[3] "Compensation."
[4] "Song of Myself," lines 609–610.
[5] "Song of the Open Road," lines 53–54, 57.

underlying identity of things. He transcends all ethical distinctions and stands indifferent like the seer in the *Upanishads*.

> Apart from right, apart from the unright,
> Apart from both what has been done and what has not been done
> Untouched by good and untouched by evil.

In what might be a close echo of the above passage from the *Upanishad* Whitman says:

> Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.[6]

He is freed from all dualities and tensions of body and soul, of matter and spirit.

> Clear and sweet is my soul, clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.[7]

While Carlyle remained a "sick soul" haunted by the spectre of world-destruction, while Emerson suffered from congenital low-spirits, and while Thoreau's mind in spite of its remarkable peace and poise bristled with criticisms and negations, Whitman showed a complete accord with existence and gave an unqualified approval to everything. He feels an ineffable sense of fruition and fullness:

> I am satisfied, I see, dance, laugh, sing.[8]

Whitman has been blamed for his incapacity to portray evil and human suffering. But the poems of Whitman do not purport to portray evil; they express rather this exalted vision of a mystic.

ROGER ASSELINEAU

[The "Plan" for *Leaves of Grass*]†

* * * The book is too often studied as a unit and critics tend to forget that it represents forty years of assiduous experimentation, that

[6] "Song of Myself," line 465.
[7] *Ibid*, line 52.
[8] *Ibid*, line 59.
† From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality*, trans. Roger Asselineau and Richard P. Adams (Cam-