

## A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS FEELING IN WALT WHITMAN'S "CHANTING THE SQUARE DEIFIC" AND SIDNEY LANIER'S "THE MARSHES OF GLYNN"

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### I. Walt Whitman

Apparently literary critics have not agreed upon Whitman's religious feeling: how much, if any, he was influenced by Quakerism, and or by all the religious of the world; what his religion was.

When I read "Chanting the Square Deific" carefully I was reminded of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which is also pointed out by George L. Sixbey.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the organization of the poem is analogous to that of these creeds, in which each section deals with the qualities of one of the persons of the Trinity. The poem, however, has an additional "person," Satan, to complete the square. But I am not sure whether the poet meant the square deity to be the Christian Trinity with Satan added.

In the first section the poet identifies himself with Jehovah of Hebrew tribes; Brahm, the creator in the Hindu Trinurti; Saturnius, an ancient Roman deity; Time; Earth; and Father. As for the notion of Time the poet asserted in "Song of Myself" :

"I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured."<sup>2</sup>

It may be plausible that the poet identifies himself with all these gods, since he is eternal in time and space -- "No Time affects me -- I am Time,

old, modern.” The poet must have meant Father to be “God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth” in the Christian Creeds. The following “Unpersuadable, relentless, executing righteous judgments,” is very well put to describe the characters of Jehovah. The god with these characters seems to be universal regardless of time and space. The poet does not forget to add Brahm and Saturnius to Jehovah to make this universality even greater.

The strictness and decisiveness “with those laws” of this side of the square deity are well expressed in the following lines, “...as the seasons and gravitation, and as all the appointed days that forgive not, I dispense from this side judgments inexorable without the least remorse.”

In the second section the poet is the Consolator “with gentle hand extended” toward men, rich and poor. The poet identifies the Consolator with Christ, Hermes and Hercules. The image of this section is, I think, represented most appropriately by Christ. The following lines, “Foretold by prophets and poets in their most rapt prophecies and poems, ...Many times have I been rejected, taunted, ... and crucified, All the world have I given up for my dear brothers’ and sisters’ sake, ...” are nothing but the life story of Christ. This section, therefore, expresses the Love for man. Here the poet must have thought of thousands of sick, wounded, and dying American boys in crowded army hospitals during the Civil War. Hermes and Hercules with Christ are very well used to emphasize the character of the Consolator and to make him “the mightier God,” It is indeed very much like Whitman to treat all these three equally.

In the third section comes the poet as the defiant Satan. The description of Satan is very impressive. Which reminded me of the Satan in the earlier books of *Paradise Lost* in his craftiness, pride, and divinity. However, Whitman’s Satan is neither baffled nor dispelled; his wiles will never be done. His Satan is “Comrade of criminals, brother of slaves.” In this sense

he is very much like Christ who went to the "sinners" to save them. The function of the poet's Satan, however, is not to save criminals and slaves but to plot with them a new spiritual revolt. I think, therefore, his Satan is not simply a negative element opposing things good and consolation in the universe, but he is a positive stimulus to those who hear him. The motif of this Satan seems to have remained throughout Whitman's life, always stimulating man.

In the fourth section, if Whitman had meant his "One advancing" deity to represent the Christian Trinity plus Satan, he would have named the remaining person Holy Ghost. The feminine form Santa Spirita, unlike the above mentioned masculine forms including Satan, must have been, in Whitman's mind, different from the Holy Ghost in some respects.<sup>3</sup> Santa Spirita mystically binds Jehovah, Consolator and Satan together, "including all life on earth, touching, including God, including Saviour and Satan." Perhaps Santa Spirita, "breather and life" represents the spirit of what Whitman conceived America might be in the future. Therefore, the feminine side of his square deity, Santa Spirita, implies woman's pervasiveness and is highly significant in Whitman's religious theory. The lines "..., I the most solid, Breathe my breath also through these songs." appeal to me a great deal. Exactly the same ending can be seen in many other poems by Whitman.

In conclusion, "Chanting the Square Deific" is a highly subjective poem which described Whitman's religious doctrine. Whitman made his fourth-sided deity universal enough to include gods of many nations and ages, and at the same time, sufficiently specific to compose a single, fairly succinct concept of deity.

However, it seems to me that his religious doctrine is much too optimistic. This optimism may well appeal to Americans, but I doubt if it appeals

to other peoples with the same intensity. G. W. Allen says that this four-sided deity is nothing but a kind of pantheistic Over-Soul, which is personified by the "I" as in Whitman's other poems.<sup>4</sup> But it seems to me that the truth is that Whitman studied the world's religions and religious institutions and gave his allegiance to none of them.<sup>5</sup> He was, therefore, essentially a good pagan and created his own religion to meet his love of god, himself, man, nature, and America. Like many good pagans he possessed a deep religiosity, and a deep current of mysticism, which enabled him to write *Leaves of Grass*, and which mystify the poet himself and his readers.

## II. Sidney Lanier

When I read Lanier's "The Marshes of Glynn," I immediately thought of Shelley and Tennyson. In this poem, Lanier is very conventional in form and content, suggestive of these two poets. This lyric poem is so melodic and colorful that one is apt to appreciate his instinctive mastery of beautiful cadences, rather than its content, in which the poet must have meant to express his religious philosophy. Indeed, he was a musician before he was a poet. Every line is the adoration of nature. He really revived the beauty of the sun and water.

The following lines are suggestive of the core of his religious feeling: "As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod, /Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God: /I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies /In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies: /By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod /I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God: /Oh, like to the greatness of God is the greatness within /The range of the marshes, the liberal marshes of Glynn."

The poet was so fascinated by the exquisite beauty of nature that he complacently committed himself to the greatness of God without seriously thinking about Him. The poet's conventional concept of religion seems to be fully reflected in these lines. They are beautiful indeed and they do appeal to me a great deal. At the same time, however, one cannot help perceiving the poet's pensiveness and solitude coupled with his ardors and ecstasies.

In order to explain the poet's pensiveness and solitude, it suffices to say that he was a sick man throughout his periods of poetic productivity, in which this poem also was written. The poet's feeling expressed in this poem with his romantic eloquence cherished by his musical ability does not have to belong to any specific established religions. This kind of feeling toward a god seen through the beauty of nature can be almost universal. This may well be called Paganism. I think the feeling, religious feeling of this sort, for the beauty of nature is appreciated with sympathy, especially by the peoples of the Orient. However, I would like to call this feeling of Lanier the nineteenth century Christianity which was not influenced by Darwinian science, since he was not so interested in the world's religions, old and modern, Oriental and Occidental as Whitman was.

### **III. Comparison of the Two Poets**

Whitman created his own religion which is different from any of the established religions of the world. His religion embraces every element of those religions plus his own ideas, say, his conception of Satan and Santa Spirita—rather different from the Christian Holy Spirit. I called Whitman a Pagan rather than a Pantheist.

Unlike Whitman, Lanier never stripped himself of old belief. He was a

conventional poet, reminiscent of Shelley and Tennyson. Lanier's ideas and images derived from his sensitivity and his emotional feeling are not comparable with the most profound and sophisticated theories of Whitman. Lanier was religious--Christian--in the sense I mentioned above. Whitman's poem covered the whole world with a fair amount of success, whereas Lanier's did not go out of his own South. He hid himself in the beauty of nature, seeking God through that beauty.

#### NOTES

1. George L. Sixbey, "Chanting the Square Deific - A Study in Whitman's Religion," *American Literature*, IX (May 1937), 171-195.
2. "Song of Myself," Section 46.
3. Sixbey, 195.
4. Gray Wilson Allen, *What Whitman Handbook*, Hendricks House, New York, 1946, p. 271.
5. Hugh I. Fausset, *Walt Whitman; Poet of Democracy*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1942, p. 36.