

The Myth of the Self in Whitman's "Song of Myself"¹ and Traherne's "Thanksgivings":² A Hypothesis³

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The Title

"Song of Myself," untitled and unsectioned in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, became "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" in 1856 and "Walt Whitman" in the succeeding editions, until in 1881 it became "Song of Myself."⁴ So the finished title is the product of a number of revisions and, therefore, clearly intentional. *Song* is the English equivalent of *psalm* and *carmen* and *canto* and *chanson* and *Lied*.⁵ There are quite a number of "Songs" in *Leaves of Grass* but only one of epic dimensions. It is certainly not a "song of sixpence" nor does it belong to the kind of *songs* which are the lyrical counterparts of *sonnets*. In the historical background the great English *Songs* of the Renaissance (not to mention the medieval epics called *Song* or *Lied* or *Chanson*) are looming large. Like Spenser and Milton, Whitman frequently invoked the Muse⁶ and, in the end, he gave a name to his "Poem of Walt Whitman" which echoes their words: "Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall moralize my song"⁷ and "I thence / Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song."⁸

That Marvell was concerned with the genre of *song* when he read Milton, appears in his poem on *Paradise Lost*: he confesses to having been afraid that Milton

. . . would ruine . . .
The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song . . .⁹

This seems like a foreshortened version of Whitman's lines in "Passage to India."

. . . the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

Not you alone proud truths of the world,

. . . .

But myths and fables of eld, . . . (17-20)

The words are nearly the same, only that Marvell is afraid of mixing truth and fable while Whitman is keen on it; moreover Whitman brings in the word *myth* (which has been in use only from 1838 onwards)¹⁰ as a synonym of *fable*, adding "The deep diving bibles and legends, . . . the elder religions."¹¹

Apart from the two great epics described by their authors as "my song" there is a modern title which should not go unmentioned: Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" of 1855 which is all about "primitive fables . . . myths and fables of eld . . . the elder religions," with a kind of an Indian Christ-figure for a hero. With these parallels, old and new, in mind the reader of "Song of Myself" has every right to expect an epic poem on a large scale, even one of religious purport.

Syntactically seen, the words "Song of Myself" function in two different ways. Firstly the "of" indicates the "maker or author of a work."¹² This is a "Song" made or written or, as we shall immediately hear, sung by "Myself." Secondly it indicates "the subject matter."¹³ As Milton invokes the Muse to sing "Of Man's first disobedience," this is to be a "Song of Myself." The maker and the subject matter of the song are essentially the same. If the expression is taken as a genitive construction, "Myself" is subject and object, like God in "Love of God." God is the one who loves and is loved. "Myself" is the one who sings and is sung.

When the title melts, as it were, into the first line both meanings are augmented: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself." Not only is "Myself" the maker of the song but he also makes it publicly known with his own voice. He did not write it to hand it over to someone else for recitation but he himself sings the "Song of Myself" and consequently, true to the bardic tradition, he sings himself. Since, moreover, his singing is coupled with celebrating, the action and the meaning are charged with sacramental overtones. "Myself" celebrates and sings and is sung and celebrated, he is subject and object of the solemn rite. He brings and is the sacrifice. This tone is clearly kept up in formulae like: "The peace

and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth"¹⁴ It is rather tempting to envisage an Emily Dickinson who had Whitman, the singer of the *Leaves of Grass*, the bard of the nation, in mind when she wrote, in characteristic irony of his eucharistic aspirations:

Further in Summer than the Birds
 Pathetic from the Grass
 A minor Nation celebrates
 Its unobtrusive Mass.¹⁵

"Myself" in some lines by Herbert and Donne

The "Myself" celebrating and celebrated in the "Song" is more or less identical with the autobiographical author of the "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," but it is also suggestive of the divine Orpheus, the "true son of God, the poet," going out of himself to meet and embrace and become one with all created beings. It is the nucleus of a world, this nucleus to consist of the one who says: "I dote on myself,"¹⁶ and "If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body . . . ;"¹⁷ and ". . . here comes my mistress the soul."¹⁸ The three components of "Myself," the I, the body, and the soul, are well known to readers of Metaphysical Poetry of the 17th century, though with very different overtones. Here they are in George Herbert's *The Temple*:

While that my soul repairs to her devotion,
 Here I entombe my flesh. . . .¹⁹

What follows is a meditation on death or rather on the putrefaction of all flesh. Myself as a subject of moral and religious self-castigation is Herbert's theme in "Miserie" which is suggestive of *Leaves of Grass* from the beginning because of the biblical definition "*Man is but grasse.*" The poem ends with the very words "my self." Man is

A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;
 Nay, his own shelf:
 My God, I mean my self.

The "sick tossed vessel, dashing on each thing" which becomes "his own shelf" is a ship which, leaking and unseaworthy, has become a reef to itself on which it will founder; but the words "toss'd vessel" and "dashing on each thing" also suggest drunkenness and finally, "shelf" does not only mean *reef* but *gradine* or *reredos*, that is to say the shelf at the back of the altar which, in the poem, appears misused by man for setting himself up as an object of worship. The words "I celebrate myself" and "I dote on myself" aptly describe what to Herbert was a fatal error.

Where doting on oneself is concerned, Donne must not be unheard. Self-love is one of the great themes of his Sermons. Writing in an age when the list of composite words beginning with *self* suddenly got longer and longer,²⁰ he was not content with reiterating the harsh condemnations which had come down from the Middle Ages to the Reformation.²¹ His main source with respect to self-love is St. Augustine, to whom man's love of himself is inseparably bound up with man's love of God. "That man doth not love God, that loves not himself; do but love yourselves," but: "Only that man that loves God, hath the art to love himself;"²² this is exactly in keeping with Matt. 22:36-40 where the lawyer asked Jesus:

Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

and Jesus answered:

. . . Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

What matters to Donne (as it did to St. Augustine or Melanchthon) is that the two laws are essentially one. Without the love of God both love of the self and of one's neighbour will pervert.²³

To compare the great Americans of the middle and later nineteenth century with the Metaphysical Poets is far from original but it seems worth considering whether the demarcation-line between their perspectives is, perhaps, to be sought not in the decadence of Calvinistic

determinism preceding and in a way provoking Unitarianism and Transcendentalism,²⁴ but much earlier; not in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in America, but in the late 17th century in England. The Metaphysicals (including Sir Thomas Browne as a theoretical thinker) were anything but dogmatic and narrow-minded, but all their works to the last detail radiate a religious single-mindedness (especially with regard to self-love) which died with them and was practised, much later, only by such writers as Hawthorne, or Emily Dickinson, or Hopkins, who swam against the current.

The God of "Myself"

The word and notion "Myself" seems a possible focus for the change that took place sometime in the later 17th century. The more the gods of the Theists and Neomystics and Latitudinarians and Christian Platonists came into fashion and the revealed God of the Bible was proclaimed to be no fit subject of academic discussion, the office of revelation somehow began to devolve on "myself." The God of the Theists is revealed in a man's own heart,²⁵ the God of the Christian Platonists by man's sense of human perfectibility,²⁶ and the God of the Neomystics by their vision.²⁷ In other words: to the same extent that divine revelation, that is to say, the biblical God of the fathers, begins to be regarded as more or less of a myth, man begins to regard himself as his own source of revelation and thus pretends to just that mythical quality to which he objects in the Books of Moses. To give an example of what is meant here by "myth," I refer to Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey who convincingly argues in her book on *Paradise Lost as "Myth"* that, to modern man, "Christ becomes one among many dying gods."²⁸ There is much to be said for the process being a reciprocal one involving both God and man. When God is regarded more and more as a mere fable, man begins to regard himself more and more as fabulous. Of this Traherne's *Thanksgivings* provide some telling examples.

The series begins with the sections "Thanksgivings for the Body" and "Thanksgivings for the Soul." So, in a way, the speaker presents himself to us, to say it in Whitman's words, as "the poet of the Body and . . .

the poet of the Soul,"²⁹ moreover, he worships his "body" and "soul" no less than Whitman does:

O Lord!
 Thou hast given me a Body,
 Wherein the glory of thy Power shineth,
 . . .
 Limbs rarely poised,
 And made for Heaven:
 Arteries filled
 With celestial Spirits:
 Veins, wherein Blood floweth,
 Refreshing all my flesh,
 Like Rivers.
 Sinews fraught with a mystery
 Of wonderful Strength,
 Stability,
 Feeling.
 O blessed be thy glorious Name!
 That thou hast made it,
 A Treasury of Wonders,
 Fit for its several Ages;
 For Dissections,
 For Sculptures in Brass,
 For Draughts in Anatomy,
 For the Contemplation of the Sages.³⁰

The corresponding enumerations in Whitman spring to every reader's mind and need not be quoted, but his version of the glory of God shining in the body calls for direct comparison with Traherne. In "Starting from Paumanok" Whitman writes:

Behold the body includes and is the meaning, the main
 concern, . . .
 Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body,
 or any part of it! (187ff.)

In Traherne's "Thanksgivings for the Soul" (the "mistress" of Whitman's "self")³¹ the note of exaltation is sumptuously augmented:

All things are penetrable to the Soul of Man.
 All things open and naked to it.
 The Understanding seeth
 Natures,
 Uses,
 Extents,
 Their Relations,
 Ends,
 Properties,
 Services,
 Even all their Excellencies.
 And thee my God is she able to behold (217-228)

O my God!
 In the contemplation of my Soul
 I see the Truth of all Religion,
 Behold all the Mysteries of Blessedness (294-297)

...
 Who hast made me the best and the greatest
 Like thee,
 Thine Image, Friend,
 Son, Bride,
 More than thy Throne,
 Thy peculiar Treasure!
 Such wonderful power hast thou created in me,
 That I am able to do more . . . (305-312)

It would be tempting to go on immediately with

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I
 touch . . .³²

Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,
 ...
 Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,
 I and my soul to range in range of thee.³³

But, of course, no reader would be taken in by the deception because Whitman's lines are too well known and, of course, of a different calibre in tone and diction and rhythm and poetic energy. There is also a difference in the way God is seen and addressed: to Traherne he is the

"Benefactor,"³⁴ the giver of good gifts, while in Whitman generally a vague pantheism prevails. But the two speakers are strangely alike in their constant concern, their admiration, their worship of their own selves. From both might be quoted endless repetitions of: I know, I understand, I comprehend, I see, I behold, I say, I sing, I will, I give, I rejoice, I praise, and, last but not least, "I am . . ." To give a few examples from Whitman and Traherne, freely mixed:

I am the poet . . . I am the poet . . . I am he that walks . . . I am integral with you . . .

I am he attesting sympathy . . . Divine am I inside and out . . .³⁵

. . . I am satisfied³⁶ . . . I am made able to enjoy even thee . . . I am contented with my Being . . .³⁷

I am a dance . . . I am the ever-laughing . . .

I am the actor . . . I am she who adorn'd herself . . .³⁸

Me! even me!

Hath thy glory exalted in all these things:

I am possessor, and they my treasures,

I am delighted . . .³⁹

Whatever the differences: the religious concern with the glory of self-hood is very similar.

From Religion to Myth

In this essay Traherne's meditations and Whitman's poem are regarded with respect to a single theme, not in their various aspects. But it seems that a detailed interpretation would confirm rather than disprove the hypothesis in question: in Traherne God is praised as the giver of gifts (of good ones only) and the self, the receiver of the gifts, is exalted, body and soul. In Whitman the self, body and soul, has expressly become an object of worship.

Traherne still addressed "God" whilst Whitman declares himself to be the inaugurator of a religion.⁴⁰ And yet, seen in the light of Christian

theology from St Augustine (or even St Paul) to Luther and Calvin, not only Whitman's but already Traherne's attitude appears, to put it strongly, as irreligious. God the Benefactor is a myth. He has come down in the world as, reciprocally, man has raised himself to that "superb" kind of exaltation which, seen in the light of the Augustinian tradition, declares itself to be nothing less than *superbia*. God the Benefactor is no longer God, and man, glorified and exalted, is no longer man. They meet on the level of myth.

Some criteria for this hypothesis are to be found in the philological as well as philosophical studies of the names of the gods begun by Hermann Usener and continued by Ernst Cassirer. Usener convincingly shows that the names of the gods of polytheism develop according to a certain historical pattern: in the beginning there are certain "Augenblicksgötter" (gods of a moment). To give an example, a flash of lightning might be a moment giving birth to such a god and his name. These are to be followed by "Sondergötter" (gods with a special office). Their names are appellatives, unambiguous and clearly denotative. When such an appellative name changes into a proper name, when the original denotation is forgotten, the name becomes an indicator of a personal idea and relation, the divine office being then no longer clearly defined and selective but comprehensive and mysteriously named. In the course of time the mysterious proper name will, however, be surrounded by surnames which are felt to make the invocation more effective; and so it may happen that one of the surnames overrules the truly numinous name and the process begins anew.⁴¹

But, as Usener shows, already in Aeschylus the need is felt to break out of this mythical circle and to try and find a virtually different kind of name for a God believed to be virtually different from all "Sondergötter," however impersonated. Aeschylus rejects all nominal attributes because they are inadequate to name the godhead greater than all, that is to say, a godhead only to be compared with himself.⁴²

At this point the philosopher takes over from the philologist. Cassirer argues in a way which to me seems congenial, to a certain extent, to Whitman who saw himself on the road toward a new religion⁴³ while, otherwise, he declared the *Leaves of Grass* to be "only a language

experiment."⁴⁴ To Cassirer, myth and language meet in one vanishing point. The last and most difficult effort in the development of language is the formation of the principal notions "I" and "to be" (the latter taken not as an auxiliary but as an active verb); equally the last stage of myth and polytheism is the idea and signification of the one and only God besides whom there must not be any other gods. Beginning in spontaneity and inarticulate vagueness, language and myth resort to particularization until, paradoxically, they arrive at the stage where they help fulfil the ideal of discursive thinking, strict abstraction from particularity, in their own way. That is to say, they help realize an idea of being which is no longer a mere predicate of some thing, least of all of God.⁴⁵ This happens, characteristically, in the realm where, according to Donne, "contraries meete in one,"⁴⁶ that is to say where the sign is the thing and the word is the god. This word must not be an appellative because "*omnis determinatio est negatio*."⁴⁷ It must be the one proper name which is incomparably individual as well as absolutely general, that is to say, it must be the "I AM" which, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, first appears in Exod. 3:13-14:

And Moses said unto God, Behold, *when* I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name ? what shall I say unto them?
And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.⁴⁸

Usener's and Cassirer's considerations, culminating in this revelation of the name of God, may perhaps shed some light on the development of which Traherne's *Thanksgivings* are an early example and the *Leaves of Grass* a much later one. To put it crudely, against the background of revealed religion, Traherne's Benefactor and giver of good gifts appears as a mere "Sondergott" belonging to some Christian mythology in which Christ has become (to quote MacCaffrey once more) "one of many dying gods."⁴⁹ God is no longer I AM with any predicate strictly ruled out; he is a benefactor while man pretends to be I AM in the character of a giver of thanks.

The themes of self-celebration and God-the-Benefactor in a canonical text of the Reformation

Quite a number of the criteria which contribute to the great change from George Herbert's "Nay, his own shelf: / My God, I mean my self" to Traherne's "Me! even me! / Hath thy Glory exalted in all these things:"⁵⁰ are contained in what is, perhaps, one of the most exquisite, because completely unaggressive and theologically convincing tracts of the Reformation: Luther's interpretation of the *Magnificat*.⁵¹ It is an added reason for resorting to this theological foil, that Traherne quotes the *Magnificat* in the "Thanksgivings for the Soul":

My soul, O Lord, doth magnify thee;
Because out of nothing thou hast exalted thy Servant, (392)

The meditation quoted under the name of *Magnificat* is one of the most beautiful gems in the New Testament (Luke 1:46 ff.). When, after the annunciation, the Virgin Mary wants to give thanks to God, she sets the example for Christ's rule in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:7): ". . . when you pray, use not vain repetitions." Ten verses are sufficient for her, and in these she does not speak in the name of her own self but she says: "my soul doth magnify the Lord, / And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." To Luther the faculties of soul and spirit as used in these words fit into the following order: man is like the Mosaic Temple: his body is *atrium* where everyone can see what he does and how he lives. His soul is *sanctum* where there are seven lights, as there are reason, the power of discrimination, knowledge, and understanding. His spirit is *sanctum sanctorum*, "Gottes Wohnung im finstern Glauben ohne Licht; denn er glaubt, das er nicht siehet, noch fühlet, noch begreifet." ("God's homestead in the darkness of faith without light; for the spirit believes what he does not see, nor feel, nor understand.")⁵² Seen from this vantage point Traherne's praise of the wideness of man's understanding appears to be expressive of a rationalist and at the same time, strangely and yet obviously enough,⁵³ mystical kind of humanism:

In the twinkling of an eye
 My Sight removeth,
 Throughout all the Spaces beyond the Heavens:
 My Thoughts in an instant like the holy Angels.
 Nor Bounds nor Limits doth my Soul discern
 But an infinite Liberty beyond the World.
 Mine Understanding being present
 With whatsoever it knoweth.⁵⁴

Whitman's anaphoric "I know" appears as an echo of Traherne's intellectual enthusiasm:

I know I am solid and sound,
 To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
 All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.

I know I am deathless,
 I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's
 compass,
 I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a
 burnt stick at night.

I know I am august,
 I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,
 I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
 (I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my
 house by, after all.)⁵⁵

Understanding according to Luther does not reach up to religious belief (which, however, is the very essence of man's intellectual existence, not to be cut off from it as it happens in the New Philosophy).⁵⁶ When man is enabled to understand the ways of God rationally, he is acting on a plane where belief does not belong. Furthermore, when man is "exalted" in the sense of being lifted out of his (corporeal as well as spiritual) poverty and depravation, his likeness to God is not enhanced but lost, because (to say it with Donne's words) *vera imago is nuda imago*, the naked beggar in his likeness to Christ at the whipping post.⁵⁷ Exalted man becomes invisible to God who is the highest and therefore, as Luther says, can see only what is low and poor like the Virgin Mary, "das arme Aschenbrödlein" ("the poor Cinderella").⁵⁸ She rejoices in God, her Saviour. And now comes, in Luther, a wonderfully convincing

explication of the *sola fide*: it is as vain to praise God for his works as to try and do some in order to please him.⁵⁹ This conviction is the ideal model of personal love which is given as well as taken for nothing, for otherwise, according to Shakespeare, "it but usurps that name."⁶⁰

Religious belief of the kind demanded in the *Magnificat* is realized in Herbert's "Ah my deare God! though I am clean forgot, / Let me not love thee, if I love thee not,"⁶¹ or in Crashaw's apostrophe (to the Magdalene as well as to Christ): "Mercillesse Love."⁶² And it is clearly denied by Traherne when he says (having mentioned in passing man's sins):

	Goodness,
Thou hast employed thy	Wisdom,
	Power,
To enrich thy Servant	
With The Chief of Beings. . . . ⁶³	

According to Luther God's grace is essentially invisible ("die unsichtliche Gnade Gottes").⁶⁴ According to Donne man does *not* "understand" God, even in the beatific vision, as he is understood by him.⁶⁵ Or, to quote the Sermon on the Mount: "God is in secret" (Mt 6.6). The words of the *Magnificat* are recalled in the "Thanksgivings for the Soul" in a way which to Luther would have been a perversion of their meaning: "My soul, O Lord, doth magnify thee; / Because out of nothing thou hast exalted thy Servant, . . ." (392)

Traherne uses an abstract notion, "nothing," where Luther, in characteristic theological realism, speaks of poverty, sickness, hunger, thirst, imprisonment, suffering, dying. And with him the exaltation answering to all this does not consist in riches and honour and glory being conferred upon man but in God's regard for Mary who was so wretchedly poor that the daughter of a man like Caiaphas would not have had her in her household as the lowest servant.⁶⁶ There is, syntactically and theologically speaking, no other reason why Mary's soul magnifies God and why she believes in being exalted by him but his having regarded her poverty: ". . . my Saviour, / For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden" (Lk 1:48). She does not praise her humility (which by that very praise would have been perverted into

pride). And when she does praise God for having exalted "them of low degree" (Lk 1:52) it means that he has regarded them, too, and not that by making them rich he has lifted them out of the reach of his view.

This idea that God's regard for man is what finally brings about his conversion is poetically realized, for instance, by Donne in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" (41-42): "Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace, / That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face." The great thing God has done for Mary is to have given her his regard. She, however, does or even gives nothing. To quote Luther again: "Sie gibt nichts, sondern allein Gott" ("She gives nothing, but only God [gives]").⁶⁷ This is pure George Herbert: "To one word only I say, No: / Where in the Deed there was an intimation / Of a gift or a donation, / Lord, let it now by way of purchase go."⁶⁸

God gives; man gives nothing. Even when man wants to thank God let him not think of it in terms of a gift. George Herbert's "Thanksgiving" is a deeply ironical aftermath to "The Sacrifice" and it ends with man's inability to give thanks: "Then for thy passion - I will do for that - / Alas, my God, I know not what." "Thanksgiving" is a biblical word very much in need of interpretation. The 51st Psalm shows the way to its religious use: "For thou desirest not sacrifice: else would I give it . . . The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." In other words, man is

A sick toss'd vessel, . . .
Nay, his own shelf:
My God, I mean my self.

Though in Whitman the "strong music" for "those who have failed!"⁶⁹ does as little to qualify his self-celebration as does an occasional "how highly great have my Transgressions been"⁷⁰ in Traherne, the power called "god" in the *Leaves of Grass* is not just Benevolence personified. One and a half centuries separate Whitman from Traherne and he freely draws on all the sources supplied by transcendentalist syncretism. Traherne was still very sure about his God while Whitman seems to be on the lookout for his prints everywhere as of someone who has been lost. But the comparison (which can be at best a very tentative one) holds

so far, that Whitman might have found one of the traces he is so eagerly looking for in the *Thanksgivings*. Though the predicate "giver-of-good-gifts" does not absolutely define God in the *Leaves of Grass* it goes a long way to doing so.

The idea that God is a giver of gifts, and of good ones only, and man (though fallen) is redeemed to understanding and exaltation, is ridiculed by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, and Luther in the *Magnificat* has a prophetic dictum concerning man's covenant with a benevolent God who "exalts" man: "Wenn sich aber Gott verbirgt und seiner Gutheit Glänzen zu sich zieht, daß sie bloß und elend sind, so geht auch Lieb und Lob sogleich aus . . . sie machen sich selbst zum Abgott, und Gott soll sie lieben und loben, eben das ihnen tun, das sie ihm tun sollten; . . ." ("But when God hides himself and draws the shining of his goodness to himself so that they are naked and lost, then their love and praise go out . . . they make an idol of themselves and expect God to love and praise them, to do just that to them what they ought to do to him . . .").⁷¹

This exactly describes the reversal of God and man meeting on the level of myth, with man's own self playing the role of the golden calf. The creed of a man who worships on this level is "O Lord, I am contented with my Being. / I rejoyce in thine infinite Bounty, / And praise thy Goodness."⁷² Traherne still looked upward not only inward or around himself as, according to Mark Van Doren, Emerson did.⁷³ But what he saw there was an impersonation of benevolence, not God. And accordingly the self which he did not get tired of declaring to be God's image has become the image of just that kind of god. And this is, perhaps, worth considering as part of the intellectual background of Emerson's creed "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself"⁷⁴ and of Whitman's self-worship: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself . . ."

* * *

The affinity of the *Leaves of Grass* to the *Thanksgivings* is just one single component in the tradition of singing the self in English and American poetry. If Whitman echoed Traherne he might have quoted verbatim from a much earlier and a very different source which uses singing the self to introduce Puritan self-exploration:

I sing my SELF; my *Ciuil-Warrs* within;
 The *Victories* I howrely lose and win;
 The dayly *Duel*, the continuall Strife,
 The *Warr* that ends not, till I end my life.

It might be well worth while to try and read the *Leaves of Grass* as Puritan autobiography in reverse, and it might be equally interesting to consider Whitman's "Song of Myself" in the light of Edward Taylor's *Meditations* though Whitman, of course, did not know them. With Taylor "self" is nothing less than a divine name: Christ is the "Self" to be sung and celebrated, "thy Lovely Selfe," "thy Shining Selfe," "thy Sacred Selfe," "thy Glorious Selfe," "thy Mystick Selfe."⁷⁵ Since Whitman's poetic "self" is conceived very much in the image and likeness of Christ the Divine Word as well as the *agnus Dei*, Taylor's praise of the Divine Self would fit easily, if parodically, into the fabric of *Leaves of Grass*.

The *Meditations* were written one generation after Traherne and no longer in England but in the New World, but they recall, consciously or unconsciously, the piety and humility of George Herbert. The strands of self-glorification and self-abnegation as well as of secularization and religious sincerity overlap, and it might be rewarding to look for this warp and woof in the texture of Whitman's own poetry. To end this paper concerned with confessions with a confession: the most beautiful part of "Song of Myself" is, to me, the sixth one:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full
 hands;
 How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
 more than he.
 I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful
 green stuff woven.
 Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
 A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
 Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
 may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

...

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

...

This is metaphysical poetry, recalling (from afar) George Herbert, and Sir Thomas Browne, and Henry Vaughan, and foreshadowing a fairly unironical Emily Dickinson. It is symbolic and concerned with the mysteries of creation which appear in such simple garb that it needs a child's ingenuousness to dare and ask for their *quidditas*: "What is . . . ?" so that we can ask for their owner: "Whose?" Here we are drawn, *via* the speaker and the child and the seemingly real grass and the really metaphorical signature in the handkerchief,⁷⁶ towards someone who is not a myth but a numinous entity, actually and personally present in the simplest things and felt to be their source and meaning, but deeply mysterious and essentially unknown, were it not for the old intelligence of his words and deeds which taught our fathers to call him "the Lord."

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NOTES

¹Quoted text: Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. S. Bradley (1969; New York: Norton, 1973).

²Quoted text: Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings*, 2 vols., ed. H. M. Margoliouth (1958; Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).

³This paper was read at a symposium on *The Presence of Mythology in American Literature* in Cologne from 24th-26th July 1995. The style of oral delivery has been retained.

⁴"Song of Myself," editor's note to title, 28.

⁵Most of the lexical definitions are not doing justice to the function of "song" in titles or descriptions of epic poems. See, for example, *OED*, "Song, *sb.*, 2. A metrical composition adopted for singing; occas., a poem," or *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. A. Preminger (1965; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), "Song."

⁶See I. Leimberg, "Zur Tradition der Motive in Walt Whitmans *Leaves of Grass*," *Nachrichten der Giessener Hochschulgesellschaft* 35 (1966): 91-105, esp. 94.

⁷Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977), Proem I.9, and see the editor's note to ll. 1-5 which testify to the word "song" being suggested by (Pseudo-) Virgil: "Lines 1-4 imitate verses prefixed to the opening lines of Renaissance editions of Virgil's *Aeneid* believed to be by him: *Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena / carmen . . . at nunc horrentia Martis.*"

⁸John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. A. Fowler (London: Longman, 1971) I.12-13.

⁹*The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 138.7.

¹⁰OED, "Myth, sb."

¹¹"Passage to India" 22-23.

¹²OED, "Of, prep. V. 17.b. . . . Made, written, painted by." Cf., too, "TV.12.b. Of oneself, by one's own impetus . . ."

¹³*Ibid.* VIII.

¹⁴"Song of Myself" 92.

¹⁵Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. T. H. Johnson (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), No. 1068.1-4.

¹⁶"Song of Myself" 544.

¹⁷"Song of Myself" 527.

¹⁸"Starting from Paumanok" 68.

¹⁹*The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), "Church-monuments" 1-2.

²⁰OED, "Self-, the word SELF used as a prefix . . . *Self-* first appears as a living formative element about the middle of the 16th cent., probably to a great extent by imitation . . . of Greek compounds in $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron$ -. The number of *self*-compounds was greatly augmented towards the middle of the 17th cent. . . ." See also OED, "Self-love, 1. Love of oneself . . ." (from 1563 onwards) and "2. *Philos.* Regard for one's own well-being . . ." (from 1683 onwards).

²¹See, e.g., Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes 1521*, ed. H. G. Pöhlmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), "De peccato" 46-99, esp. 50 (9) where self-love serves as a definition of sin: "Fieri enim nequit, quin sese maxime amet creatura, quam non absorpsit amor dei" (See note 104).

²²*The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1956), vol. 8, 236.626 ff.

²³See Rosemond Tuve's interpretation of self-love in the *Faerie Queene*, seen against its medieval background in *Allegorical Imagery. Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966) 50-51.

²⁴See Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol. 2, 1800-1860: *The Romantic Revolution in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), esp. Part 2, Chapter 2, "Liberalism and Calvinism."

²⁵See Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*, transl. with intr. by M. H. Carré (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1937), *passim*, esp. Chapter 10, "On Revelation" 308 ff.: ". . . revelation must be given directly to some person; for what is received from others as revelation must be accounted not revelation but tradition or history. . . . the breath of the Divine Spirit must be immediately felt . . ."

²⁶See *The Cambridge Platonists*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Cambridge: CUP, 1969) 128-44, John Smith, "The True Way or Method of Attaining to Divine Knowledge" (esp. 143): ". . . The true Metaphysical and Contemplative man . . . who running and shooting up against his own *Logical* or *Self-rational* life, pierceth into the *Highest life* . . ."

²⁷See R. M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th & 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1914), esp. Chapter 13, "Early English Interpreters of Spiritual Religion: John Everard, Giles Randall, and others."

²⁸I. Gamble MacCaffrey, *Paradise Lost as "Myth"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1959) 14.

²⁹"Song of Myself" 422.

³⁰"Thanksgivings for the Body" 42-66.

³¹"Starting from Paumanok" 65.

³²"Song of Myself" 523.

³³"Passage to India" 187-93.

³⁴"Thanksgivings for the Body" 200-04: "That in us thou mightst see / Ingenuity, Thanksgiving, / Fidelity, Wisdom, / Love, / Even to an absent Benefactor." See also "Thanksgivings for God's Attributes" 251-54: "Shall I not then love thee more than my self? / As much as my self because thou hast given me my self; / Infinitely more for giving me all things: The benefits I receive / being the fuel of my love?"

³⁵"Song of Myself" 422; 425; 433; 458; 461; 524.

³⁶"Thanksgivings for God's Attributes" 23.

³⁷"Thanksgivings for the Soul" 321 and 332.

³⁸"The Sleepers" 32-45.

³⁹"Thanksgivings for the Beauty of his Providence" 523-26.

⁴⁰"Starting from Paumanok" 102.

⁴¹H. Usener, *Götternamen: Versuch einer Lehre von der religiösen Begriffsbildung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Schulte-Bulmke, 1948) § 20, 330-349, "Ausgestaltung persönlicher Götter."

⁴²Usener 196, 338-39 and 336n11.

⁴³Cf., for instance, "Starting from Paumanok" 102, "I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion," and 129-30 "Know you, solely to drop in the earth the germs of a greater religion, / The following chants each for its kind I sing."

⁴⁴Quoted from F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: OUP, 1941) 517.

⁴⁵E. Cassirer, *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956, rpt. 1976) 71-167, "Sprache und Mythos: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen." Cf. esp. 137-41.

⁴⁶John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. H. Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952, rpt. 1964), *Holy Sonnets* (from the Westmoreland MS.) 3.1.

⁴⁷Quoted from Cassirer 137.

⁴⁸Cassirer 139.

⁴⁹See above n27.

⁵⁰"Miserie" 77-78 and "Thanksgivings for the Beauty of his Providence" 523-24.

⁵¹Quoted text: Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Werke*, eds. H. H. Borcherdt and G. Merz (München: Christian Kaiser, 1968), vol. 6, 186-244, *Das Magnificat, verdeutschet und ausgelegt durch D. Martinum Luther, Aug.*

⁵²*Magnificat* 192-93, esp. 193 (231-32). All translations from Luther's *Magnificat* are mine.

⁵³The dialectics of rational theology and inspirational mysticism are manifest, for instance, in the personal revelation of the Theists (see above n24), or in the "rational mysticism" of the Cambridge Platonists, see *The Cambridge Platonists* Intro. 16-18.

An outstanding representative is, of course, Henry More who, first a Cartesian, became a spiritualist.

⁵⁴"Thanksgivings for the Soul" 64-71 and *passim*.

⁵⁵"Song of Myself" 403-12 and *passim*.

⁵⁶See I. Leimberg, *Die geistliche Dichtung der englischen Frühaufklärung* (Münster: Waxmann, 1996; forthcoming), Chapter I.3, "Die Pilatus-Frage."

⁵⁷Donne, *Sermons*, vol. 8, 285.553-564.

⁵⁸*Magnificat* 199 (239).

⁵⁹*Magnificat* 201 (241-42).

⁶⁰*Venus and Adonis* 794, *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, The Poems*, ed. F. T. Prince (London: Methuen, 1960).

⁶¹"Affliction I" 65-66.

⁶²*The Poems English Latin and Greek of Richard Crashaw*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927, rpt. 1968) *Carmen Deo Nostro*, "The Weeper" XXII.3.

⁶³"Thanksgivings for the Glory of God's Works" 413-17.

⁶⁴*Magnificat* 194 (233).

⁶⁵Donne, *Sermons*, vol. 8, 235.591-93.

⁶⁶*Magnificat* 191 (231).

⁶⁷*Magnificat* 215 (259).

⁶⁸"Obedience" 32-35.

⁶⁹"Song of Myself" 367.

⁷⁰"Thanksgivings for the Body" 466.

⁷¹*Magnificat* 198 (238) and 200 (241).

⁷²"Thanksgivings for the Soul" 332-34.

⁷³See Matthiessen 100-13.

⁷⁴Ralf Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance, The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 5 vols., vol. 2, *Essays: First Series*, ed. Joseph Slater (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979) 27-51, esp. 51.

⁷⁵*The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. D. E. Stanford (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), *Preparatory Meditations*, Second Series, 11.45; 21.32; 36.40; 43.28; 47.21 and the NT subject of this meditation: "Joh. 5:26. The Son hath life in himselfe." I owe this reference, as well as the previous one to George Goodwin's "I sing my SELF," to Professor Ursula Brumm. Goodwin's text is quoted from Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) 12 with n35 (17). That the self, instead of the soul, is regarded as the focus of human existence since the early seventeenth century is Hannah Arendt's thesis in *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben* (München: Piper, 1981) 249.

⁷⁶The idea of a handkerchief provided by God occurs in *The Temple*, "The Dawning," 13-16.