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SOMEONE sometime should gather together the worst criticism ever written, on all the great masters, in a collection to be titled The Return of the Screw (title borrowed, with many thanks, from an essay by Eric Solomon). Here splenetic critics and bad reviewers, like the scum in Dante’s hell, would be forever remembered to the upper world—a punishment rightfully eternalized in the name of Keats and Melville and Twain and Joyce and Faulkner and the other heroic spirits now gone to their rest on Olympus. And above all in the name of the great Walt Whitman, who must surely have suffered more than any other the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism, things like: “[he] roots like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts” (The New York Times); “We leave this gathering of muck to the laws which . . . must have the power to suppress such obscenity” (The New York Criterion); “the man who wrote page 79 of the Leaves of Grass deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner’s whip” (The London Critic); “Nobody can force us to drink from a polluted bucket a maniac has filled” (The Harvard Advocate); “[Whitman has] fouled with excrement the doorstep of civilization” (Theodore Watts-Dunton, Swinburne’s guardian); “He is morally insane” (Max Nordau’s Degeneration); “[His] is the little nursery game of ‘open your mouth and shut your eyes’” (Henry James); “The best claim that could be preferred for him [is] a seat beside such writers as Ebenezer Elliott” (Algernon Charles Swinburne); “Whitman is poetry’s butcher. Huge raw collops, slashed from the rump of poetry, and never mind the gristle—is what Whitman feeds our souls with” (Sidney Lanier); and “His political, social, religious, and moral ideas are negligible” (T.S. Eliot).  

To be sure, Eliot’s statement, although a very sweeping dismissal indeed, is not in the scatological category of some of the others, but on the other hand it was made in 1927, and by the high priest of modern poetry, which is grounds enough to secure Eliot a place in our prospective volume of immortal criticism. What is more, as it is the intention of this paper to show, Eliot’s own poetry sufficiently resembles Whitman’s in technique and meaning so that if one is negligible in its ideas, the other can hardly escape a similar description. Proceeding upon Eliot’s own dictum that “Comparison and analysis are the chief tools of the critic” (“The Function of Criticism,” 1923), we shall find that image by image and theme by theme, in both the practice and theory of poetry, the differences between the two are less striking than what they did and thought in common.

To begin with, a few studies in comparative imagery may be instructive. Considering Whitman’s “Lilacs” for a start, it is worth noting that Whitman’s four main images in this poem—lilacs, star, cloud, and bird—reappear carrying precisely the same meaning in some of Eliot’s most celebrated passages. “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d, / ... I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring” are lines that exactly anticipate in mood, setting and imagery the most famous first lines in twentieth century poetry: “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire. . . .” The reason why Whitman mourns is exactly the same as Eliot’s reason: like Eliot, he mourns the burial of the dead, made especially intolerable by the ironic upsurge of new life in the springtime:

Passing the yellow-spear’d wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

(“Lilacs,” section 5)

Whitman knew all about April being the cruellest month; even his sorrowing trochaic cadences here are similar to Eliot’s meter, though Whitman gets extra weight and dignity from his grand style, piling up line after line on the awakening life of spring so as to point with periodic force towards the concluding main statement: “journeys a coffin.”

A second major image common to Eliot and Whitman is
the distant star referring to the inaccessible realm of the dead, a "drooping star" in Whitman, mainly signifying the loss of a man (Lincoln), and a "fading star" in Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, signifying every man's loss of immortality. The two poets' images show further similarity in the darkness that blots out the star in each poem; Eliot speaks more abstractly—

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Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion —
And the act
Falls the Shadow
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—while Whitman, the man whose ideas are negligible, puts it this way:

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... [I saw] the fields all busy with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on,
each with its meals and minutia of daily usages,
And the streets how their throbblings throbbed, and the
cities pent—lo, then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping
me with the rest,
Appear'd the cloud . . . the long black trail,
And I knew death . . .
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("Lilacs," section 14)

(While a modern reader might prefer Eliot's brevity of statement, Eliot himself does not complain of Whitman's versification—indeed, he calls Whitman "a great master of versification"; it is only the ideas that are negligible!) So Eliot's lilacs, his fading star, and his cloud or Shadow (*Burnt Norton* makes it a black cloud—"The black cloud carries the sun away"), for all their symbolic effectiveness, may appear less than a novelty to Whitman readers.

The thrush image completes this set of parallel symbols. Whitman's star, distant as the dead beyond all apprehension, and his lilacs, fragrant and lovely but transitory like all life on this planet, are reconciled into unity by the hermit thrush singing in a swampy borderland where life and death visibly mingle. In a typically symphonic structure, Whitman's main images here interact like leitmotifs, separately introduced in stanzas 1-4, pulling against one another in stanzas 9 and 14, and gathered into perfect harmony in the coda—"Lilac and star and bird twined
with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and
the cedars dusk and dim”—after the bird’s song has shown life
and death to be complementary halves of a totally benevolent
reality. This bird-voice of visionary consolation finds a counter-
part in the concluding section of The Waste Land, although Eliot
is only wishing for the consolation that Whitman achieves
(hence the initial “if”): “If there were the sound of water
only / Not the cicada / and dry grass singing / But the sound
of water over a rock / Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine
trees.” As Eliot’s outlook changed to include the possibility of
mystic experience, the bird-image appears more positively as an
instrument of spiritual discovery. A “woodthrush singing
through the fog” (no mere “if” of desirability) does appear
in “Marina,” and the bird’s voice is even more significant in
Four Quartets for announcing epiphanies—“Quick now, here,
now, always—.”

Like Eliot, who endures “dung and death” in each Quartet
before moving toward acceptance, Whitman’s speaker in “Lilacs”
cannot accept the bird’s consoling vision until he has purged
himself of his personal grief (especially by adorning “the burial
house of him I love” with pictures of a united country—“the
varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light”—
the perfect memorial picture for Lincoln’s martyrdom), but
once he does go forth to receive the thrush’s carol of death, one
of the supreme lyrics in world literature ensues. Like the
classical philosophers of old—we may remember Socrates offer-
ing a cock to Aesculapius, the god of health, on the occasion of
his death, and Petronius referring to his imminent death as
merely his “going over to the majority”—Whitman sees death
as a welcome fulfillment, not a horror; to die is to sleep at the
end of a beautiful day, or to return to the ultimate mother—
“Come lovely and soothing death . . . Dark mother always gliding
near with soft feet, . . . And the body gratefully nestling close
to thee.”

To Eliot, no doubt, Whitman’s view of death seemed senti-
mental or, after the Ash-Wednesday watershed, heretically
pagan. Eliotic phrases like “I stiffen in a rented house” (Geront-
tion), “[he] saw the skull beneath the skin; / And breastless crea-
tures under ground / Leaned backward with a lipless grin
(“Whispers of Immortality”), or “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (The Waste Land) do not
show much affinity with Whitman’s “Come lovely and soothing
death . . . Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest wel-
come? / Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all.” And
it is true that Whitman’s “praise! praise! praise! / For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death” remind us more of Faulkner’s Quentin Compson, “who loved death above all . . . as a lover loves . . . the waiting willing friendly tender incredible body of his beloved,” than of Eliot. But on further reflection, Whitman’s image of “the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee . . . O death” may remind us not only of Quentin’s death by water but of Eliot’s “Death by Water,” in which Phlebas has escaped the profit and the loss and the burning sexuality of the Fire Sermon into an enviable tranquillity—“A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell . . . / Entering the whirlpool.” Presiding over the entire Waste Land, moreover, is the headnote from the Sybil, the aging sage whose sum of wisdom, “I wish to die,” is a death-wish not greatly different in its line of reasoning from Whitman’s concluding vision of the dead in “Lilacs”: “But I saw they were not as was thought, / They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not, / The living remain’d and suffer’d. . . .”

The later Christian Eliot agrees most positively with Dylan Thomas’s line that “wise men know that dark is right.” Striking an attitude comparable to Whitman’s “no array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death” (Song of Myself, section 48), Eliot conveys his mood of acceptance through a movie metaphor: to die is nothing more than to wait for the start of the next feature (or next act of a play)—

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed. . . .

(East Coker, III)

The resemblance in outlooks is at least close enough to justify a return to our central question: whose ideas are negligible?

One could point to a number of other recurrent themes and metaphors with similar effect. In some of their best poetry, for example, both poets speak of the ocean to indicate death and eternity. “You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean, / I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,” says Song of Myself (section 22), and even more explicitly, in “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,” the poet asks for “The word final, superior to all, . . . / Whereto answering, the sea . . . / Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word
death, / And again death death death death,” while Eliot speaks in *The Dry Salvages* of “the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage, / The bone’s prayer to Death its God.” “We cannot think of a time that is oceanless / Or of an ocean not littered with wastage,” he goes on to say, and asks, “Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage, / The prayer of the bone on the beach . . .?” That line, one of Eliot’s best, evokes a parallel in Whitman: “In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder’d bones” (*Song of Myself*, section 31). The fact that Whitman’s extinct creature takes permanent identity from Whitman’s grand vision of an osmosis of being, while Eliot’s takes his from the “barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation,” should not seem too seriously a discrepancy. What Eliot and Whitman hold in common here is again larger than their distinctions, and neither poet’s philosophical recourse can be rightly called negligible.

Moving from these specific images to issues of larger moment, what of the gathering of opposites that serves both as theme and technique in both these writers? Probably influenced by the Bhavagad-Gita in this respect, as Emerson suspected, Whitman sought above all in his work to be the Great Unifier: the spokesman of the body and of the soul; the uniter of here and hereafter; the poet who bridges past and future; who makes a passage from modern America to ancient India; who embraces prostitute and President in one easy sweep, and spreads the table “equally set . . . for the wicked just the same as the righteous . . . the kept-woman, sponger, thief . . . The heavy-lipp’d slave . . . the venerable is invited; / There shall be no difference between them and the rest”; who even binds God and Satan as parts of the one Square Deific; and who consigns his identity to the totality of all time and space, marking his connections with an infinite past and future: “Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there . . . / For it [my embryo] the nebula cohered to an orb . . . / And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.” (Eliot objected, in “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” that “A man does not join himself with the Universe so long as he has nothing else to join himself with . . ., and Christians have had something better,” but one wonders if there is a meaningful distinction here: is not the Christian, in worshipping the Creator of all, joining himself to the universe, and establishing that satisfactory relationship between himself and eternity which all major religions predicate, and which Whitman’s poetry too tries to conceptualize?)
Clearly, even a casual look at Whitman’s work will establish its place within the scope of Coleridge’s definition of poetry as the reconciliation of opposites. And again, Whitman’s lifelong effort at gathering opposites into unity meets a parallel in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, whose work is dominated by seemingly irreconcilable opposites in the earlier poems—Sweeney and Prufrock (comparable to Whitman’s “body” and “soul”) contrasting against each other, and Eliot’s wish for “an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing” (the Christ to be) set off hopelessly against naturalistic wasteland reality—but whose *Four Quartets* takes as its master theme the thesis that man must live both on the naturalistic plane and on the level of epiphany, until “the fire and the rose are one.” (The fire and the rose refer to spiritual and natural reality, respectively.) Eliot’s Incarnation, then, his achievement of the “impossible union / Of spheres of existence [where] . . . / the past and future are conquered, and reconciled” (The Dry Salvages, V), is not so different from Whitman’s grand synthesis. Again, neither poet’s ideas are negligible. (In passing, one might note how both poets see music as a way of attaining this deepest mode of perception, Eliot gaining his Incarnation during “the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time, / . . . lost in . . . music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts” (The Dry Salvages, V), and Whitman feeling “the puzzle of puzzles, / And that we call Being” while “The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies, / It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess’d them”—Song of Myself, section 26.)

As further evidence of Eliot’s and Whitman’s affinity, on grounds of similar techniques in this instance, we have Eliot’s dicta on “The Music of Poetry” (1942) wherein Eliot notes parallel principles of organization in music and poetry. “The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music,” he says, perhaps seeking to justify such titles as “Preludes,” “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” *Four Quartets*, and Prufrock’s “Love-song” (cp. Whitman’s Songs, Chants, Carols). But further, in the matter of technical construction, Eliot goes on to say: “There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter.” To be sure, Eliot’s poetry from the beginning used the principles of symphonic structure: the recurring leitmotif, subtle instances of counter-
point (especially the epic past versus mock-epic present, Michelangelo versus Prufrock), points of gathering and falling intensity, crescendos and decrescendos, multiple masks and voices, repetitions and variations on a theme. But—as I have already suggested in connection with “Lilacs”—Whitman was master of symphonic structure just as largely. His *Song of Myself* uses counterpoint (the gathering of opposites); rising and falling intensity of emotion, corresponding to the expanding or contracting of vision in his catalogues; the idee fixe (the widening identity of “I” or self); and the recurrent leitmotif, especially that of grass, which as the “beautiful uncut hair of graves” (section 6) conjoins the living and the dead, which as the “journeywork of the stars” (a scientifically valid assertion, section 31) links geologic eons past and future, which unifies all castes and races by “Growing among black folks as among white” (section 6), and to which Whitman finally commits his decomposing body—“And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure. . . . / I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts of melons” (section 49). Symphonic structure, or “contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter,” as Eliot put it, is also evident in “Chanting the Square Deific,” “To Think of Time,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and many other of Whitman’s poems. Neither Whitman nor Eliot was a lifelong devotee of music for nothing.

In addition to these comments on the music of poetry, other Eliotic statements, familiar now but taken as revolutionary novelties in their time, tend to justify Whitman even more than Eliot himself, in the light of Whitman’s greater daring and isolation seven decades earlier. “Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself as, a return to common speech,” said Eliot in “The Music of Poetry,” and further, in the same vein “Milton—II” (1947): “it was one of our tenets that verse should have the virtues of prose, that diction should become assimilated to cultivated contemporary speech. . . . Another tenet was that the subject-matter and the imagery of poetry should be extended to topics and objects related to the life of a modern man or woman; that we were to seek the non-poetic, to seek even material refractory to transmutation into poetry, and words and phrases which had not been used in poetry before.” All of Walt’s poems and Prefaces are so plainly assumed under this canopy as to not even require demonstration. Likewise, Eliot thought himself to be defending a pioneering spirit in saying (“The Metaphysical Poets,” 1921), “to look into our hearts and write’ . . . is not looking deep
enough. . . . One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts." But to any reader familiar with Whitman’s aesthetics, Eliot’s claims seem mild and redundant; compare Whitman’s complaint to Emerson, which was printed in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856): “This tepid wash, this diluted deferential love, as in songs, fictions, and so forth, is enough to make a man vomit. . . . I say that the body of a man or woman . . . is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is.” While poems like “A Woman Waits for Me” may have pursued this ideal a bit over zealously, earning Whitman such epithets as “bestially sensual” and “morally insane,” no one can doubt that Whitman explored the fullest range of experience, as Eliot prescribed, writing out of cerebral cortex, nervous system, and all. Such passages as the millennial vision at the end of “The Sleepers,” bespeaking the healing powers of the unconscious, and the tender lyric projecting a female sexual fantasy in *Song of Myself*, section 11—“Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather”—compare favorably with anything out of Eliot’s cortex and nervous system, it seems reasonable to say.

A few further specimens from Eliot’s criticism call for comparative judgment, showing affinities that are not negligible. Eliot’s statement that “The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time” (“Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” 1927) nicely echoes Whitman’s creed that “The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today” (1855 Preface), and in writing himself and his time, each poet adopted a disregard for his audience reception. “The question of communication, of what the reader will get from it,” said Eliot in “Poetry and Drama” (1950), “is not paramount: if your poem is right to you, you can only hope that the readers will eventually come to accept it,” while Whitman declared, “I have had my say entirely my own way, and put it unerringly on record—the value thereof to be decided by time” (“A Backward Glance,” 1888). What difference here separates the two poets consists mainly in the price that was paid for following these principles, Eliot following a string of popular triumphs towards a Nobel Prize and elder statesmanship, whereas Whitman in his seventieth year was obliged to write the following: “That from a worldly and business view *Leaves of Grass* has been worse than a failure—that public criticism of it yet shows mark’d anger and contempt more than anything else—. . . is all probably no more than I ought to have expected” (“A Backward Glance,” 1888).
Concerning the ultimate purpose of poetry, substantial agreement is evident between Eliot’s statement, in “Poetry and Drama,” that “. . . it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, . . . to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation,” and Whitman’s statement of his purpose, in “A Backward Glance,” “I say the profoundest service that poems or any other writings can do for their reader is not merely to satisfy the intellect, . . . nor even to depict great passions, . . . but to fill him with vigorous and clean manliness, religiousness, and give him good heart [emphasis Whitman’s] as a radical possession and habit.” (Faulkner likewise wrote, “To uplift man’s heart: . . . we all write for this one purpose,” in his Foreword to A Faulkner Reader, 1954.) And concerning the limitations of poetry, both Eliot and Whitman continue to express similar convictions. Once having achieved this condition of “serenity, stillness, and reconciliation,” Eliot says, art should “leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no further,” while Whitman likewise limits his image of the artist-guide in Song of Myself, section 46: “. . . each man and woman of you I lead upon a knoll. / My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road. / Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself.” Perhaps this is why Whitman says, with impeccably Eliotic logic, that “The word I myself put primarily for them [Leaves of Grass] . . . is the word Suggestiveness . . . The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as I have had mine” (“A Backward Glance”).

There is finally the matter of language development. In “A Talk on Dante” (delivered at the Italian Institute, London, July 4, 1950), Eliot called The Divine Comedy “a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them; and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted.” Here is another splendid touchstone for Whitman’s poetry, beyond a doubt, as is also Eliot’s concluding statement in the above commentary: “The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a
much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed.” How strange that Eliot could be so generous about Dante, yet not notice the obvious relevance of these statements to Whitman, the great experimenter in contemporary language, the emancipator of poetry from its straight-jacket of conventional rhyme and rhythm as well as the singer of bold new themes.

But I think there is finally an explanation for Eliot’s strange obtuseness concerning Whitman’s gifts and his vision, and it should begin with Eliot’s statement in “Religion and Literature” (1935) that “Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.” From that standpoint, Eliot himself found “the whole of modern literature” corrupted by what he called “Secularism,” a charge not applicable to Dante. But how does Eliot himself stand compared to Whitman in the light of an ethical and theological standpoint? First, as to the ethical problem: if it is the writer’s task, as Joyce and others have supposed, to forge the conscience of his race, and the largest and most generous conscience at that, then Whitman’s is by far the greater achievement. Being large and containing multitudes, after all, requires that very highest level of imagination which can assume another person’s identity—the kind of imagination evidenced in Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and Faulkner, whose own identities become totally immersed in that of their characters, as opposed to those lesser writers who write primarily about themselves, like Donne and Milton and Hemingway and Eliot and Wallace Stevens. These latter may be very great writers, but yet they lack that ultimate ethical and religious dimension that enables a man to live, so far as anyone can, the life of another person, preferably drawn from the ranks of outcasts and losers, as are Faulkner’s idiot Benjy and Emily Grierson and Wash Jones, or Twain’s Nigger Jim or Jonathan Swift’s starving Irish.

A large and compassionate imagination, not to be confused with mere sentimentality, may very well be the highest product of human evolution, better than intelligence or heroism, and Eliot fares rather badly on this point. His portraits of class inferiors like Bleistein and Sweeney, inevitably sketched against a house of prostitution for a setting, contrast lamentably against Whitman’s limitless powers of empathy, especially notable in his continual reaching downward: to a lunatic (“carried at last to the asylum a confirm’d case”), to a common prostitute (“Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you”), to criminals and
traitors ("For me the keepers of prisons shoulder their carbines,"
"I and nobody else am the greatest traitor"), to beggars and
pariahs ("I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg," "To
cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean, / On his right
cheek I put the family kiss"), and to all "them the others are
down upon." As a Christian, in his later so-called "wisdom"
period, Eliot did try manfully to develop generosity of spirit
like this, but it never permeated his art as it does Whitman's.
Indeed, except for the Crucifixion—a very special category—
Whitman's work transcends the prophets and Gospels; it is
larger and more generous, freer from the principle of exclusion
that marks off the sheep from the goats even in the Sermon on
the Mount ("depart from me, ye that work iniquity"—Matthew
7:23). Above all, it is free from the malice that leads the
Redeemed to rejoice in the out-pouring of God's wrath in Revela-
tions just as the Israelites had exulted in witnessing the fourteen
plagues on Egypt, lingering deliberately in Goshen to watch
their slavemasters get in full what was coming to them. If there
is a god, one must protest, He should rise above the all too human
malice of such Biblical episodes; He should rather aim to be as
generous of spirit as Walt Whitman, as large and inclusive.

Which brings us from ethical to theological criticism. About
the time of Eliot's nervous breakdown (or near breakdown),
when he was writing *The Waste Land* in a Swiss sanatorium,
his search for a sustaining belief had led him nearly to become
a Buddhist (hence Buddha's Fire Sermon, "shantih shantih
shantih," etc.). Quite reasonably, he settled on Christianity in-
stead within a few years, but the point is that he was at least as
well acquainted with the sacred writ of India as Whitman.
Without questioning Eliot's wisdom in becoming a Christian,
one might wonder all the same how he would, while still deeply
appreciating Hindu thought, have dismissed Whitman's religious
thought as negligible. Whitman's osmosis of being, his sense of
participation in a larger being or process that goes on and
on—and this sense is what animates all those expanding cata-
logues—is visibly descended from Hindu writ like the Bhagavad-
Gita, which Eliot himself was to quote admiringly in *The Dry
Salvages*. Mahatma Gandhi, who in a reversal of Eliot's develop-
ment almost became a Christian, would have understood Whit-
man's ideas perfectly, as is obvious in this quotation from *The
Essential Gandhi*: "I believe in the absolute oneness of God and
therefore of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We
have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refrac-
tion. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach
myself from the wickedest soul nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous." Whether in Whitman or Gandhi, this theology and its ethic are hardly deserving of the epithet "negligible"; one can only conclude that it was Eliot's comprehension of Whitman that was negligible—a transgression made less pardonable by Eliot's role as a Pied Piper in the making of modern literary taste.

Whitman's religious position, like the rest of his nature, was large and multiple, but it did, I believe, have a center which he hoped his poetry would advance: to carry forward the historic process of the humanization of God. Since primitive antiquity, all the great advances in religious thought have been in this direction, from earliest man's worship, out of fear, of the naked power of nature; to the later worship of animals, and semi-human animals like the Sphinx, out of admiration for their brute strength or fertility; to the worship of the fully humanized gods of Olympus or Valhalla, who embody human traits both good and evil; and on to the worship of man-gods, like Christ or Buddha, who embody the highest ideals of humanity—justice and compassion and sacrifice and discipline—unlike their Olympic forebears. (Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and the *Oresteia* were written for just this purpose, to bring an outdated image of God—Zeus the Oriental despot and Zeus the Avenger—up to date with man's evolving soul.) Whitman incessantly called his work *religious* poetry precisely because it advanced this refining process to keep pace with the evolution of a larger soul in humanity, divested now of the chosen people mentality and of all malice and ill-will and spurious selectivity whatsoever.

Under his principle of gathering opposites, then, Whitman quite properly enlists himself in all religious movements, in his splendid section 3 of *Song of Myself*, "Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern" while careful not to exclude "Down-hearted doubters dull and ... dishearten'd, atheistical, / I know every one of you, I know the sea of torment, doubt, despair and unbelief." But while "Making a fetich of the first rock or stump, ... / Helping the lama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols, / Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession ... , / Accepting the Gospels, accepting him that was crucified, knowing assuredly that he is divine," Whitman at the same time observes the limitations of all these "rough deific sketches" of orthodoxy in section 41, "Admitting

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they were alive and did the work of their days” but refining them in the direction of humanizing the divine. Accordingly, scenes and characters from ordinary contemporary life may assume a godlike superstature, conveyed through Biblical phraseology; Whitman’s Madonna becomes “the mechanic’s wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born”; his Christ figure is “The snag-toot’d hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and to come, / Selling all he possesses, traveling on foot to fee lawyers for his brother and sit by him while he is tried for forgery”; and his angels are anyone doing productive work for his fellows—“Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels with shirts bagg’d out at their waists” (emphasis mine). One is reminded of the humanist theology of William Blake in poems like “The Divine Image” (the vers libre chant of Blake’s prophetic books also seems to have influenced Whitman’s style) and again of Gandhi’s theology: “I know God is neither in heaven nor down below, but in everyone.”

But this humanization of the gods does not make Whitman a rational materialist only; his theology does have a mystical dimension, which is best exhibited in his incomparable threnodies on death and its significance, on what it means to die—

I do not know what is untried and afterward,  
But I know it will in its turn prove sufficient, and cannot fail.

And here is where Whitman’s ethics and metaphysics form a perfect whole, for Whitman’s generosity of spirit is never more evident than when contemplating lives wasted and ruined, redeemable only by “what is untried and afterward” (comparable to Eliot’s “prayer of the bone on the beach”)—

It cannot fail the young man who died and was buried,  
Nor the young woman who died and was put by his side,  
Nor the little child that peep’d in at the door, and then drew back and was never seen again,  
Nor the old man who has lived without purpose,  
and feels it with bitterness worse than gall [cp. “Gerontion”],  
Nor him in the poor house tubercled by rum and the bad disorder,  
Nor the numberless slaughter’d and wreck’d, nor the brutish koboo call’d the ordure of humanity,
Nor the sacs merely floating with open mouths for food to slip in,
Nor any thing in the earth, or down in the oldest graves of the earth. . . .

*(Song of Myself, section 43)*

Much more could be adduced to define and justify Whitman's religious position, but why bother when one may dip into his verse almost anywhere and find evidence of the same large and comprehensive soul, basing its ethics and theology on a profoundly religious imagination? Whitman's mystic osmosis of being, like Eliot's Christianity, may rely on erroneous assumptions, but it is in no wise negligible.

To conclude, Eliot's dismissal of Whitman appears in retrospect to have been another of his infamous blind spots, like his praise of Milton merely for his "auditory imagination"—as though Milton were utterly lacking in symbolic or philosophical imagination—and his failure to consider Hamlet's bad mood, or Shakespeare's, properly motivated by an objective correlative, as though the loss of a father, on Hamlet's part, or of an only son, on Shakespeare's, were insufficient motive for regarding one's existence with a corrosive sick joke mentality. The best Eliot can say of Whitman is that "he was, in my opinion, a great master of versification, though much less reliable than Tennyson" (and having, moreover, an "intellect . . . decidedly inferior to that of Tennyson"), comparable to Tennyson mainly in serving as a rather inferior poet laureate for the idea of America as Tennyson did for England.

But in seeing Whitman merely as the American laureate, the poet of his national epic, Eliot was only repeating a vulgar error that persists to this day in American classrooms. It is not widely enough realized that Whitman's truest worth resides in the religious nature of his poetry, in his ethic of a generous spirit and his metaphysic of an osmosis of being, transcending all barriers of time and place and origin. What Whitman lacked of Eliot's personality—his Puritan guilt, his class snobbery, his sardonic masks—redounds mainly to Whitman's credit; what he shared with Eliot—a sensitivity to suffering, a literary pioneering spirit, a great willfulness and intellect and talent and energy—is to the credit of both. And in their literary achievement, what they held in common, ranging from their concepts of the theory and structure and purpose of poetry to an impressive list of specific recurrent themes and images, is much too large for Eliot to dismiss his predecessor as in any wise negli-
gible. Not to detract from Eliot’s achievement, which is great, these arguments will constitute, I hope, a persuasive protest against Eliot’s bad criticism—will provide, that is, one good twist in the return of the screw.