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MACKAY, HELEN HONEYCUTT. The Romantic Concept of the Poet-Prophet and Its Culmination in Walt Whitman. (1970)  
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One of the outstanding characteristics of the Romantic period was the widespread urge to find an acceptable substitute for the religious faith of earlier centuries. The Age of Enlightenment had given popular acceptance to the theory that there was no personal God who interested Himself in the affairs of men. The result was an overpowering feeling of helplessness and desolation, to which has been given the name "the Romantic void." People turned for an alternate spiritual fulfillment to nationalism, to utopian schemes, and finally to art. A corresponding elevation of the artist placed him in a position similar to that once filled by religious functionaries such as priests and prophets. Poets, in particular, were considered to have finer sensibilities than average men, sensibilities which enabled them to see intuitively the transcendental ideal behind Nature's material forms.

A related trend of wide scope was important to the concept. As people, influenced by nationalism, began to examine their national origins, a desire grew for the simple life and primitive vigor of earlier ages. The figure of the ancient bard, who was not only poet but often priest as well, became a shaping influence of vast proportions on the developing concept of the poet-prophet.

To America, with its unique experience and position in civilization, the idea had particular appeal. There the religious, political, social, and cultural aspects of life

in the nineteenth century gave renewed emphasis to the tradition, which was beginning to weaken in Europe.

Walt Whitman, in Leaves of Grass, gave the fullest portrayal of the poet-prophet. Through his wide reading and his journalistic experience, he was exposed to the most important ideas which gave rise to the concept. His life and his work were heavily influenced by this persona, which he expressed most fully in the 1855 Preface and in his early poems. His Civil War experience gave new impetus to the idea, but as he tried more consciously to expand it, and to exemplify it in his life, it became more conventional and pedantic.

The poet-prophet in Leaves of Grass has the characteristics, first, of a prophet: he is a seer, he preaches reform, and he prepares his audience for death and an after-life. He is also, however, a priest, for his work includes various types of ritual observances, particularly those which suggest the shaman. Whitman moreover invests his persona with divinity, as he incorporates various characteristics of deity. Finally, the poet-prophet influences his nation by the power of his "songs," and thus he is essentially the primitive bard.

Whitman did not create an original concept; rather he synthesized a wide range of thought of the Romantic period and incorporated it in his persona. The idea did not have the propagating force for which Whitman had hoped, but it was the culmination and crowning presentation of the Romantic poet-prophet.

THE ROMANTIC CONCEPT OF THE POET-PROPHET  
AND ITS CULMINATION IN  
WALT WHITMAN

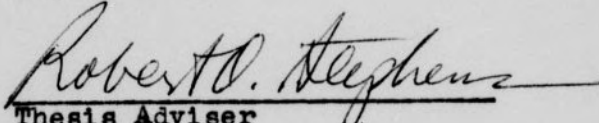
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## CHAPTER I

### THE GENEALOGY OF THE POET-PROPHET

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. . . . Through the divinity of themselves shall the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. . . . They shall not deign to defend immortality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

This passage from Whitman's 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass presents without apology the obituary of the Age of Faith and the birth-certificate of the Poet-priest. The concept here designated "poet-priest," however, included vastly more than is incorporated in the idea of a priest as one who carries on the religious ritual. Whitman saw himself (or his poet-persona) as the founder of a new religion:

I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion, I descend into the arena,  
(It may be I am destin'd to utter the loudest  
cries there, the winner's pealing shouts,  
Who knows? they may arise from me yet, and  
soar above everything.)  
("Starting from Paumanok," VII, 8-10)

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<sup>1</sup>This and all succeeding quotations from Leaves of Grass are taken from Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston, 1959).

Indeed, the concept included the attributes of divinity,  
for Whitman ascribed to the poet the powers of creation:

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise  
would kill me,  
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out  
of me. ("Song of Myself," XXV, 1,2)

or transcendence of time and space:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest  
in sea-gaps,  
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,  
I am afoot with my vision.  
("Song of Myself," XXXIII, 5-7)

and even of resurrection:

Corpses rise, gashes heal, fastenings roll  
from me.  
I troop forth replenish'd with supreme power.  
("Song of Myself," XXXVIII, 11,12)

The term which best incorporates the essentials of Whitman's idea of what the poet should be, however, is "poet-prophet." To understand this term correctly, we must rid ourselves of the narrow modern notion of a prophet as a mere crystal-ball gazer. Whitman's concept of the prophet is more closely akin to that of the ancient Hebrews. To them the prophet was, above all, the spiritual leader of his people. He was the inspired medium through which Jehovah revealed His will to mankind. The Hebrew prophet was also a political power, as might be expected in a theocracy, for he anointed kings, guided their actions through his divine insight, and re-proved them publicly for wrong-doing. Many of the later prophets put their work into literary form with an elevated style which often became poetry, as Isaiah and Jeremiah, in



particular, did. Finally, they did foretell the future;<sup>2</sup> and this too Whitman adopted:

Chanter of Personality, outlining what is yet  
to be,  
I project the history of the future.  
(*"To a Historian,"* 6,7)

Whitman's use of the persona of the poet-prophet was not, however, an unprecedented thunderbolt of creative inspiration. Rather, he performed one of the most remarkable synthesizing functions of all literary history, for the roots of this concept form a complicated tangle which involves a broad cross-section of the literary, philosophical and religious thought of his era and the previous one. It includes such widely divergent realms of thought as Oriental mysticism and nineteenth century American nationalism. It draws from the ancient chants of the Welsh bards, as well as from the more recent philosophy of the Sturm und Drang movement and its followers, Emerson and Carlyle.

The idea of the poet-prophet was Romantic in origin. The Romantics were the first to feel the full impact of the loss of religious faith begun during the Enlightenment. As the view grew that there was no personal God who interested Himself in the affairs of men, they staggered under the weight of the realization that man was completely responsible for his own destiny in a universe regulated only by the

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<sup>2</sup>Characteristics of the Hebrew prophets may be found in C. von Orelli, "Prophecy, Prophets," The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids, 1943), IV, 2459-2466.

mysterious forces of natural law. An element of stark blackness and desolation began to appear in the corpus of virtually all the Romantic and Victorian writers. Carlyle expressed it:

Like the valley of Jehoshaphat, it lies around us, one nightmare wilderness, and wreck of dead men's bones, this false modern world; and no rapt Ezekiel in prophetic vision imagined to himself things sadder, more horrible and terrible, than the eyes of men, if they are awake, may now deliberately see.<sup>3</sup>

Melville incarnated the void in his great white whale, the symbol of the mysterious unknowable. Hawthorne examined it brilliantly in, for example, The Scarlet Letter, as when Hester says to Roger Chillingworth:

Nor do I,--whom the scarlet letter has disciplined to truth, though it be the truth of red-hot iron, entering into the soul,--nor do I perceive such advantage in his living any longer a life of ghastly emptiness, that I shall stoop to implore thy mercy. Do with him as thou wilt! There is no good for him,--no good for me,--no good for thee! There is no good for little Pearl! There is no path to guide us out of this dismal maze!<sup>4</sup>

To this sense of futility has been given the name, "the Romantic void." Man cannot exist in a spiritual vacuum, however, and an alternative lay at hand.

Art had long been considered to be divine in origin, and the same forces which generated the void had been

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<sup>3</sup>From Latter-Day Pamphlets, quoted in Robert H. Murray, Studies in the English Social and Political Thinkers of the Nineteenth Century, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1929), p. 318.

<sup>4</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, The Riverside Library Edition (Boston and New York), p. 209.

working out its solace, through a strengthening of the concept of the divinity of art. As writers began turning to their national past for spiritual inspiration, they discovered that poetry had originated in religious ritual, with its magical spells and priestly incantations. It was early considered a sacred art, or "mystery," often associated with fertility or purification rituals, and the poet was regarded as a priest.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Romanticism's poet-prophet was born.

This is an over-simplification, however; as early as the third century, the neo-Platonist Plotinus had promulgated the theory that works of art reflected the ideal more accurately than nature because:

. . . they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen, but go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking.<sup>6</sup>

The poet who had insight, intuition, intellect and imagination could reach these Divine Ideas and thus see the truths behind nature and mankind.<sup>7</sup> This idea lost currency during the intellectual decline of the Middle Ages and was not

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<sup>5</sup>See "Poetry," The Encyclopedia Britannica (1968), XVIII, 90, 91.

<sup>6</sup>From the Enneads; quoted in M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York, 1953), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>Alba H. Warren, Jr., English Poetic Theory, 1825-1865 (Princeton, 1950), p. 23.

further developed until its revival in Renaissance Italy, when it gained new significance. M. H. Abrams explains the ensuing change in the concept of the artist:

The artist, from being a craftsman, became (in a momentous new aesthetic metaphor) a creator, for it was sometimes said that of all men the poet is likest God because he creates according to those patterns on which God himself has modeled the universe.<sup>8</sup>

Cristoforo Landino made the parallel between the poet's creation and God's creation more explicit in Commentary on Dante (1481) when he reminded his readers that the Latin term vates meant both "poet" and "seer" (or "prophet"). He added that the word "poet" came from the verb used to speak of divine creation: "making from nothing." He concluded: "Although the feigning of the poet is not entirely out of nothing, it nevertheless departs from making and comes very near to creating."<sup>9</sup>

Sir Philip Sidney was responsible for bringing the concept of the poet-creator into English criticism. In so doing, he reiterated the points made by Plotinus and Landino, adding that the poet is superior to nature especially in his ability to bring forth new forms, such as "Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like . . ."<sup>10</sup> The thought simmered slowly during the years after Sidney, until in 1759

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<sup>8</sup>Abrams, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Abrams, pp. 272, 273.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Abrams, p. 273.



Edward Young, in his Conjectures on Original Composition, again brought it to a boil. He spoke of the "natural genius," the creative mind which could see clearly depths dimly felt by the average person.<sup>11</sup> His advice to the poet was to respect the genius within himself and to follow its leading. Young also developed to some extent the metaphor of organic growth which Coleridge would later make his basic distinction. The paper, in general, set forth, in a way not previously attempted, the primary attributes of the figure who would later be called the "Romantic genius," an important ancestor in the history of the poet-prophet. Young's Conjectures failed to attract much attention in England, but became very popular in Germany, where it especially influenced the Sturm und Drang movement.<sup>12</sup>

During the latter part of the eighteenth century, as the early Romantics--Blake, Collins, Gray, and Warton--were turning against the restrained classicism of their day, they appealed for a return to more "primitive," imaginative poetry such as that of Spenser, Shakespeare, and even Milton. They saw in them qualities of creativity and spontaneous inspiration which manifested themselves in, as M. H. Abrams says, ". . . a poetry of inspired vision, related to

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<sup>11</sup>This idea is an interesting foreshadowing of the more modern concept of the racial memory, which Whitman used.

<sup>12</sup>See, for a fuller discussion of the importance of Young's Conjectures, Abrams, pp. 198-202.



divinity, and populated by allegorical and supernatural characters such as do not exist 'in nature.'<sup>13</sup> They also considered these writers members of an inspired line of poets dating back to the Hebrew prophets. Gradually, the Romantics began to adopt the persona of the inspired prophet-priest for their own work, especially in the realms of political and social commentary.<sup>14</sup> Blake, however, used the device in poetry, for in his introduction to Songs of Experience (1794), he spoke of the "voice of the Bard" who would "sing" all his poems in the future.

Rousseau contemporaneously was adding his part to the developing theory of art and the poet. Northrop Frye suggests that Rousseau's great contribution to modern thought was the assumption that civilization was made by man, and that its only known model was in the human mind. This led to two effects: first, it puts art in a key role in civilization, because the basis of civilization is man's creative power; second, the sources of creative power are in the mind and are only reflected by the outside world--thus the inner world is the only one of importance.<sup>15</sup>

The theory continued to grow during the heyday of Romanticism, as, for example, in Coleridge's critical

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<sup>13</sup>M. H. Abrams, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," in Romanticism Reconsidered, ed. Northrop Frye (New York, 1963), p. 38.

<sup>14</sup>Abrams, "English Romanticism," p. 45.

<sup>15</sup>Northrop Frye, "The Drunken Boat," in Romanticism Reconsidered, pp. 10,11.

work, in which he advanced the idea of creation as central to poetry.<sup>16</sup> Shelley wrote in "A Defence of Poetry" (1821):

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. . . . Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition. . . . A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.<sup>17</sup>

Poets soon came to be divided into two groups: seers or men of genius, and men of talent who only arranged or modified the seers' works. John Stuart Mill, for example, saw a dichotomy between "poets of nature" and "poets of culture," with his ideal, the "philosopher-poet" combining the two.<sup>18</sup> Emerson made the same distinction in his essay "The Poet" in which he distinguished between the merely talented poet and the genius. Whitman followed him in this, speaking, in "Song of the Answerer," for example, of the "singer" and the "poet":

The singers do not beget, only the Poet begets,  
The singers are welcom'd, understood, appear  
often enough, but rare has the day been,  
likewise the spot, of the birth of the  
maker of poems, the Answerer. (II, 9,10)

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<sup>16</sup>Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in Major British Writers, eds. G. B. Harrison, et al. (New York, 1959), Vol. II, p. 306.

<sup>18</sup>Warren, pp. 24, 25.

The major contribution of the Victorian era (outside of Carlyle, whom we will consider in more detail later), was to make an explicit connection between the functions of poetry and religion. Wordsworth and Coleridge had exalted poetry, but they kept it distinct from religion.<sup>19</sup> Alexander Bain, John Stuart Mills' biographer, said that Mills "seemed to look upon Poetry as a Religion, or rather as Religion and Philosophy in One."<sup>20</sup> Matthew Arnold left no room for doubt of his appraisal of the relationship:

The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry. . . . More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.<sup>21</sup>

M. H. Abrams calls this Arnold's "innovation," placing on poetry the "tremendous responsibility of the functions once performed by the exploded dogmas of religion and religious philosophy."<sup>22</sup>

In the study of the Romantic theory of poetry and the poet, the German Sturm und Drang movement is important.

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<sup>19</sup>Pointed out by Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 335.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup>Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," Essays in Criticism: Second Series (London, 1935), pp. 1,2.

<sup>22</sup>Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 334.

I have not dealt with this group in its chronological setting because it was not influential in England until the Victorian period, when Carlyle introduced and popularized its thought. Carlyle's views were so colored by German transcendentalism that a brief survey of the essential views of the Sturm und Drang is necessary to the examination of his synthesizing work on the poet-prophet.

Alba H. Warren summarizes the essential structure of German idealistic philosophy:

The external world is a world of appearance. Behind the world of appearance is the world of reality, a spiritual reality, which exists in the mind of God. The mind of man is also spirit and therefore real, but even man is hardly more than a flicker in the eye of God. Man's intellectual tools are reason and understanding: understanding is the pedestrian, discursive faculty of the mind; reason or insight (roughly equivalent to the creative imagination of the English romantics), its supreme power of intuition.<sup>23</sup>

By a surrender to sense and imagination the poet could know the divine. The genius was to shake off restraints and rules and look into his own personal experience for revelation.<sup>24</sup> If poetry expressed truly the writer's own "living world," it would be reflected in a sense of exhilaration, of a changed relationship with others, as Herder suggested in his essay of folksong. The Sturm und Drang also saw the poet as

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<sup>23</sup>Warren, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup>Roy Pascal, The German Sturm und Drang (Manchester, 1953), p. 240.

a spontaneous creator, the analogue of God. One of its members, Lavater, made this point grandiloquently in his

Physiognomische Fragmente:

Human gods! Creators! Destroyers! Revealers  
of the mysteries of God and of men! Interpreters  
of nature! Speakers of inexpressible things!  
Prophets! Priests! . . .

Who is a poet? A spirit who feels that he  
can create, and who does create, and whose  
creation does not only please himself as his  
work, but of whose creation all tongues must  
witness: Truth! Truth! Nature! Nature! We  
see what we never saw, and hear what we never  
heard, and yet, what we see and hear is flesh  
of our flesh and bone of our bone.<sup>25</sup>

Shakespeare was highly influential on the German concept of the poet as creator. In seeking to determine the source of his extraordinary power, they decided that it lay in his ability to throw people out of normal experience and to impose upon them a world of his own making. In the creation of this powerful illusion the poet became a "dramatic God," creating his own space and time.<sup>26</sup>

Carlyle suggested in The State of German Literature (1827) that the Sturm und Drang brought about a change in criticism. It was no longer to be merely mechanical analysis, but to show in what sense poems themselves are true, "since the essence of unmixed reality is bodied forth in them under more expressive symbols."<sup>27</sup> The most important

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Pascal, p. 241.

<sup>26</sup>Pascal, 244.

<sup>27</sup>Warren, p. 79.



element of Carlyle's theory of poetry was the presentation of truth and the edification of the reader. He said of Sir Walter Scott's novels:

What are his novels--any of them? A bout of champagne, claret, port, or even aledrinking. Are we wiser, better, holier, stronger? No. We have been amused.<sup>28</sup>

Thus to him the poet was essentially the seer, or prophet. In the essay "Death of Goethe" he writes:

The true Poet is ever, as of old, the seer; whose eye has been gifted to discern the god-like Mystery of God's Universe, and decipher some new lines of its celestial writing; we can still call him a Vates and Seer; for he sees into this greatest of secrets, "the open secret"; hidden things become clear; how the Future (both resting on Eternity) is but another phasis of the Present: thereby are his words in very truth prophetic; what he has spoken shall be done.<sup>29</sup>

The goal of art was to reveal the transcendental ideal, and the poet was to be the seer who could reveal this truth which lay hidden behind the material world.

Carlyle made a more important contribution to the theory of the poet-prophet, however, by ascribing to the poet the qualities of the Romantic hero. Indeed, Carlyle seems to have been the first to state any sort of developed theory of the hero at all, although the idea had long been current among the Romantic thinkers. B. H. Lehman has made a

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<sup>28</sup>Quoted in Murray, p. 311.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Warren, p. 81.

careful study of the idea of the hero as national leader in the work of the major writers of the period--Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Byron--in order to determine its critical importance in their work. He says that the concept of the hero gained importance during the terrible days of the French Revolution when the early Romantics had their faith in the masses shaken. Until then they had felt that vox populi was equivalent to Vox Dei. The new conclusion was that the people did not always have the "Voice of God"; sometimes they had to learn the truth from the "Man of Destiny."<sup>30</sup> The nineteenth century social determinists believed that the hero was primarily an expression of the spirit of his times or the "soul" of his culture. He understood that the Reason behind things spoke through him, as others did not. Thus his superior understanding justified him in overriding others who "remain on the level of everyday understanding."<sup>31</sup>

Carlyle's concept of the hero was derived more directly from the German critic Fichte, however. Charles F. Harrold cites six major points of similarity.<sup>32</sup> Fichte said that the hero could be any sort of man (political leader, poet,

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<sup>30</sup>B. H. Lehman, "The Doctrine of Leadership in the Greater Romantic Poets," PMLA, XXXVII (December, 1922), 645.

<sup>31</sup>Sidney Hook, The Hero in History (Boston, 1943), p.61.

<sup>32</sup>Charles Frederick Harrold, Carlyle and German Thought: 1819-1834 (New Haven, 1934), pp. 185-188.

priest, etc.). The specific manifestation of his powers was determined by the needs of his age. Second, the hero must possess integrity, or, as Carlyle put it, "sincerity." Third, he must have moral insight which would lead toward a fuller spiritual life, in Carlyle's words, the "seeing eye." Fourth, the hero has a talent for silence; he acts rather than speculates. Fifth, he is unselfconscious of his genius; and sixth, he is born to act, to do a divine deed. Fichte said:

All his thoughts and impulses will of themselves take the most direct way to this end; whatever he does, prompted by this thought, is good and right, and must assuredly prosper, for it is an immediately divine act.<sup>33</sup>

Acting upon the ideas gained from the Germans, as well as those which had developed among the English writers, Carlyle brought them together in one of his 1841 lectures on Heroes and Hero-Worship, "The Hero as Poet." He reiterated initially the kinship between poet and prophet:

Poet and Prophet differ greatly in our loose modern notion of them. In some old languages, again, the titles are synonymous; Vates means both Prophet and Poet: and indeed at all times Prophet and Poet, well understood, have much kindred of meaning. Fundamentally indeed they are still the same; in this most important respect especially, That they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Harrold, p. 188.

<sup>34</sup>Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Poet," in Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History, The World's Classics Edition (London and New York, 1950), pp. 104,105. Subsequent references will be parenthesized within the text.

He then summarizes the qualities of the hero-poet, his message, his role as the spokesman for his age, and finally, the one essential quality:

The seeing eye! It is this that discloses the inner harmony of things; what Nature meant, what musical idea Nature has wrapped-up in these often rough embodiments. Something she did mean. To the seeing eye that something were discernible.  
(pp. 137,138)

To the Poet, as to every other, we say first of all, See. If you cannot do that, it is of no use to keep stringing rhymes together, jingling sensibilities against each other, and name yourself a Poet; there is no hope for you. (p. 138)

Carlyle has weaknesses; Sidney Hook calls Heroes and Hero-Worship "a tract for the times, full of damply explosive moral fervor, lit up here and there with a flash of insight, but contradictory, exaggerated, and impressionistic."<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Carlyle, more than any of his predecessors, established and defined the concept of the poet-prophet. As early as 1827 he had presented poets as dispensers of divine wisdom to their own age, for in "The State of German Literature" he wrote:

Literary men are the appointed interpreters of this Divine Idea; a perpetual priesthood--standing forth, generation after generation, as the dispensers and living types of God's everlasting wisdom, to show it in their writings and actions, in such particular form as their own particular times require it in. For each age, by the law of its nature, is different from every other age, and demands a different representation of the Divine Idea . . .<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Hook, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Hill Shine, "Carlyle's Views on the Relation Between Religion and Poetry up to 1832," SP, XXXIII (1936), 76.

Ideas such as this are in the very marrow of Whitman's work. The fact that Carlyle had a well-documented influence on both Emerson and Whitman makes his thought worthy of careful consideration in the study of Whitman's use of the prophetic tradition.<sup>37</sup>

The genealogy of the poet-prophet thus involves a millenium and a half of development, and a diverse mixture of literary, social, political and religious thought from the best thinkers of many lands. Yet it cannot convey all the elements which Whitman absorbed into his concept, without a survey of associated traditions, which became especially relevant to its Americanization.

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<sup>37</sup>See, for a study of Carlyle's direct influence on Whitman, Fred Manning Smith's articles, "Whitman's Poet-Prophet and Carlyle's Hero," *PMLA*, LV (1940), 1146-1164, and "Whitman's Debt to Sartor Resartus," *MLQ*, III (March, 1942), 51-65.



CHAPTER II  
THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE POET-PROPHET

The concept of the poet-prophet, long nurtured in Europe, found the fertile soil of the New World ideal for its future development, and accordingly took root. America was in many ways peculiarly suited to the growth of the idea, by its geographical location and physical attributes, by the religious, social and political thought upon which its existence as a nation depended, and by the literary concepts and goals which found in it a kindred environment. Some of the diverse forces which had a shaping influence on Whitman's poet-prophet were either peculiarly American or were significantly adapted to nineteenth century American culture. The goal of this chapter is primarily to explore the influences current in the society of which Whitman was a part, and from which he drew the most essential elements of his concept. Among these influences were: the theme of a new man in the New World, the shaping force of a democratic form of government, the current spirit of social reform, Emersonian transcendentalism, and the literary concept called the bardic tradition.

Remote from the "decadent" culture of Europe, blessed with what seemed infinite tracts of fertile land for expansion, and free from political ties with any other nation,

nineteenth century Americans could in all truth see themselves as living in literally a new world, beginning time all over again. In such a setting, many of the same forces which gave rise to primitive poetry were present. R. W. B. Lewis has explored the impact of this idea of the new man in the new world in his book The American Adam.<sup>1</sup> Lewis says that in Whitman "innocence replaced sinfulness as the first attribute of the American character."<sup>2</sup> Whitman seemed to deny altogether the existence of evil, not to feel the presence of what Lewis calls the "convulsive undertow of human behavior."<sup>3</sup> That Whitman consciously applied to himself the idea of Adam, or at least felt it an apt metaphorical statement to enlighten certain aspects of his poetry, may be inferred from his use of it in the "Children of Adam" section of Leaves of Grass. Certainly it was in his Adamic role that Whitman most thoroughly explored Coleridge's concept of the poet as creator. From him we receive forcefully the impression of a new world being created as we watch. Lewis points out that the "dominant metaphysical illusion" of the day was that the process of naming is equivalent to the process of creating, for in this act the mind imposes

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<sup>1</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 1955).

<sup>2</sup>Lewis, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Lewis, p. 49. For a differing view, see Richard Chase, "'Out of the Cradle' As a Romance," in The Presence of Walt Whitman, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York, 1962).

its own order on sensuous matter, rather than searching for a pre-existing order.<sup>4</sup> In Whitman's eyes, the power of a word was enormous. This accounts for his long catalogues; he depends on the words he uses to arouse certain emotions and images in the mind of his reader, who thus completes the process of creation. In his poems he strove to make words embody the elemental force of nature: "Air, soil, water, fire--those are words" ("A Song of the Rolling Earth," I, 10). This emphasis on the power of words, derived from Emerson's transcendental theory of language, set forth in "Nature," is similar to the primitive priest's use of word-magic, bringing events to pass by the power of his repetitive incantations.

In addition to the inspiration afforded by the land itself, democracy as the chosen form of government exerted vast shaping power upon the development of poetry. Exploring the far-ranging influences of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville made some astute observations on the nature of literature in a democratic land. According to his analysis, the equality afforded by democracy "not only turns attention away from the description of the ideal but also provides less to be described."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to fill the vacuum created by

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<sup>4</sup>Lewis, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, eds. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner, trans. George Lawrence (New York, 1966), p. 451. Subsequent references from this edition will be parenthesized within the text.

the loss of the aristocracy, poets, he suggested, customarily turned first to nature: "Gods and heroes gone, they began by painting rivers and mountains" (p. 453). This, however, was only a transitional phase, for the real inspiration of poetry in a democratic nation (and here Tocqueville had America in mind) lay in the people themselves, especially in relation to their future. Successful poetry would depict Americans "marching through wildernesses, drying up marshes, diverting rivers, peopling the wilds, and subduing nature" (p. 453). Democracy by its nature, moreover, would lead irresistibly to poetry of universal scope; for, as in a democracy people began to resemble one another, so nations would come to seem alike to them. The entire human race would thus become the theme of poetry. Tocqueville goes on to say:

Incidents in the life of a man or people have made fine subjects for poetry in aristocratic ages, but none of their poets has ever attempted to include the destiny of the whole human race in the scope of his work. That is a task which poets writing in democratic ages may be able to undertake. (p. 454)

Poetry under the influence of democracy would also tend to become more spiritualized, for as the poet acquired the universal view, he would more readily see the mystery of divine regulation of human affairs according to a great universal and consistent plan. The poet would see beyond the external facts of men and their deeds to the passions and ideas which move them, and in so doing he would "glimpse the soul itself"



(p. 455). His poetry would be based not on legends, traditions, and the like, but on "human destiny, man himself, not tied to time or place, but face to face with nature and with God, with his passions, his doubts, his unexpected good fortune, and his incomprehensible mysteries" (p. 455).

These suggestions were well-adapted to the concept of the democratic poet-prophet, which was a popular theme of nineteenth century writers. Yet primarily only in Whitman, interestingly enough the "poet of democracy," do we find a full use made of the material afforded by his environment. His nationalist forerunners and contemporaries had spent their energy vainly farming what sparse legends and traditions America could offer.

In the social climate of nineteenth century America the poet-prophet also found a congenial atmosphere, for the idea of the prophet was a useful handle by which to initiate social reform. One example will suffice. In the feminist movement of the day, advocates of women's rights often set forth the concept of woman as prophetess, suggested perhaps by the sibyls and pagan priestesses of antiquity. Margaret Fuller, one of the leading feminists of her day (whom Henry James called "the Boston sibyl"), set forth, in her book Woman in the Nineteenth Century, the view that by their very nature women were more capable of seeing into the divine mysteries than men. She said:

What I mean by the Muse is that unimpeded clearness of the intuitive powers, which a



perfectly truthful adherence to every admonition of the higher instincts would bring to a finely organized human being. It may appear as prophecy or as poesy. It enabled Cassandra to foresee the results of actions passing round her; the Seeress to behold the true character of the person through the mask of his customary life. . . . of this sight of the world of causes, this approximation to the region of primitive motions, women I hold to be especially capable.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the poet who saw and eloquently expressed truth owed this ability to the feminine principle operating in him.

"The divine birds need to be brooded into life and song by mothers."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Whitman perhaps had a similar feeling, for he seems often to express this idea in his poetry. E. H. Miller says that Whitman equates "the fertility of his verse with the fertility of motherland--and, more important, motherhood. . . . The poet is woman."<sup>8</sup>

Margaret Fuller also spoke of the prophetess who was to come and lead her peers into the truth: "And will she not soon appear? The woman who shall vindicate their birthright for all women; who shall teach them what to claim, and how to use what they obtain?"<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne perhaps poked a little gentle fun at this statement when he had Hester Prynne speak of the future:

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<sup>6</sup>Margaret Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, condensed in Margaret Fuller: American Romantic, ed. Perry Miller, Anchor Book #A356 (Garden City, New York, 1963), pp. 172,173.

<sup>7</sup>Fuller, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup>Edwin H. Miller, Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey (New York, 1968), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>Fuller, p. 189.

. . . some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess . . .<sup>10</sup>

Nineteenth century American literature, molded both by literary influence from abroad and by the environmental factors already suggested, began in various ways to provide the conditions conducive to bringing forth the poet-prophet. We may look largely in vain, however, to the writers of distinction in the early nineteenth century, the revered triumvirate, Bryant, Irving, and Cooper. Bryant and Irving dealt with American subjects, but in the European style; and even the all-American Cooper was a Sir Walter Scott in frontier garb. It is to Emerson that we must look for evidence of the ferment of change in literary thought. With his characteristic insight, he gauged very quickly the direction of the wind and set himself to exploring its possibilities. In 1837, his Harvard lecture, "The American Scholar," gave a badly-needed boost to the drooping movement for a nationally-oriented literature. In it he declared America's literary independence from Europe in the statement which still moves us by its majesty: "The millions around us rushing into life cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests . . ." America, as a unique historical

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<sup>10</sup>Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, p. 311.

experience, must search for its own truth and not hold to the once-meaningful traditions which were applicable to a different people in a different era. The poet was important as the channel through which the truth would come to his land, for he would see through the material surroundings to the divine ideas which had always existed. All men dimly felt the existence of these ideas, but found themselves unable to express them: "The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that which men in crowded cities find true for them also."<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not Emerson ever felt personally the existence of the Romantic void, he saw its effects in the lives of his friends, and wrote:

It was not until the nineteenth century, whose speculative genius is a sort of living Hamlet, that the tragedy of Hamlet could find such wondering readers.<sup>12</sup>

His brother Edward Waldo Emerson remarked in his notes to the edition:

While writing this, Mr. Emerson was surrounded by persons paralyzed for active life in the common world by the doubts of conscience or entangled in over-fine-spun webs of their intellect.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in The Complete Works, Centenary Edition, Vol. I (Boston and New York, 1903), p. 103.

<sup>12</sup>Emerson, "Shakespeare; or, the Poet," in The Complete Works, Vol. IV, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup>Found in the notes at the end of Vol. IV, p. 352.

The European concept of the poet-priest seemed to Emerson the needed remedy, for it would resolve doubts by showing the truths which had always existed. In the essay in Representative Men, "Shakespeare; or, the Poet," he concluded his remarks by saying:

The world still wants its poet-priest, a reconciler, who shall not trifle, with Shakespeare the player, nor shall grope in graves with Swedenborg the mourner; but who shall see, speak, act, with equal inspiration. For knowledge will brighten the sunshine; right is more beautiful than private affection; and love is compatible with universal wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

The idea also appears in his poetry, as in the following short poem:

"A new commandment," said the smiling Muse,  
"I give my darling son, Thou shalt not preach;"  
Luther, Fox, Behmen, Swedenborg, grew pale,  
And, on the instant, rosier clouds upbore  
Hafiz and Shakespeare with their shining choirs.<sup>15</sup>

Emerson's transcendental beliefs played an important role in forming his view of the poet as prophetic seer. To him the word "poet" meant one who has intuitive vision, rather than one skilled in language. Thoreau succinctly summarizes the transcendental theory of poetry in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, in which he says:

A poem is one undivided unimpeded expression fallen ripe into literature, and it is undivi-

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<sup>14</sup>Emerson, Works, Vol. IV, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup>Emerson, "ΑΑΑΚΡΤΝ ΝΕΜΟΝΤΑΙ ΑΙΩΝΑ," Works, Vol. V, p. 313.



dedly and unimpededly received by those for whom it was matured. . . . The unconsciousness of man is the consciousness of God.<sup>16</sup>

Emerson makes the same observation in "The Poet," when he speaks of all poetry being written before "time was" and declares that the true poet can hear "those primal warblings." Shelley speaks in "A Defence of Poetry" of poetry as the "interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own." The poet, according to Emerson, "saw" the divine ideas by means of his insight, expressed by imagination, "a very high sort of seeing." By stimulating the reader to new responses, poets became "liberating gods." Most men could feel the influence of nature, but were not able to express it; the poet could both receive and impart.

Transcendentalism was compatible with a widespread literary tradition of the nineteenth century, the bardic tradition, which had a vital influence on the concept of the poet-prophet. "Bard" was the most common synonym for "poet" in much nineteenth century writing, because it suggested a primitive, untutored, romantic past. The Romantic idea of the ancient bard is perhaps best shown by referring to Macpherson's introductions to his Ossianic "translations." In the preface to the 1760 volume called Fragments of Ancient Poetry he stated:

There can be no doubt that these poems are to

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<sup>16</sup>Henry D. Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (New York, 1911), p. 411.



be ascribed to the Bards; a race of men well known to have continued throughout many ages in Ireland and the north of Scotland. Every chief or great man had in his family a Bard or poet, whose office it was to record in verse, the illustrious actions of that family. By the succession of these Bards, such poems were handed down from race to race; some in manuscript, but more by oral tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Thoreau, who was a lifelong admirer of Ossian in spite of the widespread talk of forgery, referred often to the bardic ideal, as in this statement from A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers:

The bard has in a great measure lost the dignity and sacredness of his office. Formerly he was called a seer, but now it is thought that one man sees as much as another. He has no longer the bardic rage, and only conceives the deed, which he formerly stood ready to perform. Hosts of warriors earnest for battle could not mistake nor dispense with the ancient bard. His lays were heard in the pauses of the fight. There was no danger of his being overlooked by his contemporaries. But now the hero and the bard are of different professions. When we come to the pleasant English verse, the storms have all cleared away, and it will never thunder and lighten more. The poet has come within doors, and exchanged the forest and crag for the fireside, the hut of the Gael, and Stonehenge with its circles of stones, for the house of the Englishman. . . . We see the comfortable fireside, and hear the crackling fagots in all the verse. (pp. 459,460)

Poetry with the flavor of the "hut of the Gael, and Stonehenge" lacked what the Romantics considered the artificially imposed form and tame subject matter of neo-classical

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<sup>17</sup>James Macpherson, Fragments of Ancient Poetry, ed. Otto L. Jiriczek (Heidelberg, 1915), p. 5. In this and in all following quotations from Macpherson, I have regularized the { sign to s.

writing. It appealed to the basic human emotions which they felt were common to all people in the infancy of their cultures, regardless of how widely disparate those cultures had since become. To them, the great classical works of the Renaissance owed their success to their appeal to these fundamental instincts of humanity. The knowledge of human nature which was thus exemplified was the result of the poet's inspiration and not of education. The growing reverence for Shakespeare was partly a result of the belief that he was an untutored genius, who had "warbled his native woodnotes wild."

In such reasoning lay the hope of New World letters. The paucity of outstanding American writing was attributed to the fact that writers had no national past upon which to draw, no great experiences which could yield the raw materials for drama or the exalted forms of poetry. Shakespeare became the measuring-stick for nationalistic literary aspirations, for if he gained his inspiration solely from the emanations of nature, surely the sublime grandeur of the American surroundings was at that moment nurturing the native genius who would raise American literature to a level with or beyond that of Europe.

The bardic tradition grew out of a late eighteenth century movement which looked for inspiration to the literary tradition of the ancient Celts.<sup>18</sup> This became a key element

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<sup>18</sup>William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York, 1960), pp. 76,77.

in the total Romantic movement by its emphasis on a strange and mysterious past. The trend caught the imagination of readers who demanded, and received, more translations and imitations of Celtic poetry. Thomas Gray, as early as 1757, showed the influence of the revival in "The Bard" and "The Progress of Poesy." The 1760's saw the publication of Macpherson's spurious, but highly influential, Ossianic poems. Blake, in his introduction to Songs of Experience spoke of the "voice of the bard" who would "sing" all of his future poems.

The concept of the poet-prophet owes much of its power to the Celtic revival. As writers, intrigued by this fresh store of material, delved more deeply into primitive poetry, they discovered an overlapping of the functions of poet and priest which suggested, if not synonymy, at least a very close relationship. The Welsh bards, in particular, seemed to be considered seers, or prophets, and as such were greatly respected by the people. Edward, previous to his invasion of Wales, is said to have killed the bards to prevent their arousing their countrymen to action.<sup>19</sup> One of the four ancient books of Wales, the Black Book of Carmarthen, which consisted primarily of prophetic verse, may have been written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as bogus

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<sup>19</sup>Nelson F. Adkins, "Emerson and the Bardic Tradition," PMLA, LXIII (June, 1948), p. 667.

prophecy, in order to inspire revolt against the English and Normans.<sup>20</sup> Caesar reported that the Druids taught their pupils great numbers of verses,<sup>21</sup> which would suggest very close functional ties between poet and religious leader. Macpherson stated in the preface to the main body of Ossian's poems that the bards were an inferior order of Druids, and were their disciples. We can only be certain, however, that after the introduction of Christianity into Britain and the resultant fall of the Druids, poets performed many of the functions which had once been performed by the Druids.<sup>22</sup> As a result, perhaps, of the religious aura, miraculous power was often ascribed to the primitive poet. This is obvious from an unidentified bardic fragment used by Emerson:

I am possessed of songs such as no man can repeat; one of them is called the "Helper"; it will help thee at thy need in sickness, grief, and all adversities. I know a song which I need only to sing when men have loaded me with bonds; when I sing it, my chains fall in pieces and I walk forth at liberty.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the idea of the poet as inspired seer and prophet became one of the characteristics of bardic poetry.

The Romantic view of the inspirational quality of

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<sup>20</sup>Gwyn Williams, An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century (Philadelphia, 1952), p. 39.

<sup>21</sup>Williams, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup>Williams, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup>Used in Emerson's Letters and Social Aims; quoted in Adkins, p. 671.



nature also stemmed in large part from the influence of primitive poetry. Nelson F. Adkins points out that the Romantics saw the bard as "rude, wild, elemental," and his milieu as "forests, cliffs, crags, and mountains," from which his poetry was derived.<sup>24</sup> This view of nature was actually the crux of a vast difference in outlook of Celtic as opposed to Mediterranean art. R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, in their historical survey of Roman Britain, pinpoint the divergence, which they suggest stemmed from widely disparate views of life.<sup>25</sup> To the Roman and the Greek, the countryside was useful only for meeting the needs of the body. Man must turn for his spiritual needs to the city, for it was the most important fact of his culture. The northern European tribes, by contrast, met around an oak tree or a rock for whatever group functions were necessitated by their civilization. Their villages were small and insignificant to their system of thought. To them, nature was entirely adequate as a means of spiritual fulfillment. Macpherson reflected this outlook when he had Ossian go out into the forest to compose his songs:

But lead me, O Malvina! To the sound of my  
woods; to the roar of my mountain streams.  
Let the chase be heard on Cona; let me think  
on the days of other years. And bring me the

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<sup>24</sup>Adkins, p. 665.

<sup>25</sup>R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, Roman Britain and the English Settlements (Oxford, 1937), pp. 186,187.



harp, O maid! that I may touch it, when the  
light of my soul shall arise.

(Ossian, I, 110)

Macpherson went to the extreme with his use of nature to set a mood, a device often seen in genuine Celtic poetry. By so doing, he was trying to exemplify his mistaken notion of Celtic melancholy and wildness. Common are examples such as the following:

I sit by the mossy fountain; on the top of the  
hill of winds. One tree is rustling above me.  
Dark waves roll over the heath. The lake is  
troubled below. The deer descend from the  
hill. No hunter at a distance is seen; no  
whistling cowherd is nigh. It is mid-day:  
but all is silent. Sad are my thoughts as I  
sit alone. (Fragments, 11,12)

Gaining inspiration directly from nature, bardic poetry came to be characterized appropriately by its lack of a formal prosody, in theory at least, although few of the Romantic aspirants to bardship actually put that doctrine into practice. They felt that a simple, but elevated, style, not bound by rhyme or meter, best expressed the bardic ideal. For example, they appealed again to Celtic poetry, which seemed to them wild, irregular and untutored, a view which has now been largely refuted. Scholars in the field have shown that Celtic, especially Welsh, poetry is actually characterized by a very intricate rhyme scheme and prosodic pattern.<sup>26</sup> Most writers, however, could not read ancient

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<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Williams, op. cit., and H. I. Bell, The Development of Welsh Poetry (Oxford, 1936).

poetry in the original, and their speculations about its nature were based on the English translations, which were normally in prose. Macpherson also commented on the prosody of his "original," saying in the introduction to the Fragments:

The versification in the original is simple; and to such as understand the language, very smooth and beautiful. Rhyme is seldom used: but the cadence, and the length of the line varied, so as to suit the sense. (p. 5)

In the introduction to the larger body of Ossianic poems, he added:

Each verse was so connected with those which preceded or followed it, that if one line had been remembered in a stanza, it was almost impossible to forget the rest. The cadences followed in so natural a gradation, and the words were so adapted to the common turn of the voice, after it is raised to a certain key, that it was almost impossible, from a similarity of sound, to substitute one word for another. (p. xix)

Not only Celtic poetry, but also the ancient poetry of other lands, contributed to the view of the appropriate prosody for poetry in the bardic style. Especially important was the example of the English Bible. In the eighteenth century Bishop Lowth analyzed Hebrew poetry for its prosodic pattern, and promulgated the view that the devices of repetition and parallelism formed its characteristic quality.<sup>27</sup> For example, in Exodus 15:2 we see an example of parallelism:

The Lord is my strength and song, and he is  
become my salvation;

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<sup>27</sup>See "Lowth, Robert," The Encyclopedia Britannica (1968) XIV, 377.

He is my God, and I will prepare him an  
 habitation;  
 My father's God, and I will exalt him.<sup>28</sup>

This verse has an extremely rhythmic, chanting quality, but the poetic effect cannot be attributed to rhyme or to syllabic meter. The cadence comes naturally from the parallelism of the phrases and lines.

Many Romantic writers spoke of this "natural" poetic style which should characterize bardic poetry. For example, in the introduction to Canto V of Marmion, Scott wrote (in carefully rhymed and metered verse!):

Come listen, then! for thou hast known,  
 And loved the minstrel's varying tone,  
 Who, like his border sires of old,  
 Waked a wild measure, rude and bold,  
 Till Windsor's oaks, and Ascot plain,  
 With wonder heard the northern strain.  
 Come, listen!--bold in thy applause,  
 The bard shall scorn pedantic laws,  
 And, as the ancient art could stain  
 Achievements on the storied pane,  
 Irregularly traced and planned,  
 But yet so glowing and so grand;  
 So shall he strive . . .<sup>29</sup>

Emerson conveyed the same thought in his poem "Merlin," in which he says:

The trivial harp will never please  
 Or fill my craving ear;  
 Its chords should ring as blows the breeze,  
 Free, peremptory, clear;

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<sup>28</sup>This and all following quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Scofield Reference Bible (New York, 1969), in which the King James Version is used, but archaic expressions are brought up to date.

<sup>29</sup>Sir Walter Scott, Marmion, ed. William J. Rolfe (Boston and New York, 1913), pp. 142,143.

No jingling serenader's art,  
 Nor tinkle of piano strings,  
 Can make the wild blood start  
 In its mystic springs.  
 The kingly bard  
 Must smite the chords rudely and hard,  
 As with hammer or with mace;  
 That they may render back  
 Artful thunder, which conveys  
 Secrets of the solar track,  
 Sparks of the supersolar blaze.<sup>30</sup>

More explicitly, in the same poem, he states that the bard should not "encumber" himself with "the coil of rhythm and number," or with "rule and pale forethought." With a similar feeling Thoreau writes: "What is produced by a free stroke charms us, like the form of lichens and leaves."<sup>31</sup>

Closely related to the desire for an elevated, but unartificial prosody, was the feeling that certain poetic genres were more suited than others to the expression of bardic poetry. As one might expect, the more elevated forms, such as the epic and the ode, were preferred. The Pindaric ode, in particular, was highly regarded for its combination of dignity, imagination and passion. Gray used it in "The Bard" and "The Progress of Poesy"; Goldsmith pointed out the similarity between the Irish bard Carolan's work and that of Pindar, especially in their vivid imaginative detail.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Merlin," in Essays and Poems of Emerson (New York, 1921), pp. 505, 506.

<sup>31</sup>Thoreau, Week, p. 411.

<sup>32</sup>Adkins, p. 667.

In 1839, Emerson noted of his own poetic aspirations:

. . . not tinkling rhyme, but grand Pindaric strokes, as firm as the tread of a horse. . . . I wish to write such rhymes as shall not suggest a restraint, but contrariwise the wildest freedom.<sup>33</sup>

This "wildness" was best suited, however, to the lyric, for it gives the most scope to imagination and emotion, and has a freedom and adaptibility which enable it to fit into other poetic forms,<sup>34</sup> in addition to having been found often in ancient Celtic and Anglo-Saxon verse. Much of the extreme use of melancholy in Romantic poetry, especially that within the bardic tradition, stemmed from the elegiac quality often seen in its primitive antecedents. Therefore, the elegy also came to be considered an appropriate form for poetry of this sort. It is noteworthy that Whitman's poems almost without exception can be placed in one of these four categories. Leaves of Grass as a whole has undeniably epic qualities: the epic hero (Whitman's poet-persona); a theme which is national and even universal in scope, the simple but elevated style, and the assertion that the poet is inspired, if not by the Muses, at least by something beyond the ken of most men. "Passage to India" may be appropriately explicated as an ode, particularly in the classical sense of a public chant on a public occasion. "When Lilacs Last in

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Adkins, p. 665.

<sup>34</sup>Thrall, Hibbard and Holman, p. 269.



the Dooryard Bloom'd" is one of the great elegies of the Anglo-American tradition, and many of Whitman's war poems have a hauntingly elegiac quality. The lyric, of course, is his most characteristic means of expression.

One other form, while not a genre, was often associated with bardic poetry. The catalogue is a well-known epic device, but it is also found in many other poetic settings in most primitive verse. The Hebrew poets of the Old Testament made use of it, as we see in the following verses:

In that day the Lord will take away the bravery  
of their tinkling anklets,  
And their headbands, and their crescents like  
the moon,  
The pendants, and the bracelets, and the veils,  
The headdresses, and the armllets, and the sashes,  
And the perfume boxes, and the amulets,  
The rings, and nose rings,  
The festival robes, and the mantles,  
And the cloaks, and the handbags,  
The hand mirrors, and the linen wrappers,  
And the turbans and the veils. (Isaiah 3:18-23)

Gwyn Williams tells us that among the Welsh poets prose lists were often set as exercises in literary expression to apprentices in the bardic schools.<sup>35</sup> Often in primitive cultures catalogues were used by the priests as a sort of word magic. By repetition of certain words, one could weave a spell which could bring a desired event to pass. One form of catalogue poetry was the riddle, in which the attributes of a being or object were enumerated and the solution left to

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<sup>35</sup>Williams, p. 31.

the reader or listener to determine. An interesting use of the riddle as a sort of incantation is made by the Welsh poet Taliesin in his "Song to the Wind," which begins:

Discover thou what is  
The strong creature from before the flood,  
Without flesh, without bone,  
Without vein, without blood,  
Without head, without feet;  
It will be neither older nor younger  
Than at the beginning . . .<sup>36</sup>

After a long rehearsal of the other characteristics of the wind, the poem ends dramatically:

One being has prepared it,  
Out of all creatures,  
By a tremendous blast,  
To wreak vengeance  
On Maelgwyn Gwynedd.

Another poem by Taliesin also has the aura of magic; it suggests an enchanter creating a being by enumerating various aspects of nature from which he will be made. Taliesin sings:

Neither mother nor father  
was my maker;  
my source and my mould  
were the senses, ninefold,  
springing from fruits,  
the fruit of God's roots,  
primroses and hill bloom,  
of tree and shrub blossom,  
of earth and of clay,  
on my birth day,  
of nettle bloom  
and the ninth wave's foam.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Lady Charlotte Guest's Mabinogion, p. 276.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in Williams, p. 30. The spelling and capitalization follow the text.

The belief in magic is closely related to another characteristic of much primitive poetry--what has been called "cosmic consciousness." Dr. Richard M. Bucke, the psychiatrist friend of Whitman, seems to have coined this phrase in his book of the same name. He defines the term:

The prime characteristic of the cosmic consciousness is, as its name implies, a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe.<sup>38</sup>

Karl Shapiro gives a clearer definition in an essay on the subject:

By cosmic consciousness is meant the capacity of the individual consciousness to experience a sense of total unity with all Nature, or the universe, or some degree of that experience.<sup>39</sup>

Whitman illustrates the sense of unity with nature in some lines from "A Song for Occupations": "Strange and hard that paradox true I give,/ Objects gross and the unseen soul are one" (V, 4,5). The concept of unity also involves the unity of the various parts of the universe with each other in an understandable way. This order may be seen by the person possessed of cosmic consciousness, in whatever age he lives. If the universe is thus unified in logical, understandable order, the one who sees that order becomes possessed of the power to manipulate events; this is the

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<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Edgar Lee Masters, Whitman (New York, 1937), p. 85.

<sup>39</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote, Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry (Lincoln, Neb., 1960), p. 30.

rationale behind magic. We may see it, for example, in ancient Chinese poetry:

My being is one with the primeval spirit,  
I am a wave in the river of light and darkness.  
All creation is my father and my mother,  
The sky is my bed and the earth my cushion.<sup>40</sup>

The same element is present in ancient Irish poetry:

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,  
I am the wave of the ocean,  
I am the murmur of the billows,  
I am the ox of the seven combats,  
I am the vulture upon the rocks,  
I am a beam of the sun . . .<sup>41</sup>

In more modern times, Whitman expressed the same view, as in "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd":

We are Nature, long have we been absent,  
but now we return,  
We become plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark.  
We are bedded in the ground, we are rocks,  
We are oaks, we grow in the openings side  
by side,  
We browse, we are two among the wild herds  
spontaneous as any,  
We are two fishes swimming in the sea together.

Because man is one with nature, we often find what may be called the cosmic flight. Blake writes in Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

. . . then I flung myself with him directly  
into the body of the sun. . . and passed all  
the planets till we came to Saturn, here I  
stay'd to rest, and then leap'd into the  
void between Saturn and the fixed stars.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Quoted in Frederik Schyberg, Walt Whitman, trans. Evie Allison Allen (New York, 1951), p. 249.

<sup>41</sup>Elizabeth A. Sharp, ed., Lyra Celtica: An Anthology of Representative Celtic Poetry (Edinburgh, 1896), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup>Quoted in Schyberg, pp. 255, 256.

In the Bible cosmic attributes are usually reserved for God, but the principle is the same:

[God] bowed the heavens also, and came down,  
 And darkness was under his feet.  
 And he rode upon a cherub and did fly;  
 Yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind.  
 (Psalm 18:9,10)

One of the earmarks of cosmic poetry is that it appeals strongly to the emotions, for it springs from them; not, as Miller points out, the normal emotions of personality, but from "dark, mystic sources, involving, ultimately, the cosmic order both of the man and of the universe."<sup>43</sup> We are reminded of the ancient belief of the divinity of the insane person or of someone in a trance, such as the priestess at the Oracle of Delphi. These "dark, mystic sources" involve undoubtedly not only some primal transcendental truth, but the collective racial memory, what Whitman called the "float of the brain of the world," for it is out of this that great archetypal poetry grows.

Another characteristic of cosmic poetry is its emphasis upon procreation--the most vital function of the cosmos, for it involves the entire life cycle of birth, growth, death, and resurrection. Primitive people have always felt this strongly, and demonstrated it in their literature, as well as in fertility rituals. One example from the Bible will suffice to show a typical use of procreative imagery:

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<sup>43</sup>Miller, Start with the Sun, p. 45.



Hath the rain a father?  
 Or who hath begotten the drops of dew?  
 Out of whose womb came the ice?  
 And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath  
 gendered it? (Job 38:28,29)

Finally, as the ancient bards were nothing without an audience, so cosmic poetry depends upon the reader for its power. Having little or no imposed form, it "realizes its latent order in the emotional reconstruction provided by the responding and participating reader."<sup>44</sup> Whitman wrote in Democratic Vistas:

. . . the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem. . . . Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. (pp. 500,501)

The bardic tradition was perhaps the single most important influence on the concept of the poet-prophet. In America, it found its most ardent support, for it was ideally suited to the development of a native literature in an infant country which lacked the historical and traditional materials available in Europe. Yet, although the varied aspects of the poet-prophet tradition were the subject of literary treatises among many of the Western world's best thinkers, none of them really acted upon them. That was the unique contribution of Walt Whitman.

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<sup>44</sup>Miller, Start with the Sun, p. 53.

## CHAPTER III

## THE EMBODIMENT OF THE POET-PROPHET

Walt Whitman, perhaps more than any other author, was inseparable from the personality he created in his book. The relationship was so close that it became indistinguishable even to Whitman himself. He was being very nearly literal when he wrote: "Camerado, this is no book,/ Who touches this touches a man" ("So Long!" 53,54). He was one with his book when he pled poignantly (in a sublimation of his Calamus emotions):

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your  
 clothing,  
 Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or  
 rest upon your hip,  
 Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;  
 For thus merely touching you is enough,  
 is best,  
 And thus touching you would I silently sleep  
 and be carried eternally.  
 ("Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,"  
 22-26)

His acquaintances also recognized the relationship; Edward Carpenter remarked after his first interview with the poet: "Whitman seemed to fill out 'Leaves of Grass,' and form an interpretation of it."<sup>1</sup> The concepts gleaned from his surroundings and his reading Whitman put into his poems,

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer (New York, 1955), p. 481.

only to reabsorb them into his life. The persona of the poet-prophet, most clearly and completely expressed in his early work, became one of the most important aspects of his life, one which he assiduously cultivated until his death. As he developed this role, it changed, gradually, but surely, becoming more and more a narrow stereotyped pose quite different from what it had originally been, not in idea, but in scope. The chapter following this one will survey the use of the concept in Whitman's poetry; it is the purpose of this chapter to examine its influence primarily on his life, although any examination of Whitman's life apart from his work is not really possible.

Whitman's poet-prophet sprang from its creator's head, like Minerva, full-grown, in the 1855 Preface and "Song of Myself." One would surmise from the well-established traditions summarized in the past two chapters that a world so prepared for an idea would immediately and jubilantly welcome its realization. Whitman himself undoubtedly thought so, for he confidently foresaw his acceptance in the last sentence of his Preface: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." Thus we can only wonder that he was not completely crushed by the violence of the reaction which followed, the more cruel in that it was so unexpected. The unfavorable criticism probably resulted from the fact that Whitman gave his world its first real primitivism undiluted. The

Romantic literati liked their savages refined, like Natty Bumppo's Indian friend Chingachgook. Whitman's "barbaric yawp," although not literally so barbaric as he liked to think, was to their Victorian sensibilities merely crude. Having learned from his literary masters that the bard should not "encumber" himself with "rule and pale forethought," he did not so encumber himself--no rhyme, no established meter, no uniformity of line length, no prescribed subject matter. Having understood from the leading philosophers that the modern ideal should be the noble savage in all his primitive simplicity, Whitman failed to provide the appropriate fig leaves. And having taken a long look at the much-glorified "common" people about him, he did not understand that this group could not possibly include the prostitute, the "onanist," the "venerealee," or even the "cleaner of privies."

During the long, seemingly barren years preceding the 1855 coup, Whitman's active mind was absorbing the multifaceted Romantic literary traditions, synthesizing them, and assimilating them into the more mundane, but nonetheless exciting, facts of his American environment. The unique achievement which resulted has often been undervalued by critics who have discovered that he was not the inspired and original creator his (favorable) contemporaries and early biographers thought. Leslie Fiedler, for example, points out with his customary ascerbity that all the ideas

incorporated in Whitman's bard-prophet eidolon were "tired literary cliches" by the time Whitman adopted them--"the dreams of the effete at their most exhausted, the last nostalgia of the hyper-aesthete for a mythic 'natural.'"<sup>2</sup> To him, Whitman was simply caught on a treadmill from which he lacked the sense to extricate himself:

Condemned to play the Lusty Innocent, the Noble Savage, by a literary tradition that had invented his country before he inhabited it, Whitman had no defenses. The whole Western world demanded of him the lie in which we have been catching him out, the image of America in which we no longer believe; the whole world cried to him: "Be the Bard we can only dream! Chant the freedom we have imagined as if it were real!"<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Fiedler fails, however, to explain why the world then failed to accept its "looked-for darling." He does at last toss Whitman a bone, although by this time well-cleaned and marrow-sucked. Somehow, Whitman "remained a poet through it all"! Gay Wilson Allen also makes the point that Whitman was working within a well-defined tradition, adding, however, that the poet was distinguished from others of the movement by his "international-nationalism" and his preaching of an "ethical democracy." To Allen the question seems not so much one of direct borrowing as one of "common origins and similar ambitions."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, "Images of Walt Whitman," in An End to Innocence (Boston, 1955), p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>Fiedler, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook (Chicago, 1946), p. 446.



Whitman's use of the poet-prophet of the 1855 edition was admirably suited to the proclamation of an "ethical democracy," in the religious connotations of the role and in the rhapsodic style it permitted. To him, the concept of the poet-prophet was far more than just a convenient device. He felt that America, to realize its full potential, needed the moral and spiritual leadership once provided by organized religion. The unique needs and conditions of his country, however, could not be met by an outmoded system of thought. To him, poetry seemed the answer, not the "trivial" poetry of the European literary tradition, but poetry which, as Richard Chase points out, promulgated a program.<sup>5</sup> The 1855 Preface set forth the character of the poet-prophet and the functions of the poetry he would write. In 1871, Democratic Vistas was still expressing the same concepts, although now they were far more standardized and organized. Whitman's reading had shown him the philosophical foundations for what he had been stumbling toward in 1855. The task of the poet he now felt was more specifically to create "archetypal poems," which, as Chase adds, could unify people's "soul and imagination."<sup>6</sup> Archetypal images were those which welled up out of a

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<sup>5</sup>Richard Chase, Walt Whitman, Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 9 (Minneapolis, 1961), p. 43.

<sup>6</sup>Chase, p. 42.

collective soul common to all men, the "float forever held in solution" from which man only "receiv'd identity by [his] body," as Whitman said in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." The divisions between men could surely best be resolved by appealing to that original soul which all have in common.

Although the various streams of influence resulting in Whitman's poet-prophet can be traced, the unique quality of his creation has often caused critics to wonder what else lay behind the surprisingly original concept which resulted. His education was in no way superior to that of his peers, and it seems unusual that one unskilled in disciplined reading and study could so well have assimilated such a wide range of literary and philosophical concepts. The influence, of course, of his journalistic years cannot be underestimated. He was in New York, one of the two great literary centers of the day, during its most exciting period of activity. The wars of the literati, which were at that time at their peak,<sup>7</sup> were performing the valuable service of keeping literature in the forefront of the news. Even the political journals carried a wide variety of literary discussions, book reviews, poems and stories. Knowledge of literary trends was as much a part of life for the young reporter as the knowledge of front-runners for the next presidential election. In addition, America's isolation assured that generally only the

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<sup>7</sup>The leading history of these literary wars is that of Perry Miller, The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville (New York, 1956).

best literature from abroad reached its shores; it is likely, therefore, that Whitman's reading of third-rate work would have been somewhat limited. With a naturally curious and quick mind, he undoubtedly soon attained a literary sophistication which would be most unlikely for a young journalist of today.

A number of special influences on the developing concept seem worthy of note. In 1866, Emerson noted in his journal:

I suspect Walt Whitman had been reading these Welsh remains when he wrote his "Leaves of Grass." Thus Taliessin [a Welsh bard of the sixth century] sings:--

"I am water, I am a wren;  
I am a workman, I am an actor;  
I am a serpent;  
I am a cell, I am a chink;  
I am a depository of song, I am a  
learned person."<sup>8</sup>

The importance of the bardic tradition was pointed out in the last chapter, but the influence which Emerson here suggests seems far more specific than that which Whitman might have gained from the foggy atmosphere of literary trend alone. Robert R. Hubach points out in his article "Walt Whitman and Taliessin" that Whitman would have had access to a limited sample of Taliessin's work in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of Welsh tales, The Mabinogion, which was published in 1849. He further notes two similarities between the poets: both considered themselves poet-prophets and their contemporaries agreed, and both were poetic innovators

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Adkins, p. 675.

who scorned mere versifiers and imitators.<sup>9</sup> One poem from the Mabinogion especially anticipates Whitman, as these lines illustrate:

I was with my Lord in the highest sphere,  
 On the fall of Lucifer into the depths of hell.  
 I have borne a banner before Alexander,  
 I know the names of the stars from north  
     to south;  
 I have been on the galaxy at the throne of the  
     Distributor;  
 I was in Canaan when Absalom was slain,  
 . . . . .  
 I have been teacher to all intelligences,  
 I am able to instruct the whole universe.<sup>10</sup>

Another element which seems likely to have been influential on Whitman's developing concept resulted from the widespread enthusiasm of his era for Oriental mysticism. To Thoreau, in 1855, he disclaimed having read the Orientals. Allen suggests that this, however, may only have represented modesty before Thoreau who was widely read in the field. It is significant that Whitman later said he had studied the "ancient Hindoo poems."<sup>11</sup> C. N. Stavrou claims that Whitman's concept of the racial memory stemmed from the combined influence of Buddha and Darwin. From this he saw each man as made up of the millions of lives preceding him and as contributing to those following him. Thus by expressing his

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<sup>9</sup>Robert R. Hubach, "Walt Whitman and Taliessin," AL, XVIII (January, 1947), p. 330.

<sup>10</sup>Lady Charlotte Guest, trans., The Mabinogion, Everyman's Library, No. 97 (London, 1906), pp. 273, 274.

<sup>11</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 141.

thoughts in his lifetime, an individual could insure their perpetuation in future generations.<sup>12</sup> This thinking is evident as early as the 1855 version of "Song of Myself," in which Whitman says: "I am an acme of things accomplished, and I an encloser of things to be" (XLIV, 15). Whitman's interest also in Egyptian civilization and his subsequent close study of it between 1850 and 1855 are well-documented from his notebooks and diaries. Allen says that the influence in particular of the fertility cult of Osiris was important to the "development of his own poetic role."<sup>13</sup> One other influence was especially important to the cosmic aspect which gave Whitman's poetry much of its "primitive" vigor. In 1847, O. M. Mitchel gave a series of lectures on astronomy which were published in 1848, and which were a key source for Leaves of Grass.<sup>14</sup> It was probably from Mitchel that Whitman gained his "cosmic vision," or his ability to transcend space and time, such as we see over and over in "Song of Myself," as, for example:

I visit the orchards of spheres and look at  
                   the product,  
 And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at  
                   quintillions green.  
 I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing

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<sup>12</sup>C. N. Stavrou, Whitman and Nietzsche: A Comparative Study of Their Thought, University of North Carolina Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures, No. 48 (Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 123.



soul,  
My course runs below the soundings of plummet.  
(XXXIII, 89-92)

Some critics, however, feel that all of these combined influences were still insufficient to have yielded a book such as the 1855 Leaves of Grass. A few, such as Malcolm Cowley, have concluded that Dr. R. M. Bucke must have been correct in assuming that Whitman gained his insight from a mystical experience which Bucke dates in June of 1853 or 1854.<sup>15</sup> James E. Miller, Jr., also accepts this theory, which he feels can be borne out from internal evidence in "Song of Myself": "'Song of Myself' is the dramatic representation of a mystical experience."<sup>16</sup>

The paucity of biographical material available, especially in the five years preceding the first edition, probably insures that we will never have a complete picture of all the facets of Whitman's life that went into his new concept. It is equally difficult to determine how much he may have drawn his poet-prophet from a role he was even then playing in his own life. The episode of his work as a carpenter in the early 1850's has been pointed out as an example that he was doing exactly that, an interpretation

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<sup>15</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "'Song of Myself' As Inspired Prophecy," in James E. Miller, Jr., Whitman's Song of Myself--Origin, Growth, Meaning (New York, 1964), pp. 179-195.

<sup>16</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., "'Song of Myself' As Inverted Mystical Experience," in Whitman's "Song of Myself," op. cit., p. 134.

probably influenced by O'Connor's story "The Carpenter" in which Whitman is presented as a Christ-figure who performs a miracle on Christmas Eve. However, Allen feels that at the time Whitman did not assume the Christ-carpenter role consciously, although it may have had symbolic influence later when his role as poet-prophet became clearer.<sup>17</sup> He is also known to have read George Sand's The Journeyman Joiner, in which a poet worked as a carpenter for ideological reasons. Allen notes: "George Sand's poet-carpenter may have given Whitman some suggestions for the poet-prophet role he was constructing in fancy and gradually adopting in practice."<sup>18</sup>

As Leaves of Grass began to go through successive editions, Whitman's own life and the role of the poet-prophet became more entwined. Allen points out that in "Starting from Paumanok," more than in the 1855 Preface or the 1856 "By Blue Ontario's Shore," Whitman was creating a self-characterization, visiting places he had never really been, seeing himself in times in which he had never lived.<sup>19</sup> The first line of the poem, "Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born," shows the poet investing his birth with a mythic, primitive aura. After a stanza in which he seems

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<sup>17</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup>Allen, Handbook, pp. 138, 139.

to be seeing his own (imaginary) life as a composite of American characteristics, he announces his program:

"Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World."

Whitman's desire to be an orator and go directly to the people with his message, suggests that the role of the prophet was beginning to influence his life. In 1858 he drew up a circular which presented his program for a course of lectures, but which he never used.<sup>20</sup> In 1864, he was evidently still cherishing the old dream, for he confided to John Burroughs that, as Burroughs said, "By and by he expects to make himself felt lecturing."<sup>21</sup> And, as late as 1879, after giving his Lincoln Lecture, he expressed a desire to present other lectures.<sup>22</sup> The evidence seems to indicate, however, that the magnetic personality which Whitman displayed in conversation with small groups, was not present when he tried to lecture. His speeches were never successful. Perhaps, if he had been a success as an orator, we would now lack the poetry on which he lavished so much of the same dream. Mary Colum points out that in Whitman's poems he is always speaking to the masses rather than to individuals. He urges "acceptance of things in the mass"--fatherhood, motherhood, sex, comradeship, and death. The oratorical

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<sup>20</sup>Allen, Singer, pp. 218, 219.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Allen, Singer, p. 309.

<sup>22</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 484.

style of his poetry was thus an eminently suitable means of conveying his thoughts. She says that the traditional forms had in general expressed more personal emotions.<sup>23</sup> To Whitman, however, an audience was a necessity; he intended his poems to be read aloud. Richard Chase says of Whitman's desire to speak to the masses:

In Whitman's poems the individual "identity" is always identifying itself and then, as it were, unidentifying itself with the "En-Masse." This often becomes disconcerting and is inevitably one of the origins of the diffuseness, vagueness, and lack of inner structure and dramatic tension which characterize much of Whitman's verse.<sup>24</sup>

E. H. Miller also feels that Whitman's poetry sometimes suffers from his desire to be an orator. He says:

When he consciously assumes a public prophetic role, he is a declaimer of truisms rather than a prophet; he speaks to the future meaningfully only in his songs of the self.<sup>25</sup>

There is nothing of truism about the 1855 edition, however. It was later, as Whitman reabsorbed his own ideas into his life and tried to live them, that he tended to become more self-conscious and artificial.

Whitman's knowledge of the ancient bards undoubtedly influenced his view of himself as an orator, for they were the poets of the oral tradition who went directly to the

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<sup>23</sup>Mary M. Colum, From These Roots: The Ideas That Have Made Modern Literature (New York, 1937), p. 299.

<sup>24</sup>Chase, Walt Whitman, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup>E. H. Miller, Walt Whitman's Poetry, p. 208.

people with their poems. Soon after the 1855 edition's jolting rejection we can see this idea working in Whitman's life, for in one of his self-written reviews he proclaimed: "An American bard at last! One of the roughs . . . his voice bringing hope and prophecy to the generous races of young and old."<sup>26</sup>

Although Whitman never in his lifetime won the wide public acclaim he so much desired, the acceptance he did achieve in his declining years became complete adulation. Men such as Edward Carpenter, William O'Connor and Dr. R. M. Bucke saw him not only as a religious seer, but as in many ways god-like. Carpenter in his biographical study spoke of Whitman as a mystic, saying:

The mystic has the sense of special knowledge. In his mood, in his vision, he sees--he knows not how--the greater scheme of creation and his own relation to it; but this knowledge is ineffable; it cannot be uttered; it may only be adumbrated or symbolized. . . . The whole universe opens before him. He sees all and is all. There is no beginning or end to what he sees; cause and effect are identical; the spirit of the universe is one, and that spirit is love.<sup>27</sup>

On Carpenter's first visit to Whitman, he remarked that as they talked he was "aware of a certain radiant power" in Whitman, "a large benign effluence and inclusiveness, as

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<sup>26</sup>Quoted in James E. Miller, Jr., Walt Whitman, Twayne U. S. Author Series, No. 20 (New York, 1962), p. 25.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Clayton Hamilton, "Walt Whitman as a Religious Seer," Forum, XLII (1909), pp. 83,84.



of the sun, which filled out the place where he was."<sup>28</sup> Allen suggests that Swinburne's early portrait of Whitman as prophet of a new social order may have been influenced by Adah Menken's view of him as a new Messiah.<sup>29</sup> If these portraits seem overdone, we might consider Bucke, who said he experienced a "spiritual intoxication" in the poet's presence that was the "turning point" of his life. "It seemed to me at that time certain that he was either actually a god or in some sense clearly preterhuman."<sup>30</sup> In 1886, when Whitman gave his Lincoln Lecture in Madison Square Theater he was heard by José Martí, a Cuban journalist, who, according to Allen, wrote a "highly eulogistic account which spread Whitman's fame throughout Latin America as the semi-divine author of Leaves of Grass."<sup>31</sup> Allen also points out that the annual birthday celebrations planned for Whitman during his last years took on the character of the meetings of a religious cult. Such adoration would have influenced the most solidly-entrenched author, and Whitman, starving for acceptance, was not immune.

Incidents in his last years often show him acting out the role of a venerable old prophet. For example, when

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<sup>28</sup>Quoted in Allen, Singer, p. 481.

<sup>29</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 431.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Allen, Singer, p. 482.

<sup>31</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 525.

Horace Traubel and Anne Montgomerie were married in his bedroom, he kissed the bride and then pronounced his blessing upon the couple. When he prepared his last edition of Leaves of Grass Whitman added "An Executor's Diary Note, 1891," which placed upon the executor

the injunction that whatever may be added to the Leaves shall be supplementary, avowed as such, leaving the book complete as I left it, consecutive to the point I left off, marking always an unmistakable, deep down, unobliterable division line. (p. 385)

In view of Whitman's disciples' insistence that Leaves of Grass was a modern Bible (a view probably not too far removed from Whitman's own), one is tempted to compare this with the anathema in Revelation 22:18,19, placed upon anyone who would add to or take away from "the words of the prophecy of this book." Throughout most of his life after 1855, but especially in the last years, Whitman's insistence upon living in the most humble surroundings, seems unmistakably a sign of his desire to appear the saintly prophet. He seems to have had no special compunction about accepting his friends' financial aid in other ways, many of which are documented by Allen in the last chapter of The Solitary Singer. For example, they provided a nurse for him at all times during the last four years of his life; a number of literary funds both in the United States and abroad were established for him; and friends provided many conveniences such as his horse and carriage. However, he refused a lawyer friend Thomas Donaldson's offer

of a comfortable house in Philadelphia rent free.<sup>32</sup> Even more revealing was his decision to build a mausoleum in preparation for his death. He signed a contract for this without even asking the price. His friend Thomas Harned, upon checking into the matter, discovered that the contractor had planned to charge Whitman several thousand dollars. Harned settled the bill for \$1500, which Allen suggests he probably paid himself.<sup>33</sup> The poet was undoubtedly preparing what he felt would become a shrine for pilgrims to visit.

Even the personality which had such a powerful effect on Whitman's friends seems to have been a consciously developed pose. He wrote in an undated manuscript:

The idea of personality, that which belongs to each person as himself, or herself, and that you may so heighten your personality by temperance, by a clean and powerful physique, by chastity, by elevating the mind through lofty discussions and meditations and themes, and by self-esteem and divine love, that you can hardly go into a room--or along the street, but an atmosphere of command and fascination shall exhale out of you upon all you meet--<sup>34</sup>

Whitman's desire to be the poet-prophet was not consistent throughout his life, as Gay Wilson Allen has pointed out in the Walt Whitman Handbook in his discussion of the various editions. He suggests that the third edition,

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<sup>32</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 515.

<sup>33</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 540.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Allen, Singer, p. 425.

that of 1860, shows the poet turning away from the prophet persona of the 1855 and 1856 editions, toward a desire to make personal confessions, to be the tender lover. In one of the poems of this period, Whitman wrote:

Take notice, you Kanuck woods--and you, Lake  
 Huron--and all that with you roll toward  
 Niagara--and you Niagara also,  
 And you, Californian mountains--that you all  
 find some one else that he be your  
 singer of songs,  
 For I can be your singer no longer--I have  
 ceased to enjoy them,  
 I have found him who loves me, as I him, in  
 perfect love,  
 With the rest I dispense . . .<sup>35</sup>

Other than adding "Chants Democratic" (a rather weak section which he later dropped) to his third edition, he gave little new thought to the poet-prophet concept. By 1866, his confidence had returned, however, for the war had drawn him out of his personal problems and back into the mainstream of his country's life. He now felt a new need for the poet-prophet. The national poet needed to be one who could heal the deep wounds made by civil strife, and who could reunite his divided land. Even though his faith wavered at times, it seems a certainty that Whitman felt that he could meet that need.

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<sup>35</sup>From a later rejected poem, "Long I Thought That Knowledge," p. 401.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE MANY FACES OF THE POET-PROPHET

In the 1872 Preface to "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free," Whitman stated:

When I commenced, years ago, elaborating the plan of my poems, and continued turning over that plan, and shifting it in my mind through many years, (from the age of twenty-eight to thirty-five,) experimenting much, and writing and abandoning much, one deep purpose underlay the others, and has underlain it and its execution ever since--and that has been the Religious purpose. (p. 431)

With due allowance for the intervening seventeen years and the poet's natural desire to make his early poems consistent with his present intention, this statement still seems in line with what we have in the early work. In the 1855 Preface he wrote:

. . . folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. (p. 415)

Gay Wilson Allen remarks that this statement "very nearly sums up Whitman's whole intention in Leaves of Grass. It might, indeed, be called the 'religious intention' which he so many times mentions in his prefaces."<sup>1</sup> When Whitman announced the imminent disappearance of the priest in the

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Handbook, p. 285.



1855 Preface, he also announced his successor--the poet who would sing of the innate unity of the "kosmos," who would praise the body, and who would show people their inherent divinity. Having had very little exposure to religion as a child, his execution of a religious purpose was not influenced to a great extent by any one faith. In his article on "Chanting the Square Deific," G. L. Sixbey points out that Whitman studied comparative religion with great interest.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Whitman himself claimed to have read the Bible, Shakespeare, Ossian, Homer, "Eschylus," Sophocles, "Nibelungen," "the ancient Hindoo poems" and "other masterpieces," including Dante. Sixbey states that we know also that he read Paradise Lost and Goethe, and that his work shows the influence of Hegel.<sup>3</sup> All of these influences, and undoubtedly many others (certainly his study of Egyptology) went into the creation of the poet-prophet.

The use of the term "poet-prophet" is somewhat misleading, however, because Whitman incorporated into it many diverse elements from various religions and from the literary traditions of the day. Many of the functions customarily associated with the religious leader usually known as "prophet" are present in Whitman's poet-prophet, to the extent that they give the persona its most distinctive coloring. However,

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<sup>2</sup>George L. Sixbey, "'Chanting the Square Deific'--A Study in Whitman's Religion," AL, IX (May, 1937), 176.

<sup>3</sup>Sixbey, p. 177.

Whitman's prophet also incorporates many traits usually considered those of the priesthood. The concept combines not only the ideas of prophet and priest, though; at times it takes on the character of divinity--in such diverse forms as the pagan fertility gods and the Messiah. Finally, because of the paramount importance of poetry in the "religion" Whitman was constructing, his poet-prophet finds its most intrinsic aspects centered in the idea of the ancient bard--the spiritual leader of his nation, leading his people by the power of his songs.

Some clarification is needed of the religious functions usually considered the realm of the prophet and the priest respectively. When used in connection with Whitman's broad spectrum of religious thought, the terms are difficult to categorize. The most distinctive mark of a prophet seems to be, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, that ". . . he claims no personal part in his utterance. He speaks not his own mind, but a revelation 'from without.'"<sup>4</sup> In addition, the prophet is customarily distinguished by a religious experience by which he is "called" to this work, a message which demands of the people to whom he preaches a reform which will result in some special salvation or blessing, and a message which prepares the people for death, judgment, and a future life.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, the priest, in general, is

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<sup>4</sup>"Prophet," The Encyclopedia Britannica (1968), XVIII, p. 632.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 636.

one who has the sanction and the knowledge to perform the ritual acts required by the divinities of his group,<sup>6</sup> although he may also preach, aid the people in eschatological preparation, etc. Whitman's concept, however, compounds the two even more by the important influence of the idea of the Asian "shaman," a religious functionary also present among many of the North American aboriginal tribes. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines the term:

The shaman is medicine man, priest, and psychopompos; that is to say, he cures sicknesses, he directs the communal sacrifices and he escorts the souls of the dead to the other world. He is able to do all this by virtue of his techniques of ecstasy; i. e., by his power to leave his body at will.<sup>7</sup>

The shaman is most easily distinguished by the mystical experience in which he makes his "flights" to heaven with the souls of the dead, and by his paramount importance as healer. He is also the guardian of the tribal lore, and often a poet, particularly through his narratives of his cosmic flights, which "constitute the materials of popular epic poetry, in central Asia and in Polynesia."<sup>8</sup> An analysis

<sup>6</sup>"Priesthood," Britannica, XVIII, 498.

<sup>7</sup>"Shamanism," Britannica, XX, 342.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 343. The mystical nature of so much of Whitman's writing, which was touched on in the preceding chapter, shows the scope of the influence of the idea of the shaman. Whitman's "cosmic flights" are an important part of his technique. Furthermore, the shaman's function of healing can be demonstrated over and over again in Whitman's poetry. Note, in "Song of Myself," section 40: "To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door, / . . . I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will."

of the various aspects of Whitman's poet-prophet reveals the intricacy of the concept.

In spite of the overlapping religious functions inherent in Whitman's conception, his poet-prophet is most clearly described first by his prophetic characteristics. The distinguishing mark of a prophet is that he "sees" some special truth or revelation from God which is not apparent to others. Whitman says of his persona in the 1855 Preface: "He is a seer. . . . What the eyesight does to the rest he does to the rest" (p. 415). Through the knowledge gained by what he sees, it is possible for him "to indicate the path between reality and [people's] souls" (p. 415). In Whitman's case, this special insight, as Gay Wilson Allen says, is based on the "Platonic notion that truth is eternal and existed before the world was created."<sup>9</sup> This idea came to Whitman through Emerson, who spoke in "The Poet" of the "primal warblings" which the true poet alone could hear. Whitman said in the 1855 Preface: "The poets of the kosmos advance through all interpositions and coverings and turmoils and stratagems to first principles" (p. 421). Because he could see the Platonic ideal behind nature, Whitman's poet-prophet, like the biblical prophets, was a channel of revelation to the people and their mediator:

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<sup>9</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman as Man, Poet, and Legend (Carbondale, Ill., 1961), p. 33.



The prophet and the bard,  
 Shall yet maintain themselves, in higher stages yet,  
 Shall mediate to the Modern, to Democracy, inter-  
 pret yet to them,  
 God and eidólons. ("Eidólons," 69-72)

The prophet's divine insight often enabled him to foretell future events, and this too was a characteristic of Whitman's poet-prophet: "Chanter of Personality, outlining what is yet to be, / I project the history of the future" ("To a Historian," 6,7). In "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" he describes the future of America and concludes: "These! these in thee, (certain to come,) to-day I prophesy" (V, 40).

A second distinguishing mark of the prophet is that he preaches reform and morality to the people. It is more difficult to think of Whitman in his prophet-persona in this way, particularly in view of his personal notoriety. Yet he wrote in the 1855 Preface: "The time straying toward infidelity and confections and persiflage he [the poet] withholds by his steady faith" (p. 414). It is important to remember, however, that Whitman's was not conventional morality--he proclaimed himself the poet of the evil as well as the good. The basic tenet of the "religion" he proclaimed was the Emersonian idea that "every human being is a portion of the Divine substance, out of which he issues and into which he is reintromitted."<sup>10</sup> The reform for which he called was for each person to recognize his own divinity and to live up to

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<sup>10</sup>Stavrou, p. 34.



it by living his life wisely and to the fullest possible extent. Thus in "The City Dead-House" the dead prostitute is still "the divine woman," but because she did not recognize her own worth, even in life she was, spiritually speaking, "dead, dead, dead." The idea of living one's life in consciousness of his divinity is incorporated in Whitman's "doctrine of prudence." Mentioned also in the 1855 Preface, this doctrine is most clearly summarized in "Song of Prudence":

The soul is of itself,  
 All verges to it, all has reference to what ensues,  
 All that a person does, says, thinks, is of  
     consequence,  
 Not a move can a man or woman make, that affects  
     him or her in a day, month, any part of the  
     direct lifetime, or the hour of death,  
 But the same affects him or her onward afterward  
     through the indirect lifetime.  
 The indirect is just as much as the direct,  
 The spirit receives from the body just as much as  
     it gives to the body, if not more. (5-11)

The doctrine of prudence assumes the fact of immortality: "Did you guess anything lived only its moment?/  
 The world does not so exist . . ." ("Song of Prudence," 36); thus Whitman's prophet also fulfills the prophetic function of preparing people for death and for the afterlife. In "Proud Music of the Storm" he speaks of the poet in this sense: "Poems bridging the way from Life to Death, vaguely wafted in night air, uncaught, unwritten,/ Which let us go forth in the bold day and write."

As the representative of God on earth, the prophet

was also a judge, sometimes only in a moral sense, but often in a civic capacity as well (e. g., Moses, to whom the Israelites brought their disputes for settlement). Whitman said of his poet-prophet:

He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land. . . . He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing. (p. 414)

Finally, the poet-prophet, like Mohammed and other past prophets, inaugurated a new religion: "I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion . . ." ("Starting from Paumanok," VII, 8-10). This purpose also he maintained throughout his life, writing in his last poem of importance:

Passage to India!  
Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the  
first?  
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in  
marriage,  
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought  
near,  
The lands to be welded together.  
A worship new I sing . . . ("Passage to India," II, 15-21)

"Passage to India" and "Chanting the Square Delfic" were the two most important poems to set forth any sort of theology for this new religion, although the religious nucleus is influential in virtually all the poems. The great subject of "Passage to India," according to Allen, was the "human soul's triumph over Time, Space, and Death."<sup>11</sup> The poet

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<sup>11</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 427.

was not so much impressed by the technical achievement of the canal as he was by its symbolical possibilities. This linking of East and West seemed to him predestined by God to bring about world-wide peace and brotherhood, with God as the true "Companion" of man, a sublimation of Whitman's Calamus emotions. In "Chanting the Square Deific" Whitman attempted to provide a theological basis for his new religion. Allen points out that Whitman, when he wrote this poem, had been trying for fifteen years to "evolve a new eclectic religion suitable for a democracy."<sup>12</sup> The resulting concept substituted for the Christian trinity a quaternity, which included: (1) "the theological symbols of law and authority," (2) "the Consolator or Christ," (3) "resistance to the godhead, or Satan," and (4) "'Santa Spirita' or the life principle,"<sup>13</sup> interestingly a feminine principle which harmonizes, or resolves, the conflicts between the other three.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps, in his role as theologian, Whitman's prophet is coming very near the functions of a priest--one who knows the proper ritual and is thus the final answer as to theological questions. The concept of the priest, like that of

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<sup>12</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 427.

<sup>13</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 358.

<sup>14</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 359. G. L. Sixbey's article, previously cited, provides the definitive treatment of these four aspects.

the prophet, is eclectic. At times the priest seems Christian, performing the last rites of absolution: "I absolve you from all except yourself spiritual bodily, that is eternal, you yourself will surely escape" ("To One Shortly to Die," 8). The monk-like renunciation of "Out of the Rolling Ocean" also suggests the Catholic priest, condemning physical love to death and looking forward to an eternal union. Often, however, the priest is primitive, manifesting the characteristics of various cultures of antiquity, as well as of more modern "primitives." The earliest priest was the tribal member who possessed mana, a power obtained from nature which gave him the ability to produce charms or curses, or other magical events--causing the rain to fall or the sun to shine. Many of Whitman's poems, especially the shorter ones, vividly portray the primal priest performing his ritual magical incantations. "City of Ships" is a war-chant. The poet describes the city's appearance and function in appellations increasing in intensity until the climax: "Spring up O city--not for peace alone, but be indeed yourself, warlike." Then the priest asks his city to incarnate his own war-like spirit, and concludes: "War, red war is my song through your streets, O city!" The word "city" is the ritualistic key word, repeated in almost every line, often more than once, which gives the poem its repetitive, arousing, chanting quality. "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" is a ritual performed over the dead--with the shaman seeing the soul of the dead



warrior safely to the after-life. After the consummation of the night-long vigil, with the coming of the day, symbolic of life after death, the priest concludes the ceremony with a ritual burial of his spiritual "son":

Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed  
 just as the dawn appear'd,  
 My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd  
 well his form,  
 Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully  
 under feet,  
 And there and then and bathed by the rising  
 sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug  
 grave I deposited. (18-21)

In "Unfolded Out of the Folds" the primitive priest, according to James E. Miller, weaves a "magic spell about the figure of the woman and her miraculous role in the preservation of the tribe."<sup>15</sup> The "Dionysian" element often remarked in Whitman's poetry is the Greek contribution to the concept. Wimsatt and Brooks' Literary Criticism, following Nietzsche, defines Dionysus as the "god of wild flute music, of wine and intoxication, of the dancing throng and of the orgy in which men as satyrs were connected with their darker, subterranean selves and with the primordial unity of nature."<sup>16</sup> The Dionysian approach suggested that man, prior to a vision of the god, must become the satyr, or recognize his own dark impulses. Emerson suggests

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<sup>15</sup>James E. Miller, Jr., A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass (Chicago and London, 1957), First Phoenix Edition, (1966), p. 156.

<sup>16</sup>William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York, 1965), p. 562.



something of this in "The American Scholar" when he writes:  
 "Out of terrible Druids and Berserkers come at last Alfred  
 and Shakespeare." The Dionysian element is brilliantly  
 incarnated in "The Sleepers":

I am a dance--play up there! the fit is  
 whirling me fast!  
 I am the ever-laughing--it is new moon and  
 twilight,  
 I see the hiding of douceurs, I see nimble  
 ghosts whichever way I look,  
 Cache and cache again deep in the ground and  
 sea, and where it is neither ground nor  
 sea. (I, 32-35)

Whitman goes on to extol his seer's knowledge of the divine  
 beings:

Well do they do their jobs those journeymen  
 divine,  
 Only from me can they hide nothing, and would  
 not if they could,  
 I reckon I am their boss and they make me a  
 pet besides . . . (I, 36-38)

He concludes with a description of the Dionysian parade:

"Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards! with mirth-  
 shouting music and wild-flapping pennants of joy!" (I, 41).  
 At times, Whitman's priest is similar to the Egyptian priest  
 of the sun god. This is true strikingly in "Thou Orb Aloft  
 Full-Dazzling" which is a chant addressed to the sun, begging  
 it for a continuation of its fructifying heat and life. The  
 opening lines are the priest's colorful address to the sun:

Thou orb aloft full-dazzling! thou hot October noon!  
 Flooding with sheeny light the gray beach sand,  
 The sibilant near sea with vistas far and foam,  
 And tawny streaks and shades and spreading blue;  
 O sun of noon refulgent! my special word to thee.  
 Hear me illustrious!  
 . . . as now to thee I launch my invocation. (I-6,9)

Not only does he plead for the blessings of life from the sun, but he asks also that the deity prepare his people for old age and death:

Nor only launch thy subtle dazzle and thy strength  
for these,  
Prepare the later afternoon of me myself--prepare  
my lengthening shadows,  
Prepare my starry nights. (23-25)

Whitman, in giving his poet-prophet elements of divinity, was following a well-established practice. The Encyclopedia Britannica states:

Priestly establishments tend to develop doctrines extolling their divine nature and function. Even if the well-nigh incredible pretensions sometimes expressed in Brahmanic literature often reflect wishful thinking rather than social reality, the doctrinal tendency is evident: Brahmans are gods. According to the Roman catechism of 1567 priests are fittingly called not only angels but "gods" because Dei immortalis vim et numen apud nos teneant ("they are the holders among us, of the power and might of the immortal God"); and according to the encyclical Mediator Dei of Pius XII the priest "alter est Christus" suius personam gerit ("is 'another Christ,' whose person he represents").<sup>17</sup>

A number of Whitman's poems show him striving toward deity. In "A Song of Joys," in which he catalogues the diverse joys of life, he enumerates: "To be indeed a God!" (p. 133). In "Song of Myself," Whitman seems to make a series of biblical allusions to God as creator, showing the poet competing with Him, as, for example, in the lines: "Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,/ If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me" (XXV, 1,2), in which

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<sup>17</sup>"Priesthood," op. cit., p. 499.

the miracle of the second line is greater than that of the first.<sup>18</sup> Whitman invests his persona with deity through the idea of people being created in his image: "I acknowledge the duplicates of myself" ("Song of Myself," XLII, 27). He is also divine through his incorporation of contradictions in himself as the cosmos.<sup>19</sup> Whitman said, "I contain multitudes." Divinity is inherent in his device of the cosmic flight:

Speeding through space, speeding through heaven  
and the stars,  
Speeding amid the seven satellites and the broad  
ring, and the diameter of eighty thousand  
miles,  
Speeding with tail'd meteors, throwing fire-balls  
like the rest,  
Carrying the crescent child that carries its own  
full mother in its belly.  
("Song of Myself," XXXIII, 82-85)

Whitman's divine poet has the characteristics both of the Messiah and of God as the primeval seed-bearer. He often speaks of the poet as the "true son of God," able, as Allen says, "to teach mankind--and lead it to accept--the proper application of the discoveries and inventions of the scientists and engineers."<sup>20</sup> He is also able to unite people with each other and with nature: "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,/ The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them" ("Passage to India," V, 24,25). E. H. Miller

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<sup>18</sup>Lawrence I. Berkove, "The Biblical Influence on Whitman's Concept of Creatorhood," Emerson Society Quarterly, XLVII, 34-37.

<sup>19</sup>Stavrou, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup>Allen, Singer, pp. 411,412.

points out the religious implications of "These I Singing in Spring" in which the poet gives gifts of flowers or branches to the "spirits of dear friends." He says:

At the "pond-side," then, an ancient ceremony takes place, reminiscent of the birth perhaps of Eros, or of a messiah-like figure conducting a baptismal rite for initiates . . .<sup>21</sup>

Stavrou suggests that Whitman also sees himself as the "primordial seed-bearer," a "super-American Zeus," fathering a future American master-race by impregnating American womanhood.<sup>22</sup> Whitman wrote to women in "A Woman Waits for Me": "Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards, / They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me" (23,24). As Allen points out, Whitman considers the act of procreation a divine act because it carries the seeds of life to the future.<sup>23</sup> Much of Whitman's sexual imagery is used to convey the thought of the poet as propagator. In "So Long!" he wrote:

Screaming electric, the atmosphere using,  
At random placing, each as I notice absorbing,  
Swiftly on, but a little while alighting,  
Curious envelop'd messages delivering,  
Sparkles hot, seed ethereal down in the dirt  
dropping,  
Myself unknowing, my commission obeying, to  
question it never daring,  
To ages and ages yet the growth of the seed  
leaving. (36-42)

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<sup>21</sup>E. H. Miller, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup>Stavrou, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman as Man, etc., p. 37.



In "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" the divine poet-prophet is portrayed as the creator of the modern world:

I'd sow a seed for thee of endless Nationality,  
I'd fashion thy ensemble including body and soul,  
I'd show away ahead thy real Union, and how it  
may be accomplish'd. (I, 5-7)

Thou wonder world yet undefined, unform'd,  
neither do I define thee,

. . . . .  
I but thee name, thee prophesy, as now,  
I merely thee ejaculate! (V, 13, 18-20)

Although prophets and priests of almost every religion have been to some extent "literary," among none of them has poetry been the main tenet and shaping force of their religion, in spite of the paramount importance of sacred writings such as the Bible, the Koran, the Talmud and the Bhagavad-Gita. To round out the essential aspects of Whitman's poet-prophet, the idea of the bard was necessary. The poet-prophet was also the "divine literatus." Democratic Vistas contains the heart of Whitman's new "religion," the morally and spiritually shaping influence of archetypal poetry. The bardic foundation of his poetry is implicit in Whitman's assertion in the 1872 Preface that Leaves of Grass was an "utterance. . . of New World songs, and an epic of Democracy" (p. 429). Throughout the book his repeated references to the "bard," to "singing" or "chanting" his nation and its ideals, are an indication of the importance to him of the bardic concept. In "Passage to India," for example, he combines the religious and the bardic ideals:



Singing my days,  
 Singing the great achievements of the present,  
 Singing the strong light works of engineers,  
 (I, 1-3)

A worship new I sing. (II, 21) . . . . .

Edgar Lee Masters said of him: "Whitman was the tribal prophet and poet. . . . When it [poetry] speaks for a land and celebrates a tribe it has done the greatest work that poetry can do."<sup>24</sup> Whitman's great love for oratory suggests the bard. In "A Song of Joys" he extolled the orator's "joys":

O the orator's joys.  
 To inflate the chest, to roll the thunder of  
     the voice out from the ribs and throat,  
 To make the people rage, weep, hate, desire,  
     with yourself,  
 To lead America--to quell America with a great  
     tongue. (p. 132)

The bard, in a very real way in the days of the oral tradition, did lead his nation by his "tongue." In his own poetry, which he wanted to be read aloud, Whitman made use of the stylistic devices of rhetoric: colorful epithets, antithesis, rhythm, parallelism, repetition of words, a refusal to attempt weighty syllogistic argument.<sup>25</sup> These are, interestingly, the characteristics of bardic poetry. The use of ellipsis marks in his early work almost certainly indicates oratorical pauses. A number of critics have made

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<sup>24</sup>Edgar Lee Masters, Whitman (New York, 1937), pp. 306, 307.

<sup>25</sup>Rhetorical devices taken from "Rhetoric," The Encyclopedia Britannica (1968), XIX, 258.

important contributions to the analysis of Whitman's prosody.<sup>26</sup>

Bernice Slote speaks of Whitman's bardic style:

Whitman is primarily the bard of the immortal mysteries, strong and certain in his singing. His voice is rolling, hypnotic, incantatory. It has rush and flow, the shock of harshness, a delicate precision. . . . Whitman was master of his line. Giving the impression of careless freedom, his verse is actually an artfully handled, intricately composed music. It is molded into subtleties of tone and meaning that are possible only with skill, care, and an immensely knowing ear.<sup>27</sup>

One of the important functions of a bard was, when necessary, to arouse his countrymen for war and to encourage them on during the battle. Whitman said in the 1855 Preface:

In war he [the bard] is the most deadly force of the war. Who recruits him recruits horse and foot . . . he fetches parks of artillery the best that engineer ever knew. If the time becomes slothful and heavy he knows how to arouse it . . . he can make every word he speaks draw blood. (p. 414)

In "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" he attempted to inspire the revolutionists of 1848 to try again for the sake of liberty:

Courage yet, my brother or my sister!  
Keep on--Liberty is to be subserv'd whatever  
occurs;  
There is nothing that is quell'd by one or two  
failures, or any number of failures,

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<sup>26</sup>See, for example: Gay Wilson Allen, American Prosody (New York, 1935); Sculley Bradley, "The Fundamental Metrical Principle in Whitman's Poetry," AL, X (Jan., 1939), 437-459; Fred N. Scott, "A Note on Whitman's Prosody," JEGP, VII (1908), 134-153.

<sup>27</sup>Bernice Slote, "The Whitman Tradition," in J. E. Miller, et al., Start with the Sun, op. cit., p. 6.

Or by the indifference or ingratitude of the  
 people, or by any unfaithfulness,  
 Or the show of the tushes of power, soldiers,  
 cannon, penal statutes.  
 What we believe in waits latent forever through  
 all the continents . . . (1-6)

Whitman's early glorying in battle, demonstrated in the first "Drum-Taps" poems, was attributable to the bardic concept. However, as he became acquainted with the horrors of war, his goal became to lead the people to peace, to fuse them into the "compact organism of a Nation":

I listened to the Phantom by Ontario's shore,  
 I heard the voice arising demanding bards,  
 By them all native and grand, by them alone  
 can these States be fused into the  
 compact organism of a Nation.  
 To hold men together by paper and seal or by  
 compulsion is no account,  
 That only holds men together which aggregates  
 all in a living principle . . . (IX, 1-5)

The primitive bards expressed their national myths and hero-legends in their poetry, as we see in Homer's epics or in the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, or the Battle of Maldon. Whitman also incorporated the national myths, as, for example, what has been called the "Davy Crockett" myth, or the idea that the genius of the United States lies in the common people, whose character is formed by space and ruggedness. Allen says that Whitman wished to perpetrate this ideal in great art, not for art's sake, but to influence the people to become worthy of the land.<sup>28</sup> At times Whitman seems to

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<sup>28</sup>Allen, Singer, p. 153.

use science and democracy, as James E. Miller has pointed out, to replace myth and to fill the vacuum created by the loss of faith.<sup>29</sup> In the 1855 Preface, Whitman wrote:

Exact science and its practical movements are no checks on the greatest poet but always his encouragement and support. . . . [Scientists, historians, etc.] are the lawgivers of poets and their construction underlies the structure of every perfect poem. . . . always of their fatherstuff must be begotten the sinewy race of bards. . . . In the beauty of poems are the tuft and final applause of science. (pp. 418,419)

The bard, by his religious activities, his position of leadership, and especially by his poetry, was a vital part of the poet-prophet concept.

Whitman was not merely imitating bards, prophets, or priests. To him, these representatives of earlier ages contained sparks of truth which were meaningful in their own times, and which, in some of their aspects, could serve as models for his day. By the judicious use of these materials as a foundation, he could build upon them and extend out from them. In "Song of the Exposition" he wrote:

The same undying soul of earth's, activity's,  
beauty's, heroism's expression,  
Out of her evolutions hither come, ended the  
strata of her former themes,  
Hidden and covered by today's, foundation of  
today's. (III, 14-16)

We have explored many of the elements, the "former themes," which Whitman adapted to his poet-prophet. The concept which resulted was a product of the traditions and thought of many

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<sup>29</sup>J. E. Miller, Jr., Walt Whitman, p. 159.



eras and many lands. He drew his inspiration both from primitive chants and from the sophisticated literary thought of his own day. He incorporated an extensive treatment of his nation and its ideals, and he undergirded the whole with a structure gleaned from comparative religion. The result, Leaves of Grass, was thus not a new creation, but an unprecedented synthesis and summary of a remarkably wide range of cultural, political, religious and philosophical speculation. Whitman's most avant-garde aspects were heavily rooted in the traditions of the Romantic era. The welter of Romantic ideas and aspirations tending toward the concept of the poet-prophet found their final fulfillment in Whitman's persona. It is important to remember that the poet-prophet was, in the last analysis, only a persona. Allen says of Whitman, "What he is deifying is not himself in the ordinary sense but the self, the cosmic 'soul.'"<sup>30</sup> Malcolm Cowley makes a similar point:

The hero as pictured in the frontispiece--this hero named "I" or "Walt Whitman" in the text--should not be confused with the Whitman of daily life. He is, as I said, a dramatized or idealized figure. . . . This dramatization of the hero makes it possible for the living Whitman to exalt him--as he would not have ventured, at the time, to exalt himself . . .<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Allen, Handbook, p. 269.

<sup>31</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "'Song of Myself' As Inspired Prophecy," in Miller, "Song of Myself"--Origin, Growth, Meaning, p. 182.



The persona of the poet-prophet was, rather, a useful tool for expressing Whitman's wide scope of thought about life. As he grew older, however, he identified himself more and more with his persona, at the expense, as Cowley implies, of "ceasing to be universally representative." Nevertheless, the loss of his early freshness was not a death-blow; he wrote some of his best poetry after 1865. The real tragedy of Whitman's poetry was that its fundamental ideas were, paradoxically, both too old and too new. They had lost their original freshness and appeal, and Whitman's reinterpretation of them was too realistic and too unstructured for the readers of his day. He stood on the dividing line of two worlds, and his poetry was not able to grasp the popular spirit of either age. Attempting to speak for a country and for its masses, he has spoken meaningfully only to a few.

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