

Walt Whitman's Use of Indian Sources: A Reconsideration

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Walt Whitman's insistence on the absolute originality of his poetry often led him to deny or obscure the intellectual and literary influences on his work. He began promulgating the myth of himself as a "natural" poet of America as soon as he published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. In an anonymous review of his own book, published in September of 1855, for instance, Whitman asserts that he "makes no allusions to books or writers; their spirits do not seem to have touched him" (*Leaves of Grass: A Volume of Poems Just Published* 778). Whitman's continuing assertions that his poems were the result of untainted inspiration have provided critics with the challenge of deciphering the real influences which shaped the poet's art. In some instances Whitman has been shown to have appropriated others' ideas and language without properly acknowledging his debt, as in his use of Jules Michelet's *L'Oiseau* in composing "To the Man-of-War Bird" (Allen, "Walt Whitman and Jules Michelet" 230-231). However, determining Whitman's more general intellectual allegiances amid the many cross-currents found in his writing has often proved to be a difficult task, appropriately so in the case of a poet who contentedly claimed to "contain multitudes" ("Song of Myself," section 51).

One particular line of criticism has sought to identify how Hindu mysticism resembles, or perhaps has influenced, certain ideas found in Whitman's writing. T. R. Rajasekharaiah observes that as early as 1881 newspaper commentaries had noted a parallel between Whitman's thinking and "Asiatic" themes (35). Much earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson had also termed *Leaves of Grass* "a remarkable mixture of the Bhagvat Ghita and the *New York Herald*" (Sanborn 38). It was not until the twentieth century, however, that Whitman's ideas were compared to those of specific Hindu traditions. Scholars in this area have attempted to find varying kinds of significance in a parallel or connection between Whitman and Hinduism. Some critics feel that Whitman was a genuinely inspired mystic. In such a view, he did not write under the influence of Hindu ideas but rather reproduced Hindu insights from his own illumined state of consciousness. The infamous progenitor of this view is R. M. Bucke, whose hagiographic chapter on Whitman in *Cosmic Consciousness* contends that the poet was a saint on a par with Christ, Buddha, and Mohammed. Malcolm Cowley follows somewhat more moderately in Bucke's footsteps by asserting that Whitman's ideas may have originated "after an experience similar to the one for which the Sanskrit word is samadhi, or absorption" ("Hindu Mysticism and Whitman's 'Song of Myself'" 920). O.K. Nambiar's *Whitman and Yoga* ventures even further, arguing that Whitman experienced the rising of his spinal kundalini energy and thereby attained cosmic consciousness. Nambiar claims that Whitman, not having received formal instruction in the

breathing exercises and meditative techniques normally needed to awaken the kundalini, came to that experience through innate ability. Nambiar finds section five of "Song of Myself" to be especially indicative of this mystical occurrence, suggesting patterns of color that a person will experience when the kundalini rises, and he likens Whitman's experience to that of the Bengali saint, Shri Ramakrishna. In *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975), Gay Wilson Allen finds Nambiar's arguments interesting (264), but other critics have not been receptive to the notion of Whitman as a yogi. V. Sachithanandan's short refutatory article, "Whitman and the Serpent Power" (1970) asserts that the sensations Whitman describes in section five of "Song of Myself" actually do not match up very well to those encountered upon the true awakening of the kundalini.

While it is not inconceivable that Whitman did undergo some sort of extraordinary experience, it would be unwise to postulate a mystical awakening when the poet himself never claimed to have experienced one. It was instead the "disciples" such as William D. O'Connor and Bucke who formed and perpetuated the idea of Whitman as messiah, and their ideas came from their own view of Whitman and his poetry. In *Cosmic Consciousness*, for instance, the only evidence Bucke gives for Whitman's supposed awakening is a few citations from the poetry. Certainly people in all societies and in all ages have reported mystical experiences of varying content, but in the case of Whitman the claims of the "hot little prophets" fail to carry much weight given the silence of the man himself.

Other critics have pursued a more fruitful consideration of the similarities between ideas found in Whitman and Vedānta, one of the six traditional schools of Indian philosophy (*darśanas*). These studies do not emphasize either the possibility of a mystical awakening or of actual textual influence but instead use Vedānta as a philosophical model which accounts for some apparently divergent trends in Whitman's thinking. In short, the non-dual (*advaita*) school of Vedānta asserts the unity of the nameless transcendent reality (*Brahman*) and material existence, and this identification of matter and spirit mirrors Whitman's insistence on being the poet of both body and soul. Applying this philosophical view to Whitman has the advantage of reconciling what most Western mystical traditions would find to be a contradiction in the poet's outlook. James E. Miller, Jr. uses Western religious traditions to suggest that Whitman wrote under the influence of an "inverted mystical experience," but critics who use Vedānta as a model prefer to view the poet as expressing a form of mysticism grounded in a consistent metaphysical framework.

Dorothy F. Mercer initiated critical discussion of Whitman and Vedānta in this vein with her 1933 doctoral dissertation, "*Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita: A Comparative Study.*" Although her dissertation was not published, Mercer did publish a number of articles in *Vedanta and the West* documenting the presence of Vedāntic ideas in *Leaves of Grass*. V. K. Chari contributed a significant addition to this line of critical inquiry with *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (1964). Rather than simply making comparisons, Chari uses Vedāntic philosophy as a tool to define Whitman's thought. He comments, "The Vedantic

comparison is to be understood simply as a critical instrument, one that I have used to define and illustrate Whitman's most basic ideas" (xi). Chari asserts that "the theme of self, of relating the self to the world of experience, is central to the comprehensive intent of Whitman's poems," and proceeds to illuminate the strikingly Vedāntic quality of Whitman's treatment of that theme.

Comparative studies such as Chari's face a substantial difficulty in the sense that Vedānta must provide a comprehensive model of Whitman's outlook for it to have any real significance. Total conformity between Whitman's ideas and Vedānta would provide invaluable insights into the poet's philosophy, but the truth is the two share only a partial resemblance. Any number of inconsistencies between Whitman and Vedānta invite exploration, but the prime one that has caused critics much consternation is the problem of sexuality. Hinduism defines four aims which people can pursue in life: pleasure, material success, righteousness, and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, and *mokṣa*, respectively). Although each of these is a legitimate aim, almost all Hindus, including Vedāntins, would consider it the height of contradiction to pursue pleasure and liberation simultaneously. In her 1982 article, "Silence as Argument in 'Song of Myself,'" Carmine Sarracino attempts to reconcile this apparent inconsistency between Whitman and Vedānta. She asserts that the sexual imagery in section five of "Song of Myself" and the Calamus poems is not an expression of Whitman's homoerotic feelings but rather an analogy for the blissful experience of communion with the divine. Sarracino supports this argument by noting the parallel found in Kabir's mystical love poetry, and she thereby opens a new perspective on the question of Whitman's sexuality. She does not, however, convincingly show the divine beloved invoked by Kabir to be the same as the "comrades" who populate the Calamus poems. It may be true that Whitman wrote about mystical experience in terms of sexuality, but it may be nonetheless true that he wrote about sex and friendship as spiritual experiences. Further, Sarracino does not address the biographical evidence available (such as that collected by Allen in *The Solitary Singer* [1955]) which documents Whitman's homoerotic tendencies. And Sarracino's attempt to demonstrate a unified Vedāntic view behind all of Whitman's poetry lost some key support when Chari published a revision of his views in 1994. In "Whitman Criticism in the Light of Indian Poetics," Chari concedes that Whitman's celebration of sexuality does not bear out his earlier thesis that Whitman's views of the self and the universe were fundamentally spiritual and Vedāntic (243).

Given the impossibility of ascertaining Whitman's inner experience and the failure of Vedānta to function as a total model of Whitman's ideas, we are left with the simpler question of direct intellectual influence. Did Hindu ideas to any degree inspire Whitman as he wrote *Leaves of Grass*? T.R. Rajasekharaiah has already made a concerted effort to identify Hindu sources for virtually all of Whitman's ideas in *The Roots of Whitman's Grass* (1970). Examining the holdings of the libraries to which Whitman had access, Rajasekharaiah lists dozens of items dealing with Eastern literature, philosophy, and religion which Whitman could have read. Rajasekharaiah then attempts to prove that Whitman's "mysticism" is really just a collection of

ideas surreptitiously borrowed from Hindu thinkers. He uses the term "Hinduism" in its broadest sense of "religion in India" and thus includes occasional examples from Buddhism and Jainism along with Vedic and post-Vedic ideas. I will follow him in using "Hinduism" in this larger usage rather than restricting it to one particular sect or school such as Vedānta.

While some of the influences Rajasekharaiah suggests could well be genuine, for the most part they simply cannot be accepted without stronger proof. It is one thing to explore what Whitman might have read, but Rajasekharaiah concludes that Whitman must have read these sources since Hindu mysticism constitutes "the main stream of thought" informing his writings (31). This thesis is not only predicated on an assumption which cannot be proven but also claims that mysticism is indeed the core idea which accounts for all of Whitman's ideas. As we have already seen, Indian religion, though in some ways an evocative parallel to Whitman's thinking, does not provide a key to the "real" Whitman as Rajasekharaiah suggests. Yet Hindu ideas and texts undoubtedly had some degree of influence on the poetry, since they show up in his writings. The aim of this study is to consider what these references tell us about the degree of Whitman's knowledge of and interest in Hinduism.

Whitman's own statements on this topic are contradictory. H. D. Thoreau, in a letter to Harrison Blake from December 1856 recounts his first meeting with Whitman. Thoreau remarked that Whitman's poems were "wonderfully like the Orientals" and asked Whitman whether he had read them. Whitman's reply was "No; tell me about them" (347). However, in the 1888 preface "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman remarks that he had read "the ancient Hindu poems," among other important works of world literature, in preparation for writing the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (305). Since the poet himself (somewhat typically) does not tell a consistent story about his knowledge of Hinduism, the best estimate we can achieve is that which results from a careful examination of his works and reading he is known to have done.

The first area to consider is the knowledge of Hinduism that Whitman possessed before 1855. If Indian thought did indeed play a crucial role in developing his views, then that influence should be detectable before his first great poetic outburst. In the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the only Hindu references in the poetry appear in the first poem (which would eventually become "Song of Myself"). In section 41 "Brahma" appears in the midst of a list of gods who are termed "the old cautious hucksters." Similarly, the speaker assists "the lama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols" and declares that he is "to shastas and vedas admirant" in section 43. Once again, these references appear in the middle of a catalog describing a number of religions. Moreover, the overall purpose of sections 41 through 43 is to show that the speaker has gone beyond traditional gods and religions: the speaker boasts that "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern." These few references discuss Hinduism only as part of the body of ancient cultures that the speaker strives to embrace and transcend. The 1855 edition thus does not suggest that Whitman held a particularly strong interest in Hindu

thought.

The only primary Hindu source we are sure Whitman possessed at this time is described nebulously by Bucke as “leaves torn from a book on ‘The Heetopades of Veeshnoo Sarma’” (*Complete Writings* 10: part V). Rajasekharaiah tentatively identifies this as the article “Extracts from the Heetopades of Veeshnoo Sarma,” from the July 1842 number of *The Dial* (84). Assuming this is indeed the correct attribution, we may conclude that Whitman could have gained virtually no knowledge of Hinduism from this brief collection of aphorisms; Rajasekharaiah admits that “this little item is not of very great significance for Whitman’s knowledge of Indian thought” (84). In fact, some of the selections run against the grain of Whitman’s deepest-held beliefs: one holds that “the difference between the body and the qualities is infinite; the body is a thing to be destroyed in a moment, whilst the qualities endure to the end of the creation” (82-83). The dualistic and anti-physical sentiment of this passage seems unlikely to have sparked Whitman’s spiritualization of the body. Finally, the aphorisms provide none of the Hindu terminology found in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman’s pre-1855 acquaintance with Indian thought can be more easily accounted for by his reading of secondary sources. After culling out the many possible sources listed by Rajasekharaiah, we are left with only two items he definitely read, both periodical articles preserved among his papers (75). One was J. D. Whelpley’s article, simply entitled “Laws of Menu,” which was published in the May 1845 number of *The Whig Review*. The other was an anonymous review of translations of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana entitled “Indian Epic Poetry” which appeared in the October 1848 number of *The Westminster Review*. The very titles of these articles suggest that Whitman was as interested in Indian literature and politics as he was in Hinduism. Significantly, the two works account for all of the Sanskrit words in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. “Indian Epic Poetry” contains the words “Vedas,” “Brahmins,” and “Brahma.” “Laws of Menu” contains “Brahmins,” “Brahma,” and “*shastra*,” which Whitman likely misspells as “shastas” in the volume’s opening poem. Thus, we need not suppose that Whitman’s readings went any farther than these articles.

Most of the other ideas found in the 1855 edition, although possibly influenced by Hindu thought, can be accounted for by more immediate sources. One example is the poet’s assertion of his own divinity: “In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass” (“Song of Myself,” section 48). This assertion is indeed reminiscent of the Upanishadic dictum that the self (*ātman*) and the Absolute (*brahman*) are essentially one (Hopkins 38). However, the same idea can also be found in Emerson’s writings. Some of Emerson’s famous statements, such as his description of feeling himself to be “part or particle of God” in the essay “Nature,” are much more reasonable sources for Whitman’s own claim that the individual is divine (“Nature” 8). It is likely that the early Whitman, so disdainful of foreign models, would have turned first to his “dear Friend and Master” Emerson (as Whitman addressed him in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*) rather than to Hinduism, a religion with which he seemed to have had only a passing acquaintance (“Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson” 346). Emerson himself read Hindu texts and was

arguably influenced by Indian thought; as editor of *The Dial* he made the decision to publish the extracts from "Veeshnoo Sarma" that Whitman was later to read. Whitman's writing, however, does not betray any awareness of Emerson's interest in Indian thought.

The only other concept from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that has a real claim to be of Hindu origin is the ideal of "the prudence suitable for immortality" articulated in the Preface (21). Although he never uses the word, this idea is almost identical to the Hindu concept of karma. Certainly all religions are predicated on the notion that our futures are determined by our actions in the present, but Whitman's phrasing brings out the sense of the inevitable fruition of past deeds, good or bad, that is particularly characteristic of Indian religions: "All that a person does or thinks is of consequence. Not a move can a man or woman make that affects him or her in a day or a month or 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 always as great and real as the direct" (21). Whelpley's "Laws of Menu" could have provided a source for such thinking in its summary of the doctrine of karma: "Actions, says Menu, bear fruit according to their spirit, whether good or evil; and from the actions of men proceed their various transmigrations" (519). Both passages emphasize that actions can have effects which go beyond the present lifetime. Whitman may well have found this idea in other sources, but his sense of the inevitability and the long duration of the effects of action does appear to be virtually identical to the doctrine of karma in the Laws of Manu (*Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*). Given his reading of Whelpley's article, this is one area where Hindu thought may have exerted a genuine influence on him. It is also possible, however, that the "prudence" theory could derive from Greek philosophy. Allen notes that "Whitman's 'prudence' was long-range, Epicurean in the true sense of the term: a sacrifice today may bring more lasting happiness tomorrow" (*The Solitary Singer* 187). Whitman had an acquaintance with Epicurean philosophy based on his reading of Frances Wright's *A Few Days in Athens*, "a book that he had been reading for some years, and was later to call one of his favorites" (Allen 138). Thus, even though a Hindu source for Whitman's "prudence" is possible, it is by no means the only available explanation. It therefore seems likely that Whitman did not make one source central to all his ideas but instead used a wide range of reading to form what he felt was a new and distinctive American literature.

Since uniquely Hindu ideas are only minimally present in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and since Whitman does not appear to have read extensively about Indian religion before its publication, it is reasonable to conclude that Hinduism did not have a significant impact in the formation of his philosophy. The rest of his career shows that while he gained a somewhat more detailed knowledge of India and Indian thought, he never gave it a central place in his thinking.

After 1855 Whitman had many more sources for Hindu ideas available to him. Roger Asselineau observes that "he even bought scholarly books on the East, such as William Dwight Whitney, *Oriental and Linguistic Studies: The Veda; The Avesta; The Science of Language* (New York, 1873), and J. Muir, *Religious and Moral Sentiments metrically rendered from Sanscrit*

(London and Edinburgh, 1875)" (2: 302). Rajasekharaiah adds that Thomas Dixon gave him a copy of the Bhagavad Gita in 1875 and that he was given a copy of R.W. Alger's *The Poetry of the East* in 1861 or 1862 (74; 47). He also received a copy of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* from Thoreau in 1856, taking the trouble to cut out and preserve pages dealing with the Laws of Manu (Rajasekharaiah 68; 84).

Despite having so much more material to work with, Whitman's treatment of Hinduism reflects only a moderate increase in his understanding of that religion. He continued to use Sanskrit terms in his poetry, but for the most part they were neither more numerous nor more significant than the references in the 1855 edition. Some require little comment. In the late poem "Twilight" Whitman uses the word "nirwana" in association with images of death. This fits well with the word's essential meaning of "the 'blowing out' or 'extinction' of desire" (Hopkins 56). Other usages shed light on the degree of familiarity Whitman had with some facets of Hindu philosophy. The 1860 poem "So Long" contains one example:

I feel like one who has done work for the day to retire awhile,
I receive now again of my many translations, from my avataras ascending, while others
doubtless await me,
An unknown sphere more real than I dream'd, more direct, darts awakening rays about me,
So long! (66-68)

In the Norton Critical edition the word "avatara" is glossed as "'incarnation' or 'embodiment'" (506n), and those are common translations of the term. Although such a definition is not incorrect, the idea of "incarnation" is shaded by the Christian notion of the Word becoming flesh. The Sanskrit *avatāra* literally means the "descent" of a deity into the world (Hopkins 92). Whitman thus appears to be fairly sophisticated in his use of this word, stating that he is "ascending" from his previous descents into human birth. He may well have picked up this usage from "Indian Epic Poetry," as it is once defined as "descent" in that essay (41).

Another 1860 poem, "Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?", expresses a theme common to the "Calamus" cluster in which it resides, the uncertainty of outer appearances. The poem concludes:

Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground toward a real heroic man?
Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion? (8-9)

In this case, Whitman's use of *māyā* does not reveal deep insight into the meaning of the term. J.P. Rao Rayapati comments,

Maya is naively and inadequately translated into English as "illusion". . . . What is denied by *Maya* is not the reality of the world, but only the ultimacy of this phenomenal world. The concept of *Maya* seems to serve a purpose which is explained by Heinrich Zimmer in these words: "The secret of *Maya* is this identity of opposites. *Maya* is a simultaneous-and-successive-manifestation of energies that are at variance with each other, processes contradicting and annihilating each other. . . ." Therefore, *Maya* is not to be understood as a world and life negating doctrine. . . . (20-21)

Zimmer's commentary on *māyā* as an "identity of opposites" recalls Whitman's integration of body and soul, but Whitman himself uses the term in a purely negative sense to mean a false and betraying appearance. He seeks not to bring out the significance of *māyā* as a Hindu philosophical term but to use it as material for the theme of the illusoriness of reality that runs throughout the "Calamus" section. Other poems, such as "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances," and "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" also raise questions about the basic nature of reality and the radical aloneness of all people. In "Calamus," the recurrent conclusion is that such problems can be solved by the love of comrades, something completely unlike answers found in Hinduism. Whitman's knowledge of the term could have come from "Indian Epic Drama," as it provides the usual gloss of *māyā* as "illusion" (61).

A final example from the poetry is the use of "sudra" in "Chanting the Square Deific." In this poem, Whitman depicts a fourfold god which contains as one of its aspects a Satanic side:

Aloof, dissatisfied, plotting revolt,
Comrade of criminals, brother of slaves,
Crafty, despised, a drudge, ignorant,

With sudra face and worn brow, black, but in the depths of my heart, proud as any, (26-29)

All of the traits listed in this passage resonate with the word *sudra* (*śūdra*). The Hindu *varṇa-dharma* defines four classes of people who are ranked by their level of purity, social status, and profession. The *sudras*, as the lowest caste, are servants of the other three. The word *varṇa* literally means color, and *sudras* are associated with the color black. The blackness, as Rajasekharaiah notes, is connected with the theory that the *sudras* are of Dravidian racial background in contrast to the other, nominally Aryan castes (239). They are also considered black because their spiritual nature is thought to be characterized by *tamas* or "darkness" (Hopkins 66). For these reasons *sudras* have been "despised" in Hindu society and are excluded from Vedic initiation, making them "ignorant" as well. Whitman's phrasing in this passage thus appears to reflect detailed knowledge of the significance of this term. However, he uses the word *sudra* to characterize one facet of a larger metaphysical structure that bears little resemblance to anything found in Hinduism: the four-sided "Square Deific" does not easily correlate with the many trinities found in Hindu thought. Again, Whitman demonstrates an awareness of Hindu ideas but does not make them the focal point of his philosophy. Elsewhere in the poem he equates "Old Brahm" with "Saturnius" and "Lord Christ" with "Hermes" (4, 16). Whitman thus gives Hindu concepts a more prominent role than they receive in the many catalogs and lists mentioned earlier, yet those concepts remain, along with the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions, the raw materials out of which he seeks to forge a new mythos that both encompasses and transcends the world's religions past and present.

A number of Hindu references appear in Whitman's prose as well, but they tend to be brief and of little significance. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), he mentions the "endless epic" of the Hindus (361), and he even lists the names of some of the heroes of the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata: "Yudhistura, Rama, Arjuna" (347n). Rajasekharaiah concludes that these

references are “obviously the product of actual reading of the two epics of India” (61). While Whitman may have done such reading, he could well have gotten the names from the *Westminster Review* article on “Indian Epic Poetry.” And as we have seen with Whitman’s poetry, both of the above references from *Democratic Vistas* occur in lists of poems and characters from other ancient literatures, suggesting that Whitman viewed them as part of the cultural background out of which his new American literature would arise.

In a few places, however, Whitman demonstrates some awareness of the content of the Indian epics. In *Specimen Days* (1882) he quotes from what he generically terms an “Old Hindu Poem”:

Clothed in his white garments,
 Into the round and clear arena slowly entered the brahmin,
 Holding a little child by the hand,
 Like the moon with the planet Jupiter in a cloudless night-sky. (CW 4: 163)

This passage is from the Mahābhārata, describing the scene where Drona, the master of combat techniques and military strategy, enters the arena before the mock combat of his pupils. Initially one is tempted to conclude that Whitman must have read original Hindu sources, but this quotation is more likely a paraphrase of a part of “Indian Epic Poetry” which depicts the same scene:

With the noise of the musical instruments, and the eager voices of the spectators,
 The din of the assembly rose up like the roaring of the sea;
 When lo! wearing his white raiment, and the white sacrificial cord,
 With his snow-white hair and his silvery beard, and the white garland round his head,
 Into the midst of the arena slowly walked the Brahmin with his son,
 Like the sun with the planet Mars in a cloudless sky! (54-55)

Intentionally or not, Whitman’s version distorts the original, but the basic identity of the passages seems clear.

Only one passage in Whitman’s prose indicates that he ever read the epics themselves. In *November Boughs* (1888) the poet remarks,

The finest blending of individuality with universality (in my opinion nothing out of the galaxies of the Iliad, or Shakespeare’s heroes, or from the Tennysonian “Idylls,” so lofty, devoted and starlike,) typified in the songs of those old Asiatic lands. Men and women as great columnar trees. Nowhere else the abnegation of self towering in such quaint sublimity; nowhere else the simplest human emotions conquering the gods of heaven, and fate itself. (The episode, for instance, toward the close of the “Mahabharata”—the journey of the wife Savitri with the god of death, Yama,

“One terrible to see—blood-red his garb
 His body huge and dark, bloodshot his eyes,
 Which flamed like suns beneath his turban cloth,
 Arm’d he was with a noose,”

who carries off the soul of the dead husband, the wife tenaciously following, and—by the resistless charm of perfect recitation!—eventually redeeming her captive mate.) (CW 6: 106-107)

The story of Savitri appears in “Indian Epic Poetry,” but Yama is never described in this manner. Rajasekharaiah notes that nothing like it appears in Alger’s *Poetry of the East*, either (63). The most likely conclusion is that Whitman, intrigued by the brief description of Savitri in “Indian Epic Poetry,” found a translation of the story that contained the passage he quotes (or, knowing Whitman, one roughly like it). Rajasekharaiah cites a version by Sir Edwin Arnold that closely resembles Whitman’s quotation above (63). Whatever its origin, this description of Yama confirms that Whitman had some contact with Hindu literature outside of the secondary sources mentioned above.

The prose references thus suggest that Whitman gradually became more familiar with the Indian epics, as he discusses them in greater depth in his later works. Such a conclusion is complicated, however, by a possible reference to the Indian epics in the earlier *Democratic Vistas*. In a passage exploring the nature of the individual, Whitman writes of “a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal” (348). Shortly thereafter, he comments that this higher consciousness “alone takes possession, takes value. Like the shadowy dwarf in the fable, once liberated and looked upon, it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven” (348). As I have argued elsewhere, this “shadowy dwarf” is almost certainly a reference to the Vāmana avatar of Vishnu (Preston 185). This legend tells of a demon named Bali who, having conquered the gods, declared himself as the ruler of the earth, atmosphere, and heavens. Vishnu, entreated by the other gods, agreed to reclaim the world from Bali. Vishnu took birth as the dwarf Vāmana and went to see the demon. Bali knew that this humble visitor was actually the lord Vishnu, and offered him a gift out of respect. Vāmana requested a mere three steps of land, which he would use for his own sacrificial ground. But when Bali acquiesced, Vāmana expanded to the size of the universe and crossed its layers (earth, atmosphere, and heaven) in three strides. Since Hindu literature contains thirty versions of the Vāmana myth, Whitman seems likely to have run across it in the course of his reading, perhaps in Horace Wilson’s translation of the Vishnu Purāṇa or in William Carey’s rendition of the Rāmāyana (Soifer 5; Rayapati 115-116).

Ironically, then, the supporters of the “Indian” or “Vedāntic” Whitman have overlooked the one place where Whitman makes a link between Hindu myth and an elevated state of consciousness. In this passage, the Hindu source is not part of a catalog of ancient creeds, but instead provides a metaphor for the expansive consciousness possible in states of contemplation. And the fact that Whitman does not emphasize the Hindu origin of his reference is also significant, suggesting that Whitman is interested in the Vāmana myth for its content and not for its exotic cultural status. Still, this one reference is far from sufficient to grant Indian thought any more than a peripheral place in Whitman’s thinking.

The references in both the prose and poetry show that Whitman eventually gained a sporadic knowledge of Hinduism much greater than that revealed in the 1855 edition of *Leaves*

of *Grass*, yet there is little evidence suggesting that Indian religions ever exerted a major influence on his ideas. As we have seen, he most frequently refers to Hindu concepts as subsidiary illustrations of other themes, none of which are distinctively Hindu. India appears to have held significance for him mainly as the cradle of human civilization, a primal home out of which he believed European feudalism, and eventually American democracy, evolved. In "A Broadway Pageant" he describes India as "The Originatress," and as "The nest of languages, the bequeather of poems, the race of eld" (26, 27). Likewise, "Passage to India" speaks of the East as the "soothing cradle of man." The poem subsequently depicts the progression from Indian civilization through "the sunset splendor of chivalry declining" and eventually the spiritual dawn that Whitman associated with America (125-174).

To Whitman, then, India does not hold timeless truths, but is rather situated within a historical progression which will come to fulfillment only on the American continent. In *Democratic Vistas* he asserts that "almost everything that has been written, sung, or stated, of old, with reference to humanity under the feudal and oriental institutes, religious, and for other lands, needs to be rewritten, resung, restated, in terms consistent with the institution of these States, and to come in range and obedient uniformity with them" (381). India may be America's venerable and praiseworthy progenitor, but Whitman emphasizes the creative reworking of tradition and not a direct transmission of spiritual wisdom. Certainly, Whitman's thought was in some way influenced by the poet's encounter with primary and secondary Hindu texts, just as he was influenced by his study of ancient Greek and Egyptian civilizations. Hinduism, far from being, as Rajasekharaiah puts it, "the main stream of thought" in "the mighty river of Whitman's work," is only one of many tributaries feeding a much broader current (31). While sounding his sources of knowledge about Indian religion has brought us a little closer to the poet, he remains, as he always wished, elusive.

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