WHITMAN AND THE BIBLE

—A Study in American Poetry—

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Bible—more specifically the Authorized Version of 1611—is admittedly a very treasury of world literature. Its style, as well as its thought, has had a profound influence on innumerable authors and scholars, among whom may be listed Thomas Hardy who, in the Fortnightly Review of the summer of 1887, declared his “favorite poem” to be Samuel II, 8; Professor George Saintsbury who is particularly lavish in his praise of the rhythm of the Song of Solomon 8; and Matthew Arnold who found “greater delight” in Isaiah than in Shakespeare or Milton; (see Saito, The Bible as Literature, pp. 137; 196–7; 206), to mention only a few names.

To this list, the present writer would add Walt Whitman. In the sense that, whether we like it or not, none of us can escape from the cultural legacy that we inherit, the Bible has had an influence on all English literature and the makers thereof. But the influence which the Bible has had on Whitman is of a far more concrete and specific nature. We know from reading any of his biographies that Whitman not only read, knew, and loved the Bible, but also consciously and conscientiously, at least in his formative years as an “outsetting bard,” (“A Word Out of the Sea,” an 1860 version of the later “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”), strove to imitate its style and imagery and to mould on its teachings his views and general outlook on life. My purpose in the present paper shall be to discover some of these “biblical echoes” (cf. G. W. Allen, “Biblical Echoes in Whitman’s Works,” [169]
American Literature, VI, Nov. 1934, pp. 302-15) which are to be found in the form and substance of his poetry.

II. BIBLICAL THEMES

There are countless instances in Whitman's poetry of themes whose origins are directly traceable to the Bible and its precepts. Here we can only take up a few of them at random for consideration.

First of all, his comparison of life to going on a journey is a distinctly biblical idea. "For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country," (Matthew 25, 14) so Scripture tells us. It is on this idea that the whole conception of that allegorical poem, "Passage to India," is based. Life is a journey of the soul which must pass to its India, that is, its ultimate goal, eternal life.

Passage to India!
Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

Whitman's identification of himself with the poor and lowly, becoming degraded with the "degraded," criminal with the "criminal," and ill with the "ill," ("A Song for Occupations") is also of strictly biblical derivation. For who can deny that this thought reiterates the counsel of St. Paul, "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." (Romans 12, 15). So faithfully does Whitman observe this apostolic exhortation that he can truly say:

Whoever degrades another degrades me.

* * * * *
Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'd to him and walk by his side.

—Song of Myself.

And this, again, is another "echo" from the New Testament: "He that despiseth you despiseth me." (Luke 10, 16.)

Whitman's demand that his gospel of the "manly love of comrades" ("For You O Democracy") be preached to all—to "the daughter or son of England . . . the Russ in Russia . . .
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The overwhelming affirmation of the essential "goodness" of the universe which Whitman makes—

The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good,
—Song of Myself.

The sun and stars that float in the open air,
The apple-shaped earth and we upon it, surely the drift of them is something grand,
I do not know what it is except that it is grand,
—A Song for Occupations.

can also be traced to a biblical source. "And God saw the light, that it was good." (Genesis 1, 4.)

One more example must suffice. Whitman's biographer, G. W. Allen, says that in the early 1850's, the poet presumably heard the lectures given by the astronomer, O. M. Mitchel, at the Broadway Temple in New York. His reaction to the astronomer's lectures is recorded in "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," part of which I reproduce below:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me
* * * * * * * * * I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.
The lesson of humble wonder at the splendor and magnitude of the heavens which these lines teach us is the same as that taught by the Psalmist who wrote: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork." (Psalm 19, 1.)

III. Biblical Influence on the Form of Whitman’s Poetry

Having considered some of the themes of Whitman which are traceable, either directly or indirectly to scriptural sources, my purpose now shall be to proceed to an inquiry into the nature of the influence which the Bible has had on the form of his poetry in two of its major aspects, namely, imagery and rhythm.

(a) Imagery

It is to be hoped that the present writer shocks the sensibilities of none of his readers by attributing Whitman’s choice of a tree as a symbol of the need of friendship in his short poem, "I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing," to a hint presumably received from the parable of the mustard-seed and the tree which sprang from it, related with such simplicity of expression by the Divine Master in the New Testament. "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." (Matthew 13, 31-2.)

The use of the spider as an image or symbol of the poet’s soul, lonely yet "full of love," ("The Soul, Reaching, Throwing Out for Love," the original version of the later "A Noiseless Patient Spider,") may, strange as it might seem to some readers, be also attributed to the influence—in this case, indirect—of the Bible, where Christ uses, most aptly, the hen as a symbol of motherly affection. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23, 37.)
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I said that the influence here is indirect because the only common feature between the two symbols in question—a spider and a hen—is that both are taken from nature—from animal life. Viewing these two creatures thus symbolically used, we feel instinctively that the hen is indeed a very happy choice, whereas the spider is not. But in the case of Whitman (and it is his case that we are considering), can we say that the choice is so unhappy? Hardly. In fact, it is, perhaps, the happiest choice that he could have made, both as a poet and as a commentator on his own biography, for it is one that throws light upon an aspect of his character which has been the subject of much controversy. We know that Whitman has been criticized for being a poet of sex without being one of love. He might have understood “companionship” (“For You O Democracy”), and “manly love” (ibid.), and “adhesiveness” (“Song of the Open Road”), but the warm romantic love between a man and a woman was something unknown to him and totally alien to his experience.

In this connection, the following statements are of interest. “I am confident I never knew Walt to fall in love with young girls or even to show them marked affection,” testifies the poet’s younger brother George. (See Allen, Solitary Singer, p. 33.) Another witness, Mrs. Orvetta Hall Brenton, the daughter-in-law of James J. Brenton, editor of the Long Islander, testifies that “the girls did not seem to attract him... he did not care for women’s society—seemed, indeed, to shun it.” (Ibid., pp. 35–6).

Knowing, as we do, Whitman’s adventures—if adventures they may be called—with such women as Ellen Eyre (ibid., p. 279), Mrs. Juliette H. Beach (ibid., pp. 260–2), Mrs. Anne GilChrist (ibid., pp. 416–17), and probably several others, we can readily understand his choice and use of the spider as a symbol of affection—of his type of affection; namely, a cold, intellectual, strictly platonic and strictly sexless and passionless type. Whitman affirms, true enough, the equality of the sexes and calls himself

the poet of the woman the same as the man,

—Song of Myself.
but he did not know how to respond to, and still less to return, a woman’s love. He was, in brief,

... (a) spider ... throwing out filament after filament, tirelessly out of itself, that one at least may catch and form a link, a bridge, a connection. . . . . alone . . . yet full of love.

—The Soul, Reaching.

The spider-like nature of the poet’s feeling in regard to women is eloquently revealed in his letters to Mrs. GilChrist above-mentioned. Otherwise, he conceived of women merely as propagators of the race. (See his poem, “A Woman Waits for Me,” for instance.) But enough of this subject.

Whitman’s use of the metaphor, “a call in the midst of the crowds,” (“Song of Myself”), when speaking of himself, is reminiscent of the Bible. What he presumably had in mind at the time of writing this metaphor was the passage in the New Testament where John the Baptist is referred to as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” (John 1, 23.) He uses the same metaphor—namely, that of a voice calling—when speaking of his mission as a poet, declaring that “his call is the call of battle.” (“Song of the Open Road.”) But this is also a strictly biblical allusion, for the notion is based on the words of Christ: “I came not to send peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10, 34.)

His bold reference to prostitutes in such of his poems as “A Woman Waits for Me,” “To a Common Prostitute,” and “Once I Passed Through a Populous City”—it may be of interest to the reader to know that the word “woman” in the last-mentioned poem was originally “man”, giving the poet’s enemies grounds for accusing him of homosexual tendencies, (See Shimizu, A Study of Whitman’s Imagery, p. 149)—his bold reference to prostitutes, I say, may also be attributed to the mental picture of Christ which the poet presumably liked to call up—a picture of Him as a champion of the “woman taken in adultery.” (John 8, 3.)

Such instances of biblical influence could be multiplied almost indefinitely. Only a few more must be made to suffice. Whitman’s image of the “city which stands with the brawniest breed
of orators and bards,” (“Song of the Broad-Axe”) is of scriptural derivation, reminiscent of the biblical city “which is set on a hill.” (Matthew 5, 14). His use of the “harvester harvesting” (“As I Watch’d the Ploughman Ploughing”) as a symbol of death is again reminiscent of the biblical “reapers” in Matthew. (13, 30.)

And lastly, his conception of himself as one going through the world “doing good,” (“Song of the Open Road”) is a direct reminder of Jesus who “went about doing good.” (Acts 10, 38.)

(b) Rhythm

The rhythm of Whitman’s poetry is no mechanical one. It is one that defies all such arbitrary labeling as either iambic or trochaic. We only know that among the various forces that went into the creation of this unique rhythm, the influence of Ossian’s long and sweeping lines played an important part. (Strong, American Poets and Their Theology p. 424). We also know that another of the influences was the effect the free and untrammeled lines in the librettos of Rossini and Verdi’s operas had on the poet, (Brooks, Times of Melville and Whitman, p. 136) who was so “enthusiastically susceptible” (Rhys, Poems of Walt Whitman, Introduction, p. xviii) to music of all kinds.

But far greater than the influence of Ossian or the Italian operas was that of the Bible on the rhythm of Whitman’s verse. A. H. Strong, author of American Poets and Their Theology, does not hesitate to say that without a knowledge of the Bible, particularly “its Old Testament parallelism . . . he (Whitman) never would have devised his method.” (p. 427.)

What, then, is this Old Testament parallelism to which our American poet is allegedly so deeply indebted? It is, in one word, the balancing, from line to line, of image with image, thought with thought, a prosodic method characteristic of Hebrew poetry. S. R. Driver, in his book, Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament, (quoted by Dr. Saito in his Bible as Literature, pp. 142-5,) classifies parallelism into the following four kinds: (1) synonymous, (2) synthetic, (3) climactic, and (4) antithetic. These terms, I believe, are sufficiently self-clarifying to warrant my dispensing
with an explanation of their meaning, beyond merely remarking that Dr. Saito amply illustrates each type with scriptural quotations in his book on the Bible mentioned above, and to which the curious reader is hereby referred.

Suffice it to say that, while in the Bible, and the Psalms especially, all these four types are found in almost equal profusion, contributing materially to stylistic beauty and solemnity, a fact pointed out by the same S. R. Driver mentioned above, in Whitman, it must be admitted with regret and disappointment, that the four types are very unevenly represented. Synonymous parallelism predominates, almost to the total exclusion of the other three types. And it is undeniably owing to this marked predominance of just one type of parallelism that his verse has incurred the criticism of "wearisomeness." "His (Whitman's) wearisome cataloguing," complains one critic, "often runs into a maundering vacuity." (Strong, p. 433.)

Synonymous parallelism is the predominant characteristic of Whitman's "Son of the Broad-Axe," "Salut Au Monde," "Song for Occupations," and many other longer pieces. In fact, his longer works seem to owe, in some part at least, their length—I am tempted to say "lengthiness"—to the over-use of this particular form of rhetorical embellishment.

But my object in the present paper is not to point out the defects of Whitman's technique. The reader can open practically any page of the Leaves of Grass to find for himself examples of this "cataloguing." I would rather single out some passages of our poet, analyze them, and try to discover what elements of intrinsic beauty can be found therein. And for that purpose, nothing would serve me better than the following lines from the "Song for Occupations":

1. If you stand at work in a shop, I stand as nigh as the nighest in the same shop,
2. If you bestow gifts on your brother or dearest friend, I demand as good as your brother or dearest friend,
3. If your lover, husband, wife, is welcome by day or night,
I must be personally as welcome,
4. If you become degraded, criminal, ill, then I become so for your sake,
5. If you remember your foolish and outlaw’d deeds, do you think I cannot remember my own foolish and outlaw’d deeds?
6. If you carouse at the table, I carouse at the opposite side of the table,
7. If you meet some stranger in the streets and love him or her, why I often meet strangers in the street and love them.

A superficial reading of these lines would lead us to conclude that here we have an example of synonymous parallelism. At least, lines 4 and 5 constitute an example of such parallelism. For “being degraded and criminal” is, in some senses, equivalent to “being guilty of foolish and outlaw’d deeds,” you will admit.

Closer scrutiny, however, of the passage will enable us to discover that the arrangement of the lines follows, with some irregularities, the climactic order. “Standing at work in a shop” (line 1) and “bestowing gifts” (line 2) are commonplace enough as acts. “Being degraded and criminal” (line 4) and “being guilty of outlaw’d deeds” (line 5) exceed the scope of the commonplace. But the last line which speaks of “loving a stranger in the street” is a climax which only Whitman, the poet of democracy and the spokesman of the gospel of “companionship,” could have thought of.

The arrangement of these lines is strongly reminiscent of the technique such as we find in the Psalms and in other books of the Old and New Testaments. And though we are here primarily concerned with the form of Whitman’s verse, I must not forget to point out that the idea of “loving a stranger” is of direct biblical derivation, too. For who can deny that here we find Whitman repeating the very words of Christ, “I was a stranger, and ye took me in”? (Matthew 25,35.)

IV. Conclusion

I must warn the reader of the essential fallacy of construing my statements concerning Whitman’s use of biblical themes, and the
abundant traces of the influence of the Bible discernible in the rhythm of his verse, as an indication that I consider him a religious, not to say Christian, poet. It cannot be denied, of course, that the religious element is one that no conscientious student of Whitman could ignore with impunity, so predominant a part it plays in his philosophy and general view of life. But to regard him, on those grounds, as an essentially or primarily religious poet would be sheer misapprehension of both the man and his works.

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