

ioning of *Leaves of Grass* with the purpose, as Thomas sees it, of creating the impression that the book, from its very inception, had always embodied the democratic principle and the unitary democratic vision expressed in the Revolution and in the Civil War.

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George B. Hutchinson. *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986. xxviii, 231 pp. \$25.00.

Although a relatively short study, *The Ecstatic Whitman* is an ambitious effort which attempts nothing less than to outline a new understanding of Whitman's spirituality, relationship to his culture, sense of vocation, and poetic achievement. Regardless of its quality, such a thoroughgoing revisionist effort is likely to encounter substantial resistance. This may be even more the case when it is written by a younger scholar, as is, I assume, true of Professor Hutchinson, who is described on the book jacket as an assistant professor of English at the University of Tennessee. I admit at the beginning that I do not find myself won over by several aspects of Hutchinson's argument, but at the same time I am sympathetic to his large undertaking and impressed with many of his interpretations and insights.

Hutchinson maintains that the essential Whitman is a religious figure, and his analysis of the form and inner dynamics of Whitman's spiritual experience is indebted to historical-phenomenological scholarship such as that of the late Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade. According to this interpretation of religion, the basic structures of Whitman's religious experience are transhistorical, but at the same time the precipitate for these experiences, as well as their specific content, arise out of Whitman's particular historical situation. It should be added that Hutchinson does not deny the importance of other approaches—psychological, political, historical (in fact, he uses them)—but he sees such methods as inevitably distorting Whitman's own understanding of his intention and achievement unless they are integrated with an understanding of his spirituality.

According to Hutchinson, the type of religious experience that inspires Whitman's poetic production and informs many of his major poems is the ritualistic roleplaying and ecstatic experience of the religious shaman. Shamanism itself is defined as consisting of two elements: a belief in parallel spiritual and physical worlds, and the notion of a dualistic soul (the fixed soul that maintains the human organism and a free soul that can exit the body under certain conditions such as trance, sleep and death).

In addition, Hutchinson also draws upon the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Anthony F. C. Wallace for an analysis of the social function of religious symbols and a cross-cultural understanding of the role of a religious leader or prophet who arises during periods of radical social transformation marked by competing belief systems or a bad fit between the stubborn facts of reality and the inherited symbolic system that mediates this reality to human consciousness. These conditions spawn various forms of religious immediatism, prophets and false prophets, religious enthusiasms, and reform movements that attempt to redefine the culture's relationship to reality and to guide social change toward a new cultural equilibrium.

Hutchinson's analysis of the antebellum society in which Whitman matured and developed his sense of vocation stresses the presence of a pervasive sense of anxiety about preserving the legacy of the Revolution. This concern, heightened by the fact that the last of the Revolutionary soldiers were dying, often assumed the form of a regressive national fixation upon the virtues of the founding fathers. Underlying this anxiety was the emergence of new socioeconomic forces that were eroding the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian dream of a nation of noble farmers and workers and the growing sectionalism that would culminate in the Civil War. Middle and lower class citizens found that their expectations for political power and economic security were frustrated and their hopes for a future classless republic increasingly threatened. These conditions provided a hospitable cultural matrix for the revivalism, sundry reform efforts, communitarian experiments, and new religious and parareligious sects and movements such as mesmerism and spiritualism that characterized the age. Placed within this perspective, Whitman's effort to create a new civic faith appears as just one more instance of the period's widespread religious ferment.

Whitman's inner life, as depicted by Hutchinson, was closely entwined with the fate of the nation. In response to the inadequacy of his own father—an inadequacy compounded by the difficulties of his class—Whitman transferred his affections and many of his oedipal feelings onto the founding fathers, developing a lifelong exaggerated filio piety for the Revolutionary heroes and an intense commitment to their vision of an egalitarian democracy. He personally assumed the obligation of preserving the legacy and promise of the Revolution. Accordingly, the marked conflicts in Whitman's emotional life were more than personal issues; they were, at least in part, reflections of stresses in the national life, and the resolution he would find for them would be exemplary for the larger society.

Whitman's main activity in the 1840s and 1850s was "the search for and the creation of a role" (p. 26), and Hutchinson maintains that the vocation Whitman finally assumed has its closest analogue in the office of the shaman of archaic and traditional societies. Unnerved by the course of the nation's political life, and feeling betrayed by the Democratic Party, Whitman was thrown back upon his own psychological resources. At the same time he was involved in an active process of reading and reflecting upon the likes of Volney and Scott, and, especially, Emerson and Carlyle. Hutchinson stresses two influences from Volney: his search for a basic religion underlying all the various religious systems which inspired Whitman's somewhat similar quest for the primal roots of religion, and his theory of metempsychosis which conceived of the soul as an immortal electrical substance (thus Volney prepared Whitman for the later electrical souls of the mesmerists and spiritualists). From Scott's "Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft," Hutchinson suggests that Whitman received the idea of the soul entering into ecstatic trances in which it communicated with spirits from a supernatural realm. Not much attention is spent rehashing Emerson's mentorship, but Carlyle is seen as giving Whitman a theory of poetry as prophecy, and perhaps more important, of the role of the prophet in periods of historical crisis. These and lesser contributing sources provided Whitman with the necessary materials for shaping a notion of the poet as shamanic prophet. Guided by these influences, he would learn to attain to ecstatic states, to commune with spirits or enter the realm of the dead, and to acquire the spiritual wisdom to heal his own soul and revitalize the larger culture.

After etching the highlights of Whitman's development, Hutchinson discusses the

1855 *Leaves*, focusing upon "Song of Myself," but I will temporarily move on to his analysis of the 1860 edition. Recent criticism tends to emphasize the edition's personal and homosexual dimensions, but Hutchinson, in keeping with his notion of Whitman as cultural prophet, argues that the 1860 poems also convey "the most overt and sustained political charge of Whitman's poetic career while directly emphasizing a 'Religion' of democracy as its over-arching theme" (p. 95). There is no effort to deny Whitman's homosexuality, but it is deemphasized by Hutchinson's speculation that during the late 1850s the real threat to Whitman's identity and the catalyst for his confessional poems was not his need to confront his unconventional sexuality but the challenge to his entire system of belief raised by the spectre of civil war which called into question not only his millennial faith in America but his very belief in an orderly cosmos. This may or may not be true, but certainly Hutchinson is correct in seeing a common crisis of belief running through "Calamus," "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," and "Out of the Cradle," and he properly points out, in contrast to the conventional view of the 1860 edition as expressing a tragic or even nihilistic outlook, that Whitman's metaphysical doubts receive a positive resolution in poems such as "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" and "Out of the Cradle."

The homosexual significance of "Calamus" is also reduced by the manner in which Hutchinson relates the sequence to "Starting from Paumanok." Many other critics have made this linkage, but usually by stressing the common theme of manly love. Hutchinson instead provides a more comprehensive reading of "Paumanok" which demonstrates that it subordinates comradeship to larger political and religious purposes. This further bolsters his case that Whitman's concern to establish a new political faith informs both the "Calamus" sequence and the larger edition. The overall argument of this chapter might have been strengthened by including at least a brief discussion of "Children of Adam" which, as Harold Aspiz has demonstrated (in *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980]), contributes to Whitman's political purposes by incorporating aspects of nineteenth-century eugenic theory as part of a poetic program to help create physically perfect men and women who would be fit inhabitants of Whitman's ideal democracy. Nevertheless, as the chapter stands, it makes the most balanced discussion to date of the purposes of the 1860 edition.

The final two chapters, which discuss Whitman's response to the Civil War and his later poetry, contain a goodly number of insightful readings and apt critical commentary. For instance, in place of the usual view that some of the later parts of "Drum Taps" possess a realism that is new to Whitman and American poetry, Hutchinson suggests that a poem such as "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame" transmutes a moment of history into myth and envelopes it in an atmosphere of religious awe; as such, it is a special type of realism: "the snapshot of a sacred event" (p. 143). Also timely is Hutchinson's corrective to the current fashion of distinguishing between the earlier "poet" who was deeply immersed in the concrete life and struggles of his day and the later "prophet" who, cutting himself off from the present, preferred to let his imagination dwell in the remote future and an otherworldly realm of the spirit. As Hutchinson argues, the younger Whitman was both poet and prophet, for a prophet does not merely limn the future. Rather, fearful of the future he foresees, he passionately engages with the present in an effort to avert impending disaster and to guide society along healthier lines of development.

Yet despite the strengths of these two chapters, their general account of Whitman's

relationship to American culture during and after the war is less than completely convincing. For instance, Hutchinson asserts that Whitman's involvement in the war assumed the character of a shamanistic ritual. In support of this claim, Hutchinson strains for evidence: Whitman's notebook entry of April 1861, in which he renounces alcohol, fat meats, and late suppers, is viewed as a close analogue to the shaman's spiritual preparation for the ritual of the war years; and his work in the hospitals is likened to the descent of the shaman's soul into the underworld. Such forced comparisons fail to add to our understanding of Whitman's war experience.

In discussing Whitman's poetic decline, Hutchinson rehearses many of the standard theories (physical decline, growing fame, more satisfying personal relations, a resolution or retreat from subconscious conflicts) and then suggests his own explanation: with the successful resolution of the sectional crisis, Whitman's beloved Union was no longer threatened and so he no longer experienced the social tensions that drove him to ecstatic prophecy in service of personal and national well-being. The weakness of this position is that the gap between Whitman's ideal America and the actual historical conditions was greater in the 1870s than in the '40s and '50s. Post-war capitalism created a plutocracy that completely overwhelmed Whitman's beloved artisans and farmers, dashing his dream of a democracy of working class, spiritual athletes. It is true that the later poems look forward to a coming millennium, but there is much in Whitman's prose and conversations with Traubel that shows he was far from sanguine about the tendencies of American society. But like most Americans, Whitman seems to have been so enamoured with the principles of economic and political liberalism that he lacked the intellectual and imaginative resources to make a more thoughtful analysis of the Gilded Age. In addition, his spirit was damaged by the war and his body was increasingly infirm. Unable to forge a vision appropriate to these new social conditions, Whitman increasingly detached his poetic imagination from his historical environment. But the environment produced tensions aplenty, and Whitman felt them; he chose to ignore them, however, hoping they would somehow disappear, because he lacked the wherewithal to make a meaningful response.

Hutchinson's study provides detailed readings of the major poems which he interprets as shamanic rituals in which the poet-performer interacts with both his audience and the spiritual agents he contacts in his ecstatic trances. The poems share a similar basic format: a presentation of the problem in which materials are introduced that pose a threat to the psychic well-being of the poet and the larger culture; an ecstatic vision by which the poet-shaman gains the wisdom to resolve the crisis; an application in which the new wisdom is used to renew or reinforce the society's symbolic systems.

For instance, "Song of Myself" is described as a shamanic performance consisting of many small cycles. In each of these the poet alternates between an ordinary mode of consciousness in which he talks to his audience in a discursive manner and absorbs the diverse materials of life, including apparently contradictory elements, and a transcendent or ecstatic state in which he gains existential insight into the problems he poses. These smaller movements are part of a larger tripartite structure: in the first major movement (Sections 1-24), the poet engages his audience, establishes his subject matter, and gradually compresses the contradictions into "the central riddles of life and death, 'good' and 'evil,' subject and object, and unity and diversity—all of which dualisms are joined in the dominant symbol of the grass, a riddle in itself"

(p. 72). The poem's central and climactic movement (Sections 26–38) is a classic shamanic ecstasy which “solves the riddles experientially: diversity merges with unity, subject with object, good with evil, life with death. At the same time, the foundations of the culture are identified and integrated, the audience itself caught up in this integration and unified” (p. 72). The remainder of the poem “chiefly dramatizes applications of the power the poet has acquired through the ecstatic process” (p. 88). By the poem's end the readers are initiated into a similar process of self-realization which is also “a democratic revitalization grounded in the solution of the riddles of life” (p. 72).

No critic can be expected to completely master the manifold riddles of “Song of Myself.” But setting aside such an unrealistic standard, and sharing a sympathy for Hutchinson's general approach to the poem as some version of inspired performance, I find his reading unsatisfactory. I will limit my discussion to two general criticisms that pertain to both his analysis of “Song of Myself” and his overall argument.

Hutchinson's contention that Whitman's spirituality is best understood as a form of shamanism is based upon questionable premises. For instance, one of the ways he maintains that a shamanistic model is superior to a mystical model for interpreting Whitman's spirituality is because the former fully employs the senses in an effort to achieve transcendence whereas the latter practices sensory deprivation. This assertion continues a longstanding confusion in Whitman criticism that erroneously equates the first stage in the Christian mystical way, which involves a mortification of worldly desires and a purgation of the senses, with a rejection of sensory activity. But purgation aims to free and cleanse the senses, not to dry them up. Its purpose is to liberate the subject from the hurriedness and superficial pursuits of life, from the desire to possess and control things, and from mental precepts or the tyranny of the intellect. This psychological adjustment allows the subject to approach life with a centered consciousness and to see, hear, feel, taste, and touch more fully. The mystic is to “see” things not only with the senses, but also with the “eyes” of the soul. In the words of Evelyn Underhill, one of the ablest students of Christian mysticism, this type of “pure sensation” provides “one of the most accessible avenues” to union with God's immanent presence in this world (*Practical Mysticism* [New York, 1915], 24).

Hutchinson is also on shaky ground when he contrasts the Christian or meditative mystic to the shaman by suggesting that the ecstasy of the former can only be realized after years of practice and discipline, whereas the ecstaticism of the shamanic ritual is more immediately accessible to others, at least in a mild form which elevates the souls of the observers out of a profane consciousness. He uses this comparison to contend that if the poems are viewed as mysticism, then they cannot possibly enable the reader to participate in the poet's altered consciousness, but they can do this if the reader is observing a shamanic production. One problem with this is that the candidate for shamanism, like the serious pursuer of the mystical way, goes through a long training process. Another is that short and light forms of mystical experience, often referred to as “ordinary contemplation,” are accessible without long periods of preparation (Underhill, pp. 11–12). It might well be argued that Whitman hoped that his poetry would lead readers to moments of this type of contemplation. In turn, this perception of the sanctity of ordinary things would encourage them to embark upon a more arduous program of spiritual development. If this is the case, then the mystical model provides a superior understanding of the poet-reader relationship.

In addition, many of the incidental parallels that Hutchinson establishes between

Whitman's poetry and shamanistic ritual, for instance his comparison of Whitman's page to the shaman's drum, are either not unique to shamanism or not helpful in understanding the poetry. The shamanic model does shed light upon certain important passages in the poetry—for example, the passages in which Whitman's soul takes flight or makes contact with other spirits—that previous criticism, perhaps because it found them too befuddling or embarrassing, tended to deemphasize or ignore. Hutchinson overstates the case, however, by using shamanism to interpret all aspects of Whitman's artistic vocation, his religious experience, and the structure of the major poems.

My second major reservation is that Whitman's understanding of science and the accompanying idea of evolutionary progress go virtually unmentioned, not even meriting listings in the index. Yet Whitman conceived of his poetry as an effort to reconcile religion not only with democracy but also with science, and all three of these factors are integrated in his effort to create a new public faith. To continue our discussion of "Song of Myself," Hutchinson argues that Whitman's ecstatic states provide him with a conviction of immortality and enable him to reconcile the oppositions of secular consciousness that are impediments to belief. Yet these elements of Whitman's faith cannot be understood apart from his scientific views. One of the most important ways Whitman resolves the dualism of good and evil is to suggest that evil is only apparent, and actually contributes to a divinely ordained scheme of evolutionary progress toward perfection. This belief, rooted in a conception of the cosmos derived from the evolutionary theories of nineteenth-century science, undergirds and fuels Whitman's faith in America's millennial mission and destiny. In addition, it also supports his belief in personal immortality. When Whitman overcomes his lapse of faith in Section 38, he immediately invokes two proofs of immortality: a thinly veiled reference to Christ's resurrection, and a brief reminder of cosmic evolution ("The blossoms we wear in our hats the growth of thousands ["two thousand" in the 1855 edition which Hutchinson cites] of years."). Even more important are Sections 44 and 45 (beginning with the line "It is time to explain myself—let us stand up") which many critics see as crucial to the poem's resolution. Here Whitman devotes some forty lines to describing his soul's long process of evolutionary development beginning with the earth's formation from cosmic gases and extending onward to an evolutionary view of the heavens, and to speculation that his consciousness will encompass these ever-expanding celestial realms in higher post-human states of existence. As Whitman conceives of it, the entire evolutionary process is a symbol of the soul's immortality and ongoing development. In short, Whitman's belief in immortality may derive from ecstatic experience, but his interpretation of that experience is both informed and supported by his scientific views, and these need to be included in Hutchinson's discussion.

But a more important question for the present discussion is how science affected Whitman's understanding of his religious experience, including his ecstatic trances and soul journeys. The shaman is a phenomenon of archaic and premodern societies; not identical with the medicine man or sorcerer (unlike him he knows techniques for achieving ecstasy), he nevertheless often indulges in magic and operates on many assumptions that the modern, educated, religious mind would reject as naive and superstitious. In contrast, Whitman embraced the scientific and highly rational culture of mid-nineteenth-century America, arguing that his faith was not inconsistent with reason but rather a supplement to it. Surely an ecstatic personality in a scientific

culture interprets religious experience, including trances and soul flights, in substantially new ways. If Whitman's poetry contains shamanic elements, it would be helpful to know how he tried to adapt them to a scientific world view. Such a discussion would add to our understanding of both Whitman's art and the history of religion in America.

Despite these limitations, *The Ecstatic Whitman* is a thoughtful response to what remains the major problem for Whitman criticism: how to develop a hermeneutic adequate to the peculiar nature of Whitman's text. Hutchinson deserves considerable credit for the various religious and anthropological categories he brings to his analysis of Whitman. In my judgment, these are more promising than their application in this study. Hutchinson's approach would profit from a richer immersion in the facts of both Whitman's historical situation and the prose and poetry itself, which would in turn require that the categories be refined and complicated. Yet one puts down the volume with the feeling that it cannot be dismissed lightly. Although unconvincing in many of its specifics, it does nevertheless make a compelling case for criticism taking more seriously both Whitman's religious experience and an understanding of his vocation as a lifelong effort at forging a new public faith to revitalize American culture.

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