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**WALT WHITMAN IN HIS TIMES
(WITH HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW)**

Уточнюються деякі моменти початкового та кінцевого етапів в еволюції поетичної візії Уїтмена порівняно з еволюцією поетичної візії Лонгфелло; аналізується ступінь адекватності творчості Уїтмена викликам свого часу та її новизна.

Ключові слова: Лонгфелло, Уїтмен, американська романтична поезія, американський літературний націоналізм, громадянська війна, Данте.

Уточняются некоторые моменты начального и завершающего этапов в эволюции поэтического видения Уитмена в сопоставлении с эволюцией поэтического видения Лонгфелло; анализируется степень адекватности творчества Уитмена вызовам своего времени и его новизна.

Ключевые слова: Лонгфелло, Уитмен, американская романтическая поэзия, американский литературный национализм, гражданская война, Данте.

The paper correlates some early and late points in the evolution of Whitman's poetic vision and to what extent Whitman shares the interests and concerns of his times and where and in what way he makes those concerns new.

Key words: Longfellow, Whitman, American Romantic poetry, American literary nationalism, the Civil War, Columbus, Dante.

The debate on the prospects of national artistic achievement commensurate with the political success of the United States agitated American artists and intellectuals during the War of Independence, still more intensely – around the Second War with Britain, then continued practically to Whitman's days. Emerson's essay «The American

Scholar» (1837) – «our intellectual Declaration of Independence,» according to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Longfellow's early articles on the problems and prospects of national literature in the *North American Review* and opinions expressed on the author's behalf by Mr. Churchill, a teacher character in Longfellow's novel *Kavanagh* (1849), as well as Whitman's 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* should be viewed as voices in that debate. The polarity of attitudes assumed in it may be conveniently summarized by juxtaposing Mr. Churchill's protest against the «gargantuan barbarity» of contemporary American letters with Whitman's proclamation, at the end of «Song of Myself,» «I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.»

Longfellow, born in 1807, was over a decade older than Whitman; his first widely successful collection of poems *Voices of the Night* came out in 1839, that is, three years after Emerson's *Nature* and two years after «The American Scholar.» The volume contained more translations from European poetry than original works by the author and, throughout Longfellow's career, translations continued to absorb a large part of his poetic energy and talent. In addition to professional interests of the Harvard Professor of Languages, behind his translating efforts lay the recognition that American claims to future cultural success had no solid basis for significant achievement, founded as they were from early on in the debate on the assumption of a special relation of the new nation to untamed nature. Nature in its «original energy» (to use Whitman's phrase) was encountered in America on unprecedented scale and thus – with unprecedented intensity of experience. Longfellow, however, believed that to inspire human creativity, nature had to be infused with human meanings as «natur landschaft» was being transformed into «kultur landschaft» Thus, America had to learn from older cultures and in her cultural development go through the same, tried out and necessary stages. Most centrally, she had to acquire her «usable past.» Longfellow's narrative poem «Hiawatha» published in 1855, the very year of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, was offered in lieu of the «primitive» epic America lacked.

For Longfellow, however, poetry's truth was not only the truth of direct relation of human history to specific locations or facts (such as traces of Indian presence in the American landscape or legends of the past attached to local landmarks), it was also, and perhaps first of all, the larger truth of the envisioned transnational aesthetic ideal:

The statue of Venus de Medici is the perfection of female beauty; and every individual feature had its living original. Still the statue itself had no living archetype. It is true to nature but it is not true to fact.» ...And so, too, with poetry. The scenes and events it describes; the characters and passions it portrays, may well be natural though not real («The Defence of Poesy». Ruland, 248).

Consequently, absorption of «universal» aesthetic and formal standards must precede national cultural achievement. In his role of the national poet Longfellow aspired to integrate American literary productions into the existing treasury of western literatures. Thus, he placed the New England village blacksmith next to Wordsworth's Michael and the girl from «We Are Seven.» For, like so many romantic poets Longfellow, too, preaches and teaches the dignity of the common man.

«The Village Blacksmith» (from *Ballads and Other Poems*, 1841) instantly became a beloved household and schoolroom poem enjoying amazing longevity in its canonical status. Most of my American contemporaries still remember learning «The Village Blacksmith» by heart in grade school. To Longfellow's homage to the common man paid in this and several other of his poems holding up the simple man as paragon of virtues to be emulated, Whitman responds famously: «I celebrate myself and sing myself and what I assume you shall assume,» commanding the reader not to look up to some externally provided model, however close to himself it might be, but to put himself in the center of the world and become his own hero. That is not, emphatically, an invitation to megalomania but an invitation to a journey of lifetime education and growth.

In Longfellow's poem the blacksmith is fixed in a particular village and a particular place in the village; his creative act, the useful work he does, his position in the family and community, the purpose of his existence, to use big words, has already been shaped and is repeatedly achieved each day according to the predetermined pattern. Thus, his life is framed and the vista for him as an individual – closed; the tightly rimed, stanzaic and rigidly regular form corresponds to the completed picture and to its unambiguous application as exemplum for instruction.

For all his commitment to America, to Long Island, to his home town in Brooklyn or New York, Whitman unfixes his «I» protagonist in space, setting him on a journey, compelling him to move across continents and even into outer space. And Whitman's speaker is not an accomplished pro; he is a perpetual learner. In «Salut Au Monde,» for example, he is learning the world as in «Song of Myself» he is learning the self and America:

I see a great round wonder rolling through space,
 I see diminute farms, hamlets, ruins, graveyards, jails, factories,
 palaces, hovels, huts of barbarians, tents of nomads
 upon the surface,
 I see the shaded part on one side where the sleepers are sleeping,
 and the sunlit part on the other side,
 I see the curious rapid change of the light and shade,
 I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of them as
 my land is to me. (section 4, CRE, 139))

Whitman's speaker is also a prophetic leader and teacher asking all the «yous» to whom the poem is addressed to follow as lifetime learners. The «I» persona is a project to be achieved, always in the making and never completed. Calling the poet (after Randall Jarrell) «the participle loving Whitman,» Ezra Greenspan points out how rhetorically this vision relies on the poet's use and overuse of participles «The effect of the participial phrases, whose number in such a structural configuration is unlimited, is to carry the potentiality of the persona forward and onward, as it were, similarly, without limitation « (94). Thus, Whitman views his hero not in terms of end results but in terms of potentialities. There are social consequences of such a vision. Unlike Longfellow's blacksmith, Whitman's representative «I» is socially mobile and, with the mobile «I,» the whole social structure becomes mobile and subject to change.

By assuming the «I» persona and canceling the distance between the poet and his protagonist, between the author and his subject, Whitman abolishes the hierarchic position of the poet-observer who, as if from above, perceives meanings larger than those available to his humble model. Longfellow's blacksmith only does the work but does not reflect; reflection is done for him by the poet-speaker. Whitman's «I» both acts and reflects and so abolishes the hierarchy in the relation of the poet with his reader making the reader a fellow traveler and fellow thinker, compelling him to go through the process of learning himself rather than holding up to him for emulation some already achieved ideal of conduct. The shift from displaying the result to experiencing the process enforces the shift of focus from what has been accomplished, so the patterns of the past, to what is being done and what is still to be done, thus – the present action and the vista opening into the future. Such a perspective simply demands an «unfinished,» open, experimental and progressive form.

In the 1855 «Preface» Whitman (like Emerson in «The American Scholar») challenges Longfellow's (and not only Longfellow's) position on the grounds that to create new poetry one has to reverse the traditionally accepted perspective. New is new NOT because it is the latest addition to the layered cultural legacy; new is new from the very bottom. The new poet does not continue the time honored models for it is not the sophisticated, hierarchic culture that produces and nourishes new artists

and their audiences. It is the American, «this new man» absorbing the scope of the American experience, the generosity and unlimited resources of the continent and of the whole earth who speaks through his representative, new poet and makes new poetry commensurate with his new situation in the new world: «All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it» (Song for Occupations v.93). And correspondingly:

«A live nation can always cut a deep mark and can have the best authority the cheapest...namely from its own soul. This is the sum of the profitable uses of individuals or states and of present action or grandeur and of the subjects of poets – As if it were necessary to trot back generation after generation to the eastern records! As if the beauty of the demonstrable must fall behind that of the mythical!» (1855 Preface, CRE 710)

Longfellow provides translations, folk ballads and poetic tales that furnish the United States with respectable imaginative, «national» and «folk,» heritage and on the other hand, he educates the American public in literatures of different European nations. His project, at least in the earlier part of his career (before the Civil War), is nationalist and didactic not *despite* but *in* his far ranging international explorations. Whitman, too, responds to nationalist and didactic impulses but he is first of all interested in ensuring that his «I» persona as the representative «new man» and the United States as the new nation taking its place in the historical process of «the westward course of empire» «make their mark,» not by contributing to but by transforming what has been done so far. So even when he borrows from older and foreign writers as to a significant extent he does, for example, in «Salut Au Monde» which heavily draws on Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, his borrowings serve to map the space for growth of the self in the making. For such a self the immediate personal experience, the new national experience, and the corresponding political and philosophical perspective fuse to accomplish the great change of consciousness, a condition sine-qua-non-of the new poetry and new art.

«The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions...he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake.» (CRE, 711)

In 1847, the year of *Evangeline*, Longfellow wrote in his journal:

Much is said now-a-days of national literature. Does it mean anything? Such a literature is the expression of national character. We have, or shall have, a composite one, embracing French, Spanish, Irish, English, Scotch, and German peculiarities. Whoever has within himself most of these is our truly national writer. In other words, whoever is most universal is also most national.»(Samuel Longfellow II:73-74)

Quite close to Whitman but also quite different: whoever is most universal is also most national because the universal comes before the national, and needless to say, before the personal. For Longfellow the personal and specific is clearly subordinated to the «universal»; for Whitman the external, foreign and universal is valid only in so far as it is made personal, as it stimulates the growth of the self. Such stimulation confirms its validity only in the process in which «the universal» is being reached within the individual through the progressive expansion of self:

Salut au monde!

What cities the light or warmth penetrates I penetrate those cities
myself,
 All islands to which birds wing their way I wing my way myself.

Toward you all, in America's name,
 I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,

To remain after me in sight forever,
For all the haunts and homes of men. (CRE,148)

The mature manhood of both Longfellow and Whitman was torn by the Civil War. In his book on Civil War literature, *The Unwritten War*, Daniel Aaron speaks of the whole generation of American writers fed by the intensity of the War experience. And on both sides of the conflict, the War evoked intense poetic reaction. Throughout the years of war and the years immediately following, poems kept getting published in newspapers, periodicals and as broadside sheets. Not so long ago, Faith Barrett and Cristanne Miller published a new anthology of Civil War poetry *Words for the Hour*. As with the massive poetic reaction to 9/11, among the authors of the «words for the hour» there are anonymous, little known and forgotten authors as well as poets whose names still appear in college anthologies and reprints of 19th century poetic canon. Among them, very centrally, – Whitman of *Drum Taps* and the Lincoln elegy but also Longfellow for, again as with 9/11, practically each published or even unpublished (as Dickinson) American poet of the time felt the need and perhaps even the obligation to respond to the national tragedy.

Longfellow's war experience was, at least at points, quite similar to Whitman's as he, too, went to the front lines in search of his wounded son Charlie. He saw the camps and the hospitals and like Whitman responded to the war with a series of poems, among them the ballad like «The Cumberland» (1862) commemorating the gallant though lost fight of the Union ship the «Cumberland» with a Confederate «ironclad,» the «Virginia,» the popular «Christmas Bells,» (1864) and «Killed at the Ford» first published in the *Atlantic* for April 1866, then included in the collection *Fleur-de-Luce* (Nov.1866). «Killed at the Ford» is a poem mourning the death of a young soldier in which the speaker is one of the fellows at arms of the dead boy. The soldier's death, however, involves not only his comrades at arms; the bullet that hit the soldier also hit the woman who loved him. One can say that, like the «Blacksmith» poem, this poem too aims at the popular audience repeating the accepted pieties: the dead soldier is presented as above the rank and file, an officer, a courageous leader of his unit; his looks in life as his wounds in death, seen as red and white roses, are sentimentally aestheticized and a melodramatic love motif provides the poem's climax. The war does not only hurt the soldiers, it takes its toll among the civilian society as well. Longfellow's war poems like Whitman's poems in *Drum Taps* follow the national mood ranging from the early praise of war heroism to the later longing for the end of hostilities and mourning of wasteful deaths and suffering of soldiers and their families.

In 1863 Longfellow's son Charlie, not even 19 at the time, joined the Union army against his father's will. Longfellow, still shattered by the death (in July 1861) of his wife in a household fire and actually fearing for his sanity, started translating the *Inferno* part of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. He was avoiding that part of Dante's poem in his earlier translation work as well as in his teaching (cf. Matthew Pearl, «Preface» to *Inferno*) but translating it during the War, whatever the artistic failures of his translation, the poet produced a culturally important work, a sort of intertext through which the American public could read and relate to the War. While working on the translation, he also wrote a sequence of six sonnets «Divina Commedia» which refer not so much to Dante's poem as to his own work on translating Dante. The sonnets are Longfellow's most personal published poems, since the more directly personal «Mezzo Camin» and «The Cross of Snow» were not printed in his lifetime. Here is the first sonnet of the sequence:

Oft have I seen at some cathedral door
A laborer, pausing in the dust and heat,
Lay down his burden, and with reverent feet
Enter, and cross himself, and on the floor
Kneel to repeat his paternoster o'er;

Far off the noises of the world retreat;
 The loud vociferations of the street
 Become an undistinguishable roar
 So, as I enter here from day to day,
 And leave my burden at this minster gate,
 Kneeling in prayer and not ashamed to pray,
 The tumult of the time disconsolate
 To inarticulate murmurs dies away
 While the eternal ages watch and wait.

Entering the cathedral of Dante's great poem Longfellow becomes, somewhat like his blacksmith, a simple laborer leaving behind «the loud vociferations of the street» in order to pursue his task and worship divine order. Entering the Cathedral insulates the speaker from «the tumult of the time disconsolate» and allows him to commune with «the eternal ages» beyond the present and the immediate. In fact, entering the sacred space of Dante's art not only provides a refuge from the anxiety and pain of the present moment in national and personal history but positions Dante's poem as a kind of «objective correlative» allowing the translator to deal with the experience too painful and too personal to be treated directly. Longfellow, the widowed husband and father of a wounded Union soldier, desperately needs both a distancing filter for his pain and the formal rigors of the sonnet enriched with the cultural and historical associations that go with the genre. At this point, we may legitimately ask the question to what extent such distancing strategy is linked to the older aesthetics of decorum and to what extent, as Dana Gioia suggests, it already looks forward to the practice of Longfellow's great modernist successors like Pound and Eliot? Longfellow invokes Dante and identifies with the Italian's work to filter personal experience through his landmark opus, to wrap up private experience in transpersonal meaning and form and also to inscribe himself in the line of the great tradition.

In total contrast, Whitman seeks to annul the distance between himself and the war experience, for example in a poem such as «A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown» which seeks to make the reality of war available to the reader as unmediated, direct experience. Whitman, as we remember, started visiting soldiers in New York hospitals even before he went to the frontlines of Virginia looking for his wounded brother George. Having sent George home, he stayed in Washington throughout the War acting as a sort of volunteer nurse in the military hospitals of the capital. Out of the chaos and confusion of war, which he got to know through and through, the poet rescues not the ability of the self to still commune with the ideal but the sense of dignity and value of each individual life, so easily and so massively destroyed. Marching in the «ranks hard-prest,» along «the road unknown,» uncertain and anxious, his «I» speaker stops to attend to the single dying «lad.» Only feeling with and caring for an individual human being has any meaning in the chaos of war. Whitman, much more readily than Longfellow, takes the reader into the very experience of war. He does not elevate the soldiers' rank or idealize their figures and character to impress the reader with the magnitude of waste and loss. His method remains direct personal and emotional involvement carrying the reader along. Still, less obviously than Longfellow, he too seeks to aestheticize, even more – to consecrate the war experience through art. For example, «A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim» is shaped by traditional forms of religious art imposed directly onto the reality of war. Against the turmoil and chaos of war the ritually structured sequence of three views of dead bodies and the invocation in the poem of set motifs of religious art such as the pieta or the ivory carvings of crucified Christ press the horrid naturalistic experience into moulds of order and meaning infused with aesthetic and religious significance. But it is still the «I» persona that performs the sacred rites and, however conventional they may seem in

form, they are first of all gestures of affection, protected in their intimacy by the shades of «daybreak gray and dim.» It is love more than beauty that provides Whitman with the way to oppose the destructiveness of war.

But the distancing impulse has already set in and it gains its fullest expression in Whitman's late long lyric «Prayer of Columbus.» The poem was published in 1874, that is almost a decade after the end of the armed conflict, three years after the poet voiced his disappointed criticism of America in «Democratic Vistas,» and a year after he suffered the first stroke. Whitman appropriates here the figure of Columbus who, in the course of the 19th century, had been made into an American hero guaranteeing American national achievement and justifying the nationalist thought. We only need to remember all the places and institutions named Columbia or Columbian this or that (like the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago celebrating the 400 anniversary of the discovery of America) or the door to the Capitol decorated with scenes from the life of Columbus like the doors of European cathedrals – with scenes from the lives of patron saints. Also the different patriotic poems like Joseph Hopkinson's «Hail Columbia» (1787) or Joel Barlow's «The Vision of Columbus» (1787) revised and republished as «Columbiad» in 1807, and reprinted as late as 1825. In Barlow's poem, the beaten, broken Columbus at the end of his days is granted a vision of the future progress and flourishing of the United States as solace in his personal misery. In 1847, in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Whitman reviewed the abridged version of Washington Irving's *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* originally published in 1828. In his biography, Irving treats Columbus as a heroic figure making him into a national hero. Thus the theme of pioneering, exploratory journey that ends in personal disappointment and the motif of recompense given to the explorer in a prophetic vision of the continent's future fuse in the way Columbus has been treated by American writers before Whitman. And Whitman was certainly aware of that tradition. Not only did he repeatedly refer to Irving and Cooper (whose novel *Mercedes of Castile* also features the story of the voyage of Columbus) in his *Brooklyn Eagle* column and mentioned them in conversations of his late life but he retained throughout his poetic career the Federalist name habit referring to the United States as Columbia in a number of poems from early to late.

Already in a notebook of 1862 Whitman made plans for a poem about great men: «Sing the death of Kepler (Columbus, Cervantes, John Brown, Burns...)» and he quoted a fragment from George Ticknor's *History of Spanish Literature* (3 vols. 1849, later Whitman mentions Ticknor in *Democratic Vistas*):

....in 1506 Columbus died at Valladolid, a disappointed, brokenhearted old man – little comprehending what he had done for mankind, still less the glory and honor that through all future generations awaited his name... But the mantle of his devout and heroic spirit fell on some of his successors (Grier, I,460)

To this quote Whitman added a personal comment « Columbus was a grander man by far than I thought? – had visions – wrote with unsurpassed vigor – had the loftiest spirit?»

That 1862 response to Ticknor's portrait of Columbus may have started the train of associations and the line of thinking that created in «Passage to India» and even more in «Prayer of Columbus» the figure of Columbus as a visionary and a type of poet with whom Whitman intensely (though indirectly) identifies. He identifies with Columbus not so much as a national hero but as a man of vision and, what is more, a man of religious vision, especially in «Passage to India.» In «Prayer of Columbus» the vision Columbus is given at the end of the poem is not a confident vision of America's future greatness or of America's glorious progress but a much less specific one, stressing aesthetic and linguistic elements in it and the hope of personal fame. Also, the scope of the vision is global rather than directly national:

And these things I see suddenly, what mean they?
 As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,
 Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,
 And on the distant waves sail countless ships,
 And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.

Has Walt Whitman lost, as Ezra Greenspan suggests, the faith in the American reader? Did international recognition appear to him at this point more probable than either the future greatness and glory of America or his own national fame and recognition? Or has his poetic ambition transcended the borders of national achievement and assumed global horizons? For, it seems that the older Whitman got the more international minded he became. And the figure of Columbus allowed him to fuse the national and the transnational perspective, to view himself as both an American and a global explorer, whose quest and vision, unrecognized in the present, are nevertheless analogous to the fate and posthumous vindication of the great Italian.

In the final sonnet of the «Divina Commedia» sequence Longfellow, the artisan-translator, invokes Dante as a bearer of a similarly transcending, unifying vision working above immediate realities of Italian history and Italian politics to effect religious and aesthetic illumination.

I lift mine eyes, and all the windows blaze
 With forms of Saints and holy man who died,
 Here martyred and hereafter glorified;
 And the great Rose upon its leaves displays
 Christ's Triumph, and the angelic roundelays,
 With splendor upon splendor multiplied;
 And Beatrice again at Dante's side
 No more rebukes, but smiles her words of praise.
 And then the organ sounds, and unseen choirs
 Sing the old Latin hymns of peace and love
 And benedictions of the Holy Ghost;
 And the melodious bells among the spires
 O'er all the house-tops and through heaven above

Proclaim the elevation of the Host! (*Poems and Other Writings* 481–82)

In translating Dante, the American poet becomes an instrument of such illumination. Characteristically too, it is Italian struggle for unification (1848–1871) that becomes a source of political hope in the poem written in the course and published just after the Civil War (just as in «Passage to India», it is the old European dream that justifies the faith in America's crowning achievement). Although, as almost always in Longfellow, the poem ends on a positive note, its hopeful ending is only indirectly (if at all) related to contemporary American reality. It is more clearly related to the transnational vision (the hymns, after all are sung in Latin, the supra national language of Christian Europe) of aesthetic and spiritual harmony. Eventually, what for both poets saves the hope is faith in the religiously colored vision of supranational, unifying appeal of art and expectations, however hesitant, of their own transnational poetic fame projected onto the historical figures of great European visionaries.

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