

# 琉球大学学術リポジトリ

## ホイットマンのサブライムー「自己の歌」26－38節 の一解釈

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The Whitmanian Sublime:  
A Reading of "Song of Myself," Sections 26-38  
Katsunori Yamazato

Is Whitman's "Song of Myself" a structured poem? Or is it a chaotic amalgamation of poems? Despite the difficulty arising from reading "Song of Myself" as a structured poem, a number of critics have so far attempted to do so.<sup>1</sup> Valuable as these readings may be, one is induced to give his own reading of the poem as a structured work. Although it is not my intention to give a structural analysis of the whole of "Song of Myself," I believe that by using the concept of the American Sublime we can isolate sections 26-38 as a structural unit.<sup>2</sup> It is my thesis, then, that sections 26-38 express a Whitmanian version of the American Sublime, and Emerson's "transparent eyeball" passage in *Nature* will serve as the model of the American Sublime.<sup>3</sup>

Before going on to analyze a Whitmanian version of the American Sublime, however, we need to examine briefly Emerson's "transparent eyeball" passage:

In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, —no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean

egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulates through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintance, master or servant, is then trifle and a disturbance.<sup>4</sup>

In Emerson's brief account of the Sublime, the self, standing "on the bare ground," is exposed to an external sensation: "my head bathed by the blithe air." The depiction of the external sensation (or power) is not elaborate, yet the sensation certainly appears powerful enough to change the self drastically. The self is "uplifted into infinite space," and "all mean egotism vanishes." The pressure of the external power, moreover, is apparently so compelling that the self undergoes a metamorphosis: "I become a transparent eyeball." James M. Cox thinks that the metaphor of "the eyeball" is "a declaration of a change from being to seeing." Cox goes on to say that "The metaphor instantaneously transforms being into seeing; if it does not annihilate personal consciousness, it causes the personal experience to vanish by virtue of the expansion and uplift of essential self into infinite space."<sup>5</sup> Individual characteristics are suppressed in the moment of the Sublime: "I am nothing." Yet, now that the transformed self is part of the vast whole of creation (or God), it is capable of seeing all: "I see all." The old self is forgotten and, as Daniel B. Shea puts it, "the attainment of a newly-given self, not simply the regaining of identity through recognition" takes place.<sup>6</sup> Shea interprets the implications of the "transforming moment" as follows: ". . . the American writer after Emerson is challenged to induce belief that something extrinsic to the character has, in a transforming moment, become intrinsic to him. Something apparently not in the system of the protagonist's growth, but deriving from his

natural environment, perhaps from the American spirit of place, invades and transforms the self.”<sup>7</sup> The self, invaded and flooded by the external power, feels “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through” itself. The idea of the self as a sensitive medium (or conductor) capable of transmitting external sensations, as we shall see also in Whitman, seems to originate in this passage.

The moment of the Sublime in Whitman essentially follows the pattern briefly discussed above. While the Sublime in Emerson is rendered in a few suggestive images charged with implications, the Sublime in Whitman is an extended, detailed process in which, one might say, the Emersonian implications are fully substantiated in vivid, overwhelming details.

Section 26 opens with the meditative voice of the passive, somewhat despondent self being exposed to external sensations. At first the external sensations are mainly aural: “Now I will do nothing but listen.”<sup>8</sup> In the early part of the section, the external sensations are distant and various, and the self, by virtue of its distance from the sensations, remains composed. Yet the distance gradually diminishes, and the sensations penetrate the empty self, fill it, and stir it:

I hear the violincello (’tis the young man’s heart’s complaint,)  
I hear the key’d coronet, it glides quickly in through my ears,  
It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast.  
.....

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,  
The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

I hear the train’d soprano. . . .

The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,

It wrenches such ardors I did not know I possessed them,  
It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are licked by the  
indolent waves.

The tactile sensation (“bare feet” and “licked”) in the last line is reminiscent of the Emersonian passage in which the bare head is exposed to “the blithe air.” The external sensations are powerful and bitter-sweet and, flooded by them, the self experiences a fake death: “I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breaths, / Steeped amid honey’d morphine, my windpipe throttled in fake of death.” Toward the end of the section, tactile sensations replace the aural ones. The self is revived with a new strength, a strength necessary “to feel the puzzle of puzzles, / And that we call Being.” Whitman’s language here calls to mind Emerson’s words: “I am part or parcel of God.” The self’s ultimate purpose is expressed in Whitman’s line, in which “Being” may be equated to “the Universal Being” or “the Universe.”

In section 27, the “I” asserts that he is sensitive and extremely receptive of external sensations. The self is “no callous shell,” and the self can passionately respond to the sensations:

I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.  
I merely stir, feel with my fingers, and am happy,  
To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as  
I can stand.

Just like the Emersonian self which allows the currents of “the Universal Being” to run through it, the Whitmanian self, trembling even to the faintest tactile sensation, prepares itself for the major “assault” of the external power.

The external sensations in section 28 become, as in Emerson, mainly tactile. (Yet nothing is more remote from the Emersonian language than the Whitmanian diction in section 28). External sensations are depicted in sexual imagery; they assault the self and transform it:

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,  
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,  
.....  
On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,  
.....  
Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,  
Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,  
Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist,  
Deluding my confusion with the calm of the sunlight and  
pasture-fields

External power, or eroticized Nature, sexually overwhelms the self, and the self is struck with a sense of terror and helplessness:

The sentries desert every other part of me,  
They have left me helpless to a red marauder,  
They all come to the headland to witness and assist against me.

Although the “marauder,” painted with the archetypal color of terror, ravishes the self, the self is not free from culpability: “I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the great traitor, /I went myself to the headland, my own hands carried me there.” The Emersonian pattern is evidenced here by the “marauder,” a Whitmanian substitution for Emerson’s “Over-Soul” (or God), and “the headland” perhaps replaces the Emersonian “woods.”

The Whitmanian self desires an orgasmic fulfillment (which perhaps parallels the Emersonian fusion with God) and, in the end of section

28 and the early part of section 29, the external power is depicted as a phallus which overwhelms and fulfills the self with sexual energy:

You villain touch! What are you doing? my breath is tight  
in the throat.

Unclench your floodgate, you are too much for me,  
Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth's  
touch!

Did it make you ache so, leaving me?

The Whitmanian fusion of the external power and the self, however, does not, as in Emerson, instantaneously transform “being” into “seeing.” The Whitmanian process of metamorphosis is complicated, and the ecstatic moment (that is, section 33) is considerably delayed. The self in the second half of section 29 anticipates a “birth” as a consequence of the fusion: “Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward. / Sprouts take and accumulate, stand by the curb prolific and vital.” One may perhaps say that, as in Emerson, something extrinsic to the self has become intrinsic to it.

Now serene, “sexually at peace with himself and by extension with the universe,”<sup>9</sup> the self contemplates the consequence of the fusion it experienced in sections 28-29:

All truths wait in all things,  
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,  
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon.

The self is speaking as if it had been endowed with a power to perceive “All truths.” The imagery of delivery, then, anticipates perhaps section 33 in which “being” is totally transformed into “seeing.” The second line quoted above (“They neither hasten their own delivery....”)

reads as if it were a Whitmanian swerve from the Emersonian Sublime. That is, compared with the ethereal, instantaneous metamorphosis in the Emersonian Sublime, the Whitmanian Sublime is attained only through a complex, "ripening" procedure. At any rate, the self, having quivered to "a new identity," speaks with a conviction of the importance of the tactile sensations (or the direct experience of the universe): "Logic and sermons never convince, / The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul." Any elements of intellectualization, the self seems to assert, are ultimately irrelevant to its pursuit of the Sublime. (Is this again a Whitmanian criticism of the abstracting, intellectualizing tendency of the Emersonian self?)<sup>10</sup>

Section 31 depicts the new identity the self has acquired. As a consequence of the assault (and the fusion), the self finds itself different from what it used to be: "I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over." This perhaps in an example of Whitman substantiating the implications involved in the fusion; the self in a sense has become a landscape, a representative of "the whole earth" (section 32). The fusion, moreover, appears to have given the self primeval psychic energy. The despondent self in section 26 is pale and remote when compared with this new self. Having achieved a new identity filled with psychic energy, the self is aggressive and ascending, desiring and capable of identifying with any objects existent around itself. The short catalogue in the end of section 31 attests to the aggressiveness of the new identity, and the energized, relentless self diminishes the distance between itself and external objects. The self is now driven by an impulse for endless identification.

But departing from the Emersonian model the whitmanian self at this stage lingers; it finds it necessary, prior to the attainment of the ecstatic



moment, to test the new identity through the examples of animals: "So they show their relations to me and I accept them, / They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession." The movement of the self in this section is noteworthy: "Myself moving forward then and now and forever." The self, "infinite and omnigenous," now moves with "velocity." Having been energized and tested, the self appears fully prepared for the Sublime, a moment of ecstatic epistemological expansion and emptying-out of psychic energy: "Why do I need your paces when myself out-gallop them? / Even as I stand or sit faster than you."

Sections 26-32 correspond to or parallel the Emersonian account of the self exposed to the external sensations: ". . . my head bathed to the blithe air." Or perhaps a more eloquent Emerson will better illustrate my point :

We all stand waiting, empty, — knowing, possibly, that we can be full. . . . Then comes the god and converts the statues into fiery men, and by a flush of his eye burns up the veil which shrouded all things, and the meaning of the very furniture, of cup and saucer, of chair and clock and tester, is manifest. . . . All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles, and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes. And yet here again see the swift circumscription ! Good as is discourse, silence is better, and shames it.  
("Circles," p. 173)

This passage parallels sections 26-38 almost point by point. "Waiting" and "filling" are accounted in the early part of the sections, the despondent self has qualities of "a statue," and "the red marauder" is perhaps Whitman's expression of Emerson's "god." The moment of epiphany—the burning-up of the veil—parallels section 33, a Whitmanian moment of epistemological expansion, and "the swift circumscription" sets in

after section 33, which makes the “fiery” self silent. Sections 26-32, then, represent an extended process of “filling,” and it becomes apparent that Whitman is following the basic pattern of the Emersonian Sublime.

Then, after considerable preparation (or procrastination), comes section 33, the moment of ecstasy, in which the self, as in Emerson, becomes part of the universe. The self is depicted in an image of a balloon—“My ties and ballasts leave me” — and this visualization directly corresponds to the Emersonian abstract statement: “uplifted into infinite space.” Whitman presents a gigantic image of the self— “. . . my palms cover continents” — yet this may be a corollary of the Emersonian statement: “I am part or parcel of God.”

The self becomes omnipresent and, thus, section 33 is also a moment of “seeing.” (Sections 26-32 in this context may be called the moments of “being”). The fusion of the self into cosmos, that is, the suppression of individual characteristics, enables the self to see almost everything existent in the universe. Stated in Emersonian terms, the self has become “nothing,” yet it sees “all.” The catalogue, then, not only expresses “the vastness of existence itself”<sup>11</sup> or “the complexity of the modern world,”<sup>12</sup> but also serves as the eye of the Whitmanian self—the means of “seeing all.” (Also, the catalogue is indicative of the psychic energy which the self has gained and which the self is emptying out.) Indeed, the self attaches the primary importance to the epistemological expansion it has gained through the Sublime:

Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guessed at,  
What I guessed when I loaf'd on the grass,  
What I guessed while I lay alone in my bed,  
And again as I walk'd the beach under the paling stars of  
the morning.

The self relentlessly pursues the Emersonian implications: if the self becomes part of God, space and time available for the self must be unlimited. Although Emerson does not mention "time" in his account of the Sublime, Whitman's energized, ecstatic self can travel unlimitedly in space and time:

Solitary at midnight in my backyard, my thoughts gone from  
me a long while,  
Walking the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful God by my  
side,  
Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the  
stars,  
.....  
Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,  
Rocking and filling, appearing and disappearing,  
I tread day and night such roads.

The passage quoted above, we might say again, is a Whitmanian elaboration of the Emersonian implications. The Emersonian "woods" are replaced by the more democratic "backyard," and "the blithe air" (and by implication, the bright sunshine) are perhaps substituted for by the nocturnal air and starlight. Also, if the self becomes part of God, why can't it be a companion to God? In what seems a genuine Whitmanian (and American) stance, the self, unconfined in time, walks with "the beautiful gentle God," the Christ. One may also note that this expansion of the self to its possible limit is genuinely Emersonian: "The only sin is limitation" ("Circles," p. 171).

The moment of ecstatic expansion, however, does not endure; it is doomed to die away. The "swift circumscription" inevitably sets in. If "The essential claim of the Sublime is that man can... transcend the human,"<sup>13</sup> the duration of transcendence is subject to the strength of

the psychic energy the self possesses. No human being, unfortunately, is capable of sustaining the Sublime forever. Hence the Emersonian anxiety over the transitoriness of the Sublime: "O, keep this humor, (which in your life-time may not come to you twice), as the apple of your eyes."<sup>14</sup> Even the Whitmanian self, seemingly filled with inexhaustible psychic energy, is not free from the precarious swing of the Sublime. The transcendent space attained during the moment of ecstatic expansion diminishes, and the ever-approaching temporal self once again sees the distance widen between itself and external objects.

Sections 34-37 mark the declining Sublime in which the self, having spent the primary psychic energy, retreats into silent, meditative moments. Section 34 takes up a theme intoned at the end of section 33: "Distance and dead resuscitate." Although the self keeps identifying with the external objects, the mood has subtly changed toward the end of section 33. The identification is no longer totally joyous or ecstatic, "seeing" is supplemented by "hearing," (that is, "distancing" has set in), and the fusion involves painful human voices: "I take part, I see and hear the whole, / The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots, / . . . The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air." The conspicuous elements in sections 34-37 indeed are pain, defeat, and death, which form a striking contrast to the major elements in section 33 – joy (or ecstasy), victory (or the sense of attainment), and life (expressed comprehensively in the catalogue). The self still bearing with it Christ-like impulses from its spiritual heights appears to be plunging into a painful depth:

...I am possessed!

Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering,  
See myself in prison shaped like another man,

And feel the dull unintermitted pain.

.....  
Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the  
last gasp,  
My face is ash-colored, my sinew gnarl, away from me people  
retreat.

Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in them,  
I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg.

The depth is full of pain and humiliation and, although the abnegated self still feels capable of union with others – indeed with outcast humans – the distance between it and the external objects is ever-widening. The self has emptied out its psychic energy with which in section 33 it victoriously annihilated the distance between itself and others. The image of the self as a beggar indeed is quite appropriate after the tempestuous emptying – out of the psychic energy. This plunge from spiritual heights (an ecstatic companion to God) into earthly depths (a shame-faced, alienated beggar) perhaps corresponds to an Emersonian swing in moods:

When I write, whilst I write, seems the most natural thing in the world; *but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much* ; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, *this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature ; I am a weed by the wall.* (“Circles,” p.171 ; italics mine)

Emerson, like Whitman, understood the transitoriness of the Sublime, and the Emersonian parallelism – “I am God in nature ; I am a weed by the wall” – seems to sum up the movement of the Whitmanian self

in sections 33-37.

Section 38 represents a moment of recognition and recovery from the psychic exhaustion. The self, after a tumultuous journey of identification and “seeing” needs to “stand back.” The psychic emptying-out has reached its nadir, and the self defensively shouts: “Enough! enough! enough! /...Stand back! / Give me a little time beyond my cuff’d head, slumbers, dreams, gaping, / I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.” What is the “usual mistake”? The self cannot forget that a new identity will not endure. The self has to return to the old state in which it has to face the reality outside the Sublime – “the mockers and insults.” In the ecstatic moment, the self can employ “a separate look,” yet outside the Sublime it cannot avoid the images of reality: “My own crucifixion and bloody crowing.” Here is a painful recognition that the attainment of the Sublime does not necessarily free the self from human predicaments, life’s “blows of bludgeons and hammers.” Section 38, thus, is a necessary moment of recovery for the self returning from the darkening Sublime. The self can resume its psychic activities only after a moment of rest is secured: “I troop forth replenish’d with supreme power... / Eleves, I salute you! come forward! / Continue your annotations, continue your questionings.”

The concept of the Sublime enables the reader to read sections 26-38 of “Song of Myself” as a structural unit. Although the Whitmanian Sublime is considerably extended with vivid details, it clearly follows the basic pattern shown by the Emersonian model. And although to analyze the whole poem using the concept of the Sublime is beyond my concern at this stage, one is left with the impression that “Song of Myself” consists of separate “Sublime” units, an impression which will be developed by a future study.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example: Carl F. Strauch, "The Structure of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," *English Journal*, 27 (1938), 599; James E. Miller, Jr., *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 6-7; Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 74; Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression* (New York: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 248. See Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), for a summary of critical comments on the structure of "Song of Myself" (pp. 74-77).

<sup>2</sup> I am partly indebted to Strauch in seeing sections 26-38 as a structural unit, yet Strauch's interpretation, of course, is not based on the concept of the Sublime. Strauch interprets sections 26-38 as follows: "Paragraphs 26-38, life flowing in upon the Self; then evolutionary interpretation of life (p. 599). The term, "the American Sublime," is Bloom's. See *Poetry and Repression*, chapter 9.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom quotes the passage as one of the two most famous of all American Sublime passages (p. 247).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 24. All references to Emerson's essays are from this edition and will be cited subsequently in parentheses after quotation in my text.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Cox, "R. W. Emerson: The Circles of the Eye," in *Emerson: Prophecy, Metamorphosis, and Influence*, ed. David Levin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel B. Shea, "Emerson and the American Metamorphosis," in Levin, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Shea, pp. 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 44. All references to "Song of Myself" are from this edition.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Note, however, the basic pattern of the American Sublime stated in Bloom's highly suggestive words: "This, I now assert, is the specifically American Sublime, that it begins anew not with restoration or

rebirth, in the radically displaced Protestant pattern of the Wordsworthian Sublime, but that it is truly past even such displacement. . . . Not merely rebirth, but the even more hyperbolic trope of self-rebegetting, is the starting point of the last western Sublime, the great sunset of selfhood in the Evening Land" (Bloom, p. 244).

<sup>11</sup> Detlev W. Schumann, "Enumerative Style and Its Significance in Whitman, Rilke, Werfel," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 3 (1942), 171.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Spitzer, *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> An entry in Emerson's journal for March 19, 1835, quoted by Whicher, p. 473. The "transparent eyeball" passage is based on this entry.

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### 論文要約

ホイットマンのサブライム  
——「自己の歌」26-38節の一解釈

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ホイットマンの力編「自己の歌」("Song of Myself")に首尾一貫した構造が存在するかどうかという問題は、1938年の Carl F. Strauch の論文を契機に多くの批評家を刺激してきた。たとえば、Gay Wilson Allen, Malcolm Cowley, Roy Harvey Pearce, James E. Miller, Jr., そして最近では Harold Bloom などが、独自の批評的見地から「自己の歌」の構造について論じている。

小論の主張は、ホイットマンの上記作品中 26-38 節がひとつの構成単位として読めるということである。テキストの分析には Harold Bloom の "the American Sublime" という示唆豊かな概念を援用した。

エマソンの *Nature* における "a transparent eyeball" の一節を "the American Sublime" の原型と考え、そのパターンがホイットマンの上記作品、とくに 26-38 節にきわだって鮮明にみられるというのが小論の論点であるが、同時にまた小論における分析は、「自己の歌」全体の解釈にも有効に拡大し得るひとつの焦点をつくる試みでもある。