

「私自身の歌」：神話的曖昧性の構造

“Song of Myself” : The Structure of the Mythological Ambiguity

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要 約

ホイットマンの代表作ともいえる「私自身の歌」は、アメリカの大衆や風物などを織り込みながら、活気ある新世界を描いている詩である。しかし、アメリカの新しい詩は「直接的」「叙述的」ではなく、「間接的」に描く必要があるとホイットマンは主張した。「私自身の歌」においても、多様なアメリカの現実をリアルに描くと共にホイットマンが理想としたアメリカの姿が観念的にも描かれている。アレンが言うように、ホイットマンがアメリカを描くために利用した観念や概念は種々雑多なもので、多くの矛盾を含んでいる。そのため、彼が意図した理想のアメリカやアメリカ人の姿が曖昧になっているともいえる。これがこの詩の理解を難しくしているものであるが、ホイットマン自身が認めているように、その矛盾や曖昧性を肯定的に利用していることがこの詩の大きな魅力の一つである。ルイスの言葉を借りれば、ホイットマン達「希望派」が作品を通して表現しようとしたのは「アメリカの神話」であった。ホイットマンが描こうとした「アメリカの神話」は多くの曖昧性を含んでいる。この論文では、カタログ、二項対立、超越的な言説という「私自身の歌」にみられる特徴的な詩文を分析し、その言わば「神話的曖昧性」の重層的な構造を明らかにして、その上で、ホイットマンがその曖昧性の隠喩的效果を利用しながら、伝統的な神秘主義的・神話学的概念を超えた「アメリカ神話」と独自の詩的世界の構築を成し遂げていることを結論づけている。

キーワード：ホイットマン、私自身の歌、神話、曖昧性、構造

1. Introduction

In Walt Whitman's most important poem, "Songs of Myself," he depicted America's people, culture, and daily lives in order to express the positivity of the free and lively New World of Democracy. Like many contemporaries of Whitman, he expected such a lot of greatness from the New World that he was convinced that it was very important for American poets to use things American as crucial motives in their poetical works, and to sing about them in free verse ignoring the traditional metrical rules. Because of this, his fundamental purpose of "Songs of Myself" was to describe a great America as he saw and heard.

On the other hand, Whitman insisted that "the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic," in the Preface of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In other words, it should be metaphorical. But when he declared that "the United States is the greatest poem," he was trying, beyond a problem of articulation, to convey a mythical America in the transcendental manner.

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In the context of literary influences, the main source of Whitman's idea of transcendence is Emerson, or it might have an affinity with Wordsworth's mysticism. It might also be safe to say that it is, as Lewis points out in his "American Adam," one of the typical manifestations of the collective optimism of the "Hope"

Unlike Emerson's Transcendentalism, however, which does not require any catalysts to connect with "Over-soul," and Wordsworth's mysticism, which is nourished mostly in the nature of the Lake District, Whitman's poetical conceptions of the divinity has brought architectonic contradictions into the lines of the song. As Allen points out, Whitman's "conceptions of the world he lived in and man's place in it came from various sources, some of them contradictory." According to Allen, Whitman brought "a blend of concepts and abstractions which satisfied his own needs" into his songs, and "they carried over some connotations from their sources, with consequent ambiguity" (Allen 174). The ambiguity is clearly caused by trying to achieve a poetical exquisiteness in expressing a mythical America indirectly by depicting real and vivid America directly. It explains an existential problem of America in poeticizing it metaphorically, and provides the theme and the philosophy of the song an ambiguous characteristic, which can be called "mythological ambiguity."

Whitman himself, of course, understood what kind of contradictions were there in his own lines of the song as he actually mentions the problem in the song. He did not consider them, on the contrary, to be a conceptual flaw in the song, but to be what can be positively used as an agent that implies the mythological ambiguity. Although the idea of the mythological ambiguity arguably makes the song more complicated to read, it is definitely one of the characteristics that make the song much more worth reading. In that sense, poeticizing the mythological ambiguity was a poetical feat that Whitman intended to include in the song.

The crucial device that actualizes the poetical feat is "I" the poet of the song. The "I" is the key to the mythological ambiguity in terms of the importance of his metaphorical interpretation of the mythological ambiguity that leads readers to a full-understanding of the poem. To understand the mythological ambiguity requires us to understand the structure of the ambiguity of America and the poet that Whitman poeticizes in the "Song of Myself."

To do this, we will analyze, first in this paper, some segments of the poem that 1) are articulated in "cataloging" method, 2) deal with the motives of the "opposites," 3) express the transcendental self, and investigate the structure of the ambiguity of America. Next we will turn to the poet's responses to and interpretations of the ambiguous America in order to disclose how the poet works in poeticizing the mythological ambiguity. Lastly, we will compare Whitman's metaphorical strategy of depicting America and the poet with some notions of mysticism and mythology and conclude the uniqueness of Whitman's technique of poeticizing the mythological ambiguity.

2. Catalog

In “Songs of Myself” as well as in other poems, Whitman used the so-called catalog technique, which employs an enumerative way of nouns of people, places, and/or actions to express the greatness and wholeness of America as it is in a materialistic way. In the cataloged lines, therefore, the diversity of America is powerfully and vigorously depicted seemingly at random in a realistic way.

Trippers and askers surround me,
 People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,
 The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
 My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
 The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
 The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,
 Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events ;

(4 ; 1-7)

The catalog of enumerated people, things, and places can conjure up a lot of American scenes just in front of the reader, whether they are good or bad. These cataloged items are descriptively poeticized at random to emphasize the liveliness and sickness of America without filters. The reality of America described here embraces the old and new, love and indifference, depressions and exaltations altogether. In this way, Whitman’s catalogs passionately describe both some moments of affection and even facts that we want to ignore.

The little one sleeps in its cradle,
 I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand.

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
 I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
 I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen.

(8 ; 1-6)

The catalog of people that the poet shows here is technically supposed to create as he “loafes” around America. The poet sings about the reality of America with affection and indignation. Whitman succeeds in

poeticizing a vivid America that is unable to be explained with any metaphorical interpretations. The realistic and diverse America that is described in the cataloging method constitutes the bottom layer of the mythological ambiguity.

3. Opposites

The mythological ambiguity of “Song of Myself” is, as we have analyzed above, supported by the reality and diversity of America as a strong foundation of the structure. The poetical fact distinguishes Transcendentalism and some mainstream mysticism from “Song of Myself.”

In the song, however, there is indeed a type of lines that deal with some pairs of idealistic opposites. It provides to the song more philosophical topics than those of the reality in discussing America. The most frequently discussed topic is arguably the pair of the “Body” and the “Soul.”

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

(21 ; 1-3)

Here shows the duality of the human existence. The responses of the poet to the topic will be analyzed later, but the poet considers the opposites to be equal.

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other. (5 ; 1-2)

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul, (48 ; 1-2)

The “soul” is treated as equally as the “body.” What matters about these lines is the fact that it is implied that materialism can be metaphorically replaced by spiritualism, and vice versa.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. (3 ; 15-17)

The opposites of the body and the soul are mutually complementary and work as a device of metaphorizing America in the song. Unlike the cataloged lines, the lines discussing opposites can achieve an idealization of America. They explain the mythological ambiguity of America bridging between the reality and the ideal. The ideal but still dual America that is described in the lines discussing opposites constitutes the second layer of the mythological ambiguity.

4. Transcendence

The last type of lines poeticizing the mythological ambiguity is the transcendental one that depicts the poet's mystical exuberance. This type of lines highly metaphorize or sublimes America into the oneness and the wholeness of the poet's consciousness. In the high density of metaphor, there exists only the selfness of the poet losing the reality completely.

I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick at night.

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
(I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house by, after all.)

(20 ; 15-24)

As the words “converging objects of the universe,” “orbit of mine,” and “elementary laws” clearly show, these lines poeticize the purity and the concentration of the poet's consciousness that is directed towards within. The “All” have lost their specific reality and have become what is written just as codes to decipher. In this state of the poet's consciousness, America is completely a metaphor, the one which is consumed and assumed by the poet's self. This type of expressions are almost identical to statements about spiritual enlightenments of mystics, which means the poet's poetical staleness or incapability of articulating such an overwhelming experience. In either way, the transcendental or mythic America that can be expressed only in excessive emotions constitutes the top layer of the mythological ambiguity.

The essence of poeticizing the mythological ambiguity is, as we have investigated, in the multi-layered

structure of America that consists of three different levels of existence of America. There exists diversity in the bottom layer, duality the second layer and unity the top layer. The mythological ambiguity is provided by the structure of the multi-layered America, which is realized with the introduction of the catalogs, the opposites, and mystical enlightenment.

Chart 1 shows the structure of the multi-layered America.

AMERICA	
Transcendence (Unity/Mythic)	
Opposites (Duality/Idealistic)	
Cataloging (Diversity/Materialistic)	

Chart 1

5. Multi-layered Self

Now here is the discussion about the responses and attitudes of the poet to the three types of segments of lines. The first one is to the cataloged lines. After the quoted lines of Section 4 above, the poet sings about the catalog :

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders,
I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait. (4 ; 15-16)

The poet does nothing but to remain silent about the reality of the diverse America. It is the realistic attitude of the “noncommittal self;” which shows the poet’s acceptance of contradictions in the reality without check.

Here is another example depicting the noncommittal self. After the quoted catalog of people in Section 8 above, the poet also leaves them behind and sings as follows :

I mind them or the show or resonance of them — I come and I depart. (8 ; 19)

The intention of the poet is neither to refuse the reality nor to negate it. The poet accepts the reality and is content with it. The line in Section 26, “Now I will do nothing but listen” is another example of the non-committal attitude of the poet’s. The noncommittal self that responds to the cataloged lines constitutes the bottom layer of the mythological ambiguity.

Here are some lines where the poet responds to the opposites of the body and the soul :

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age,
 Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and
 admire myself. (3 ; 18-19)

The poet still keeps silent and noncommittal in the discussion of the opposites here. The attitudes of the poet to the opposites, however, are not the same all the time. Sometimes the poet commits to the discussions about the opposites and affirms the contradiction of the opposites.

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less,
 And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them. (20 ; 13-14)

The poet's use of the negative and the comparative of inferiority as well as the affirmative statement emphasizes the duality and the unity of the opposites at the same time. The emphasis can explain both the individuality and the transpersonality of people.

Taking another segment about the opposites for example, the poet's way of dealing with the existential contradictions will be revealed :

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
 And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
 And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

I chant the chant of dilation or pride, (21 ; 4-7)

The pair of the opposites of the woman and the man evokes poet's self-esteem because of the fact that the men are born from their mother. In the poet's view, procreation sanctifies the woman and the man in terms of the unity of the opposites. The committed self is another entity of the poet. Both the noncommittal self and the committed self emerging in the lines dealing with the opposites and affirms them constitutes the second layer of the mythological ambiguity.

Lastly, as expected, we see the fully-committed and self-sufficient self in the transcendental line of the song. The self admires itself :

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from,

(24 ; 28)

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious,
 Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy,

I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish,
Nor the cause of the friendship I emit, nor the cause of the friendship I take again.

(24 ; 48-51)

The transcendental self, as these lines above show, expands like the big bang and absorbs everything like a black hole, which gives the poet an ambivalent characteristics : fully committed and self-sufficient.

I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content. (20 ; 25-27)

The ambivalent self that is fully committed to the universe and also self-sufficient independently constitutes the top layer of the mythological ambiguity.

Chart 2 shows the structure of the multi-layered self in correspondence with the multi-layered America, of which the mythological ambiguity is composed.

The Mythological Ambiguity	
AMERICA	SELF
Transcendence	Fully Committed/Self-Sufficient
Opposites	Noncommittal/Committed
Cataloging	Noncommittal

Chart 2

6. Poeticizing the Mythological Ambiguity

As discussed above, “Songs of Myself” employs the multi-layered structure of America and the self. The two are never sublimed into the transcendental enlightenment. The poem shows several dimensions of existence of America---diversity, duality, and unity---and of the self---noncommittal, committed, fully committed, and self-sufficient. This multi-layered structure is the skeleton key to the mythological ambiguity of the poem.

Arguably the way of poeticizing the mythological ambiguity can be attributed to Whitman’s technique only. According to Joseph Campbell, duality is the only mode in which we can think. It defines and rules the reality. Myths always require us to find the unity of all beyond the reality.

Whitman created a myth that includes the ambiguity of diversity, duality, and unity. This is his version of the American myth and his vision of the myth is poeticized in “Song of Myself.”

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