EGYPTIAN MYTH AND WALT WHITMAN'S "LILACS"

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ABSTRACT

This paper establishes the influence of Egyptian myth and religion on Walt Whitman, and explores the direction of his use of the Egyptian material in his art, particularly in the elegy for Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." The study helps to account for the sources of some of the elements in the poem that differ from the traditional pastoral elegy form, and thereby increases our understanding of Whitman's creative achievement and our appreciation of "Lilacs."

I

Many studies have been done on Walt Whitman's elegy for Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Critics have examined the influence of the pastoral elegy tradition,[1] the poem's structure,[2] unity,[3] symbolism,[4] and voice.[5] Incomplete attention, however, has been given to the influence of ancient myth despite Gay Wilson Allen's and James E. Miller's identification of mythic elements in the poem[6] and the recognition that Whitman regarded Lincoln's death as a mythic event.[7]

Traditionally, mythology has provided the material that determines the dramatic structure, the imagery, and the symbolism in the pastoral elegy form. The Greeks and Romans built their elegies from the myths of their fertility gods--Adonis, Dionysius, Thyrsis, and Lycid. Milton incorporated the Christian mythology with the classical material to produce "Lycidas." Shelley employed classical and Christian material in "Adonais," though the poem ultimately rejects the notions of immortality expressed in these myths in favor of the Romantic idea of immortality as absorption of the soul into the universal life principle. The addition of new bodies of mythic material was necessary because the religious beliefs of the poet dictate the kind of resolution with death that is an essential feature of elegy and its ultimate purpose.

Whitman, as it is well-known, developed his own set of beliefs based on what he perceived to be the natural processes of nature. A large part of his thinking was derived from oriental sources, especially from Egypt. It was to Egypt that Whitman went for a body of mythological material to use in his elegy. He found an appropriate myth in the drama of the death of the fertility god, Osiris. Unlike other elegists, Whitman, in accordance with his habit of avoiding direct allusion, never mentions his source. The evidence for his use of Egyptian sources is there, however.

The dramatic structure in "Lilacs" parallels the Osiris myth. Whitman employed a two-fold journey motif: one of a coffin carrying a corpse to its final resting place; and the other of a mourner wandering aimlessly in search of comfort for his grief. The Osiris myth has the same pattern: Osiris' body, sealed in a coffin, makes a journey while Isis, his sister and wife, makes another journey aimlessly and sorrowfully searching for him.

Egyptian beliefs about death, life, and immortality inform the imagery and symbolism of Whitman's poem. The sun, the tomb, and the swamp in particular have their basis in the myth and ritual surrounding Osiris. The symbolism in the poem operates according to the Egyptian concept of principles at work in the universe. Seeing "Lilacs" against the background of the Egyptian material will help us to understand the poem's integrated structure and the manner in which the poet arrives at a successful reconciliation with his grief. Beyond this, the analysis may

have broader implications for the study of symbolism in Whitman's other poems.

II

That Whitman should have looked to Egyptian material is not surprising. During the mid-1850's, at the time he was composing the first edition of Leaves of Grass, he was steeped in Egyptology.[8] Spurred by the news of excavations of Egyptian tombs, the subject was of current popular interest. Artifacts from the tombs were making their way to the Western world. A collection of objects recovered from ancient tombs was brought to New York in the early 50s by Dr. Henry Abbott, a physician who had spent thirty years in Egypt and was a learned Egyptologist. Dr. Abbott had initially intended to sell his collection, but failing to find buyers, he opened a museum in Brooklyn, where Whitman was then living. The Egyptian Museum bacame a favorite haunt of Whitman's, and a friendship developed between the two men. Dr. Abbott and his museum made such an impression on Whitman that he wrote an essay for Life-Illustrated in 1855 to publicize the museum, which had been experiencing financial difficulties. Whitman's "Egyptian Essay" is a tribute to the greatness of the ancient civilization and an indication of Whitman's high regard for and extensive knowledge of the culture.[9]

A brief analysis of the essay will demonstrate the depth of Whitman's knowledge of Egyptology, his sources of information,

and those elements of the culture which most impressed him. Whitman begins by placing Egypt historically as the most ancient of the cultures and the greatest of its day:

> Bordering Broadway...is a large hall in which are collected together, brought at great care and cost over distant seas, the tangible representations of the oldest history and civilization now known upon the earth. They are, many of them, not at all decayed, but remain perfect. They are of those famous regions of the Nile, populous and powerful and rich before Homer wrote of the siege of Troy--before Troy was--before the days of Abraham, the patriarch--before Athens had begun--before Sparta--before Rome--before the advent of Christ--before all whose lore fills our libraries, and lives in our art and poetry, and architecture and romance. These are the representations of Egypt. (pp. 30,31)

In this passage, Whitman is concerned with impressing upon the reader the fact that Egypt attained a highly sophisticated civilization long before the rest of the Mediterranean world. Whitman's esteem for the great accomplishments of the oldest known culture is obvious throughout the essay. He is awed in the presence of "these wonderful relics," because they suggest to him a lively and flourishing society:

> In that country there lived a population of many millions--there are good reasons for supposing them to have been scores of millions. They had cities equal to or superior in architectural grandeur to any now upon the earth. They had an ancient and elaborated religion, with temples, some of the main portions of which yet stand in almost their first integrity. They had regular laws, administered with system and order. In the country parts were agriculture, roads, canals, conveyances, barns, implements, cattle, machines, and all that goes to facilitate the production of food out of the earth. In their cities were officers, streets, aqueducts, manufactories, public institutions, quays, markets, amusements. Their government was firmly founded, and their religious theory, without doubt, had a deep and broad and definite meaning. They not only had books, but these books were plentiful. Epics were common. They had novels, poems, histories, essays, and all those varieties of narratives forever dear to the people. (pp. 31,32)

Whitman's description indicates that he saw ancient Egypt as a powerful nation whose strength lay in her strong institutions and her hardworking people. He saw both the culture as a whole and smaller components operating in the daily round of activity. The lens is the same one through which he viewed America's people and institutions behind her greatness. It is because of the vision that he was able to mingle the ancient material with his American material--side by side at first, as we shall see, and later, in "Lilacs," welded into a unity.

Of all ancient cultures, Whitman regarded the Egyptian as the finest and oldest; it was the origin of the greatest thoughts and greatest knowledge. A good deal of the next section of the essay is taken up with establishing the indebtedness of the Greeks and Romans--in short, of our whole western civilization--to Egypt. The culture's greatness, writes Whitman, lasted longer that Rome's, ranging over several thousand years. Its science, literature, and democratic attitudes preceded the Greeks', taught much to them, and was superior to theirs. Herodotus learned much about history and astronomy from them; Pythagoras learned that the sun was fixed in the sky and the earth revolved around it; Homer drew some of his finest material from their literature; and Greek mythology owed much to their religion. "Geography," Whitman writes, "was made a science. The Greeks and Romans had known nothing of it worth mentioning" (pp. 32,33). Whitman supports his view about ancient Egypt's superiority with a full-page chronology

of antique history, showing Egypt as a developed civilization at the time when the event of the Bible--of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christ--and of Greek history--Hercules and the Trojan War--reveal those societies still emerging.

In the middle section of the essay Whitman gives an account of the modern discovery and interpretation of the artifacts. He relates Champollion's work on the Rosetta stone, Rosellini's history containing the plates showing Osiris' corpse with the sprouted leaves growing up,[10] and the two-volume work written by Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians.[11] Wilkinson's books contain detailed accounts of the daily lives and religious practices of the ancient people, and a complete description of the gods and an interpretaion of the religious system. The work was a likely source of much of Whitman's understanding of Egyptian religion, and certainly a complement to the discussions with Dr. Abbott.

The final section of the essay contains information on the contents of the museum. Since the Egyptians entombed both articles used by the dead person in daily living and sacred objects with the corpse, their daily habits and religious practices were laid out before the eyes of the museum visitor. But particularly, since the artifacts had come from tombs, the beliefs and rituals concerning death and burial could be learned. Whitman's description of the artifacts includes explanations of their significance with respect to the Egyptians' religious beliefs:

Now and then on the stones are portrayed snakes, fishes,

> pollywogs, toads, beetles, and so forth. Then there are great mummy cases, some of them with lids off, and the cerements partly torn away, disclosing the mummy, black with the pitchy substances used in embalming. There are three large mummies of the sacred bull, Apis; this animal had some reference in their worship which is now lost.[12] There are also mummied cats, lizards, ibises, and crocodiles. The object of mummying is supposed to have proceeded from the belief in Egypt that the body, if kept intact a certain time after death (guessed at 5,000 years),[13] would be re-entered by the spirit, and the double identity be resumed again. The pyramids were the burial-places of kings and queens and their families, to preserve their bodies, under that belief....
>
> There are vases of many materials and sizes, pieces of linen with printed inscriptions, papyrus, hundreds of figures of idols and heroes, some in limestone, some in ivory, and some in porcelain. There are small clay or stone coffins containing figures of persons deceased, singularly illustrating a passage of the most ancient Greek histories. When the guests of an Egyptian gentleman were enjoying themselves (so say those old books), a small coffin was carried round containing a miniature of a corpse, and the attendant exclaimed: "Cast your eyes on this figure; so will you be before many years. Drink, then, and be happy, now that you have life."
>
> There are strips of papyrus containing whole narratives, often representing pictorially the lives of persons and their funeral ceremonies, and their judgment before the gods after death. The advocates stand on each side of the tribunal, the goddess of justice with a feather in her hand, and many attendants and deities. (pp. 38,39)

Next to this passage Whitman has included a picture of a statue, with this footnote:

> This is a figure in bronze of an Egyptian deity of subordinate character. The theology of Egypt was vast and profound. It respected the principle of life in all things--even in animals. It respected truth and justice above all other attributes of men. It recognized immortality. This figure is supposed to be Horus, the son of Osiris. (p. 38)

These passages demonstrate that Whitman knew Egyptian burial practices and beliefs about immortality. The various points of focus identify as Egyptian certain concepts in Whitman's

own philosophy. What the catalogue of animals indicated to Whitman is found in the footnote reference: they represent the Egyptians' belief in the principle of life existing in all things. An entry in Bucke's Notes and Fragments assures us that each of these life forms were indications of divinity in all things, and that the concept was, as Whitman saw it, the central idea of their religion:

> Egyptian religion--...The central idea seems to have been the wonderfulness and divinity of life, the beetle, the bull, the snipe were divine in that they exemplified the inexplicable mystery of lie.[14]

This note occurs as the first in a list of elements from three ancient religions which Whitman intended to combine in order to form a new American religion.[15] For Whitman, the Egyptian pictures of animals functioned as symbols of the universal spirit in all things, in much the same way that his leaf of grass symbolizes the mystery of life.

Another point of focus in the essay is the immortality of both body and soul. Unique among the ancient religions, Egyptian theology preached a duality of body and soul, a perfect equality and immortality of both. Whitman describes the burial practice of mummying and explains the belief in the re-entrance of the soul into the body after thousands of years. The belief is actually more complicated than Whitman explains in the essay. The body which the Egyptians actually believed to be immortal was a form they called the "ka" and was represented by a bird escaping from the corpse.[16] This

concept is different from the concept of the soul. The "ka," which is the "real body" or the "eternal" and "electric self" in Whitman's poetry, was thought to retain the form and impressions it received as part of the physical, mortal body. Section 13 of "Starting from Paumanok" describes the divinity of life in all things, which is the soul, and the character of the real body:

> Was somebody asking to see the soul?
> See, your own shape and countenance, persons, substances, beasts, the trees, the running rivers, the rocks and sands.
>
> All hold spiritual joys and afterwards loosen them;
> How can the real body ever die and be buried?
>
> Of your real body and any man's or woman's real body,
> Item for item it will elude the hands of corpse-cleaners[17] and pass to fitting spheres,
> Carrying what has accrued to it from the moment of birth to the moment of death.
> Not the types set up by the printer return their impression, the meaning, the main concern,
> Any more than a man's substance and life or a woman's substance and life return in the body and the soul,
> Indifferently before death and after death.
>
> Behold the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern, and includes and is the soul;
> Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body, or any part of it! (ll. 177-88)

Whitman's "real body," like the Egyptian "ka," includes the individual soul: it is an immortal thing shaped by life in the physical body, but it retains the stamp of the bodily life when it passes on to the next state. This is the essential difference between Whitman's idea of immortality and the Romantics' idea of absorption of the individual souls into

the universal one.

It may have been this belief in a kind of individual immortality that prompted Whitman to write repeatedly that death is happy. This notion is characteristic of Whitman and central to "Lilacs." Whether he adapted the idea from Egyptian material or not remains unclear; but surely he felt a commaraderie with a people who could make a daily practice of circulating a small coffin at the dinner table to remind themselves of death, and thinking of it, to be happy.

Dr. Abbott's collection contained much of significance that Whitman did not specify in his essay.[18] There were many figures of Osiris, as one would expect since Osiris was the god of the afterworld. The ritual of his death was repeated at every Egyptian funeral. Symbols of the god were placed on the openings made in the body by the embalmer, and amulets bearing his image were placed on the corpse. Pictures of his life and death decorated the coffins and walls of the tombs because his history represented the promise of immortality. Early in his essay when he is describing the absence of racial prejudice in the ancient culture, Whitman remarks, "Before Isis and Osiris all human beings were equal" (p. 32). Whitman knew of their status as judges in the afterworld.

Whitman incorporated some of this early Egyptian funeral material in a pre-1855 poem titled Pictures, published in 1927 by Emory Holloway. Though Whitman himself never published

the poem, he drew large sections of it for inclusion in other works.[19] The poem shows both that he knew and used this material in his poetry and that he developed a great deal of control over the use of his material between the time he wrote Pictures and "Lilacs." In Pictures, the Egyptian funeral scene occurs alongside scenes of Oregon, Canada, and California, and the funeral procession of a young country girl. The poet merely moves from one scene to another, with no attempt at integration:

> There is an old Egyptian temple....
> And here, see you, a picture of a dream of despair (is it unsatisfied love?)
> Phantoms, countless, men and women, after death, wandering;
> And there are flowers and fruits--see the grapes, decked with vine-leaves;
> But see this!--see where graceful and stately the young queen-cow walks at the head of the large drove, leading the rest;
> And there are building materials--brick, lime, timber, paint, glass, and iron, (so now you can build what you like;)
> And this blak portrait--this head, huge, frowning, sorrowful,--
> (But I do not deny him--though cast out and rebellious he is my God as much as any;)
> And again the heads of three other Gods--the God Beauty, the God Benificence, and the God Universality, (they also are mine,)
> And there an Arab caravan, halting--See you the palm trees, the camels, and the stretch of hot sand far away;
> And there...Kanada....
> And here...Oregon....
> And there, singular, on ocean waves, downward, buoyant, swift, over the waters, an occupied coffin floating....
> (pp. 14-21)

The ancient and modern materials are catalogued together. Probably Whitman was dissatisfied with this method and so never published the poem. He did incorporate some of the elements

here into "Lilacs," in a manner that demonstrates Whitman's masterful merging of the old and the new. The striking presence of the occupied coffin and the decking of the coffin with flowers and vine-leaves (Whitman used lilacs and lilac leaves), and fruits (the apple blossoms are burgeoning fruits and decorate the countryside where the coffin passes) are used in "Lilacs" in altered form. The queen cow, thought by Wilkinson to be either Isis or Hathor, disappears.[20] Possibly her function is retained in the poet-speaker's function as a priest leading his people out of mourning.[21] The "Phantoms, countless, men and women, after death, wandering" is used in the description of the mourning crowds,

> ...processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
> With the countless torches lit, with the sea of faces...,
> (ll. 37,38)

and in the idea of phantoms coming out of the cloud in section 14.[21] Lastly, the Egyptian theological ideas presented in Pictures occur in the use of symbolism in "Lilacs." Whitman's acceptance of Lucifer as a god is a feature of Egyptian thought.[22] The destructive principle, called Typhon, was worshiped alongside the regenerative principle (Osiris) because of their interdependence. One could not exist without the other. Though Whitman names Lucifer here, he knew from Wilkinson and Volney's Ruins that the Egyptian god who destroyed Osiris was the prototype of the Hebrew god. The destructive principle enters "Lilacs" as the harsh surrounding cloud.

Also, Whitman's use of the trinity of star, bird, and lilac is congruent with the Egyptian practice of worshiping trinities. Egyptian religion is based on the belief that there is one universal life spirit, the Demiurgos, present in all matter.[24] Every other god was an emanation of a particular aspect, or aspects, of the Demiurgos. Osiris and Isis were the only such manifestations worshiped all over Egypt. They appeared together with one other god in a triad, and also separate from each other with other combinations of gods. Each city had its own special triad of gods that were the tutelary deities of the city. In those triads, various combinations appeared across Egypt. Following these principles, Whitman was able to create his own trinity out of elements which for him represented certain aspects of nature. In his early Egyptian funeral scene in Pictures, Whitman uses the idea of three gods appearing together--the gods of Beauty, Benificence, and Truth; later, in "Lilacs," he captures the principle of emanation of aspect that lay behind the trinity and translates natural objects into parts of a trinity. The story that told of the creation of an emanation was a myth; and Whitman, creating the trinity out of the drama of the poem, is creating his own myth after the Egyptian model of myth-making.

All of these relationships help to explain Whitman's symbollic art in "Lilacs." His adaptation of the elements to fit a peculiar American circumstance show him to be a conscious and original artist.

III

We have seen that many of Whitman's key concepts about life and death were drawn from Egyptian theology. We have also seen that he was deeply impressed by their funeral ritual. In writing a death elegy, for a man who was not Christian, these factors alone may have been sufficient cause for Whitman to turn to Egyptian sources. There were others, however.

Wilkinson reports that Osiris was known as the "President of the West."[25] The term "West" was the Egyptian signification for the afterworld, which was thought to lie to the west. The title must have struck Whitman, who repeatedly refers to Lincoln as the Western president in his prose, and called him the "western star" in "Lilacs." As president, Lincoln's power extended over a whole nation. Similarly, Osiris was the only male deity who was worshiped over the entire length and breadth of Egypt. Osiris was the manifestation of all that is good in the Demiurgos: he was the bringer of order, goodness, truth, and justice--all traits Whitman surely associated with Lincoln. Both Osiris and Lincoln brought peace and stability to their nations, and were assassinated at the height of their accomplishments. Both were buried in coffins that made long journeys, and both ended their journeys in the west. (See Appendix for details of Osiris.)

There is also a curious poem collected in Bucke's Notes and Fragments celebrating Sesostris, the Egyptian king Rameses II, whom Whitman describes in his Egyptian essay at great length.[26]

The poem is included in a section of fragments the pre-date 1855. Rameses was an emancipator and leader, a man Whitman quite obviously admired:

> Advance shapes like his shape--the king of Egypt's shape,
> Shapes that tally Sesostris--gigantic in stature, wholesome, clean-eyed,
> Six feet ten inches tall--every limb, every part and organ in proportion--strong, bearded, supple,
> Conqueror of two continents in nine years,
> Lover most of those that repelled him sternest--builder to them of phallic memorials,
> Ruler wisely and friendily for sixty two years--accepter of all religions--preferer of none,
> Freer of slaves--divider among them of homesteads--maker of farmers.[27]

Surely Lincoln must have reminded Whitman of this portrait. Both men initiated new ages of freedom.[28] Both were tall, supple, bearded, wholesome, and wise. Both admired and respected the strength and courage of their enemies. And, most important to the consideration of a poem about death and immortality, both respected all religions. In Whitman's mind, Lincoln was most like the greaest Egyptians, Rameses II and Osiris. Egyptian materials--minus direct allusions--must have seemed to Whitman a fitting replacement for the Greek and Christian material that other elegists had used.

IV

With these associations in mind, we are ready to proceed with an analysis of the influence of the Osiris myth on the dramatic structure of "Lilacs." The portion that most concerns us is the myth of Osiris' death and burial. The story is told

in Wilkinson's volumes, which draw heavily from Plutarch's "Isis and Osiris" segment of the Moralia. Whitman could have learned the story from Wilkinson, Abbott, Plutarch, or, given his interest in the subject, all three. Whitman made several notes on Plutarch which are preserved in Notes and Fragments, though he never explicitly states that he read the historian's works.[29] We can be more sure that he read Wilkinson's work, since he commended the books to the readers of his essay, and later to a private request for more information on Egypt made by a reader of his essay.[30] Whitman was enamoured of the Osiris figure (E.C. Stedman once said that Whitman used to walk about Broadway comparing himself to Christ and Osiris),[31] and one would think that he read everything on Osiris he could get his hands on. However, since Wilkinson is thorough and authoritative, his books will serve as the source throughout the remainder of this paper. (For a summary of the myth, see Appendix.)

The pattern of two journeys--one of the corpse-laden coffin and the other of the wandering mourner--is present in both the Osiris myth and "Lilacs." In both instances, the corpse is that of a great leader who was assassinated after completing a mission of bringing peace to the world. The dead man in "Lilacs," like the dead Osiris, appears only as a corpse in a coffin. In sections 5 and 6 we have our only encounters with the physical man, and it is a corpse in a coffin:

Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

Coffin that slowly passes through lanes and streets,
...the arriving coffin...
Here coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac. (from lines 31-45)

Significantly, Whitman does not address the corpse but the coffin. Coffin, not corpse, is the emblem of death. That is why the decking of the coffin in section 7 becomes a tribute for all coffins, symbolically for all death. This death, this corpse, this coffin is not singular; it is representative. Whitman, in following after the Egyptian type of funeral, celebrates the principles of life and death. Reference to the individual is only in those respects where he shows qualities of the divine spirit. Thus, the only other references to Lincoln are as the western star, and as a wise and sweet soul.

The journey of the coffin has been attributed to an actual event because the description in sections 5 and 6 is similar to the actual journey taken by Lincoln's coffin. The springtime countryside, the mournful faces, the black-draped cities, the mournfully singing people, the lights shining in the night have all been shown to be part of historical event.[32] Yet, other facts that might have been included were omitted. The train, for instance, is missing, though it would seem to be an important detail. Facts about the death are absent. There is no display of the body. The stopping points along the journey are not named. Instead, the coffin is emphasized. The coffin makes the journey as if floating through the countryside and cities.

It is a coffin journeying like the coffin in Pictures--Osiris' coffin. The lengthy sentence which comprises section 5 ends in a short independent clause, in effect focusing our attention on the coffin and the continuousness of its journey: "Night and day journeys a coffin." The focus is immediately continued in section 6 with an epanalepsis: "Coffin that passes through lanes and streets...." In this section we watch the coffin passing amid grieving people. All the trappings of funeral ritual are there. The details are historically accurate; yet there is no detail specific enough to pin the scene down to a particular death. The funeral procession might as well have been Egyptian. The lighted torches, the dirges, the black-clothed figures, the instrumental music, the placing of a heart-shaped plant on the coffin, and the depot (a river port in the Egyptian context) are all elements of Egyptian ritual. Throughout these two sections, Whitman has selected out the the historical features that are common to Egyptian ritual and at the same time has left out Egyptian features which would be unsuited to an American funeral. The effect is a transcendence of time and place--of the particular--for an emphasis on the universal and eternal, which are the characteristics of myth.

In the second journey of the poem,which parallels Isis' wandering, mournful search for Osiris' body, the speaker moves about erratically and mournfully. Like Isis, the speaker is a seer, loves the dead hero, mourns him, and ends his journey in a swamp. Both the speaker and Isis possess perfumed breath which

mixes with the wind. Both perfume the tomb of the dead subject, not the body, as is the practice of Greek, Roman, and Christian ritual. Both must rely on the form of the bird to be able to sing. Isis changed herself into a swallow to sing her mournful song around the pillar concealing Osiris. The speaker in "Lilacs" is unable to sing except through the bird's carol. Isis finds the body and ends her search in the bird's shape. Whitman adapts the motif to suit the purpose of his speaker, which is to find an end to his search for consolation. He also transforms the bird into an American thrush in keeping with his American subject, and has the speaker listen to the bird and tally its song rather than actually turn into a bird.

V

The journey of the speaker and the journey of the coffin are, as we have seen, part of the dramatic structure of the poem. They are also associated symbolically with the principles represented by Osiris and Isis. The two Egyptian figures cannot be located in any <u>single</u> element, such as the sea, the earth, the sun, or the stars. Rather, each represents a principle, along with a secondary derivative set of principles, that may occur in any or all of these natural elements. Osiris is the generative principle, and the aspects associated with him are hence those conducive to life--love, light, growth, order, and stability. Isis is his counterpart and represents the <u>matter</u>

upon which the generative principle acts. She is associated with the fertile earth, and for that reason she clings to love, light, and order--that is with the orderly passage of the seasons and the growth of the crops. It is important to notice that Isis is not the earth itself: her principle, rather, is evident in the earth when it is fertile. Similarly, Osiris is not represented by daylight. His principle is light and stability, which may be realized on a calm starry night. Likewise, a cloudy day or a stormy upheaval means that the opposing destructive principle is ascendant. This principle is represented by the god Typhon, who killed Osiris. His aspects are chaos, disorder, darkness, decay and death. The Egyptians believed that there was no absolute good or evil in the universe. Instead, there was a fluctuation of opposing principles. Whitman often works according to this view, and this is the reason his symbols are so difficult to pin down.

In his 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass Whitman expresses the philosophy of opposing principles. Good and evil were both necessary since they were only expressions of the fluctuation of the life spirit. He accepted both:

> I am not the poet of goodness only....I do not decline
> to be the poet of wickedness also....
> What blurt is it about virtue and about vice?
> Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me....I
> stand indifferent,
> My gait is no faultfinder's or rejector's gait,
> I moisten the roots of all that has grown.
> ("Song of Myself," ll. 467-72)

Whitman's favorite symbol for this fluctuating principle was

the sea. In the same section of "Song of Myself," Whitman imagines the sea to have many phases: some signify love and life and others destruction, harshness, and death:

> You sea! I resign myself to you also.... I guess what you mean,
> I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
> I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me;
> We must have a turn together....I undress....hurry me out of sight of the land,
> Cushion me soft....rock me in billowy drowse,
> Dash me with amorous wet....I can repay you.
> Sea of stretched ground-swells!
> Sea of breathing broad and convulsive breaths!
> Sea of the brine of life! Sea of unshovelled and always-ready graves!
> Howler and scooper of storms! Capricious and dainty sea!
> I am integral with you...I too am of one phase and of all phases. (ll. 451-61)

The sea in this poem "means" something to the poet; that is, it is a symbol for him. The meaning it holds for Whitman is the mystery of the operation of the universe. Whitman accepts Nature for what she is--loving as well as harsh, soft and hard, mighty and destructive, creator of life ("the brine") and of death (of "always-ready graves"). Realizing that there must be death if there is to be life, as the Egyptians realized it, Whitman can celebrate death, as the Egyptians celebrated it in the figure of Typhon. Death, like Typhon's power, is temporary. What is retrieved from the world by death will be given back again to life: the process is imaged for Whitman in the sea. For Whitman, creating his own pantheon of symbols, the sea becomes a mother who in death welcomes her children back home:

> Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,....

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing
the dead,....

Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose
voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd
death,
And the body nestling close to thee.

("Lilacs," from ll. 142-58)

The Mother-Sea-Death is imaged as a loving protector. The child loves the mother in return, "nestling close," in a sort of womb state, surrounded completely by loving waters, safe, and experiencing that sublime state of total happiness--bliss.

In this figure, the principle that life regenerates itself from death is Egyptian, and the idea of the ocean as the regenerative force is Egyptian. The figure itself, however, is Whitman's own. He drew consciously from Egyptian material. In a note included with a list of facts on African rivers which is recorded in Notes and Fragments, Whitman called the Nile "the black, venerable, vast mother."[33] Though the Egyptians considered the Nile to be a masculine principle, associated most often with Osiris, they considered it, as did Whitman, the source of life and the receiver of the dead: its waters made their crops grow and carried the boats that took the dead to the burial places. The Egyptian name for the river was Oceanus, a detail which may have impelled Whitman to combine the properties of the Nile with those of the ocean. Clearly,

the Mother-Sea-Death figure has its basis in Egyptian thought, but in Whitman's hands it becomes a new and unique symbol. His figure is a personal, intimate, loving one.

It is this kind of understanding and transformation of the mythic material that informs the symbolism of "Lilacs." Gay Wilson Allen has remarked that the image of the sprouting wheat spear in section 5 appears to be taken from fertility symbolism, though he does not identify it.[34] The image refers to Osiris wrapped in a shroud with wheat spears growing from his corpse. The symbol was used universally on Egyptian tombs and represented to the Egyptians the same thing that Whitman's leaf of grass represented: the fluctuating principle of the universe evident as new life emerging from dead material. Significantly, the wheat spear metaphor is stronger in "Lilacs" than is Whitman's familiar leaf of grass. The grass is present and growing, but the metaphor is not fully drawn. The significnace of the catalogue of new-growing things is encapsulated in the image of the wheat-spear arising anew from its shroud, "uprisen" or resurrected from its dead state. The passage shows life continuing despite death. Life surrounds the passage of the coffin:

> Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
> Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
> Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
> Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
> Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
> Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,

Night and day journeys a coffin. (ll. 26-32)

This proclamation that life goes on in the face of death, and is in fact replenished, is the equivalent of the Egyptian celebration of Osiris' resurrection in the form of the new wheat. The description of the vegetation runs counter to the pastoral elegy tradition, which shows life stopping, wilting in mourning for the dead god. In "Lycidas," the flowers mourn and die:

> Bring the rather primrose that forsaken dies.
> The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,
> The white pink, and the pansy freaked with jet,
> The glowing violet,
> The musk-rose, and the well attired woodbine.
> With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,
> And every flower that sad embroidery wears:
> Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,
> And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,
> To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.
> (ll. 142-51)

Similarly, in "Adonais," the new spring growth is ended with the death of grieved subject:

> Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down
> Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were,
> Or they dead leaves; since her delight is flown,
> For whom should she have waked the sullen year?
> (ll. 136-9)

In "Lilacs," however, the flowers continue to bloom, and nature continues her growth. Death does not bring more death; it brings more life. The destructive principle is relaced by the regenerative power. The coffin passes, and we are shown freshness, life, and the orderly processes of nature.

This idea of the regenerative principle ascending after the destructive principle is extended and strengthened in sections 11 and 12. Whitman's description of the tomb differs

from the frozen, stone cold, dark atmosphere of the tombs in "Lycidas" and "Adonais." Whitman's passages depict scenes teeming with life and light. The tomb is perfumed and hung with pictures. It is Egyptian, as Gay Wilson Allen has discovered:

> The funeral of the President seems to [Whitman] comparable in historical and tragic significance to the burial of one of those pharaohs of old whose hieroglyphic-decorated tombs (or at least fragments of them) he had seen so many times in the Egyptian Museum in New York City while he was writing the first Leaves of Grass.[35]

The "historical and tragic significance" Allen has in mind is Lincoln's political stature. The comparison is made to go much deeper. Osiris' death made immortality possible, and in Lincoln's tomb Whitman envisions the emergence of a prosperous, shining America. His martyrdom makes possible a new age. Lincoln's immortality is symbolized by the new growth which results from his death. Immortality is imaged by the shining sun--the very same image which decorated every Egyptian tomb. The sun, says Plutarch, represents the immortality of Osiris, who was believed to be cradled in the arms of the sun. The sun was the symbol of the Demiurgos, the most visible evidence of the fire-spirit that was thought to be the divine essence in all things. Thus we find in Lincoln's tomb the sun spreading its rays over a unified America. Instead of desolation and darkness, instead of a body, which were aspects of the degenerative principle, Whitman shows life and light. The regenerative principle is ascendant. Whitman's placing the regenerated America in Lincoln's tomb

makes the vision a tribute to Lincoln; Whitman credits Lincoln with the strong unified America.

The dominant image in both tomb passages is the sun. It is shown suffusing the land, sea, and sky with a bright, divine ("measureless") light:

> Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
> With the Fourth-month eve at sun-down, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,
> With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air,
> With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,
> In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there,
> With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,
> And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,
> And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning. (ll. 81-8)

The lush new growth is expressed by the words "growing," "prolific," "fresh sweet herbage," and "pale green leaves." The piling up of details of vegetable and human life and activity gives a feeling of denseness. The light of the sun spreads over all of this teeming life, making the smoke "lucid and bright," "burning, expanding the air," transforming the scenes in the distance into a melted, "flowing glaze." The sun is there, but it is at the low point of its strength, near evening, and there is a suggestion of things merging into a state of undifferentiation. The picture describes the eve of Lincoln's death. The destructive principle reigns. The sun is "sinking" and "indolent," and there are shadows cast upon the land.

The second tomb passage describes the vision of post-war America. It is the time of fulfillment and prophecy, the "fulfill'd noon" when the sun is at its zenith:

> Lo, body and soul--this land,
> My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships,
> The varied and ample land, the South and North in the light, Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,
> And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.
>
> Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,
> The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
> The gentle soft-born measureless light,
> The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
> The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,
> Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.
> (11. 89-98)

The sun in this passage is personified as a god or great ruler, "most excellent," "calm and haughty." Its light is a "miracle spreading bathing all." The passage shows America healed, North and South together, by the miraculous light. Light is "sparkling" off the tides and ships, off the land, and the prairies now lush with the grass and corn that was only sprouting with the passage of the coffin in section 5. The light, however, continues after sundown. At night the stars continue to illuminate the land: "...and the stars/ Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land." The sun clearly is the strongest manifestation that the principle of light, growth, and order is reigning. The stars are another such indication. The cloud is gone. The haziness of the Fourth-month eve is gone. The darkness is section 6 and the cloud that is present through most of the poem are at this moment

in the future gone.

The sun cannot be equated with Lincoln nor with Osiris. It only reveals in the relative strength at any time which stage of fluctuation is being experienced. Similarly, the star cannot be too closely associated with one thing. Sometimes it seems to represent Lincoln (section 2) and other times a guardian friend (section 8). Both sun and star are manifestations of the light principle, which the Egyptians associated with Osiris. Death is associated with the disappearance of the star behind a cloud and with the loss of power by the sun at sundown. Death is a moment in the fluctuation of the universe when the dark principle associated with Typhon ascends. The murkiness of the cloud and the haze and shadows of sundown reflect the chaotic undifferentiation of Typhon. The ebb and flow of the two principles is the necessary operation of the universe, since new life proceeds from the old, dead matter. From the shrouded wheat spear grows a new spear, from the dark mother death new births occur.

The working of Nature along these lines reverberates throughout the poem in the song of the bird. Critics have been at pains to explain why the speaker sometimes hears the mournful sound of the bird and at other times a joyful song. In a notebook on birds, which Whitman compiled while he was writing "Lilacs," we learn that Whitman was developing a kind of religious figure, secluded like a holy hermit, a spokesman

for "holy" Nature, singing her hymns:

> Hermit Thrush Solitary Thrush...is very secluded...--his song is a hymn--real seriously sweet--in earnest--the mockingbird is a wonderful intellectual music--in swamps--is very shy--is our best songster--song clear & deliberate--has a solemn effect...it is rare--only those that frequent the deep remote dark woods hear it--...is the bird of the solemn primal woods & of Nature pure and holy.[36]

Whitman's use of such terms as "solemn," "hymn," and "holy" indicate the bird's religious function. The bird is differentiated from the mockingbird's "intellectual" song because his music is primal, that is, it is intuited from nature directly. The bird lives secluded from civilization, and knows nature in her purest, most primitive state, and, Whitman says, her "holy" state. The bird is like those Egyptian priests who lived in the swamps and knew the secret mysteries. The bird, like them, knows the sacred knowledge of death. That knowledge, as Whitman learns, is that death is always replaced by life in an everlasting fluctuation. Death can be celebrated because it is part of nature. In section 13, the song is first sung with "voice of uttermost woe," and in the next line it is "liquid, free and tender." In section 16 we are clearly and repeatedly told that the bird's song rises and falls, is sometimes sad and sometimes joyful:

> Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
> As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,
> Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,
> Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven....
> (ll. 188-91)

The bird's song echoes death and life: the sum of its song is the ebb and flow of Nature--life and death, joy and sorrow.

The carol of the bird expresses this ebb and flow in the image of the ocean, which is imagined to be death undulating around the world. The bird praises the "fathomless universe" for "life," "joy," and "love." It especially praises death at this moment because death has arrived. The image of the "rising and sinking waves" is crucial, for it signifies that death is a necessary and inevitable part of the eternal fluctuation of Nature. What falls must again rise, just as what had risen once is at the moment falling. The speaker learns through the bird's song to praise death because it is not an end but a moment in the eternal ebb and flow of the universe. The suffering that the speaker and the living people in the vision in section 15 undergo is found to result from resisting death. When death is recognized for what it is (according to Whitman's philosophy), a temporary return to the safe, restful womb of the mother, the pain that results from mourning can be eliminated. In the vision of the dead soldiers, the young are "fully at rest," and only the living mourners suffer. This sacred knowledge enables the speaker to emerge from his state of mourning, his search for consolation ended.

This final reconciliation scene bears additional attention. The speaker is partially readied for his revelatory vision by the bird's song. Other elements contribute as well to his experience. The perfumed atmosphere is especially strong in this

section of the poem. The speaker focuses on the perfume of the cedars and pines twice in the swamp and again at the end of the poem. Immediately before his soul tallies with the bird's song, the speaker notices the perfume:

> From deep secluded recesses,
> From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,
> Came the carol of the bird. (ll. 129-31)

The perfume mingles with the bird's song at the moment the speaker's eyes are opened to the transcendent vision:

> Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
> With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.
>
> Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
> Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,
> And I with my comrades there in the night.
>
> While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed....
> (ll. 164-9)

Finally, the poem itself ends with the reconciliatory experience symbolized in the trinity of lilac, star, and bird immersed in the perfume of the swamp:

> Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
> There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.
> (ll. 205,6)

The fragrance of the evergreens is so important as to be placed at the end with the trinity because it has an important function in the reconciliation experience. It acts as an emollient to soothe the soul, dispel its cares (it replaces the lilac fragrance associated with the thought of Lincoln), and make it ready for spiritual understanding. Perfume was used in this way by the Egyptians in their rituals in the belief that perfumes in the air dissipate anxieties, brighten the imaginative faculties,

and cure emotional and irrational disequilibrium in the soul.[37] Whitman must have had these rituals in mind: he uses the cedar and the pine, both sacred to Osiris. The cedar was especially important in funeral ritual: its oil was the chief ingredient used to preserve the body and its wood was chosen by those who could afford it for the coffin. Both practices derived from the fact that Osiris was buried in a cedar coffin. In creating his primal swamp of "Nature pure and holy," Whitman took the fragrance of the Egyptian funeral, made it live in the trees of his swamp, and made it function for his speaker in the way that it functioned for the Egyptians.

VI

Whitman's use of Egyptian myth helped him to write a beautiful poem, coherent in form and function. The poem is structurally tighter than most of his other poems. The narrative structure is consistent from beginning to end--centering in the speaker's wandering search for consolation complemented by the coffin's journey toward its final resting place. The speaker's successful reconciliation proceeds from a mystical experience with nature--as it must since neither Whitman nor Lincoln believed in any orthodox religious dogma. Whitman's religious beliefs about life and death were deeply influenced by Egyptian theology. Its ideas of the universal spirit, the indestructability of body and soul, the regeneration of new life out of death were central ones for Whitman. They are especially crucial in

a poem whose subject is death and immortality. The Osiris myth with its obvious parallels to Lincoln and its inherent symbolism of regeneration and its significance of the dead subject providing new life for the nation supplied Whitman with a body of material exactly suited to his artistic aims. What "Lilacs" has is "a mediating body of mythic narrative and metaphor," which Richard Chase has stated is lacking in all but Whitman's best poems.[38] Our knowledge of Whitman's Egyptian sources helps us to appreciate this poem, widely acclaimed as one of Whitman's best.

This paper has demonstrated the extent of Egyptian influence on Whitman and the direction that influence took in his work, particularly in his elegy for Lincoln. The degree of such influence in Whitman's other works needs yet to be examined. The influence is greatest in his use of symbolism. He follows the Egyptian practice of employing symbols to point to aspects of nature and the principles of the operation of the universe. By examining the Egyptian representation of gods and natural objects we can begin to understand Whitman's world of symbols. By knowing their view of the universe and the meaning of their gods, we can better understand Whitman's universe and the meaning of his figures.

Appendix

The Osiris myth goes like this: Osiris was the god of agriculture, and having taught the cannibal tribes of Egypt to cultivate grain, figs, and grapes, thereby enabling them to live together in peace, he became their first ruler. Following a successful trip to other lands to teach agricultural skills, he returned to Egypt where he was assassinated by his brother Typhon, who was jealous of his power. Encased in a cedar coffin, Osiris' body was launched from the swampy waters near the Nile. The coffin traveled into the Mediterranean and after a long journey landed on the shores of Syria near Byblus. There a tamarisk tree (the fragrant myrrh) grew around the coffin until it was completely concealed within the trunk. The king of the country, admiring the tree, had it cut down and made into a pillar for his palace.

Meanwhile, Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, was searching mournfully up and down Egypt for his body. She knew that Osiris was dead, but it was essential that the body be given proper funeral rites so that the soul could be released to enter the world of the dead. Hearing of the pillar, she travelled to Syria. She disguised herself, went to the well of the city, and sat there weeping. When the king's handmaidens came to draw water, she braided their hair and breathed on it so that the perfume of her breath remained on their hair. When the queen saw the braided hair and smelled the sweet perfume, she

sent for the woman and made her a nursemaid to her infant son. The pillar containing Osiris' coffin was in the nursery. Each night, Isis turned herself into a swallow and flew around the pillar, singing mournfully. One night she was discovered by the queen. Isis revealed herself as the goddess, begged for the pillar, had it cut down and the coffin removed. The pillar, which had been the grave of the god for many years, was anointed with perfume and made a shrine. The coffin she put on a boat and carried home to Egypt by the aid of the winds, which she commanded with her perfumed breath. She hid the coffin in the delta swamp where the Nile meets the ocean until she could arrange for proper burial. (Preparation for an Egyptian burial took several months.) Before she could make arrangements, the wicked brother Typhon discovered the coffin, removed the body and tore it into fourteen pieces. The body was scattered by the winds to all parts of Egypt.

There are two versions of the remainder of the story. One relates that Isis retrieved all the parts of the body except the genitals, which had been eaten by fish. Isis put all the parts of the body back together and fashioned genitals from clay and vegetable mold. Then she fashioned thirteen other bodies of the same substance and took all fourteen to fourteen different cities for burial, telling the priests of each city that they alone had the real body. The other version tells that Isis fashioned a complete body using one real part of the body until she had made fourteen likenesses. Each city that

claimed to be Osiris' burial place thus has one real portion of Osiris' body. The distinctions are unimportant for our purposes: what is important is that the body was buried in several locations.

Ancient Egyptian fertility rites and burial rites were based on this myth. The scattering of the body over the land and the fashioning of Osiris' body from clay and vegetable mold symbolized planting and fertilization. Images of the god made of this substance mixed with grain seeds were buried in the fields each year following the harvest. The sprouting seeds were thought to insure fertility for the whole field the next growing season. The seeds literally grew from the body of the god. Pictures of Osiris in tombs showing his body wrapped in a shroud with wheat spears growing from his body were common. Ippolito Rosellini's book, which Whitman referred to in his Egyptian essay, shows three such pictures(I monumenti dell' Egitto e dell~ Nubia, Vol. III, Monumenti del culto [Pisa, 1844], Plate 23). They invariably appeared in tombs because Osiris was believed to preserve the body from death as he preserved the wheat from death. The soul--or divine essence--of all the wheat in a harvested field was thought to be subsumed into those seeds which were replanted in the image of the god. In a similar manner, men's souls were thought to be absorbed by Osiris. The funeral rites were a recapitulation of Osiris' death and burial. The dead man was given the title "Osiris" and was henceforth referred to by that appellation. What was

celebrated in the funeral rites was not the accomplishments of the dead man but that part of the man which was of the divine essence. If he had the aspects represented by Osiris--goodness, truth, and justice--he was accorded a proper burial. If not, he was denied burial of this kind. The most honored and the wealthiest men were buried in tombs near the beautiful swamps of Memphis, which claimed to have the head and the soul of Osiris entombed there.

Notes.

[1] See Richard P. Adams, "Whitman's 'Lilacs' and the Tradition of Pastoral Elegy," PMLA, 72 (1957), 479-87; and Charles Clay Doyle, "Poetry and Pastoral: A Dimension of Whitman's 'Lilacs'," Walt Whitman Review, 15 (December 1969), 242-5.

[2] See especially Gay Wilson Allen, A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman (New York: Octagon, 1973); James E. Miller, "'Lilacs': Grief and Reconciliation," in A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Howard J. Waskow, Whitman: Explorations in Form (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); and Jane A. Nelson, "Ecstasy and Transformation in Whitman's 'Lilacs'," Walt Whitman Review, 18 (December 1972), 113-23.

[3] For a survey of critical approaches on unity in "Lilacs" see Evelyn J. Hinz, "Whitman's 'Lilacs': the Power of Elegy," Bucknell Review, 20 (1972), 35-54.

[4] See V. K. Chari, "The Limits of Whitman's Symbolism," Journal of American Studies, 5 (2), 173-84; and Richard Allen Davison, "Ambivalent Imagery in Whitman's 'Lilacs'," Walt Whitman Review, 14 (June 1968), 54-6.

[5] See Harsharan Singh Ahluwalla, "The Private and the Public Self in Whitman's 'Lilacs'," Walt Whitman Review, 23 (December 1977), 166-75.

[Notes to pages 1 - 3]

[6] Allen, Reader's Guide, 200; and Miller, 117-9.

[7] Whitman's attitude toward Lincoln is described by Charles I. Glicksberg in Walt Whitman and the Civil War (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 173,4. Also, there is a newspaper clipping from one of Whitman's scrapbooks in the Harned Collection's "Lincoln Material" located in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. which describes Lincoln as a hero martyr. The article is undated and unidentified, though it is titled "Real Particulars of the Murder," so it is probably from the period immediately following Lincoln's death. It was also probably written by Whitman since it bears the stamp of his style and some portions of it appear almost word for word in his Lincoln oration printed in The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, Volume II, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948). The article views Lincoln as a martyr in a mythic setting: "Dear to Muse--thrice dear to nationality--to the whole human race--precious to this Union precious to democracy--unspeakably and forever precious--their first great martyr."

[8] See Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 121-3; and Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari's introduction to Whitman's "Egyptian Essay," in New York Dissected (1936; rpt. Folcroft Library Editions, 1972), 27-30.

[9] The essay was published in Life Illustrated on December 8, 1855. It is reprinted in New York Dissected, 30-40.

[Notes to pages 4 - 8]

[10] Esther Shepard has shown the influence of Rosellini's book on the symbols Whitman used to decorate his books in her article, "Possible Sources of Some of Whitman's Ideas and Symbols in Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus and Other Works, MLQ, 14 (1953), 60-81.

[11] London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1841.

[12] Wilkinson attempts to explain Apis, but concludes that the significance of the animal to worship is lost. This and many other dates and details agree with Wilkinson.

[13] This detail appears in the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself":

> I do not despise you priests;
> My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,
> Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern,
> Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,... (lines 192-5)

[14] Walt Whitman, Notes and Fragments, ed. Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke (1899; rpt. Folcroft Library Editions, 1972), 78.

[15] Notes and Fragments, 78. The first paragraph of the note reads: "? Spinal idea of a 'lesson.' Founding a new American religion (? No religion.) That which is comprehensive enough to include all the doctrines and sects and give them all places and chances, each after its kind."

[16] Pictures of the soul escaping from the corpse in the form of a bird were common in Egyptian tombs. The Egyptian Museum contained many such figures. Some of them are indexed

in Caroline Ransom Williams' Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities (New York: New York Historical Society, 1924). The New York Historical Society purchased Dr. Abbott's collection and published this book, which includes photographs and explanations of many of the smaller artifacts.

[17] The reference to corpse-cleaners is to the Egyptian mummiers, who removed the digestive organs and the brain from the corpse and spent weeks cleansing and preserving the body with special oils. The corpse-cleaners attend to every detail of the physical body inside and out, but yet do not touch the real body. Whitman means that the real body leaves the corpse.

[18] For more information see footnote 16, Williams' Catalogue, and "Dr. Abbott's Egyptian Museum, described," New York Times, 24 March, 1860, p. 3, col. 6.

[19] Pictures, An Unpublished Poem of Walt Whitman with intro. and notes by Emory Holloway (New York: The June House, 1927). Holloway's notes give a great deal of information on sections used in othe Whitman poems. He does not, however, mention "Lilacs."

[20] Wilkinson says that the confusion occurs because the Greeks mistook the cow for Isis, but that she was actually Hathor, the goddess who led the dead to the afterworld. Plates 35 A and 36 in Wilkinson's separate volume of plates show this figure.

[Notes to pages 12 - 14]

[21] The image of the cow was at the head of the procession of mourners in the Egyptian funeral.

[22] The Egyptians worshiped Typhon believing he was the emanation of certain aspects of the one divine being. By worshiping him, they were worshiping the one universal spirit. Whitman also knew that the Hebrews discarded this view of his being part of the one great spirit and in their figure of Satan, or Lucifer, they split the good and the evil aspects into two distinct beings. Volney's Ruins, which Whitman had read and reread, explains this relationship, pp. 148-59.

[23] C. F. Volney, The Ruins (New York: Peter Eckler, 35 Fulton Street, 1890). See note 22.

[24] See Volney, 145-9 and Wilkinson, Vol. I, 177-9, 316, 371.

[25] Wilkinson, Vol. I, 320, 344.

[26] The information in the essay on Rameses takes up one-third of the entire chronology list. Even at that, he had many more notes on Rameses, which can be found in Bucke's Notes, 100-2 and 154. Here is the Rameses section from the essay:

> Remesis Second, supposed to be the same as Sesostris, 1355 years before Christ. This was, indeed, a king of men. He was six feet ten inches high, and of equal proportions and noble shape throughout. He conquered all Asia and part of Europe in nine years. Wherever he went he erected monuments to tell how he had found the people. If they were brave and did their best to repel him, he inscribed on these monuments phallic emblems; but if they were timid and gave easy tribute, he made the chisels cut feminine tokens in the granite or limestone. In the programme of Egyptian greatness he is the first after Osiris. His reign was long continued, being over sixty-two years. He partitioned the land among the peasants, and compounded with them to pay him a fixed tax. (p. 34)

[27] Notes and Fragments, 15,6.

[28] See note 26. Rameses freed slave laborers in the lands he conquered, divided the land among them into farms and taxed them a portion of their profit.

[29] Notes and Fragments, 94, 99, 112,3.

[30] In a note to the Egyptian essay, the editors include this information: "A correspondent wrote to Life Illustrated on January 26, 1856, praising the Egyptian Museum article and asking where more information could be had. Whitman's answer, in 'Notes and Queries,' was that 'we have nothing better than The Egyptians in two volumes, by John G. Wilkinson."

[31] Sadakichi Hartmann, Conversations with Walt Whitman (New York, 1895), 46.

[32] Allen, The Solitary Singer, 354-9.

[33] Notes and Fragments, 156.

[34] Allen, Reader's Guide, 200.

[35] Allen, The Solitary Singer, 357.

[36] Walt Whitman, "Notebook on Birds," Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

[37] Fragrance in the air was supposed to cleanse the air, which was constantly being breathed by unhealthy and diseased bodies. Also, it was supposed to counteract the heavy, depressing night air by stimulating the olfactory sense. See Plutarch, "Isis and Osiris," Moralia Vol. V, trans. by Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 185-91; and

Wilkinson, 338,9.

[38] Richard Chase, "Whitman's Verbal Strategies," in Whitman the Poet: Materials for Study, ed. John C. Broderick (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1962), 116.

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