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The New Empire Grander Than Any Before: 19th-Century American Versions of a Democratic Imperialism

Walter Grünzweig

The *Walt Whitman Fellowship International* was a group of ardent admirers of Walt Whitman in the United States and overseas headed by Whitman's friend Horace Traubel, the companion of his final years. After Whitman's death in 1892, Traubel and the *Fellowship* conducted highly effective campaigns on behalf of what they considered the lyrical prophet of a new era of humankind. Traubel's leftist views determined the direction which Whitman's reception and criticism took in much of the 20th century. The Traubel papers, an incredibly rich resource for anyone interested in studying the American Left between 1890 and the end of World War I, are a testimony both to Traubel's politics and to his activism where Whitman's reception was concerned.

Among Traubel's papers, located at the Library of Congress, I found a letter to Traubel written in 1907 by one Felix Emanuel Schelling (1853-1945),¹ a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania around the turn of the century specializing mostly in Elizabethan literature. Traubel had apparently asked him how Whitman fared at the respected university right across the river from the poet's last domicile in Camden, New Jersey:

My dear Mr. Traubel:

In reply to your request I gladly write the following:

It may interest the members of the Walt Whitman Fellowship to know that the students of the University have been lectured to specifically on Walt Whitman every year for the last ten years, that they have been instructed fully to recognize the importance of Whitman from a historical point of view and for the intrinsic nobility of his opinion and broad and liberal art.

¹ Felix Schelling to Horace Traubel, 23 May 1907. Horace Traubel Papers, Library of Congress.

Of late I think we have laid especial stress on the fact that Mr. Kipling in his imperialism, his sense of expansion and his large treatment of large issues is, when all has been said, a disciple of Walt Whitman.

It is the contemporaneousness of Whitman that made him the man that he was and will long remain. It was a great truth to be told that in literature we must not dwell wholly in the past.

Expressing my deep sympathy with the noble ethics, the high aims, the liberality that knew no bounds, all of which were so distinctively characteristic of that great poet, I greet this meeting with the hope that the Fellowship may long continue and make more widely and better known the work of this great man.

Sincerely yours,

Felix Schelling [emphasis mine, W.G.]

What made me intensely curious was Schelling's line that Kipling's imperialism should be derived from Whitman and that the British writer should be a disciple of the American. It served me well in an analysis of Whitman as a poet connected to a version of American imperialism², but I remained confused how to read it in the larger context. How could Schelling, a liberal academic, write to a well-known leftist and a well-known leftist organization admiringly and appreciatively of Whitman as a teacher of Kipling, especially regarding British imperialism? Which traditions were at work here, which conceptions did Whitman himself connect to and how did this affect the large number of his readers, especially on the political left?

In a larger context, transcending the Whitman example (Whitman being probably *the* most important literary representative of American Empire) this also means to investigate the question of the nature of the empire rhetoric as it developed over a long period of time.

The notion of America as a special empire is an early one and can be found in quite unlikely places. In John Donne's famously pornographic Elegy XIX, "To his Mistris Going to Bed," the speaker's mistress is addressed as "America":

O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,
My myne of precious stones: My emperie,
How blest I am in this discovering thee! (Donne 120f.)

My use of Donne's American empire here is not all serious although it fits my purposes really well. America here is merely a vehicle, and the tenor

² Walter Grünzweig, "Noble Ethics and Loving Aggressiveness: The Imperialist Walt Whitman," in: *An American Empire: Expansionist Cultures and Policies, 1881-1917*, ed. Serge Ricard, Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1990, 151-165.

very much something else. But America is also a *special, different* empire, so special that only *it* can serve to suggest the properties of the mistress asked to shed her robes. At the same time, and this is the *other* dimension, the aspirations of the *persona* to “discover” (i.e. uncover) her body and to eventually possess and control it exclusively (“safeliest when with one man man’d”) suggests the mainstream British connotation of the term, that of domination.

In an excellent article published more than twenty years ago on the occasion of the bicentennial, Norbert Kilian investigated the changes in the rhetoric surrounding the notion of “empire” just before, during and after the American revolution. The British notion of empire suggested to many Americans a political entity with a center to which the American colonies were subservient. After the revolution, many Americans therefore rejected the term as expressive of European domination. Others, however, reappropriated it for their own purposes. The American Empire thereby becomes a democratic empire, in Jefferson’s words an “empire of liberty” (Wright 22), a special empire.

This process strikes me as similar to that of the reformulation and reappropriation of the notion of dictatorship in the Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, as in “dictatorship of the proletariat.” A predominantly negative term, dictatorship, is changed into its opposite. Whereas in earlier times, a minority ruled over a majority – the negative variant –, in Socialism the majority of the people as assembled in the working class rules over the minority, a situation to be welcomed. Whereas before the Revolution the British Empire dominated the freedom-loving colonies, the colonies would now establish an empire, greater than any before, which is based on the humane rule of reason and, of course, on an autonomous, free people.

Interestingly enough, the American rhetoric in reformulating empire does not pick up on the rich possibilities offered by its connection with economics. Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* published in 1776:

To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation that is governed by shopkeepers. (Smith 483)

Very much in contradistinction to this economic formulation of empire (in the quoted passage, Smith actually refers to the American colonies), Americans developed an interesting counter-rhetoric referring to the intellectual realm. America is said to be an empire of science where the

development of knowledge reigns supreme (Kilian 145), an idea which can still be found in Emerson's "American Scholar" when he proclaims, now in a romantic mode:

The man has never lived that can feed us ever. The human mind cannot be enshrined in a person, who shall set a barrier on any one side to this unbounded, unboundable empire. (Emerson 67)

The empire of the human mind and of human thought fits well the "progressive" empire which in the enlightenment context is but the logical practical social product of reason, thought and learning (Kilian 145). It is a moral "empire of laws and not of men" (Kilian 142), a distinct empire, the greatest, best, and last and final empire suggesting, according to Kilian, millennial thinking (Kilian 145f.).

Whereas some representatives of the enlightenment thus tried to link the notions of empire and republic or empire and democracy, the earlier rejection of empire as a European concept also continued. Ralph Waldo Emerson may have accepted an empire of the mind, but his other uses of the term are definitely negative. He associates "empire" with the Old World. The English press has "an imperial tone, as of a powerful and independent nation. But as with other empires, its tone is prone to be official, even officinal" (Emerson 913). A man, he warns in "History," "must sit solidly at home, and not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography (. . .)" (Emerson 239). Empire can suggest the European monarchical mode: society, in its restrictive variant, Emerson says in "Spiritual Laws," is a "graduated, titled, richly appointed empire, quite superfluous when town-meetings are found to answer just as well" (Emerson 308). Emerson's most vehement rejection is found in an interesting passage on tyranny:

The patriarchal form of government readily becomes despotic, as each person may see in his own family. Fathers wish to be fathers of the minds of their children, and behold with impatience a new character and way of thinking presuming to show itself in their own son or daughter. This feeling, which all their love and pride in the powers of their children cannot subdue, becomes petulance and tyranny when the head of the clan, the emperor of an empire, deals with the same difference of opinion in his subjects. Difference of opinion is the one crime which kings never forgive. An empire is an immense egotism. "I am the State," said the French Louis. (Emerson, 219)

I am proposing here that these two tendencies do not only run parallel to each other far into the 19th century and on into the 20th, thus making the term “empire” and its use highly unstable, but that there is actually an integral connection between the two as suggested by Felix Schelling’s optimistic and revealing line in the letter I presented initially.

“An empire is an immense egotism,” Emerson complains accusingly, but would his protégé Walt Whitman have worried about this a great deal? It is, after all, precisely a version of egotism, both of the self and his nation, which Whitman celebrates and which shows that the American empire, far from the exceptionalist claim made for it by its early revisionist propagandists, is not so far from the British version after all.

Whitman’s empire translates the rhetoric of manifest destiny to a global level: “It seems as if the Almighty had spread before this nation charts of imperial destinies, dazzling as the sun (. . .)” (Whitman 990). He claimed that “the existence of the true American continental solidarity of the future (. . .) wholly depends on a compacted imperial ensemble” (Whitman 1050). American “individuality” would “flourish best under imperial republican forms” (Whitman 959). In “A Broadway Pageant” he formulates the line which I have used in my title: “I chant the new empire grander than any before, as in a vision it comes to me (. . .)” (Whitman 386).

In constructing the difference between the British and the American empire, I have stressed the contrast between despotism/dominance on the one hand and democracy on the other. This democracy seems to manifest itself in the notion of expansionism which is seemingly free of domination. Whereas domination is hierarchical, in the United States empire flattens out in the great movement toward the west. Empire thus becomes a question of space rather than of domination.

However, this space very quickly becomes also a space of exploitation. In “Salut au Monde!,” Whitman’s most successful and, given its global reception, most credible international(ist) poem, Western technology is forced on the whole world:

I see the tracks of the railroads of the earth,
I see them in Great Britain, I see them in Europe,
I see them in Asia and in Africa. (Whitman 290)

While the railroad tracks seem to equalize all continents and bring them together, they also standardize them on western terms following a western logic.

In one of Whitman's best-known poems, "Passage to India," a dialogue of the lyrical *persona* with his soul barely hides the poem's imperialist impulse:

Passage to India!
Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network (. . .). (Whitman 532)

Again, manifest destiny is extended globally, controlled by a universal "network."

What is curious is not so much the existence of empire in Whitman's poetry but its complex lyrical representation which, by fusing industrial, technological, logistical and imperial images as early as 1871, already anticipates the Leninist interpretation of imperialism as the ideology of the emerging monopoly capitalism.

Whitman's *personae*, seemingly referring to the progress of the race, frequently celebrate the progress of Americanism in imperialist terms. Speaking prophetically to the world using an enlightened rhetoric, they oftentimes identify the cause of America with that of humankind in general. Proceeding from his idea of America as a "composite" nation which in itself contains all elements of humanity, Whitman develops a theory that America is by definition the one country that can serve as a model for all others. Thus, imperialism is actually mandated in the interest of humanity. Emanating from progressive America, American imperialism would appear to be benign, productive and serving the common good.

However, Whitman also seems to have understood the problematical implications of imperialism when he suggested the problems caused by an "empire of empires" (Whitman 990). The quotation above, in which Whitman imagines an empire as "dazzling as the sun," continues as follows: "(. . .) dazzling as the sun, yet with many a deep intestine difficulty, and human aggregate of cankerous imperfection (. . .)" (Whitman 990). And, he goes on, with the skepticism characteristic of *Democratic Vistas*:

But behold the cost, and already specimens of the cost. Thought you greatness was to ripen for you like a pear? If you would have greatness, know that you must conquer it through ages, centuries – must pay for it with a proportionate price. (Whitman 990f.)

Whitman was definitely more aware of the problematical implication of "empire" than Mexican critic Mauricio González de la Garza who, in *Walt*

Whitman: Racista, Imperialista, Antimexicano, characterized Whitman as “hombre contradictorio” (9) who expressed “en ocasiones (. . .) el sentimiento del internacionalismo” (10) in his poetry while harboring regrettable imperialist attitudes otherwise.

During World War II, Whitmanite Klaus Mann similarly reflects the problem that universal love is associated with universal egotism. With many doubts, he seems to absolve Whitman’s empire from direct guilt:

If it is correct that the economic angle is in Whitman’s view only of secondary importance, it is even more evident that his program of expansion has nothing in common with any traditional pattern of imperialism. (. . .) Yes, he wanted democracy to fight, to win, to triumph. But the triumph he visualized is not the gain of markets, nor does it humiliate or exclude other races or continents. The keystone of his program is solidarity, not conquest. (Mann 28f.)

There remains, however, the troubling question of reception and fair use:

One might object that the Christian message has been exploited and misused through the centuries for imperialistic purposes, and that Whitman’s ‘loving aggressiveness’ could easily serve as an ideological excuse for similar aims and tactics. This may be so, and would be ugly and deplorable. All we can do to forestall such a development, is to stress and clarify the real sense and impact of his vision, which is (at least consciously and subjectively) infinitely remote from any scheme of nationalistic or capitalistic greed. (Mann 28)

Of course, this is the European analysis of what from an American perspective is an integral whole. Empire is both solidarity *and* conquest, democracy *and* exploitation, and, overall, egotism. Solidarity often expresses itself in conquest. Who would separate the two or see one as a mask for another is missing the point. They belong together, seamlessly and inseparably.

Among the many charges the communist movement made against the United States, one of the most successful internationally was that against ‘American imperialism.’ If it eventually became ineffective, it was from overuse and not because American propaganda refuted it. To American ears, the very charge must have seemed pointless and confused, whether this imperialism was a paper tiger, as Mao had it, or not.

There is a vague relationship between the instability of the term ‘empire’ and that of another, more recent term, ‘global,’ especially in its new version of ‘globalism.’ In the past few years, this term has been in inflationary use and rapidly deteriorating at the same time. Recently it has almost become a

swearword, referring to everything that is bad about the new capitalism which is so much more uncomfortable than the old capitalism domesticated by the existence of a bipolar world. The instability of that term will also remain with us as we will discover an internal nexus between global vision and empire. But that is a whole different, even though in many ways related, story.

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