

Mysticism in American Literature: Thoreau's Quest and Whitman's Self
By Paul Hourihan, edited by Anna Hourihan with a foreword by V.K. Chari
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Review by Dr. Steven F. Walker, *The American Vedantist*, Winter 2005

Can an artist be a mystic? And can a mystic be a partially realized soul who stops on the road to realization? In these two fascinating studies published in one volume Paul Hourihan give a resounding YES! to each of these questions. Anyone who has been drawn to Thoreau's prose and to Whitman's poetry will be intrigued to learn why. Hourihan deals directly and fearlessly with the question of how these two nineteenth century American proto-Vedantists reached moments of genuine spiritual insight and realization, but then sought to perpetuate them not in their lives but rather as the subject matter for their much revised and reworked literary works *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass*. The artist in them benefited, but the mystic lost out.

Thoreau's solitary retreat to Walden Pond constituted, I would say, a kind of *vanaprastha*, the third stage of life as described in the *Laws of Manu* (a translation of which was, along with the *Gita*, one of Thoreau's favorite books); in fact, if you translate *vanaprastha* literally, it means "spending time in the woods" or, as Thoreau's subtitle for *Walden* put it (surely not coincidentally) "*Life in the Woods*." For Hourihan Thoreau's spiritual retreat marked the high point of his life, after which he increasingly succumbed to his inner demons, especially to an ingrained contempt for ordinary human beings, a growing "anger at society" (p. 10) and at his teacher Emerson in particular, and "a compulsive naturalism" that in the later sections of his journals makes for tedious reading, with "hardly any of the insights and beauty we would expect from Henry Thoreau." (p. 9)

When *Walden* turned out to be no commercially successful publication, Thoreau fell victim to a severe depression; Hourihan adds, in one of the many insightful bits of commentary that are scattered throughout his essay, that one revered swami, when asked what was the principal difficulty of spiritual life, replied after a silence, "Don't let your mind give in to depression." (p. 13) Of course, some readers may feel that Hourihan is too quick to analyze the unconscious mind of Henry David Thoreau. But others, including this reader, will feel that he is intuitively right about the complex nature of a man, who has been such an inspiration for American spiritual seekers for many generations, but whose life seems somehow incomplete, as though still tending towards a goal that eluded it.

Still, incomplete and imperfect as he may be, Thoreau reminds us, over and over again of "the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" and the need to "keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep." (quoted p. 54)

The Ideal Is to Combine Them

If Thoreau found inspiration in the relative solitude of Walden Pond, Whitman, by contrast, loved riding in the horse drawn buses of Manhattan, watching the crowd,

mingling with all kinds of people and feeling himself to be one with them all. This mystical experience—that “My Self” is present in all human beings without exception—left him with enough material for a lifetime of poetry. But if the artist in him flourished, the mystic ran into a roadblock. Hourihan explains this by arguing that Whitman “made no serious attempt to alter his life to accord with the dimensions of the experience” (p. 86); he did not choose to discipline his life. Once again, Hourihan seems to this reader to have hit the nail on the head, when he writes that Whitman “acts as though the mystical moment was an aspect of his personality he had known from birth” and hence falls victim to his own ingrained tendencies, especially “indolence” and “procrastination” (p. 87). Like Thoreau, he fails to develop further.

But Hourihan still finds inspiration in both, and especially in the *combination* of both. He argues that Walt Whitman reveals a figure that complements that of Thoreau beautifully. If we take them together, and if we emphasize the positive dimensions of their inspiration, we would see, writes Hourihan, that “the ideal life would show a combination of their dominant traits.” From Thoreau we would learn “the great challenge of self-conquest and inner purification;” from Whitman we would learn “the secret (in Vivekananda’s phrase) of the deification of the world, the necessity of cultivating a sense of the divine in all forms of life.”

He concludes that “Thoreau gives us willpower, Whitman gives us humanity—the ideal is to combine them!” (p. 126) It is a fitting conclusion for a reverent—and yet fittingly at times *irreverent*—appreciation of two classic American artists and mystics.

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