

Geographical Illustrations:

The Popular Atlas and the Internationalization of Walt Whitman

In his first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855, Walt Whitman introduces himself as the bard of America, the singer of those states. By the time of the second printing, in 1856, his scope had expanded, reaching farther and internationalizing, as evidenced most clearly in “Salut au Monde!,” his telescopic glimpse around the world. In response to political failures at home, poor book sales, and the increasing inevitability of a conflict over slavery, Whitman looks abroad, sounding an ever widening yawp to echo about the globe. Newspaper clippings, reviews, and notes in his scrapbook attest to the influence of popular atlases, including the works of Samuel Goodrich and Alexander Keith Johnston, on this process of expansion, inspiring and informing Whitman’s use of facts and images in his internationalist poetry. Despite his reliance on these atlases as sources of information, spelling, and vicarious sensory experience, Whitman adopts a more universalist tone in his descriptions of foreign culture, a departure from the stress on dichotomy (i.e. savage/ civilized, white/ non-white) found in the texts. Although he celebrates individuality, he portrays worldwide humanity as united in manly and womanly love, physical work, and the inescapable influence of the epochal force of democracy, a result of his adoption of Hegelian philosophy. Looking across America’s borders to the world at large, Whitman travels vicariously and shapes his poetry through his study of the popular atlas as a source of information, if not ideology.

In his process of self-education, Whitman kept an ever-growing scrapbook in which he placed newspaper clippings, articles, reviews, and lecture notes. Although the topics vary widely, fitting for a man of Whitman’s voracity, “articles on travel, geography, and history

predominate” (Stovall, The Foreground of *Leaves of Grass* 159). As such, these scrapbooks attest to a quest for information regarding people and places he never had the opportunity to encounter firsthand. Even as he sings of America from his apartment in Brooklyn, Whitman’s eye searches for multitudes, a search which brought him to the popular atlas. The reviews in his scrapbook include a piece on Alexander Keith Johnston’s The Physical Atlas of Natural Phenomena and one on Mary Somerville’s Physical Geography, a work advertised in the front of Johnston’s atlas; his reading of the former perhaps guided him to the latter. He placed selections from the primary works into his book as well, including pages from Samuel Griswold Goodrich’s writings on geography and history. In turn, Whitman kept numerous notebooks, in which he copied statistics and other fragments of information from these works, as well as observations on his readings. Indeed, “some of the geographical statistics” found in his notes “derive largely from these atlases and the clippings related to them” (Stovall 159). Whitman drew upon the studies documented in his notes and scrapbooks when assembling Leaves of Grass, in particular for a poem like “Salut au Monde!,” with its immense geographical scope. In its lists, images, and terminology, “Salut au Monde!” reflects a reading of popular atlases, such as the works of Johnston and Goodrich, research which enables Whitman to internationalize his poetry into a song of the whole world.

The first two sections of “Salut au Monde!” closely follow the introductory section of Samuel Goodrich’s 1853 edition of Geography and History, Ancient and Modern and the listing of contents in Alexander Keith Johnston’s The Physical Atlas of Natural Phenomena. Answers to the series of questions in part one of the poem can be found in The Physical Atlas, easily located in the listings of the table of contents. Whitman asks, “what are the mountains call’d that rise so high?,” “what rivers are these?,” and “what climes?” (Whitman, Poetry and Prose 287), a line of questioning following the structure of Johnston’s atlas and its organizational sections of

Geology, Hydrography, and Meteorology (Johnston, Physical Atlas List of Plates). As the anxious reader, Whitman prepares his questions beforehand, ready to explore the atlas for answers.

Part two matches Goodrich's introduction, which presents definitions and a general outline to guide the mainly amateur readers exploring the atlas. In this section, Goodrich defines geography as describing "the surface of the earth, its distribution into land and water, and the various objects, whether physical, moral, or political, which appear upon it" (Goodrich, Geography and History 9), a close description of the poem as well. Like the geographer, Whitman sets out to depict the physical and human inhabitants of the globe. In part two, he even adopts the terminology of an atlas. As Goodrich defines "the *poles*, the *equator*, lines of *latitude* and *longitude*...boundaries of the *zones*, &c" (Goodrich 10), Whitman accepts "within me latitude...longitude" as well as "the hot equator" (Whitman 287) and the "zones" (Whitman 288). Additionally, Goodrich explains that "the *motions of the earth* are twofold-one...on its own axis and one...round the sun" (Goodrich 10), matters of astronomy Whitman sees as the "axis-ends" and "sun wheels" (Whitman 288) contained within the great Bard of the Earth.

Both men divide the world into East and West, with the poet demarcating "Asia, Africa, Europe, are to the east-America is provided / for in the west" (Whitman 287) and the geographer describing "the *Grand Divisions* of the Eastern Continent are *Europe, Africa, and Asia*; those of the Western Continent are *North and South America*" (Goodrich 13). Such similarity indicates familiarity, as if Whitman's inspiration for "Salut au Monde!" sprang from his reading of an atlas's table of contents. It also hints at a desire on the part of Whitman to present his own poetical atlas, sharing the structure and content of a Goodrich geography textbook. The likeness continues as Whitman moves from introduction to poem's main thrust, a gaze around the planet which, like Johnston's and Goodrich's works, provides information on and description of the

great physical monuments of the world.

As throughout his poetry, Whitman includes catalogues and lists in "Salut au Monde," -of mountain chains, bodies of water, cities- a device which here mirrors similar listings found in the popular atlas. He includes in his lists the bests of their respective categories, whatever the atlas authors found worthy of mention in their lists of the highest, longest, or most populous. "I see mountain peaks" (Whitman 289), Whitman proclaims, followed by a listing of the great chains of Asia, Europe, and, later, South America. Both Goodrich and Johnston include similar lists of major mountain chains, the former in his introductory sections to each continent and the latter in his Geology section. Glancing across Asia, Whitman "see[s] the Himalayas, Chian Shahs, Altays, Ghauts" (Whitman 289) while, in the same view, Johnston similarly designates the "Himalaya...Thian-shan, and Altai" as the "great chains" of Central Asia (Johnston 8). Goodrich, too, lists "Himmaleh...Altai...[and] Ghauts" among the "principal mountains" (Goodrich 243) of Asia. Rather than a spontaneous outpouring, the catalogues of "Salut au Monde!" often appear to be copies of these statistics placed directly into the poem. Whitman goes on to include "the giant pinnacle[] of Elbruz" (Whitman 289), perhaps after reading its mention in The Physical Atlas as the "culminating point[]" (Johnston 13) of the Caucuses. So too does he list in his poem the first four European mountain ranges that appear on Johnston's table of highest chains. And while lacking in Johnston, Goodrich mentions "Mount Sorato, in Bolivia" as "the highest mountain on the Western Continent" (Goodrich 159), inspiring Whitman's vision of "the Bolivian ascending mount Sorata" (Whitman 292). Only the highest and grandest peaks appear within the poet's eyesight, a selectivity made possible by the quantitative listings of the atlas.

Such listings similarly inform the inclusion of other particular landmarks; he mentions only the longest rivers, the busiest ports, and the most populous cities, information readily available as the statistics which Goodrich and Johnston provide. Indeed, of the fourteen longest

rivers in Europe listed by Goodrich, eleven appear as an entry in Whitman's notebook, and of that list nine appear in the final poem; the Volga, "the largest of European rivers" and the "principal river of Europe" (Johnston 43, 44) is mentioned in all three sources, atlas, notebook, and "Salut au Monde!" Eight of Goodrich's thirteen longest Asian rivers appear within a twenty-line section of the poem, from "ascend[ing] the Obi" to the "falling of the Ganges" (Whitman 290-291). With an eye to the greatest and the most important, Whitman could consult the atlas material in his scrapbook for the necessary statistics. While seemingly counter to his philosophy of equality, the quantitative-based priorities of his sources mandate Whitman's focus on the tops of the lists, limiting his ability to include.

Beyond his lists of names and landscapes, Whitman presents an enthusiastic procession of visual images, a mosaic of activities from across the continents. As with his statistics, the atlases furnish these images as well, through a series of drawings which allow Whitman to vicariously travel the globe, documenting all he sees. Aside from the maps which provide exotic place names and their locations, depictions of native life accompany many of Goodrich's sections on the countries and regions of the world, enabling Whitman to include "not just a list of names or places; but descriptive phrases, showing considerable detailed knowledge" (Stovall 161). After a journey through the illustrated pages of Mr. Goodrich's atlas, Whitman can claim to "see...all the inhabitants of the earth" (Whitman 294). Even for a vision of the entire spheroidal planet, a "great round wonder rolling through space" (Whitman 289), the poet need only open to the second page of Goodrich's introduction (Appendix, figure 1); the Bard of the cosmos can glimpse the whole of his domain at once.

Describing the disparate regions of the world, the atlas provides visual depictions of "the seal-seeker in his boat poising his lance" (Whitman 293, (figure 2)) in Greenland and the "lithe matador in the arena at Seville" (fig. 3) in Spain for Whitman to include in his poem, as well as the

“beautiful-bodied Persian at full speed in the saddle / shooting arrows” (fig. 4), the “foot-worn pilgrim welcoming...Mecca” (fig. 5), and the “shieks...ruling your families and tribes” (Whitman 295 (fig. 6)) in Arabia. Such depictions of actions tend to follow from visual antecedents in the atlas, while the listings of nationalities (i.e. “you liver in Madagascar, Ceylon, Sumatra, Borneo” (Whitman 295)) stem from the maps and the text. Even so, the two on occasion combine, with Whitman’s glimpse of “the caravans toiling onward” (Whitman 294) across the Arabian desert matching Goodrich’s assertion that “traveling in Arabia is almost wholly performed by caravans” (Goodrich 252).

His research, including study of these drawings, even allows Whitman to form opinions of the peoples he purports to see. From a profile of an Abyssinian in Goodrich (figure 7), he deduces, as a comment in his notebook, “a large fine formed race of Abyssinia, black, athletic, fine heads” (Whitman, Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts 1972). Though his encounter consists only of a removed rendering based mostly likely on supposition, Whitman forms enough of a relationship to sing praises of the far-off African man; so ready is he to embrace all the world that he accepts artistic guesswork as sufficient knowledge. Despite the positive judgment, the Abyssinian fails to appear to “Salut au Monde!,” though a fellow African is similarly described as “fine-headed” (Whitman, Poetry and Prose 294). Like the statistics of river lengths and mountain chain heights, the illustrations found in the popular atlas influence Whitman’s selection of images for his poetry. As his major source of information, the atlas shapes the direction of his internationalism, dictating its scope and vision. In the opening line of part four, Walt Whitman asks himself what he sees when he glances around the world; he answers by describing the geographical illustrations found in his atlases.

Despite the dictates of statistics and imagery, Whitman breaks with the atlas in his attitude towards the peoples of the earth, abandoning the divisions of white / non-white or

civilized / savage found in Goodrich and Johnston in favor of a universalist celebration of all that is man and woman. With his devotion to equality, Whitman draws everyone, every type of person, together as “equals and lovers” (Whitman 296) as he concludes his poem. While the authors of atlases focus on distinctions of race, character, and religion, Whitman looks to unity, celebrating, as elsewhere in his poetry, family and labor. Everywhere on earth contains “the workman singing and the farmer’s wife singing” and “the sounds of children...early in the day” (Whitman 288); beyond all differences, he sees “male and female everywhere” (Whitman 294), unified in human desires for love and companionship. Similarly, the poet of the roughs looks for the “menials of the earth, laboring” (Whitman 294) worldwide in their professions. With these bases of humanity recognized, differences become a part of individual identity but no longer fundamental distinctions or barriers to a shared affinity. While Goodrich, with a heavily Christian influence, defines Muslims as followers of a “pretended...revelation from heaven” who “propagate Religion by the Sword” (Goodrich 16), Whitman includes “the Arab muezzin calling from the top of the mosque” alongside the “Christian priests at the altars” and the “Hebrew reading his records” (Whitman 288). As human expressions, all religions are equal. So too are the peoples of Africa, South America, Oceania, and the far North, rather than dismissed as uncivilized savages or as subjects of colonial rule, addressed on their own merits.

With a similar respect, Whitman refutes the concepts of superiority and inferiority as defined by race. In his section on ethnography, Johnston focuses on the physical, intellectual, and moral characteristics of distinct races, adopting John Frederick Blumenbach’s divisions of Caucasian, Mongolian, and Ethiopian. Along with a chart documenting statistics of pure and mixed blood races in Europe, he describes variations in physical appearance, language, and mental capacity. While Whitman adopts some of these descriptions, such as the “Austral negro...with protrusive lip” and “woolly-hair’d” (Whitman 296) from the Ethiopian with “hair on the head

woolly” and “very thick lips” (Johnston 102), he rejects the idea of an inherent distinction or inferiority thus implied. What Johnston refers to as “monosyllabic, inartificial, and limited in range” (Johnston 102), Whitman celebrates as “glimmering language and spirituality!” (Whitman 296) in accordance with his enthusiasm for the individual and personal expression. Rather than “look down upon” those peoples often dismissed as savage or barbarous, he accepts them “where you stand” (Whitman 296) with neither derision nor attempts at anthropological explanation.

In particular, Whitman splits with prevailing understandings of the peoples of Africa, an understanding integral to the survival of slavery in America. Johnston, in his comparative ethnography, classifies the “Negro type” as “very patient of hard and protracted labour under a broiling sun, and even in damp and marshy localities where other races would sink under disease” (Johnston 102), amounting to an apologetic for slavery. They, unlike any other race, can perform these labors; without African slavery, certain work simply could not be done. He similarly praises them as inherently “patient, submissive,...and contented in their dispositions” (Johnston 102). Informed that these characteristics are intrinsic and natural to the black race, Americans could more readily accept slavery as similarly natural, befitting, and perhaps even necessary. Whitman presents a significantly more negative portrait, describing the “wheeze of the slave-coffle,” the “husky gangs,” and the “wrist-chains and ankle-chains” (Whitman 288) that bind them together. He describes the realities and the workings of slavery as an institution rather than as the natural state of being for an entire race. As elsewhere in his poetry, Whitman views the “black, divine-soul’d African” as “on equal terms with me!” (Whitman 294), forcing a recognition of his or her humanity. With conflict over the issue of slavery continuing across the country, Whitman perhaps casts this point of disagreement with the atlas as a political as well as philosophical distinction.

Further, Whitman expresses the certainty that one day all people of every nation “will come forward in due time” (Whitman 296) to democracy, a notion of progress inspired by his readings of Hegel. As the epochal force of democracy will one day replace, through synthesis, what has come before it as it spreads across the globe, Whitman views current divisions as meaningless and irrelevant in a poem about universal humanity. Unlike the student of comparative ethnography, he refuses to focus on distinction and to segregate humanity by race but instead provides an egalitarian embrace to all the peoples of the world, holding each in equal regard regardless of physical, intellectual, or cultural differences. While relying on the atlas for much of his information, he thus does not allow it undue influence on his poetic themes and personal philosophy; the chanter of “Song of Myself” remains in control. The combination of Whitman’s egalitarianism and Goodrich’s geography allows the reader to “mix indiscriminately” among “all the inhabitants of the earth” (Whitman 294), men and women documented by the geographer in his atlas but saluted by the poet in his song.

In the composition of “Salut au Monde!” for the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman referred to the clippings and notes in his scrapbook and various notebooks, as well as referenced the popular atlas. Works like Samuel Goodrich’s Geography and History, Ancient and Modern and Alexander Keith Johnston’s The Physical Atlas of Natural Phenomena from the early 1850’s provided, through maps, statistics, and written and visual descriptions, the information necessary for a poem of such international scope. The atlas informed the latest incarnations of Whitman’s lists, presenting him with lists of their own announcing longest rivers, highest mountain ranges, and most populous cities. Similarly, the poet’s visions, recounted in enthused bursts, find their source in the illustrations present in a popular atlas. Whitman transforms the images he sees on the page into a telescopic glimpse around the world, though a glimpse dictated by the scope of Goodrich’s engravings. Although he relies on them heavily for

information, Whitman rejects the anthropological ideology of these atlases as counter to his philosophy of equality, celebration of the individual, and the uniting forces of family, physical labor, and democracy. The combination of forces, the atlases' interplay of factual information and dramatic presentation with Whitman's universalist poetical philosophy, creates a grand portrait of the world, a vicarious travel expedition for the reader perhaps akin to the poet's first encounter with an atlas. Indeed, in "Salut au Monde!" Whitman presents his own manifestation of the popular atlas, a source of information on rivers, mountains, and exotic cultures infused with his poetic project, a celebration of all that is man and woman and of the worldwide flourishing of democracy setting forth, alongside the poet's gaze, from America.

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Figure 1



Goodrich p.10

View of the Earth, as seen from the Moon.

"I see a great round wonder rolling through space"



Greenlanders Catching Seals.

Goodrich 139

"I see the seal-seeker in his boat poising his lance"



Spanish Bull-Fight.

Goodrich 204

"You like matador in the arena at Seville!"

INDEPENDENT TARTARY.

Goodrich 257



Ancient Parthians.

"You beautiful-bodied Persian at full speed in the saddle / shooting arrows to the mark!"

ARABIA.



Pilgrims going to Mecca, resting at night in the Desert.

"You foot-worn pilgrim welcoming the far-away sparkle of the minarets of Mecca!"



Arabs, with a Chief, or Sheik.

Goodrich 253



Abyssinian.

"You sheiks along the stretch from Suez to Bab-el-mandeb
ruling your families and tribes!"