

Sidney Lanier's "Nirvana"

Lanier Graham

Buddhism and Hinduism appear to have played a special role in Lanier's spiritual development. He was introduced to both spiritual traditions by his Aunt Mary shortly before the Civil War. [1] He continued to ponder their meaning during and after the War. "Nirvana," one of his first important poems, was written in 1869 in Macon, and first published in the New Eclectic in 1870 with a note by the title to explain the Asian term, a note which reads:

*The Highest Paradise of Buddha, attainable only by long contemplation,
and by perfect superiority to all passions of men and all vicissitudes of Time."*

Nirvâna

Through seas of Dreams and seas of Phantasies,
Through seas of Solitudes and Vacancies,
And through my Self, the deepest of the seas,
I strive to thee, Nirvâna.

O, long ago the billow-flow of Sense,
Aroused by Passion's windy vehemence,
Upbore me out of depths to heights intense,
But not to thee, Nirvâna.

By waves swept on, I learned to ride the waves;
I served my masters till I made them slaves;
I baffled Death by hiding in his graves,
His watery graves, Nirvâna.

And once I clomb a mountain's stony crown,
And stood, and smiled no smile and frowned no frown,
Nor ate, nor drank, nor slept, nor faltered down,
Five days and nights, Nirvâna.

Sunrise and noon, and sunset and strange night,
And shadow of large clouds and faint starlight,
And lonesome Terror stalking round the height,
I minded not, Nirvâna.

The silence ground my soul keen like a spear;
My bare thought, whetted as a sword, cut sheer
Through time and life, and flesh and death, to clear
My way unto Nirvâna.

I slew bodies of old ethnic Hates
That stirred long race-wars betwixt states and states;
I stood and scorned these foolish dead debates,
Calmly, calmly, Nirvâna.

I smote away the filmy base of Caste;
I thrust through antique blood, and riches vast,
And all big claims of the pretentious Past
That hindered my Nirvâna.

Then all fair types, of form, and sound, and hue,
Up-floated round my sense and charmed anew;
I waved them back into the void blue:
I love them not, Nirvâna.

And all outrageous ugliness of time,
Excess, and Blasphemy, and squinting Crime,
Beset me; but I kept my calm sublime:
I hate them not, Nirvâna.

High on the topmost thrilling of the surge
I saw, afar, two hosts to battle urge:
The widows of the victors sang a dirge,
But I wept not, Nirvâna.

I saw two lovers sitting on a star;
He kissed her lip, she kissed his battle-scar;
They quarrelled soon, and went two ways afar:
O Life! I laughed, Nirvâna.

And never a king but had some king above,
And never a law to right the wrongs of Love,
And ever a fangèd snake beneath a dove,
Saw I on earth, Nirvâna.

But I, with kingship over kings, am free;
I love not, hate not: right and wrong agree;
And fangs of snakes and lures of doves to me
Are vain, are vain, Nirvâna.

So by mine inner contemplation long,
By thoughts that need no speech nor oath nor song,
My spirit soars above the motley throng
Of days and nights, Nirvâna.

O Suns, O Rains, O Day and Night, O Chance,
O Time besprent with seven-hued circumstance,
I float above ye all, into the trance
That draws me nigh Nirvâna.

Gods of small worlds, ye little deities
Of humble heavens under my large skies,
And governor-spirits all, I rise, I rise,
I rise into Nirvâna.

The storms of Self below me rage and die;
On the still bosom of mine ecstasy,
A Lotus on a lake of balm, I lie
Forever in Nirvâna.

In the critical literature on this poem, one discussion centers of whether or not Lanier understood the true meaning of "Nirvana." Here is a passage from Parks, Sidney Lanier: The Man, the Poet, the Critic, 1968:

These seem the best of his early lyrics. Aubrey Starke (147) preferred "Nirvâna," reading into Lanier's quest for spiritual contentment an epithalamium for Mary Day Lanier: "marriage to her more than anything else in his life brought to Lanier the enraptured ecstasy and the sense of escape from the terrors of contemporary events which he so subtly conveys to us in this poem." This is an attractive reading, although it hardly jibes with Lanier's explanation to Virginia Hankins that "Of course it is a rapt Hindu who speaks" (I, 335). But the erroneous conception of Nirvâna as the "Highest Paradise of Buddha," attainable only by long contemplation, and by perfect superiority to all passions of men and all vicissitudes of Time" (instead of a state of non-existence) has proved a stumbling-block to many readers.

[2]

Professor Parks was not a Buddhist, nor did he teach World Religions. He taught English at the University of Georgia. I'm not sure on what authority he made his claim that Lanier misunderstood the concept of "Nirvana." I suggest Parks misunderstood the concept of "non-existence." There is reason to believe that Lanier understood "nirvana" and "non-existence" quite well. The term "nirvana," in Sanskrit, means "extinction." This does not imply the death of the body but rather the death of the ego. Then and only then is one free from attachment and thus from suffering.

Buddhism teaches that life for most is suffering. Suffering is caused by the attachment of ego to what it thinks it needs, greedy needs. To defend itself, one's ego continuously tries to fight off fear, insecurity, etc. with anger, violence, and many other forms of selfishness. Egocentric people can love only themselves. Suffering can be stopped by setting one's self free from the ego, free from attachment. This is easier said than done, but it can be done. Once done, once one's Buddha-nature has been found, it is said one becomes fearless, spontaneous, and all-loving.

In the last three stanzas of the poem, we see Lanier rising above "seven-hued circumstance," that is to say, above all transitory experiences, even mind-projected images of deities. He has become detached. In this condition-of-mind, his ~~larger~~ self, the part of him now linked with the infinite, can look down on the ~~smaller~~ self, the self that rages and dies inside space and time, from the perspective of calm eternity. Eternity in esoteric Buddhism is not a long time trapped within the material sphere of space and time. It envelops and permeates the products of mind-generated space and time. Lanier liked Blake, and Blake said it well when he reminded us that from an esoteric perspective "Eternity is in love with...Time." [3]

HIGHER
LOWER

In a poem called "A Song of Eternity in Time," Lanier expressed his parallel understanding with these words:

"Thus Time," I cried, "is but a tear
Some one hath wept 'twixt hope and fear,
Yet in his little lucent sphere
... Eternity, is beaming." [4]

In a letter to Paul Hayne, Lanier spoke of what was in his mind as he thought about the two selves. De Bellis provides us with an analysis:

[5]

Hayne was a friend and a poet, one of his few literary friends. Lanier's awareness of two selves is reminiscent of letters that Mallarmé wrote after he began to experience "two selves" the Nothingness in between during the 1860s. It is said that a certain degree of Enlightenment or Illumination is needed before one can become conscious of the fact that one has two selves, a ~~Larger~~ Self and a ~~Smaller~~ Self. [6] Some might argue that Lanier could not have wanted to "go into nirvana," because nirvana implies an extinction of personality, and the development of personality was very important to Lanier as seen in his book The English Novel: A Study in the Development of Personality. [7]

Higher
Lower

However, this assumption is incorrect. The traditional teaching is that after Enlightenment, one's general personality structure remains as it was. What changes is the permanent direction of one's intention. One stops being self-serving and becomes a servant of the world.

On the basis of "Nirvana" Lanier was invited to write four articles about India called "Sketches of India" for Lippincott's Magazine in 1875. Lanier was surprised by the invitation, as he actually did not know a great deal about India. However, living near poverty with a large family to feed, he wanted the commission, so he plunged ahead and wrote the piece as a tourist guide to country he had never visited. (But he did not sign his name). It is a strange piece, fictional and yet full of accurate cultural and architectural details and a clear understanding of the basic principles of Hinduism and Buddhism. [8]

Not much is known about what Lanier read on Buddhism or Hinduism. From the evidence in "Sketches of India," it is obvious Lanier read the Bhagavad-Gita (which he summarizes), along with a number of Buddhist texts. The Gita, so loved by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, teaches that bliss arrives when true self is realized. This teaching is not unique to Hinduism and Buddhism, of course; it is at the core of all the great esoteric traditions.

Where did Lanier's first glimpses of Asian and esoteric metaphysics come from? Novalis, whom he read when he was quite young, or from Swedenborg, whom he (like Emerson) respected? More study is required. In his later years, Emerson's universal spirituality and passionate pantheism seem to have been strong influences as Lanier was moving away from traditional Christianity toward what the Transcendentalists called Universal Religion.

When Lanier started to read Emerson is not certain, but between 1874 and 1877, it is clear that Emerson's metaphysics had become important to Lanier. He wrote in 1877: "Emerson, whom I have been reading all winter, gives me immeasurable delight because he does not propound to me disagreeable systems and hideous creeds but simply walks along high and bright ways where one loves to go with him." [9]

Lanier started to speak of divinity, in a very esoteric way, as the "All-One." [10] In ~~"what title?"~~ of ~~1875??~~ we read:

"Psalm of the West" 1876

And Art shall be known as the soul making love to the All,
And Love shall be known as the marriage of man with the All. [11]

In the mid 1870s, with only a few years of life left to live, Lanier became a new man. He may not have attained a continuous experience of "nirvana" or "paradise." However, he had connected with enough of the "not-self" to feel his "other self" transforming. His Higher Self was filling his Lower Self with a new kind of fullness. He "became himself," in the usual sense of the term, and reached his full maturity as a spiritual poet.

1. See Lanier Graham, "Sidney Lanier & his 'Montvale Muse': The Story of Two Poets," in Iconography of Infinity, Series B, Vol. 8h??, 2004 ??

2a Parks, pp. 48-49.

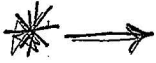
2b No Buddhist term has been more misunderstood in America. For an historical review of this misunderstanding, see Versluis, American Transcendentalism & Asian Religions, 1993, pp. 48, 151, 210.

3. Blake's full line from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is :
"Eternity is in love with the productions of time."

4. "A Song of Eternity in Time" was written in 1867 and published in 1870.

5. Jack De Bellis, Sidney Lanier, 1972, p. 56. Lanier worked with this concept of two selves in a number of other ways. In Anderson's poem outline #60 reads: "Two of us wander on the beach / Me and myself" In Anderson's poem outline #64 we read:

The Me that is within us all,
Music speaks in tones devine,
The other Me - they hear and fall
Upon their knees before the shrine
Where Love - the Me of Me - doth shine.



6. For these letters and their meaning, see Lanier Graham, "The Philosophical Aesthetics of Mallarmé," in Iconography of Infinity: Essays on Art & Philosophy, Series E, vol. 2, 1993? For further analysis, see Lanier Graham, Mallarmé & Modern Art: A Study Guide, 1999, and Lanier Graham, Duchamp & Androgyny: Art, Gender, and Metaphysics, 2003, pp. 67-68. Mallarmé was attracted to the poetry of Poe for the same reason Lanier was: extraordinary musicality. Verbal artists and visual artists have wanted their work to attain "the condition of music" for a long time. Mallarmé went farther than either Poe or Lanier in making his poems musical. Many think Mallarmé went too far and regard Mallarmé as the most difficult of poets to understand. Indeed, some think the words in Mallarmé's poems have meanings that are primarily if not exclusively musical sounds, with narrative content having all but disappeared.

7. Anderson, Op. Cit., p. lxxi, argues this way.

8. "Sketches of India" in Lippincott's Magazine, Jan.-Apr. 1876. For some of Lanier's sources, see Arthur Christy, "The Orientalism of Sidney Lanier" in Aryan Path, Oct. 1934, pp. 638-641. Christy is a major authority on Orientalism in 19th century America, especially as regards the Transcendentalist movement. His publications include The Orient in American Transcendentalism, 1932, and The Asian Legacy and American Life, 1968.

9. Lanier on Emerson, quoted in Anderson, Op. Cit., p.

10. Lanier, quoted in Ibid., p. [which poem?] All-One = where?

11. Lanier, quoted in Mims, Op. Cit., p. 370 {but which poem?}

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