

The Democratic Element in Whitman

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"The democratic poet would begin to discover the ideal world not in external figures, but in himself — not as an individual, but as an embodiment of the evolving nation and race."

— Tocqueville

"I am not in them, they are in me."

— Krishna

"I have taught one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man."

— Emerson

Whitman embraces, then shies from, Emerson, because his mentor has said it all. Western democratic theory and Hindu thought find their first synthesis in the apothegms of the Concord sage, their exposition in the poems and ancillary prose of Tocqueville's democratic poet. We apprehend both bodies of thought somewhat obscurely, the first perhaps because of our very nearness to it, the second no doubt because of our distance from it. Their resolution too remains something of a mystery, one which we intuit in the great canonical poems of *Leaves of Grass*, one which we puzzle over in the prose.

Much has been said of democracy, much remains to be understood. The wise are hesitant to pronounce. "Nothing," writes Henry Adams of Jefferson and Madison's administrations, "was more elusive than the spirit of American democracy." Not a set of laws, but a spirit. Not a set of philosophical formulations, but a movement: "Jefferson's writing may be searched from beginning to end without revealing the whole measure of the man, for less of the movement." Adams is perhaps here soberly recapitulating what he has found more exuberantly phrased by Whitman. "We have frequently printed the word Democracy," says the poet. "Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose,

remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted."

When we put "Democratic Vistas" alongside *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* we sense a generic mismatch. Why? Both Locke and Whitman are speaking of democracy. But the thing itself has changed, from an Enlightened idea to a Romantic emotion, the distinction suggested by Adams: "No one questioned the force or the scope of an emotion which caused the poorest peasant in Europe to see what was invisible to poet and philosopher" — if not invisible to Whitman — "the dim outline of a mountain-summit across the ocean, rising high above the mist and mind of American democracy."

What is this thing, democracy, this estate "all men are naturally in" (Locke) but must unnaturally construct and then construe? "A state of perfect freedom to order their actions," "a state of equality wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocated." Not the power of which Adams speaks — the force of an emotion — but the force of law. And not freedom *from* but freedom *within*: "freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to everyone in that society."

The last word is crucial and predictive. For what we are dealing with are three democratic revolutions, the first political, the second social, the third yet to be named but the subject of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau's radically libertarian, egalitarian, fraternal thought. We will limit ourselves here to Whitman and to the narrower focus of the Hindu contribution to these new ideas.

The three revolutions trace a progression from the intellectual to the emotional to the religious, as Tocqueville predicted: "The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them." Only the last clause escapes the Frenchman's Biblical frame, a clause better glossed by our epigraph from the Bhagavad Gita: "I am not in them, they are in me." But here we must ask, Who is this me, this divine Self, poetically rendered as Krishna? Only then may we understand how the people and the poet become one in Whitman.

The divine Self is of course the *atman*, a term that may be translated as either Self or Soul, two aspects of an entity that stand in need of distinction. By Self we do not mean self, which would translate *svayam*, my ordinary personal identity. We mean instead that larger iden-

tity which compounds itself through the experience of the cosmos. But whereas the Self is limited by time and space, the Soul is not, and though in a sense, then, the Soul is transcendent, in a more important sense it cannot be, for the Soul depends upon the Self for its experience. It is this Self that Whitman has in mind when he titles his epyllion "Song of Myself." It is this Soul that he has in mind when, in that poem, he speaks of himself as "the poet of the Soul." It is the relationship of Self (body) and Soul that informs the first two of the following lines:

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
 And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
 And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is.

To understand the crucial term of the third line — a universalized "God" — we need to bear in mind another Upanishadic concept, *brahman*, the universal principle, which, in the monistic synthesis central to the doctrine, is identified with the *atman*. Finally, this *atman* writ large is the *paramatman*, the God of the Gita, among whose attributes are love, perfection, eternity. Now we understand the closing lines of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as representing *atman* in its identity as *paramatman*, both terms simultaneously translated "soul."

We fathom you not — we love you — there is perfection in you also,
 You furnish your parts toward eternity,
 Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

All is not strictly Hindu — how *could* such poetic English words, used with such license, be identical with their theological Sanscrit counterparts? But the correspondences nonetheless should be clear.

As a young boy Krishna went out into the yard to play. Whereupon his mother observed him eating a handful of dirt. Opening his mouth to remove it, she was offered therein a vision of the heavens and the earth, sun and moon, the vastness of the universe. "I am not in them, they are in me." And yet the first clause, while denying it, speaks another truth: Krishna *is* the god incarnate. Whitman, late in life, conceived a poetic project, never executed, which he titled "I, Osiris." "Song of Myself" might well be thought of, by analogy, as "I, Krishna."

Thus perhaps we now may supply the middle term: the People = Whitman = the Deity. "I am persuaded that in the end democracy directs the imagination from all that is external to man and fixes it on man alone," says Tocqueville, thereby moving us from Wordsworth's natural to

Whitman's human universe. "Democratic nations may amuse themselves for a while with considering the productions of nature, but they are excited in reality only by a survey of themselves," he continues, in a chapter of *Democracy in America* titled "Sources of Poetry Among Democracies," Might we retitl Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (the People)? And do the observations of Tocqueville, in conjunction with Hindu theology, help us better understand the sequence of the poem's actual titles: 1855: no title (the ineffable *brahman*); 1856: "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" (the representative democrat); 1860: "Walt Whitman" (the Self)? The poem's true title, the 1881 "Song of Myself" (cp. Bhagavad Gita, Song of the Lord) then makes explicit what had earlier been merely implicit. This is the song of the *atman*, through which we know all, the *brahman*, a doctrine expressed in the Brihadaranayaka Upanisad (I iv, 7) as follows: "Of all these, the self alone is to be realized for one knows all these through it." Likewise in the Tantras, where the Self, called "the witness of all," is seen as pervading everything (II , 46-48): "All gods and goddesses — nay, the whole universe from Brahma to a blade of grass — are his forms. "From the god to his creation, from Whitman to his Leaves of Grass.

Not only the terms themselves — *freedom, equality, brotherhood*, but their sequence, is instructive. The great revolutions — of 1776, of 1789, of 1905, of 1949 — are principally *political*. They begin with the need for freedom from tyranny. The Declaration of Independence iterates the doctrine of equality, the basis of subsequent *social* revolutions, accomplished in the manumission of slaves, women's suffrage, the extension of civil rights into every aspect of life. The third revolution is the most radical yet. It may eventuate in the realization of universal brotherhood but is directed by a more profound egalitarianism, one neither political nor social but cosmic. All things are equal, it says. All people, it says, are of equal value. It finds noxious the very notion of hierarchy. It is this revolution that prompts the student to say, to his teacher: "That is your opinion. My opinion is different" (meaning equally valid). Though Whitman celebrates the political revolution, and participates in the social, it is our third revolution that he passionately advocates ("He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher"). The principal prose text is "Democratic Vistas."

Asked what Aeneas believes in, the American student says "freedom." Asked "What is democracy?" "Equal opportunity," he replies. "We are the World," says the Chinese student of the popu-

lar song of brotherhood, "that is a Chinese idea" (four seas one family). From the Vedic Seers on, Indian poetics stress *rasa*, emotion. The great Hindu poems are religious. We are dealing here, as Adams understood, in these popular conceptions of democracy, not with ideas but poetic emotions, not with emotions but religious beliefs. These beliefs inform "Democratic Vistas," their irrational content and illogical exposition rendering Whitman's text difficult of explanation. "I shall use the words America and democracy," he begins, "as convertible terms." Unlike Montesquieu and Locke, who address the problem of the body politic, unlike Jefferson and Madison, who create a national social polity, Whitman universalizes democracy and so transforms it into something else. "The problem of humanity all over the civilized world," he says, "is social and religious." The solution to the problem, he claims, is democracy. His view has become the American faith. But what does Whitman — and what do we — mean by democracy?

Whitman means many things. First, he means *individualism*, thereby grossly reducing democracy's complex ideologies and manifestations to Emerson's "infinite of the private man." "The ripeness of Religion," says Whitman, "is doubtless to be looked for in this field of individuality." By democracy he also means freedom, not that freedom from political tyranny spoken of in The Declaration but rather the modern doctrine of one's freedom to realize oneself, to realize, for that matter, anything desirable (cp., for example, the cant phrase "freedom from poverty"). "The doctrine," says Whitman, "that man, properly train'd in sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law . . . unto himself . . . *this* . . . is the only scheme worth working from."

Turning then from individualist to collective democracy, Whitman recommends as the greatest "lesson" Lincoln's "The government of the people, by the people, for the people." Here by democracy he means not the carefully balanced representative mechanism designed by those conservative founding fathers but a liberal mid-nineteenth-century *populism*. But, he adds, "Democracy too is law," referring again not to the body of adjudicated precedent, nor to the Constitution with its political and social rights, but rather to "the unshakable order of the universe," the "superior law," "not alone that of physical force," but "that of the spirit." "Would you have in yourself the divine, vast, general law?" he asks. "Then merge yourself in it." Again, not a political, not a social, but a religious doctrine, heavily indebted, as elsewhere, to Hindu theology.

Addressing the "purpose" of democracy — an interesting topic, implying as it does democra-

cy's *dynamism*, Whitman is also of several minds: "The purpose is not altogether direct; perhaps it is more indirect," he says. We should not, that is, limit the formulations of democratic purpose to the straightforward language of political and social thinkers. "For it is not that democracy is of exhaustive account, in itself," he continues. "Perhaps, indeed, it is (like nature,) of no account in itself," that is, undefinable. To which he appends an even more fanciful figure: its "end," he says, "may be the forming of a full-grown man or woman." Democracy is to rival the God of Genesis. Or, in another Miltonic trope: "to justify God, his divine aggregate, the People" (not, we might note, the American people, but the people of the world). For democracy's "most alluring record," — its highest justification, says Whitman, is that it "alone can bind . . . all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family," though again into a mystical, not literal, brotherhood. "At the core of democracy," Whitman himself concludes, "is the religious element."

Democracy for the poet, then, is religion. But what does Whitman understand by religion? Certainly not the Christian faith, though one whose individualism and sense of mission Christianity feeds. "Religion, although casually arrested, and after a fashion, preserv'd in the churches and creeds, does not depend at all upon them." This universal religion of the spirit is instead "a part of the identified soul," which is to say, the *parmatman* as we find it embodied in the world. "Bibles may convey, and priests expound," Whitman continues, "but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one's isolated Self" — the *atman* — "to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach divine levels, and commune with the unutterable," that is, with *brahman*. How, though, are we to identify this Self, this Soul, its activity leaving no trace? By attending, says Whitman, to the divine literatus. For, says the poet, concluding his account of democracy, "This SOUL — its other name, in these Vistas, is LITERATURE." For Whitman democracy is religion, religion, literature. Democracy, then, must be literature.

Which all brings us to that second major topic of the prose, the democratic poet. He, Whitman argues, is not only the exponent of the new democratic religion but its creator too, for "a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance,) of American democracy." Without its poet, democracy fails, as without democracy so does the American poet. We will here conflate what Whitman says in the Vistas with what he

has already said in the 1855 Preface.

There, we recall, despite protest to the contrary, Whitman had devoted much of his energy to dismissing the past. "The poems distilled from other poems will probably pass away," he had somewhat rashly predicted in his final paragraph. So much for Vergil, Dante, Milton; so much too for Homer and Vyasa. The expression of the American poet was to be "transcendent and new, "not direct or descriptive or epic." In "Democratic Vistas" (1871) Whitman concludes that "There can be no complete or epical presentation of democracy in the aggregate, or anything like it, at this day." Thus he dismisses not only the past but the present. Then, in the 1872 Preface, he speaks of "an impetus" that has urged him "to an utterance, or attempt at utterance, of . . . an epic of Democracy." The ambiguity of the latter phrase, a reprise of his 1855 statement, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (itself an echo of Emerson's "America is a poem in our eyes"), is deliberate. In a world where democracy is literature, history supplants poetry, a dangerous trend for the democratic epic poet. Falling into line, Whitman in the Vistas takes the further step of reducing the canon of democratic literature to "The Declaration of Independence and . . . The Federal Constitution." If in the process, however, he seems to withdraw authority from his own project, not so. By moving forward into an indefinite future the realization of democracy (its "history," we remember him saying, "yet to be enacted"), he has likewise pushed the realization of his own project forward and therefore out of reach of the critic. He has, in other words, become authority itself. "How long it takes," he says slyly, "to make this American World see that it is, in itself, the final authority and reliance!" Yet, by making of himself the authority on democracy, has Whitman not contradicted democratic principles? So it would seem. "How much," exclaims the poet of democracy, entangled in his own contradictions, "is still to be disentangled, freed!"

At the heart of Whitman lies another paradox. This poet of the democratic future has chosen as his spiritual authority the traditions of the most ancient past. What, we must ask, is the relationship between those Hindu beliefs and democratic ideals that Whitman both expounds in his prose and embodies in his verse? Before we turn to examine the poetry let us consider some general parallels.

Above all, both doctrines are idealistic. Freedom, equality and brotherhood, as newly

construed by the mid-nineteenth century, all represent, practically speaking, unattainable goals. Likewise, that spiritual perfection recommended by Upanishadic, Sankhya, and Buddhist doctrines, is for most an ideal, not a reality. All three principal democratic ideals, moreover, have their equivalents in Indian thought and practice. *Moksha*, the principle of release from *sansara*, the round of worldly suffering, corresponds to the ideal of *freedom*, the appetite for both perpetually renewed by the world's constraints. *Nirvana*, which portends a world of dissolved distinctions — between self and other, right and wrong, this and that — corresponds to the ideal of *equality*. As Krishna tells us (Bhagavad Gita V, xviii), the aspirant must "see with an equal eye the learned and the modest Brahmin, the cow, the elephant, the dog, the outcast." At its furthest reaches the Sankhya doctrine asserts the equality of man and God (of *atman* and *parmatman*). "Nothing," as Whitman had said, "not even God, is greater than one's self is." *Bhakti yoga*, which represents God as father, brother and friend — the last term suggesting Whitman's "friendliness," one of the democratic virtues listed at the close of the 1855 Preface, is parallel with *brotherhood*. *Bhakti's* doctrine of love, furthermore, adumbrates the spiritual dimension of Whitman's own "amateness."

In terms of those expanded mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of democracy, observable in Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau (as well as more generally), Hindu thought might be said to promote *individualism*, i. e., the celebration, even deification of the self. The terms of the Sankhya philosophy, as embodied in the Gita, are highly moral: by achieving self-knowledge one may realize tremendous powers for good within oneself. Whitman reflects this doctrine too, as when he says, elliptically, "The supernatural of no account, myself waiting my time to be one of the supremes, / The day getting ready for me when I shall do as much good as the best, and be as prodigious." The principle of self-reliance, again shared with Emerson and Thoreau, has both Hindu roots (*svayam nirbhar*) and democratic manifestations. In philosophical terms, Sankhya doctrine maintains that truth is self-proven (*svasidh*) and to the Soul self-evident. In Whitman's language, "Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof." Finally, that dynamism which we have identified as characterizing latter-day notions of democracy has its counterpart too in the Gita's theory of transmigratory existence. "Myself moving forward then and now and forever," in Whitman's rendering. Only his *populism* is missing from Hindu doctrine.

To explore further these parallels and, where possible, locate their nexus, we turn now to

four poems: "Song of Myself," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "The Sleepers" and "Passage to India."

"Night Poem," the 1855 title of the third of these, retitled in 1870 "The Sleepers," suggests that Whitman was pairing this work with that untitled poem of "the rich running day," later titled "Song of Myself," which so premeditatedly introduces us to the poet's vision. "I celebrate myself," reads the latter's first line in 1855, "I stop some where waiting for you," its last. The relation not only of first and last lines but of first and last words within those lines is intentional ("myself" closely translates *atman*, the Sanscrit reflexive). Study of the opening and closing lines of the other poems of 1855 confirms our sense of artful design. "The Sleepers," for example, begins, "I wander all night in my vision," referring us to that democratic vision which precedes the poetry ("Speech," Whitman had said in his first poem, "is the twin of my vision").

Between day and night is dusk, the time at which "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" has its natural setting (commuters returning home from Manhattan). Between the publication of the 1855 edition, which fully embodies the Hindu thought Whitman for seven years had sedulously studied, and the 1856 edition, in which "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" first appeared, Whitman's father died. Thus this poem of passage across water (it begins with "Flood-tide" and ends with "soul") represents other rites of passage, perhaps recapitulating as well the historical passage from Hindu to Buddhist thought. Taken together, the poems of day, dusk and night — "Song of Myself," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and "The Sleepers," to arrange them in the order of the deathbed edition (1891-92), whose text we will use — form a trilogy, whose first and last parts begin with "I" and end with "you," and whose last line reads, "I will duly pass the day O my mother, and duly return to you. The "mother" is the mother of all things.

The motif of outward voyage and return, which plays upon larger patterns of natural occurrence, constitutes of course a fundamental epic structure not limited to the Western tradition but a notable component thereof, where circular voyages vie with open-ended ones as though in a contest to determine which is the more appropriate figure for life itself. Thus Odysseus returns home but Aeneas voyages outward to found a new home; Don Quixote comically tropes the Homeric pattern, as Ahab, tragically, the Vergilian. Both directions of heroic movement owe something no doubt to the sun's course, which in one sense begins in the East and ends in the West,

in another sense voyages outward and returns.

Whitman's work partakes of both traditions, as his title "Passage to India" suggests, but in the four canonical poems under scrutiny the pattern of outward voyage and return predominates. Thus the "Song of Myself" persona returns to the earth that has borne him; the Brooklyn commuter, to Brooklyn; "The Sleepers"'s European immigrant, in his dream, to his native land. Only "Passage to India" exhorts us to sail farther, though that course of action, as Magellan's servant Henriquez first demonstrated, eventually leads us homeward.

Whitman's poems, however, are not epics and not entirely western. "Song of Myself," though I have called it an epyllion, may owe more structurally to those episodic anthologies, the Ramayana and Mahabhartta, that Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman had, along with other religious, poetic and philosophical texts from the Orient, so enthusiastically assimilated. The fundamental motif in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" owes more to a central Buddhist metaphor — the passage from this shore to that (from *sansara* to *nirvana*) — than to any western figure. Likewise, "The Sleepers," in its reversals of westward progress, its double motifs ("The homeward bound and the outward bound"), its continental linkages ("The Asiatic and African are hand in hand, the European and American are hand in hand") is not traditionally western. That his general penchant was for Asia, not for Europe, is made clear by Whitman's acknowledgement of the Occidental's general debt to the Orient, in religion (to "those autochthonic bequests of Asia," "the Hebrew Bible, the mighty Hindu epics"), in poetry (to "the Iliad . . . certainly of Asiatic genesis"), in thought ("Probably both the Druids and Pythagoras drew their philosophy from the same source . . . the Indus or the Nile?"). "An oriental origin to all," he says in summary, his examples helping us to see what he means by "oriental."

That Whitman is working in the form of a trilogy may have to do with his trinitarian penchant. It is not the Christian configuration so much as the Romantic — Man, Nature and God — that attracts him, as he himself suggests in "Carlyle from the American Point of View." "The most profound theme," he says,

that can occupy the mind of man . . . is doubtless involved in the query: What is the fusing explanation and tie — what the relation between the (radical democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit &. on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in space and time, on the other side?

"Song of Myself" takes up the radical democratic Me, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the conservative Not Me, "The Sleepers" exploring "the other side," not just the nighttime realm of sleep but that which lies behind human identity and nature. But the trilogy may also owe something to the triadic structure of Hindu doctrine, divinity and cosmology. For example, *sukarma*, the action of good deeds, describes "Song of Myself"; *vikarma*, the action of ill deeds, a central concern of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"; *akarma*, the neutral bodily functions (among which, sleep), the world of "The Sleepers." Likewise Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, or the cosmic cord of the Upanishads, with its strands of white, red and black, suggest themselves as parallel.

Others have dealt with the element of Hindu doctrine in "Song of Myself." Rather than rehearse these points, let us instead return to our principal theme, the democratic element. The central text is section 17:

These are really the thoughts (1) of all men (2) in all ages and lands,
 (3) they are not original with me,
 (4) If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
 (5) If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
 (6) If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.
 This is (7) the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
 This is (8) the common air that bathes the globe.

In summary, then, democracy according to Whitman is (1) universal, (2) eternal, (3) dependent upon no authority, (4) consensual, (5) both mysterious and explanatory, (6) immediate, (7) natural, and (8) essential. By "the thoughts of all men" he of course is also referring to his own poetry, but then democracy, as we have understood, is literature. If we do not normally think of literature as universal, dependent upon no authority, consensual, or natural, this, we recall, is democratic literature. Moreover, "Song of Myself" embodies that universal, natural religious doctrine of consensual democracy. But what of those specific ideals — freedom, equality, brotherhood — as they manifest themselves in the poem?

The greatest *freedom*, for Whitman, is the freedom to be oneself (the last word a literal translation of *atman*). Here the poet frees us from any and all other obligations, religious, cultural and philosophical. "Song of Myself" celebrates the freedom achieved in the political revolution, and it promotes those liberations of the ongoing social revolution, but at its core is the celebration of personal experience. "Not I, not any one else can travel the road for you, / You must

travel it for yourself." How we feel about these lines may determine how we feel about Whitman's work, about democratic literature, even about democracy itself.

Generally speaking, Whitman's democratic bias leads him away from Wordsworth's egotistical mode and toward a more compassionate humanism. Common sense, along with common experience, give to his work what is all too frequently lacking in Blake or Milton. But is experience, we must ask, the only basis for literature? "You must travel the road for yourself," says Whitman, but who built the road? Nor does experience begin and end with the individual. The traveller who precedes us on the road, like the one who follows, can tell us of his travels, which then become a part of our experience. "Not any one else can travel that road for you." Which road? There are many roads to travel. How choose among them? Whitman has chosen, has constructed, his road, and tells us that we must take it. But are we not also free to choose, or build, another? A wiser than Whitman once asked if the road itself existed.

Freedom in "Song of Myself," however, is not nearly so central a theme as equality, whose political aspect in turn is less central than its social and religious aspects. Here Christian compassion and Hindu cosmology prove more important factors in Whitman's doctrine than democratic theory. The view of "the wicked" as "just the same as the righteous" has its parallel in much religious thought, but Whitman's equalizing principle of sympathy seems Christian in origin. His "Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same" promotes social equality, though Whitman's meaning verges toward the religious (we are all equal in the eyes of God). "Out of the dimness opposite equals advance," he says, sounding political or social to the modern ear, in fact echoing the religious *Tao*. "Always," he continues, substance and increase, always sex," the line now introducing a Hindu element. "Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life."

The so-called "catalogues," principally the longer sections 15, 16 and 33, but including as well other passages of one-line montage, illustrate *equality*, but they also express *brotherhood* ("all the men ever born are also my brothers," says the poet, temporally enlarging the doctrine). These sections, as their misnomer suggests, have been little understood, principally because their social has been allowed to obscure their religious dimension. True, Whitman treats social occupations as equal (15); but he also treats geographical places as equal (16); the animals, the vegeta-

bles, all details of creation, as equal (33). We have to do here less with the European sense of equality, political or even Christian, than with the Hindu sense of self-realization in the cosmos. That Whitman's rubric for these sections is birth, procreation and death is suggested by the opening of section 8, one of the briefer instances of the mode, where couplets introduce us to a baby asleep in its cradle, "the youngster and the red-faced girl," and the suicide sprawled" on the bloody floor of the bedroom." The remainder of the section, followed by those mentioned, then releases upon us the perpetual cornucopia of reality, interweaving among egalitarian juxtapositions images of natural *difference* (the sequence of the seasons, in 15), of natural *inequality* (the patriarchs, again in 15, who sit "at supper with sons and grandsons and great-grandsons"), of racial, social and political *distinction* (the "hue," "caste," and "rank" of 16). All these inequalities, however, in some sense resolve into equality, as the democratic poet incorporates them into his consciousness. In section 33 Whitman intersperses his so-called "catalogue" with narrative, dramatic incident, thematic rubric, and philosophical generalization so as to represent the equality of all situations. Defining his enterprise in heroic and Christian terms, he allows all history and time to march through him. The last of these sections, 41, universalizes Hesiod, in a Theogony of ancient gods, divine men and animals, in another Works and Days, where the natural world is internalized by the poet, who ends by designating himself "a creator," his "ambushed womb" suggesting rather the *hiranyagarbha*, that generative golden egg of Hindu tradition, than the Biblical Logos.

Some of Whitman's democratizations in "Song of Myself," on the other hand, are neither so ambitious nor so admirable. His patriotism, for example, leads him to a narrow view of history, as reflected in the choice of incidents for his two narrative sections. Likewise his mode of narration there, limited as it is to fictionalized autobiography: "Now I tell what I knew in Texas in my early youth," he opens section 34, which goes on to recount an episode from the history of Manifest Destiny. "Would you hear of an old-time sea-fight?" he begins 35, introducing another nationalistic tale. "List to the yarn, as my grandmother's father the sailor told it to me." Both Whitman's ethno- and egocentric treatment — tendencies that Pound and Eliot will overcorrect for — make of an otherwise cosmopolitan work something more provincial. His democratic reductions of past literature impress us as skillful but also faintly ridiculous, as when Barnardo's thrilling "Who's there?" and Hamlet's plangent "What a piece of a work is a man?" conflate to become

"Who goes there? . . . What is a man anyhow? as when Whitman reduces the elegant pathos of Homer's Odyssean invocation to the *Schwarmerei* of "Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine . . . Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go." When he says of his reader (and poem), "It is you talking just as much as myself," Whitman anticipates much nonsense of the sort answered by Berrigan's riposte in "People of the Future": "while you are reading these poems, remember / you didn't write them, / I did." Whitman's democratic theory of truth, "Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so," has more serious weaknesses. "What is known I strip away," a provocation to ignorance, rather than promoting, threatens the enlightened world that Whitman elsewhere proposes.

If "Song of Myself" expresses the limited attachment (*moha*) advocated by the Gita (which tells us that, even though we should not be attached to the world, we should not hate it; otherwise, we could not play our proper role in it), then "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" advocates the detachment (*nirmoha*) of the Buddhist tradition ("Give up attachment and desire," says the Dhammapada). Whereas the doctrine of "Song of Myself" can be largely understood by reference to that theory whereby the accidents of the self, becoming *atman*, merge with that *brahman* which has unified the phenomenal world, the later poem intermingles a variety of notions from the various Hindu traditions and may finally be read as Whitman's most Buddhistic work. How these elements combine in a democratic text will be our subject here.

The movement of the poem traces the larger pattern, typical of Buddhist thought, from differentiation to non-differentiation back to a higher sense of differentiation. Here "non-differentiation" combines an element of Buddhist selflessness (*anatman*), "myself disintegrated" in Whitman's phrase, with the broader Upanishadic doctrine of one and all (*sarvatmaya*). The latter, elaborated in temporal terms, expresses the corollary that all souls are the same age; in moral terms, that young and old should be equally respected. This accords with Whitman's democratic views. In short, says the doctrine, there is no difference between past, present and future. Hence Whitman's "similitudes of the past and those of the future." Those other souls of the Buddhist cosmos who "enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore," once reborn in the future, will again undertake the passage from *sansara* to *nirvana*. The doctrine resolves differences of place as well as time: "It avails not, time nor place — distance avails not." Whitman's brilliance here

lies in turning the scene of his poem into the future, where he personally addresses us, each and all, as "you":

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
 Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, so I was one of a crowd,
 Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was
 refresh'd,
 Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet
 was hurried . . .

The river gains from its metaphorical Hindu associations with experience. But the sense of far and near, of past, present and future, are all merged in the consciousness of the eternal moment, a psychological feature, the westerner might say, of the *nirvana* toward which Whitman is moving. As in the formal aspects of his work, so in its imagery Whitman absorbs the Hindu esthetic (the flames of the foundry "casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light," an Indian triad of colors). In Hindu deathbed practice, a flame is lit, whose extinction signifies the death of the individual. But the flame is also a characteristic Buddhist metaphor for the self.

In section 5 "curious abrupt questionings stir within" the poet, suggesting the Buddhist theory of knowledge through questioning. (The poem placed after "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in the deathbed edition is "Song of the Answerer.") Also Buddhist are the lines at the close of the section, with their emphasis not upon soul but body: "I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body." Such reasoned self-knowledge stands in contradistinction to the intuitive Hindu process of self-realization.

In section 6 Whitman combines a Buddhist figure — the rebirth of the Buddha in the enlightened reader — with a series of Hindu metaphors in illustration of "what it was to be evil." "I too knitted the old knot of contrariety," he says, averting to the Gita's distinction between *jatil*, knotted, and *sara*, straight, the latter used of a person who thinks and acts in unison, unlike Whitman here, whose wishes, he says, he "dared not speak." "Nor," he introduces the passage, "is it you alone who know what it is to be evil," echoing in his complicity with the reader the Hindu view that when there is an evil everyone participates in it. The list of vices Whitman confesses to incorporates the five emphasized in the Gita: *kama* (lust), *krodha* (anger), *lobh* (greed), *moha* (attachment) and *hath* (pride, vanity or stubbornness, here reflected in the word "lied"). The

animals that allegorize the lower vices — "the wolf, the snake, the hog," might all have been drawn from those animal fables of good advice collected in the *Hitopadesha*. The final lines of the section, with their mention of the role, great or small, "that is what we make it," also incorporate doctrine from the *Gita*, which tells us that we all have roles to play; no matter that your role is inferior, you must play it well.

Section 7 brings to climax the Buddhist movement in the poem. "Who was to know what should come home to me?" asks Whitman, alluding to two Buddhist doctrines, those of the return and of no-knowledge. Thereafter the poem itself returns from non-differentiation to its opposite, perhaps, as suggested earlier, recapitulating the broad historical trend of Indian thought whereby Hinduism returns to supplant Buddhism. At any rate, the doctrinal distinction of section 8 between "my highest name" and "my face" is interpretable in the *Gita*'s terms, *nama* (name) and *rupa* (appearance), used to express the doctrine of soul consciousness: we communicate soul to soul not body to body (though it is through the body that we reach the soul).

The final section 9 (the number itself suggests the avatars of Vishnu, among which the Buddha is sometimes counted as the ninth) reintroduces terms compatible with Buddhist emphases. "Objects than which none else is more lasting" suggests the doctrine of no-permanence, in which transience is paradoxically regarded as the only permanence. At the same time — and in keeping with this syncretistic tradition — the argument includes an urging of the "necessa^ry film" — appearance — "to envelop the soul," thereby reverting to Hindu doctrine, which, as shown earlier, informs the poem's closing lines.

To deal properly with these exotic elements involves a certain antisepsis. The poem's speaker is, after all, a resident of Brooklyn and lover of Manhattan, passing among the objects of his affection. The measure of his greatness is the measure of his human sympathy ("crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!"), the tone of this meditation determined by the prediction of his death, an event never literally referred to. The cast of the poem's imagery is chiaroscuro, as in the image of seagulls — "how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow," its visual effects reminiscent of the work of Winslow Homer, Whitman's contemporary, but not at all of oriental painting. The poet's projection of nostalgia into the future ("you . . . are more in my meditations than

you might suppose"), and then back into the present ("I loved well those cities . . .") may be a tour de force, but we must bear in mind that all is not rhetoric. When Whitman speaks of "others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them," his words pull the reader up short. And not simply with the truth that we register as Tu Fu and Li Po congratulate themselves in the knowledge that we will be reading them a thousand years thence. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," though Romantic, is also romantic in the larger sense — of expressing nostalgia for life in the midst of its being led. It is this, rather than its doctrinal features, that places it among the world's great lyric poems.

We turn now to our third major poem. I have suggested analogies between Whitman's trilogy and various trinities of Hindu myth and western thought. If we take Man as the subject of "Song of Myself" and Nature as the object of meditation in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," then "The Sleepers" is preeminently the poem of God. If we do not immediately recognize the divinity, it may be that we are thinking in western rather than Hindu terms. For just as "Song of Myself" has at its heart the creative Brahma, and "Crossing Brooklyn," the solicitous Vishnu, so "The Sleepers" embodies Shiva. Having dealt successively with democratic theory and philosophical doctrines in the first two poems, we now turn to the question of Whitman's use of myth.

Among the earliest deities of the Vedic period, preceding by eons the synthetic Hindu divinities just mentioned, are Indra and Varuna, the solar and lunar dyad, maintainers of the universal order (*rita*). Indra, an identity that Whitman assumes in "Song of Myself," like the sun, shines during the day. Like the democratic poet, he presides over friendship and ratifies contracts (democracy's ultimate basis is in law). Varuna, by contrast, presides over the night, nothing, it is said, escaping him. He judges all equally by peering into the natures of men as they sleep. He is omnipresent, knows the past and the future, is unequalled in authority. Varuna, in short, describes the persona of "The Sleepers," from whom, says Whitman of himself, they can hide nothing, "and would not if they could." Stepping, like Vishnu (another early deity), "with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly," the poet bends "with open eyes" over their "shut eyes," "pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping."

Myth, in the poem as in mythology itself, is multi-layered. The later Shiva, anticipated in the Vedas but only elaborated in the Mahabharata, figures too in "The Sleepers"'s subliminal

mythology ("I am a dance," says Whitman). Though also a god of fecundity and creation, he is principally the god of destruction (the two, however, interlinked in the Hindu vision). An episode of the great epic recounts his destruction of the triple city of the universe — heaven, sky and earth, the latter two having been propped apart in the earlier Indian creation myths.

Likewise Whitman, in his poem, collapses what had earlier been distinguished. Shiva, in the myth, then causes those pairs, differentiated and named at the time of creation, to unite, thereby dissolving their separate identities. It is thus that he again produces Chaos, that original state which in most myths precedes creation. Likewise Whitman, having joined his opposites, moves behind them to their origins:

Now I pierce the darkness, new beings appear,
The earth recedes from me into the night,
I saw that it was beautiful, and I see that what is not the earth is beautiful.

As the poet himself had said of Emerson, "He pierces the crust that envelops the secrets of life." But in piercing the darkness he arrives at night, which "pervades" and "infolds" both "the new-born emerging from the gates, and the dying emerging from the gates." What is this night? The text that stands in need of explication is the cosmic love sonnet that concludes section 1:

I am she who adorn'd herself and folded her hair expectantly,
My truant lover has come, and it is dark.

Double yourself and receive me darkness
Receive me and my lover too, he will not let me go without him.

I roll myself upon you as upon a bed, I resign to the dusk.

He whom I call answers me and takes the place of my lover,
He rises with me silently from the bed.

Darkness, you are gentler than my lover, his flesh was sweaty and panting,
I feel the hot moisture yet that he left me.

My hands are spread forth, I pass them in all directions,
I would sound up the shadowy shore to which you are journeying.

Be careful darkness! already what was it touch'd me?
I thought my lover had gone, else darkness and he are one,
I hear the heart-beat, I follow, I fade away.

Whitman's principal source here is not the Vedic but the early Greek creation myth. Hesiod, we recall, derives Erebus, the dark, from Chaos, in the first differentiation. Night, the second born, then couples with Erebus to produce Ether and Day. But, as in the early Vedic myths, the actors in Whitman's primordial scene remain nameless, the One creating a Second. The "she" of Whitman's text is undoubtedly Hesiod's Night, product of Chaos's second parthenogenic act. "She" now awaits her lover, "Erebus, the dark," as Hesiod calls him. "My truant lover has come, and it is dark," says Whitman's figure, who proceeds to transform Erebus into "darkness," thereby preserving the Vedic tradition of obscure original principles. This doubling of Erebus, then, explains the double figures of darkness and lover who dominate the sonnet's octave. The gesture, in the tenth line, of spreading the hands forth and passing them in all directions suggests that Whitman is conflating with the feminine Hesiodic principle the masculine Egyptian principle Ra, god of the sun, whose rays are often represented as hands spread forth. In the final lines the speaker acknowledges the unity of darkness and the lover ("darkness and he are one"), the final fade presumably presaging the dawn of creation.

This fundamentally Greek structure is complemented elsewhere in the poem by motifs that parallel Vedic mythology. Thus the four linked continents — Asia, Africa, Europe and America — mentioned earlier, might be identified with the four parts of the world bodied forth as the limbs of Purusha, that Indian Adam Kadmon who also figures in the creation myths. More generally, the underworld aspect of Whitman's scene corresponds to Indian conceptions: in the Vedic Hell, the kingdom of Yama had represented a paradise for the good; in the Hell of the Puranas, a purgatory for the wicked. Whitman — in his characteristically democratic gesture — includes the not-so-virtuous side by side with the virtuous ("I swear they are averaged now," he says). Even more generally Hindu, however, is the sense we have in Whitman of a world which the gods maintain without having instituted. As he says in "Song of Myself," "I do not talk of the beginning or the end, / There was never any more inception than there is now." By thus balancing his allusions to the Greek and Vedic creation myths with this steady-state perspective the poet reinforces the non-sequential, non-hierarchical, non-ethnocentric tendencies that we have identified as so important to his democratic stance.

As in "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," so in "The Sleepers" the democratic

and the Hindu elements blend into one another. Whitman's "journeymen divine," though American craftsmen, suggest the Vedic half-gods (what later generations viewed as divine beings were, in their time, says the Hindu, merely men). Due to the mythic ambiance here, American history is more successfully universalized than it had been in "Song of Myself." In section 4 the ship heading helplessly on, though it may suggest a premonition in 1855 of that impending national tragedy, The Civil War, remains generalized. In section 5 Whitman successfully democratizes Homeric motifs by transuming the figure of Priam in Washington. In the mythic scene of section 6, the red squaw — of Asiatic origins — visits Whitman's mother, thus paired with the *pater patriae* of the preceding section, in a scene which successfully renders the Edenic America. Elsewhere, Hesiod himself is democratized in Whitman's transmogrifications of Hypnos and Thanatos into sleep and peace, that latter universal modern desideratum replacing the classical equalizer, death. Under the protection of sleep's mythic spell Whitman restores a dreamlike hierarchy, one in which the scholar kisses the teacher and the master salutes the slave, only to balance it out with reciprocal, egalitarian gestures.

In "Poetry To-day in America — Shakspeare — the Future" (1881) Whitman quotes approvingly Sainte-Beuve's distinction of 1866 between the poet of "perfect" — we might translate *accomplished* — "work," and the poet "who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your own turn." This early characterization of modern poetry by itself proves the critic's stature. In one sense its latter terms define the whole Whitman project, in another more specific sense the enveloping moves that Whitman makes in the major poem of 1871. And yet, ironically, it is that former term, *accomplished*, that best characterizes "Passage to India." This summative poem, like works of the later Stevens, may seem abstractly orotund, until its poetic is understood.

"Singing my days," reads the first, apparently naked, line. "Singing the great achievements of the present," the poet continues, as though directly affronting the reader's sense of epic propriety. Upon reflection, however, we realize that "my days" are our days, the singing a continuing activity, the invocation both "feudal," as Whitman might say, and democratic. Just as we have heard him out on the splendors of technology, suddenly, at the stanza's end, the poet turns, in his hopelessly flat apostrophe, to "The Past! the Past! the Past!" Is this but more democratic reduction, such as we have seen in Whitman's travesties of lines from Homer and Shakespeare?

In one sense the poem merely reworks familiar arguments; and yet its central subject — "the Past" — is surely new. This is the juncture of past and future like it or not, that the theory has predicted. "O you temples fairer than lilies pour'd over by the rising sun." "The mighty imagination," in Stevens's phrase "triumphs" over nature, imagination now enlarged to embrace precisely those high cultural and religious traditions hitherto so much maligned. Whitman, in short, has made of the arch-enemy of democracy — tradition — the subliminal hero of this Miltonic ode. Having done with day, dusk and night, he turns to the fourth body of Brahma, the dawn, including in its hopeful light what he had earlier omitted.

Like his incorporation of Victorian diction, Whitman's marriage of Capitalism and Christianity ("not for trade or transportation only, / But in God's name") strikes the modern liberal reader as extinguishing, not kindling, that light. But for Whitman these features merely indicate a desirable popularization of his work. At 52 he is not, at any rate, in conservative dotage but rather profound consolidation, having mastered a skillful duplicity whereby, for example, in the poem that precedes this one ("Proud Music of the Storm") he can rehearse the repertoire of grand opera only to dismiss it. Thus he has his cake and eats it too. In "Prayer of Columbus," the poem that follows ours, he lets Tennyson loose on a figure who to the popular ear may have seemed memorialized but who to the more attentive reader appears limned as a kind of degenerate Ulysses. Such practice may not be to everyone's taste, but a deliberate ambiguity is clearly what Whitman is up to.

The question he is raising might be put more sympathetically: how within democracy can the older traditions be maintained? The answer: by an Odyssean cunning. By speaking openly but disguising one's intentions. By denying the older traditions but embodying them. These procedures may grow out of Whitman's modulation from the early canonical mode, in which democracy is promoted over culture, to that middle, essayistic mode of the "Song," which reflect the popular values of oratory, hymnody and opera, on to the new mixed genre of the work before us, where cultural motifs from the history of civilization shape the exposition of ideas. It is this new genre itself — Whitman's unacknowledged legacy to Pound — that makes the reader uncomfortable. More uncomfortable, though, than the mere reader of poetry, is the democratic apostle who, in place of Whitman's early native and naive vision finds an amalgamation of Professor Longfellow's Euro-

pean reading lists into a work of democratic idealism. "Lands found and nations born," says Whitman, the former signifying rediscovery of the past, the latter, further extensions of the new ideology.

Our specific subject here is Whitman's handling of the epic tradition. We could without difficulty trace its presence through the poem's tropes on Homer ("Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead"), Dante ("Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou . . . frontest God"), and later figures. More to the point is to seek Whitman's true model, one which Sainte-Beuve happens to have mentioned in the passage quoted by Whitman: the Aeneid. For indeed, Whitman is not our Homer, as we have long misled ourselves into thinking — *that* position occupied collectively by the founding fathers. He is instead our Vergil. Like the Roman poet, Whitman assimilates past to present and projects us into the future, offering to the Empire a social, political and cultural model. If Vergil's deliberate effort focuses upon Book VI of the Aeneid, Whitman constructs "Passage to India" with a similar intent.

"Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating," he writes, translating a Biblical subject into modern dactylic hexameter, thus metrically alluding to Vergil, rhetorically, to Milton. "Finally shall come the poet worthy that name," he continues, "The true son of God shall come singing his songs," a figure that collapses Christ with Vergil's "*Augustus Caesar, divi genus*," the offspring of a god. Thus Whitman renders unto us what Vergil has rendered unto Caesar Augustus. The passage of prophecy that follows, moreover, follows closely the model of Vergil's prophecy, one spoken, we recall, by Aeneas' father. Whitman, then, as both father and son — he himself the hero as well as author of his poems — speaks prophetically to his progeny, that is, to you and me.

It is of course Columbus — to whom Whitman next turns — not Caesar, who issues in for us the golden age, the "golden world," as Whitman has it. Like Vergil, who had done so in his Fourth Eclogue, Whitman works here in motifs compatible with Christianity, as he searches out the "Comrade perfect." The Dantesque passage already quoted from concludes with the achievement of "love complete": "the Elder Brother found, / The Younger melts in fondness in his arms," an echo not only of the reunion of Prodigal Son with older brother but of those underworld reunions described by Homer, Vergil and Dante. At the close of the poem, having traced out this

European epic tradition, Whitman, in a generous but prudential gesture, draws in, by allusion, figures from his own contemporary world: Melville ("Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!") Thoreau ("Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?"), and Poe ("Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me, / For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go"). Finally, however, affirming his own exclusive divinity, he exhorts himself and us ("O my brave soul!") — America and the brave new world generally — to "farther farther sail," on into that democratic vision of the poet's own making. This voyage across "the seas of God," though it may require daring, is ultimately safe, conducted as it is under Whitman's benevolent supervision.

Like Vergil, then, the American Poet has humanized the gods and immortalized men, but, unlike Vergil, all within his own divinely capacious person. Like Aeneas, who had voyaged from Asia to Africa to Europe — leaving women behind to do so, Whitman, himself companionless, marries the continents (*his* higher goal). Like Vergil he celebrates the past, present and future of Empire. Each poet effectively dispenses with a burdensome heritage by transforming it for his successors into a difficult but accessible vision, in the process creating a myth that no man can fully believe in, but no man dare gainsay.