

“THE ESSENTIAL ULTIMATE ME”: Whitman’s Achievement in “Passage to India”

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TALKING ABOUT HIS LAST major poem, “Passage to India,” Walt Whitman once remarked, “There’s more of me, the essential ultimate me, in that than in any of the poems.”¹ Yet in the past thirty or forty years a number of Whitman scholars and historians of American poetry, disagreeing with the more positive earlier responses to the poem, have viewed it as less than a complete success. Newton Arvin, Richard Chase, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Hyatt Waggoner have all briefly expressed reservations about it; Edwin Haviland Miller and Arthur Golden have criticized it, rather severely, at greater length.² It has been suggested that this devaluation of the poem may be the result of a shift, beginning in the 1950s, from a history-of-ideas approach to an aesthetic approach to Whitman.³ And certainly insofar as modern critics have failed to give due weight to the nineteenth-century American belief in a connection between the technological and the spiritual—a belief that is central to the poem—the suggestion may be valid.

This belief is reflected in Whitman’s most explicit comment on the poem, made in his letter of 22 April 1870 to Moncure D. Conway:

I send . . . a poem I have written, “Passage to India,” in which I endeavor to celebrate in my own way, the modern engineering masterpieces, the Pacific Railroad & the Suez Canal—in fact the great modern material practical energy & works—& then make of them as heights and apices whereby to reach freest, widest, loftiest spiritual fields.⁴

The notion of such a connection between material and spiritual progress is hardly unique to Whitman. It is expressed, for instance, in an editorial written twenty years earlier by the Transcendentalist reformer W. H. Channing:

How bright is the promise that the day of refreshing from on high draws near. What a triumph of good over evil, advancing with ever swifter, broader sweep, are the coming twenty-five years to witness. . . . On an earth interlinked by railroads, steamboats, telegraphs, into one body, will be manifested that life of Universal Unity, which is the indwelling of God with Man.⁵

The advent of this “Universal Unity” is an idea that Whitman had been trying to express, in various ways and with varying success, since 1855. In “Passage to India” he seems to have found for the first time the occasion and the vehicle to express this idea fully, explicitly, and concretely. The true significance of the engineering achievements celebrated in the poem, he insists, lies in the fact that they promise to bring about a threefold reconcilia-

tion—between the Western and Eastern halves of humankind, between humankind and Nature, and between humankind and God. As we shall see, this threefold reconciliation—never explicitly mentioned by the poem’s critics, perhaps because it is too obvious—is the idea that pervades and informs the poem.

In its opening lines “Passage to India” appears to be an occasional poem written to celebrate the completion of the transcontinental railroad and the Suez Canal in 1869. A third engineering achievement, the Atlantic Cable, is also alluded to but receives only brief mention, probably because it had been completed three years earlier, after its initial but temporary success in 1858. By 1870 it was old news.⁶ Although these engineering achievements appear to be Whitman’s subject, they are soon dropped, and after the third section of the poem they are not mentioned. Whitman then turns his attention to the explorers Vasco da Gama (line 76) and Christopher Columbus (ll. 65–67 and 147–159), both of whom are prominently mentioned in the fourteen-page Lion notebook where Whitman had jotted down his ideas for the poem.

Yet despite Whitman’s emotional identification with Columbus, he appears less interested in these two explorers as individuals than in the whole process of exploration. “The spinal Idea” of the poem, he wrote in the Lion notebook, is “that the divine efforts of heroes, & their ideas faithfully lived up to will finally prevail, and be accomplished however long deferred. . . . Every great problem is *The passage to India*.”⁷ A subsequent entry in the notebook reads: “A main idea is to be that a brave heroic thought or religious idea faithfully pursued, justifies itself in time, not perhaps in its own way but often in grander ways.”⁸ Thus what appears at the outset to be a celebration of recent technological achievements turns out to be, in Whitman’s words, “but freer vent and fuller expression to what, from the first, . . . more or less lurks in my writings, underneath every page, every line, everywhere.”⁹

As the idea of the poem evolved, so did its structure: about a third of its 255 lines may be traced to unpublished poems that Whitman apparently wrote independently but then incorporated into the final version of the poem.¹⁰ In doing so Whitman seems to have achieved a clearer relationship between the structure of “Passage to India” and its central idea than he often did in his major poems. Certainly if one compares the diffuseness of such earlier long poems as “Song of Myself” (52 sections), “Starting from Pausanok” (19 sections), or “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” (20 sections) with the compactness and symmetry of the nine sections of “Passage to India,” it can be argued that Whitman may have discovered something about structuring a long poem.

It is surely no coincidence that a poem concerned with so many groups of three—the three engineering achievements, three classes of geographical and intellectual explorers (the voyagers, scientists and inventors mentioned in line 106); the triad of Time, Space, and Death (line 189); and the threefold

reconciliation already mentioned—should consist of nine sections and that those nine sections should fall into three groups of three, each of which begins with a short introductory section (Sections 1, 4, and 7). Furthermore, each of these three groups deals predominantly, although not exclusively, with a different one of the three reconciliations.

Thus the middle section of the first group, Section 2, deals primarily with the reconciliation, through the means of modern technology, of the Western and Eastern halves of humankind:

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together. (ll. 31-35)

The middle section of the second group, Section 5, deals primarily with the reconciliation of humankind with Nature:

Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them. (ll. 114-115)

And the middle section of the third group, Section 8, deals primarily with the reconciliation of humankind with God:

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,
Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
The Younger melts in fondness in his arms. (ll. 219-223)

A caveat may be needed here: this reading might seem to suggest that Whitman is portraying three separate processes of reconciliation. But what makes for much of the complexity—and, I would argue, for much of the greatness—of the poem is that Whitman is showing that these three kinds of reconciliation are intimately and inextricably interrelated as part of a single process. In other words, the first of them makes the two others not only possible but inevitable. And the three occur not so much sequentially as simultaneously.

Whitman provides the essential clue to this interpretation near the midpoint of the poem, in the last paragraph of Section 5:

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists
and inventors, shall be justified,
All these hearts as of fretted children shall
be sooth'd,

All affection shall be fully responded to, the
 secret shall be told,
 All these separations and gaps shall be taken up
 and hook'd and link'd together,
 The whole earth, this cold impassive, voiceless earth,
 shall be completely justified,
 Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and
 compacted by the true son of God, the poet. . . . (ll. 106–111)

The crux here is the last line quoted. Commentators on the poem have been strangely uninterested in the curious phrase “Trinitas divine.” Despite the adjective “divine,” it should be obvious that Whitman does not have in mind the traditional Christian meaning. The context in no way suggests this meaning, and Whitman’s theological views—insofar as he held any very precisely formulated ones—tended to reflect the unitarianism of the Hicksite Quakers. And in his one explicitly “theological” poem, “Chanting the Square Deific,” published a few years before “Passage to India,” Whitman describes not a three-part deity but a four-part deity. The word “trinitas” is used nowhere else in his writings, and the four uses of the word “trinity”—once in the preface to *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free* (1872), twice in “Patroling Barnegat,” and most memorably in the opening lines of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”—are all clearly secular in meaning.

The two suggestions put forward by one of the severest recent critics of the poem, Arthur Golden, likewise fail to withstand close scrutiny.¹¹ The first is that the three engineering achievements comprise the “Trinitas divine.” But aside from the fact that they are not particularly “divine,” they have obviously not been “accomplish’d . . . by the true son of God, the poet,” but by engineers. The second suggestion, that the threefold group addressed in line 106—“O voyagers, O scientists and inventors”—comprise the “Trinitas divine,” also must be rejected. However “divine” they may be, they too cannot logically be considered as having been “accomplish’d . . . by the true son of God, the poet.”

But if we keep in mind what Whitman believed about the role of the poet as “arbiter of the diverse” (“By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” Section 10) and as “blender, uniter” who reconciles Nature with the Soul of Man (“When the Full-Grown Poet Came”), then it is logical to assume that the threefold reconciliation is the “Trinitas divine” that has been “gloriously accomplish’d and compacted by the true son of God, the poet.” Indeed, Whitman describes this essential function of the poet, much more prosaically, two years later: “I say a modern image-making creation is indispensable to fuse and express the modern political and scientific creation—and then the trinity will be complete.”¹²

Whitman’s reason for seeing these three processes of reconciliation as a true trinity—that is, three entities in one—may be seen if we look at his early

depictions of the implications of the first of them: the reconciliation of the two halves of humankind. Like Emerson, Thoreau, and such less famous Transcendentalists as Samuel Johnson and William B. Greene, Whitman felt the attraction of Eastern thought. In his short poem "Facing West from California's Shores" (1860), he speaks of the migration westward from "the house of maternity" in Asia and says, as a Western man looking across the Pacific:

Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd,
Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)

The same sense of the need of Western humankind to return to its "home" in Asia is expressed in "A Broadway Pageant," an occasional poem prompted by the arrival of Japanese envoys in New York City in 1860:

The sign is reversing, the orb is enclosed,
The ring is circled, the journey is done . . .
Were the children straying westward so long? so wide
the trampling?
Were the precedent dim ages debouching westward from
Paradise so long?
Were the centuries steadily footing it that way, all
the while unknown, for you, for reasons?
They are justified, they are accomplish'd, they shall now be
turned the other way also to travel toward you thence,
They shall now also march obediently eastward for
your sake Libertad. (ll. 70-71; 77-81)

Significantly, the key verbs in line 80—"justified" and "accomplish'd"—reappear later in the Lion notebook, as we have seen, and in lines 110-111 of "Passage to India."

In "Passage to India," as in these two earlier poems, Whitman pictures Western humankind as feeling incomplete. And this sense of incompleteness accompanies the West's most characteristic achievements: its scientific discoveries and technological inventions. Like his contemporaries, Whitman can wax eloquent over the achievements of science; yet he insists that the principal role of science is to prepare "the way for One indescribably grander," since the "supreme and final science is the science of God—what we call science being only its minister."¹³ Thus in "Passage to India," just after his celebration of the West's three technological triumphs, Whitman adds:

Not you alone proud truths of the world,
Not you alone ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables . . .
You too I welcome and fully the same as the rest!
You too with joy I sing. (ll. 18-20; 28-29)

Where the West has turned to the exploitation of natural resources, the East, in Whitman's view, has remained closer to the ultimate source of truth, Nature itself. Hence those of the West must return to their Eastern origins,

To realms of budding bibles . . .
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
Again with fair creation. (ll. 168, 172-174)

In the first part of Section 5 Whitman describes the history of Western humankind as a process of increasing alienation both from its Eastern origins and from Nature:

Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,
Adam and Even appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations . . .
Ah, who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?
Who speak the secret of impassive earth?
Who bind us to it? What is this separate Nature
so unnatural? (ll. 88-90, 93-96)

The "restless explorations"—both geographical and technological—become "justified" as they serve "God's purpose from the first" (line 31) of bringing the two halves of humankind together. And as the two halves of humankind become reconciled the poet can proclaim: "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more" (line 114).

In Whitman's description of the reconciliation of humankind with God, we likewise find echoes of his earlier poems. The line in Section 8 "Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect" (line 200) recalls both a line in the original (1855) version of "Song of Myself," "Our rendezvous is fitly appointed. . . . God will be there and wait till we come," and the final version of that line, "The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there."¹⁴ And despite the intensely personal language of Section 8, the "soul" addressed by Whitman actually seems to be, in the context of the poem, that of the "great composite *democratic individual*, male and female," whose song Whitman proclaimed himself to be singing in *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁵

The final line and a half of Section 8—"the Elder Brother found, / The Younger melts with fondness in his arms"—in view of Whitman's reference

to the divided family of humankind could refer to the reconciliation of the West ("The Younger" brother) with the East ("the Elder Brother"). But in the light of the language of Section 5 of "Song of Myself" – "I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own" – this passage could equally well refer to the reconciliation of humankind with God. The two interpretations are not inconsistent: each reconciliation, as part of a trinity, is simply a different aspect of the same process.

Having thus described what he sees as the glorious destiny of humankind, Whitman, not surprisingly, abandons himself to the ecstasy of the poem's final section. It is this ecstasy, insistently emphasized by the abundant exclamation points, that may make modern critics most uneasy. For when Whitman dons his prophet's robes and makes his oracular pronouncements, some skeptical readers are in danger of recalling the aptness of Amy Lowell's description of him as "a prophet straying in a fog, shouting half-truths with the voice of great trumpets."¹⁶ But Whitman's enthusiasm here may be excusable: he is expressing an idea that for years had been important not only to him but also to many of his contemporaries.

The central idea of "Passage to India," as we have seen, can be easily traced to the Transcendentalists. Emerson, in "The Poet," describes the poet as a "reconciler," and Whitman's threefold reconciliation – "the unity of Man with Man, with Nature, and with God" – is stated explicitly in the first issues of the Transcendentalist periodical *The Harbinger*, published by George Ripley at Brook Farm.¹⁷ An early and not very successful attempt by Whitman to express an idea similar to Ripley's – it was, after all, something of a Transcendentalist commonplace – may be found in "Starting from Paumanok," where he speaks of three large and rather vague abstractions:

My comrade!
For you to share with me two greatneses, and a third
one rising inclusive and more resplendent,
The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness
of Religion. (ll. 131–133)

Because Whitman has found in "Passage to India" a more vivid and precise way of expressing this idea, and because this idea anticipates a central concept in the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, it might be tempting to regard "Passage to India" as a "philosophic" poem.¹⁸ This is a temptation, I think, that it is better to resist. Whitman was never a rigorous or systematic thinker, and he himself says of the poem: "There is no philosophy, consistent or inconsistent, in that poem . . . but the burden of it is evolution – the one thing escaping the other – the unfolding of cosmic purposes."¹⁹ And it is the business of the poet, after all, to give us not "philosophy" but a vision.

The vision expressed in "Passage to India" stems not only from Transcendentalist ideas but also, as Henry Nash Smith has shown, from popular

nineteenth-century American interest in reaching and trading with the nations of Asia.²⁰ Whitman is saying, as Thoreau had said a number of years earlier, that the true significance of American commerce with the peoples of Asia should be seen as spiritual. Like the magnificent last paragraph of the chapter "The Pond in Winter" in *Walden*—a paragraph based on Frederic Tudor's venture in selling New England ice in Calcutta—"Passage to India" is one of the most successful American expressions of this vision. The central idea of the poem may indeed be "a mysticism difficult for the twentieth century to follow"—which could well account for some of the difficulty modern critics may have had with it.²¹ But if we take seriously Whitman's belief that the poem expresses "the essential ultimate me," we may return to it and find in it the powerful expression of an idea that has at least as much value for our age as it had for his.

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NOTES

- 1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1906), 1:156-157.
- 2 See Newton Arvin, *Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 225-226; Richard Chase, *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (New York: Sloan Associates, 1955), pp. 147-148; Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 173; Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 179-180; Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), pp. 210-221; and Arthur Golden, "Passage to Less than India: Structure and Meaning in Whitman's 'Passage to India,'" *PMLA*, 88 (October 1973), 1095-1103.
- 3 Harsharan Singh Ahluwalia, "A Reading of Whitman's 'Passage to India,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 1 (June 1983), 9.
- 4 Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 2: 96-97.
- 5 *The Spirit of the Age*, 2 (27 April 1850), 265.
- 6 See Martin Doudna, "The Atlantic Cable in Whitman's 'Passage to India,'" *Walt Whitman Review*, 23 (March 1977), 50-52.
- 7 Fredson Bowers, "The Earliest Manuscript of Whitman's 'Passage to India' and its Notebook," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 61 (July 1957), 349. Emphasis in the original.
- 8 Bowers, p. 350.
- 9 Walt Whitman, Preface, 1876, to the Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:465.
- 10 Golden, p. 1096.
- 11 Golden, p. 1098.

- 12 Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, 2:461.
- 13 Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, 2:462.
- 14 "Song of Myself," Section 45. The ellipsis in the original line is Whitman's.
- 15 Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, 2:463. Emphasis in the original.
- 16 Amy Lowell, "Walt Whitman and the New Poetry," *Yale Review*, 16 (April 1927), 505.
- 17 Emerson, "The Poet," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 238; the quotation from *The Harbinger* (14 June 1845) is in an editorial reprinted in Perry Miller, ed., *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950; rpt. 1971), p. 471.
- 18 For discussion of parallels between Whitman's thought generally and that of Teilhard de Chardin see Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 196-205, and William L. Moore, "L. of G.'s Purport: Evolution—the Cumulative," in William White, ed., *1980: Leaves of Grass at 125* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), pp. 45-57. A comparison of the parallel passages cited by Moore demonstrates not only the similarity of the two writers' ideas but also which of the two expresses them more vividly and precisely.
- 19 Traubel, 1:156-157.
- 20 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (1950; rpt. Random House, n.d.), pp. 16-51.
- 21 Smith, p. 51.