CHAPTER IV

RELIGIOUS ALIENATION

Whitman believes that religion is a source of inspiration for man torn and tormented by the outrageous and demoralising conditions of life. It inspires man to think originally and creatively to brighten up his personality. It dispels the dark clouds of ignorance hovering over his intellect. It is a quest for the Ultimate Reality. The path of religion is the path of gradual self-effacement, for this alone chastens the heart and prepares it for the realization of the spiritual truth. He believes that religion that goes to eliminate the baser instincts of man and manifest the Divinity within him is surely the greatest of all civilizing forces. It makes man think "how divine he himself is?"1

Whitman believes that institutionalized religion is not religion but ignorance and perversion of religion. It is at the root of all evils. It leads to self-deception. It enervates man and brings about his moral degeneration. It is a pernicious trash. In Recorders Ages Hence, Whitman maintains that in the hands of unilluminated persons "the measureless ocean of love"2 flowing out of religion gets dried up. It throws man "away from one he loved."3 The real religion as it has been taught by the

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 17
2. Ibid., p. 98
3. Ibid.
seers of the world has degenerated into meaningless rituals or bundle of crude dogmas. In *Salut Au Monde* Whitman says:

I see the spots of the successions of priests
on the earth, oracles, sacrifices,
brahmins, sabians, llamas, monks,
muftis, exhorters,
I see where druids walked the groves of Mona,
I see the mistletoe and Vervain
I see the temples of the deaths of the bodies
of Gods, I see the old signifiers.

The poet feels that the country he is living in is not his "true country." He feels that he is living here "banished" from his true homeland. He wishes to "go back" there, to return to "the celestial sphere where every one goes in his turn." In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman says that religion has failed to teach man the lesson of harmony. It does not lead man to higher and higher altitudes far above the brute plane. Man is busy in knitting the "old knot of contrariety." It has made man "vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant." It has given man nothing but "the cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish." It has bred in man evils known as "hates, postponements, meanness, laziness."

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p.129
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
More than anything else, Whitman is the singer and prophet of American democracy. Democracy is his religion. In his opinion, evil flows from tyranny or superstition rather than from human nature. The comparatively free environment in which the Americans live seem to him to be well-suited to the growth of a noble race of people. He decided to sing not of kings or nobles but of the "divine average" of American citizenship, engaged in the homely yet wonderful tasks of every day:

In the labor of engines and trades, and the labor of fields,  
I find the developments,  
And find the eternal meanings....  

Whitman identifies America with the concept of freedom, and in effect writes one continuous song about democracy. In his poems the words America and democracy are used as convertible terms. He expresses the inner spirit of America and its freedom as nobody has ever done before or shall do afterwards. He has no theme other than democracy in all its human applications and universal implications. He does indeed, identify democracy with religion and art, believing them to be but different expressions of the unhampered life of a free people. Democracy, he tells us in Specimen Days (1882), most of all affiliates with the open air, is sunny and hardy and sane only with Nature – just as much as art is. American democracy, in its numerous manifestations,

1. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.18
2. Ibid., p.78
in factories, work-shops, stores, offices, through streets and cities and all their sophisticated life, must be vitalised by regular contact with outdoor light and air, farm-scenes, animals, fields, trees, birds, because otherwise it will certainly dwindle and pale.

Whitman sings about his countrymen in the totality of their lives and doings. Unlike the poets of the past, who wrote about the romance of the heroic, Whitman celebrates, the common-place and the earthy. To him the whole kosmos is beautiful and made of the stuff of poetry. So he sang about the life of every-day Americans, their fields and their follies, their leaders and their lusts, their politics and their politeness, their lunatics and their literates.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of Mechanics .......
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam.
The mason singing ....,
The boatman singing ...., the deck-hand singing....

He itemises every detail, place and name of American life:

Land of coal and iron! land of gold! land of cotton,
sugar, rice!
Land of wheat, beef, pork! land of wool and hemp!
land of apple and the grape:
Land of the pastoral lambs....!
Land of the herd, the garden....!
Land of the eastern Chesapeake!
Land of the Delaware!
Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan....!

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.11
2. Ibid., p.20
In Section 7 of *Song of Myself*, the poet calls himself "'the mate and companion of people',"\(^1\) whom he regards just as "'immortal and fathomless',"\(^2\) as himself. The poet expresses his interest in all kinds of people - "'the man that is proud',"\(^3\) "'the sweet-heart and the old maid',"\(^4\) the "'mothers, and the mothers of mothers'".\(^5\)

In Section 24, he gives a classic expression to his love of democracy in such lines as the following.

> whoever degrades another degrades me\(^6\)

He further says:

> I speak the pass-word primeval,
> I give the sign of democracy,
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.\(^7\)

In the poem called *I Hear It Was Charged Against Me*, he celebrates the institution of "'the dear love of comrades'"\(^8\) which also shows his sense of equality or democracy.

In *Song of the Open Road*, he speaks of the Negro "'with his woolly head, the felon, the diseased, the illiterate person.'"\(^9\)

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1. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.29
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p.43
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.103
9. Ibid., p.118
He further speaks of the "beggar's tramp"\(^1\), the "drunkards' stagger"\(^2\), the "escaped youth"\(^3\), the "fop"\(^4\) etc. In Section 12 of the same poem, he speaks of "sailors of many a ship"\(^5\), walkers of many a mile of land"\(^6\), "observers of cities"\(^7\), "solitary toilers"\(^8\), "dancers at wedding dances"\(^9\), 'tender helpers of children"\(^10\), "soldiers of revolts"\(^11\), and "journeymen"\(^12\) of all kinds. Such catalogues show the writer's all-embracing humanity.

Through Whitman poetry breathes the spirit of charity and tenderness. This charity is almost Christ-like. The following lines from *Song of Myself* may be taken as an example:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men neer and wink to each other.
Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you.\(^13\)

Some consider Whitman's charity to be a mere pose. No doubt he liked to think of himself as a new Messiah, but it would be wrong

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.123
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p.36
to look upon him as a poseur.

Whitman believes that true religion consists in brotherly love and complete equality. This is his great point, and his catalogues show this point best in Section 15 of Song of Myself where he gives us a catalogue containing pictures of the carpenter, the pilot, the farmer, the lunatic, the printer, the wagon-driver, the overseer, etc. The very versification of the lines in this Section represents the author’s concept of a democratic society. The lines march shoulder to shoulder, without any subordination, one to another. They march with a sense at once of individual self-containment, and of being a part of a large company.

There is very little of the Christian doctrine in Whitman’s religious creed. Whitman, like Emerson, rejects Original Sin, the atonement, the special authority of the Christian scriptures. Like Emerson, again, he does not recognise distinctions between natural and regenerate, bad and good, wrong and right, low and high, inferior and superior. He treats everybody on the same footing. No doubt there is such a thing as Christian equality, but the Christian doctrine recognises also a scale of values. There are thrones and dominions, principalities and powers inclusions and exclusions. Excellence cannot exist in a distinctionless world. Whitman’s world is man-centred and certainly not theo-centric. Nobody has carried the apotheosis or glorification of man farther than Whitman.
In his *Song of the Exposition*, Whitman writes not only his own credo, but utters the manifesto of the new generation - especially in these lines:

Come, Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia,
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas',
Odysseus' wanderings,
Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus, ...
For knew a better, fresher, husier sphere, a wide,
untried domain awaits, demands you.¹

From the beginning, however, he is firm in his demand that the immortal soul of man should be subject to no discipline except its own. Hence, there shall be no more formulas, no priests, no prayer; the man of the future shall include all gods and all faiths and be himself greater than any.

It seems probable that only a Christian culture could have produced *Leaves of Grass*. Yet the poem is almost totally without conventional theological terminology. God is an emotional, not a logical, concept and Whitman even does not attempt a definition:

And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God.
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.)
I hear and behold God in every object yet, understand
God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful
than myself.²

¹. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.159
². Ibid., p.71
Leaves of Grass as a whole is the bible of democracy. The problem of democracy is to develop supreme individuals on the one hand and on the other to bind these separate selves into a social union. Leaves of Grass has for its chief aim the stimulation of personality. The purpose of the first poems is to arouse, dilate, expand and greaten the reader. Consequently they radiate personal energy - they are proud, strenuous, joyful, optimistic. The function of the second group of poems is to provide for union. They show the identification of each with all, with Nature, and with God. The first stage of union is in sex - union in the natural. A higher, more spiritual identity, is found in comradeship or union in the spiritual domain. Other forms of union appear in the songs of occupations and in the chants of nature. The war was a war for union: the Drum-Taps inculcate, therefore, identity in nationality. The songs of death and parting declare the fusion of soul and body in a cosmic order. As pride was the key-word of the first group, love becomes the sign of the second series. To sing the Great Ideas, the transcendental union - that, thought whitman, must be the religion of poets.

Whitman's poems originated in unconscious conflicts, and that the poems are responses to those conflicts. Whitman often tried to suppress the pain of those conflicts by inducing catharsis, an experience which gave the illusion that the conflicts had been resolved. At times he went beyond catharsis to express
with remarkable honesty and courage the pain itself. Occasionally he achieved a limited degree of understanding of his internal conflicts. A detailed analysis of four exemplary poems will show that the excellence of Whitman's achievements depends on the fullness with which Whitman can express the originating conflicts. Whitman's poetic intention was to seek a condition of elevated consciousness, which can be compared to Emersonian transcendence and to several kinds of mysticism. It can be compared to the cathartic method of psychological therapy. He experiences a climactic emotional explosion, accompanied by tumultuous insight into the unconscious and by temporary relief from the pain of internal conflicts. In *Song of Myself* Whitman assimilates a good many of his insights, but in subsequent poems assimilation is relatively rare—nor is the quality of those poems dependent on therapeutic assimilation. Most commonly, Whitman stops when he reaches catharsis, and it is this tendency which has probably led many scholars to assume that catharsis is itself the poet's primary goal.

_Clef Poem_¹ is an expression of catharsis built around and implicit but unassimilated insight. Like _As I Ebb'd_ and _Out of the Cradle_ this poem is organized as a search for the "clef

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¹. The poem was first published in 1856 edition but later on Whitman deleted it from all subsequent editions.
of the universe''¹, which the narrator intuits. And as the
organization of Clef Poem is familiar, so the mood at the begin-
nung is also common to Whitman - including the implication that
there are other nights when he is not happy.

In between the first and last stanzas, the narrator
moves from a series of ambiguous questions to the development
of a metaphor which has no explicit relation to the rest of the
poem. Beginning in stanza five with the assertion that he will
''have good housing''² after death, he develops the conceit
according to his present housing. At an unconscious level Whitman
relates the unified world of the womb with the unified ''vast
similitude''³ of the transcendental vision.

The thought of the house apparently leads to a thought
of existence in which there is no conflict with old or young men,
where love is requited:

I am not uneasy but I shall have good housing to myself,
But this is my first - how can I like the rest any better?
Here I grew up - the studs and rafters are grown parts of me.
I am not uneasy but I am to be beloved by young
and old men, and to love them the same.⁴

This in turn leads to a thought of the ''pink nipples of the
breasts of women with whom I shall sleep''.⁵ By means of fantasy

2. Ibid., p.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.101
Whitman seeks to abolish time and return to infantile security. Such fantasy seems intended to compensate for childhood deprivation and exclusion revealed in other poems. Yet there can be no such compensation: time cannot actually be stopped, the poet cannot resume infancy or the womb. He can only assert, in the last two stanzas, a metaphor which extends the womb and cradle into the entire universe:

I suppose I am to be eligible to visit the stars, in my time,
I suppose I shall have myriads of new experiences — and that the experience of this earth will prove only one out of myriads;
But I believe my body and my soul already indicate those experiences,
And I believe I shall find nothing in the stars more majestic and beautiful than I have already found on the earth,
And I believe I have this night a clue through the universes,
And I believe I have this night thought a thought of the clef of eternity. 1

He continues:

A vast similitude interlocks all, All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets, comets, asteroids, All the substances of the same, and all that is spiritual upon the same, All distances of place, however wide, All distances of time — all inanimate forms, All souls — all living bodies, though they be in different worlds, All gnosseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes, All men and women — me also, All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages, All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe or any globe, All lives and deaths — all of past, present, future, This vast similitude spans them, and always has spanned, and shall forever span them. 2

2. Ibid.
In this poem he seems to flee from the insight about a regressive impulse, to seek escape from the anxiety attending that insight by rushing into catharsis.

Whitman's mode of coping with experience - prophetic, passive and dominated by the unconscious, and the other analytic, active and a movement toward consciousness is large indeed. The prophetic mode extends the womb or cradle throughout the world; it seeks to eliminate consciousness and the ego, thereby precluding conscious control over one's self or one's moods. The analytic mode acknowledges the isolation of individuals (forgoing the universal oneness promised by the transcendental vision), and accepts the boundaries between the Me and Not Me. It demands that choices be consciously made and seeks conscious control. Whitman's dilemma, is that he cannot altogether commit himself to either the analytic or the prophetic mode. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.

At the heart of As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life are mutually exclusive assumptions about the nature of identity. Part of Whitman wants to believe that the self is immortal and infinite; but another part knows that the self exists in nature and is, according to all rational evidence, mortal and finite. At times Whitman characterizes his identity as "the eternal self of me"¹, but at other times as "the real Me"². He is

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2. Ibid., p.209
probably not entirely conscious of the opposition implied between these two phrases; nevertheless these two ideas of self remain separate voices in the poem: when the 'eternal self' speaks, it assumes the mystical cloud of unknowing.

The poem begins in a moment of despairing passivity, the poet ebbing, wending the shores he knows, 'held by this electric self'\(^1\) that threatens to get the better of him, and stifle him. He seeks to suppress his despair beneath cathartic ecstasy; the disoriented 'eternal self' leads the narrator to seek transcendental correspondences — 'the old thought of likenesses'\(^2\) and these lead him away from 'the shores I know'\(^3\) to 'the shores I know not'\(^4\). He enters his unconscious, but in the cathartic state he cannot understand what anything means; 'the least thing that belongs to me, or that I see or touch, I know not'\(^5\). So lost is he in his unconscious that he doubts his very identity:

O, baffled, balked, bent to the very earth,
Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
Aware now, that, amid all the blab whose echoes
recoil upon me/I have not once had the least idea who or what I am/
But that before all my insolent poems the real ME
still stands untouched, untold, altogether unreached. 6

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 209
Catharsis, which sometimes leads to ecstasy, here leads to a crisis. He cannot believe that his self is eternal when he finds such deep self-doubt. The appearance of this other sense of self, "the real ME", calls into doubt the honesty of his poems. "The real Me" stands

Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word
I have written or shall write,
Striking me with insults till I fall helpless upon the sand.¹

For him religion consists in discovering the truth about the hidden self. The source of present conflict is in the past, and this source is what he searches for: he must touch and tell that private world of the unconscious, where the past lives in memory.

But his search for the hidden self begins indirectly with a series of disorganized insights: that he understands nothing and perhaps never can; that Nature darts and stings him because he has presumed to sing; that the ocean and land conspire with Nature to render him powerless. These perceptions attest mainly to the confusion of his search. This conflict results from the transcendental view that the rational communication possible through poetry is subordinate to a higher intuitive form of

¹. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.209
knowing. And Nature, which he identifies with the paternal land and the maternal ocean, may not be only external reality but also that which is innate - "the real ME". These confusions apparently lead him to seek some indisputable fact, and he concedes his relation to the "fish-shaped island";¹ "What is yours is mine, my father"². From his father he seeks the intimate embrace denied to him by the ocean, and also "the secret of the murmuring";³ he envies. This secret is several things: it is the ebb and flow of the waves - corresponding to the ebb and flow of his despair and ecstasy; it is primal sexual knowledge - the sounds of parental lovers; and it is those immutable facts of nature he desperately wants to escape - conception and death. Whitman's poems repeatedly reveal his unconscious connection of identity to the continuity of time and the limitations of choice: that is, identity implies man's mortality, the ever-narrowing potential for his choices and the inescapable demands of his sexuality. To escape these limitations Whitman revels in self-contradiction. But it is mainly himself he seeks to escape from.

At this point in As I Ebb'd all Whitman can do is try to survive the ebb and wait for the flow to return. But the self-doubt discovered in stanzas four and five makes this presently impossible and leaves him vulnerable to apparitions

¹ Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p.209
² Ibid.
³ Ibid., p.210
of chaos. He feels himself disintegrated by the conflicting roles he has tried to play; in the last stanza his solvus are now "little corpses"1 and he thinks of himself as having been stillborn. Incapable of relief in catharsis and unable consciously to accept mortality, Whitman sees no way out of the dilemma. His ego warns of facts he cannot cope with. "The storm, the long clam, the darkness, the swell"2 lead not to life but to "Musing, pondering, a breath, a briny tear, a dab of liquid or soil"3. And until he becomes that final "dab of liquid or soil" he can only passively lament his mortality.

The pattern of conflicts in this poem prevents Whitman from obtaining the "secret of the murmuring" he envies and leads him only to a sense of his passive impotence. The elemental conflict symbolically pits the poet against the wind, sea, and land; they symbolize his parents and he becomes the child he once was, excluded by parental conflicts, lost, ebbing, stifled, one of the castaways the sea endlessly cries for. In Whitman the value system seems overtly zealous, the little policeman arresting by means of anxiety and fear. This police riot goes on unconsciously while the ego, concerned only with survival, must decide which expressions from the id and super ego it can safely permit. When Whitman says that Creeds and schools are

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
in abeyance, it is his ego acknowledging the super ego's excessive zeal for law and order. But usually in Whitman it is only in moments of catharsis that Nature is permitted to speak with original energy; in between those moments Whitman's characteristic pose is witnessing and waiting, the conscious ego stands paralyzed, incapable either of making judgments or of letting Nature speak out. The secret of the murmuring eludes him because he fears that his ego might be weakened if he acknowledges the drives beneath the secret murmuring. This indicates his final recognition that Nature is not an external force but is within; or Whitman finds only the revelation of his passivity.

In *A Child went Forth* what is recalled is the child's first discoveries of a world beyond himself in his barnyard; "the old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse of the tavern whence he had lately risen"; staying at home while the schoolmistress and children passed him by. In stanza four there is a radical change of tone as Whitman re-creates the image of his own conception. The feelings attending this image lead to memories of his mother's mildness, his father's harshness, and his own "yearning and swelling heart". Beginning with stanza four the poet begins to react to long-dormant anxieties; these reactions prove so powerful that a period of general disorientation ensues. At this point all he can do is retreat from the

1. Printed in PMLA, p.105
2. Ibid.
sources of confusion.

His doubts and confusions are not allayed by his final assertion of faith, and he does not learn anything about his identity.

The question behind Whitman's search is: Who and what am I? The first stanza theorizes that he is a composite of all his experience: He, therefore, searches for things forgotten, beginning by re-enacting the Narcissus myth. We know that narcissism characterizes a child's earliest relations with the external world, objects being loved as if they were part of the child himself. One of the ego's functions is to test reality, to distinguish between that which exists externally and that which is projected onto the environment from one's unconscious. As the ego develops, one becomes able to react emotionally to external phenomena knowing that the objects are not part of one's self. But in this poem the objects which 'became part of' the child are presented as he saw them before their incorporation, The flowers, the infant animals, the fish, the drunkard, the schoolchildren are presented in the tone characteristic of Whitman's catalogues, with no evident evaluation or response on the poet's part. Whitman's celebrated tolerance seems to be evidence of lingering childhood narcissism that prevents him from attaching emotional energy to many of the

images that fill his memory. The extreme simplification of the following portraits indicates that a high degree of infantile hostility still lingers in the adult whitman's unconscious sense of his relation to his parents. Whitman can then only retreat from the anxiety threatened by these images. The memory of the "family usages\(^1\) leads to the memory of his "yearning and swelling heart\(^2\)\), and then to the "affection that will not be gainsayed\(^3\). This latter seems to refer to the urgency with which oedipal feelings present themselves, and, willing or not,

His own parents... he that had propelled the father-stuff at night, and fathered him... and she that conceived him in her womb and birthed him... they gave this child more of themselves than that, They gave him afterward everyday..... they and of them became part of him.\(^4\)

The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the supper table.
The mother with mild words... clean her cap and gown... a wholesome odor falling off her person and clothes as she walks by: The father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, angered, unjust, The blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure, The family usages, the language, the company the furniture.... the yearning and swelling heart\(^5\)

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
Whitman blocks the whole matter by interposing a cloud of unknowing:

*** The sense of what is real.... the thought if after all it should prove unreal,
The doubts of daytime and the doubts of night-time... the curious whether and how,
Whether that which appears to is so.... Or is it all flashes and specks?¹

Whitman now retreats from the causes of his disorientation; the rest of the poem is presented from a point of view which moves steadily upward among the clouds and above the human landscape. Disembodiment appears the best defense against continuing oedipal conflicts. But the assertion of faith at the end seems to ring rather hollow and to promise very little resolution or lasting serenity. Transcendentalism seems merely another name for infant narcissism and implies a world-womb to which the poet secretly knows he cannot return.

At the beginning of Out of the Cradle is a Pre-Verse. The private self Whitman seeks emerges in the Reminiscence as the poet becomes the boy he still is. At the beginning his understanding of the birds corresponds to some sense he already has acquired of the way things are or ought to be. Like the birds, Whitman himself wants intimate relations with his "lovers"²; like the birds he measures his wellbeing by the

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¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.106
² Printed in FMLA, p.107
attunement he feels with the sun, the winds, the waters, and
the earth. More important, the serenity of the birds is as
fragile as the poet's: both are passively unable to control the
sources of their happiness.

In the Reminiscence the boy's identity merges with that
of the he-bird. The boy weeps for the birds and for himself
as he shares the he-bird's sense of loss. The boy, like the
bird, has been turned out "of the ninth-month midnight,"1,
abandoned in a world he doesn't understand. As the world of
the birds "together"2 was once all one and all home - womblike
- so the world of the he-bird alone has become hostile and
uncontrollable. Love, in Whitman's view, once meant "two
.together"3; now it means loss and abandonment, and the word
discovered in the arias is not "love"4 but "love"5. In
the last seven stanzas of the second aria the he-bird's grievances
are reiterated, but there is no hint of reconciliation nor any
acknowledgement that one must accept mortality in order to
survive. The he-bird's plight is not the loss itself but his
.inability to accept its finality.

Yet the boy reacts to this song with ecstasy - "The
love in the heart pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously

1. Printed in PMLA, p.107
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
bursting''. ¹ This cathartic reaction apparently comes from the boy's discovery in the reminiscence of his present world's origins - though he does not yet understand the relation between these origins and specific assumptions he now unconsciously holds.

The aria sinking,
All else continuing - the stars shining,
The winds blowing - the notes of the wondrous bird echoing,
with angry moans the fierce old mother yet, as ever, incessantly moaning,
Or the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
The yellow half-moon, enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching,
The boy extatic - with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the atmosphere dallying,
The love in the heart pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting,
The aria's meaning, the ears, the Soul, swiftly depositing,
The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
The colloquy there - the trio - each uttering,
The undertone - the savage old mother, incessantly crying,
To the boy's Soul's questions sullenly timing - some drowned secret hissing,
To the outsetting bard of love.²

At this point the reader may understand better than Whitman himself, not only why the poet is ecstatic but also why the ecstasy fades so rapidly. Along with the pleasure of having suspicions confirmed comes the sense of how terrible that confirmation is. There is little ultimate comfort in the incessant moaning and crying of the old mother, and little hope

₁. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.107  
². Ibid.
for the passive boy in the example of "Paumanok's shore gray and rustling". The sea may seem to hold answers to the 'boy's Soul's questions', but they are incomprehensible and seem to mock the outsetting bard. What the narrator knows, however, is that since he cannot go back to 'innocence', he must go forward toward as much consciousness as he can reach.

O throes!
O you demon, singing by yourself - projecting me,
O solitary me, listening - never more shall I cease
imitating, perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape,
Never more shall the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent
from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was
before what there, in the night,
By the sea, under the yellow and sagging moon,
The dusky demon aroused - the fire, the sweet hell
within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me.

There is an equation implied between the demon and the implications of "the fire, the sweet hell within. The unknown want, the destiny of me." The "cries of unsatisfied love" seem clearly to imply not only the wish Whitman so often expressed for a prerational intimacy with others, but also the awakening

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
within himself of sexual longings — fire and sweet hell. As a child these longings were submerged beneath narcissistic wishes for a transcendent world-womb, but now he knows he can never again be "the peaceful child I was before." And expressing all this still leaves the "want, the destiny," unknown. The achievement of consciousness and understanding still eludes him.

The ambivalence of whitman's wish — partly to see, partly not to see — is made clear in the next stanza:

O give me some clew!
O if I am to have so much, let me have more!
O a word! O what is my destination?
O I fear it is henceforth chaos!
O how joys, dreads, convolutions, human shapes, and all shapes, spring as from graves around me!
O phantoms! you cover all the land, and all the sea!
O I cannot see in the dimness whether you smile or frown upon me;
O vapor, a look, a word! O well-beloved!
O you dear women's and men's phantoms;³

A little glimpse of the chaos within is enough to send him looking for correspondences and for sources outside himself by which to account for the chaos he fears. As much as he wants to understand these phantoms and shapes, the symbolic mode of perception obscures as much as it clarifies. At best he is able to see only part of the reality within. In stanza 32,

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.108
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
he becomes dimly aware that he has always known the answer to
the question this poem asks. And in stanza 33 he becomes
conscious of part of that "answer":

Answering, the sea,
Delaying not hurrying not,
Whispered me through the night, and very plainly
before daybreak,
Lisped to me constantly the low and delicious word
DEATH,
And again Death—ever Death, Death, Death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird, nor like
my aroused child's heart,
But edging near, as privately for me, rustling at my
feet,
And creeping thence steadily up to my ears,
Death, Death, Death, Death, Death.

Whitman's feeling that the fearful "chaos" he
momentarily apprehended in stanza 31 is made orderly by the
subsequent discovery of the word "Death", and his later
feeling that the word not only provides order but is sweet and
delicious, seem to indicate more than what Stephen Whicher calls
the discovery of reality, or what Edwin Miller calls the acknowledge-
ment of death. What Whitman seems to be doing in stanza 31
and thereafter is substituting the word "death" for the word
"sex". The discovery of "the fire, the sweet hell within".

1. Whitman. Walt. Leaves of Grass, p. 108
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 109
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
led to a question: "O what is my destination?" The answer at that point seemed to be: The acceptance of sexual identity and thereby the acceptance of mortality.

There are three main components in Whitman's poetry: first, the poet's a-contextual perception of objects in the external world, perceived through memory and presented in those catalogues which seem organized mostly by unconscious association; second, publicly accepted myths about the external world—folklore, religion, science or whatever; third, Whitman's own unconscious world view, heavily oriented to his unresolved oedipal conflicts. These components must be both co-ordinated and dynamic if a given poem is to succeed: the myth must never become more important than the process by which it is created. Ignoring for the present the relation between myths and psychological defense mechanisms, we must recognize that, with Whitman, the dynamic process in which myths are constantly destroyed and created anew is inseparable from the process by which poetry is made; Whitman's best poetry is that in which the poet constantly moves among the various components of his poetic world. In short, the presence or absence of poetic dynamism seems to determine the success or failure of Whitman's poems. *As I Ebb'd or Out of the Cradle may I end in self-deception and in ultimately unsuccessful attempts at psychological defense; nevertheless,*

the movement between internal and external realities and the conscious attempt to organize and integrate these various realities keep the myth and the poems alive. Whitman's best poems are journeys into chaos which lead to the orderly presentation of disorder. His power is marked by the confidence we feel that he will survive the experience of chaos.

Whitman always sought to explore the transcendental nature of reality. His vision leads him into the regions extending beyond the limits of empirical experience. The unknown, the unseen, the unheard and the unexpressed, reveals to his mind the deepest truths about the ultimate reality. To an Indian reader Leaves of Grass should have a special significance, since in respect of its transcendentalism it carries palpable overtones from the Bhagvadgita, which was his constant companion. In Song of Myself one hears echoes of Lord Krishna in the Gita:

   with music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums,
   I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons....

And again:

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 38
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous,
I make appointments with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited.....
There shall be no difference between them and
the rest.

The saint and the sinner, the alms-giver and the beggar,
the high and the low – are welcomed by the genuine creative
artist who, god-like, receives them all in his arms. The
 correspondence between the Bhagavadgita and Leaves of Grass
becomes still more intimate when Whitman suggests his potentiality
to assume any form. With a peculiar resonance from the Gita,
one reads:

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,
My course runs below the soundings of plummetts,
I help myself to material and immaterial,
No guard can shut me off, no law prevent me.
I anchor my ship for a little while only,
My messengers continually cruise away or bring
their returns to me.

Whenever the cause of righteousness shall fail, the
Lord will descend upon the earth to redress all wrongs and undo
the evil.

...... I rise, from age to age and take
Visible shape, and move a man with men,
Succouring the good ......

1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.38
2. Ibid., p.53
3. Ibid., p.70
It is in the same symbolical role that Whitman, representing the Divine Self, proclaims:

Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years, waiting responses from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun ....
Helping the Ilama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols....... 1

Again, if the Lord holds equal both gain and loss, influx and efflux, victory and defeat, joy and pain, so does Whitman equate all opposites:

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day? I also say it is good to fall, battles are lost in the same spirit.
I also say it is good to fall, battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won. 2

The wise man is he who can transcend all contraries, and perceive a fundamental unity beneath all diversity. In expressing the unfathomability of the soul, Whitman again seems to echo the voice of the Lord:

I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured......
I am an acme of things accomplished, and I an encloser of things to be. 3

1. Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 87  
2. Ibid.  
3. Ibid., p. 68
And again in *Song of the Open Road*, he holds himself above all censure or praise:

Whoever denies me it shall not trouble me, whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me.¹

Although whitman never fully elaborates his indebtedness to Indian thought, he seems to have been intimately conversant with the "Shastras and Vedas"² often imagining "the Hindoo teaching his favourite pupil the loves, wars, adages, transmitted safely to this day from poets who wrote three thousand years ago."³ *Passage to India* is full of allusions to the "myths and fables of eld, Asia's", the "far-darting beams of the spirit,"⁴ and "the elder religions."⁵ From the vast store-house of philosophic thought, "the infinite greatness of the past", emerges India as an integral symbol of man's quest for the infinite - India with her "flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and junior Buddha."⁶

India, in the same poem, symbolises "primal thought"⁷, holding the key to the "aged fierce enigmas."⁸ She is like

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2. Ibid., p.65
3. Ibid., p.109
4. Ibid., p.322
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p.326
8. Ibid., p.328
"the Elder Brother", guiding the "Younger" (America) into regions unknown:

O Thou transcendent,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the Light, shedding forth universes,
thou centre of them,
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,
Thou moral, spiritual fountain - affection's source - thou reservoir ....... ³

But this poem is not a passage to India only; it is a passage to more than India, since it gathers within its symphonic cumulation all that may be best in the great religions of the world, both Eastern and Western. All the great savants and philosophers have recognised the supremacy of the unknown over the known, the transcendental over the empirical. If the senses of the body do not ultimately lead us on to the Divine Self, they have not performed their true function. In his poem Portals, he asks:

What are those of the known but to ascend and enter the Unknown?⁴

Whitman always believes that "grander far was the unseen soul of me, comprehending, endowing all those, lighting the light, the sky and stars, delving the earth, sailing the

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1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.328
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.327
4. Ibid., p.389
sea (what were all those, indeed, without thee, unseen soul? Of what amount without thee?)"

Leaves of Grass, like Paradise Lost, also justifies the ways of God to man. Although not designed as an epic, the range of experience represented here is no less epical. Its purport is:

Not to exclude or demarcate, or pick out evils from their formidable masses (even to expose them),
But add, fuse, complete, extend - and celebrate the immortal and the good. 1

It may be noted that his humanitarianism was not a sentimental creed as it generally is with poets and philosophers. He translated his humanitarianism into active love and service. He frequently visited the prisons where he befriended with and consoled the destitute convicts. In the New York hospital he nursed the helpless patients, and soothed their physical and mental agonies. He resigned himself to sit by the wounded soldiers and soothe them, or silently watch the dead. In The Wound-Dresser, he writes,

I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have
  cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips. 2

2. Ibid., p. 378
In society he did not recognise any distinctions of caste, colour or creed. His heart went out in sympathy to all the underdogs of society — the social outcasts and the forsaken. His vision would not exclude anyone, not even a prostitute who symbolised for him "utter destitution." In his poem To a Common Prostitute, he holds out his hand in friendship and comfort to this helpless victim of society:

Be composed — be at ease with me — I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as nature,
Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and
the leaves to rustle for you, do my words refuse to
 glisten and rustle for you.

Whitman's humanitarianism embraced the world of animals also. He had innate love for his "dumb-friends." In fact, he admired animals more than ever covetous, quarrelling and wrangling human beings. So he said:

I think I could turn and live with animals,
they are so placid and self-contained,
I stand and look at them long and long,
They do not sweat and whine about their conditions.

Whitman who was never tried of asserting the common bonds of humanity has been accused of being one of the greatest egotists

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.270
2. Ibid., p.271
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p.50
in literary history. The 'I' in whitman's poetry is not first person pronoun, it symbolises man in his universality. In his poetry, the ego is made not only to assert but to preserve itself. The ego asserts itself Adamically, by naming. The poet is a father giving his name to all he sees, hears and feels. Charles Feidelson says that the 'I' of Whitman's poem speaks the world that he sees, and sees the world that he speaks and does this by becoming the reality of his vision and of his words, in which the reader also participates. Therefore, his 'I' is of supreme importance; it is the incarnation of the Universal:

It is not the earth; it is not America who is so great, It is 'I' who am great or to be great.¹

He identifies 'I' with God:

I hear and behold in every object, yet understand God not in the least, Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.²

I am the mate and companion of all people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself.³

In The Sleepers, he identifies himself with all kinds of people:

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1. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.278
2. Ibid., pp.72-73
3. Ibid., p.29
I am the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician, 
The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the fox, 
He who has been famous and he who shall be famous after to-day, 
The stammerer, the well-form'd person, the wasted or feeble person.

Love and sex are the dominant themes of Whitman's poetry. Whitman called his *Leaves of Grass* the song of sex. His treatment of love and sex is frank and realistic without any of the prudery and inhibitions of contemporary poets. He recognised the legitimate claims of the body, and considered the physical relationship between man and woman as blessed with divine grace. The most emphatic affirmation of the legitimate place of sex in human life is to be found in his well-known poem *A Woman Waits for Me*:

A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking, 
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the 
moisture of the right man were lacking,

Sex contains all, bodies, souls. 
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, 
pronouncements, 
Songs, commands, health, pride, the 
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, 
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and 
justifications of itself.¹

¹ Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 77
One of the great allegations levelled against Whitman was the charge of homosexuality. J. Arthur Symonds, a keen student of Greek and Renaissance homosexuality and himself a homosexual, discerned in the Calamus poems a kindered soul caught within the turmoils of the same kind of physical experience. Leaves of Grass, revolutionized his previous conceptions and made another man of him.

For Whitman "merely touching you is enough, is best, and thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally."¹ (Whoever You are Holding Me Now in Hand).

Wraapt in such felicitous phrases, the mere sensation of touch thus becomes invested with a peculiar divinity of its own. For Whitman, there were no barriers between a man and woman. He voiced the deepest urges of the body in highly suggestive symbols and images, charged with an unprecedented intensity. In his Notebooks he sums up admirably his entire attitude towards sex. As to the feeling of a man for a woman and a woman for a man, and all the vigor and beauty and muscular yearning - it is well to know that neither the possession of these feelings nor... having them powerfully infused in poems, is any discredit but rather a credit.... Most of what is called delicacy is filthy or sick and unworthy of a woman of live rosy body and a clean

¹. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 91
affectionate spirit.

The chief characteristic of Whitman's poetry that impresses every reader is its mysticism. Whitman himself said that the essential spirit of his poetry was mysticism, and not merely social reformation or aestheticism. "No one will get at my verses", he said, "who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly towards art or aestheticism." ¹ His essential aim in poetry was to discover the relationship between the material and the spiritual, between the temporal and the eternal. In poems like The Sleepers, Prayer of Columbus and Passage to India, mysticism is predominant, to the almost entire exclusion of sensualism.

In The Sleepers, night is regarded as the symbol of the innate spirituality of all things. Night results in a spiritual peace unknown to day. The poet here acquires an insight into the "myth of heaven" ²:

Peace is always beautiful,
The myth of heaven indicates peace and night,
The myth of heaven indicates the soul.³

In Passage to India, the soul is depicted as master of orbs, mate of time, smiler at death. God is described as "Light of light, shedding forth universe, thou centre of them."

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¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p.19
² Ibid., p.327
³ Ibid.
The true solemnity of a mystical visionary is reflected in the following lines:

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders. Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O Soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest Time, silest content at Death,
And silest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Whitman was a transcendentalist in the Oriental sense of the term. To us Leaves of Grass has a special significance, since in respect of its transcendentalism it carries palpable overtones from the Bhagvadgita, which was his constant companion. In Song of Myself we hear echoes of Lord Krishna in The Gita:

With music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums,
I play not marches for accepted victors only,
I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons...

Whitman suggests man's potentiality to assume any form like the Lord in Bhagvadgita. The human soul, he says, is not only universal and immortal, it is also irresistible and invincible:

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul
My course runs below the soundings of plummets.
I help myself to material and immaterial, ....
I anchor my ship for a little while only,
My messengers continually cruise away or bring their returns to me.

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2. Ibid.,
3. Ibid., p. 93
Whitman who is a mystic without creed feels that the body is the manifestation of the spirit, which is liberated by death for a Higher life.

Religion, according to Whitman, must bring about the assimilation and synthesis of ideas. Ideas serve the function only of means - the end being the analysis of crisis of a time or man's situation in general and restoration of order. Whitman's religious ideas are related to a unified sensibility - the grand humanitarian purpose to which he devotes his muse and ideas. His prayer both for the lost and the good souls, reveals his basic humanitarian stand which is essentially religious.

In the following chapter the theme of self-alienation has been dwelt upon.