CHAPTER II

LIFE AND DEATH

*Leaves of Grass* is a brilliant document of Whitman's deepest and ripest experiences of life and death. Life to him is an insignificant tiny drop of spray in the multi-continuous surge that flows on to eternity. It is with an unwavering steadfastness that he exhibits a craving for the fixity of purpose in the whirlpool of life. It shows his intuitive efforts to comprehend the enigma of life which is likened to a mighty stream of intangible force. He brings different elements of individualised psyche into an over riding and consummating oneness.

Whitman places faith in life and its potentialities. He is great moralist and a great leader, because he is the first heroic seer to seize the soul by the scruff of her neck and plant her down among the potsherds. This is a doctrine of life, new morality - a morality of actual living not of salvation. By salvation he means christian asceticism. And the source of this new morality is the
unconscious, which he calls "the soul,"¹ the source of healthy, life-giving impulses. It is not I who guides his soul to heaven. It is he who is guided by his own soul, along the open road, where all men tread. Therefore, he accepts life's deep motions of love, or hate, or compassion, or dislike, or indifference. And he must go where life takes him for his feet and his lips and his body are his soul. It is I who must submit to the soul.

This is Whitman's true message of American democracy, where soul meets soul on "the open road"². Leaves of Grass begins in part from an accommodation with death that has now begun to fail. Love itself became bound up with his own death:

Scented herbage of my breast,  
Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best afterwards,  
Tomb-leaves, body-leaves, growing up above me, above death  
Perennial roots, tall leaves....³

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 120.  
² Ibid., p. 117.  
³ Ibid., p. 93.
- and with the death of others. He seems almost to foresee the war years he spent ministering to the torn bodies of soldiers:

Of him I love day and night I dream'd I heard
he was dead,
And I dream'd I went where they had buried him I love,
but he was not in that place,
And I dream'd I wander'd, searching among burial places to find him.
And I found that every place was a burial-place;
The houses full of life were equally full of death...

The secret of his own nights and days, as he writes in *Calamus* could be got at only by "faint indirections":

Among the men and women, the multitude,
Perceive
One picking me out by secret and divine signs,
Acknowledging none else - not parent, wife, husband, brother, child, any nearer that I am;
Some are baffled, But that one is not - that one knows me. 2

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2. Ibid., pp. 106-107.
Ah lover and perfect equal!
I meant that you should discover me, so by faint indirections,
And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the like in you. 1

Whitman upholds the sanctity of human body. He worships the human body not only because every man or woman is the son or daughter of God. (One of the tenets in his "new" 2 religion) but also because it ferries the seeds of life, so that each person bridges, potentially, at least, past and future generations. The act of procreation he describes in the same poem as:

Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan,
Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.
Sprouts take and accumulate, stand by the curb prolific and vital,
Landsnakes projected masculine, full-sized and golden. 3

The poet, too, is a propagator, and Whitman often uses sexual imagery to describe his function, begetting a

2. Ibid., p. 22.
3. Ibid., p. 48.
new race on women fit for conception. And this is not inconsistent with his role as cultural time-binder, conserving the knowledge and experience of past generations and by his imaginative intuition drawing upon the future, thereby making both past and future and present available to his readers. Whitman believes in life after death. America (or Democracy) is a ship, with Lincoln as captain. The was is over, the nation is welded in blood more closely than ever:

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
walk the deck my captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.\(^1\)

More, conspicuous and significant, however, is Whitman's use of the sea as a symbol of life after death. It appears as the theme of no fewer than ten poems, including the long Passage to India, Joy Shipmate joy, Let Final to the Shore, Sail out For Good, Eidolon Yacht! Among the Songs of Parting he writes:

\(^1\) Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 268.
Joy, shipmate, joy,
(Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry,)
Out life is closed, our life begins,
The long, long anchorage we leave,
The ship is clear at last, she leaps!
She swiftly courses from the shore,
Joy, shipmate, joy! 1

The green waves, rolling in on Paumanok, the far horizon
faint against the sky, never lost their strangeness. The
miracles of the land seem to Whitman no less wonderful
but certainly more tangible, while the miracles of the
sea remain inscrutable. Liquidness is curious enough,
but liquidness and vastness is one, constant in mood, or
a mystery akin to that of death and new life. Whitman
would naturally often employ a highly verbalized vocabulary
to express his vision of the dynamism of life. A fairly
typical example of this propensity is the opening stanza
from section 10 of Song of Myself:

Alone far is the wilds and mountains I hunt,
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee.
In the late afternoon choosing a safe spot to pass the night,
Kindling a fire and broiling the fresh-kill'd game,
Falling asleep on the gather'd leaves with my dog
And gun by my side. 2

2. Ibid., p. 31.
Whitman sees "buds" as a suitable trope for the potentiality of life that he not only longs to believe in but that he needs to associate with his own existence. But even in old age, with his health and vitality fast waning, his ability, his compulsion to figure life as a process of ongoing budding remains staunch. Even beyond the tenacity of his will power, is the way Whitman imagines the buds of life in terms of process whose defined end or direction is never given. Neither in youth nor in old age was it characteristic of Whitman to determine what the end product or specific configuration of the buds would be, or, to take another example, we find a similar phenomenon in Whitman's Children of Adam and To the Garden the World:

To the garden the world anew ascending,  
Potent mates, daughters, sons, preluding,  
The love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being,  
Curious here behold my resurrection after slumber,  
The revolving cycles in their wide sweep having brought me again,  
Amorous, mature, all beautiful to me, all wondrous,  
My limbs and quivering fire that ever plays through them, for reasons, most wondrous,  
Existing I peer and penetrate still,  
Content with the present, content with the past,  
By my side or back of me Eve following,  
Or in front, and I following her just the same.  

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 45.  
2. ibid., p. 75.
Section 13 of *Song of the Open Road* speaks of living a
life of deception, of conforming to popular mores and
thereby denying one's authenticity:

Whoever you are, come forth! or man or woman come forth!
You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house,
though you built it, or though it has been built for you,
Out of the dark confinement! out from behind the screen:
It is useless to protest, I know all and expose it. 1

Inside of dresses and ornaments, inside of those wash'd
and trimm'd faces,
Behold a secret silent loathing and despair. 2

Home to the houses of men and women, at the table,
in the bedroom, everywhere,
Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright,
death under the breast-bones, hell under the
skull-bones,
Under the broad cloth and gloves, under the ribbons
and artificial flowers,
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable
of itself,
Speaking of anything else but never of itself. 3

Whitman like a true mystic refers to this gross body
composed of the five elements; or of four, excluding the

2. Ibid., p. 124.
3. Ibid., p. 125.
ethereal, when he says in *A Song of the Rolling Earth*

Section 1:

Air, soil, water, fire — those are words,
I myself am a word with them — my qualities
interpenetrate with theirs — my name is nothing to them...

and to the invisible, imperishable "subtle," body when
he asks:

How can the real body ever die?

To this awareness of the distinction of the perishable and
the durable bodies that envelope the soul, Whitman gives
a veiled expression in these words of his prose elegy on
Carlyle and the clearest echo is heard in these lines:

For not life's joys alone I sing, repeating — the joy of
death!
The beautiful touch of Death, soothing and numbing
a few moments, / for reasons,
Myself discharging my excrementitious body to be burn'd,
or render'd to powder, or buried,
My real body doubtless left to me for other spheres,
My voided body nothing more to be, returning to the
purifications, / further offices, eternal uses of the
earth. 4

2. Ibid., p. 180.
3. Ibid., p. 20.
4. Ibid., p. 147.
whitman's curious sense of body and identity for which:

Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form'd...

The threads that were spun are gather'd... the weft crosses the warp.... the pattern is systematic.

He describes it most clearly in *A Song of Joys*:

O the joy of my soul leaning pois'd on itself, receiving identity/through materials and loving them, observing characters/and absorbing them,
My soul vibrated back to me from them, from sight, hearing, touch/reason, articulation, comparison, Memory and the like,
The real life of my senses and flesh transcending my Senses and flesh,
My body done with materials, my sight done with my Material eyes,
Proved to me this day beyond cavil that it is not my Material eyes/which finally see,
Nor my material body which finally loves, walks, laughs, shouts, embraces, procreates.....

The major part of the Vedanta concerns the nature of God, the soul of man, the world, death and immortality;

2. Ibid., p. 344.
3. Ibid., p. 146.
so the analysis opens with the inquiry concerning God, the nature of His being and attributes, as postulated by the Upanishads. Whitman is "Transcendent"¹ in Passage to India and his concept of God in general has a noticeable resemblance to this account. Besides, like the Upanishads, he too regards that all is enfolded in joy, joy joy, which underlies and overtops the whole effusion. Song of "a perfect world, all joy!"² and of "joy in the ecstasy of life"³, felt that it was "enough to merely be!"⁴, and declares:

The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness, I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times, Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged.⁵

In Section 2 of Song of Myself after repudiating, "houses and perfumes"⁶ and establishing "undisguised and naked

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 327.
2. Ibid., p. 368.
3. Ibid., p. 368.
4. Ibid., p. 368.
5. Ibid., p. 121.
6. Ibid., p. 25.
contact with the atmosphere\textsuperscript{1}, Whitman expresses his joy of the senses:

\begin{quote}
The smoke of my own breath, 
Echoes ripples, buzz'd whispers.....lover root, silk-thread, crotch and vine, 
My respiration and inspiration.....the beating of my heart, 
........the passing of blood and air through my lungs....\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

He is celebrating his senses as part of the celebration of himself, which is the theme of the poem. And, apart from the identity he has recognized and is celebrating, of his soul with the universal soul, his body is also identified with his soul. So, the celebration of the body is an important part of the celebration of his self. The senses and organs, the body, the soul, and the supreme soul are all thus regarded in one single understanding. This equalization of the bodily portion of his self and the soul, and their equation with the supreme or universal self in one unified celebration reveal his deep insight into the mysteries of life.

\textsuperscript{1} Whitman, Walt, \textit{Leaves of Grass}, p. 25.  
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 25.
Whitman's vision of life in section 3 unfolding
the first element of his new knowledge, with the imagery
of the grass, is immortality:

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk
of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. 1

The doctrine of the impress of actions, the meritorious
ones making for many "enjoyments" 2 and the evil ones
for great misery, enters briefly into his other poem,
To think of Time, and elaborately into the preface and
the later Songs of Prudence. From the deathlessness of
all beings, the poets thought turn immediately, in
section 7, to his own immortality and other qualities:

I pass death with the dying, and birth with the
new—wash'd babe,
..... and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
And per-use, manifold objects... 33

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2. Ibid., p. 82.
3. Ibid., p. 29.
I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth, I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself.¹

If the Hindus have superstitious fears respecting invisible existences in the air, Whitman, too, believes in:

Living beings, identities now doubtless near us in the air that we know not of.²

To this superstition of his concerning "invisible" existences, the Song of the Open Road, bears most eloquent testimony:

You air that serves me with breath to speak!
You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape:
You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers!
You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the road sides!
I believe you are latent with unseen existences, you are so dear to me.⁴

Even this line from his Song at Sunset echoes Ward:

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 29.
² Ibid., p. 18.
³ Ibid., p. 107.
⁴ Ibid., p. 118.
illustrious what we name space, sphere of unnumber'd spirits.... 1

In a word, whitman is quite the Hindu Vedantic philosopher believing in deities, chanting, saluting, his "myriads" 2 of "supremes" 3.

Whitman believes that the moving cause of every action, however fictitious, is God; that man is an instrument upon which God plays what tune he pleases.

In His Mystic Trumpeteer Whitman says:

O Trumpeter, methinks I am myself the instrument thou playest. 4 (sec. 7)

In many sections of Song of Myself Whitman praises the life-force that moves through all things and creatures. Although Whitman does admit that the mystical utterances of the universe can not be immediately perceived but are to be intuited, he claims that "the unseen is proved by

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 385.
2. ibid., p. 37.
3. ibid., p. 63.
4. ibid., p. 368.
Ethereal, pervading all, (for without me what were all? what were God?)
Essence of forms, life of the real identities,
Permanent, positive, (namely the unseen,)
Life of the great round world, the sun and stars,
and of man, I, the general soul....1

Great constituent elements of his poetry are
Materialism and spirituality. For the poet has the vision
to see beyond the conflicts which irk his fellow-men: "One
part does not counteract another part, he is the Joiner,
he sees how they join." 2

The pages of Leaves of Grass are filled with the
evidences of Whitman's programme, in accordance with
which he would attempt to be "the arbiter of the diverse" 3
who would indicate the path between reality and souls. But
few expressions of the programme are so clear as the follow-
ing poem:

When the full-grown poet came,
Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe,
with all its shows of day and night,) saying,
He is mine;
But out spake too the soul of man, proud, jealous
and unreconciled;/Nay, he is mine alone; 4

2. Ibid., p. 134.
3. Ibid., p. 274.
4. Ibid., p. 418.
achieving immorality:

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......1

This poet sounds more like a god than a man, but through
his art Whitman could perform some of these marvels, as
in Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. Here, beginning on the factual,
realistic level, the poet considers his ties with the past,
present and future. As he thinks sympathetically of all
the men and women who have crossed the river on this same
ferry, he feels an identity, a oneness in spirit with them,
and when he projects his thoughts into the future he feels
the same identity with the generations to come who will
share with him the same experience. This "identity"2
exists, of course, only in the fantasy of the poet (and
his intuition fails to warm him that the ferry will give
way to a bridge!), but in another sense he turns the dream
into reality. The poet himself is a ferry, shuttling

2. Ibid., p. 128.
across the river of time:

What is it then between us?....
Whatever it is, it avails not - distance avails not, and place avails not, I too lived....
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution. I

"The float forever held in solution" is, of course, life in the transcendental sense whatever the life force may be it does seem like an ocean, out of which individual drops emerge from time to time, only to return and be lost again in the great womb of time. This mystical doctrine gives whitman his key symbol, the ocean as mother - death - resurrection. And it is significant that in the myths of all lands the ocean (sometimes lake or river) has been used with the same symbolism. Whether by studying these myths or by actual mystical intuition, the poet somehow attains a universal view of the meaning of life, and a sympathetic identification that transcended time and space, thus realizing the fantasy in Song of Myself:

Space and Time! Now I see it is true, what I guess'd at,\(^1\)

* * *

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palmscover continents,
I am afoot with my vision.\(^2\)

Whitman views life as a perpetual movement. For
him, movement of life signifies the unending quest of life
and of the soul, the eternal cry in the heart of the
universe:

The smallest sprout shows there is really
no death.\(^3\)

Life is always 'alive'\(^4\) and 'well somewhere'\(^5\). Even
death cannot 'arrest it'\(^6\). And 'if ever there was it
led forward life'\(^7\).

\(^1\) Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 50.
By the magic of sympathetic identification the symbolical
"I" of his poems ranges back and forth in time and space,
thus in a sense annihilating time and space. Whitman's
poems are suffused with cosmic emotion when he images
the evolutionary processes which have culminated in his
own birth and personal identity in the present physical
world:

All forces have been steadily employ'd to
comeplete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul

As a mystic he places his trust in the "faithful and
friendly...arms" of nature that has carried and guided
him to the present moment of human existence. Moreover
scientific theory enables him to visualize his evolutionary
origin:

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs;
On every step bunches of ages, and larger
bunches between the steps,
All below duly travel'd, and still I mount and mount.

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2. Ibid., p. 67.
3. Ibid., p. 66.
Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,  
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,  
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.¹

Thus through the lyric 'I' of Song of Myself speaking for the human race from its faint inception to its future culmination, Whitman can prophesy:

The past and present wilt - I have fill'd them, emptied them,  
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.²

Though The Sleepers begins as a vision of the sleepers of the world, levelled by slumber and their equality in nature, it becomes an analogy of the transmigratory journey of the soul from its embowered garden of spirit to the physical world and back again to reinvigorating sleep in the womb of time, to await another avatar. "Night"³ is not so much death itself as the strength - restoring interval between death and birth, analogous to the physiological chemistry of sleep:

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2. Ibid., p. 73.  
3. Ibid., p. 333.
I will duly pass the day O my mother, and duly return to you.

The large themes of Song of Myself, The Sleepers and indeed most of his poems, are universal: the nature of the self in relation to the cosmos and the meaning and purpose of life and death. These huge themes he could present artistically only by suggesting analogies in nature. Crossing Brooklyn Ferry presents one of Whitman's favourite daily experiences, in which the movement is back and forth across the not-very-wide river separating two cities. But in the poem forward movement is interrupted by suspension and centrifugal movement, as in the diverging 'spokes of light'\textsuperscript{2} radiating from the poet's reflection in the water. He merges his identity in the crowd, feels in the 'float'\textsuperscript{3} sustaining the ferry himself and all humanity dissolved into the flood and ebb-tide of eternity: the endless cycle of birth, death and re-birth:

\begin{footnotes}
2. Ibid., p. 130. \\
3. Ibid., p. 68. 
\end{footnotes}
The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day, The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme....

The sense of movement conveyed both by the progression of images and by the imperatives to the river to "flow", "suspend", "expand", etc. carries the sympathetic reader to the completion of a vicarious experience with the poet, the abstract and concrete having operated simultaneously to the speaker's conclusion:

Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

The theme of Spider is solitude and Whitman uses the analogy of a spider sitting on "a little promontory", surrounded by vacant space, as a parallel to his own human condition. Just as the spider throws out "filament, filament, out of itself" the repetitions convey the

2. Ibid., p. 130.
3. Ibid., p. 130.
4. Ibid., p. 131.
5. Ibid., p. 131.
tireless "unreeling", so does his soul spin its gossamer thread into "measureless oceans of space":

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.  

And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

In fact, the theme of life as a journey and of the evolution of man and the universe as a journey, may well be called a major motif in Leaves of Grass. Whitman's fascination with the idea of the "procession of souls along the grand roads of the universe/of the progress of the souls of men and women along the grand roads/of the universe,

2. Ibid., pp. 352-353.
all other progress is the needed emblem and sustenance. ¹
and of each stage in the travel as but temporary "journeys," ²
led him to the mystical desire in Song of the Open Road:

To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads,
as roads for traveling souls,³

Forever alive, forever forward,
(All humanity)....I know not where they go,
But I know that they go toward the best- toward something
great.⁴

Thus the journey motif includes a scientific theory, a
metaphysics, a religious faith, and a personal philosophy.
In fact, it provides a background for the various themes
of Leaves of Grass. In accord with the philosophical
concept of "plentiful" ⁵, Whitman believes in a cosmic
evolution, an eternal process of "becoming" ⁶ never

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2. Ibid., p. 10.
3. Ibid., p. 124.
4. Ibid., p. 124.
5. Ibid., p. 64.
6. Ibid., p. 63.
reaching perfection but always ascending the scale of being:

How curious! how real!
Underfoot the divine soil, overhead the sun.¹

The arrogance of Song of Myself depends upon this faith proclaimed in the poem:

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.²

I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I [am] an encloser of things to be.³

Whether or not this doctrine is akin to the belief that each soul in the chain of being migrates to other planes of existence, where it may attain higher perfection, at any rate the cycle of existence gives Whitman a great spiritual and imaginative stimulation:

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² Ibid., p. 67.
³ Ibid., p. 66.
Ages and ages returning at intervals,
Undestroy'd, wandering, immortal,
Lusty, Phallic...  

And as with birth, so with death.
A minute, a touch and a drop of us can Launch immortality...
and what we thought death is but life brought to a firmer parturition. 2

Whitman's conception of his role as poet and prophet naturally involves this motif. Indeed, it is prominent to some extent in nearly all romantic poetry, as witnessed by Goethe, Nietzsche, Wordsworth, Shelley, and others, but none of these used the theme in so varied and significant a way as Whitman did in Song of the Open Road, he says:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose. 3

2. Ibid., p. 48.
3. Ibid., p. 117.
In *Song of Myself* there is the obvious use of this motif by a nature poet. But though Whitman likes to swim, lie in the sun, and listen to the ocean, he is not a great hiker. He tramps with his imagination and says:

Not I, not any one else, can travel that road for you, You must travel it for yourself.¹

Always the journey becomes allegorical, and it may signify life the cosmic process, the task of the poet, or the search for the perfect "comrade"² sometimes identified with the reader. *Song of the Open Road* illustrates the idea:

Comerado, I give you my hand! 
......will you come travel with me?³

But the poet can also identify himself with the cosmic journey, with time and space, or with the lives of other people. He can therefore wander at will over

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the universe, and through past and future ages. In his role as mystic poet he can even identify himself with Christ. The idea is imaged in To Him that was Crucified:

...We walk unheld, free, the whole earth over, journeying up and down till we make our ineffaceable mark upon time and the diverse eras, Till we saturate time and eras, that the men and women of races to ages to come may prove brethren and lovers as we are.¹

Walt Whitman by mystic physiology and his plantheistic philosophy, felt the mysterious current of the living process cursing through the fibres of his sensitive organism, and he experienced the illusion of identity with the process itself, so that, at the height of his cosmic consciousness, time and space ceased to exist for him. His thin thread of life connected him with all life, past and future, until all time became one eternal present:

You are not thrown to the winds,
You gather certainly and safely around yourself,
Yourself! yourself! yourself! for ever and ever!²

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 303.
² Ibid., p. 344.
He continues to uphold the idea:

I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!
That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous
float is for it,
and the cohering is for it!
And all preparation is for it — and identity is for it—
and life and materials are altogether for it.

Whitman himself defines his intention in these words:

Haughty this song, its words and scope,
To span vast realms of space and time,
Evolution — the cumulative — growths and generations.

The haughtiness need not detain us here, though we may
note in passing that it grows out of the poet's consciousness
of the relationship between man and nature — nature crude,
virile, growing and travelling toward a higher goal. The
song also purports to span vast realms of space and time,
and to do so in order to express evolution and cumulative
growths. From Song of Myself to Roaming in Thought the
central theme and the literary technique are the same.

2. Ibid., p. 422.
In *Starting From Poumanok* he roams the continent projecting himself backward in time and space until he identifies his life with the continuity of the race, and then has a vision of the "successions of men"\(^1\) who constitute for him "an audience interminable"\(^2\). In another poem *The Sleepers* "flow hand in hand over the whole earth from east to west"\(^3\) while the poet wanders all night in his vision. In *Proud Music of the Storm* he hears the sounds of all the world and of all history; he is filled "with the voices of the universe"\(^4\).

Columbus is but a symbol of the yearning of mankind, a symbol of that urge which has propelled humanity through the eternal journey. As Whitman says in *Passage To India*:

Sail Forth — steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!\(^5\)

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In *Prayer of Columbus*, Whitman says:

All my emprises have been fill'd with Thee,  
My speculations, plans, begun and carried on in thoughts of Thee,  
Sailing the deep or journeying the land for Thee;  
Intentions, purports, aspirations mine, leaving results to Thee.  

Whitman takes up the theme of death. He believes that death is the essential and inevitable end of life. It is, in fact, the culmination of change, the climax of the flux to which life aspires. He refuses to acknowledge death as a destroyer of life not worth a conscious living. As a matter of fact, life and death are two identifiable realities with man. They are synonymous entities. They are inter-changeable and convertible units. In other words life matures into death which in turn is the certainty of life. Death is a finish worthy of the start and can make life much sweeter. It is the extinction of lamp in the morning light not the abolition of the sun.

The nobility and grandeur of death was not a theme which appealed to Whitman only in his old age; it was prominent even in the preparatory notes and fragments. It is part of the whole long journey. Motif, and it explains Whitman's constant insistence that there is no death. The process is ceaseless, restless, an eternal journey.

I tramp a perpetual journey.... ¹

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded heaven, And I said to my spirit, when we become the enfolders of those orbs... shall we be fill'd and satisfied then? And my spirit said, No, we but level that life to pass and continue beyond. ²

In fact, he believes that there is no actual termination of existence of any kind - no death - only change. What is called 'death', therefore, is no more to be feared than birth, for both are merely stages in the everlasting cycles

². Ibid., p. 69.
of life. Consequently Whitman's poems are filled with symbols of resurrection, or fish eggs to sprouting grass and Adam propagating the human race:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey - work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven......

In his speech at the Art Union, Whitman describes Death as a beautiful boy enfolded with his brother, sleep, in the comforting arms of night. The image is classical, perhaps inspired by Frances Wright's *A Few Days in Athens*. It conveys an erotic wistfulness. The figure with calm but drooping eyes"² might almost be a self-portrait. Lounging on an inverted torch, the figure also resembles the 'singer'³ in *Song of Myself* who "bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,/looking with side-curved head

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2 *ibid.*, p. 334.
3 *ibid.*, p. 135.
curious what will come next."¹ Death exists in the
speech as a curious self-mirroring. In one of Whitman's
most puzzling poems, Scented Herbage of My Breast, the
longing for "comrades"² the leaflike growth of poetry,
and the vision of death, are woven together with peculiar
intensity:

O slender leaves! O blossoms of my blood! I permit
you to tell/in your own way of the heart that is
under you,
O I do not know what you mean there underneath
yourselves,/you are not happiness,³

You are often more bitter than I can bear,
You burn and sting me,
Yet you are beautiful to me you faint tinged
roots, you make me think of death,
Death is beautiful from you (what indeed is finally
beautiful except death and love?)
O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my
chant of lovers....⁴

Great is death...sure as life holds all parts together

¹. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 27.
². Ibid., p. 93.
³. Ibid., p. 93.
⁴. Ibid., p. 93.
death holds all parts together; sure as the stars return
again after they merge in the light, death is as great as
life. The account of Death as a journey of the soul, given
thus in the end of the other passages noticed, probably
has a share in the making of Whitman's notice of the
"exquisite" \(^1\) transition of death, the beautiful touch
of Death, soothing and benumbing a few minutes, for reasons.
More significant, doubtless, is the contribution of the
idea of "journey" \(^2\). In a penetrating analysis, Allen
has noticed how the long journey motif is of the greatest
importance in a study of the genesis of *Leaves of Grass,*
in the interpretation of its message, and in understanding
the psychology of Whitman's style.

This fascination of Whitman with the idea of journey
of souls, which he uses with such profound connotations
in both his poems and prose, can be traced to his readings
in Hindu philosophy, because the notion of the soul as
travelling through life, death, time and the material
universe to the ultimate liberation or absorption with the

\(^1\) Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass,* p. 83.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 65.
supreme Being is basic to it, and is to be found in all accounts of it. Bliss Perry rightly regarded as one of his oriental traits this concept of Whitman, of the "universe as a Road for traveling souls". The idea, undoubtedly, came to Whitman, with many other details, from such passages as the one we are examining, which repeatedly uses the metaphor. In addition to what is seen in the above extracts, there is a description of the souls that proceed further on their respective paths after departing from the body, of the liberated soul proceeding directly to reunion with the supreme being.

Whitman's message is:

All parts away for the progress of souls, All religion, all solid things, arts, governments — all that was or is apparent/upon this globe or any globe. Falls into niches and corners/before the procession of souls along the grand roads of — the universe. 2

And when his own "Eidolon yacht" was ready for his voyage

2. Ibid., p. 124.
'on really deep waters', in 1891, he cried:

(I will not call it our concluding voyage,
But outset and sure entrance to the truest, best maturest)
Depart, depart from solid earth — no more returning to these shores,
Now on for aye our infinite free venture wending,
surning all yet tried ports, seas, hawsers,
 densities, gravitation,
 Sail out for good, eidolon yacht of me!

Whitman's admixture of immortality and materialism within the same set of conceptual images makes for a theory of immortality that locates the course and the realization of immortal life on earth, within a physical body, even while he recognizes the fact of individual death. The idea that to die is only to assume a new form — that nothing is annihilated and this dissolution is merely the forerunner of reproduction. This tone and this belief are carried through Song of Myself:

I know I am deathless.......3

2. Ibid., p. 412.
3. Ibid., p. 39.
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time.¹

This audacious stance toward death can be possible only
if it is supported by a strong belief in immortality
(and, here, in the revivification of the body through a
"physical"² soul):

Distant and dead resuscitate,
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I
am the clock myself.³

Probably the most striking example of this theme in
Song of Myself is its first appearance in the poem, in
section 5 and 6, where the images of regeneration coincide
with the images of the "grass"⁴:

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed
and luckier.⁵

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 40.
² Ibid., p. 410.
³ Ibid., p. 55.
⁴ Ibid., p. 28.
⁵ Ibid., p. 29.
Out of the Cradle is presented as a reminiscence, but it is told in dramatic rather than narrative form. First, the prologue states the theme in a long, winding, involuted sentence. The drama of the mocking birds singing happily together and then the lament of the he-bird for his lost mate do not provide the main tension of the poem. The major suspense is created by the boy's longing to understand the meaning of the tragedy - the meaning of death - and the answer comes not from the grieving mate but from the sea, the old crone rocking her cradle. The illumination transports the boy into manhood and endows him with the gift of song. Death is now a "delicious word" to him, and henceforth in his poems it is a "uniter of here and here-after".

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd is, of course, a genuine elegy. First the poet gives expression to what seems for a time unassuageable grief. Then comes some consoling thought or new perspective, and this leads finally to a complete reconciliation with the

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 207.
2. Ibid., p. 203.
fact of death. But in the stricter sense of a dramatic situation, this development is anticlimactic; the emotional tension eases too gradually and the end is undramatic. However, this is not true of *When Lilacs Last* which is the most skilfully constructed of all Whitman's poems and the most dramatic in structure. The poet begins with the lilac and the star, which "everreturning spring"¹ always brings back to him. He calls these a trinity. Their function is to remind him perennially of "him I love",² and to convince the reader that he will never forget the person who has died. The star is a symbol of the great leader from the west, Abraham Lincoln, whose death the poet personally mourns, though, following the elegy tradition, the deceased is never mentioned by name. Section 2 is an area of lamentation utilizing the imagery suggested by the "fallen star"³. In section 3 the poet breaks a twig from the lilac bush for his funeral bouquet. In section 4 a new symbol appears, the hermit thrush,

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warbling shyly in the secluded recesses of the swamp, singing "Death's outlet song of life....". Then in section 5 the funeral train begins carrying the coffin "over the breast of spring"... across the broad, fertile land:

Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud/in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journey's a coffin.

Spring is not a protagonist in the emotional and spiritual drama, but the symbol and its accompanying images of sprouting seed and blooming trees contribute to the development of the drama in two ways: first, there is the pathos of death in the time of birth, the coffin travelling across the fields and woods green with new life; and second, spring is a reminder that death will be followed by resurrection. The journey of the coffin continues.

2. Ibid., p. 261.
3. Ibid., p. 261.
through section 6, on and on through the fertile land and the mourning people. In section 9 the thrush begins to compete with the star for the poet's attention. The import of this song from nature is the universal necessity and goodness of death. The poet hears but is still detained by the star. From the middle of the poem to the end these opposed attractions create a peculiar tension. The poet is pulled first one way (personal grief) and then the other (philosophical acceptance) until the coffin reaches its final resting place. He does not forget his loss even then, but he can now accept all three symbols on equal terms: "Lilac and star and bird twined with chant of my soul." 1... star and bird no longer pull in opposite directions, for their power has become polarized by love and understanding. Faith in resurrection, for the lilac is the golden bough of primitive myth.

**Song of the Redwood Tree** is a highly subjective poem. The poet "'heard the mighty tree its death-chant

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chanting"1, and in recollection he repeats the words of the chant, with his comments. The tree is not unhappy over its impending death because it has fulfilled nature's purposes and will not be "absorb'd, assimilated"2 into a more magnificent future generation of life and cosmic development. This is a new treatment of the Crossing Brooklyn Ferry theme, with emphasis on Whitman's literary nationalism; here in the new world man can "tower proportionate to Nature"3. Such is the burden of the death chant in Leaves of Grass.

The foregoing study of the themes of life and death in Whitman's Leaves of Grass reveals that he is a serious artist with a deep and penetrating insight into the mysteries and immensities associated with life and death. His Leaves of Grass presents a significant and meaningful record of life and death.

2. Ibid., p. 169.
3. Ibid., p. 170.