CHAPTER-III

ABSOLUTE

The chief end of man's life, Whitman says, is to glorify God by obedience to the inward truth received directly by each individual from "the unknown region/where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow". This is independent of all worldly conditions:

No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.

This Absolute is a riddle. It is "inaccessible". It is incomprehensible by human ingenuity: "all is a blank". Till the worldly "ties loosen", the "ties eternal, Time and space/Nor darkness, gravitation, sense nor any bounds

2. Ibid., p. 347.
3. Ibid., p. 347.
4. Ibid., p. 347.
5. Ibid., p. 347.
bounding us...1 can bring us face to face with the joy, the
"fruit of all"...2. The Absolute is likened to:

Some parturition rather, some solemn
immortal birth;
On the frontiers to eyes impenetrable,
Some soul is passing over.3

Pre-occupied with his "own soul"...4. Whitman feels "the
majesty and beauty of the world"...5, latent in an "iota of
the world"...6. His belief in his being "limitless"...7 is
his belief in the absolute which makes us see and realize
that "the universes are limitless"...8. Life and death
are two poles of the absolute:

Did you think Life was so well provided for, and Death,
the purport of all life, is not well provided for?9

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 347.
2. Ibid., p. 347.
3. Ibid., p. 348.
4. Ibid., p. 351.
5. Ibid., p. 351.
6. Ibid., p. 351.
7. Ibid., p. 351.
8. Ibid., p. 351.
9. Ibid., p. 351.
Whitman believes that it is because of the divine power operating in this universe that "interiors have their interiors, and exteriors have their exteriors"\(^1\). All of them have their own places in the eternal scheme of things. They are not subject to vagaries of life. Moreover what we see with our naked eyes and hear with our mortal ears are unreal, frustrating and frutile and do not provide us an insight into the beauty and majesty of the Absolute grace. It is so because "the eyesight has another eyesight and the hearing another hearing, and the voice another voice"\(^2\). He further observes that "whatever can possibly happen anywhere at any time, is provided for in the inerences of things"\(^3\). Hence the poet needs no assurances. He is confident that "Life provides for all and for Time and Space"\(^4\). The poet thus absorbs "immortality and peace"\(^5\) and feels a thrill in becoming a part of the absolute:

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How plenteous! how spiritual! how resume!¹

The poet is simply astonished:

I was thinking the day most splendid till I saw what the not day exhibited, I was thinking this globe enough till there sprang out so noiseless, around me myriads of other globes.²

Unless "the great thoughts of space and eternity"³ fill the heart no mortal can "measure"⁴ himself "by them"⁵. It is only after death of ignorance that poet hopes to have the glimpse of the absolute:

O I see now that life can not exhibit all to me, as the day can not, I see that I am to wait for what will be exhibited by death.⁶

¹ whitman, walt, *leaves of grass*, p. 354.
² ibid., p. 354.
³ ibid., p. 354.
⁴ ibid., p. 354.
⁵ ibid., p. 354.
⁶ ibid., p. 354.
His long Island background and his sympathetic perspective is best imaged in the following lines:

Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.1

But some unseen mysterious omni-present power seems to "Bear"2 him as "through the regions infinite"3. The poet maintains that it is the same power:

Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, love me all over. 4

Hence the poet's desire to carve out a "passage" to the mysteries of the infinite grace. The poet believes that all his speculations, plans are carried on in "thoughts of Thee".5

2. Ibid., p. 327.
3. Ibid., p. 327.
4. Ibid., p. 327.
5. Ibid., p. 331.
The poet suddenly awakens to the divine mysteries beauti-
ifying this vast and prolific universe:

And these things I see suddenly, what mean they? 
As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes, ¹

He builds no hopes at all on man in his "natural"² condition. He shows himself in this particular a product of the past rather than a prophet of the future. There must be, he continually insists, a withdrawal from the "world"³, a relaxing of all dependence on outward, a return into the holy place within, a patient travail of soul, through inward poverty and death to the "will"⁴ entirely his "own"⁵, until the soul finds itself merged in union of will with the will of the Highest. None else is perhaps "more spiritual"⁶.

2. Ibid., p. 22.
3. Ibid., p. 321.
4. Ibid., p. 121.
5. Ibid., p. 123.
6. Ibid., p. 131.
The fundamental assumption behind all this is a dualism of natural mind and inner "light", which is "decisive and final". There is a similar dualism in Whitman; but always he seems to be trying to eliminate the dualism, to bridge what was unbridgeable, or at the very least to set up a sort of comradeship between his soul and body:

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul.
O I say now these are the soul!

O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me, Thy circumnavigation of the world begin, Of man, the voyage of his mind's return, To reason's early paradise, Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions, Again with fair creation.

Whatever Whitman's own theology, Whatever the inconsistencies of his Persona in the poetry, certainly he goes beyond the

Quakers in his attempt to retrieve the physical self from damnation by linking it to the spiritual soul. He sought to save the physical world by interfusing it with spirit:

With laugh and many a kiss,  
(Let others deprecate, let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation.)  
O soul thou pleasest me, I thee.  

As to the significance of the inner "light", it is preeminently the spirit of God in each man, which could be cultivated by quietism. It is God's law written into the spirit in man. It is true knowledge, the intuition of religious truth. True knowledge is merely the obvious manifestation and proof of intuition or Inner Light. The Absolute manifests itself as "Love" and gets interhyphenated not only with man but also with the objects of nature:

2. Ibid., p. 174.
Hither my love!  
Here I am! Here!  
with this just sustain'd note I announce myself to you,  
This gentle call is for you my love, for you.¹

Since the Absolute is omnipresent, Whitman wants us not to be "decoy'd elsewhere"². He finds the divine grace manifesting itself in the "whistle of the wind"³, in the "fluttering of the spray"⁴ and in the "shadows of the leaves"⁵. This divine presence can be realised in the "shining"⁶ of the "stars"⁷ and the "blowing"⁸ of the "winds"⁹. The notes of the birds are continuously "echoing"¹⁰ the divine beauty. The "yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face of the sea almost touching"¹¹ conveys to the poet the glory and magnificence of the Absolute.

¹, Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 206.  
², Ibid., p. 206.  
³, Ibid., p. 206.  
⁴, Ibid., p. 206.  
⁵, Ibid., p. 206.  
⁶, Ibid., p. 206.  
⁷, Ibid., p. 206.  
⁸, Ibid., p. 206.  
⁹, Ibid., p. 206.  
¹⁰, Ibid., p. 206.  
¹¹, Ibid., p. 206.
He says that we learn it from a consciousness within us, of having done right or wrong: because whenever we do amiss, and turn aside from the path of rectitude, we find something in us, that impeaches us, that brings guilt and remorse upon us. It certainly is something invisible to the outward senses of animal man; yet we know it to exist in us. There is nothing more self-evident to us than this fact; and here it is, then, through this medium, that we are to get right knowledge, right ideas, and right views of the divine character.

It is clear from all this that the inner "Light" is conceived as an instrument something like a divine radio set turned to the right channel to receive messages from God. But there is also an element of retention involved, in so far as one is able to learn from experience and develop a growing awareness and sensitivity to what is right and wrong. The inner "Light" seems to be not only a receiver but a record of true knowledge. At this point difficulties enter. It may be argued that a good recording is better than bad reception. Thus, scripture and ecclesiastic authority enter into the picture to give permanent form
and discipline to religious life.

Whitman condemns dogmatic Christianity. Beware of priests, churches, ritual, prayer, says Whitman — all this stands in the way of real religion. There is nothing in the universe more divine than man. Whitman makes no claim to settle religious questions, he can only stimulate thought by asserting that all-religions serve their purpose in their time, all are equally valid:

Magnifying and applying come I, outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah, Lithographing kronos, zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson, Buying drafts of osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha, In my portfolio Placing, Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved, with odin and the hideous — faced Mexitli and every idol and image¹

Whitman places immense faith in the immanence of the Absolute manifesting itself in the universe and in all objects that adorn and glorify it:

¹. Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 62.
Taking them all for what they are worth and
not a cent more,
Admitting they were alive and did the work of
their days.......

He accepts "the rough deific sketches" to fill out
"better" in himself. He bestows them "freely on
each man and woman". He considers even "a curl of
smoke" or "a hair" just "as curious as any
revelation". To him "Dung and dirt" are more
admirable than were ever "dreamed". The "supernatural" is of "no account". He himself is waiting to be
"one of the supremes". The day is "getting ready" for him when he shall do "as much good as the best."
and "be as prodigious". His "life-lumps" are now assuming the role of a "creator". He listens to his "own voice" which is the voice of the Absolute:

Come my children,
Come my boys and girls, my women, household and intimates,
Now the performer launches his nerve,
he has pass'd his prelude on the reeds within.
Easily written loose-finger'd chords - I feel the thrum of your climax and close.

the Absolute appears as "love" or "the sobbing liquid of life" glorifying this phenomenal world this is "the city" and he is "one of the citizens".

Prayer of Columbus is a monologue, a prayer to God, in which the "batter'd, wreck'd old man" rehearse like Job his failures and sufferings but reasserts his faith in God's plan. The confession progresses uniformly to the

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2. Ibid., p. 63.
3. Ibid., p. 63.
4. Ibid., p. 63.
5. Ibid., p. 63.
6. Ibid., p. 63.
7. Ibid., p. 63.
8. Ibid., p. 64.
9. Ibid., p. 64.
10. Ibid., p. 332.
last stanza, in which suddenly, as if in answer to his prayer, Columbus sees in vision:

Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,  
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,  
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.

Passage to India opens with a prologue, announcing the poet's initial theme: Out of the past have grown wonderful material achievements that have finally linked the old and the New-world. The remaining eight sections are given in a chanted monologue addressed mainly to the poet's soul, but in order to dramatize his thought he often personifies his illustrations and addresses each abstraction in turn. He sings, he says, ''Not you alone... facts of modern science''  
but ''Myths and fables of eld... bibles and legends.....''  
He asks his soul the rhetorical question, ''...seest thou not God's purpose from the first''? That is, ''The earth to be spann'd,.../The oceans to be cross'd,.../The lands

2. Ibid., p. 322.
3. Ibid.; p. 322.
4. Ibid., p. 322.
to be welded together'.

Then in section 3 he unrolls for his soul a sequence of panoramic images of this process in operation: 'I see... I see... I hear... I hear... I mark... I scan...'.

Thus the poet acts out the history of the human race, the 'feverish children' (sec. 5), 'Down from the gardens of Asia descending, radiating...'.

Crying out incessantly, 'Wherefore Unsatisfied soul? and whither O mocking life?'

Toward the end of section 5 the poet advances his second theme despite the achievements of the explorers, scientists, and inventors there still remain separations and gaps between man and nature, but the poet, the 'true son of God', will fuse them.

In section 6 and 7 Whitman attempts this fusion by rationalizing man's place in the scheme of nature and history. Like Milton's, his purpose is to justify the ways

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2. Ibid., pp. 322-323.
3. Ibid., p. 324.
4. Ibid., p. 324.
5. Ibid., p. 324.
6. Ibid., p. 325.
of God to man, though he still consistently speaks to his soul instead of directly to mankind. This attempt to plunge by intuition back to "reason's early paradise", 1 to the wisdom that man possessed before he became alienated from God and Nature, leads to the chief dramatic situation of the poem. Section 8 opens with:

O we can wait no longer,
We too take ship 0 soul, 2

The poet now takes a mystic pleasure in his soul and the thought of their union with God:

Bathe me, 0 God in thee, mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee. 3

He thinks of God as the "Comrade Perfect", 4 who waits somewhere for him and his soul, and he is eager for

2. Ibid., pp. 326-327.
3. Ibid., p. 327.
4. Ibid., p. 327.
"Passage to more than India". He asks his soul another rhetorical question:

Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like mere brutes?
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough? 2

For the poet who had for so many years sung the delights of the body and the perfection of the material universe, this overwhelming desire for liberating death is indeed the culminating dramatic situation in the poem. He can now wait no longer, and he commands his soul to "sail forth-steer for the deep waters only...." 3. He is not afraid for "are they not all the seas of God?" 4

It is in Passage to India that the fusion in diction is achieved most impressively. The "Light of the light" 5 of universes, the "centre" 6 of them all is "Thou moral,

2. Ibid., p. 329.
3. Ibid., p. 329.
4. Ibid., p. 329.
5. Ibid., p. 327.
6. Ibid., p. 327.
spiritual fountain-affection's source-thou reservoir'. This is the "Pulse" that is the:

.....Motive of the stars, suns, systems, That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious, Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space.

One of Whitman's fundamental ideas—almost the very base of his metaphysics—is the doctrine of "identity", which to him is a "knit" achieved by "opposite equals"—namely, of sex. This entire creation, for him, is the product of two principles, two elements fused though antagonistic, and the soul of the universe is the male and genital master and the impregnating and animating spirit—Physical matter is female and mother and waits barren and bloomless, the jets of life from the masculine vigour.

2. Ibid., p. 327.
3. Ibid., p. 327.
So that with "the seas all crossed, weather'd the capes, the voyage done"\(^1\), and "the Elder Brother found, the younger"\(^2\) might melt "in fondness in his arms"\(^3\). It is surely this divine "guest" who is "beautiful and happy" and of whom he speaks in To Think of Time:

It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your Mother and father it is to identify you, but that you should be decided,\(^4\)

He continues:

The guest that was coming.... he waited long... he is now housed, He is one of those who are beautiful and happy.\(^5\)

Spirit is lovely, the Deity is perfect joy. Brahma, the supreme Being whom the soul obtains, is described as the

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2. Ibid., p. 328.
3. Ibid., p. 328.
4. Ibid., p. 344.
5. Ibid., p. 344.
happy refuse of souls, the giver of joy to the mind; the fountain of joy; and the immortal.

As another proof of his wonderful power of capturing the glimpse of the Absolute, the following passage from Whitman's *Song of the Universe* may be cited:

Over the mountain - growths disease and sorrow, An uncaught bird is ever hovering, hovering, High in the purer, happier air.¹

Whitman always finds "one ray of perfect light"² or "one flash of heaven's glory"³ darting forth from "imperfection's smurkiest cloud"⁴. Those are "the blest eyes"⁵ and "the happy hearts"⁶ that are endowed with divine power to "see"⁷ and to "know the guiding thread"⁸

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² Ibid., p. 186.
³ Ibid., p. 186.
⁴ Ibid., p. 186.
⁵ Ibid., p. 186.
⁶ Ibid., p. 186.
⁷ Ibid., p. 186.
⁸ Ibid., p. 186.
along "the mighty labyrinth." Man's purpose is to know the divine "scheme's culmination", its "thought", and its "reality". He must try to know his own "grandeur" and:

Deific faiths and amplitudes, absorbing, comprehending all All eligible to all.

Absolute stands for "immortality". The lack of the knowledge of it is "dream". It is like living in ignorance far removed from the realm of divine beauty:

And failing it life's lore and wealth a dream, And all the world a dream.

2. Ibid., p. 187.
3. Ibid., p. 187.
4. Ibid., p. 187.
5. Ibid., p. 187.
8. Ibid., p. 187.
In Chanting The Square Deific cosmos is seen emerging "out of the one"\(^1\) and "out of the square entirely divine"\(^2\), the Absolute. The four deities are brought to our focus. Jehovah is the first "old Brahm"\(^3\), the "Saturnius"\(^4\) independent of "Time"\(^5\) because he himself is "Time, Old, Modern as any"\(^6\). But it is:

Unpersuadable, relentless, executing righteous judgements.\(^7\)

The Absolute appears:

As the Earth, the Father, the brown old kronos, with laws, Aged beyond computation yet ever new, ever with those mighty laws rolling.\(^8\)

It is "Relentless"\(^9\) and forgives no man:

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Whoever sins dies.  

It keeps dispensing "judgements inexorable without the least remorse".  

The Second deity is the "Consolator". It is "Most mild" and pronounces "one advancing" prepared to undergo any tortures provided they could increase welfare of human beings:

With gentle hand extended, the mightier God am I, 
Foretold by prophets and poets in their most rapt prophecies and poems,
From this side, lo! the Lord Christ gazes — lo! Hermes I— lo! mine is Hercules' face,
All sorrow, labor, suffering, I, tallying it, absorb in myself,
Many times have I been rejected, taunted, Put in Prison, and crucified and many times shall be again.  

It has given up "All the world" for "Dear brother's and sister's sake, /for the soul's sake". It keeps on

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2. Ibid., p. 348.
3. Ibid., p. 348.
4. Ibid., p. 348.
5. Ibid., p. 348.
6. Ibid., p. 348.
7. Ibid., p. 349.
8. Ibid., p. 349.
Crafty, despised a drudge, ignorant,
with sudra face and worn brow, black, but in the
depths of my heart,
Proud as any,
Lifted now and always against whoever scorning
assumes to rule me.¹

He is "full of guile"². He is defiant and "still utter
words"³ which baffle the mind of man. Hence "nor time
nor change shall ever change"⁴ him or his words. The
last deity is "Santa Spirita"⁵. He includes God, Christ
and Satan all in one. He is:

Beyond the light, lighter than light,
Beyond the flames of hell, joyous, leaping easily
above hell,
Beyond Paradise, Perfumed solely with mine own perfume.⁶

He is life of "the great round world, the sun and stars
and of man"⁷. This Absolute is "the general soul"⁸.
This Absolute is "the solid, I the most solid"⁹. Whitman

² Ibid., p. 349.
³ Ibid., p. 349.
⁴ Ibid., p. 349.
⁵ Ibid., p. 349.
⁶ Ibid., p. 349.
⁷ Ibid., p. 349.
⁸ Ibid., p. 349.
⁹ Ibid., p. 349.
calls the universe wisdom itself, for matter and spirit,
as milk and water, are inseparable. Whitman insists:

Lack one lacks both

The insignificant is as big to me as any

The earth (is) good, and the stars good, and their
adjuncts all good.

The moth and the fish eggs are in their place,
The suns I see and the suns I can not see are in
their place,
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its
place.

The "pleasures" of the "body" belong to the spirit;
whitman believes "in the flesh and the appetites", and
is "the poet of the body", too, each particular thing
in which he "worship(s)" since they belong to "others",

2. Ibid., p. 48.
3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. Ibid., p. 37.
5. Ibid., p. 40.
6. Ibid., p. 128.
7. Ibid., p. 44.
8. Ibid., p. 40.
9. Ibid., p. 44.
10. Ibid., p. 126.
also, the others 'shall assume what (he) assume(s)'.

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own.

The Yogi is declared to be 'awake' when aware of his spiritual nature, though 'asleep' in reference to sensible objects.

Whitman starts Passage to India by announcing that all times—present, past, future—are homogeneous in Ideal Time, or pure essence which is absolute:

For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?
(As a projectile form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,
So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past).

2. Ibid., p. 43.
3. Ibid., p. 39.
5. Ibid., p. 293.
Along all history, down the slopes,
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again
to the surface rising,
A ceaseless thought, a varied train - lo, soul, to thee,
thy sight, they rise,
The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions:
AgainVasco de Gama sails forth,
Again the knowledge gain'd, the mariner's compass,
Lands found and nations born, thou born America,
For purpose Vast, man's long probation fill'd, ¹
Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd.

Ideal Time plus Ideal space gives Whitman the solution
to the problem of communion: identity of all discrete phenomena
in Absolute.

The next step requires that Whitman, as representative
self, becomes Ideal Time space. His existential reality
experiences lyric communion with his soul or the principle
of being in itself. This marriage of his creatural integrity
with the eternal principle of being (soul) collapses all
distinctions that make up the universe. The universe is
one, there is no time or space, only Ideal Time space.
So there is no death and no estrangement between one and
other:

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, smilest content at Death, And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of space. Greater than stars or suns, Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth; What love than thine and ours could wider amplify? What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours O soul? What dreams of the Ideal? What plans of purity, perfection, strength? What cheerful willingness for others' sake to give up all? For other's sake to suffer all?¹

His representative self now in communion with his soul, Whitman is automatically united with God. For God is the soul—the "Elder Brother", another version of the God in Song of Myself. If he is in communion with his soul, he is in communion with himself. And since the soul is not only one's personal property but the creation's soul as well, Whitman's soul is a universal self. If he is whole, the universe is whole "Love complete"² reigns throughout Ideal Time-space. All Times and all space are meant to satisfy the soul by collapsing themselves in the

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, pp. 327-328.
² Ibid., p. 328.
³ Ibid., p. 328.
union of his creatural self with Ideal Time space. All historical actions and thoughts are "yet thine, all thine, 0 soul, the same". All is the "same" as the self.

History, present experience, the future - all is food for the essential soul of Whitman's representative self. The world of Passage to India is the self-reflective, tautological cosmos of the final sections of Song of Myself the infinite sea, the void:

Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,
Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, 0 soul,)
Caroling free, singing our song of God,
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration. 2

All existence, as men can know it, is to be risked for the venture into this void where all "these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hooked and linked together". 3

2. Ibid., p. 327.
3. Ibid., p. 324.
In *Passage to India* the figure of Columbus is "Christ the divine", 1 who points with unmitigated conviction of success to the New world's fulfillment of its destiny in solving the problem of communion between Heaven and Earth. The west accomplished Columbus' visionary design by equating itself in Absolute with all the old worlds and all the possible new ones:

And who art thou sad shade?
Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,
with majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes,
Spreading around with every look of thine a golden world,
Enhuing it with gorgeous hues. 2

As the chief histrion,
Down to the footlights walks in some great scena,
Dominating the rest I see the Admiral himself,
(History's type of courage, action, faith)
Behold him sail from Palos leading his little fleet,
His voyage behold, his return, his great fame,
His misfortunes, calumniators, behold him a prisoner,
Chain'd,
Behold his dejection, Poverty, death. 3

2. Ibid., p. 326.
3. Ibid., p. 326.
(Curious in time I stand, noting the efforts of heroes, Is the deferment long? bitter the slander. Poverty, death? Lies the seed unreck'd for centuries in the ground? lo, to God's due occasion, Uprising in the night, it sprouts, blooms, And fills the earth with use and beauty.)

For an Absolute the present is the apex of all times and spaces, all history so even though Whitman pays homage to "God's due occasion", he does so confident that he is experiencing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the final completion of divine purpose, which is the human soul's identification with God. The ensuing journey is "safe", for there can be no risk of loss or pain or misery in a world without differentiation or mutability. when all times and all space become Absolute and when the self is God, all the future passages track through seas that are "all the seas of God".

Faith in Absolute inspires Columbus to feel the "interior command" in the first place. Faith is

2. Ibid., p. 88.
3. Ibid., p. 329.
columbus' sense of life:

O I am sure they really came from thee,
The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,
The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,
A message from the Heavens whispering to me
even in sleep,
These sped me on. 1

The prayer for justification is identical to the
prayer of thanks for being granted the life to do what
needs justification:

One effort more, my alter this bleak sand;
That thou O God my life hast lighted,
With ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed to Thee,
Light rare untellable, lighting the very light,
Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages;
For that O God, be it my latest word, here on my knees,
Old, poor, and Paralyzed, I thank Thee. 2

Prayer of Columbus is not a pious token, however, offered
out of grudging formality. Whitman as Columbus is perfectly
frank with God about the appalling misery of his existence.
Indeed, in its restraint, the opening stanza betrays an

2. Ibid., p. 331.
almost non-christian attitude toward suffering. The straightforward yet sculptured phrasing and the simple diction combine Homeric clarity with Anglo-saxon pathos:

A batter'd, wreck'd old man,
Thrown on this savage shore, far, far from home,
Pent by the sea and dark rebellious brows, twelve dreary months,
Sore, Stiff with many toils, sicken'd and night to death,
I take my way along the island's edge,
Venting a heavy heart.¹

Only after this stalwart and objective appraisal of his situation does Whitman venture the more subjective outburst of pain and urgent desire typical of the christian sense of interconnected suffering and pity:

I am too full of woe!
Haply I may not live another day;
I can not rest O God, I can not eat or drink or sleep,
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once more to Thee,
Breathe, bathe myself once more in Thee, commune with Thee,
Report myself once more to Thee.²

¹ Whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 330.
² Ibid., p. 330.
his tempered frankness, both classical and Christian, sets
the tone proper to eventual acknowledgment of the distinction
between man and God. In Passage to India man is God because
of the universal identity of the soul. In Prayer of Columbus,
God can be God for man only because He is not man. And
whitman, poignantly human before this God, is more convincing
as Christ the son of man, who must succumb to the conditions
and feelings of mortality in order to do his father's
business. Columbus's sufferings as a man in and of history -
not, as in Passage to India, the "Chief histrión" 1 or
actor in an "historic" 2 Pageant—are, like Christ's,
entirely human. They provide the ground for submission to
God's inscrutable will not for defiant coercion. Prayer
of Columbus harks back to As I Ebb'd. In both poems the
lesson to be learned is unflinching truth to the tragic
predicament. This truth requires doubt about one's
significance and humble recognition that grace can come only
from without.

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 326.
2. Ibid., p. 381.
My terminus near,
The clouds already closing in upon me,
The voyage balk'd, the course disputed, lost,
I yield my ships to Thee.¹

My hands, my limbs grow nerveless,
My brain feels rack'd, bewilder'd,
Let the old timbers part, I will not part,
I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves
buffet me,
Thee, Thee at least I know.²

Is it the prophet's thought I speak, or am I raving?
what do I know of life? What of myself?
I know not even my own work past or present,
Dim ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,
Of newer better worlds, their mighty parturition,
Mocking, perplexing me.³

And resolution comes not with mastership but humility:
"Leaving results to Thee!"⁴ Whitman does not presume
to have the impossible experience of the Ideal. All he
has is submission to God's purpose, without knowing what
that purpose really is. Whitman now is a means to an end

2. Ibid., p. 332.
3. Ibid., p. 332.
4. Ibid., p. 331.
which his human nature cannot comprehend: "The end I know not, it is all in Thee." Whitman's prayer ennobles humanity by being true to its limitations. A man can intend the good and work for it. But to know finally whether his accomplishments are good, he must refer to the only standard which can do them justice — the standard which is by definition beyond humanity. Yet at the same time accessible to it. He can say "'Perhaps'"¹, but not "'certainly'"².

The end I know not, it is all in Thee,  
Or small or great I know not — haply what broad Fields, what lands,  
Haply the brutish measureless human undergrowth I know.  
Transplanted there may rise to stature, knowledge Worthy Thee,  
Haply the swords I know may there indeed be turn'd to reaping-tools,  
Haply the lifeless cross I know, Europe's dead Cross, May bud and blossom there.³

The reward for humility is not union with the transcendent, but communion with humility. In the closing

¹. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 94.  
². Ibid., p. 344.  
³. Ibid., p. 331.
Stanza of *Prayer of Columbus*, Columbus has a vague glimmering of the future significance of his efforts to "uncloy"¹ and "unloose"² the old world, to enact communion on earth by "rounding"³ and "trying"⁴ the "unknown"⁵ to the "known"⁶. This distinction between the first and second eyesights is that is between the tragic and the lyric modes. Through the first Whitman sees himself and everything else as matter, or variable appearance. Through the second he sees that all is, simple. Consequently, he is convinced he can be united with all other existents through either of two modes. The first is the mode of connection by phenomenal similarity or analogy, through the medium of properties. The second is the mode of identity, through "departing"⁷, "effusing"⁸, and "drifting"⁹ to the

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transcendent "life". In the mode of identity, all things having being are the same with reference to the fact that they have being. As distinguished from the field of the first eyesight, the second's is amorphous. It has no forms; it is the platonic Real, or the principle of being in itself.

Upon moving from the first to the Second mode of unity, the self explodes into God. Since all is matter, in Whitman's sense of having properties, bodies exist. But since all in the universe has being, there is spirit. Body and spirit to Whitman are the same in that they both simply are, but different in that the body's being depends on its existence as matter while the spirit's depends solely on the fact of being in itself. Whitman's God, viewed from the perspective of the Second, lyric eyesight is the spirit, or soul - the fact that things have being. This non-theistic spirit saturates existence; it is essence in the broadest sense. The important point is that when Whitman moves beyond the range of the first, tragic

eyesight and out of the mode of connection properties to
the Second "vision" in the sense of visionary Power
would be more appropriate to the force of this experience
and the mode of identity, he can not even conceive the
body and spirit as separate.

But sometimes, especially in the alternation
between the intense physicality and wild spirituality of
Song of Myself, he does not see – through the Second,
lyric eyesight – the absolute integration entailed by the
mode of identity. In Song of Myself the obstacle to
Whitman's vision seems to come from feelings of error and
guilt about emphasizing the body to the detriment of the
spirit. When Whitman grows confessional, this spirit also
changes in meaning; it retains only the difference from
the body, losing the sameness. If he had been able to
attain the vision of universal identity, Whitman would find
such emphasis on the body as separate from the soul
impossible.

1. whitman, Walt, Leaves of Grass, p. 357.
whitman records such a lapse from the vision of pure, homogeneous being back to the perception of confusing experiences in the world in this passage from Song of Myself:

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy, To touch my person to someone else's is about as much as I can stand. 1

On all sides prurient provokers—stiffening my limbs, Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip, Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial, Depriving me of my best as for a purpose, Unbuttoning my clothes and holding me by the bare waist, Deluding my confusion with the calm of the Sunlight and pasture fields, Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away, They bribed to swap off with touch, and go and graze at the edges of me, No consideration, no regard for my draining Strength or my anger, Fetching the rest of the herd around to enjoy them awhile, Then all uniting to stand on a headland and worry me..... 2

2. Ibid., p. 47.
In the first two lines, the poet occupies the realm of the lyric eyesight, in which even the most basic sense, touch, simply corroborates the fact of being. Happiness is the automatic result of his sense of pure being. But in the ensuing lines he returns to the tragic mode of communion. The sense of touch unlooses a hysterical complex of desire and shame. It, no longer affirms the joy of being. Instead, it stirs Whitman to the tormenting experience of a world in which the pitch of yearning for unity increases as objective realities 'quiver' him to 'a new identity,' the identity of a mortal man who wants unity precisely because his senses prove that he is alienated.

Thus, Whitman's concept of the Absolute is contrary to the traditional Christian belief in God and is therefore highly original and thought provoking.