WALT WHITMAN'S SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY
FROM BROOKLYN TO INDIA

...this is no book
Who touches this touches a man
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)
It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms:

So affirms Walt Whitman in 'So Long.' In *Leaves of Grass*, which is described by the poet as his 'definitive carte visite' to the coming generations, the shadows of Walt Whitman fall everywhere. There is not one Walt Whitman, there are many. To Thoreau he appears 'wonderfully like the Orientals,' and Emerson rubs his eyes 'a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion' though his wife would fain not let that notorious loafer cross the threshold of their home. Across the Atlantic he seems to cast a spell as it were. Mrs. Gilchrist falls in love with the poet at first sight and finds in his portrait 'the face of Christ,' whereas to J. A. Symonds a reading of his poetry is 'tantamount to religious conversion.' Dante Gabriel Rossetti is nearly swept off his feet: 'That glorious man Whit will one day be known as one of the greatest sons of Earth, a few steps below Shakespeare, Darwin or Nietzsche.' To this may be added the popular though idealistic Indian image of a sage haunted by divine visions and Upanishadic truths. But the twentieth century images of the poet are as intriguing as conflicting. If to Leon Howard he is 'a foot-loose Thoreau whose Walden was everywhere,' to Leslie Fiedler he is, 'that pristine poet, that dirtiest beast, whom in a world grown ever more genteel we cannot afford to lose...as offensive as any disturber of received ideas, as upsetting as Copernicus or. Darwin or Nietzsche.' Allen Ginsberg loves to 'stroll dreaming of the lost America of love' in the company of this 'grubber' and inquires 'Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The Doors close in an hour/which way does your beard point tonight?'—the beard which strikes Lorca because it is 'full of butterflies,' the beard of a poet whose 'voice like a pillar of
ashes' can 'cry like a bird/whose sex is transfixed by a needle?'
D. H. Lawrence finds in him 'a very great post-mortem poet of the transitions of the soul as it loses its integrity. The poet of the soul's last shout and shriek, on the confines of death.' 'Whitman is to my fatherland,' observes Ezra Pound, 'what Dante is to Italy.' To make matters worse, the poet himself has added to these vastly diverse and contradictory images quite a few: 'Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself.'

Who goes there? Hankering, gross, mystical, nude?

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding.

Or, look at the torrent of abuses hurled by him at his own self:
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety
Blabb'd, blush'd resented, lied, stole, grudg'd;
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak
Was wayward, vain greedy, shallow, sly...

and thus it goes on! One could go on gathering innumerable images of the poet both from his poetry and his readers, the images that war with one another. But where will this unavailing though fascinating game lead us? It is true Walt Whitman is essentially romantic and so intensely subjective that any line of demarcation between his poetry and personality is easily blurred; and his work readily lends itself to biographical criticism which has grown so dense. Biographical criticism has one apparent advantage in that it takes you into the innermost recesses of the artist's mind and lays bare the studio of his creative activity. It is none the less not without a danger of letting the personality of the artist loom large on the work of art and thus cloud the perspective. Font that matter, what do we know of lives of the painters and sculptors of the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellora in India? How much do we know of the life of Homer or Kalidasa or even Shakespeare? And yet our aesthetic experience, surely,
WALT WHITMAN'S SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

does not suffer. But looking at the bulk of Whitman criticism, one cannot help being sick to see the way critics after critics rattled the bones of the poet or gloated over the theme of his homosexuality or mental perversities, at times leaning heavily on those ninth-rate poems which, perhaps, the poet might have let willingly die. He himself cautions us against any perversity of approach: 'Grandest poetic passages are only to be taken at free removes, or as we sometimes look for stars at night, not by directly gazing towards them, but off one side. In a sense, poetry like that of Walt Whitman's is an atonement for life's deficiencies and does not fail to transcend personal limitations. Like the play, the poem is the thing. Approaches to poetry should be for poetry's sake without either confusing the poet's personality with his work or building up any scaffolding of dialectical philosophy by tracing farfetched influences and parallelisms. When Thoreau complimented Whitman by hailing Leaves of Grass as 'wonderfully like the Orientals' and inquired if he had read them, the poet pleaded ignorance saying: 'No. Pray tell me all about them.' But the author of The Solitary Singer does not take the poet at his word and persists in his contention that Whitman had studied the Orientals. Now if one spins the coin and looks at the other side, would the poet's reply not appear also as a mail of a plagiarist? With Gay Wilson Allen, unfortunately, Whitman's background of Oriental studies has been a sort of obsession. In his book, Walt Whitman Hand-Book, hopelessly attempts to vindicate this point of view with uncritical zest. He writes: 'In 1889 Gabriel Sarrazin declared that Walt Whitman, in his confident and lofty piety, is the direct inheritor of the great Oriental mystics, Brahma, Proclus and Abou Said. It is amazing how a mystic called Brahma does not disturb a scholar of his stature; for Brahma the Lord of creation is the theme of Emerson's well-known poem also, but Brahma the mystic is yet to be born. So far he is a chimera. It is equally staggering to see Indian scholars' zest for paralleling Vedanta and Whitman as if Leaves of Grass were a dream of an American Brahmin fallen asleep over the scriptures of
the East. It is amusing to see the portrait of the Vedantic Whitman as it emerges from these studies. Parallels are drawn between Whitman and Sankara, Whitman and Shakespeare, Whitman and Nietzsche, Whitman and Tagore and so on. All this points to one fundamental fact—the universality of mind which is the mark of genius. Take for instance, Shakespeare who had a universal mind. Is there one great thinker who preceded him or followed him, the echoes of whose thoughts are directly or obliquely not heard in his works? Did they all influence him? Whitman’s too, was a universal mind with a very sensitive antenna of intuition. His grasp of universal philosophy was intuitive. Here is a poet in whose case the cliché, ‘all great minds think alike’ comes true. It was an era of Transcendentalism and, as Malcolm Cowley observes, ‘Vedanta was in the air.’ But these Vedantic scholars would do well not to ignore the fact that “American Transcendentalism might be called the offspring of a German father and a Hindu mother.” The poet who declaimed Homer and Shakespeare wandering on the sea-shore was exposed to all sorts of complex influences of life and literature and tracing these influences can at the best give us shocks of recognition and nothing more. The enquiry into Whitman’s influence on Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, John Masefield, Rabindranath Tagore, and others and the consequent impact on the course of modern poetry could be as fascinating as the study of influences on Whitman who has inspired Edwin Arlington Robinson to pay him a great homage:

The master-songs are ended, and the man
That sang them is a name. And so is God
A name; and so is love, and life, and death
And everything. But we, who are too blind
To read what we have written, or what faith
Has written for us, do not understand;
We only blink, and wonder.
We surely blink and wonder at *Leaves of Grass* which according to Roger Asselineau, is ‘essentially a long cry of wonder before the beauty of the world, and of astonishment before the mystery of life.’ It is as complex and varied and immense as life itself. Both as an extension of poetic sensibility and experience and novelty of diction and even technique it is a landmark in the history of nineteenth century American poetry. At a close look, however, it does not betray a uniform degree of poetic achievement and excellence, and roughly falls into three categories. One, the verse of his ‘en-masse’ his ‘barbaric yawp’: noisy, loud, crowded, congested, and even at times stinking. Two, his pseudomystical verse not lacking in ill-digested and vague philosophisings; a little pretentious and didactic. But then there is the third kind of poetry: his profoundly calm and meditative poems, exuding an exquisite lyrical charm and beauty, the poems that the heart lifts and chants like hymns, revealing the essential Walt Whitman, the poet who with confidence can stand with any great poet anywhere in the world. In the words of Geoffrey Dutton these poems are as fresh as the words just spoken by someone you love, and as permanent as only the highest poetic imagination can make it. No passage of time has corroded the terminals of his sense perceptions. His human sympathies are so basic that they are unshakable, and the great symbols to which his being vibrated are unchanged….the sea, the grass, the song of a bird, night, sleep, death and the stars.

To this class belong ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,’ ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’, ‘When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d’. Of this kind again are some cantos of ‘Song of Myself’ or even ‘Passage to India’ that takes the reader on an endless cruise. There is nothing static about *Leaves of Grass*. Like a surging sea it is the poetry of ceaseless flux. The poet is obviously in no mood to stand and stare, but like Ulysses moves with a hungry heart in search of the unknown. In fact this was a typical Transcendental trait. As Sculley Bradley points out
To Whitman; to Emerson, to Thoreau, as to other contemporary leaders of liberal thought, the individual human intuition was the energetic force in the evolitional condition. Mankind was called upon to tramp a perpetual journey. One's freedom to follow his vision was limited only by the freedom of others on the same road, which extended backward to the huge first Nothing and forward beyond vistas no man could foresee endlessly, forever.

The poet, to use the phrase of Shelley, is a pilgrim of eternity. And as Blake puts it, 'This World of Imagination, is the world of Eternity...Infinite and Eternal...There exist in the Eternal world permanent realities of everything...'. Thus poetry is voyaging on the waves of fancy and imagination into some vast unknown; it is an exploration. It is an eternal quest of the human heart, 'a journey into unknown areas, as the type of the uncertain faring of humanity and the human consciousness through life...a kind of knowing and that too the highest and farthest that exists for us.' The poet is a traveller along the uncharted contours of the conscious and the subconscious even unconscious. Time and place are ubiquitous, but it is the function of poetry to rise above this ubiquity without annihilating either. Particularly, the romantic temper loves to apprehend reality in flux, and the traveller is a typical romantic figure no matter whether it is Coleridge's Mariner or the protagonist of Wordsworth's Prelude, the lonely Knight of Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' or Browning's Childe Rolland or even Arnold's Scholar. This journey theme is not confined to the nineteenth century poetry alone. It is there in the poetry of our times and even in the works of the existentialists. Does not a Kafka protagonist travel on and on through the corridors of castles and courts? It has been there all along.

In literature as in religion the long journey motif is as old as the hills. In the scriptures, all over the world, life is described as a journey not merely from the cradle to the grave but also from this world to the other, from the physical to the spiritual, from mortality to immortality from here to eternity. The image of life as a road is evident in all cultures, and
WALT WHITMAN'S SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

man is viewed as an eternal tramp. Even science vindicates this allegory of journey, and Darwin's theory of the evolution of species propounds the idea of man's journey to the higher and higher stages of evolution. Agastya and Ulysses, Marco Polo and Columbus, the great explorers and voyagers have all furnished literature with myths centering round the journey theme in literature. The action of the ancient epics runs through travels and battles. These journeys sometimes symbolise inner journeys along spiritual contours far beyond the terminals of space and time. It is a prominent motif in the epic poetry of the East and the West, and in the epics like Mahabharata and Odyssey the journey theme is right at the centre. Dante opens Inferno with this metaphor:

In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost. 
Ah! how hard a thing it is to tell what a wild, and rough and stubborn wood this was, which in my thought renews the fear!

The scheme of Divine Comedy has a very vital journey theme of spiritual and cosmic dimensions. Milton's Paradise Lost is certainly not devoid of it. If Satan's space travels are intended to sabotage the divine set-up eventually by contriving the fall of man, the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden in quest of 'paradise, fairer far within' marks the beginning of the eternal human Odyssey. Bunyan uses the same motif in Pilgrim's Progress powerfully. The nineteenth century witnessed the romantic experience and romantic assertion on a grand scale on both sides of the Atlantic. The narrow circle of settled and traditional horizons no longer satisfied man, in literature we see quite a heavy traffic along the roads not taken, and the artist is seen heading for the unreached skies. This situation is brilliantly summed up by Sculley Bradley:

The eighteenth-century rationalism, with its concept of a universe whose final limits of form were already fixed by the laws of its being, had now served its time. To
Whitman, to Emerson, to Thoreau, as to other contemporary leaders of liberal thought, the individual human intuition was the energetic force in the evolutionary condition. Mankind was called upon to "tramp a perpetual journey". One's freedom to follow his vision was limited only by the freedom of others on the same road, which extended backward to the "huge first Nothing", and forward beyond vistas no man could foresee, endlessly, forever... The consequences of this idea extend through the whole of *Leaves of Grass*.

The journey is quite a major theme in Walt Whitman's poetry. Gay Wilson Allen digs out an interesting evidence from Dr. Bucke's *Notes and Fragments* to show the inherent journey motif in Whitman's plan to write "a volume... running in ideas and description through the whole range of recorded time—Egyptian, Hindustani, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Alb, Gallic—and so on down to the present day". The poem "which celebrates the procession without a halt" could never be written by the poet whose genius was essentially lyrical. "But the 'procession' idea is always an underlying motif; the word itself constantly recurs in Walt Whitman's poems. 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*". Walt Whitman is an incorrigible romantic vagabond, a wandering bard who has hardly much time to stand and stare excepting in his most inspired moments. In the whole range of Victorian poetry it is difficult to come across a poet with such a wanderlust and unrest. It makes a decisive shift.

The shift of image from the contemplative eye of "established poems" to the voyaging ego of Whitman's poetry records a large scale theoretical shift from the catagories of "substance" to those of process. The true voyage is the endless becoming of reality. Here there is no clear distinction among the traveler, the road and the journey, for the journey is nothing but the progressive unity of the voyager and the lands he enters".
Charles Feidelson, Jr. thus views in Whitman’s poems not merely ‘voyages’ in a metaphysical sense, but also a “new theory of literary composition for imaginative works” involving the poet’s “becoming the reality of his vision and of his words, in which the reader also participates”.

Whitman had profound historical sense that enabled him to view the procession of races on the march. In “Song of the Open Road” he views

...the universe itself as a road, as many roads,
as roads for travelling souls.
All parts away for the progress of the souls,
All religions, all solid things, arts, governments—
... ... ... ... ... ...the procession of
souls along grand roads of the universe.
... ... ... ... ... ...
Camerado, I give my hand!
... will you come travel with me?

That way Whitman’s passages run. The journey theme lent
Leaves of Grass a dynamic motif ever pushing off the bounds of
time and space, on the spiritual plane drifting toward eternity.

Leaves of Grass is the poetry of flux. There is hardly anything static about it. It abounds in kinetic imagery, both spatial and temporal, and creates a deep impression of some huge, ceaseless movement. The poet opens it with a positive statement in “Inscriptions”:

Here are our thoughts, voyagers’ thoughts,
... ... ... ... ... ... ...
The sky o’erarches here, we feel the undulating
deck beneath our feet,
We feel the long pulsation, ebb and flow of
endless motion
... ... ... ... ... ... ...
The boundless vista and the horizon far and dim
are all here,
... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Toward the fag-end of his life we notice the same urge guiding the poet to cast 'a backward glance o'er travel'd roads', the urge of a traveller:

So here I sit gossiping in the early candle light of old age—I and my book—casting backward glances over our travel'd road.

After completing, as it were, the journey.

Between "Inscriptions" and "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" we have a continual recurrence of this theme. It is visible on the surface in the poems like "The Song of the Open Road" in which we are asked "To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads/as roads for travelling souls", while in the poem like "A Noiseless Patient Spider" the journey motif is embodied in a most subtle way. Here is a spiritual journey. The sight of the spider launching "forth filament, filament, filament, out off itself/Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them" at once stirs the poet's soul, "surrounded, detached in measureless oceans of space" to journey forth along the gossamer thread which is in fact for it a path of eternity along which he seeks an identity between his ego and cosmos. "The Sleepers" which is written in the stream-of-consciousness way, much before it was identified as a mode of expression and technique, presents a fantastic voyage in the inner-space, as it were, across the corridors of the subconscious. The poet flits about all night from bedside to bedside identifying himself with the dreamers in their most unguarded moments. He has travelled a stupendous range from life to death without either fearing death or ceasing to love life.

I too pass from the night,
I stay a while away O night, but I return to you again and
I love you.

This fantasy of journeying through the dream-worlds of others is one of those moments in Whitman's poetic activity when we would fain reject all his caution against taking his poems "as a literary performance or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism". For here is poetry for poetry's sake and as in
"Passage to India" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" the principle of structure is determined by the theme of journey. In "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd" the journey is not imaged merely through the cycle of seasons whirling round with 'ever returning spring' or even by the journey of the coffin. It is also exhibited by the hidden tension in the poet's mind from the start between the song of the bird and the symbolic star of life, and the ultimate drift toward the song. Even in the "Calamus" and "Sea-Drift" poems we encounter the soul journeying not so much backward or forward, but as Richard Chase observes: "back to the roots of its being and discovers there a final mystery, or love or comradeship, or death", metaphysical journeys. While in "Song of Myself", where the self assumes a most supple quality, expanding and contracting as it wills, the journeys are as numerous as subtle. Quite striking again, is the theme of the march of humanity, travelling endlessly across the shifting frontiers in "Pioneers, O Pioneers!" If one were to shun all journeying in Leaves of Grass and distil the 'I' out of it, what will really remain? Whitman is the poet of the open air and loves to wander endlessly under the big sky.

The journey theme is vitally linked up with the poet-reader relationship also. Unlike Keats or Shelley, who is hardly if ever aware of the audience once he steps into his world of imagination, Whitman cannot enisle himself even on the sea of fancy. The portals of his poetry are for ever flung wide open and we at once jostle through willy-nilly. The poet's journey to the reader, using his poem as a ferry as he does in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," is quite central to our understanding.

Closer yet I approach you,

What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you

... ... ... ... ...

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good looking at you now for all you cannot see me?
In fact the ‘I’ sprawls all over *Leaves of Grass* like the spider, but neither noiselessly nor patiently. This mythical ‘I’ is an intriguing figure. He is sometimes everyman, sometimes oversoul, sometimes the wandering human voice and more often than not the poet himself. “The ‘I’ of *Leaves of Grass* anticipates such different creations as T.S. Eliot’s Tiresias and James Joyce’s Bloom, just as the organic wholeness of its conception would have met with Coleridge’s approval. It has the same permanently modern quality as any dramatic figure”. It is not difficult, however, particularly in the poem like “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” to detect beneath the mask of the mythical ‘I’, the poet. But it will be an error to stick to that identity in spite of the occasional backsliding of the Whitman hero. Floyd Stovall marks the development of the hero-poet from “Song of Myself” through “Passage to India” as that of “a passionate and yet essentially religious person whose soul is purged by its own fires and stands at last tranquil and free”. He adds,

I think...that Whitman has merely accentuated in his hero a condition that exists in every individual! The sense of duality is merely a recognition of man’s finite and infinite selves, and his consciousness of being both subject and object, the knower and the known.

In short it is the phenomenon of self-consciousness.

It is this ‘phenomenon of self-consciousness’ that becomes a motive force of that supreme journey of the mythical ‘I’ resulting in his fusion with ‘you’. It is the journey along the poetic path, with a sure rapport between the poet and the reader. Of the ‘three voices of poetry’ of which T. S. Eliot speaks, in Whitman’s poetry we generally hear ‘the second voice’. It was too lyrical and subjective for ‘the third voice’. Even when he uses the first voice he gets obsessed with the imaginary presence of some invisible audience round the corner, and the wave-length is soon disturbed. It is only in his most inspired moments such as in “A Noiseless Patient Spider” or “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” that he speaks in the first voice and emerges as the solitary singer.
"Passage to India" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" are outstanding examples of the journey theme. They are not travelogues, but they are the journeys of the mind taking the reader on trackless seas and uncharged routes far and wide in space and time and beyond. The readers' journey on the printed page is restricted. It has a beginning, a middle and an end determined by the outer poetic structure. But once the reader commences to share the poetic experience and is in the stride, he launches out with the poet on an endless cruise far beyond the horizon. Both the poems open at a point where the reader cannot help feeling of having joined somewhere in the middle of the journey. And even when the poems terminate on the printed page, the reader sees no terminus, nowhere the journey's end. It goes on. There is an enormous poetic spill-over at both ends. Thus beneath the finite outer structure, both the poems grow into immensity that pushes back the bounds of comprehension and experience. The inner structure of both thus follows the pattern of time, without a beginning without an end—time which is also a protagonist in both the poems; time, which again furnishes the poet with a centre of tensions without which no dramatization of the poetic experience would have been possible. Here are the poems without terminals. Such an abundant fluidity of the inner structure must necessarily put a great stress on the setting not merely for thematic integration but also for structural reinforcement. In these poems we have hence an inevitable interdependence of theme and setting with an organic unity. But while in "Passage to India" we have a breathtaking experience of a spiritual voyage of cosmic dimensions, the locale of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is narrow with the confines of space, if not of time. Its setting is not built on an epic scale as that of "Passage to India", but the small world of Brooklyn has the warmth of familiarity. The poem at once springs out of the printed page and begins to flow all over and around us enveloping us in an intimate way. It is impossible to miss the poet's hug of immortality. Unlike "Passage to India", it does not distance the reader away by the mystic strides far beyond the sun, the moon and the stars. "Passage
to India” says Bermice Slote, “records the journey of the soul farther than the knowledgeable mind can record. The geographical terms are emblamatic only. India is the image of mystic fulfilment, and the mariner is the soul itself”.

The voyager constantly goes on telescoping time. History runs like a rivulet. The conquerors, the historians, the voyagers and explorers all these who defied the barriers of space are conjured up, and we have an experience of time-travelling. Dramatization of the voyaging along the vast contours of the wide world while exploring the inner spiritual landscape makes “Passage to India” a unique journey poem and the journeying through the tracks of time and space lends quite some fluidity to the inner symphonic structure of the poem. Of course the passage to India which is ‘more than passage to India’ is eternal; it knows no end, and we are struck with the romantic sense of nowhereness. And yet it would be rather perverse to see in it as Richard Chase does, “a hollow optimism, a sententious contributing of immortality.” On the contrary one might easily approximate C. M. Bowra’s view of Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode to Passage to India : “But what mattered most in him was the creative imagination which carried him beyond the bounds of space and time into some vast order of things, where, in almost losing his individuality, he saw in impassioned vision the power which sustains the universe and gives meaning to life”.

There is a striking identity between the two seemingly divergent poems like “Passage to India” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and they vindicate Shelley’s contention in “A Defence of Poetry” that “a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one...He beholds intensely not the present as it is... but he beholds the future in the present”. But whereas timelessness hovers over the whole of “Passage to India”, in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” time impinges upon our sensibility as something rather concrete, drifting endlessly. In “Passage to India” eternity is temporal. At what hour does the protagonist set sail? In the morning, in the evening or at night?
But "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, like Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" opens in the evening, half an hour before sunset. But it is not the evening saturated with smog as in Eliot's modern wasteland, not the diseased "evening spread out against the sky like the patient etherised upon a table". It is the serene evening, with the sun hanging lowly over the cloudy west. As "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" opens, we get an impression as if some huge, invisible curtain is drawn, and we see unfolding before our eyes an exquisitely beautiful world of sights and sounds:

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—
I see you face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!

It is a work-a-day world, where that jostling crowds of men and women cross on the ferry boats from shore to shore; 'the sailors are at work'; 'the pilots are in the pilot houses; 'the world is agog with clear, loud voices of young men clasping one another's hand'; Time does not have a stop. The caravan of life moves on. Whitman was a super comrade who saw God as omnipresent, everywhere. "In song of Myself" he sings:

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,

I find Letters from God dropt in the strart, and every one is signed by God's name.

He delights in the world which he loves and even the commonplace, mundane objects become the part of the soul. His experience becomes an arch wherethrough gleams eternity. We are not allowed to stand aloof as spectators as we do, to a certain extent, in "Passage to India". We are vitally involved as actors ourselves. The sun is half an hour high. Within half an hour the sun sets and the dark shadows are gathering wrapping the world in the night when the poem ends. But as we travel with the poet we cannot help recalling the words of Blake: "In a grain of sand, the universe expands". Half an
hour is stretched to merge with eternity. Brooklyn's is a small world; and the poet is at peace with it. No divine discontent launches him out on a cosmic cruise as it does in "Passage to India". He loves his world of the East River the way perhaps no one else ever did. He loves it as a great lover. God is in His heaven and all is right with Brooklyn. And, therefore, in spite of dramatization of an aesthetic and spiritual experience, the lyrical element is too intense and subjective to render this monologue either a dramatic monologue or even "a monodrama" as Gay Wilson Allen and Charles Davis call it. There is total absence of conflict and objectivity indispensable to any dramatic form.

The poem operates on two levels, factual and symbolical; the symbolical is more real than the factual. The horizon of Brooklyn is narrow; it cannot be expanded whereas his emotional experience and vision expand. Since the space is narrow and rigid, he stretches his world into the dimension of time:

Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high.

A hundred years hence; or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,

Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

The present is jerked off into future and the bondage of time, mutability and death snaps as time intersects with the timeless:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence.

Once the barriers of time collapse, the memories of the past come crowding into the mind of the poet, making him nostalgic. The present world, projected into the future and viewed from a point of retrospection, gathers a romantic splendour and we see springing up before us the river with its "bright flow and swift current":" the sky with sea-gulls high in the
air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies and edging toward the south in slow wheeling circle; 'the summer sky reflected in water'. But as the poet looks into it, he is spellbound, like Narcissus, by his own dazzling image floating there:

Had my eyes dazzled—by the shimmering of beams,
Look’d at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water.

But here is the rub. Do we have here any clue to the limitations of Whitman's poetry which often tends to be the poetry of pose? Like Byron, he is never tired of projecting himself at the centre in the drama of life enacted in the vast cosmic theatre. His self-love is as plain as daylight: the way he could fabricate interviews, review his own poems under fictitious guise or write squibs about himself! Here is how he drew his own portrait in The New York Times (October 1, 1968):

With the bright crispy autumn weather,
Walt Whitman again makes his appearance on the side walks of Broadway.
His large massive personality—his grave and prophetic, yet free and manly appearance—his insouciance of manner and movement, his easy and negligent, yet clean and wholesome dress—go to make up a figure and an individuality,—that attracts attention and heart of everyman.

True, Whitman does remain a most charming wonderer; but this sort of self-consciousness might impede the creative experiment by pinning his poetry down to some narrow ego-centric plane. Thank God, the East River is in full tide. And even if the poet's eye could really, if at all, see his own image there, it must be quivering and blurred and drowned in the eddies! And once again the poem flows on. We see 'the haze on the hills' 'the white sails of boats', 'the large and small steamers in motion', 'the white wake left in the passage'... The real world is submerged in the poet's imagination only to emerge
as an imaginary world of the future. This entire process affects it not only with greater reality; but also with eternity. Some dreams are more real than reality. So is this dreamland of the poet which mirrors eternity. The actual world is absorbed into the poet's imagination and it springs to life even on the printed page: the world thronged by generations of men and women. Whitman's technique is not photographic. It is cinematographic. He does not capture the world in still pictures. It is a world alive and pulsating and we see flitting up before our eyes images after images, both spatial and temporal. It is a marvellous journey from generation to generation through the tracks of time. The poet’s jostling of the past, the present, and the future is most extraordinary. He transcends all the barriers of time and thus travelling, arrives on the shores of eternity. He can jerk off present into future and then view it back into the past. He views his world from both the ends of the telescope, as it were, at the same time. Time is plastic in his hands, and he manipulates the tracks of time like toys. It is this complex telescopic movement of time, backward and forward, that accentuates the drift toward eternity. The world of Brooklyn may be small. But in the poet's vision it knows no frontiers. It is not parochial, but a microcosm of the wide world. And the crowds of men and women in this world, free from the bonds of time, seem to have lost all domicile identity. Here is no vanity fair. It is a pageant of life across the corridors of time. He viewed "the simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme" and thus symbolised "birth, life and death by the metaphor of integration and disintegration". Once he strikes a lasting tie with humanity, the bonds of time, mutability and death totter:

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be
I knew I should be of my body.
It is the physical self which gives a separate identity. But 'the float ever held in solution' knows no disintegration. One mingles with the tissue of the universe free from flesh and blood. Once the poet thus arrives on the shores of eternity he has a spiritual vision. He now looks within as without and imbibes self-knowledge which is indispensable to all spiritual journeys. He does not shy away from evil for both good and evil are the parts of "the simple, compact, well-join'd scheme."

I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me.

Here is no terrifying vision of evil. Whitman had faith in the evolutionary principle envisaging man's journey from anarchy to culture, from brutality to humanity and on to divinity. What emancipates the poet from the obsessing evil is love and the spiritual attitude of non-attachment. The world is a stage and we merely act our roles:

Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

It is a spiritual confrontation of the scheme of things when all polarities of good and evil, life and death, light and darkness are resolved. The poet's fusion with the multitudes awakens boundless joy in his heart. There is an exciting recapturing, once again, of the old world. Now the poet's audience is not the mere reader or the Brooklyn crowd. It is universal—the sky, the river, the clouds, the sun, the sea birds, water, ships, men and women and even the eternal float of solution. And we have
a loud shout of joy in the invocation to all these in a mystic moment of some profound spiritual ecstasy. The poet's fusion with the universe is attained—the highest point in man's spiritual odyssey. This divine rapture finds expression in a joyous and uninterrupted expression in the universal invocation in the final section.

The ferry becomes a fragment of eternity. As Gay Wilson Allen and Charles Davis suggest, the ferry is a basic symbol. "The poem itself is a ferry, shuttling across the river of time. Since the poet's death thousands of people have read this poem and shared vicariously his experience and identification". Equally central to our understanding of the symbolical meaning is the East River. It symbolises birth, life and death and return to life. Again, the way "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is vitally concerned with the making of the poet, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" suggests the poetic process, the making of a poem, and its function. Standing on the River one summer evening, the poet had an experience which he would not let willingly die. He wanted to make that experience permanent, that instant to be eternity. He captured it into his poem and made it eternal. That is the way a poem is made by the creative activity of the poet not to let a memorable moment die. The river, life and poetry all become analogous. Thus the poet's experience is turned forever into reader's dream by the aesthetic transmutation of a mundane and everyday experience. In fact it is a supreme moment of not merely spiritual satisfaction but also of creativity. The poet is on the crest, as it were, and now from these poetic heights a lot of his own work seems to him inane:

The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thought, as I had supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?

Is this not a great stride in the artistic journey—a moment not merely of aesthetic conscientiousness, but also of objective self-criticism when the poet can step away from his poetry and view it from a distance? Mattheison observes:
“His poem of the crossing might almost seem intended as an illustration of Coleridge’s belief that the reader of poetry ‘should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or a restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attraction of the journey itself’.

We are voyaging with the poet not merely in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, but almost all throughout Leaves of Grass. The line of demarcation between life and poetry is blurred. Poems keep on flowing out of the book and often we, too, are smuggled into the book, and then travel from poem, covering a wide span from “Song of Myself” to “Good-bye My Fancy!”

How far is the Ganges from the East River? How far is India from the United States? How far is the East from the West? How far is “the world of 1842, with its awaken’d enterprise” from the world of 1870s? How far is the garden of Eden? How far are the sun, the moon and the stars? These are not merely rhetorical questions. They might point to the transition from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” to “Passage to India”, covering the poetic interim between 1856 and 1868, probably the finest creative period in the life of the poet. For after “Passage to India” we find Whitman’s poetic progress almost nearing its dead-end. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” we saw how “It avails not, time nor place – distance avails not”. Whitman’s hero-poet there is a time traveller crossing with a magic passport the gateways of the past, the present and the future at his own sweet will. On the factual plane he does not go abroad. He enjoys boundless travelling through the corridors of time; but none the less loves Brooklyn too well to leave it behind. But the hero-poet of “Passage to India”, that mythical “I”, is not merely a time traveller, he is also a space-man. In “Brooklyn Ferry”, time is used for freedom from the bounds of space. In “Passage to India” space is used to annihilate time, and time to annihilate space as Miller suggests. And the final experience of all boundlessness, the total release, is fantastic. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” the poet’s wanderlust is not
to explore lands and seas but to wonder on the ‘banks and shoals of time’ without abandoning his small beautiful world, whereas in ‘Passage to India’ there is an irresistible quest of the unknown that takes the protagonist on his eternal cruise. Walt Whitman’s India is a dream world unlike the work—a—day world of Brooklyn. It is the land of his heart’s desire. But it is certainly not an escapist poem. It is not one passage. It is many. It is the passage of time from present into past and back again into future. It is the march of history. It is the voyages of the navigators. It is passage across the oceans and continents. And above all it is the journey of the soul—the spiritual Odyssey from mortality to immortality, from here to eternity. Both ‘Passage to India’ and ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ illustrate what Gay Wilson Allen and Charles Davis describe as the ability akin to Coloridge’s “to leap beyond the ‘fixities and definites’.” Thus the journey theme is a most substantial basis underlying Walt Whitman’s poetry. It can be traced not merely as a governing principle of his poetry or only in the growth of the poet’s cosmic consciousness taking him from nationality to universality, from the mundane to the spiritual. It is there inherent even in the very evolution of Leaves of Grass as it sprawled from 1855 to 1868 if not to 1892. It asserts itself the way Walt Whitman’s poetry has, through the flight of over hundred years, stood the test of time and still in great many parts remained as fresh as dew drops. The poet, who started from Paumanok declaring ‘Solitary singing in the west, I strike up for a new world’, has kept his word. He has surely not given up his eternal tramp in the world which is ever being renewed. This ‘charter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter’ ceaselessly travels along the passage of time. As we wade through his ‘leaves of grass’, we feel as if he were peering over our shoulders, and we hear echoing in our ears his voice, perhaps as deep as the sea.

We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also
You furnish your part toward eternity
Great or small ...
Boethius in *De consolatione Philosophiae* defines eternity in a way that is quite pertinent to "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

Eternity is the complete possession of eternal life all at once—ideation that becomes clearer from comparison with things temporal. For whatever lives in time moves as something present from the past to the future, and there is nothing placed in time that can embrace the whole extent of its life at once. It does not yet grasp tomorrow, and has already lost yesterday. And even in the life of today you do not live longer than in the transitory moment.

Lands and oceans stretching over thousands of miles divide the United States and India, the East and the West. As we journey forth across *Leaves of Grass* we find the poet starting from Paumanok singing on the open road eventually embarking on some endless spiritual cruise. The Brooklyn ferry sails far beyond the horizon, and we have the foot-lose wanderer ultimately embarking on a voyage to India. Much before scientific discoveries and technological advancement viewed our vastly divided world one, Whitman had intuited the vision of one world peopled by the children of Adam, and admitting of no barriers, no frontiers. India is a spiritual utopia, a springboard for launching out into infinite divinity. Profound spiritual quest transcends all the barriers of time and space and mortality and we watch the poet on a pilgrimage to the heaven of bright with light divine. From Brooklyn to India is a passage to India across the seat of mystic experience and divine vision.

*Passage to India* is not merely a typical transcendentalist poem, but a poem embodying both the strength and the weakness of Walt Whitman, the poet. In so far as it was written in idealistic reaction against *Drum-Taps* it refutes the charge that the war which proved salvation for the man proved death for the poet. Although written in the aftermath of the civil war, it opens up a sea of harmony and peace under some vast unreached sky. It is a poem brimming with an eternal quest of human heart—search of the unknown. The poet takes,
out his soul on a spiritual voyage beyond the horizon. His ego assumes the role of a captain and leads the soul, but thus willy-nilly establishes a dichotomy between the soul and self who travel together as unfailing friends. What is intriguing is the protagonist of the poem (obviously the poet's ego) subserv­ing his soul. But then there is something of a Byronic hero about Walt Whitman. His ego is extraordinarily strong. He goes on projecting himself as a protagonist in the drama of life enacted in the vast cosmic theatre while continually seeking identity with 'en-masse' or cosmos. The danger then of his poetry becoming not merely ego-centric but also the poetry of pose is great. What redeems it is the poet's universality, his cosmic consciousness, his spiritual fervour:

Agonies are one of my changes of garment
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels
I myself become the wounded person.

With boundless sympathy he could identify himself with many and contend: Ekoham Bahūsyam: I am one; let me be many. He does not let his soul be locked in a capsule of his ego then, not even in time, space and mortality; but it grows into boundless immensity.

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea gaps;
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents
I am afoot with my vision.

This puts us in mind of the vision of the World-Spirit as it is revealed in the Eleventh Canto of the Gita. It is a trait of universality that it at once fits in juxtaposition with anything universal that precedes or follows it. When a poet like this sets out on a pilgrimage of eternity as it were, as he does in Passage to India, we have surely a fascinating poetic experience.

Passage to India, though intensely lyrical, has an epic theme and canvas. Is it a narrative poem? It is no more narrative than Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner or Kubla Khan is narrative. In its rhythmic progression, tone and structure it approximates to the Ode and yet it is not an ode. It is a monologue in which
the protagonist tries to dramatize his spiritual vision and experiences and is in continual communion with his soul. He does not merely introspect. He retrospects and prospects between the terminals of time—past and present and future—which at once lose their separate terrains and merge with one another into the eternal present. Dramatization of the voyaging along the vast contours of the wide world while surveying the inward landscape without bounds, without horizons makes Passage to India an outstanding dramatic monologue, whereas the journeying through the tracks of time and space—backward and forward—gives the poem as amazingly fluid structure of a symphony. The protagonist here like T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock is visibly absorbed in communion with self. But whereas Prufrock's wanderings take him along with his invisible companion through the futile and frustrating experiences in a modern waste land, the protagonist in Whitman's poem invites his soul to sail on the waves of silent thoughts of Time and Space and Death. Life to Whitman, as to Shelley, is a dome of many-coloured glass and he, too, continually explores the white radiance of eternity. But he does not shun 'the painted veil which those who live call life'. He is enchanted by life's rainbow colours, It is this attitude which makes Whitman's poetry as great a poetry of life as of death, poetry overflowing with *joie de vivre*. Passage to India is illustrative of this.

In Passage to India, India is not at the thematic centre, it is on the periphery. 'Names are magic,' says Walt Whitman. 'One word can pour such a flood through the soul.' And India is certainly a word to conjure with in the Transcendentalist New World. It is the land of the heart's desire: The old, most populous, wealthiest of earth's lands where flow 'the streams of the Indus and the Ganges and their many affluents', the land that abounds in 'the far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloosed dreams, the deep diving bibles and legends, daring plots of the poets, temples fairer than lilies pour'd over by the rising sun, lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold; towers of fables immortal fashion'd from mortal dreams'. The land of 'the flowing literatures.
tremendous epics, of Brahma and Buddha—a highly idealized and romantic picture of India indeed. Maybe, E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, which possibly derived its title from Whitman’s poem, presents some planes of reality and thereby suggests how there falls a bleak shadow between the poet’s dreams and the hard facts of the land under a foreign yoke. Forster surely did not design to destroy the poet’s vision; he tried to mirror realities, of course in his own fashion! But Whitman’s *Passage to India* is in fact a ‘passage to more than India’. India, like the world of material and scientific progress, is only a spring-board for a cosmic leap into the spiritual realms. India acts as a catalyst and lights up in the poet’s heart an irrepressible yearning for journeying from the material to the spiritual, from the real to the ideal, from the present to the past and future and thus from the momentary to the eternal, from mortality to immortality and from the human to the divine! It ranges between heaven and earth while the protagonist sails in the direction of the rising sun with an irrepressible wanderlust.

The epic theme of the poem is as old as the hills—the destiny of the human soul. It interthreads a bunch of nine lyrics around ‘O vast Rondure, swimming in space’ in section five of the poem integrating them into an organic whole. It commences at the point where Milton’s *Paradise Lost* ends showing Adam and Eve ‘Hand in hand with wandering steps and slow/Through Eden took their solitary way,’ although not without some nostalgia for the world before the fall of man:

> 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.

With the heart full of longing for perhaps some earthly paradise, the poet finds flashing in front of him a stupendous vision:

> O vast Rondure, swimming in space,  
> Cover’d—all over with visible power and beauty,
Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,
Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless
stars above,
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Down from the gardens of Asia descending, radiating,
Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning curious, with restless explorations,
With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never happy
hearts,
With that sad, incessant refrain, Wherefore unsatisfied soul? and
Whither O mocking life?

Our earth, the great globe, swims beautifully in the infinite
universe—a sublime vision that should thrill an astron and
please a Milton. Passage to India, too, takes us to the story
of Genesis and examines the predicament of man surrounded
on all sides by the immanent nature. For a while he is seized
with alternate doubt and faith:

And who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?
...what is this separate Nature so unnatural?
What is this earth to our affections? (Unloving earth
without a throb to answer ours,
Cold earth, the place of graves).

The poet eventually does not despair. Material and physical
progress and scientific advancement are heartening. The distances
have been shrunk by the Suez Canal, the Atlantic cable and
the transcontinental railroad running criss-cross and linking the
East Coast and the West Coast of America. The New World
is linked up with Europe on the one hand and with Asia on
the other—the world has been unified. This shrinkage of distance
in space has brought about the shrinkage of the passage of
time also, and the poet starts journeying both in space and
time unbridled, making his trip to India an eternal human
odyssey. A new era of the marriage of continents, climates
and oceans’ has begun and the poet has a noble vision of
One World:
Europe to Asia, Africa join’d, and they to the New World,
The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival
garland
As birds and bridegrooms hand in hand.
Perhaps there was at the back of the poet’s mind the
popular idea of social millenium even when he was in a mood
of trance. The marvellous achievements of noble inventors,
scientists engineers and great captains symbolize triumphs on
the material plane, the achievements to be on the spiritual
plane, for
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.
Nature and Man shall be disjoin’d and diffused no more,
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.
This is too facile, too idealistic a vision of the new world order
in which the poet, the true son of God, shall be the man of
destiny. To the poet to whom ‘the United States is the greatest
poem’, the Civil War, threatening to tear his country to pieces,
must have been a matter of heartbreak. In the green world of
imagination, hence, he seeks perfect unity, unity not only of
his country, but universal unity, the unity of ‘countries and
continents, of man and nature’. The nineteenth century generally
loved to idolize the poet. But none of them, not even Shelley
or Carlyle, attributed to the poet the supreme role of a Messiah.
In his Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman
contends: ‘Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man.
Not in him, but off from him are things grotesque, or eccentric
or fail of their sanity. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he
is the key.’ He goes many more steps forward than Philip
Sidney who affirms that ‘Of all sciences is our poet the monarch.’
Whitman’s is a stout defence of poetry. Even Plato’s republic
could ill afford to banish such a true son of God. The only
point is: How far do these words carry conviction? Do they betray smug Victorian complacency? Or, is it a defence mechanism against the hostile world around him in which he had to strive hard for his own social rehabilitation? Was it a homage to the poet in order to vindicate obliquely the man? However, the fact remains that around 1860 there was a great emotional crisis in the life of the poet.

We have hardly, as in the life of Shakespeare during the period of his Great Tragedies, any clue to his private crisis. Again like Milton, Whitman too, experienced great frustration. But the Civil War in America was more tormenting to Whitman than perhaps the Civil War in England to Milton. And the death of Lincoln was definitely more heart-rending to the poet who could breathe his breath through those elegiac songs like *Lilacs* than the passing away of Cromwell to the Puritan poet. Milton's disappointment was rather political, Whitman's bereavement was intensely personal: both of them, however, were disenchanted and confronted with a crisis which they sought to resolve in poetry of spiritual vision, poetry of life and death and the vast scheme of things. *Passage to India* is one such poetic effort of a poet striving to scramble out of the doldrums of despair in quest of direction, hope and meaning. It is poetry of faith, and not 'prose run mad'. The circumnavigation of the world both in space and time assumes a profound symbolical significance and becomes an arch wherethrough gleam the untravelled spiritual realms for the soul's sailing:

Swiftly I shrived 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.

The protagonist is a romantic character resembling some ancient mariner who cannot rest from travel; and yet knowing:
not where to find his destination, he journeys through the
dimensions of time also:

   Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul,
   The Past ! the Past ! the Past !
   The Past—the dark unfathom'd retrospect.

Whether it was out of his being ill at ease with the world in
which he lived or out of some romantic yearning it was that
Whitman's heart pined for the past is not known. But the-
way to the eternal runs across the corridors of the past as well
as of future. In fact, even time and space in the poem are
integrally tied up and we have a vivid image conveying the
poet's time sense:

   For what is 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.)

Time cannot be disintegrated into past, present and future.
It is eternal, without a beginning, without an end. T. S. Eliot,
who at times enjoys debunking Whitman's 'moon-mist ideas'
himself cannot altogether run away from the influence of this
' twentieth century, poet was smuggled, as it were, into the
nineteenth century. In *Four Quartets* we have almost a poetic
paraphrase of Whitman's time image:

   Time present and time past
   Are both perhaps present in time future
   And time future contained in time past.
   If all time is eternally present
   All time is unredeemable!

But if not on the physical plane, on the spiritual plane time is
indeed redeemable. Whitman could easily be both in time and
out of time, watching and wondering at it. Time in the hands
of the poet becomes plastic. For instance, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*
stems from a poetic experience in which the poet's spirit, like
his noiseless, patient spider goes on sprawling; but since the horizons of Brooklyn are narrow and cramping and not elastic, the poet seeks release in time from the cramping tyranny of space, and stretches the poem far and wide across the dimensions of time. The Brooklyn river is soon turned into the tide of eternity. In *Passage to India* there is no such problem. The sea is boundless; so is time. There roll the waves of ecstasy on trackless seas and we see the protagonist sailing far-off toward the shores of the unknown, while time is telescoped in the world without frontiers.

Along all history, down the slopes
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising,
A ceaseless thought, varied train—lo, soul....

History runs like a rivulet. Adam, Alexander, Tamberlane, Marco Polo, Columbus, Vasco da Gama, all of whom had tried to overcome the barriers of space, flit across the canvas of the poet's imagination evoking a sense of the flight of time.

They were all explorers and voyagers in a way. How can the protagonist rest?

O we can wait no longer,
We too take ship O soul,
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,
Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,
Caroling free, singing our songs of God.

These are the moments of realization when the silent thoughts of Time, Space, and Death like waters flowing bear the protagonist through the regions infinite. It is a moment of divine bliss:

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

Here is a prayer that the heart in tune with the infinite alone can tell. Like Browning's lover he, too, might feel, 'poor the
speech, be how much I speak for all things’ as he fumbles for words to describe the indescribable:

O Thou transcendent
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them

Thou pulse, thou motive of stars, suns, systems...

And at the journey's end, perhaps, there will be union with God.

As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

There is no dissolution, no death but a release from the mortal coils into immortality. The theme of death runs like a golden thread in *Leaves of Grass*, for 'Death is beautiful.' As Horace Trauble observes in his preface to *The Book of Heavenly Death*: 'With him immortality was not an argument. It was a vision... It seemed as though something greater than death, something greater than life, of which life and death were equal integers.' The protagonist of *Passage to India* is concerned with this 'something greater.' A vision so profound cannot pitchfork the poet into the dreary, mundane world:

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor,
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
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?

The vision of evolution has a vertical hierarchy—plant life, rooted and static; animal life mobile but beastly and purpose-
less; and even human life of limited vision, bookish philosophy, and vain wisdom. He suffers from strange sea-fever:

O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the sea of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

'Daring joy but safe.' What safety does the poet care for? Anyway he sails on and on knowing not where! Does he drift in hope of arriving at some unknown destination, some El Dorado? The poet, who loves to sing the song of the open road, finds 'the universe itself as a road, as many roads for the travelling soul'. But where does the ego of the protagonist lead his soul really? Roy Harvey Pearce has his own serious doubts: 'Whitman cannot focus the poem on the sort of human experience to which one might assent... because the experience of the protagonist in this poem is that of cosmic man, who, because he is everywhere, is nowhere: who, because he can be everything, is nothing.' One might not hesitate to share the critic's dissatisfaction with the meaning of Passage to India as a utopian poem. Even as an allegory of spiritual odyssey it is rather confusing, leading nowhere. But do not all utopians end up by arriving nowhere? Is it not a profound romantic feeling one experiences intensely as he looks before and after, pining for what is not? However, Roy Harvey Pearce's charge that it fails to focus 'on the sort of human experience' is untenable. If this be the criterion in what way do the world's greatest poems like Divine Comedy and Paradise Lost focus on 'the sort of human experience to which one might assent'? Art at its highest transports us far above the common rut of experience. Whitman is surely not a mystic poet in the sense Blake or Yeats or Tagore is. He is a visionary realist. If on one hand his genius is akin to Wordsworth's, it is also akin to Masefield's on the other—the two poets between whom he stands as a link. If in the 'Immortality Ode' or 'Tintern Abbey' we are not on the high way of commonplace, mundane experience, it does not fail to have a profound
appeal. Nor does *The Everlasting Mercy* or *The Widow in the Bye Street*, because of its confrontation with the seamy side of life, lack in spiritual undertones. *Passage to India* does not end on a note of baffled joy, drifting nowhere. This poem of epic theme and setting operates on many planes of reality, many levels of meaning. Starting off on the plane of physical reality it goes back across the corridors of history into the beginnings of the Bibles. But it is a passage to more than India. Once face to face with God, all mortal coils snap; even death looks 'sane and sacred' 'cool enfolding', and we hear the intimations of immortality. Robert Spiller describes *Leaves of Grass* as 'a human document.' So is 'Passage to India', although in the ultimate analysis the poem seems to elude us like an uncaught bird while we drift with the poet on the pathless waves in the sea of ecstasy.

From Brooklyn to Banares is a far cry. But between the two and far above and beyond them Whitman's endless journeying along some untrodden paths signifies his ceaseless quest of the divine unknown both on the imaginative and the experiential planes. It is poetry not merely of eternal flux but also of eternal longing.