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APPRECIATING WHITMAN: "PASSAGE TO INDIA"

By JOHN LOVELL, JR.

The difficulty of appreciating Walt Whitman is a natural outgrowth of the vast effort just to understand him. In 1885 Edmund Stedman called him "the most subjective poet on record";¹ that estimate has not perceptibly changed. The Library of Congress *Catalog*, published as part of the centennial celebration of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, lists 1,055 references,² most of which are devoted to Whitman's personality and philosophy. But appreciation of his poetry as poetry is still, as John Cowper Powys indicated, the most neglected approach.³

Whitman was aware of one important yardstick of great poetry: the extent to which it is inspired and understood by readers. "To have great poets," he said, "there must be great audiences, too."⁴ He helped to disqualify himself for highest honors by making statements that apply this yardstick most severely. One example should suffice: "The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it."⁵ On the other hand, he urged a method of poetic appreciation, borrowed from Sainte-Beuve, which can be justly used to appreciate Whitman himself.

For us the greatest poet is he who in his works most stimulates the reader's imagination and reflection, who excites him the most himself to poetize. The greatest poet is not he who has done the best; it is he who suggests the most; he, not all of whose meaning is at first obvious, and who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn.⁶

In such a spirit the present paper accepts the invitation of Gay Wilson Allen and Charles T. Davis, in their fine interpretive volume of Whitman's poems,⁷ to attempt through the careful examination of one poem (and in some respects Whitman's greatest), "Passage to India," to evoke from the reader a genuine appreciation of the poet.

It is unfair for a reader to judge Whitman's poetry by any standard other than that of Whitman the poet. Some have tried to make his strange, inexplicable personality, his alleged democratic dishonesty and insincerity, and his assumed pose the main bases for the evaluation of

¹ Edmund C. Stedman, *Poets of America* (Boston, 1885), p. 352.

² U.S. Library of Congress, Reference Department, *Walt Whitman: A Catalog Based upon the Collections of the Library of Congress* (Washington, 1955).

³ John Cowper Powys, *Visions and Revisions* (New York, 1915), p. 281.

⁴ *Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Malcolm Cowley, Deathbed Edition (New York, 1948), II, 333.

⁵ *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose and Letters of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway, Nonesuch Edition (London, 1938), p. 320.

⁶ Deathbed Edition, II, 301.

⁷ Gay Wilson Allen and Charles T. Davis, ed., *Walt Whitman's Poems* (New York, 1955), p. vii.

his poems.⁸ Such bases are palpably invalid. Stedman, who was no Whitman-lover, early defined the most tenable position: Whitman is more admirable as poet than as annunciator; had he been no poet, no one would have cared for his philosophy and consecration; anyway, poets are rarer than preachers and heroes.⁹

This does not mean that the reader can ignore background as the first step toward appreciating "Passage to India." He must consider—as Edgar Lee Masters advised, though perhaps not as much as Masters did—the results of deflections from war, paralysis, neglect, and the lowered spiritual vitality of the postwar period.¹⁰ From Frederik Schyberg he will learn that the period of this poem reflects a deeper religious note than that of 1860, when personal suffering inspired "the last dream-wish"; Schyberg attributes this note to Whitman's having heard during the war years "the great poetry of death."¹¹ Allen has added the useful commentary that the germ of internationalism here follows the financial disappointment of the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*.¹²

Perhaps Whitman was exaggerating when in 1888 he declared that "Passage to India" contained more of himself than had any other poem.¹³ Perhaps not. The fact that he printed it separately, however, and planned to make it a definite epoch in his poetic evolution—the end of the materialistic *Leaves*, the beginning of a new spiritual cycle¹⁴—is instructive, if not overwhelming. That it did not get into *Leaves of Grass* until 1881 suggests that he considered it a bold, separate declaration of his much-declared independence of spirit.¹⁵ That he was fifty when he wrote it (in 1869)¹⁶ has some bearing, if only to augment the midway philosophy of the poem, suspended between past and future. That it was three different poems rolled into one, yet essentially unified, provokes curiosity about Whitman's successful brooding process at this time.¹⁷

The main thing, however, is the poetry and the reader's involvement in the poetry. Poetry's foremost job is magic: making man see the fullness of his glory, whether or not he is ever destined to reach that fullness. The poet's business is to make him see; the reader's, to

⁸ Some samples of these are as follows: Mark Van Doren, *The Private Reader* (New York, 1942), pp. 69-86; Leadie Mae Clark, *Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man* (Urbana, 1952); Esther Shephard, *Walt Whitman's Pose* (New York, 1938); Harvey O'Higgins, "Alias Walt Whitman," *Harper's Magazine*, CLVIII (May, 1929), 698-707.

⁹ Stedman, p. 353.

¹⁰ Edgar Lee Masters, *Whitman* (New York, 1937), p. 308.

¹¹ Frederik Schyberg, *Walt Whitman*, trans. Evie Allison Allen (New York, 1951), pp. 230-31.

¹² Gay Wilson Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook* (Chicago, 1946), p. 443.

¹³ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, I (Boston, 1906), 156-57.

¹⁴ Nonesuch Edition, p. 1076. See also "Notes" to the 1876 Preface, on "Passage to India," Deathbed Edition, II, 291-94.

¹⁵ Harold W. Blodgett, *The Best of Whitman* (New York, 1953), p. 458.

¹⁶ Mentioned by Masters, p. 323.

¹⁷ Nonesuch Edition, p. 1076.

try to see. Whitman said: "My book is written in the sun and with a gay heart."¹⁸ One of his readers aptly adds that the poet's, not the analyst's, glance was poured upon his materials, and that this glance was "always one of intense enjoyment from complete vision of the essence and heart of a thing."¹⁹ Another, speaking in similar vein, writes that Whitman's seemingly formless poetry is "the fierce, tenacious, patient, constructive work of a lifetime based upon a tremendous and overpowering Vision!"²⁰ Doubtless, Whitman's apparent lack of affectionate absorption in his own country has been due in part to the failure of readers and interpreters to be guided by such indispensable visions of the poet and to their preoccupation with the nonpoetic, the purely mental, the abstrusely philosophical, and the argumentative elements in his poems.

One assurance to the reader concerned about Whitman's personality is that in "Passage to India" the Whitman personality and the Whitman style are indivisible. As Hugh Fausset has said, "Whitman perhaps never came nearer the centre of things than in this [poem] or subdued to it better the expansive impulse of his ego."²¹ The reader might well take the word of Robert Buchanan that Whitman's style is his greatest contribution to knowledge—close upon the arcana of perfect speech,²² since hardly any poet has flung himself more, for better or for worse, into his way of expression, as contrasted with his pure ideation. That he has stylistically succeeded in "Passage to India" is attested by many distinguished critics. Schyberg, for example, speaking of its tone and feeling, refers to it as one of Whitman's "most melodic poems."²³ David Daiches, while conceding that "Passage to India" has a certain barbaric quality, calls it a good example of Whitman's favorite method of building up a series of opposites which it is part of the poem's function to reconcile: he thinks that this method creates excitement and that no Whitman poem better repays careful analysis of structure.²⁴

The reader is now ready for the poem itself. He should be reminded that since every reader is unique, it follows that every good poem is at least as many poems as it has readers. Nevertheless, certain general principles prevail. Since readers change with age, and with intensified experience and insight, a poem is a new poem each time it is read; or inversely, it is sometimes not the poem intended until it is reread. For example, Dr. R. M. Bucke, one of Whitman's greatest promoters, read him for eighteen years before making anything of

¹⁸ Gamaliel Bradford, *Biography and the Human Heart* (Boston, 1932), p. 79.

¹⁹ Roden B. Noel, *Essays on Poetry and Poets* (London, 1886), p. 306.

²⁰ Powys, p. 284.

²¹ Hugh I'Anson Fausset, *Walt Whitman, Poet of Democracy* (London, 1942), p. 240.

²² Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry* (London 1872), p. 97.

²³ Schyberg, p. 124.

²⁴ David Daiches, "Walt Whitman: Impressionist Prophet," in Milton Hindus, ed., *Leaves of Grass One Hundred Years After* (Stanford, 1955), pp. 120-22.

him.²⁵ Ultimately, poetry is the expression of ideals, not just of one man but of a whole people, as Standish O'Grady says of Whitman and his America.²⁶ Remembering these things, the reader is not obligated to accept all suggestions; he is free to substitute inspirations of his own. Whitman demands things that way. Above all, he wants the reader as co-poet and co-pilot.

Mood and setting in "Passage to India" will absorb the reader first. In the opening section, he will notice three lines representing three great events that serve as the occasion for the poem:

In the Old World the east the Suez canal,
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires...²⁷

Too often the mistake is made of thinking that Whitman is merely celebrating these events, merely pointing up significances and implications. He is doing much more than that. In the 1850's and the early 1860's he had begun to celebrate the laying of the Atlantic cable, both in newspaper editorials and in song.²⁸ In the New York papers during May and November, 1869, the reporters and editorial writers themselves had nearly equaled him in celebrating the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific (at Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1869) and the opening of the Suez Canal (begun April, 1859; opened November 17, 1869).²⁹ One sample may be quoted for illustration and comparison.

This is the way to India, telegraphed the directors of the Pacific Railroad, yesterday, from the point where the last rail had just been laid. But, give us only a half century of peace and freedom; give us only the unshackled development of all our faculties and energies, for fifty years, and we shall not cry out, This is the way to India; we shall stick up on our shores the sign, *This is India*.³⁰

But Whitman does not stop where the others stopped, with mere celebration. It is his purpose always to carry the reader, if the reader will go, into the depths of the creative process—like Shelley, into the very sinews of the wind. It is one thing to stand off and say how wonderful are these great feats of engineering. It is another and greater thing to inquire: where is the dynamo which creates them? how may we ourselves get inside that dynamo? what can we do from now on with such a dynamo at our command?

In the same way Whitman tries to build within the reader the deepest possible respect for the meaning of this new age of discovery and especially for this new faith in man's capacities and in man's ultimate

²⁵ Benjamin F. Mills, *Walt Whitman, The Man and His Message* (Cambridge, 1899), p. 10.

²⁶ Standish O'Grady, *Selected Essays and Passages* (Dublin, 1918), p. 275.

²⁷ Nonesuch Edition, p. 372.

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³⁰ *Evening Post* (New York), Tuesday, May 11, 1869, p. 2.

and endless fulfillment. In Henry S. Canby's report, "Passage to India" was written to spiritualize progress through glorifying the age of the machine and triumphant science;³¹ and Allen reports that Whitman was ahead of other poets in giving expression to his own times.³² He gains in value because to him the spirit of progress and man's faith are concrete, realizable things, standard equipment in man, not wishful thinking, not mystical in some far-off sense. As Emory Holloway puts it, Whitman's faith explains his confidence in himself and in the average man, and this confidence links him with the great lovers, prophets, and liberators of mankind.³³ One might add that an objector's lack of confidence would usually indicate an inability to discover within himself such a faith, although in Whitman's view it is certainly there to be found.

If this faith is sometimes described as an "undiscriminating hurrah for the universe"³⁴ or is devalued through such a declaration as "bawling out the rights of man is not singing,"³⁵ or if, in all truth, as one writer puts it, democratic faith is hard to keep in the light of the travail and disillusion in which the "bitch goddess success" has betrayed us,³⁶ the reader still need not stray from Whitman's purpose in his behalf.

In this effort he gets help from the poem's epic intent. The first words, "Singing my days," like the "I sing myself" of "Song of Myself," are as much the sign of the epic as "I sing of arms and the hero" or as "That man, oh goddess, sing." Gay Wilson Allen testifies that the poem reflects the history of the whole human race and quotes Whitman to the effect that its idea has lurked in his writings, "underneath every page, every line, everywhere."³⁷ According to David Daiches, Whitman's epic background comes from Homer himself. In this epic mood, Whitman sees the individual in large public context and more clearly that way.³⁸

From mood and setting, the reader launches more securely into the content and ideas of the poem, emphasizing the imaginative flight of the poet, his soul, and the reader. William Clarke declares that Whitman flings ideas in a heap and leaves the reader to arrange them.³⁹ If this is sometimes true, it is equally true that providing such responsibility and opportunity for the reader is the usual method of

³¹ Henry S. Canby, *Walt Whitman, An American* (Boston, 1943), p. 339.

³² *Walt Whitman Handbook*, p. 196.

³³ Emory Holloway, *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* (New York, 1926), p. 252.

³⁴ Jerome Nathanson, *Forerunners of Freedom* (Washington, 1941), p. 48.

³⁵ Robert Buchanan, *David Gray* (London, 1868), p. 218.

³⁶ Nathanson, p. 52. On this point of democracy as a political and an economic faith, Stovall says that Walt Whitman was the inveterate foe of economic privilege because men should not be politically free and otherwise enslaved. Floyd Stovall, *American Idealism* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1943), p. 93.

³⁷ *Walt Whitman Handbook*, pp. 196, 206.

³⁸ Daiches, p. 120.

³⁹ William Clarke, *Walt Whitman* (London, 1892), p. 50.

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³⁸ Daiches, p. 120.

³⁹ William Clarke, *Walt Whitman* (London, 1892), p. 50.

great poems. In "Passage to India," it is not so much the job of the reader to unscramble ideas; rather, he must pull out the stops in his mind to allow easy access to wide-awake and intelligent flight.

He will find himself in two principal flying areas: (1) the union of materialistic and spiritual fulfillment in the Whitman "I"; and (2) the Western Pinnacle idea, which describes man's relentless westward drive and his culmination in the American West. The first of these has three subdivisions: (a) that aspect in which the fulfilled individual accepts his place and inspired duty in a world of unfulfillment, partial fulfillment, and lack of faith; (b) the aspect in which the function of the singer-answerer-poet is fully understood; and (c) the aspect in which all man's creativity is traceable to one great motivating principle: man's insatiable curiosity. The first and second aspects are expanded throughout the poem; the third is centered in the famous Section 5, especially in the first two stanzas.⁴⁰

Further, the reader cannot forget that the main business here is not to pursue the poet's logic but to enter the creative flight pattern and to know what is happening to him as he becomes a fully creative being. Briefly and roughly, awareness emerges through the realization of several electric truths. The world is doomed unless men fulfill themselves. Once fulfilled, the individual, fully empowered, proceeds to spread the contagion of fulfillment. Nothing that he does in this regard is of value until his truth and inspiration are captured and made known by a true poet. (Cf. the bird and the star in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd.") Yet the poet's work is relatively easy and secure, since everywhere in man's universe, built into man himself, is this insatiable feeling which at its driving climax galvanizes man into endless endeavors, insuring progress, worthy of song.

This cycle of progress is always at work. One instance of it is the way in which, on our earth, civilization has steadily moved westward. This progress is not mere movement: it is also encirclement. As Holloway says, the encirclement of past and future is like that of the world in 1869.⁴¹ Encirclement means two things: (1) a greater closeness of the world's peoples—reconciliation of the one and the many, of the mass and the individual, to be achieved on a level of common culture,⁴² working always toward a common sharing of the creative product of each individual and group; and (2) a final democratic culmination in which the culture, supremely refined, will give rise to a supreme national character, embodying literature, art, statesmanship, and all other desirable things. Edward Dowden believes that such a culmination was Whitman's greatest passion and desire.⁴³

Description of this national democratic utopia is everywhere in

⁴⁰ Nonesuch Edition, p. 375.

⁴¹ Holloway, *Whitman*, p. 251.

⁴² See also Nathanson, p. 69.

⁴³ Edward Dowden, *Studies in Literature, 1789-1877* (London, 1887), pp. 520-21.

Whitman's prose, especially during his final twenty years.⁴⁴ Often it partook of the qualities of the manifest destiny he preached in his early years⁴⁵ and of his arrogant—almost chauvinistic—nationalism.⁴⁶ It is the theme of the divine literatus of "Democratic Vistas."⁴⁷ With all his might Whitman yearned for it to show even the slightest sign of coming to pass. "Passage to India" is a monumental effort to inspire it in readers, not merely to describe it or to reiterate why it must some day come.

In some respects the climb to the Western Pinnacle is even more exciting than the pinnacle itself. For many years Whitman had been making the climb, not so much in talkative prose as in impassioned verse. Beginning about 1860 with such poems as "Starting from Paumanok" and "A Broadway Pageant," he worked the dream of man's glorious crown of life in the American West into many of his poems.

California was the logical center of the fulfillment. It was the end of the trail for the encirclement which had started in man's early dawn in the Pacific East. The Suez Canal symbolically represented the drive of civilization from the Pacific East to Europe; the Atlantic cable, from Europe to eastern America; and the transcontinental railroad, from eastern America to the Pacific, completing and crowning the cycle in California. In "Facing West from California's Shores" (1860), which Whitman placed in the Children of Adam series; in "A Promise to California" (1860), which he placed in the Calamus series; and on through to "Song of the Redwood Tree" and "Song of the Universal" (both 1874)—he carried the California paean, the most expansive and fulfilling of all his melodious themes. Offshoots of the theme are to be found in "By Blue Ontario's Shores," stemming from the "Poem of the Many in One" (1856), and in "Pioneers, O Pioneers" (1865).

California itself as a state or a place is not the basic consideration. Rather, it is the fact that Whitman wants his readers to know that God and Nature are coöperating to provide an actual earthly paradise where man will come of glorious age. Without such complete arrangements, the reader might be inclined to take the poems as a timeless dream. With these definite arrangements, the reader is impelled to join the author and his soul on a definite voyage, with definite ports of call, within man's reach, however distant to the feeble or ordinary imagination. Allen and Davis emphasize the use in this poem of the energetic verb, *sailing*, borrowed from "Song of the Open Road," to describe the mediating power of fancy.⁴⁸ They might have added that this word and others like it give the poem a compelling realism.

As the reader continues through "Passage to India," he is impressed

⁴⁴ See Deathbed Edition, II, *passim*. See also *Walt Whitman's Workshop*, ed. C. J. Furness (Cambridge, 1928), *passim*.

⁴⁵ Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York, 1955), p. 266.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-83.

⁴⁷ See Deathbed Edition, II, 208-63.

⁴⁸ Allen and Davis, p. 14.

by the poetic possibilities of the role of the engineer. Engineer here includes architect, machinist, captain, explorer, scientist, and the like. Not so great as the poet, the engineer is still indispensable, since without deeds the poet would have little to sing about. He is the prime illustration and the earnest of man's insatiable curiosity and of his fulfillment. That Whitman was no fake dreamer, that he was a genuine realist in his dream, is attested by the marvelous record of engineers since his day.

Whitman's interest in science was more than casual. Joseph Beaver, in his well-documented book, repeatedly refers to the poet's knowledge of astronomy, geography, physics, and electricity, the scientific stuff of "Passage to India."⁴⁹ Beaver declares that Whitman not only believed in science, but went beyond science.⁵⁰

In an illuminating essay entitled "Machinery, Magic, and Art," the late T. K. Whipple developed the poetic trend of the modern engineering sciences. On the theory that the arts should all be useful and that real poetry is powerful, Whipple demonstrates that the engineer has taken over the powerful functions abdicated by poets.⁵¹ Here in this poem Whitman is saying that engineers and poets must work together, and that readers of poetry—in time, all the people—must become aware of the great spiritual significance of engineering monuments. In this way, man's evolution into perennially new and progressive cycles of creative expression and creative understanding will be assured.

The greatest engineer, because Whitman felt closest to him, was Christopher Columbus. As Schyberg has said, Columbus represents for Whitman, as later for Johannes V. Jensen, "the incarnation of all human yearning beyond the daily routine. . . ."⁵² In Whitman's eyes, Columbus was both poet and engineer, since he dreamed of distant greatnesses, realized the significance of his dreams, and then went forth to make those dreams come true. Columbus' process was in line with divine plan and should be repeated in successive waves of human beings. To this end, "Passage to India" is a propaganda poem.

Moreover, Whitman felt himself a new Columbus, just as Milton felt himself a new Samson. Both he and Columbus were poets of man's extremest possibilities; both felt that man had endless worlds of development ahead of him (there is always another bright India to be discovered as soon as one India is settled); both were neglected and abused by the world which they served as benefactor; each went down broken into old age. In this vein "Prayer of Columbus" (1874) is a continuation but also a limitation of "Passage to India."⁵³

If Columbus is the great inspiring figure of this poem, the soul is

⁴⁹ Joseph Beaver, *Walt Whitman, Poet of Science* (New York, 1951), esp. pp. 24, 45, 70, 75, 76, 84, 100, 163.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁵¹ See T. K. Whipple, *Study Out the Land* (Berkeley, 1943), pp. 1-18.

⁵² Schyberg, p. 229.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

the great promoter of accomplishment. The reader knows by now that he must be initially fulfilled, that he must develop his insatiable curiosity, and that he must move step by step up through new and ever-new ages of accomplishment. Now he will know how all this is to be done. As in many poems, Whitman's address to his soul is another way of saying: "All together now, let each man speak to his soul, and let us drive and sail and fly ahead. There is nothing to stop us, save our own weakness in poetizing and in fashioning our poetic dreams into steel-hard realities, like great singing cables, transcontinental railroads, and Suez Canals."

Twenty-seven times is the soul mentioned in "Passage to India." It sees; it sounds the cry of exaltation at what it sees; it reassures and listens to reassurances; it is unsatisfied; it is repressless; it is the adhesive companion; it is pleasing to its companion, the poet, and vice versa; it is the key to God; with the companion and God, it becomes an irresistible threesome; it is pensive. In the latter stages of the poem, it is the driving energy to the full benefits of the India and of the more than India. With the companion, it will risk the ship, the duo, and all. It will never stop sailing, for in whatever seas, it sails under the flag of its God. In this recklessness and risking, says Charles Fiedelson, the soul is like Captain Ahab, except that the poet and his soul do not believe in the possibility of wreck.⁵⁴

The reader can now fully appreciate the scope and thrill of this poem. Any man who is aware of his soul's potential is aware of this dazzling array of endless realistic accomplishment. Not in some gossamer way is he aware: "the blood burns" in his veins; he grovels no longer; he no longer eats and drinks like a mere brute. He captures and annihilates aged fierce enigmas—like inveterate problems, diseases, and worries of the human race. One by one the social and political problems that interfere with his full democracy disappear.⁵⁵ And far in the evolutionary distance are positive victories which have not yet even come into perspective, beyond today's Indias—if only wings are plumed "for such far flights. . . ."

In addition to these realizations, the reader is further assured and invigorated by the appropriate music of the poem. He can believe the prophecy: it is reality itself. As Allen says, Whitman no longer questions; he affirms.⁵⁶ As Noel maintains, Whitman is more prophet than artist.⁵⁷ And as Daiches notes, Whitman carries a Bible accent on his prophecy.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Charles N. Fiedelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago, 1953), p. 27.

⁵⁵ Whitman considered the development of the general population, not a select class, into a race of perfect men, women, and children, grandly developed in body, emotions, heroism, and intellect, more important than arts, literature, factories, architecture, ships, wharves, and bank-safes filled with coin or mints with bullion. *Walt Whitman Workshop*, p. 56.

⁵⁶ *Walt Whitman Handbook*, p. 198.

⁵⁷ Noel, p. 305.

⁵⁸ Daiches, p. 120.

There are two valid tests for the genuineness of "Passage to India." The first is to ask: looking backward, 1960 to 1869, has Whitman overstated the case? Has the dream of this poem come true under the hardest realistic scrutiny? The answer is certainly yes, and in most amazing particulars. The three great events which he memorialized in this poem—the three great monuments themselves—have more than realized the poetic potential he ascribed to them during a mere ninety years of development. And the prospect for the future of things corresponding to them (the more than India—things unseen when they were first sung) is greater than ever. Whitman thus opened the door not to mere celebration, but to cosmic awareness of progress and progressive reality.⁵⁹

The second test is the analysis of Whitman's optimism. From all available evidence the same Whitman who conceived and wrote the caustic, devastating *Democratic Vistas* conceived and wrote what some call the ultra-optimistic "Passage to India." Out of his searing awareness of democracy's weakness and hypocrisy and incongruity and slow progress toward a great ideal, Whitman fashioned a poem which urged the reader not to lose his vision, but to continue to look at the sky, for he and the sky are real and belong together.⁶⁰

One writer has said that Whitman was fighting the sweeping melancholy of his era.⁶¹ Whether he was or not, it is important to note that "Passage to India" presents evidence to tone down Whitman's reputation as an unlimited and cockeyed optimist. Perhaps, psychologically, he was closer to pessimist, since, like Mark Twain, he seemed often to doubt man's ability ever to reach his potential; but, unlike Mark Twain, Whitman was determined to continue to beat against the door of the heart of mankind, demanding entrance for the faith that would glorify man if man would but open his heart.

An optimist would hardly need to convince himself by speaking over and over again such words of encouragement and reassurance to a failing partner in democratic idealism. In hundreds of poems and prose works Whitman showed that he knew the failings and the inherent dangers. But he never stopped warring against the doubt of democracy and the apathy.

"Passage to India" is an excellent poem for 1960 readers. First, it is a fine introduction to what is perhaps the most satisfying way to read Whitman, namely, to treat him not as an enthusiast of man's eternal glories, of indiscriminate love for all, or of undisciplined self-conceit, but as the promoter of hard work by skilled hands without which the divine dreams, which are the first stage in every man's

⁵⁹ Bliss Perry says of "Passage to India": "The burden of it is evolution—the one thing escaping the other—the unfolding of cosmic purposes." *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* (Boston, 1906), p. 195.

⁶⁰ See Floyd Stovall, p. 93, where the idea is expressed that, if there were no evil overleaping the divine function of the spirit of freedom, there could be no good.

⁶¹ O'Grady, p. 269.

transformation, remain unfulfilled. Second, it is a chart of man's evolutionary growth over several periods: before 1492, 1492 to 1869, 1869 to 1960, and 1960 on. More than a chart of progressive civilization, it indicates the motive power of progress, man's insatiable passion for the next higher stage, and the reasons for the illimitability of that power, the constant urging from God. Third, it predicts and explains today's restless activity—even the international competition—in atomic energy, in space probing and underseas investigations, in plans for interplanetary travel, in driving ever deeper into the wilds of men's hearts and minds, and in that inexhaustible parade of invention and discovery which the coming years envision. "Are they not all the seas of God?" asks Whitman, eliminating much of the surprise (but none of the excitement) from whatever great successful endeavor. Fourth, it provides comfort to those who must find answers to uncommonly knotty problems, such as East-West coöperation, the growing pains of maverick new nations, the inscrutability of mental disease, and the fathoming of a saving balance as the world teeters between its greatest prospect and utter destruction. Finally, at a time when the tide rises against the democratic faith more threateningly than ever, from without and from within, this poem demonstrates how these dangers can be assessed at their proper value, and how man and soul can idealistically and realistically rise above them.

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