

WALT WHITMAN AND TANTRISM:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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## PREFACE

This study presents the parallels between Walt Whitman's thought and Tantrism, a product of the Upanishadic and the Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics, and interprets in the light of these parallels the growth of his thought. The relationship between the body and the soul is most vital in any correct understanding of Whitman's poetry. This study, therefore, takes this relationship as a focal point from which it delves into other areas of his thought. I have presented the parallels through generous quotations from Whitman and Tantrism (also from the Upanishads on which Tantrism relies heavily), and followed these parallels by charting the shape of the poet's thought. This study restricts itself to the consideration of the philosophical ideas in Whitman and is not concerned with other aspects of his poetry.

Discerning readers will quickly note my dependence on Arthur Avalon's Principles of Tantra, although I have also utilized writings of others on Tantrism. Principles of Tantra, though not absolutely objective, covers all aspects of Tantrism in great detail and hence is indispensable to any study of Tantrism.

Like other writers on Indian themes, I faced in this study the problem of capitalizing and italicizing Indian terms. The Anglicized and the Indian spellings of a term sometimes differ; in such a case both are accepted. Webster's New International Dictionary (2d ed.) as well as Encyclopaedia Britannica (1963) accept, for example, both "Shiva" and "Siva." In this book I have followed Avalon in adopting "Shiva" and "Shakti" spellings, which are nearer to the Indian pronunciation of



these terms. I have, however, retained the variant spellings of these and similar terms wherever they occur in quotations from authors using them. I have also used the term "Tantrik" as a proper noun and "tantric" as an adjective.

I have capitalized and not italicized terms like Maya, Karma, and Brahman, because they are known to the Western scholar. On the other hand, I have italicized but not capitalized less known words like upaya, sadhana, and mantra. Opinions will differ as to the putting of a term in one of the two categories. But as there is no uniformity among writers in this particular respect, I had to rely wholly on my judgment.

My interest in Whitman was kindled in a stimulating seminar conducted by Professor Harry R. Warfel at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. He pointed out to me--and I immediately agreed--the need and value of doing the present study in the context of more attention being given to Whitman by the Indian academicians at present. Since then, as the chairman of my dissertation committee, he has unstintingly given me scholarly advice, valuable suggestions, warm friendship, and encouragement when my interest flagged or other difficulties came up, for all of which I thank him. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Edwin C. Kirkland who, in spite of his preoccupation with a book of his own, gave me generous help in more ways and areas than can be mentioned here. My thanks are also due to Professors Arthur W. Thompson and David M. Chalmers for providing me with encouragement and helpful suggestions.



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## GLOSSARY

agantukamala: defilement.

anuttara: knowledge; philosophy.

artha: money; wealth.

asanas: sitting postures.

Atman: soul; eternal Self.

Atman-Brahman: term signifying the identity between an individual and the universal Soul.

Bhairava: Shiva, the god of destruction.

bhakta: devotee.

bhakti: loving devotion.

bhakti marg: way of loving devotion as the means of salvation.

bhava: form; mental attitude.

bhoga: enjoyment.

bhukti: enjoyment.

Bodhisattva: Gautama Buddha before attaining enlightenment; any individual dedicated to the salvation of others and destined to attain Buddhahood.

Brahman: the Absolute; the Undivided Self; the Ground.

brahmanda, brihat-brahmanda: universe.

Carya: action; ritual.

Chaitanya: Bengali poet of the Krishna cult.

chakrapuja: Tantric rite of worshipping in a circle.

chakras: psychic centers in the human body.

dharana: concentration.

dharma: religion; duty; law; righteousness; morality; norm.



dhvani: unlettered sound.

dhyana: meditation.

divya: saint; saintly character.

Dyaneshwar: Marathi saint-poet.

gunas: qualities; characteristics; forces composing the universe of mind and matter.

guru: teacher.

Ida: an important nerve in the human body.

japa: recitation of spells or religious prayers.

Jiva, Jivatma: individual soul.

jnana: knowledge; philosophy.

Kama: god of love.

kama: love; sexual love; desire; lust.

Karma: action; effects of action; universal law governing action and its effects.

karuna: compassion.

kasinas: objects on which to practise concentration.

Kaula: noble; the highest type of the Tantrik.

Kriya: action; ritual.

Kuladharma: law, duties, and morality of the Kaula, the ideal Tantrik.

Kundali, Kundalini: personified Shakti or Cosmic Energy residing in the human body.

lila: play.

lingam: phallus; phallus of Shiva.



Madhyamika: a division of the Mahayana Buddhism founded by Nagarjuna.

madya: wine

Mahayana Buddhism: the 'Great Vessel,' which was the second phase of Buddhism, Hinayana, the 'Little Vessel,' being the first.

maithuna: coitus.

mamsa: meat.

mantra: spell; magical word-formula.

matsya: fish.

Maya: illusion; the power of creation or manifestation; personification of the female half of Brahman.

merudanda: spinal column.

Mira Bai: Rajasthani poetess of the Krishna cult.

mudra: parched grain.

mudra: mystic gestures.

mukti: salvation.

Muladhara Padma: Root-Support Lotus; the place in the human body where Kundalini resides.

nairatma: state of nonego.

nirakara: formless.

nirguna: without qualities or characteristics.

nirvana: state of salvation to be realized here and now; freedom from Karma and rebirth; release from individuality; void.

padma: lotus.

panchatattva: Tantric ritual consisting of wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and woman.

paramatma: universal Soul.

pasu: person in whom brute instinct predominates.



Pingala: an important nerve in the human body.

prajna: wisdom; reason.

Prajnaparamita: supreme reason; the 'Mother of the Buddhas.'

Prakriti: Nature; female principle of creation.

pranayama: breath-control.

pratyahara: withdrawal of the senses.

puja: worship.

Puranas: books of Hindu ancient lore, myths, and miracles.

Purusha: male principle of creation; personification of Brahman.

rajas: energy

sadhaka: disciple; devotee; initiate.

sadhana: training consisting of physical, mental, and spiritual exercises.

Sahasrara Padma: lotus in the crown of the head.

samadhi: identification with, or absorption into, Brahman.

samsara: phenomenal world.

sandhyabhasa: symbolic language; language in which a word has more than one meaning.

sattva: purity; saintliness.

shabdas: lettered sounds.

Shaktas: persons belonging to the Shakti cult in which Cosmic Energy in a female form is worshipped.

Shakti, Sakti: personified Cosmic Energy; consort of Shiva; female principle of creation.

Shastras, Sastras: scriptures.

Shatachakrabhedha: piercing of the psychic centers in the human body by Kundalini.



Shiva, Siva: god of preservation and death; male principle of creation.

Shiva-Shakti, Siva-Sakti: Tantric concept of God combining both male and female aspects in one.

Shruti: Vedas and the Upanishads.

siddhi, siddhis: occult powers.

Smriti: certain Hindu law books and books containing teachings of sages.

sunya, sunyata: void; nirvana; the Reality.

Susumna: an important nerve in the human body.

svechchhachari: a liberated person.

tamas: brute instinct.

Tantra, Tantras: scriptures of Tantrism directly revealed by Shiva.

Tara: feminine counterpart of a Bodhisattva; a saviouress.

tark: contemplation.

upaya: means

vajra: thunderbolt.

varnas: lettered sounds.

Vedant, Vedanta: the philosophy of the Upanishads.

vira: hero; person in whom the quality of energy predominates.

yajna: sacrifice.

yantra: mystic diagram.

Yoga: a school of Indian philosophy.

yoga: doctrines and practices of controlling and disciplining mind and body.

Yogachara: a division of the Mahayana Buddhism founded by Asanga.

yogasadhana: training through yoga.

yoni: the female sexual organ.



## CHAPTER I

### WHITMAN, VEDANTA, AND TANTRISM

The resemblance between Whitman's and the ancient Indian philosophical thought has been marked by many Eastern and Western, past and present distinguished people, including, of course, Whitman scholars. Romain Rolland vouchsafes that Swami Vivekananda, a modern commentator and interpreter of Vedant well-known in the United States of America, read Leaves of Grass and called Whitman "the Sannyasin [sage] of America."<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, on one of his visits to the U. S. A., is reported to have said that "no American has caught the Oriental spirit so well as Whitman."<sup>2</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy saw parallels between Whitman's and the Buddhist thought.<sup>3</sup>

Moncure D. Conway in 1866, Gabriel Sarrazin in 1889, William N. Guthrie in 1897, and Edward Carpenter in 1906 marked the close relation between Whitman and Indian thought.<sup>4</sup> Bliss Perry in 1906 noted that "In his capacity for brooding imaginative ecstasy he [Whitman] was Oriental rather than Western," and further,

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<sup>1</sup>See Prophets of the New India (New York, 1930), p. 348. ✓

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Frederic Ives Carpenter, Emerson and Asia (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup>Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism (Bombay, 1956), pp. 134-135, 161, 171, 246-247.

<sup>4</sup>See Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook (Chicago, 1946), pp. 459 and 462.



His fondness for naming himself in his verse, his dervish-like passion for the endless Open Road, and even his catalogue method, have been noted as having singularly close parallels in the poetry of the East.<sup>5</sup>

While F. I. Carpenter concluded that "Certainly Whitman read the Hindu scriptures carefully either just before or just after writing the Leaves of Grass,"<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Cowley stated that as a result of his mystical experience Whitman "had arrived at something like a system of philosophy, and it bore an astonishing resemblance to certain forms of Hinduism." Cowley says further, especially about "Song of Myself," that "Apparently he had read none of the Hindu classics when he wrote those early poems."<sup>7</sup> Roger Asselineau, after giving a detailed footnote on the articles and books read and written by Whitman on Indian themes, came to the conclusion that "However, all this shows that he read seriously about the East only at a fairly late date. At first he knew it only at second hand through the Transcendentalists in general and Emerson in particular."<sup>8</sup> V. K. Chari, one of the two Whitman scholars (the other being Dorothy F. Mercer) who have done extensive research on the relation of Whitman to Indian thought, also thinks that "Whitman's knowledge of the Vedanta, if he possessed any knowledge of it at all, may have been indirect, derived through the Transcendentalists, and mainly through the writings of

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<sup>5</sup>Walt Whitman (Boston, 1906), pp. 276-277.

<sup>6</sup>Emerson and Asia, p. 250.

<sup>7</sup>"The Guru, the Beatnik and the Good Gray Poet," The New Republic CXLI (October 26, 1959), 17.

<sup>8</sup>The Evolution of Walt Whitman, II (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 303. The detailed note is no. 302 on pp. 302-303.



Emerson, which surely influenced him during his formative years."<sup>9</sup>

Dorothy F. Mercer in the Preface to her dissertation on a comparative study of Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita says that her thesis "will suggest that Whitman's own prose reveals an immediate knowledge of Sanskrit literature acquired before the publication of Leaves of Grass." In the next sentence she comes out with the confession that "this knowledge of Sanskrit literature acquired by Whitman, although unquestionable, is indefinite, and therefore definite sources cannot be discussed."<sup>10</sup> This lack of definite sources for Whitman's knowledge of the Indian thought dogs every Whitman student, as it does us in our present endeavor of comparative study of Tantrism and the poet. We must take G. W. Allen's word as final; when talking about different influences on Whitman that go to make up the thought of the first edition of Leaves of Grass, he says, "Whether Whitman had read any Oriental literature by this time the most diligent search of scholars has not yet determined."<sup>11</sup>

We find many references in Whitman's prose and poetry to Hindu gods, epics, conceptions, and words like maya, caste, and sudra. In his old age he claimed to have read "ancient Hindoo poems" as a preparation for Leaves of Grass along with other books (I, 477).<sup>12</sup> In Pictures, a

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<sup>9</sup>"Whitman and Indian Thought," The Western Humanities Review, XIII (1959), 292.

<sup>10</sup>See the unpubl. diss. (California, 1933), "Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita: A Comparative Study," p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>The Solitary Singer (New York, 1955), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup>Quotations from the prose of Whitman are identified in this book, unless otherwise stated, by volume and page number of The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, Introd. by Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1948). It was not considered necessary to so identify quotations from his poems.



catalogue poem written earlier than Leaves of Grass, Whitman writes:

Here is one singing canticles in an unknown tongue,  
before the Sanskrit was,  
And here a Hindu sage, with his recitative in  
Sanskrit.<sup>13</sup>

A copy of the Gita translated by J. Cockburn Thomson was presented to the poet by a friend, Thomas Dixon; the Introduction seems to have been diligently read by Whitman, as his marking the words or ideas that interested him show.<sup>14</sup> When Thoreau remarked that the first Leaves of Grass was "Wonderfully like the Orientals," and asked Whitman if he had read them, the poet replied, "No: tell me about them." After quoting this conversation, G. W. Allen remarks that Whitman's reply "may have been disingenuous, or it could have been modesty before a man who obviously knew a great deal about Oriental scriptures."<sup>15</sup> We agree that it could have been either. Emerson is reported to have remarked smilingly to F. B. Sanborn that the Leaves of Grass was a combination of the Bhagavad Gita and the New York Herald.<sup>16</sup> If we couple this remark with the sentence "I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start" in the famous letter Emerson wrote to Whitman on July 21, 1855, we may begin to

<sup>13</sup>Walt Whitman, Pictures, Introd. and Notes by Emory Holloway (New York, 1927), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup>See George Hendrick, "Whitman's Copy of the Bhagavad-Gita," Walt Whitman Review, V, no. 1 (March, 1959), 12-14.

<sup>15</sup>The Solitary Singer, p. 141.

<sup>16</sup>See Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman, footnote 1 on p. 276.



wonder whether by "a long foreground somewhere," Emerson might not be meaning Oriental scriptures, among other things.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is not possible to pin down the direct sources of Whitman's acquaintance with Indian philosophical thought, we can be certain of indirect sources. American Transcendentalism could be called "the offspring of a German father and a Hindu mother," because it was largely indebted for its ideas to German Idealism and Romanticism, which in turn derived many ideas from Indian mysticism.<sup>18</sup> Later on, the Transcendentalists on their own got interested in Indian mysticism, as quite a few articles on the subject in The Dial from 1840-44 show. Whitman must have read them. He was not a Transcendentalist in the strict meaning of the term. H. C. Goddard denies him that name, and Arthur Christy does not include him amongst the Transcendentalists influenced by Orientalism in The Orient in American Transcendentalism.<sup>19</sup> Yet he definitely imbibed Orientalism second-hand through Emerson who, as Whitman himself confessed, was a great influence on him in his formative years. Even otherwise, in the words of G. W. Allen, "this Orientalism was very much in the American intellectual atmosphere of the 1840's and 50's, and it would have been impossible for Whitman to escape at least some indirect influence."<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup>Walt Whitman: The Correspondence, 1842-1867, I, ed., Edwin Haviland Miller (New York, 1961), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 458.

<sup>19</sup>New York, 1932. See also H. C. Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism (New York, 1960), pp. 200-201.

<sup>20</sup>Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 458.



influence of Quakerism on Whitman in his formative years also must have quickened his interest in Indian mysticism, for the two streams of thought are similar in some vital respects.<sup>21</sup> In conclusion, the fact that he somehow was acquainted with the Indian thought is not in doubt; what we cannot be certain of knowing at this stage is whether he had imbibed this knowledge directly by reading the Hindu scriptures before 1855 or after.

While we agree that Whitman's thought resembles that of Vedant in certain respects like Atman-Brahman, Karma, and metempsychosis--ideas with which we shall deal at length later in this book--in certain important areas differences occur. The world-affirming attitude and sex as the central principle of creation, pivotal ideas in Whitman, are contrary to the Vedantic thought. Vedanta insists that spiritual knowledge can be attained only by renouncing all pleasures of life, including sex. Renunciation is the watchword of Vedanta. This attitude is diametrically opposite to that of Whitman. "Sex contains all," Whitman sings unashamedly. He so much insists on the omnipotence of sex that Henry Adams pointedly makes a reference to this quality of Whitman.<sup>22</sup> The vital relation between sex and spirituality is fundamental to Whitman's thought.

The same emphasis on sex and the vital relation between sex and spirituality is found only in Tantrism, a later development of Vedanta

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. Vedanta for Modern Man, ed. by Christopher Isherwood (New York, 1945), Introd., xiii, where Isherwood says: "I can see only one little door through which Vedanta might squeeze into Christendom, and that is the Society of Friends. The Quaker doctrine of the Inward Light is in general agreement with the principles of Vedanta."

<sup>22</sup>See The Education of Henry Adams (Boston, 1918), p. 385.



and Mahayana Buddhism. In Tantrism, senses and especially sex are made the only gates through which one can attain Brahmanhood and become Brahman himself in human form. Tantrism, therefore, offers the closest parallels to the two intermingling major strains in Whitman, namely body and soul, and sex or love and death. The following parallels of thought between Tantrism and Whitman are to be noted.

(i) Both try to make the best of both the physical and spiritual worlds. Not only the outward world and its activities are not Maya or illusion, but everything that exists or happens is a manifestation of God, and therefore it is to be enjoyed in the right spirit as a stepping stone to spiritual knowledge. Both hold that the sensual experience is identical with mystical experience and leads to Brahmanhood, to man himself becoming God.

(ii) Both are anti-ascetic and anti-speculative. It is not thinking intellectually but experiencing the Truth in an intuitive flash that counts in both. "A morning glory," a manifestation of God, satisfies both more than "the metaphysics of books."

(iii) Woman in both occupies the first place, as she represents the mystery of the generative process and thus is the image of the Cosmic Energy in flesh. She is Mother first, wife and beloved afterwards.

(iv) Coitus for both is the central symbol on the physical plane of the Mystery which is indescribable. It is through coitus, it being the closest equivalent to the Bliss of the union with God, that one can attain the spiritual goal.

(v) The individual for both is a microcosm of Cosmos. The human



body therefore is divine. All its activities are sacred, and its health important, because through sensual experiences one attains spiritual knowledge. Tantrism prescribes yogic exercises for perfect health of the body, while Whitman suggests the sun, fresh air, and open air life.

(vi) For both, it is the hero type, the rugged individual, who alone is capable of making the best of both the worlds. Sensual enjoyment will only lead to degeneration in the case of others; with the hero, who is the energetic type, the same acts will lead to spiritual knowledge, because he alone understands the spiritual nature of physical activities.

(vii) Both believe in the extraordinary power of words. But language, a human instrument, falls short in describing the mystic experience. Symbols, paradoxes, and double-meaning words therefore have to be employed. The vulgar meaning of words on the surface, which hides the mystic meaning, misleads the uninitiated; hence both the Tantriks and Whitman were misunderstood.

(viii) Both believe in democratic equality of all, tied together by bonds of love. There is no distinction in both because of color, creed, sex, or caste.

(ix) In both, the personal aspect of God is loved and addressed.

In addition, both Whitman and Tantrism share the characteristics of the Perennial Philosophy (dealt with in Chapter III in this book), of man's two selves, of intuition being superior to reasoning, of man's only goal being to identify himself with Atman-Brahman, of divine incarnations, and of Karma and metempsychosis.

In offering these parallels in the following pages, we do not



intend to suggest that Whitman got a direct inspiration from, or that he was acquainted with, Tantrism, which is partly Vedantic Brahmanism ritualized, worshipping a personal god in the form of Cosmic Energy seen as Mother. We do not have any evidence that he knew Tantrism directly or indirectly either before or after 1855. What we do know, however, is that he read incessantly all kinds of books and articles, gathered all sorts of material from libraries, took copious notes, clipped and collected articles from journals; in fact, worked hard at gathering all kinds of knowledge. Somewhere in this collection lay the germs of Tantric thought. He also might have coupled, by accident or inspiration, unknowingly, the ideas of Over-Soul with the Mother-image that was always present with him, and thus arrived independently at what bears a close resemblance to Tantrism.

The absence of any positive proof of Whitman's ever coming in contact with Tantrism should not deter us from offering parallels between the two. By doing so, we hope to illustrate the growth of Whitman's thought in a more logical way than has been possible so far, and secondly --and this is more important--to clear away cobwebs of misunderstandings woven around the sex element in his writings, without ignoring or dismissing it in a few words as some critics tend to do. We hope to show that instead of an embarrassing element, sex in Whitman is vital to his growth and therefore pivotal in any evaluation of him.

We shall, therefore, trace the parallels between Tantrism and Whitman, first in the sphere of Perennial Philosophy, then in that of sex. These two trends mingle and become the origin of the idea of



brotherhood of all human beings in a democratic society, not before, however, the poet understood death and triumphed over his fear of it. We shall, therefore, draw parallels to both these aspects of his poetic development. In doing so, we shall quote from the Upanishads and the Gita too.<sup>23</sup> This is inevitable, as Tantrism takes its monism from the Upanishads and its Sankhya dualism of Purusha (male principle) and Prakriti (female principle) from the Gita. It should also be borne in mind that when we are talking of Whitman in the following pages, it is the poet we mean, and not the historical Whitman, unless otherwise stated.

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I follow in this book the commendable practice of the Hindus of shortening the title of the Bhagavad-Gita to the Gita.



## CHAPTER II

### TANTRISM

Hindu scriptures are divided into four classes: (i) Shruti (what is heard), which are direct revelations like the four Vedas and some Upanishads; (ii) Smriti (what is remembered), which are the teachings of the sages, and certain law books; (iii) Puranas (ancient lore), which are legends, myths, miracles like the Vishnu Purana; (iv) Tantra (meaning woof, warp, system, ritual, doctrine) which are said to be directly revealed by Shiva and considered the fifth Veda by the Tantriks.

The word Tantra comes from the root tan, meaning 'to stretch, to extend,' or 'that which extends knowledge.' Tra is 'that which saves,' or 'knowledge that saves.' The Tantric writings are divided into five groups according to the god praised therein: Surya, Ganesha, Shakti, Shiva, and Vishnu. The scriptures of the last three sects, which are the important ones, are usually known as Tantra, Agama, and Samhita respectively; though loosely used, these three terms are synonymous. All these three types of scriptures deal with their subject-matter in four divisions: the first deals with the problems of philosophy (called jnana by the Hindus, and anuttara by the Buddhists); the second relates to the discipline essential for the union of self with God (called yoga); the third and the fourth (called Carya and Kriya) deal with ritual and ceremonial.

Tantrism is also used as a generic term to cover both Buddhist and Hindu Tantric sects, and it is in this wide sense that we shall be



using the term throughout. Sir Charles Eliot has defined Tantrism as

a system of magical or sacramental ritual, which professes to attain the highest aims of religion by such methods as spells, diagrams, gestures and other physical exercises. One of its bases is the assumption that man and the universe correspond as microcosm and macrocosm and that both are subject to the mysterious power of words and letters.<sup>1</sup>

This definition dwells too much on the ritual aspect of Tantrism, belittling its metaphysical aspect. Ritual is important, but the theory behind it more significant, and it is that which shall engage our attention more than the ritual aspect.

#### Buddhist Tantrism

We are not concerned with the problem of whether Tantrism in whatever form came to Buddhism and Hinduism from the non-Aryan aborigines or whether its germs were present in the Vedic writings. Probably both viewpoints are correct. We know, however, that Mahayana Buddhism provided fertile soil for the growth of Tantrism. Both the schools of Mahayana--Madhyamika and Yogachara--contributed to the theory and practice of Tantrism.

Nagarjuna (2nd century A.D.), the founder of the Madhyamika school, gave metaphysical form to the Buddha's concept of "the middle path," by declaring that there is no essential difference between samsara (phenomenal world) and nirvana or sunyata (Reality). His sunyata is not "nothing-ness," which some critics believe it is, but is really the indescribable Brahman of the Upanishads. In the fourth century A.D.

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<sup>1</sup> Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch (New York, 1921), II, 274.



Asanga and his brother Vasubandhu founded the Yogachara school, which laid stress on the yogic practices like concentration and contemplation to attain the highest Truth.

The yoga practices of the Yogachara school, and the Madhyamika doctrine that there is essentially no difference between this world and nirvana, between sensual and mystical experience, combined to bring in Tantrism. The Tantric reasoning was that if there was no difference between this world and nirvana then all men are already Buddhas. However, this knowledge is not realized by them, because it is obscured by agantukamala, a certain accidental defilement. Tantrism professes to teach how to remove this defilement. "But this can only be done by using existence itself as the means (upaya), for there is no other possible."<sup>2</sup> Thus one has to reach nirvana through this world and its activities. The motive force of nirvana is prajna (Wisdom), while that of samsara is karuna (Compassion). The highest Truth can, therefore, be reached only through the combination of Wisdom and Compassion.

In this combination or union, Wisdom dominates, though the two are indistinguishable. Wisdom in Buddhist Tantrism is symbolized by the female deity, Prajnaparamita. In the Tibetan scripture Hevajra-tantra, she is Nairatmya, or 'absence of the notion of self-hood.' This Tantrism originated the conception of the world as consisting of antithetical relationships like nirvana and samsara, and noumenon and phenomenon. According to it, to master and understand one set of these pairs of opposites is to master and understand the other one automatically. In

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<sup>2</sup>D. L. Snellgrove, The Hevajra Tantra (London, 1959), I, 22.



realizing this unity in duality, a great stress is put on the yogic practices like concentration and contemplation.

The complicated structure of Tantrism is reared on this notion of "two-in-one." It was inevitable that, to express this metaphysical doctrine in human terms, sexual symbolism should be used; the initiates were, of course, supposed to go beyond the symbolism. The sexual symbolism needs no defense, as, to put it in the words of D. L. Snellgrove,

The power and (in a sense) the profundity of these symbols is very great, for while on the one hand they refer intimately to the realm of sensual experience (samsara), they also indicate the two coefficients of mystical experience (nirvana). In fact these symbols indicate the identity of the one with the other, in a way in which no other symbols can possibly do.<sup>3</sup>

The language, too, becomes symbolic and develops esoteric connotations that are understood only by adepts. Vajra (thunderbolt) and padma (lotus) mean male and female organs on the sexual, moon and sun on the cosmic, and upaya (Means) and prajna (Wisdom) on the doctrinal level. Mamsa (meat) means bala (strength) and shava (corpse) is shraya (shelter). Tantrism developed a whole terminology which, while sounding obscene, hid metaphysical meanings.

### Shaktism

Of the Hindu Tantrism we shall deal here with Shaktism, though we shall draw on other Tantras, too.<sup>4</sup> All Tantrism, Hindu or Buddhist, is

<sup>3</sup> Snellgrove, I, 24.

<sup>4</sup> I shall use the terms "Shaktism" and "Tantrism" as synonymous in this book, because Shakti is worshipped in all Tantras, but predominantly so in Shaktism. I shall also use Arthur Avalon's spelling of the terms "Shakti," "Shiva," and "Shiva-Shakti." Some writers on Tantrism spell these terms as "Sakti," "Siva," and "Siva-Sakti," which I have retained in quotations from them.



similar in ritual; only personal deities are different. In Shaktism the Buddhist iconography is replaced by the Hindu; Prajnaparamita is replaced by Shakti. This Shakti is the Almighty Great Mother, consort of Shiva, but since she represents the Cosmic Energy, she is equated with Brahman by the Tantriks. Shiva and Shakti are identical; but while Shiva is the inactive static aspect of consciousness, Shakti is its kinetic active aspect. The world is a manifestation of this Cosmic Energy, and as she enjoys her creation which she has created in her lila (play), so, too, her devotees ought to enjoy it all. She is all activities of the body and the world; hence everything physical and material is sacred in the sense that it only leads or ought to lead to her, the Ultimate Reality.

This Shakti as a Force pervades the universe; she is also present in the human body, as the latter is a microcosm, while the universe is the macrocosm. This serpentine coil of energy, known as Kundali or Kundalini, lies dormant at the base of the spine; it is part of liberation to arouse, through the yogic exercises, this Kundalini, make her mount through the body to her lord, Shiva, who resides in the crown in the head. Their mating is liberation for the adept, who now becomes both Shiva and Shakti in one.

Like the brihat-brahmanda, or the universe, the human body has six chakras or psychical centres presided over by appropriate gods and their consorts. The merudanda, the spinal column, is filled with nerves and nerve cells, the principal of which are Ida, Pingala, and Susumna. There is mention of the importance of the Susumna nerve in the Upanishads.

Katha Upanishad has this:



There are a hundred and one channels of the heart.  
One of these passes up to the crown of the head.  
Going up by it, one goes to immortality.<sup>5</sup>

While here it is not mentioned by name, in Maitri Upanishad, it is:

There is a channel called the Sushumna, leading upward,  
conveying the breath, piercing through the palate.  
Through it, by joining . . . the breath, the syllable  
Om, and the mind, one may go aloft.<sup>6</sup>

Like all other nerves, these three important nerves have their roots in the yoni, the region between the anus and the generative organ, a region called Muladhara Padma or the Root-Support Lotus. A Sanskrit verse describes the location of the important Susumna nerve thus:

Between the anus and the generative organ is the Yoni,  
having its mouth downwards. There is what is called  
the root. Kundali is always there. Encircling all the  
nerves with her body of three and a half coils (and) with  
her tail in her mouth, she lies within the cavity of the  
Susumna nerve.<sup>7</sup>

This Susumna nerve, where Shakti as Kundalini lies dormant, extends from the Muladhara Padma at the base of the spinal column to the Sahasrara Padma at the crown of the head. Ida and Pingala wind up spirally meeting the Susumna nerve at five points--the yoni, the root of the generative organ, the navel, the heart, and the throat. At these meeting points are the lotuses or chakras, which have a definite number of petals, definite colors, the Tantric significance of which we are not concerned with here. These are presided over by particular gods and goddesses.

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Ernest Hume, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads (London, 1934), p. 361.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 437.

<sup>7</sup>Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe), ed., Principles of Tantra (Madras, 1960), p. 448.



Shatachakrabheda, a fundamental part of the Tantric ritual, means the piercing of the six chakras in the body by the rousing of the dormant Kundalini in the yonis, who, piercing these chakras, at last fuses into Shiva in the head. After attaining the discipline of the body and mind through yogic exercises like pranayam (control of breath) and concentration under a proper guru (teacher), the Tantric adept in the final stages wakes up the innate dormant powers of divinity within him, personified as Kundalini. As she rises and mounts upwards towards Shiva, she goes on activating the different centres as she passes through them. From her final union with Shiva--the mystic union of the two polar principles of Divine Energy in the human body--is born the "liberation" of the Tantrik. He is now beyond the dualities of the world, and has himself become Shiva, for the aim of the Tantrik is to become God. As the Gandharva Tantra says, "A man should worship a Devata by becoming a Devata himself."<sup>8</sup>

#### Panchatattva, or Five M's, or Five Makaras

Because Cosmic Energy resides in the body in the form of Kundalini, not only is the human body sacred, but all its activities are sacred, once it is recognized that Shakti is acting. The Tantrik believes,

To neglect or to deny the needs of the body, to think of it as something not divine, is to neglect and deny that greater life of which it is a part, and to falsify the great doctrine of the unity of all and of the ultimate identity of Matter and Spirit. Governed by such a concept, even the lowliest physical needs take on a cosmic significance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 727.

<sup>9</sup>Arthur Avalon, The Serpent Power (London, 1919), p. 269.



The principle of Tantrism is to gain mukti (liberation) through bhukti (enjoyment); the five M's, or the panchtattva, that is, mamsa (meat), matsya (fish), madya (wine), mudra (parched grain), and maithuna (coitus), form an integral part of the Tantric ritualistic doctrine. This looks very much like libertinism, but as Kularnava Tantra says:

If man could attain spirituality by drinking, then all ignoble drinkers would be liberated. If residence in heaven be the result of meat-eating, then all carnivorous beings would be righteous. If O Devi! enjoyment of women be the cause of liberation, then all creatures by enjoying women would be liberated.<sup>10</sup>

Tantrism classifies men according to gunas, which are forces or substances composing the universe of mind and matter. These three forces--sattva, rajas, and tamas, or purity, energy, and brute instinct--dominate in that order the divya, the vira, and the pasu types of men.<sup>11</sup> The five M's would have different meanings to these three types of men. For the pasu, indulgence in the five M's would be degenerating. The divya would interpret them in spiritual terms: for example, maithuna for him would be spiritual mating of the male and the female principles within himself. It is the vira who, performing these acts physically believing he is God, would through them reach his spiritual goal. The vira would perform these acts in the spirit of yajna (sacrifice). Of the five M's, maithuna is Shaktism's main rite, because Shakti in the form of Kundalini resides in the yoni, and sexual bliss parallels spiritual Bliss.

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted by Avalon, Principles of Tantra, p. 480.

<sup>11</sup>These concepts of gunas are borrowed by Tantrism from the Samkhya school of Indian philosophy.



The Tantric ritual of the five M's was not new; it had its roots, like its yoga, in the Vedic literature. Tantrism is nothing but the Vedic doctrines put in a symbolic ritualistic form. Anyone who reads the Vedic literature even cursorily will see how much time and intelligence the Vedic Aryans spent on making ritual out of imbibing somarasa (wine made out of soma plant), and dividing and eating the meat of a sacrificed animal. These and copulation acts were eulogized in most of the Vedas.<sup>12</sup> Indra, the Vedic god, is a riotous tippler consuming huge amounts of meat and wine and sometimes getting sick afterwards. Tantrism gave these delights of life a metaphysical base, thus sweeping away the ascetic attitude towards life cultivated assiduously in the post-Upanishadic and the Buddhist periods.

#### Chakrapuja or Circle Worship

Chakrapuja is the Tantric rite making use of the five M's and embodying the Tantric principles of poison killing poison, or making men rise by what causes their downfall, and of raising the devotee above the worldly notions of right and wrong. This rite is usually performed at night at a place where secrecy is ensured. After the room in which the rite is to take place has been cleaned and consecrated, a circle of a prescribed radius is drawn. At the center of the circle an yantra (a

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<sup>12</sup>Satapatha Brahmanas especially describe detailed ritual of drinking, sacrificing, and dividing and eating the flesh of the sacrificed animal. Copulation as ritual is described in the Vedas and the Upanishads. For detailed information about this description in ancient Hindu scriptures, see Appendix II in Arthur Avalon, Shakti and Shakta (Madras, 1920), pp. 440-448.



mystical diagram; Tantriks believe yantras have magical powers) is drawn, in which the host and his Shakti (usually his wife) sit. Around them sit other Tantriks with their Shaktis on their left.<sup>13</sup> A big jar of wine is then placed before the host on an altar encircled by an yantra. After incantations are repeated to consecrate this jar, cooked meat, fish, and gram are brought in. These also are then blessed by incantations and mystic gestures known as mudras. Drinking now starts. With the first, second, and third cups are eaten meat, fish, and gram respectively; with the fourth, all these, and with the fifth, anything that is desired. Not more than five cups are supposed to be drunk, after which coitus takes place.

### The Tantric Sadhana

In order to attain the highest liberating knowledge, certain physical, mental and spiritual exercises are considered necessary for the Tantrik,. These exercises are called sadhana, which includes rituals and rites. The beginner's sadhana consists of the following: (1) Sandhya or daily service; (ii) Upasana or general worship; (iii) Shatchakrabheda; (iv) Mudra Sadhana.

Common to all these four parts of Tantric sadhana are yantras (mystic diagrams) japas (recitation of mantras), and mantras (magical word-formulas). All these three are associated with almost all Tantric rites and are considered to lead inevitably to power. It is through the

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<sup>13</sup> Some Tantric scriptures allow coitus with one's wife only; others with any woman, as all women are embodiments of Shakti.



mantras or spells that the Tantrik attains siddhis or occult powers, the Tantric theory being that Shakti is the Word or Shabdabrahman. The Tantrik believes that Shakti in the form of Kundalini lives in our body with the fifty original sounds of the Sanskrit language known as varnas. These sounds have colors like red, white, and blue. The Tantrik believes that it is from these sounds that the whole universe of forms, visible and invisible, was created. Mantra is, therefore, full of consciousness, a mass of radiant energy, and its effect is "to stimulate the mental faculties with the divine radiant energy, and to thus lead to a full understanding of constantly visible supersensual realities."<sup>14</sup>

The best method of attaining siddhis and liberation is, however, through Shatchakrabheda. The Tantras warn that the powers thus obtained are not to be used for evil purposes but for salvation. Mudras or mystic gestures are certain psycho-physical processes calculated to help these occult powers, and are used in all rites and ritual.

The Tantric sadhana is full of rites and ritual, at the center of which is the principle of awakening the forces dormant within the body through Shatchakrabheda, thus joining together the male and the female principles within the body leading to liberation. In short, "It is the object of Tantrik sadhana to merge that self-principle (Svarat) into the Universal (Virat)."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 374.



### Yoga

Tantra has combined Patanjali's yoga system with rites and rituals of its own. As yogic practices are an integral part of Tantrism, it would not be inappropriate here if we take a brief look at yoga, a system of controlling mind and body common to many philosophical schools of Indian thought. Like everything else in this book concerning the Indian systems, we shall dwell only on those elements which will be sufficient to provide enough light in which to see the appropriateness of parallels between Tantrism and Whitman's thought.

Like most ideas, philosophic or otherwise, yoga has its roots in the Vedic literature. Scattered references to its theory and practice are found in the Upanishads, particularly in the Atharva-veda. As meditation and concentration were believed necessary for attaining the spiritual goal, a whole system was developed to help a devotee to concentrate and meditate. The Svetasvatara Upanishad speaks of proper places and postures for meditation, and the Chandogya of concentration. The Maitri Upanishad speaks of the sixfold yoga:

The precept for effecting this [unity with Brahman] is this: restraint of the breath (pranayama), withdrawal of the senses (pratyahara), meditation (dhyana), concentration (dharana), contemplation (tarka), absorption (samadhi). Such is said to be the sixfold Yoga. By this means  
 When a seer sees the brilliant  
 Maker, Lord, Person, the Brahma-source,  
 Then, being a knower, shaking off good and evil,  
 He reduces everything to unity in the supreme Imperishable.<sup>16</sup>

This sixfold system of yoga and the belief that only with its help can

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<sup>16</sup> Hume, p. 435.



one unite with Brahma remained with all the succeeding Indian schools of thought.

The word 'yoga' comes from the root yuj meaning 'to bind together, to yoke.' It can be best defined in the words of W. Y. Evans-Wentz:

It implies a joining, or yoking, of the unenlightened human nature to the enlightened divine nature in such manner as to allow the higher to guide and transmute the lower. It has also been taken, but less generally, to imply a yoking, or harnessing, or disciplining of the mind itself, by means of mental concentration.<sup>17</sup>

It is popularly taken to mean any technique that is used to discipline the mind and the body, so that an individual can become a proper vehicle for the union with Brahman. The yogic training, which is rigorous, has eight stages: abstinences, observances, sitting postures (asanas), breath-control (pranayam), withdrawal of mind from outer objects (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), contemplation (dhyana), and identification (samadhi). In all the main types of yoga--Hatha, Raj, Mantra, Laya, and Shiva--the last three stages are common and the most important.

The Gita dwells on three other yogas--Karma (action), Jnana (knowledge), and Bhakti (devotion), and places the last one as the best. In all these yogic systems, the yogi "turns his attention inwardly, and it is within himself that he experiences all the stages of re-integration from multiplicity towards unity."<sup>18</sup>

Because it professed to help this "re-integration from multiplicity

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<sup>17</sup>Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines (London, 1958), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup>Alain Danielou (Shiva Sharan), Yoga (New York, 1949), p. 10.



towards unity," yoga, its lore, and practices were absorbed in one form or the other by almost all the Indian philosophical systems. The Buddha stressed yogic exercises, through which he said he attained siddhis (miraculous powers) of remembering past lives and finally of transcending all states of conditioned being. From these ideas of siddhis, the Tantriks came to couple yoga with these powers as well as the union with Brahman. Shatachakrabheda or piercing of the chakras in the body by the roused Kundalini is also called Kundalini Yoga, though it comes under Laya Yoga.

The Buddhist monks were enjoined to use certain objects to help them concentrate. These objects were called kasinas. M. Eliade further explains:

Any object, any phenomenon, can serve as a kasina: the light coming through the crack of door in a dark place, a jar of water, a lump of earth, etc. Through meditation, the practitioner obtains perfect coincidence between his thought and the object--that is, he unifies the mental flux by suspending every other psychic activity.<sup>19</sup>

While the Buddhist Tantrik concentrated on kasinas, the Hindu Tantrik concentrated on the image of the goddess Shakti, having preceded it by a ritual. The image was treated as a via media, and not as a goddess, and was itself part of the ritual in this way. It and other ritual actions that helped the Tantrik concentrate and contemplate were, we must understand, only "means to awaken the slumbering Sakti, the sensational self of the worshipper, so that he may realise his Real Self

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<sup>19</sup> Yoga (New York, 1958), pp. 193-194.



(Siva-Sakti)."<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting to note that Whitman was aware of the importance of the last important stages of yoga in the process of realizing "his Real Self (Siva-Sakti)." The following note found in his papers makes this clear:

First of all prepare for study by the following self-teaching exercises. Abstract yourself from this book; realize the point you stand that is now to you the centre of all. Look up overhead, think of space stretching out, think of all the unnumbered orbs wheeling safely there, invisible to us by day, some visible by night. . . . Spend some minutes faithfully in this exercise. Then again realize yourself upon the earth, at the particular point you now occupy. Which way stretches the north, and what countries, seas, etc.? Which way the west? Seize these firmly in your mind, pass freely over immense distances. Turn your face a moment thither. Fix the direction and the idea of the distances of separate sections of your own country, also of England, the Mediterranean Sea, Cape Horn, the North Pole, and such like distinct places.<sup>21</sup>

This is like a yogi teaching yoga to his pupil. In the above passage, the last four steps (samadhi, the last, is not mentioned but understood) in the yogic training are stated, namely, withdrawal of mind, concentration, and contemplation. Whether the Indian names are given to the stages or not is immaterial; but the steps are there. Whitman must have read in his copy of the Gita about yoga:<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Mulk Raj Anand, The Hindu View of Art (London, 1933), p. 141. The term 'Shiva-Shakti' used here implies the idea basic to Tantrism that though Shiva and Shakti seem to be two, they are essentially one and the same.

<sup>21</sup>From R. M. Bucke, Notes and Fragments (London, 1899), quoted by Roger Asselineau, The Evolution of Walt Whitman, II, 101-102.

<sup>22</sup>See George Hendrick, "Whitman's Copy of the Bhagvad-Gita."



Shutting off sense  
 From what is outward,  
 Fixing the gaze  
 At the root of the eyebrows,  
 Checking the breath-stream  
 In and outgoing  
 Within the nostrils,  
 Holding the senses,  
 Holding the intellect  
 Holding the mind fast,  
 He who seeks freedom,  
 Thrusts fear aside . . .  
 Truly that man  
 Is made free for ever.<sup>23</sup>

While speaking of breath-control, this also speaks of concentration.

Whitman was a yogi, whether he was aware of it or not, in the sense that he somehow knew these important yogic steps. He was a yogi also in the sense that he was able to yoke his human mind to the divine nature, allowing the higher to transmute the lower, as in the definition of yoga given above. He was able to yoke his sexual energy, which is, when roused, Kundalini or Cosmic Energy, to the divine Shiva in him, and thus realize his Real Self.

Whitman was yogi in another way too. He identified himself with all the things in the universe, what D. H. Lawrence called in his inimitable way, Whitman's soul "leaking out in a sort of dribble, oozing into the universe."<sup>24</sup> We can guess why Lawrence did not understand this process of "oozing out." But this power of identification with anything in the universe also is yoga. The yogic training, as a matter of fact,

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<sup>23</sup>Gita, pp. 61-62. All the quotations from the Gita in this book are from Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, tr., The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita, New York, 1954.

<sup>24</sup>Studies in Classic American Literature (New York, 1951), p. 178.



aims at the direct experience of all things through identification with them. Its method is a sort of physico-mental gymnastic, through which the Conscious, carried by the subtle body, is withdrawn from its physical envelope, without however destroying it, and after having cognized all things, comes back into the physical envelope with its prodigious harvest.<sup>25</sup>

Whitman becomes young, old, man, woman, child; he is in the barn of the farmer, on the mountains, everywhere. This is a yogic feat.

But he is not, we must remember, the ascetic yogi of the Thoreau type. Whitman could have got the knowledge of yoga from the Transcendentalist group, which was interested in it, as Thoreau shows. Whitman, however, transmuted it in his own way, as he did everything else.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

Many critics recognize that Whitman's system of philosophy, which was a result of his mystical experiences, bears a surprising resemblance to certain Hindu concepts like metempsychosis, Karma, the distinction between the phenomenal self and the Spiritual Self, the identity between the spiritual Self and the Brahman, the One Source for all the universe, the progress of the Self through a number of births toward a final union with God, and many other minor ideas.<sup>1</sup> We shall, in this chapter, trace the resemblances as far as the above ideas are concerned between Whitman and Tantrism. In fundamental doctrines, Tantrism relies heavily on Vedantism and does not really teach anything that is not in essence Advaita Vedanta (monistic Vedanta).<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that there are many resemblances between Tantrism and Whitman's thought in many areas.

According to Aldous Huxley, Perennial Philosophy is distinguished by the following characteristics:<sup>3</sup> (i) All this universe of things, movable and immovable, is a manifestation of the divine Reality, within which everything exists, and without which nothing can exist. (ii) The knowledge and the realization of this divine Reality can be reached

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Malcolm Cowley, "The Guru, the Beatnik and the Good Gray Poet," p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Arthur Avalon, Shakti and Shakta, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>See Introduction to the Gita, pp. 11-22.



through intuition, which is superior to discursive reasoning. This knowledge merges the knower and the known into one identity. Once man realizes this identity between the subject and the object, he is liberated and is beyond Time and Space limitations. (iii) Man has two selves--a phenomenal self and an eternal Self. It is possible for man to identify himself with the latter, which is part and parcel of the divine Reality. (iv) Man's life here has one object only--to identify himself with the eternal Self, so that he can come to the unitive knowledge of the divine Reality. (v) This divine Reality incarnates in one or more human forms.

All these characteristics are found in the Vedic and Tantric scriptures. We shall take these one by one and trace their resemblance to Whitman's thought.

#### 1. Universe as a Manifestation of Divine Reality

In Tantric monism the divine Reality is the female Shakti, who replaces the Vedantin's Brahman. But the attributes and functions of both are described in more or less identical terms. From this Shakti or Brahman everything derives and in It everything dissolves. This Reality is the efficient as well as material cause of the universe, like the spider or the fire, illustrations given in Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad: "As a spider might come out with his thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, even so from this Soul come forth all vital energies (prana), all worlds, all gods, all beings."<sup>4</sup> Or this verse from the

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<sup>4</sup>Hume, p. 95. It is interesting to note that Whitman wrote "A Noiseless Patient Spider," and "Sparkles from the Wheel," where the same imagery of the spider and the sparks from the fire occurs.



Mundaka Upanishad:

As a spider emits and draws in [its thread],  
 As herbs arise on the earth,  
 As the hairs of the head and body from a living person,  
 So from the Imperishable arises everything here.  
 (I.1.7)<sup>5</sup>

The Vedic literature is full of such verses about the Brahman being the Source of all things, who can at best be described as "not this, not that," as Yajnavalkya's statement about Soul (Brahman and Soul being one) typifies:

That Soul (Atman) is not this, it is not that (neti, neti).  
 It is unseizable, for it is not seized. It is indestructible, for it is not destroyed. It is unattached, for it does not attach itself. It is unbound. It does not tremble. It is not injured.<sup>6</sup>

The Vedic scriptures say: "Sarvam khalvidam Brahma, all this manifold world is the one Brahman," which is also the faith of the Tantric devotee, as the Mahanirvana Tantra testifies.<sup>7</sup> Here is how Shakti, who created the whole universe as her lila (play), is described in the Tantric

Mahabhagavata:

She is pure, full of knowledge, beyond the reach of speech, perpetual, immaculate, unapproachable by even yogis, all-pervading, untroubled, eternally blissful, subtle, and devoid of all such properties as heaviness, lightness and the like.  
 Subsequently, when that Anandamayi [One who is pure Bliss] became desirous to create in order to manifest Her own play of bliss, that supreme Prakrti, though in truth formless, at once assumed a form by the strength of Her own will.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> See Arthur Avalon, The Serpent Power, p. 51, and the footnote 1 on the same page.

<sup>8</sup> Avalon, Principles of Tantra, p. 255.



Everything exists in her, and she is everything:

In the root She is all-Brahman; in the stem She is all-maya; in the flower She is all-world, and in the fruit She is all-liberation. Brahman, Isvara, Maya, and Avidya--these are Her four aspects. Dividing Herself into these four parts, the Player of the blissful play throughout the world becomes Herself mad in the intoxication of Her own joy--Herself taking birth, Herself dying, Herself dancing in Her own cremation ground, and Herself becoming Siva in Her own corpse. She Herself enjoys the play. She is Herself Purusa, Herself Prakrti, Herself the spouse of Mahakala, Herself attachment, inclination, and goal, and Herself the daughter of Supreme bliss.<sup>9</sup>

Shiva reveals to Shakti her greatness in the Mahanirvana Tantra thus:

Thou art the very Paraprakriti of Brahma, the Paramatma, and from thee has sprung the whole universe. O Gracious One! whatever there is in this world, of things which have and are without motion, from Mahat to an atom, owes its origin to and is dependent on thee. Thou art the origin of all manifestations; thou art the birth-place of even us (the members of the trinity). Thou knowest the whole world, yet none knows thee. . . . Thou art in the form of all the Saktis and thou pervadest the bodies of all the Devas. Thou art both subtle and gross, manifested and veiled, though in thyself formless, yet thou hast form. Who can understand thee? For the helping of the worshipper, the good of the world and the destruction of the enemies of the gods, thou dost assume various forms.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the Vedic Brahman becomes the Tantrik's Shakti.

As Shakti or the Cosmic Energy is the one Source of all things, dissolving or death is merely going back to this Primal Energy. Our souls are therefore immortal:

He who knows the nature of life knows also that Jiva [soul] has no real death except that in Nirvana. What you and I

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from Avalon's translation by P. Thomas, Kama Kalpa or The Hindu Ritual of Love (Bombay, 1959), p. 120.



... speak of as death is but the death of the mind, and not the death of Jiva.<sup>11</sup>

Man's birth is an evolutionary process, as the following Tantric extract makes clear:

O Daughter of the mountain [Shakti in one of her human forms], Jivatma, which decreaseth not, passes through eighty-four lakhs [lakh is 100,000] of births as inorganic things, insects, birds, beast, and the like. And after that, O Supreme Devi, it attains that human body which is so difficult to acquire.<sup>12</sup>

This process means rebirth, which keeps the cycle of birth and death moving. The Niruttara Tantra says: "Knowledge of Sakti is acquired after many births."<sup>13</sup> And again

From Brahman, the Jiva who is His avatara has come into this samsara [world]. There after wanderings and wanderings, it will again assume the aspect of Brahman and be absorbed in the Parabrahman.<sup>14</sup>

Tantrism acknowledges the law of Karma, and hence the "wanderings and wanderings" of the soul in the world.

As a result of Whitman's mystical experience, an experience which, according to Evelyn Underhill, is "that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God,"<sup>15</sup> Whitman identified himself completely with God, and had the "sudden" knowledge that all the universe was only a manifestation of the divine Reality. Asselineau

<sup>11</sup> Avalon, Principles of Tantra, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> Mysticism (London, 1911), p. 81.



says that Whitman's conception of God was pantheistic.<sup>16</sup> To a large extent this statement is true. And yet what S. Radhakrishnan has argued about the so-called pantheism of the Upanishads would also hold true about Whitman's pantheistic idea of God. Radhakrishnan says:

Pantheism is the view which identifies God with the sum of things and denies transcendence. If the nature of the absolute is exhausted completely by the course of the world, if the two become one, then we have pantheism.<sup>17</sup>

Further, he says that the nature of Reality is not exhausted by the world process. In Whitman we always get the impression that God and the universe are completely one; yet also it is apparent that He is more than the process of the world.

Whitman saw divinity in everything around him, in nature's phenomena, the birds, the beasts, and the people, of course. Greater than love of man and woman, he states in section 9 of "Starting from Paumanok," is "something else," which

makes the whole coincide,  
It, magnificent, beyond materials, with  
continuous hands sweeps and provides  
for all.

His idea of This, which "provides for all," is that of a "general soul" very much resembling the Over-Soul of Emerson, which Tantrism calls Shakti or Devi. He confesses he cannot name it, cannot define it.

"There is that in me--I do not know what it is--but I know it is in me," he says in Section 50 of "Song of Myself," and further confides:

<sup>16</sup> See Roger Asselineau, The Evolution of Walt Whitman, II, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Indian Philosophy, I (New York, 1923), 202.



Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines! I plead for my  
brothers and sisters.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?  
It is not chaos or death--it is form, union, plan--  
it is eternal life--it is Happiness.

In "On the Beach at Night Alone," he calls this Reality "A vast similitude" that "interlocks all," all spheres, distances, souls, nations, identities, lives and deaths:

This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd,  
And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose  
them.

This is the same Reality as that of the Tantriks, which holds the whole universe together, and is the cause of it. But Whitman has already identified his eternal Soul with the Over-Soul, as for example, in section 12 in "Starting from Paumanok":

Because having look'd at the objects of the universe, I  
find there is no one nor any particle of one but  
has reference to the soul.

Because all the faces "show their descent from the Master himself" ("Faces"), so also does everything else. Hence every phenomenon, great or small, is a miracle as in "Miracles." In Democratic Vistas, he defines this "One-in-all and All-in-one" thus:

And lo! to the consciousness of the soul, the permanent identity, the thought, the something, before which the magnitude even of democracy, art, literature &c., dwindles, becomes partial, measurable--something that fully satisfies (which those do not). That something is the All, and the idea of All, with the accompanying idea of eternity, and of itself, the soul, buoyant, indestructible, sailing space forever, visiting every region, as a ship the sea. And again lo! the pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever--the eternal beats, eternal systole and diastole of life in things--wherefrom I feel and know that death is not the ending, as was thought, but rather the real beginning--and that nothing ever is or can be lost, nor ever die, nor soul, nor matter. (ii, 254)



Because Whitman believes in the One, in whom everything exists, he also believes in the immortality of soul, and the continuous cycle of birth and death. The recurring symbol of the blade of grass in "Song of Myself," becomes in section 6 the symbol of the cycle of birth and death. The grass may have had its life because some man, woman or child died. Have those dead people disappeared completely, then? No,

They are alive and well somewhere,  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does  
not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.  
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed,  
and luckier.

There is not only no death for the immortal Jiva (soul), but also life goes on evolving to a better end. In the next section, he announces:

I am the mate and companion of people, all just as  
immortal and fathomless as myself,  
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

In section 20, after affirming again that "I know I am deathless," he ends the section with this better-known passage:

One world is aware and by far the largest to me,  
and that is myself,  
And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten  
thousand or ten million years,  
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheer-  
fulness I can wait.  
My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite,  
I laugh at what you call dissolution,  
And I know the amplitude of time.

The process of life and death goes on; one has ample time to work out one's salvation. The wish to be disembodied expressed towards the end of "Song of Myself," "Passage to India," and "So Long!" is as much faith in immortality as the desire to triumph over physical limitations. Whitman



is certain that "Something there is more immortal even than the stars" ("On the Beach at Night"), and that is the eternal soul.

In section 6 of "To Think of Time," he answers that teasing question "What happens to us after death?" thus:

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

The repetition of "yourself" makes it clear that it is the eternal Self that is immortal. As Dorothy F. Mercer puts it, "He [Whitman] simply states his belief in immortality as a matter of fact . . . even though his sense of immortality is more than an intellectual conviction, it logically follows from his idea that the self and God are one and the same."<sup>18</sup> At the end of the same poem Whitman affirms:

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

Commenting on "Death of Thomas Carlyle," he muses if Carlyle still retains his identity after death, and answers:

In ways perhaps eluding all the statements, lore and speculations of ten thousand years--eluding all possible statements to mortal sense--does he yet exist, a definite vital being, a spirit, an individual--perhaps now wafted in space among those stellar systems, which, suggestive and limitless as they are, merely edge more limitless, far more suggestive systems? I have no doubt of it. In silence, of a fine night, such questions are answer'd to the soul, the best answers that can be given.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Walt Whitman on God and the Self," Vedanta and the West, X (May-June, 1947), 86.

<sup>19</sup>Walt Whitman, Prose Works, I, Specimen Days, ed., Floyd Stovall (New York, 1963), p. 253.



Implicit in the statements about immortality is the idea of re-birth and the evolution of life. He accepted the Darwinian theory of evolution; but because he believed in the divine Reality as the Source of all, he believed also that life is evolving towards a better end. He respects science and all its progress, because science is merely helping us to go towards a better life, better in the spiritual and not material sense. In section 23 of "Song of Myself" the poet exultingly exclaims: "Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!" But a few lines later, he also says to the scientists:

Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my  
dwelling,  
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.

In the "Song of the Universal" Whitman again talks of science "Successive absolute fiats issuing," but declares immediately afterward that the soul is above the "fiats" of science. In "Passage to India" too, the material progress brought about by science, like the Suez Canal or laying of the cable on the sea-floor, is only a prelude for Whitman to start on his voyage toward the mystic union with God.

Like the Tantriks, Whitman holds that the soul passes through a number of births in lower forms of life before it attains human form. "Eidolons," for example, describes life as a series of cycles of evolution from lower to higher forms. Section 44 of "Song of Myself" treats this idea more fully, starting with the line, "I am an acme of things accomplish'd." He was there even when there was only the "huge first Nothing." For his embryo



the nebula cohered to an orb,  
 The long slow strata piled to rest it on,  
 Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,  
 Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths  
 and deposited it with care.

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

The Tantric idea of human form as the highest form of life one gets after going through numerous births in lower forms is present in this excerpt from "Song of Myself."

## 2. Intuition, Time, and Space

That the knowledge of God comes not through reasoning but instinct is recognized by the Upanishads. Two of them, Katha and Mundaka, have the identical verse:

This Soul (Atman) is not to be obtained by instruction,  
 Nor by intellect, nor by much learning.  
 He is to be obtained only by the one whom he chooses;  
 To such a one that Soul (Atman) reveals his own person  
 (tanum svam).<sup>20</sup>

It is Brahman that these verses talk of, for we must remember that Atman (soul) and Brahman are interchangeable and are one in the Upanishads and in almost all the monistic schools of Indian philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Radhakrishnan also affirms that the Real cannot be grasped by intellect or reasoning, and that "It is attained by the mystics in their moments of illumination."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Hume, pp. 350, 376.

<sup>21</sup>It is because of the conviction that Brahman and the soul are one that the Upanishads often speak of 'Atman-Brahman,' and the Tantric texts of 'Shiva-Shakti,' fusing the two concepts into one.

<sup>22</sup>Indian Philosophy, I, 177.



But even though both Vedant and Tantrism recognize that instinct alone can grasp the knowledge of Brahman, they prescribe a ritual as a set of guiding rules to prepare one for the final instinctive grasping of the Reality. This may sound contradictory, but the yoga methods, which both Tantrism and the Vedant prescribe, are aimed at making the task of the instinct easier. The yoga methods are prescribed as "special applications of the inner discipline which leads to the liberation of the soul and a new understanding of the unity and meaning of mankind."<sup>23</sup> These yoga methods that Tantriks employ as a preparation for the samadhi (identification), which then occurs in a flash, have been described in Chapter II. Yoga, however, is only a part of the sadhana (training by rites and ritual) of Tantrism.

To the Tantrik, philosophical or scientific disputations are like "the cawing of crows."<sup>24</sup> Yoga and puja (worship) and other ritual and rites are prescribed for those of us who have a long way to go on the road to Brahman-knowledge. But for the few, these things are not necessary, as Arthur Avalon says:

The Tantra yet recognizes that there is a stage in spiritual progress in which it becomes not merely unnecessary, but an obstacle to further advance. If Sadhana be, as it is, but a means to an end (brahmajnana, or the realization in personal experience of the Brahman), with the attainment of such end, and to the extent that approach is made to it, it becomes superfluous.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgita (New York, n.d.), p. 50.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Avalon, Principles of Tantra, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 64.



The Kularnava Tantra says in the opening chapter:

There are fools who, pleased with the mere name of the Karmakanda [action], deceive themselves with a multitude of rites. It is not by eating one meal a day that knowledge of the transcendent is attained.<sup>26</sup>

The Tantras have again and again said that he who has the Brahman-knowledge has no need of the rites and ritual:

But he who knows that all is Brahman needs neither yoga nor puja, because his competency [adhikara] is such that he has risen above both the bhavas [forms] of yoga and puja. For him there is neither worshipper nor worshipped, but all is Brahman.<sup>27</sup>

And the knowledge that "all is Brahman" is, of course, got through instinct and not reasoning.

Whitman seems to have gained his mystic experience and the knowledge of the Reality by way of instinct without the Tantrik's ritual except the Kundalini Yoga. This knowledge he can communicate to only a few:

No shutter'd room or school can commune with me,  
But roughs and little children better than they.

In "roughs and little children" instinct is not blocked by reason or intellect. Also, Whitman believes in keeping "in abeyance" "Creeds and schools" ("Song of Myself"), so that he can allow Nature to operate "without check with original energy"; and Nature means instinct.

Through intuition, having gained the knowledge of the Reality, Whitman and God become one. Whitman, like the Tantrik, becomes God. Because of certain mantras (magic formulas which, the Tantriks believe,

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 64; quoted by the author.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 232.



are manifestations of God), the Tantrik gets certain siddhis (magical powers) besides his liberation. One of the principal objects of the Tantric devotion is, like Whitman's, power, and this the siddhis grant. How much like Whitman does the Tantrik think as far as power is concerned is illustrated by the following quotation from Sriyukta Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya Mahodaya:

It is always the mark of a weak, feminine nature to endeavour to establish one's superiority on the issue of a verbal quarrel, whereas it is the sign of a man to desire to conquer the world by the strength of one's own arms. Similarly reasoning, argument and inference may be the work of other Sastras [scriptures], but the work of Tantra is to accomplish superhuman and divine events by the force of its own Mantras.<sup>28</sup>

The powers are further described thus:

The power to destroy, to banish, and control [maranam, uchchatanam, vashikaranam] are, with others, matters of daily accomplishment. . . . Dead and putrefying corpses submerged near cremation grounds are still brought to life by the force of the Sadhakas' [Tantric devotee] Mantras, and made to render aid to Sadhana and Siddhi. Tantrik Yogis even now and in this world obtain, through the potency of Mantras, direct vision of the world of Devas [gods], which lies beyond our senses.<sup>29</sup>

Such siddhis are called lower powers; they are supposed to be used rarely and then, too, for good purpose, for

Those who are charmed with those powers and are tempted to use them are like [sic] to share the same fate with the black magicians. The end and aim of high Tantrik Sadhana is the realization of the Advaita Tattva--the attainment of Kaivalya Mukti [union with the Brahman].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 163-164.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 389.



The best method of attaining siddhi is the Kundalini Yoga, which Whitman the poet practised and preached through sex. The main object of this Yoga is to enable a person to work out his or her salvation. Such a person is believed by Tantrism to be above the limitations of Time, Space and Causation. For Whitman, too, these limitations do not apply. Take for instance "Song of Myself," where no doors can shut the poet out, where no person can resist the poet's soul taking hold of him. The poet is with the lovers in their bed, with the suicide, with the animals in the field, the hunter, the farmer in the barn, in the Arctic regions, in fact anywhere in the world. He also becomes the "hounded slave," the "mash'd fireman," even the clock. He has discovered the unity in diversity and says in section 16:

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity.

He mentions Time and Space in section 33 and knows he has overcome them:

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.

He thus roams not only over all the world:

I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the  
    product,  
And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at quin-  
    tillions green.

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,  
My course runs below the soundings of plummets.

I help myself to material and immaterial,  
No guard can shut me off, no law prevent me.



Because of miraculous powers nothing can be hidden from the poet. In section 7 the poet says:

I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether  
or no,  
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless,  
and cannot be shaken away.

In "Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry" the poet completely vanquishes Time and Space, and moves in the present, the past and the future with ease. The unity of the poem is the unity of all these existences in Time and Space in one person, the poet. He triumphantly says:

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.

In "Passage to India" the phenomenal self "shrivels" at the thought of God, of Nature and Time and Space. But it is the eternal Self that masters the phenomena of Time and Space:

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.

And overcoming Time and Space his soul goes journeying to the "Elder Brother."

Often Whitman takes on the role of Christ, just as the Tantrik did that of Shiva. In Section 24 of "Song of Myself" he says he will be the voice of the poor and the dumb, the sinner and the diseased, like Christ. He will not deny anyone--prostitute, thief, or the diseased. He will also perform the miracle of saving the dying from death, like Christ, but also like the Tantrik who, as we have seen from an earlier quoted passage, still has this siddhi. In section 40 of "Song of Myself"



Whitman speaks of this miraculous power of raising the dead:

To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the  
 knob of the door, . . .  
 Let the physician and the priest go home.  
 I seize the descending man and raise him with resist-  
 less will,  
 O despairer, here is my neck,  
 By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole  
 weight upon me.

It was later in the poem "To Him That Was Crucified" that Christ becomes the poet's "dear brother." And in "Passage to India" God is his "Elder Brother." In these and other similar statements of Whitman, like establishing a better religion than the older ones (section 41, "Song of Myself"), some critics have seen an arrogance that hardly goes with mysticism. This question of arrogance in Whitman brings us to the third characteristic of the Perennial Philosophy.

### 3. Two Selves of Man

Man has two selves--a phenomenal ego and an inner Self, Atman, which is the same as Shiva or Brahman. This Atman, coming as it does from a common Source, binds us all in a brotherhood. It is necessary for man to realize this distinction between his two selves, and also that Atman is really Brahman. Only after this realization is a man liberated. The phenomenal ego is the medium between Atman and Brahman, and has to be used like a springboard to achieve the union between Atman and Brahman, which then becomes a single entity called Atman-Brahman. The recognition of Atman within us is stated in the age-old command of "Know Thyself."

The recognition of the two selves is one of the fundamental



elements of the philosophic thought of the Upanishads. As an example of this recurring strand in the texture of the Upanishads, we may cite the well-known verse from the Svetasvatara Upanishad:

Two birds, fast-bound companions,  
Clasp close the self-same tree.  
Of these two, the one [individual person] eats sweet  
fruit;  
The other [universal Brahman] looks on without eating.  
(4.6)<sup>31</sup>

The distinction between the two selves is accompanied, in the Upanishads, with the identity between Atman and Brahman, or as Radhakrishnan has it, "The two, the objective and the subjective, the Brahman and the Atman, the cosmic and the psychical principles, are looked upon as identical."<sup>32</sup> When man becomes aware of this identity, he says, without a trace of arrogance, "Aham Brahma'smi, 'I am Brahma,'" or "Aham eva idam savo'smi, 'I indeed am this whole universe,'" or as the Tantrik would say, "Shivo'ham, Bhairavo'ham, 'I am Shiva.'" Now the immortal Atman has transcended the existential ego; God, man and the whole universe are all subsumed in Brahman-Atman as the ultimate Reality.

It is this type of "arrogance" that appears in Whitman, when he identifies himself with Christ, when he talks of founding a better religion than the old ones, when he preaches and commands like a god, when he says:

I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,  
Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd  
force,

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<sup>31</sup>Hume, p. 403.

<sup>32</sup>Indian Philosophy, I, 169.



Lovers of me, bafflers of graves.  
(section 40 of "Song of Myself")

Or when he writes in his notebook, "Not even God, that dread? is so great to me as Myself is great to me.--Who knows but I too shall in time be a God as pure and prodigious as any of them?"<sup>33</sup> Leaves of Grass has much "arrogant" talk. Malcolm Cowley quotes a passage from Dr. Zimmer's book, Philosophies of India, describing what happens to a devotee after a mystical experience:

He [the devotee] feels that he is at one with the Supreme Lord, partaking of His virtues of omniscience and omnipotence. This, however, is a dangerous phase; for if he is to go on to Brahman, the goal, he must realize that this inflation is only a subtle form of self-delusion. The candidate must conquer it, press beyond it, so that the anonymity of sheer being, consciousness, and bliss may break upon him as the transpersonal essence of his actual Self.

And Cowley remarks: "Remaining for a long time in the dangerous phase of self-inflation (or "dilation," as he called it) and regarding himself as a God-inspired prophet, he kept looking about for other new doctrines to prophesy."<sup>34</sup> We think Cowley is unfair to Whitman. The phase of self-inflation that every devotee goes through is not dangerous as long as it is not used for evil purposes. All those who have become one with the Reality are bound to have this feeling of expansion, of omnipresence and omnipotence. God is omnipresent and omnipotent. Dr. Zimmer himself points out that the condition of him who has become one with Brahman or

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<sup>33</sup> Emory Holloway, ed., The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman (New York, 1921), II, 83.

<sup>34</sup> "The Guru, the Beatnik and the Good Gray Poet," p. 17, where also occurs the passage quoted from Dr. Zimmer.



Shiva-Shakti is expressed in countless statements in the Hindu scriptures. After giving some illustrations of these "arrogant" statements of "liberated" devotees, Dr. Zimmer remarks:

This [these 'arrogant' verses] has the ring of some sort of holy megalomania, a schizoid inflation of some kind, in which the rational individual consciousness has been swallowed completely by a divine Super-Ego. Actually, however, these formulae are intended for the sober purpose of medication.<sup>35</sup>

This is more to the point than the passage quoted by Cowley. Whitman's "arrogance" is most likely to be misunderstood by critics like Cowley, who do not give Whitman the credit of being capable of independent thinking, as is illustrated by the following statement of Cowley:

He [Whitman] seems not so much an independent thinker as a repository for all the ideas, however inconsistent, that might be held by a liberal mid-nineteenth-century American reader.<sup>36</sup>

The liberated condition is to be interpreted as the fullest expression of the self. In such a condition the liberated soul, as Radhakrishnan puts it, "feels his oneness with God so intensely that he calls himself the creator of the world." Radhakrishnan quotes an example from Taittiriya Upanishad:

I am the food, I am the food-eater. I am the subject, I am the object, I am the two together. I am the first-born, the destroyer of the world also. I am the sunlike light. I am the centre of the world, of immortal gods.<sup>37</sup>

There is nothing arrogant about this, as the liberated soul is above all feelings, prejudices, attitudes. Are we to consider Krishna as arrogant,

<sup>35</sup>Philosophies of India, ed., Joseph Campbell (New York, 1951), p. 447.

<sup>36</sup>"Walt Whitman: The Philosopher," The New Republic, CXVII (September 29, 1947), 29.

<sup>37</sup>Indian Philosophy, I, 239.



when he says he is everything in this or the other world, including "the Atman that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature"?<sup>38</sup> Is it arrogance on Krishna's part to say,

I am the heat of the sun; and the heat of the  
fire am I also:  
Life eternal and death. I let loose the rain,  
or withhold it.  
Arjuna, I am the cosmos revealed, and its germ  
that lies hidden.

(Gita, p. 82)

Whitman's ideal poet also is a "kosmos" who, as the poem "Kosmos" expresses, "includes diversity and is Nature." Both Whitman and the Tantrik talk as if they are God, because they know that God and their eternal Self are one. There is nothing arrogant about this attitude.

Tantrism distinguishes between our two selves, and holds that the phenomenal self is to be used as a springboard for the higher Self to unite the latter with Shiva-Shakti. The Shiva-Trinity of the Elephanta Caves near Bombay expresses the relations of the two selves and the Brahman perfectly. This sculpture has three heads--the central one, aloof, sublime, impassive, is a symbol of Eternity; the other two are the virile, defiant male Shiva on one side, and the attractive, sweet, graceful female Shakti on the other side. Dr. Zimmer comments on this Trinity thus:

This is the portrait of Atman-Brahman. And here is the paradox of Maya: the universe and our personalities are as real as--but not more real than--the phenomenal apparitions of these male and female profiles, emerging from the center, but ignored by it. Brahman and Maya coexist.



Maya is the continuous self-manifestation and self-disguise of Brahman--its self-revelation, yet its multi-colored, concealing veil. Hence the dignity of all perishable things, on all levels. That is why their sum total is worshipped as the highest Goddess, Mother and Life-Energy of Gods and Creatures, under the formula, Maya-Shakti-Devi.<sup>39</sup>

This passage, besides showing us what Maya is, also shows us the importance and relation of the two selves, and how the lower self is not looked down upon in the Tantric metaphysics. With the help of this lower self, the Tantric devotee realizes his eternal Self, which is no other than Shiva-Shakti. According to Tantrism, "Perception of the identity of Jivatma [individual soul] and Paramatma [universal soul] is Brahmabhava [highest state of knowledge]."<sup>40</sup> One who has perceived this identity needs no ritual or rites.<sup>41</sup> Tantrism would call Whitman, therefore, a Kaula (highest type of Tantrik), even though he did not know the Tantric ritual or rites. For the man who knows this identity of Atman-Brahman, everything becomes pervaded with this new identity; for example, the Tantras say:

It is Atma or consciousness who is knowledge, it is Atma who is the object of knowledge, and it is Atma who is the person who knows. He who knows this knows the truth.<sup>42</sup>

This unity or identity of the knower, the known, and the knowledge comes to him who knows his Self is Brahman. Thus the Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad

<sup>39</sup>Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization (New York, 1946), p. 151.

<sup>40</sup>Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 232.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Principles of Tantra, p. 232.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 233.



states:

Whoever thus knows 'I am Brahma!'  
 becomes this All; even the gods have  
 now power to prevent his becoming  
 thus, for he becomes their self (atman).  
 So, whoever worships another divinity  
 [than his Self], thinking 'He is one and I  
 another,' he knows not.<sup>43</sup>

Whitman worships the higher Self as divinity, but he comes to this stage, like the Tantrik, through the worship of the lower self. Questions start all knowledge, philosophical or otherwise, and Whitman starts with the question most philosophies have asked:

Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude;  
 How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?

What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?

Which is the real self--the "hankering, gross" self eating beef and drawing strength from it, or the "mystical, nude" inner self? Which of these is the one to whom a person could point and say, "Tat Twam Asi, That Thou art?" Whitman gives the answer in "Eidolons," addressing his soul thus:

Thy body permanent,  
 The body lurking there within thy body,  
 The only purport of the form thou art, the real I myself,  
 An image, an eidolon.

He is referring here to the subtle body of the Self, which the Upanishads and Tantrism believe resides within the gross physical body of the phenomenal self. He is always aware of these two selves as he himself confesses in his notebook: "I cannot understand the mystery, but I am always conscious of myself as two--as my soul and I."<sup>44</sup> The "I" which he

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<sup>43</sup>Hume, pp. 83-84.

<sup>44</sup>Emory Holloway, II, 66.



uses throughout Leaves of Grass is sometimes the lower, sometimes the higher self; but the context usually makes it clear which one. In section 4 of "Song of Myself" he states clearly this distinction between the Me and the Not-Me. The Not-Me watches everything around involving itself in the daily activities like dinner and dressing, but "they are not the Me myself." The real Me merely "witnesses and waits," apart from the activity of life, "Stands amused, complacent, compassionate, idle, unitary." Both these selves are, however, complementary to each other:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not  
abase itself to you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.

With this realization of these two selves comes, in the same section 5 of "Song of Myself," the sensuous love-making to his real soul, which he has discovered. And this thrilling experience ends the way the physical sexual intercourse, the counterpart of the spiritual, usually ends, in peace and love. Any mystic would have been pleased to write the passage that follows:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and  
knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,  
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my  
own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of  
my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers,  
and the women my sisters and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love.

The realization of the eternal Self ends in love and also makes him aware that this Self is God. Therefore, further in section 48 of the same poem, he says:



And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's  
self is. . . .

And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand  
cool and composed before a million universes. . . .

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,  
and each moment then,  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my  
own face in the glass.

The Tantrik has the same bhava (mental attitude) of a vira (hero):

From the time I rise in the morning till evening,  
and from evening till morning, whatsoever I do, O  
Mother of the Universe! that is surely Thy worship.<sup>45</sup>

Everything, even actions of the hero, have become Shiva-Shakti  
with the realization that the Self within him is the Shiva-Shakti. Until  
this realization comes while walking on the "Open Road" of spirituality,  
one does not know that "I am larger, better than I thought," or that "I  
held so much goodness" (section 5 of "Song of the Open Road"). But one  
must also keep in mind that "The efflux of the soul comes from within  
through embower'd gates, ever provoking questions" (section 7 of "Song  
of the Open Road"). The "embower'd gates" are the senses, including sex,  
through which the phenomenal self operates.<sup>46</sup>

The "I" that "shrivels" at the "thought of God" in section 8 of

<sup>45</sup> Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 473.

<sup>46</sup> In ancient Hindu scriptures, the body is often called "the holy  
city with the nine gates, navadwaram puram punyam." See J. J. Meyer,  
Sexual Life in Ancient India (New York, 1930), I, 248-249, footnote no.  
5, where these nine gates are correctly interpreted as mouth, nostrils,  
ears, eyes, anus, and penis. See also Svetasvatara Upanishad (3.18) in  
Hume, p. 402, and also Gita, p. 58, for references to the nine gates of  
the body.



"Passage to India," is the phenomenal self. But it is to be borne in mind that in this poem as in others the phenomenal "I" is complementary to the spiritual "I" and that the latter uses the former in its realization that it is Shiva-Shakti or Brahman, which is liberation.

#### 4. Aim of Life--Identification with the Eternal Self

Tantrism believes in the four aims of life prescribed by Hindu scriptures--Dharma (right conduct, religion, duty, righteousness),<sup>47</sup> Artha (wealth), Kama (desire, affection, love, lust, sensual pleasure, and the like), and Moksha (liberation)--the first three leading to the most important fourth aim. The Hindu even today mutters the prayer which the sacrificer in the Vedic age did:

From the unreal (asat) lead me to the real (sat)!  
From darkness lead me to light!  
From death lead me to immortality!

(Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad, 1.3.28)<sup>48</sup>

This desire for the real, light, immortality, or liberation is the same as the Tantrik's, for "The end and aim of high Tantrik Sadhana is the realization of the Advaita Tattva--the attainment of Kaivalya Mukti [union with the Brahman.]"<sup>49</sup> Tantrism also affirms that this "nirvana cannot be attained without a knowledge of Sakti."<sup>50</sup> How does one get

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. John W. Spellman, Introd., The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana, tr., Sir Richard F. Burton (New York, 1962), p. 16, where he says Dharma is akin to the Western concept of "natural law and the Chinese idea of tao."

<sup>48</sup> Hume, p. 80.

<sup>49</sup> Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 389.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 292.



this knowledge? Only by realizing through Kundalini Yoga that Shakti is oneself. Therefore, the only object of man's life is to know that Jiva (soul) is Shiva and Shiva is no other than Jiva. It is only then that all the confusing dualities of the world are resolved in one unity. It is then that the world will be seen not as an illusion but as the lila (play) of Shiva-Shakti, to be enjoyed by the individual Jiva.

Whitman realizes that this oneness alone is the object of man's life, that the eternal Self is no other than God. His "Noiseless Patient Spider," the soul, is ceaselessly throwing out filament after filament

Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the  
ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,  
O my soul.

The bridge he needs is the identity of his soul, his Maker, and other souls. In "To Think of Time," he says:

And I have dream'd that the purpose and essence  
of the known life, the transient,  
Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life,  
the permanent.

And this "identity for the unknown life, the permanent" is within us. Attaining the object of life is difficult, and the road to it is full of pitfalls. One can only point out this aim to others, because

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

It is not far, it is within reach,  
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born  
and did not know,  
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.  
(section 46 "Song of Myself")

But to realize this eternal Self and its identity, one has not only to discover it for oneself, but also to be bold. One has to plunge into



this ocean of Eternity without fear:

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by  
the shore,  
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,  
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again,  
nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with  
your hair.

(section 46 "Song of Myself")

Once one plunges in, one does not have to look outwards, but inwards;  
for Eternity is within oneself. The seas on which the poet dares his  
soul to sail in "Passage to India" are not Indian or Western; they are  
the eternal Self within each person.

## 5. Incarnation

The concept of God becoming incarnate in human form is common to  
all religions, including Hinduism and Tantrism. The Tantrik's Shakti,  
like the Brahman of Vedanta, is formless and attributeless. To destroy  
the enemies of gods and men, She has taken many human forms like Sati,  
the daughter of Daksha; Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya; Uma, Durga,  
Chandi, Kali, and many others. The Markandeya Purana says: "King! al-  
though eternal, that Devi Bhagavati [Shakti] incarnates Herself again  
and again in the manner aforesaid, and maintains the world."<sup>51</sup> In the  
Mahanirvana Tantra, Shiva says to Shakti:

Formless, Thou dost possess also forms. Who can know thy  
true aspect? For the success of worshippers, the welfare  
of the whole world, and the destruction of the Danavas  
[Demons], Thou assumeth all kinds of bodies.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 281. Quoted by the author.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 188. Quoted by the author.



The Kularnava Tantra affirms: "Brahman, who is all consciousness, without body or part, and beyond the power of speech and mind, builds forms for Himself for the benefit of Sadhakas." Brahman is interchangeable with Shakti in Tantrism.<sup>53</sup>

In Whitman the conception of the incarnation of God exists in the sense that because he believes he is God, he talks of his spiritual "I" incarnating. For example, in section 43 of "Song of Myself," the poet says that he believes "I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,/Waiting responses from oracles, honoring the gods." This is comparable to what Krishna says in the Gita (p. 50):

In every age I come back  
To deliver the holy,  
To destroy the sin of the sinner,  
To establish righteousness.

The idea of incarnation for destruction of evil and protection of the good, common to both Vedanta and Tantrism, is absent in Whitman. He, however, knows about the Hindu idea of incarnations, as he uses the Hindu word, avatar, in section 6 of "Salut Au Monde!" thus: "I see the place of the idea of the Deity incarnated by avatars in human forms." In referring to gods of all races--Hindus, Egyptians, Jews, Christians, and others--Whitman is implying the idea of incarnation of God. But the idea in an explicit form, as in Tantrism, is not found in Whitman.

In conclusion, we might say that both Whitman and Tantrism believe in (i) the universe being a manifestation of the divine Reality, (ii) the realization of which Reality comes through intuition, putting the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 187. Quoted by the author.



liberated soul beyond Time and Space, (iii) man having a phenomenal self and an eternal Self, which is God, and (iv) identification with this eternal Self as the goal of man's life. The Tantric idea of incarnation of Shakti is not, however, stated explicitly in Whitman.

### Karma and Metempsychosis

The Tantrik and Whitman both believe in the law of Karma and its corollary, the theory of Transmigration or Metempsychosis first put forward by the Vedas and the Upanishads. The doctrine of Karma is "the theory that according to one's good or bad actions in this life one passes at death into the body of a higher or a lower being."<sup>54</sup> It is an inexorable law from which not even the gods seem to be immune, as evidenced by Krishna saying in the Gita, "All the worlds, and even the heavenly realm of Brahma, are subject to the laws of rebirth,"<sup>55</sup> and rebirth occurs because of the law of Karma. The law of Karma is really, as Radhakrishnan puts it, "the counter-part in the moral world of the physical law of uniformity. It is the law of the conservation of moral energy."<sup>56</sup> But this should not be interpreted to mean that the law means denial of free will. The law does not discourage the moral effort, does not chain the will. "It only says that every act is the inevitable out-

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<sup>54</sup>Hume, p. 54. Karma, besides meaning the law of causation governing action and its effects in the physical and psychological sphere, also means "a deed," and "Effect of a deed."

<sup>55</sup>Gita, p. 76.

<sup>56</sup>Indian Philosophy, I, 244.



come of the preceding conditions."<sup>57</sup> As Arthur Christy says, "Karma can be transcended by a man's will, if he devotes all his energies to the good and by good deeds accumulates the merit which will advance him upward on the tortuous road to Brahma."<sup>58</sup> Because man has soul which is not subservient to any external conditions, the law of Karma cannot subjugate him if he tries hard, for Karma is not denial of Brahman's absolute reality, as Radhakrishnan puts it, "The moral law of karma is the expression of the nature of the absolute."<sup>59</sup>

Karma and reincarnation have their origin in the Upanishads.

The Chandogya Upanishad has this to say:

Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here--the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahman, or the womb of a Kshatriya, or the womb of a Vaisya. But those who are of stinking conduct here--the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an outcast (candala).

(5.10.7)<sup>60</sup>

Yajnavalkya expounds in the Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad:

According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action.

But people say: 'A person is made [not of acts, but] of desires only.' [In reply to this I say:] As is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs; what action (karma) he performs, that he procures for himself. (4.4.5)<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Gita, p. 76.

<sup>58</sup>The Orient in American Transcendentalism, p. 100.

<sup>59</sup>Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, I, 248.

<sup>60</sup>Hume, p. 233.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 140.



The individual soul is overcome by the gunas (Qualities) of Prakriti (Nature), becomes self-conceited, thinking "This is I" and "That is mine." Consequently, as the Maitri Upanishad says:

being overcome by the fruits of his action, he enters a good or an evil womb, so that his course is downward or upward and he wanders around, overcome by the pairs of opposites.

(3.2)<sup>62</sup>

Only the yogi, who through union has knowledge of Brahman, can be free of Karma and its inevitability. The Chandogya Upanishad affirms that only the yogi, who has such a knowledge of Brahman, is free from the effects of evil action, just as the leaf of a lotus-flower is free of water though in water.<sup>63</sup> The Kaushitaki Upanishad goes still further by making Indra say:

So he who understands me--by no deed whatsoever of his is his world injured, not by stealing, not by killing an embryo, not by the murder of his mother, not by the murder of his father; if he has done any evil (papa), the dark color departs not from his face.

(3.1)<sup>64</sup>

This sounds very much like Tantrism which, of course, had its roots in the Upanishads.

To be free from the inevitable Karma and the cycle of births, the Gita stresses the path of bhakti (devotion) to a personal god instead of the path of inana (knowledge) of an impersonal Brahman advocated by the Upanishads. Krishna assures Arjuna about his devotees:

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 321.



Because they love me  
 These are my bondsmen  
 And I shall save them  
 From mortal sorrow  
 And all the waves  
 Of Life's deathly ocean.<sup>65</sup>

And,

and he who attains me  
 Will never be reborn.<sup>66</sup>

The Gita affirms that, "Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead."<sup>67</sup> Krishna talks of re-birth thus:

You and I, Arjuna,  
 Have lived many lives.  
 I remembered them all;  
 You do not remember.<sup>68</sup>

While the Gita stresses bhakti to be free of Karma and re-birth, Tantrism, agreeing with this, asserts that Kundalini Yoga is the way through which this bhakti should be channeled. This bhakti is to be directed to Shava-Shakti instead of Krishna or Vishnu of the Gita. The Tantrik believes in Karma and re-birth, but by becoming Shiva-Shakti through the Kundalini Yoga he can be altogether free of the cycle of birth. Complete surrender to Shakti is necessary for this mukti (liberation). Once the Tantrik realizes that not only can he become god, but he is god, then no Karmic law can affect him.

Tantrism, however, views Karma and its sweeping powers in the

<sup>65</sup>Gita, p. 98.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 50.



same way as the Upanishads, as can be seen from the following quotation from the Saktanandatarangini, a famous Tantrik work by Purnananda Giri.

God Shiva is made to say in this work:

Through Karma Jivas are born, through Karma they die. After destruction of body, through Karma they receive bodies in rebirth and again become subject to Karma (1). Just as a calf finds out its dam amongst a thousand cows, so the good and evil Karma of a Jiva follow their author among the infinite millions of Jivas. Karma acquired in previous births is most powerful in this Samsara. Who has the power to baffle its course? (2) . . . O Devi! all things moving and unmoving are made of Karmas. . . . Through Karma a Jiva attains heaven or hell (4). Controlled by their virtues and sins, pregnant with happiness and sorrow respectively, Jivas receive their physical bodies in classes determined by such Karma and merely enjoy their fruits (5). O Parvati! it is only rarely and after passing through thousands of births in Samsara that a Jiva receives a human body by virtue of accumulated Karma (6).<sup>69</sup>

Karma and its effects are so powerful that even when the Tantrik has reached the stage of liberation, he has to allow Karma to run its full course:

He who, liberated whilst yet living, has become Atma in its true form, moves on the earth merely to work out the remaining portion of his Karma, which has begun to bear fruits in his body. It is such a Mahatma, son of the Devi, who is called a Bhairava.<sup>70</sup>

That Whitman believed in Karma or what Emerson called Compensation is clear from his poems and prose. In "Unnamed Lands," for example, a poem where the poet concerns himself with the evolution of the present from the past, he says about the men of the past civilizations:

<sup>69</sup>Quoted from Arthur Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 708. The Arabic numerals in the quotation indicate the number of the verse.

<sup>70</sup>Quoted from the Kaulavali Tantra in Avalon's Principles of Tantra, p. 731.



I believe of all those men and women that fill'd the unnamed  
lands, every one exists this hour here or elsewhere, in-  
visible to us,  
In exact proportion to what he or she grew from in life, and  
out of what he or she did, felt, became, loved, sinn'd,  
in life. . . .  
I suspect their results curiously await in the yet unseen  
world, counterparts of what accrued to them in the seen  
world,  
I suspect I shall meet them there.

Whitman is here not only talking about the Karmic law but also about evo-  
lution and immortality [that are corollaries of the law. He is much more  
explicit about Karma in the "Song of Prudence":

The soul is of itself,  
All verges to it, all has reference to what ensues,  
All that a person does, says, thinks, is of consequence,  
Not a move can a man or woman make, that affects him or  
her in a day, month, any part of the direct lifetime,  
or the hour of death,  
But the same affects him or her onward afterward through  
the indirect lifetime. . . .  
Not one word or deed, not venereal sore, discoloration,  
privacy of the onanist,  
Putridity of gluttons or rum-drinkers, speculation, cun-  
ning, betrayal, murder, seduction, prostitution,  
But has results beyond death as really as before death.

"The interest" of their actions, good or bad, will "come round" to all,  
sooner or later. It is inevitable. The moral law of Karma has to exist  
because of the "unshakable order of the universe," and because we are all  
immortal:

Did you guess any thing lived only its moment?  
The world does not so exist, no parts palpable or impalpable  
so exist,  
No consummation exists without being from some long previ-  
ous consummation, and that from some other,  
Without the farthest conceivable one coming a bit nearer  
the beginning than any.

The effects of your acts carrying you from birth to birth are what con-  
stitutes evolution. Everything has its cause buried somewhere in the



past, but nothing exists without the Karmic law. Whitman might have read about it all in an article on extracts from "Veeshnoo Sarma" in The Dial of July, 1842: "Whatsoever cometh to pass, either good or evil, is the consequence of man's own actions, and descendeth from the power of the Supreme Ruler."<sup>71</sup>

Wherever he got it, Whitman again makes unmistakable and clear reference to Karma and its part in the process of re-birth in "To Think of Time." One's birth is a long process in preparation, "Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form'd in you." This is because there is the cycle of rebirths depending upon Karma, for

The law of the past cannot be eluded,  
The law of the present and future cannot be eluded,  
The law of the living cannot be eluded, it is eternal,  
The law of promotion and transformation cannot be eluded,  
The law of heroes and good-doers cannot be eluded,  
The law of drunkards, informers, mean persons, not one iota  
thereof can be eluded.

The Karmic law, under which all these persons are, the poet feels, "is enough." It is the same law he speaks of in the Preface to 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass:

What has ever happened . . . what happens and whatever may or shall happen, the vital laws enclose all . . . they are sufficient for any case and for all cases . . . none to be hurried or retarded . . . any miracle of affairs or persons inadmissible in the vast clear scheme where every motion and every spear of grass and the frames and spirits of men and women and all that concerns them are unspeakably perfect miracles all referring to all and each distinct and in its place. . . . For the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness make the only point of sane philosophy. Whatever comprehends less than that . . . or less than the laws that follow the thief the liar the glutton and the drunkard

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<sup>71</sup>The Dial, III, no. 1 (July, 1842), 82.



through his life and doubtless afterward . . . or less than vast stretches of time or the slow formation of density or the patient upheaving of strata--is of no account.<sup>72</sup>

This is nothing but the Karma doctrine which is responsible for everyone's distinct place in the whole scheme of the universe, and which follows one throughout the cycle of birth and death.

The poet has died "ten thousand times before," and he will "come again upon the earth after five thousand years." While thus believing in the cycle of births and eternity, he wrote:

Births have brought us richness and variety,  
And other births will bring us richness and variety.  
(Section 44, "Song of Myself")

The poet also believes in the eternity of the present moment. He asks in section 48 of "Song of Myself"

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?

In the words of Dorothy F. Mercer, "Whitman not only apprehends a perpetual becoming based upon what the Hindu would call karma and reincarnation, but an eternal now, the eternal now of the mystic; all the way to heaven is heaven to Whitman; perfection both is and is becoming."<sup>73</sup>

The eternity of life and the eternity of the moment are not contradictory concepts as they seem to be. The ideas of Karma and re-birth, instead of bringing on despair because of inevitability, are the sources of optimism and joy both in Whitman and Tantrism. For are they not,

<sup>72</sup>Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose, ed., Sculley Bradley (New York, 1962), pp. 462-463.

<sup>73</sup>"Walt Whitman on Reincarnation," Vedanta and the West, IX (November-December, 1946), 182.



Whitman and the Tantrik, gods every moment of their life? Karma and re-birth are, therefore, a source for rejoicing.

### Maya

The word 'Maya' originally meant 'the capacity to produce forms,' the word coming from the root ma meaning 'to build, to form.' In most of the Indian philosophical systems the concept of Maya is present, and it means not one but many things. P. T. Raju in his book Introduction to Comparative Philosophy gives the various meanings and uses of this

term.<sup>74</sup> Maya is considered identical with the Brahman only by Kashmiri Shaivism, by Shaktism, and also by the famous Hindu commentator of the Vedas, Shankara, in his Prapanchasaratantra and Saundaryalahari, according to Raju.<sup>75</sup>

The Gita, according to Radhakrishnan, "repudiates the view that 'the world is untrue, without any fixed basis.'" He makes it clear that Maya in the Gita is the power, energy, or shakti of Ishvara or the Lower Brahman, which produces mutable nature, both Maya and Ishvara being thus mutually dependent.<sup>76</sup> But the Tantric view identifies Maya with the Higher Brahman itself. In Shankara's Vedanta, aham (ego) is the product of the unification of Maya with the Brahman; Maya and the unification are both unreal. In the Tantra, both are real. As Surendranath Dasgupta says, in the Tantra metaphysics

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<sup>74</sup>Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962, p. 248. Radhakrishnan also in his Indian Philosophy, I, 546-547, gives the different interpretations of Maya.

<sup>75</sup>Idem.

<sup>76</sup>Indian Philosophy, I, 548.



we find that the world is in one sense as unreal and illusory as in Vedanta, for it owes its existence to the connection of maya with Brahman, but the maya is here not an unspeakable entity but possesses as much reality as the Brahman or rather is identical with it. Here the ultimate category, the Siva, is prakasa, pure illumination, or abstract self-shining thought, and sakti is vimarsa, or the inherent activity of thought.<sup>77</sup>

Tantra calls the Mother or Shakti, Mahamaya or great Maya, because she is both the instrument and the material cause of the world. She has willed the creation of the world, and also out of her own Maya or manifestation fashioned all moving and non-moving things. The instrumental aspect, thus, is "Sakti or Brahman, and this material aspect is Maya."<sup>78</sup> In the aspect of Maya she assumes various forms, "the variety of which is due to differences in sattva, rajas, and tamas gunas in them, and it is then that she plays the Acts and the Scenes of the drama of Samsara."<sup>79</sup> In the Devi Bhagavata the Supreme Shakti herself is made to say:

Divided into two parts, I create the entire world. One of these parts is Sacchidananda-Prakrti and the other is Maya-Prakrti. That maya is my Parama Sakti, and I am the Isvari who possesses that Sakti. But just as moonlight is not distinct from the moon, so I am not distinct from maya. O Lord of Devas! during the dissolution of the whole world this maya exists inseparable from me in a state of equilibrium, and again, in consequence of the past karma of Jivas, this unmanifested maya becomes manifest. The aspect of Sakti, in which She is inward looking, is called 'maya,' and that in which She is outward looking is called 'avidya.'<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Indian Idealism (Cambridge, 1933), p. 192.

<sup>78</sup> Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 279.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 298.



Once the Tantric bhakta (devotee) understands that the Maya of this world is caused by the Mother, he loves that Maya, which then becomes the liberator. The Tantrik reasons:

Cannot the very same maya, by the influence of which we become attached and bound in love to father, mother, wife, children, etc., also liberate us, if through it we become attached by love to the Mother who is all full of maya? . . . Although a jnani [one following the path of knowledge] desires to be altogether free from maya, a bhakta [one following the path of devotion], while he throws off maya so far as the samsara [the phenomenal world] is concerned, secretly and carefully nourishes maya for the Mother in the core of his heart.<sup>81</sup>

The phenomenal world deludes the devotee if he does not understand the Mother's lila (play) in creating the world. Love for Her only will break the illusion; then the Maya of this world is loved by the devotee, because he then understands that the Maya is Shakti, his Goddess. In "Bhagavatigita" in the Mahabhagavata, Shakti herself says to her father, the Himalayas:

Father, for his liberation from the chains of a body a seeker of salvation should contemplate me as blameless, subtle, beyond the reach of speech, pure, attributeless, transcendently luminous, all-pervading, the sole cause of creation, preservation, and destruction, without a second, without beginning, whose substance is existence, consciousness and bliss.

Great King, deluded by my maya, Jivas fail to know that supreme and undecreasing form of mine which is in everything and is without a second. But those who worship Me with devotion cross the great sea of this maya.<sup>82</sup>

Shakti is here nothing but Brahman, who in her lila (play) has created this world. For those who understand the divine nature of the universe

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 289.



around them out of love for the Mother, Maya is not a bond but a thing to be loved for the sake of the Mother. The difference in the Vedic and the Tantric attitude towards Maya is brought out in the verse from the Gitanjali by Sriyukta Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya Mahodaya:

Veda says: vain is our effort, for everything,  
O Brother! is Maya.  
Tantra says through Maya is heard the laugh of Mahamaya;  
For it is the Mother's Maya.<sup>83</sup>

Whitman's use of Maya in his writings is not Vedantic, though he thinks it is; his Maya is Tantric. Maya as the illusory world does not exist in his writings, though consciously Whitman uses the word "Maya" in that sense more than once. But all the time he is treating Maya as power, energy, lila of God to produce mutable nature. He does not regard the world as a mere mechanical determination of nature unrelated to God, and thus does not come to disregard its divine essence. On the other hand, like the Tantrik he is aware of the divine nature of the universe at every step. He has identified himself with God and, consequently, with all of God's creation. All nature, all worldly phenomena are, therefore, real to him. Hence the pictures in his poems are real, pulsing with a life of their own, which God has poured in them. God's Maya, this world, has to be loved for His sake. Everyone and everything --woodcutter, the squaw, the mason, the boatman, the carpenter, the stars, the moon, rains, the mountain-hawk, the mocking-bird's song--in this world is real as part of the Brahman and therefore to be enjoyed and loved. In "Starting from Paumanok" the poet withdraws "to muse and

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 222.



meditate in some deep recess, Far from the clank of crowds intervals passing rapt and happy," only to meditate on the Maya of God in Nature, that is, the flowers, the buffalo herds, the flowing river, and so on. This capacity of the poet to identify himself with the surrounding Maya is evident in most of the poems. His so-called catalogues list the forms of Maya, and through them, attempt to convey the unity of himself, the world of Maya and the God.

Not only does he enjoy the surrounding Maya, but he himself becomes the Mayin like God. In "Song of Myself" the poet is everywhere and becomes everybody. He is with the child in the cradle, the lovers, the suicide, in the barn, in the mountains with the hunter. This soul-force to be everywhere and everybody is the siddhi (superhuman power) of the Tantrik, is the Maya of God; for God alone can be everywhere and can assume any form. And the Tantrik knows he is God.

In "Are You the New Person Drawn Toward Me?" the poet sows doubts about his own personality in the mind of his new follower, and asks: "Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion?" The poet here uses the term in the Vedantin's sense; but that is all he does. He does not interpret the world as Maya as does the Vedantin; in this respect Dorothy F. Mercer correctly says about Whitman: "He does mention maya a good many times, but his notion of it is superficial."<sup>84</sup> But his notion of Maya in the Tantric sense is not superficial. In the first half of the poem "Of the Terrible Doubt of appearances" one may think

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<sup>84</sup>Unpubl. dissertation (California, 1933), "Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita: A Comparative Study," p. 170.



he is talking of the Vedantin's conception of Maya:

May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men,  
hills, shining and flowing waters,  
The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms,  
may-be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions,  
and the real something has yet to be known,  
(How often they dart out of themselves as if to confound  
me and mock me!  
How often I think neither I know, nor any man knows,  
aught of them,)  
May-be seeming to me what they are (as doubtless they  
indeed but seem) as from my present point of view, and  
might prove (as of course they would) nought of what  
they appear, or nought anyhow, from entirely changed  
points of view.

This statement has, however, nothing to do with the Vedantin's doctrine of Maya; for here the poet not only doubts the existing world's reality but also the reality of the Reality beyond. He says, "That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only," which no Vedantin would say. These sentiments do not come out of any doctrines, but are just an expression of the depression period of the poet. Yet this is true of only the first half of the poem; it is the other half that is the heart of the poem. It is the love of a fellow-man that saves the poet from this depression. This love makes him indifferent to "the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave." God is in all men; love of men is therefore love of God. What need is there, then, to bother about the puzzling questions of the reality of this world when all one needs is love? This is Whitman's conclusion, the same as that of a Tantrik, who stresses bhakti or devotional love toward God and fellow beings.

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" the poet makes the point that the appearances of the world are real and partake of the divine essence. The ferry-boat, the sunset, "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual



costumes," the gulls, in fact, the whole panorama, brings the poet to that stage when he triumphs over space and time. Sensory experiences of the things of the world are real, for they lead one to the spiritual Reality:

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what  
you are,  
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,  
About my body for me, and your body for you, be  
hung our divinest aromas,  
Thrive, cities--bring your freight, bring your  
shows, ample and sufficient rivers,  
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more  
spiritual,  
Keep your places, objects than which none else is  
more lasting.

These things of the world and their experience, whether "Great or small" "furnish" their parts "toward eternity," "toward the soul." They are far from the Vedantin's Maya. They are what a Tantrik would consider them to be: so many doors to the spiritual Reality. Love, nature, "Forms, objects, growths, humanities," ripening to "spiritual images," are not dreams, just as God is not a dream ("Song of the Universal"). On the other hand, lack of faith in God and his universe is a dream. Failing to consider the divine essence of the worldly phenomena and its reality would be living in a dream. The Maya of Shiva-Shakti is as real as the Godhead.

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## CHAPTER IV

### SEX CONTAINS ALL

The element of unabashed sensuousness and sex has caused a great deal of concern to Whitman's friends and critics during his lifetime and after. One of the main objections to his poetry was and even now is the abundance of sexual imagery. Emerson tried to persuade Whitman to take out the offending passages from the Leaves of Grass. That Whitman was right in refusing, for if his thought is followed closely, sex appears as an essential part of it. Traubel reports the poet saying:

he [Emerson] did not see the significance of the sex element as I had put it into the book and resolutely stuck to it--he did not see that if I had cut sex out I might just as well have cut everything out--the full scheme would no longer exist--it would have been violated in its most sensitive spot.<sup>1</sup>

It was not merely a rebellion against the prudish "attitude from superior men and women towards the thought and fact of sexuality" ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," I, 480); it stemmed from his conviction that the body and the soul "must remain as an entirety." His spirituality is mingled with "animal heat." G. W. Allen discusses the paradox:

Whitman stressed it [sex] both to combat the prudery of his time and to illustrate the fecundity and generative power of nature; Leaves of Grass is filled with fecundity symbols, from fish eggs and sprouting grass to the 'journey-work of the stars.' The paradoxes multiply as one studies Whitman's poems: he is the poet of sensuous delights, but these are merely openings to eternity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden (New York, 1915), I, 51.

<sup>2</sup>G. W. Allen, "Walt Whitman: Passage to India," Indian Literature, II, no. 2 (April-September, 1959), 40.



How can sensuous delights and sex, the seldom mentioned if the highest and the best of bodily pleasures, be "openings to eternity"? The vital relation between sex and spirituality, central to Whitman's thought, was given a metaphysical base in Tantrism. In both Whitman and Tantrism, self-realization is achieved not through mortification of the flesh, renunciation of all worldly pleasures but, as James E. Miller, Jr. puts it, "by an ennobling and an accepting of what has been mistakenly reviled and degraded." What Miller further says about Whitman applies to Tantrism, too: "Whitman's reversal of the traditional mystic values, values not necessarily peculiar to the mystic, is the heart of his meaning: man's sense of sin is his greatest sin, his greatest delusion; in order to purge himself, he must purge this false sense."<sup>3</sup> The heart of the meaning of Whitman and Tantrism is sex. We shall, therefore, offer parallels between the two here as far as sex and all that includes this concept is concerned. In doing so, we hope not only to clear away the persisting misunderstandings about sex in Whitman but also to throw his poetic growth into sharp focus.

#### The Position of Woman

"The Female equally with the Male I sing," says Whitman in "Inscriptions." There are numerous references in Whitman's writings to the equality of women with men. In the Brooklyn Eagle of July 24, 1846, he wrote, "But if goodness, charity, faith, and love, reside not in the greasts of females, they reside not on earth," and further:

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<sup>3</sup> A Critical Guide to "Leaves of Grass" (Chicago, 1957), p. 16.



women seem to be selected by Providence, as the depositories of the germs of the truest Truth and the fairest Beautiful. In their souls is preserved the ark of the covenant of purity.<sup>4</sup>

These are not merely chivalrous sentiments. Women like Margaret Fuller and Frances Wright (the latter a great influence acknowledged by Whitman himself) were agitating for equal rights and equal treatment of women. He was in full sympathy with them and their demands. While reviewing Margaret Fuller's "Papers on Literature and Art," he said:

[Though some treat with supercilious contempt such works when essayed by women] we are not thus disposed. We think the female mind has peculiarly the capacity, and ought to have the privilege, to enter into the discussion of high questions of morals, taste, &c. We therefore welcome Miss Fuller's papers, right heartily.<sup>5</sup>

Not for him Milton's dictum, "He for God alone and she for God in him." For the new society Whitman envisioned, for the procreative role, woman, indeed, was more important than man. In "Song of the Redwood Tree" he declares:

The new society at last, proportionate to Nature,  
In man of you, more than your mountain peaks or  
stalwart trees imperial,  
In woman more, far more, than all your gold or  
vines, or even vital air.

He had read in Volney's Ruins how, according to the Hindus, the Eternal Being "separated the male and female faculties which were in him," thus giving both sexes equality.<sup>6</sup> In Vedic India, in taking part in sacri-

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<sup>4</sup>Walt Whitman, The Gathering of the Forces, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York, 1920), II, 88-89.

<sup>5</sup>Emory Holloway, I, 132.

<sup>6</sup>Volney, Ruins (Boston, 1883), p. 109.



ficial rituals, man alone was incomplete; both man and wife were of equal importance, as can be seen from the following passage from The Satapatha-Brahmana:

Being about to ascend [the sacrificial platform], he [the sacrificer] addresses his wife, 'Come, wife, ascend we the sky!'--'Ascend we!' says the wife. Now as to why he addresses his wife: she, the wife, in sooth is one half of his own self; hence, as long as he does not obtain her, so long he is not regenerated, for so long he is incomplete.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant that one of the most important statements about Atman is made by Yajnavalkya to his wife, Maitreyi.<sup>8</sup> But after Manu codified the law, the woman was degraded in position in the post-Vedic period. With Buddha, she was reinstated. She made a great comeback through the Tantric doctrine that woman was the earthly representative of Shakti, the Great Mother. Mahanirvana Tantra forbade women to go sati (burning themselves with the dead husband). Tantrism totally opposed what Manu had laid down in his Laws about women and marriage. Tantrism advocated marrying daughters after they reached ripeness of understanding, widow-marriages, and the right to divorce and re-marriage for women married to impotent husbands. All Tantras denounce the use of women as mere objects of pleasure. A hymn in the Tantric Sarvollasa says: "Striyo devah striyah pranah, 'women are gods, women are life itself.'"<sup>9</sup> Women were allowed to act as gurus (teachers), and initiation by a mother of her

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<sup>7</sup> Julius Eggeling, tr., The Satapatha-Brahmana, Part III (Oxford, 1894), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Hume, pp. 101-102, sections 12, 13, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Avalon, Shakti and Shakta, p. 96.



son had eightfold more merit than initiation by others.<sup>10</sup>

### The Great Mother

The Great Mother cult existed in all old civilizations. Isis, Cybele, Aphrodite, Astarte, Egyptian Tef and many others are the forms this Magna Mater assumed. The Pre-Aryan Harappa-Mohenjo-daro civilization in India shows the existence of this cult. In the Vedic literature there are few goddesses like Ushas, Saraswati, and Aranyani; they are all subordinate to male deities like Indra, Varuna, and the Maruts. It was Mahayana Buddhism that brought back the Great Mother. Though a corollary of the Shiva cult, the Shakti cult swamped the Vedic gods like a tidal wave. She was triumphant as Tara and Prajnaparamita of the Buddhist, and as Durga-Kali of the Hindu Tantrik.

All earlier philosophy had stressed asceticism and renunciation of all worldly pleasures. Mahayana Buddhism reset the balance by declaring identity between samsara (world) and nirvana. Its doctrine of the Bodhisattava made every man a potential Buddha. Nirvana has to be realized through samsara, for did not the Madhyamikas affirm, "Between nirvana and samsara there is not the slightest shade of difference."<sup>11</sup> The highest mystical truth can be reached only through sensual experience, and the combination of prajna, motive force of nirvana (Wisdom) and of karuna (Compassion), motive force of samsara, can alone show the essential unity behind the diversity of this world. In Buddhist Tantrism, Wisdom

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 544.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by D. L. Snellgrove, The Hevajra Tantra, I, 20.



is symbolized by the female deity Prajnaparamita in divine embrace with the male principle. In Hindu Tantrism this active female principle is the Durga-Kali form of Shiva's consort, the Adya Shakti (Primal Power), the Great Mother of all natural things (Natura Naturans) and nature itself (Natura Naturata). This Adya Shakti is

the Nature-Soul, the Energy, the Will-in-Power executive in the universe. . . . Instead of drawing back from manifested Nature and its difficulties, he [Tantrik] confronted them, seized and conquered.<sup>12</sup>

The Tantrik holds that the world around is to be fully enjoyed (Whitman's greatest poet is the "complete lover" of the "known universe"), because

the whole spectacle of the world, without exception, is generated by the dynamism of Maya-Shakti, the power of the cosmic dance (lila) of the dark and terrible, sublime, all-nourishing and-consuming Mother of the World. The beings of the world, and all the ranges of experience, are but waves and strata in a single, ever-flowing universal stream of life.<sup>13</sup>

The Tantrik substitutes, like Whitman, a personal god for the impersonal Brahman of the Upanishads; love is the emotion that unites the god and the devotee. The whole universe is

the revelation of that Supreme Divine Force (Sakti) with which he is in love, the all-comprehensive Divine being in its cosmic aspect of playful, aimless display (lila)--which precipitates pain as well as joy, but in its bliss transcends them both. He is filled with the holy madness of that 'ecstatic love' (prema) which transmutes the world.<sup>14</sup>

Only through loving the Mother madly can the Tantrik reach the goal.

<sup>12</sup>Sri Aurobindo (Ghose), On Yoga, I (Pondicherry, 1957), 47.

<sup>13</sup>Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India, p. 574.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 571.



Many references to the Great Mother and love towards her occur in Whitman. He reaches this concept of her as Cosmic Energy through women and the States. In many poems of his, woman appears as mother, which seems to Whitman her most important function. Mother and child are objects of fascination for him. Maternal solicitude for young people like Peter Doyle and caring for the wounded are manifestations of his love for the Mother-image. In Democratic Vistas he wants "a strong and sweet Female Race, a race of perfect Mothers" (II, 216). They are greater than men "through their divine maternity, always their towering, emblematical attribute" (II, 229). In a footnote (no. 8) in the same essay, he mentions "the goddesses of the Egyptian, Indian, and Greek mythologies, certain Bible characters, especially the Holy Mother," but mourns that a perfect human mother has yet to appear in literature (II, 262). At the end of the essay he visualizes America growing into a "divine Mother not only of material but spiritual worlds." In "Chanting the Square Deific" Santa Spirita is none else but the Great Mother, binding the other three figures in the "Square" like a mother binding the family.<sup>15</sup> The States appear as a divine Mother in "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood." Whitman had noted:

In Poems--bring in the idea of Mother--the idea of mother with numerous children--all, great and small, old and young, equal in her eyes--as the identity of America.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. George L. Sixbey, "'Chanting the Square Deific'--A Study in Whitman's Religion," American Literature, IX (March 1937-January 1938), 192.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. Quoted by the author.



This Mother image is only one of the many forms of Shakti. Man comes "Unfolded out of the folds of the woman," and, therefore, "First the man is shaped in the woman; he can then be shaped in himself." He declares in "Song of Myself" that "there is nothing greater than the mother of men."

There is little doubt that this recurring idea of motherhood in Whitman originates from love for his own mother. Mrs. Ellen Calder in an article says, "So deep and instinctive was Walt's veneration of the mother that he did not relish any fun at her expense."<sup>17</sup> Talking to Traubel, Whitman says, "After my dear, dear mother, I guess Lincoln gets almost nearer me than anybody else."<sup>18</sup> He paid her loving tribute in "As at thy Portals Also Death." It was this love which merged and expanded into his conception of woman as mother and of her divinity.

Leaves of Grass "is essentially a woman's book," he says, and continues:

its cry is the cry of the right and wrong of the woman  
sex--of the woman first of all, of the facts of creation  
first of all--of the feminine: speaks out loud: warns,  
encourages, persuades, points the way.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately all these ideas coalesce into the figure of Mother Nature.

In "I Sing the Body Electric," this concept comes out clearly:

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,  
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible  
completeness, sanity, beauty,  
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast,  
the Female I see.

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<sup>17</sup>Quoted by Roger Asselineau, The Evolution of Walt Whitman, II, 159.

<sup>18</sup>Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 38.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., II, 331.



In Democratic Vistas the idea of Nature is similar to Shakti or Cosmic Force. "I say the question of Nature, largely consider'd, involves the questions of the esthetic, the emotional, and the religious--and involves happiness" (II, 251), says he. Not even Wordsworth came near this conception of Nature encompassing all spheres of human activity, for Whitman further extends Nature's sway in the next paragraph:

Furthermore, as by what we now partially call Nature is intended, at most, only what is entertainable by the physical conscience, the sense of matter, and of good animal health--on these it must be distinctly accumulated, incorporated, that man, comprehending these, has, in towering superaddition, the moral and spiritual consciences, indicating his destination beyond the ostensible, the mortal. (II, 252)

Nature is not only the physical aspect of the ever-changing earth and life, but it means something beyond, for like life "the purport of objective Nature is doubtless folded, hidden, somewhere here" (II, 253).

Nature contains all, as sex does, for both Walt and the Tantrik, for does she not work her "folded" "purport" through sex?

Lo! Nature (the only complete, actual poem), existing calmly in the divine scheme, containing all, content, careless of the criticisms of a day, or these endless and wordy chatterers. (II, 254)

This Nature is the All; does not the Tantrik agree with this role of Nature, though in Whitman she is not very clearly formulated on the Tantrik lines? The idea, however is the same:

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at  
every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.  
("Song of Myself")

For him "Hindustan" was "the house of maternity" ("Facing West from California's Shores") and of Cosmic Energy, which also lies coiled up in us and wakes up through sex.



### Lingam or Phallus Worship

Correlated intimately with the Great Mother worship is the phallus worship. In the pre-Aryan Harappa-Mohenjodaro civilization (2500-2000 B.C.) appears a god who is prototype of Shiva, the phallus-god. Shiva is the lord of Shakti. In the sexual symbolism of their union, the phallus has an obvious importance, though the Tantriks do not give it the same rank of worship as they do the female organ. However, the idea of the phallus is there. Whitman openly sings "the phallus" ("From Pent-up Aching Rivers"). "Spontaneous Me" is full of phallus symbols thinly veiled. Real poems are "drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all man carry." "The sensitive, orbic, underlapp'd brothers" are also there. The "love-flesh" swells and aches deliciously. The "Emblematic and capricious blades" of "Calamus" occur in "Song of Myself," too. Homoerotic or not, the poet is a fervid lingam worshipper.

Walt had read about the lingam worship in Volney's Ruins, a copy of which his father presumably had before Walt had his.<sup>20</sup> Volney talks about Shiva thus:

God of desolation and destruction, who has, however, for his emblem the symbol of generation . . . [and whose followers] publicly crown with flowers, and sprinkle with milk and honey, the obscene image of the Lingam.<sup>21</sup>

About the story of creation in the Vedas, Volney tells

how a being, infinite, eternal, and round . . . separated the male and female faculties which were in him, and

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<sup>20</sup>See Walt Whitman's letter to Dr. Bucke, quoted by David Goodale, "Some of Walt Whitman's Borrowings," American Literature, X (March 1938-January 1939), 208.

<sup>21</sup>Volney, Ruins, p. 93.



performed an act of generation, of which the Lingam remains an emblem.<sup>22</sup>

Out of the notes compiled by Whitman from the Ruins, the following occurs about the lingam:

Vishnu, preserver of the world, image of the Lingam, the male sign . . . Chiven (god of desolation and destruction).<sup>23</sup>

Esther Shephard correctly concludes:

Thus from Volney, Walt Whitman had learned of identity and relationship among gods, especially Hermes, Osiris, and Bacchus, and had become familiar with the theory that behind the idea of trinity in ancient religions is the primitive symbol, the Lingam or phallus.<sup>24</sup>

From Volney he had learnt about Shiva's lingam and how basic was its idea to almost all ancient religions, and so he dances "through the streets in a phallic procession" ("Song of Myself"). His lyrical mysticism in praise of lingam certainly parallels that of Shiva's devotee, and by inference Shakti's. It is immaterial whether the Ruins put ideas into his head or whether the ideas were already there and he was emboldened to put them into print when he read about the phallus worship.

#### Maithuna or Coitus

The process of liberation is through maithuna for the Tantrik.

Maithuna is the central and most important rite for the Tantrik to please the goddess Shakti. Maithuna is a powerful biological urge in all living

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>23</sup>Quoted from Bucke's Notes and Fragments by David Goodale, "Some of Walt Whitman's Borrowings," p. 208.

<sup>24</sup>Esther Shephard, "Possible Sources of Some of Whitman's Ideas and Symbols in Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus and Other Works," MLQ, XIV (1953), 78.



things; it is natural, therefore, that it should symbolize the mystic spiritual union.

There is nothing with which we can better compare the 'mystic union' of the finite with its infinite ambient--that one experience which proves itself and is the only ground of faith--than the self-oblivion of earthly lovers locked in each other's arms, where 'each is both.' Physical proximity, contact, and interpenetration are the expressions of love, only because love is the recognition of identity.<sup>25</sup>

To use it as symbol for something higher is also to transmute the vulgar act. As D. L. Snellgrove puts it:

This [Maithuna] is therefore no degrading of religion, but just the reverse, an ennobling of the natural condition, or rather a realization of the essential purity (visuddhi) of the natural condition.<sup>26</sup>

This being the Indian attitude right from the beginning, sex and religion were inextricably mixed, and in India

there has always been a free and direct use of sexual imagery in religious symbolism. On the one hand, a physical union has seemed to present a self-evident image of spiritual unity; on the other, operative forces, as in modern scientific method, are conceived as male and female, positive and negative.<sup>27</sup>

One of the four aims of life according to the ancient scriptures was kama (sexual love), the other three being artha (money), dharma (religion, duty), and moksha (salvation). Kama was personified as a Primal Power; prayers such as the following were offered to him:

<sup>25</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, The Dance of Siva (New York, 1918), p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> D. L. Snellgrove, The Hevajra Tantra, I, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, The Transformation of Nature in Art (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 44.



Kama was born at first; him neither the gods, nor the Fathers, nor men have equalled. To these art thou superior, and ever great; to thee, O Kama, do I verily offer reverence.<sup>28</sup>

(Atharva-veda)<sup>28</sup>

With Indra and Agni, the elemental gods of the early Aryans, Kama was bracketed, for it was through him that the universe took its birth. It was the central principle of the whole universe. On the carnal plane it

operates through the mystery of sex; on the highest, it is the will of the Creator. . . . Kama is the power and process whereby the One begets Itself as man, beast, or plant, and thus carries forward the continued creation of the universe.<sup>29</sup>

In the beginning the One divided Himself into two; thus the universe began, as the Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad (I.4.3) tells us (Hume, p. 81).

Maithuna is, therefore, a reunion, and is, in the words of Stella Kramrisch, a "conjoint symbol of Purusa [the Essence] and Prakrti [Nature] as Moksa [salvation]."<sup>30</sup> This concept of kama as the gateway to salvation Whitman had in mind when he made sex an all-encompassing force, as in "A Woman Waits for Me":

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,  
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results,  
promulgations,  
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery,  
the seminal milk,  
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions,  
loves, beauties, delights of the earth,

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<sup>28</sup> Maurice Bloomfield, tr., Hymns of the Atharva-veda (Oxford, 1897), p. 223.

<sup>29</sup> Zimmer, Philosophies of India, p. 143.

<sup>30</sup> The Hindu Temple (Calcutta, 1946), II, 346.



All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons  
of the earth,

These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and  
justifications of itself.

This is the same kama of Bhima's reply to his eldest brother's question  
as to which one of the three--dharma, artha, and kama--is the foremost.

Bhima replies:

One without Kama never wishes for Artha. One without Kama  
never wishes for Dharma. One who is destitute of Kama can  
never feel and wish. For this reason, Kama is the fore-  
most of the three. . . . Everything is pervaded by the  
principle of Kama. A man outside the pale of Kama never  
is, was or will be seen in this world. . . . Kama is the  
parent of Dharma and Artha. Kama is the soul of these  
two.

(Mahabharata, "Shanti Parvan," 167)<sup>31</sup>

The whole of the fourth Brahmana of the sixth Adhyaya of Brihad-  
Aranyaka Upanishad is devoted to the incantations and ceremonies for pro-  
creation. Coitus is a sacrificial ritual:

Her lap is a sacrificial altar; her hairs, the sacrificial  
grass; her skin, the somapress. The two labia of the vulva  
are the fire in the middle. Verily, indeed, as great as is  
the world of him who sacrifices with the Vajapeya (Strength-  
libation') sacrifice, so great is the world of him who  
practises sexual intercourse, knowing this; he turns the  
good deeds of women to himself.<sup>32</sup>

Though Walt describes the female body in detail in the ninth section of  
"I Sing the Body Electric," the lines in the fifth section come nearest  
to the religious mystery of the woman's procreative parts of the above  
passage:

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by John W. Spellman in Introd. to The Kama Sutra of  
Vatsyayana, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Hume, p. 168.



This the nucleus--after the child is born of woman,  
 man is born of woman,  
 This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and  
 large, and the outlet again.

Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the  
 rest, and is the exit of the rest,  
 You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates  
 of the soul.

Semen and vigor of the body is necessary to impregnate women. If semen  
 is spilled,

This very semen I reclaim!  
 Again to me let vigor come!  
 Again, my strength; again, my glow!

(Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad 6.4.4)<sup>33</sup>

Walt talks of "The drops I distil upon you," "I pour the stuff to start  
 sons and daughters fit for these States," "The limpid liquid," "this  
 bunch pluck'd at random from myself," and "I dare not withdraw till I  
 deposit what has so long accumulated within me." He assumes "in his god-  
 like way" that "his semen is not only sound but endowed with a mystic  
 potency,"<sup>34</sup> and his preoccupation with this idea parallels that of the  
 Upanishads and the later yoga literature.

Vedic India required progeny, healthy and vigorous, to extend the  
 Aryan sway over the rest of India, just as Whitman required healthy sons  
 and daughters for his new and fast-developing country; hence the concern  
 of both is with procreation. In the process the woman is transfigured:

I am the heaven; thou, the earth!

Come, let us two together clasp!  
 Together let us semen mix,

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>34</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 189.



A male, a son for to procure!<sup>35</sup>  
 (Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad 6.4.20)<sup>35</sup>

Walt has sworn "The oath of procreation" and is

Singing the song of procreation,  
 Singing the need of superb children and therein  
 superb grown people.  
 ("From Pent-up Aching Rivers")

Looking at the slave in "I Sing the Body Electric," the poet has the  
 thought that

This is not only one man, this the father of those who  
 shall be fathers in their turns.

In the same poem the poet says, "She is to conceive daughters as well as  
 sons, and sons as well as daughters." In "A Woman Waits for Me":

The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in  
 their turn,  
 I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-  
 spendings,  
 I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others,  
 as I and you interpenetrate now,  
 I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers  
 of them, as I count on the fruits of the gushing  
 showers I give now,  
 I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life,  
 death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.

The cycle of life, death, and immortality has to be gone through. That  
 sequence is inevitable, as is procreation, especially for the expanding  
 States. Perfect women are "indispensable to endow the birth-stock of a  
 New World" (II, 209). The poet himself is ready to do his part:

On women fit for conception I start bigger and  
 nimbler babes,  
 (This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant  
 republics.)  
 ("Song of Myself")

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<sup>35</sup>  
 Hume, p. 171.



Walt writes in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle of April 1, 1846, about the "single fools, the bachelors and maids who are old enough to be married," telling them all, excepting a few like himself, "Turn, Fools, and get discretion. Buy cradles and double beds; make yourself a reality in life-- and do the State some service."<sup>36</sup>

In Vedic India, copulation was for procreation, and the gods' blessings were asked for conception at the time of copulation. On the fourth day of the marriage,

With his right hand he [husband] should  
touch her secret parts with the verse,  
'May Vishnu make thy womb ready . . . ,'  
and with that, 'Give conception, Sinivali.'<sup>37</sup>

Further the husband says:

As earth contains the germ of Fire (agni),  
As heaven is pregnant with the Storm (indra),  
As of the points the Wind (vayu) is germ,  
E'en so a germ I place in thee,

So-and-so!<sup>38</sup>

(Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad 6.4.22)<sup>38</sup>

After the baby is born, he says to the wife:

You are Ila, of the lineage of Mitra and Varuna!  
O heroine! She has borne a hero!  
Continue to be such a woman abounding in heroes--  
She who has made us abound in a hero!<sup>39</sup>

Thus the woman is praised for bearing children, just as she is by Walt, and the sexual plane is raised from the mere animal act to the planes of

<sup>36</sup>Walt Whitman, The Gathering of the Forces, II, 101.

<sup>37</sup>Hermann Oldenberg, tr., The Grihya-Sutras, Part II (Oxford, 1892), pp. 51-52.

<sup>38</sup>Hume, p. 172.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 173.



ritual and myth; in short, it is spiritualized, just as it is by Walt.

But it is also a two-way traffic in that the ritual is explained in sexual terms, as in The Satapatha-Brahmana:

And in that the wife [sacrificer's] anoints the burning (part) of the axle [of the Somacart], thereby a productive union is effected; for when woman and man become heated, the seed flows, and thereupon birth takes place.<sup>40</sup>

Or as in Altareya Brahmana:

If, in the course of a recitation, the priest separates the first two quarters of a verse and brings the other two close together, this is because the woman separates her thighs and the man presses them during pairing; the priest thus represents pairing, so that the sacrifice will give a numerous progeny.<sup>41</sup>

Coitus and sacrificial ritual become one, as in Chandogya Upanishad:

1. Woman, verily, O Gautama, is a sacrificial fire.  
In this case the sexual organ is the fuel; when one invites, the smoke; the vulva, the flame; when one inserts, the coals; the sexual pleasure, the sparks.
2. In this fire the gods offer semen. From this oblation arises the fetus.<sup>42</sup>

In the same Upanishad, coitus is transposed as a liturgical chant:

1. One summons--that is a Hinkara.  
He makes request--that is a Prastava.  
Together with the woman he lies down--that is an Udghitha.  
He lies upon the woman--that is a Pratihara.  
He comes to the end--that is a Nidhana.  
He comes to the finish--that is a Nidhana.  
This is the Vamadevya Saman as woven upon copulation.

<sup>40</sup>Julius Eggeling, tr., The Satapatha-Brahmana, Part II (Oxford, 1885), p. 131.

<sup>41</sup>Quoted by Mircea Eliade, Yoga: Immortality and Freedom, p. 256.

<sup>42</sup>Hume, p. 232.



2. He who knows thus this Vamadevyā Saman as woven upon copulation comes to copulation, procreates himself from every copulation, reaches a full length of life, lives long, becomes great in offspring and in cattle, great in fame. One should never abstain from any woman. That is his rule.<sup>43</sup>

Copulation in Vedic literature, though given an important place, is not given the central place that the Tantriks and Whitman give to it. For them it is the only gateway to spiritual knowledge and union with the Brahman or Shakti. It has for them both a metaphysical aspect, because in coitus

it is possible to recognize a pre-eminent rendition and profound human experience of the metaphysical mystery of the nondual entity which is made manifest as two. The embrace of the male and female principles, and their delight thereby, denote their intrinsic unity, their metaphysical identity. Regarded from the standpoint of logic in the world of space and time, the male and female are two. But in their intuition of their identity (which is the seed of love) the thought of twoness is transcended, while from the mystery of their physical union (their enactment and experience in time of their real and secret nonduality) a new being is produced--as though the corporeal imitation of the transcorporeal, nondual truth had magically touched the inexhaustible spring from which the phenomena of the cosmos arise. Through the sexual act, that is to say, creatures of the visible world actually come into touch, in experience, with the metaphysical sphere of the nondual source.<sup>44</sup>

That is what the numerous statues of Buddha embraced by female deities (yab and yum in Tibet, yang and yin in China) signify; that is the metaphysical base of the rousing of Shakti through sex in Tantrism and Whitman.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>44</sup> Zimmer, Philosophies of India, p. 451.



Maithuna is the supreme rite of Tantrism in the worship of Shakti, a culmination as it were of the other four things required in this worship, i.e., madya (wine), mamsa (meat), matsya (fish), and mudra (parched grain).<sup>45</sup> The enjoyment of these physical activities is based on the Tantric principle that

Yoga (the yoking of empirical consciousness to transcendental consciousness) and bhoga ('enjoyment,' the experience of life's joy and suffering) are the same. Bhoga can be made a way of yoga.<sup>46</sup>

This is not easy if the physical activities are performed in the spirit of an animal; the spiritual realization is possible only if these activities are done in a god-like spirit. As Sir John Woodroffe says:

The Sadhaka [the Tantrik student] is taught not to think that we are one with the Divine in Liberation only, but here and now in every act we do. . . . When this is realized in every natural function then each exercise thereof ceases to be a mere animal act and becomes a religious rite. . . . When therefore the Vira [hero] eats, drinks or has sexual intercourse he does so not with the thought of himself as a separate individual satisfying his own peculiar limited wants; an animal filching as it were from nature the enjoyment he has, but thinking of himself in such enjoyment as Shiva, saying "Sivo'ham," "Bhairavo'ham" ['I am Shiva'].<sup>47</sup>

For Walt Whitman, too, coitus leads to mystic ecstasy and spiritual realization, which leads Roger Asselineau to say, "pansexualism based on a sexual mysticism which, from 1855 on, makes him consider the coitus as a mode of knowledge."<sup>48</sup> Asselineau further remarks:

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<sup>45</sup>Anagarika Govinda in his article on Tantrism in P. V. Bapat, ed., 2500 Years of Buddhism (Delhi, 1956) translates 'mudra' as 'woman' on p. 358. Most other writers on Tantrism translate the word as 'parched grain.'

<sup>46</sup>Zimmer, Philosophies of India, p. 580.

<sup>47</sup>Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), Shakti and Shakta, pp. 357-358.

<sup>48</sup>Asselineau, II, 6.



It is undeniable that for him sexual climax was the source--and condition--of supra-rational communication, of mystical revelation.<sup>49</sup>

This is just the position of the Tantrik. Further, Whitman does not consider coitus like an animal, but in the poems unites with women as if he were a god, again like the Tantrik. All women are his to be mated with in a god-like fashion. He is a "chanter of Adamic songs," which means songs of god-like coitus, before the sense of shame became attached to the act. We must remember that whenever he talks of coitus he is not talking of it as an animal act. When he says,

I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake,  
but for others' sakes,  
Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards,  
They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me.  
("A Woman Waits for Me")

he is talking like a god, creating life at will, moulding the seed to whatever shape he wants through whomsoever he wants. Coitus is no longer on a physical plane, but spiritual like the Tantrik saying "I am Shiva."

#### Tantric Vira or Hero

Everybody indulging in physical activities cannot say "I am Shiva." It takes a special type, a vira or hero. Tantrism classifies men according to their gunas (characteristics) into pasu, vira, and divya. In pasu, the animal predominates, in vira energy, in divya purity or saintliness. The Vedantin's supreme ideal was to conquer vira's rajas (energy) by purity of divya (by sattva). Not so in Tantrism.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., II, 8.



As the union with Brahman or Shiva has to be achieved through passions themselves, vira is the fittest man to do so. He alone is capable of enjoying life, for

Through enjoyment one gains liberation; for enjoyment is the means of reaching the Supreme Abode. Hence the wise who wish to conquer the spirit should experience all pleasures.<sup>50</sup>

(Kularnava Samhita)<sup>50</sup>

Vira has the energy to enjoy all pleasures and also the capability to rise through them to the union with Shiva.

Whitman's ideal is this type of man. The word 'hero' itself occurs often in his writings, and the poet himself idealizes himself as an active, rough, bearded he-man. We do not need many illustrations to show this fact, but here are a few:

I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love you,  
I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you.  
("A Woman Waits for Me")

This one is from "Starting from Paumanok":

No dainty dolce affettuoso I,  
Bearded, sun-burnt, gray-neck'd, forbidding,  
I have arrived,  
To be wrestled with as I pass for the solid  
prizes of the universe,  
For such I afford whoever can persevere to win them.

And here is the very ideal Tantric vira, who assiduously follows the ritual of the panchtattva or the five M's:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and  
breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women  
or apart from them,

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<sup>50</sup>Quoted by Alain Danielou, Hindu Polytheism (New York, 1964), p. 383.



No more modest than immodest.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,  
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each  
part and tag of me is a miracle.

("Song of Myself")

The poet is a "kosmos"; and what is a "kosmos"?

Who includes diversity and is Nature,  
Who is the amplitude of the earth, and the coarseness  
and sexuality of the earth, and the great charity  
of the earth, and the equilibrium also, . . .  
Who contains believers and disbelievers, who is the  
most majestic lover, . . .  
Who having consider'd the body finds all its organs  
and parts good,  
Who, out of the theory of the earth and of his or  
her body understands by subtle analogies all  
other theories, . . .

He is Nature with capital 'N'; he is "majestic lover"; he has the coarseness and sexuality of the earth, but its charity and equilibrium too; and he, from the earth and his body, reaches out to other spiritual truths. The Tantrik could not have a better vira than this.

The poet understands "the large hearts of heroes." He asks "any man or woman" to behave like a vira, that is, to let their souls "stand cool and composed before a million universes." He wants others too to be heroes; he will force into the weaklings his excess energy and sexual vigor:

You there, impotent, loose in the knees,  
Open your scarf'd chops till I blow grit within you,  
Spread your palms and lift the flaps of your pockets,  
I am not to be denied, I compel, I have stores plenty  
and to spare,  
And any thing I have I bestow.

His ideal poet is a vira who "never stagnates. Obedience does not master him, he masters it" (Preface to 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass, II, 270).



The model personality he sketches in Democratic Vistas is on the lines of the strong and healthy, but cool and collected vira personality:

a well-begotten selfhood--in youth, fresh, ardent, emotional, aspiring, full of adventure; at maturity, brave, perceptive, under control, neither too talkative nor too reticent, neither flippant nor sombre. (II, 235)

In most of the poems and other writing of Whitman, we get this theme of hero. His ideal is a hero; he wants all to be heroes. In this, he is like the Tantriks.

#### Body and Health

Because Tantrism prefers vira over others as its ideal devotee, it is natural that it should stress a healthy body. Body and its perfect health are important for the Tantriks because it is through these that they achieve bhoga, yoga, and ultimately moksha. A Tantric verse says:

Here is the sacred Jumna and here the river Ganges,  
Here are Prayaga and Benares, here are Sun and Moon.  
Here I have visited in my wanderings shrines and  
such places of pilgrimage,  
For I have not seen another shrine blissful like  
my own body.<sup>51</sup>

To put the body above the sacredness of the holy rivers and pilgrim centers of the Hindus is high praise indeed! Health and strength of the body is indirectly sanctified in the Vedic literature, but Tantrism carries the conception of the "divine" body to the extreme limit, sweeping away the asceticism and torture of the body of the post-Upanishadic period. As Tantrism believes that man can and must rise through and by means of nature and not its rejection, the body, through which he

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Snellgrove, I, 37.



achieves liberation, assumes divinity. The aim of all yoga systems-- and raising of Kundalini is yoga--and the Tantric ritual is, indeed, to have a perfectly healthy body by means of which union with Brahman is to be achieved. The Tantrik and Whitman agree that body is important because it leads to spiritual realization. As Walt said,

I do not believe in the body as an end, of course, but as a beginning, or rather, as a necessary item in the combinations of material that go to the making of a man.<sup>52</sup>

In other words:

And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,  
For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems  
of my soul and of immortality.

("Starting from Paumanok")

This is why Whitman harps on the perfectly healthy body:

Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main  
concern, and includes and is the soul;  
Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body,  
or any part of it!

("Starting from Paumanok")

If anything is sacred the human body is sacred,  
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood  
untainted,  
And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body is  
more beautiful than the most beautiful face.

("I Sing the Body Electric")

In the same poem he says that the actions of the body are "the act-poems of eyes, hands, hips and bosoms," and asserts that body is the soul:

And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?  
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

In "By Blue Ontario's Shore" he establishes the same connection between the body and the universe, by which he means the Over-Soul, when he says,

<sup>52</sup> Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 110.



"All comes by the body, only health puts you rapport with the universe." In "Song of Myself" he lists the different parts and functions of the body, lovingly describes the Negro's body. And the farmer "of wonderful vigor" in "I Sing the Body Electric" "drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face." Whitman is "the poet of the Body" and "the poet of the Soul," for they are one to him. Writing about prostitution in Brooklyn Daily Times of June 20, 1857, he condemns prostitution on health grounds, and concludes thus:

Is not every young man, every girl--every person of any age--desirous of having a powerful, agreeable, clear-flashed sweet-blooded body? And through this universal wish, could not human pollution in all its forms [prostitution] be best attacked, and put down?<sup>53</sup>

In his Manuscript Notebook (I) an entry shows the same vital connection between body and soul.<sup>54</sup> To his model personality of Democratic Vistas,

a clear-blooded, strong-fibered physique is indispensable; the questions of food, drink, air, exercise, assimilation, digestion, can never be intermitted. (II, 235)

He wants all to mould themselves on this pattern of health. And woman, of course, who is the Mother of all, is to be as healthy. "A divine nimbus exhales" from her body. Like his ideal vira, his women too must be strong and active:

<sup>53</sup> See Emory Holloway, ed., The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, II, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., II, 65, the passage beginning "The effusion or corpora-tion of the soul is always under the beautiful laws of physiology . . ."



They are tann'd in the face by shining suns and blowing winds,  
 Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and strength,  
 They know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run,  
     strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves,  
 They are ultimate in their own right--they are calm,  
     clear, well-possess'd of themselves.

("A Woman Waits for Me")

The Tantrik requires a woman of healthy body for Shakti's most central ritual of maithuna, and Whitman's woman is a fit companion for his vira. Both of them, Whitman and the Tantrik, put the woman higher than the man, because her body is the vehicle of the mystery of creation.

#### Orgies, Prostitutes, and Low People

The Tantrik in his worship of Shakti indulges in a great deal of ritual. In some of their sects like the Vamacharis (left-handed worshippers), orgies have a special significance of the devotees having gone beyond the ordinary social and moral laws and values. Orgies for them are a symbol that these devotees are jivanamuktas (free souls). For Whitman, too, the orgies have possibly the same significance. He writes of the "City of Orgies," where "lovers, continual lovers, only repay me." The following may be the memories of his Pfaffian days:

I am for those who believe in loose delights,  
     I share the midnight orgies of young men,  
 I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,  
 The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I pick out some  
     low person for my dearest friend.

Orgies, persons of low character, and prostitutes go together. The poet makes an appointment with a "common prostitute," telling her "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you." A dead prostitute is for him a "divine woman." The prostitute, for the poet, had the same significance that she had for the Tantrik. She or a woman of low morals signified



"conjunction of opposites." The Vedic sacrificial ritual included a prostitute:

during the mahavrata, a pumscali copulated ritually with a brahmacarin or a magadha in the place consecrated for the sacrifice. . . . The ceremonial union between the brahmacarin ('chaste young man') and the pumscali (prostitute) may well express a desire to effect the coincidentia oppositorum, the reintegration of polarities.<sup>55</sup>

This "conjunction of opposites" is the basis of the metaphysics of the Tantric ritual. When the Tantrik started on his ritual by contemplating a naked woman, he usually had before him a woman of low caste and low morals, because such a woman meant an opposite pole to his divine nature and divine worship of Shakti. To bring these two opposite poles into union was to represent symbolically the identity of opposites which alone leads to liberation. About such women's role in the orgies of the Shaktas, Eliade says,

The role played by girls of low caste and courtesans in the tantric 'orgies' . . . is well known. The more depraved and debauched the woman, the more fit she is for the rite. Dombi ('the washer woman'; but, in the secret language, signifying nairatma [nonego]) is the favorite of all the tantric writers. . . . It is the symbolism of the 'washerwoman' and the 'courtesan' that is of chief significance, and we must reckon with the fact that, in accordance with the tantric doctrines of the identity of opposites, the 'noblest and most precious' is hidden precisely in the 'basest and most common'.<sup>56</sup>

This dialectic of opposites is the favorite theme of the Mahayanists, especially the Madhyamikas. In the Caryas (Bauddha Gana), nairatma, 'state of nonego,' or sunya, 'emptiness,' is described as a girl of low

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<sup>55</sup> Eliade, Yoga, pp. 256-257.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., footnote no. 204 on the same page.



caste or a courtesan.<sup>56</sup> The Tantriks especially made it their business to realize the unity of the world and the self through the world's paradoxes. The Buddhist Tantriks wanted to attain the paradoxical position of the Bodhisattva, who in his wisdom has gone far beyond the individual's world, and yet who in his compassion wants to save all beings. Tantrism raised and multiplied these pairs of opposites--like sunya and karuna, Shiva and Shakti--and attempted to "unify" them through techniques combining subtle physiology with meditation. For a liberated vira, who through the opposites has realized the unity of the world, himself, and Shakti, there is no opposition between high and low, between good and bad.<sup>57</sup> So is it with Whitman. It is a simple statement of faith, not heroics, when the poet says in section 19 of "Song of Myself":

I will not have a single person slighted or left away,  
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,  
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the veneralee is invited;  
There shall be no difference between them and the rest.

And further in section 40,

To cotton-drudge or cleaner of privies I lean,  
On his right cheek I put the family kiss,  
And in my soul I swear I never will deny him.

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Christy in The Orient in American Transcendentalism, p. 270, quotes from Max Müller's Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings, what Ramakrishna, the famous Indian saint who was a devotee of the Great Mother, once said: "When I look upon the chaste women of respectable families, I see in them the Mother Divine arrayed in the garb of a chaste lady; and again, when I look upon the public women of the city, sitting in their open verandas, arrayed in the garb of immorality and shamelessness, I see in them also the Mother Divine, sporting in a different way." Christy comments on this passage thus: "By no flight of the imagination could one ever conceive of Emerson or his friends uttering such words. Walt Whitman might have done so, but not the Concordians--with their Puritan heritage."



The "felons on trial in courts," "You prostitutes flaunting over the trottoirs or obscene in your rooms," are he himself, not only because of compassion for suffering humanity, but also because they are a pair of opposites and therefore one and the same. Buddha says,

I have the same feelings for respectable people as for the low; for moral persons as for the immoral; For the depraved as for those who observe the rules of good conduct.<sup>58</sup>

Whitman must have read this message in The Dial of January, 1844, under the head "The Preaching of Buddha":

I fill the whole universe with joy, like a cloud which pours everywhere a homogeneous water, always equally well disposed towards respectable men, as towards the lowest, towards virtuous men as towards the wicked; towards abandoned men as towards those who have conducted most regularly.<sup>59</sup>

The Tantrik views the world as consisting of antithetical relationships like nirvana and samsara, and noumenon and phenomenon. When one masters one of the duality, he automatically masters the other member of the duality, too, because "each of these dualities, although apparently antithetical, is inseparably a unity."<sup>60</sup> For others, association with the bad, the evil, would only degrade; not for the vira, who, making use of those very things that cause others to fall, rises above these antithetical relationships of this world to the spiritual reality of another. The

<sup>58</sup>Quoted by H. Kern, tr., The Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law (Oxford, 1909), p. 125.

<sup>59</sup>The Dial, IV, no. 3 (January, 1844), 399.

<sup>60</sup>Chen-chi Chang, "Yogic Commentary," in W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines, xxviii.



Kularnava Tantra states: "The Great Bhairava has ordained in the Kaula doctrine that spiritual advancement must be achieved by means of those very things which are the causes of man's downfall."<sup>61</sup>

### Evil

It would not be correct to say, as V. K. Chari does, that "Whitman sits and looks out on the world of misery, evil, and suffering with supreme indifference and detachment."<sup>62</sup> Such things, dualities of the world, simply do not exist for the man who has experienced what Rudolf Otto calls the "mysticism of unifying vision." In this intuition vision which Whitman for one had, "all otherness as opposition immediately disappears."<sup>63</sup> The Indian philosophy terms such unifying vision as "'nanatvam na pasyati,' or expressed positively: 'Saman pasyati,' or 'dharman samatam gatan pasyati,'" which means that the mystic "sees objects as coalescing in identity."<sup>64</sup> For the liberated vira, all dualities like good and bad disappear into the One, and when thus he becomes pure, all things to him are pure. As the Greeks put it, "panta kathara tois katharois." The vira is then a svechchhachari, 'one who does what he will,' for as there is no sin for him, no blame can attach to him. This is the position of Whitman, when he says, "there is in fact no evil,"

<sup>61</sup>Avalon, Principles of Tantra, p. 481. Quoted by the author.

<sup>62</sup>V. K. Chari, "Whitman and Indian Thought," The Western Humanities Review, XIII (1959), 296.

<sup>63</sup>Rudolf Otto, Mysticism East and West (New York, 1962), p. 63.

<sup>64</sup>Idem.



I make the poem of evil also, I commemorate that part also,  
I am myself just as much evil as good, and my nation is--  
and I say there is in fact no evil.

("Starting from Paumanok")

And in section 22 of "Song of Myself" he declares:

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be  
the poet of wickedness also.

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?  
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand  
indifferent,  
My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait;  
I moisten the roots of all that has grown.

The greatest poet, he said, "does not moralize or make applications of morals--he knows the soul" (II, 273). This attitude of Whitman makes William Sloane Kennedy write in his diary: "It is the moral repulsiveness of Whitman that makes him no great world-exemplar, no model in morals for humanity. He mixes up good and evil, muddles all together."<sup>65</sup> He does not realize that the poet "acts cosmically; he realizes that he himself is the law, the eternal dharma, through which all lesser, conventional rules of conduct exist."<sup>66</sup> In this attitude, Whitman is like the vira.

### Manly Attachment

Once the liberation takes place as a result of the conjunction of opposites producing a rupture of plane, there is the rediscovery of the primordial spontaneity in all acts. The poet wants to be "free and law-

<sup>65</sup> Quoted by George Hendrick, "Unpublished Notes on Whitman in William Sloane Kennedy's Diary," American Literature, XXXIV (May, 1962), 283.

<sup>66</sup> Dorothy F. Mercer, "Walt Whitman on Karma Yoga," Vedanta and the West, X (1947), 152.



less: like "Two hawks in the air--two fishes swimming in the sea," or wants "One Hour to Madness and Joy":

To ascend, to leap to the heavens of the love indicated  
to me!

To rise thither with my inebriate soul!

To be lost if it must be so!

To feed the remainder of life with one hour of fulness  
and freedom!

With one briefhour of madness and joy.

Liberation means abandonment of all social and moral values, to break free of all restraints, and this "desire for adventure, excitement, breaking free of all artificial restraint, acting as naturally as birds, fish, and trees, was the basic impulse in the genesis of . . . 'Calamus' poems."<sup>67</sup> This impulse came with the discovery of liberation, discovery of unity through diversity of life.

A host of critics, Malcolm Cowley, Mark Van Doren and others, have stressed the homoerotic strain in Whitman's poems.<sup>68</sup> Walt was aware that "Calamus" could easily be distorted. He said to Traubel, "Calamus needs clear ideas: it may be easily, innocently distorted from its natural, its motive, body of doctrine."<sup>69</sup> If in "Children of Adam" his object was, as Dorothy F. Mercer puts it, "to wake the larger self or soul through the arousing of that great energy innate in every man, which we call sex,"

<sup>67</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 255.

<sup>68</sup> See Malcolm Cowley, "Walt Whitman: The Miracle," The New Republic, CXIV (March 18, 1946), 385-388; also "Walt Whitman: The Secret," The New Republic, CXIV (April 8, 1946), 481-484. See also Mark Van Doren, "Walt Whitman, Stranger," The American Mercury, XXXV (July, 1935), 277-285.

<sup>69</sup> Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 74.



Whitman's object remains the same in "Calamus."<sup>70</sup> If the "dear love of comrades" in "Calamus" poems is, as Richard Chase puts it, tenderly felt and conceived with arduousness of spirit, it is as likely to be because of the poet's "liberated" sexual sense as anything else.<sup>71</sup> It is possible that the "poems were a vicarious substitute for physical experience," as G. W. Allen says;<sup>72</sup> it is also possible that, like the Tantriks after a certain stage of liberation, he became a svechchhachari and did not distinguish between the sexes. In the Tantrik code language, male and female refer to male and female principles within one's own body. Shakti is both male and female. Compare Kamalakanta's (a Tantric poet) lines:

You know not, O mind, the highest cause  
 Syama [Shakti] is not always in the form of a woman.  
 At times assuming the color of clouds,  
 She takes on the form of a man.<sup>73</sup>

Shakti is usually styled as female; she is symbolically so because the female is the productive principle. In essence, however, Shakti is neither male nor female, or in other words, both. The two great, male and female, principles, according to Tantrism,

which are ever in association in every act of creation, sustentation, and dissolution, are never divorced from each other, but ever inseparably connected, though the pre-

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102. <sup>70</sup> Dorothy F. Mercer, "Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita," p.

116. <sup>71</sup> Richard Chase, Walt Whitman Reconsidered (New York, 1955), p.

<sup>72</sup> Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 256.

<sup>73</sup> Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 104. Quoted.



dominance of the one or the other in objects present the spectacle of apparent separation.<sup>74</sup>

Thus Shakti can become male or female at will, because she is neither; so can her devotee. For her, as for her sadhaka (devotee), there is no differentiation between the two sexes. This happens to the sadhaka only when he has reached the highest Kaula stage of worship of Shakti, not before that. Whitman's narrator talks of being both male and female:

I am she who adorn'd herself and folded her hair  
expectantly,  
My truant lover has come, and it is dark.  
("The Sleepers")

Now he is the male,

I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with  
with the bride myself,  
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.  
("Song of Myself")

He also interchanges the meanings and functions of a husband and a comrade, when he says: "For I am the new husband and I am the comrade." In other words, as Kundalini wakes up and climbs through the chakras of the body during the yogasadhana of the Tantrik, at every point of the chakras the mating of the male and female principles takes place. This love-making "charges the body with spiritual energy, makes it the 'body electric'; that is to say, sexual energy is converted into spiritual energy."<sup>75</sup> It is this spiritualized love that the poet talks of in "Calamus." The "Calamus" leaves are the "frailest" at some places and yet the overall impression, if we do not misinterpret certain terms like "manly attach-

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 464.

<sup>75</sup>Dorothy F. Mercer, "Walt Whitman on Love," Vedanta and the West, X (July-August, 1947), 108.



ment," is that these leaves are the "strongest lasting," "because the love they describe is essentially immaterial, one whose roots are in earth but whose end is of a more disembodied reality."<sup>76</sup> The love in "Calamus" is "immaterial" in the sense that it is spiritualized.

This love born of the spiritual maithuna within us of Shakti and Shiva is so intoxicating and so liberating that it includes not only both sexes but the whole of humanity in its sweep. Thus Whitman through sex of "Song of Myself" and "Children of Adam" passes to the male principle, the opposite of the female, in "Calamus," which together so expands (Whitman calls this "dilation") into full love that it not only covers the democratic brotherhood of Americans but the whole of humanity. Expansion of the emotion of love is not an uncommon phenomenon resulting from the spiritual union with the Brahman. It is easy to see that this must have happened in Whitman's case, if we do not misunderstand his using words like "lover" or "adhesiveness." He certainly was using these terms in a special esoteric sense just as the Tantriks used certain words in more than one sense to convey their doctrines to those who followed Tantrism.<sup>77</sup>

#### Language--Paradox and Symbol

Mystical experience falling outside the experience of ordinary minds cannot be described in terms of human language, which is fashioned

<sup>76</sup> Idem.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 256, where Allen talking about "Calamus" says "in these poems we find more esoteric symbols than any other group in the book."



to communicate experiences of this world. In mystical experience, transcendent truth is grasped, and 'transcendent' means transcending, inter alia, the limiting and basic laws of human mind. Language being a product of limited human mind is also transcended. To hint even at this mystical experience, ordinary language has to be stretched to its maximum capacity; similes, paradoxes, and symbols have to be used to a large extent. The scriptures of most of the religions will bear out this statement.

Brahman is a riddle; to unravel It is not possible with the poor instrument called language. The Svetasvatara Upanishad presents the Riddle thus:

Without foot or hand, he is swift and a seizer!  
He sees without eye; he hears without ear!<sup>78</sup>

And thus:

Two birds, fast-bound companions,  
Clasp close the self-same tree.  
Of these two, the one [individual person] eats sweet  
fruit;  
The other [universal Brahman] looks on without eating.<sup>78</sup>

The Atman-Brahman mystery is hinted at through sexual symbolism in this passage:

With the one unborn female, red, white, and black [Nature],  
Who produces many creatures like herself,  
There lies the one unborn male [cosmic Person] taking  
his delight.  
Another unborn male [individual soul] leaves her with  
whom he has had his delight.

Or this origin of Emerson's "Brahma," from Katha Upanishad:

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<sup>78</sup>All the passages from the Svetasvatara Upanishad are from Hume, pp. 402-403.



If the slayer think to slay,  
 If the slain think himself slain,  
 Both these understand not.  
 This one slays not, nor is slain.<sup>79</sup>

Or the paradox and riddle of the dialogue between the teacher and the pupil in the Kena Upanishad:

[Pupil]: I think not 'I know well';  
 Yet I know not 'I know not'!  
 He of us who knows It, knows It;  
 Yet he knows not 'I know not.'  
 [Teacher: It is conceived of by him by whom  
 It is not conceived of.  
 He by whom It is conceived of, knows It not.  
 It is not understood by those who say they  
 understand It.  
 It is understood by those who say they understand  
 It not.<sup>80</sup>

In the Gita, the Lord is described thus:

He is within and without: He lives in the Live  
 and the lifeless;  
 Subtle beyond mind's grasp; so near us, so utterly  
 distant:  
 Undivided, He seems to divide into objects and  
 creatures;  
 Sending creation forth from Himself, He upholds  
 and withdraws it.<sup>81</sup>

In Whitman too there are paradoxes and riddles:

If they [his thoughts] are not the riddle and the  
 untying of the riddle they are nothing,  
 If they are not just as close as they are distant  
 they are nothing . . .

If no other in the world be aware I sit content,  
 And if each and all be aware I sit content . . .

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<sup>79</sup> Hume, p. 349.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>81</sup> P. 103.



Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is  
all that is not my soul . . .

("Song of Myself")

To take interest is well, and not to take interest  
shall be well.

("To Think of Time")

He is large, he contains multitudes; so what does it matter if he contradicts himself? Besides the recurring paradox of "En-Masse" and "self" in Whitman, there is the paradox of love and death, body and soul running throughout his earlier poetry. In fact, as V. K. Chari says, "The whole of the "Song of Myself" may be seen to be of the structure of a paradox--the paradox of Identity."<sup>82</sup>

This paradox is resolved through spiritualization of sexual energy. Whitman employs sexual symbolism to communicate this spiritualization and ultimate merging into the Cosmic Person, as sexual symbolism is the most natural and closest parallel to this merging. Symbolism does not tell; it only hints at the experience. If the poet is "to indicate the path between reality and their [men's] souls," he has to do this by being "indirect." It is the reader who "must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, . . . the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work."<sup>83</sup> The clue can be misinterpreted as it has been by some, especially in "Calamus." If we take into consideration this "clue" viewpoint of his, the inability of the language to convey the mystical experience, and the real "clue" behind his sexual symbolism, we do not see why "love" in "Calamus" should be

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<sup>82</sup>"A Critical Approach to Whitman," Walt Whitman Review, VI, no. 3 (September, 1960), 55.

<sup>83</sup>Democratic Vistas (II, 258).



misinterpreted or misconstrued. Whitman's language has to be understood first. Just as he employed paradox, riddle and simile, examples of which are quoted above, for conveying his mystical experience, he also used a special terminology like "adhesiveness" and other words to hint at the same experience. In such a use of language of sexual symbolism operating on more than one level, he parallels the Tantriks.

The Tantriks developed a secret language, not only because sexual symbolism was the closest equivalent to the mystical experience, but also because in the hands of the ignorant and the uninitiated, their doctrine and the complicated yogic practices would be misunderstood, misused and misapplied. The vulgar sexual language in which they hid their doctrine also was a protection against the idle intellectual curiosity of undesirable people. This secret language of the Tantriks is called sandhyabhasa, 'twilight language,' because it works on more than one level. It was purposely made to sound obscene and revolting to scare away the ignorant, while for the initiated it hid another mystic meaning. It was the only way to get beyond the Peeping Toms and the hard world of facts.

Such working of language on more than one level also destroys the language, which fact "contributes, in its way too, toward 'breaking' the profane universe and replacing it by a universe of convertible and integrable planes."<sup>84</sup> Several terms in Buddhist Tantrism and Shaktism are thus invested with a number of meanings on different levels, for example, vajra (thunderbolt) is linga (male organ) on the sexual, and

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<sup>84</sup>Eliade, Yoga, p. 250.



sunya (void) on the doctrinal plane. Padma (lotus) is yonī (female organ) on the sexual, and prajna (wisdom) on the doctrinal level. Shukra (semen) and rakta (menstrual blood) are sexual terms on the surface, but in the Tantrik secret language, they mean only karpura (camphor) and sihlaka (frankincense).<sup>85</sup> Maithuna (coitus) refers to spiritual union, while "woman" in Tantric language has a deeper meaning. A Tantra verse states: "What need have I of any outer woman? I have an Inner Woman within myself."<sup>86</sup> This "Inner Woman" means the female principles within the body with whom the male principles unite in the Kundalini yoga. Whitman could have said the same thing about himself, for he also copulated within himself, though he consciously did not formulate the thought.<sup>87</sup>

The Shaktas go to the extreme in the use of sexual symbolism, distorting and breaking apart the mold of the ordinary language. Like Whitman they were much misunderstood, because the deeper levels of meanings of the words they used were not grasped. A verse from the Kularnava Tantra says, "Drinking, drinking, again drinking, drinking fall down upon the earth; and getting up and again drinking there is no re-birth."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> A list of such terms is given in Eliade, Yoga, p. 253, and in Snellgrove, The Hevajra Tantra, I, 24-27.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted by Avalon, The Serpent Power, p. 272.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. R. W. B. Lewis, "The New Adam: Whitman," in Whitman, ed., R. H. Pearce (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), p. 117, where the author says that section 5 of "Song of Myself" means an intercourse between the two selves of the poet "with a world as its offspring."

<sup>88</sup> Quoted Avalon, Principles of Tantra, p. 456. The Sanskrit verse is: "Pitwa pitwa punah pitwa pitwa patati bhutale, Uththaya cha punah pitwa punarjanma na vidyate."



On the surface, this means, "Be drunkards and you are liberated thereby," which would be ridiculous. The wine referred to here is the spiritual wine that the Tantrik drinks while in communion with Brahman. Falling down and getting up refer to rousing of Kundalini in ourselves. The five panchtattvas (wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and coitus), which look like an invitation to general debauchery, mean quite different things to different people. All these five things, necessary to the Tantric ritual, have substitutional, literal, and esoteric meanings, for example, wine for the pasu type of man (who has only animal instincts) is coconut water, and for the divya (saintly), it is spiritual wine. It is literally wine only for the vira, who alone would know how to put it to spiritual use.

Another Tantric verse states: "Enjoy all women except mother."<sup>89</sup> The esoteric meaning is, while doing japa (recitation of God's name) of the Shakti mantra (magical formula), count is to be made on all joints of fingers, except the two upper joints of the first (index) finger. The grotesqueness of still another verse proves that it was meant as a paradox and was not to be taken literally. This verse states that the Tantrik should have sexual intercourse with his mother, his sister, his daughter, and his sister's daughter, and he will then succeed in his goal.<sup>90</sup> The females here are the female principles in the body that

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<sup>89</sup>Quoted ibid., p. 4. The Sanskrit verse is: "Matriyonium paritajya viharet sarvvayonishu."

<sup>90</sup>Quoted by Anagarika Govinda in P. V. Bapat, ed., 2500 Years of Buddhism, pp. 369-370.



unite with the male ones. These are within us; hence they are "of our own family."

Like the Tantriks, Whitman has often been charged with obscenity or immorality, because certain terms he uses have been misunderstood. Their mystic meaning has not been understood. Unless these words--and they are used not in "Calamus" alone--are given the mystic connotation that the poet gave them, we shall not understand Whitman's thought properly. He himself told the reader to go and dig behind the surface meaning of these terms like "lover," "comrade," and "adhesiveness." In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" he says,

From another point of view 'Leaves of Grass' is avowedly the song of Sex and Amativeness, and even Animality--though meanings that do not usually go along with those words are behind all, and will duly emerge; and all are sought to be lifted into a different light and atmosphere.  
(I, 480)

The "different light and atmosphere" is that of the mystic's language, that of sandhyabasa.

Under the thrilling impact with Brahman or Shiva, Whitman's soul expanded like a river suddenly overflowing its banks. Given his sensuous nature, Whitman let this emotion of love burn like a clear flame consuming the dross and the impure. This love in him is like the love of the Divine in the followers of the bhakti marg ("way of devotion," advocated over others by the Gita), completely surrendering themselves to God. In any such union with the Brahman, the mystic's soul, as Aldous Huxley points out, is like a passive female longing to melt into the arms of the Divine Lover.<sup>91</sup> Rudolf Otto compares this "voluntaristic

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<sup>91</sup>The Perennial Philosophy (New York, 1945), p. 22.



mysticism," as he calls the bhakti marg, with the Western "bride mysticism."<sup>92</sup> But the "bride mysticism" does not parallel the total abandonment of all social and moral values that such a union outside the human experience implies. The total abandonment of the social and moral values represented by the Krishna cult poets in their poems (poets like Mira Bai and Chaitanya especially) is present in Whitman. In such love of the Divine Lover, which the bhaktas (devotees) sing of, all human ties like mortal husband, wife, son, mother are submerged. Such a love knows no limits. The intensity and thrill of this mystic experience of the union filled Whitman so much that social and moral values, as society understood them, did not exist for him, because God to him is "The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine." This pining for the Lover is similar to the Tantric bhakta, for Tantrism is also a bhakti marg. It is Shakti, the Mother Goddess for whom you pine, not Krishna. The female emotion of complete surrender is, however, the same.

From becoming one with "The great Camerado," Whitman becomes one with the innumerable copies of Him, that is, the common man. These are his comrades. He loves them with the same emotion, which becomes transferred from God to these miniature gods, for, since Whitman knew the identity of his soul with the souls of others, and his soul's identity with God, the mass became for him the God to be loved. While in the case of bhaktas of Krishna cult, like Mira Bai and Chaitanya, the sexual emotion is wholly expended on Krishna, Whitman transfers and wholly expends

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<sup>92</sup> Rudolf Otto, Mysticism East and West, p. 48.



it on the common man, in whom too God resides, and whose souls are, therefore, bound to his with bonds of love. His belief in democracy or equality of individuals also helped transfer this strong sensuous emotion from God to the common man.

His "manly attachment" is not a physical love; his kiss planted on the lips of a "comrade" is not to be taken in the sensuous way; his handshake or putting his arm around the shoulder of a "lover" is only a recognition of the identity of two souls. Yet this "love" is so realistically portrayed that the language throbs with the emotion of a real experience. It is, however, not the reality of the experience but the intensity of the emotion that is the cause of this semblance to reality. Mira Bai, Chaitanya, or any Shakta devotee's verses to his Devi, Shakti, contains the same semblance to real experience; the same intensity of emotion is the cause. Yet Mira Bai never met Krishna; neither did Chaitanya. There are descriptions of sexual experiences realistically painted in the poetry of Dnyaneshwar, a Marathi saint and poet, yet he was so young at the time that he could not have had any sexual experience which he could transfer from the human to the spiritual world. We, therefore, need not assume that, because the emotion in "Calamus" is so realistically felt, it must have been physically experienced.

When Whitman says in "Starting from Paumanok":

For who but I should understand love with all its  
sorrow and joy?  
And who but I should be the poet of comrades?

we should not commit the mistake of translating "love" and "comrades" into their common language equivalents. Only the initiates could understand



these terms, like the Tantric initiates did their terminology; and by "initiates" I mean, in Whitman's case, those who understood his special mystic kind of love which, stripped of its sensuous metaphors and similes and images, meant spiritual love of the deepest level. Whitman wants his "comrade" to share with him Love, Democracy, and Religion ("Starting from Paumanok"); these three things are connected with his "comrade" idea, and all the four flow from his mystic union with the Absolute. His love is religious love, expressed in sensuous terms, for the "divine average." For him "a kelson of the creation is love."

He is the "lover" of, and has "unspeakable passionate love" for earth, too. His "lovers" are "battlers of graves," for his love for them is like Christ's and can work similar miracles. But the path of this love is not at all smooth. Like the Tantric sadhana (training), it is full of hardships and hazards. Like the Tantric guru (teacher), which he is throughout his writings, Whitman warns his pupils that their "novitiate would even then be long and exhausting," and that "I am not what you supposed, but far different." Unless we dig below the surface, the essence of Whitman's thought, of which love is a great portion, does not come through clearly.

Calamus-root, a sexual symbol, leads Whitman to more than just that. It is a "token of comrades," which youths will interchange with each other and thus be bound in a closer brotherhood. Thus he will "plant companionship thick as trees." When he has a "terrible doubt of appearances," this identity with others is the only thing that "completely satisfies" him. On the "Open Road," which is a road "for traveling



souls," he wants to share his secret mystical knowledge of love with others, and that is why he takes his "lovers" with him. This knowledge is secret and has to be shared in secrecy at night, like the Tantriks sharing their mystic knowledge with others while doing pūja (ritual worship) in a circle at night. Whitman's ritual is kissing, touching hands, embracing, looking knowingly. So he says,

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man,  
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)

The Tantrik has hidden behind the book; as soon as the reader catches on and is initiated, it is time to share the secret knowledge with the ritual of a handshake, a kiss, a look, at night and alone. The theme of "The Mystic Trumpeter" is "knitting, enclosing, all-diffusing love":

Love, that is all the earth to lovers--love, that  
mocks time and space,  
Love, that is day and night--love, that is sun and  
moon and stars,  
Love, that is crimson, sumptuous, sick with perfume,  
No other words but words of love, no other thought  
but love.

This is the same love, glorious love, that has been so misinterpreted in "Calamus." It encompasses all humanity. From the realization of identity with other souls, it has expanded into an ocean of love through the suffering of the Civil War, and carried the poet from the narrow confines of the American continent to the wider seas, carried him to "Passage to more than India!"

#### Magic of Words

Both Whitman and Tantrism believe in the magic and the potency of words. The Tantriks regard the fifty primary sounds of the fifty shabdas



or varnas (lettered sound) of the Sanskrit language to be Shakti herself. Hence words, which are "living, conscious sound-powers," and mantras (magical formulas to be recited), which are "secondary sound-powers" evolved from the varnas, are very important in the Tantric ritual and worship.<sup>93</sup> The mantras give the Tantrik the siddhis 'the occult powers' to create, to destroy, to charm and so on. These words to be recited are spiritual because they wake up the sleeping Kundalini or the Cosmic Energy in us.

Whitman has a theory of words and he practises it in a fashion similar to the Tantriks', though the latter have developed it in a complicated metaphysical and esoteric form not to be found in the poet. According to Whitman, "All words are spiritual--nothing is more spiritual than words."<sup>94</sup> "Why are names (words) so mighty?" Whitman asks in An American Primer, and answers, "Because facts, ancestry, maternity, faiths, are.--Slowly, sternly, inevitably, move the souls of the earth, and names (words) are its (their) signs."<sup>95</sup> To him "Names are magic.--One word can pour such a flood through the soul."<sup>96</sup> This also explains his catalogue technique. As R. W. B. Lewis puts it, "And the process of naming is for Whitman nothing less than the process of creation. . . . The things that are named seem to spring into being at the sound of the word."<sup>97</sup> His

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<sup>93</sup> See Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 407.

<sup>94</sup> Walt Whitman, An American Primer, ed., Horace Traubel (Boston, 1904), p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>97</sup> "The New Adam: Whitman," Whitman, ed., Roy Harvey Pearce, p. 116.



inventorying is like chanting the mantras. In section 25 of "Song of Myself," the poet declares,

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,  
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds  
and volumes of worlds.

With words he grasps Infinity. Words to him are alive, conscious, active, and therefore his "language, together with the self and the material world turns out to be a process, the pouring of the flood."<sup>98</sup> In "A Song of the Rolling Earth," he says:

Were you thinking that those were the words, those  
upright lines? those curves, angles, dots?  
No, those are not the words, the substantial words  
are in the ground and sea,  
They are in the air, they are in you.

Is he not saying here that it is through words that God manifests himself, a position similar to the Tantriks'? It is the same message he is trying to get across when in "Vocalism" he says,

For I see every word utter'd thence has deeper,  
sweeter, new sounds, impossible on less terms.  
I see brains and lips closed, tympan and temples  
unstruck,  
Until that comes which has the quality to strike  
and to uncloze,  
Until that comes which has the quality to bring  
forth what lies slumbering forever ready in  
all words.

What lies slumbering in the words is Shakti according to Tantrism. Is it not the same what Whitman is saying in the lines quoted from "Vocalism"? Both Tantrism and Whitman agree that there are certain root-words, root-sounds common to all languages. Barada Kanta Majumdar says, "In every

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<sup>98</sup>Charles Feidelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago, 1953), p. 20.



language there are root-words which are identical."<sup>99</sup> Whitman puts the same idea in these words: "A great observation will detect sameness through all languages, however old, however new, however polished, however rude."<sup>100</sup> Through repeating mantras like "death, death, death, death," or "farther, farther, farther sail!" one is bound for "Passage to more than India!" the mantra helping one on to something Beyond, where "mariner has not yet dared to go."

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<sup>99</sup> Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 403.

<sup>100</sup> Walt Whitman, An American Primer, ed., Horace Traubel, p. 1.



## CHAPTER V

### THE DARK MOTHER

the low and delicious word death,  
And again death, death, death, death.

The two strands of body and soul, sex or love and death run throughout Whitman's poetry before "Passage to India." He sees that the two are but one, and to know one is sooner or later to know the other, if one must have the full knowledge of the Absolute. Having passed through sex to ananda (Bliss) of the union with Shiva, he has realized that the other aspect of this Bliss is death, whether one wants it or not. Shakti is sex, love, life; she is also death, known to her devotees as the Dark Dancer of the Cremation Ground. Like her lord, Shiva, she has forms classified as benignant and black. Uma, Parvati are her loving aspects; Kali, Durga, Chandi are the terrible ones. Shiva is the god of generation as well as of death. He is the Force which rules the universe,

which reproduces and destroys, and in performing one of these acts necessarily performs the other, seeing that both are but aspects of change.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever his functions and forms, they are also the functions and forms of his female half, Shakti. If he is Mahakala or Mahabhairava (Time), she too is Mahakali or Mahabhairavi. The Tantriks worship the female form of Death, and it is to their conception of the Dark and Terrible

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<sup>1</sup>Sir Charles Eliot, Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch, II, 144.



Mother that Whitman's conception of death bears similarity.

The Tantric legend says that Shakti assumed this terrible form to destroy the invincible demons. She thus signifies the triumph over the wicked, but also death as an inevitable and universal phenomenon.

Mahakali, or Kali as her devotees call her, is a symbol of death, blood and war, and as such is terrible to look at for the uninitiated. Naked as space, she is a black figure with a ferocious countenance, fang-like teeth, protruding tongue, and a gaping mouth thirsty for blood. Round her neck is a garland of skulls. Two of her hands carry a sword and a severed head; the other two are extended to bless her worshippers. There is a prostrate male beneath her feet. Legend has it that, elated with her victories over the demons, she began to dance, and the whole earth shook with fright. Shiva, the god of generation, afraid that the world might be destroyed, placed himself under her foot, so that when she saw it was her husband she was trampling, she stopped her dance of victory.

Durga, another of her forms, is the war-goddess, shown as killing the buffalo-demon, Mahishasur. Another of Shakti's form, who sits on a corpse, is known as Shavasana. The most terrible form is Chhinnamastaka, the goddess who carries her own head which she has cut off, the neck spouting blood that is being drunk by her attendants and by the cut-off head itself.

These images must seem fantastic to the uninitiated, fantastic, horrible, and ugly; but so is war, bloodshed, and death. These images are symbols of the other side of life, other than love and sex. Kali is not so fantastic or horrible if one considers her, as she is,



a reminder that birth and death are twins, that the horrors of the world come from the same source as its grace and beauty and that cheerful acceptance of the deity's terrible manifestations is an essential part of the higher spiritual life.<sup>2</sup>

Liberation cannot be complete unless having loved, one did not die and be reborn. To work out his rebirth--and dying and rebirth are themes of some of his best poems--Whitman had to know, understand, love this terrible Kali, the goddess of death. Abyssus invocat abyssum, deep calls unto deep, which means the depth of our being calls out to the depth of the Divine; but the way to mingle and be one drop of the Divine Ocean is through love and death. In many of his poems, we see that Whitman knows that the way is through love and death, that they are but one, that having known love is not enough, that unless he knows and loves death, too, his boundaries will not broaden out into eternity. Narrow love for individuals in "Calamus" blossoms out into love of humanity only when Whitman knew death from close quarters. He was afraid of looking on the terrible face of death at first; but he also knew from the beginning that he has to look on that face of death if he wants the Bliss of union with Shiva. Unless one establishes the identity between death and life after the identity between soul and God has been established--as Whitman had--one's knowledge of the latter identity is bound to show gaps. Compare the parallel from the Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad:

Aswala: Yajnavalkya, since everything connected with the sacrifice is pervaded by death and is subject to death, by what means can the sacrificer overcome death?

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, 287.



Yajnavalkya: By the knowledge of the identity between the sacrificer, the fire, and the ritual word.<sup>3</sup>

The identity of everything including death is necessary for liberation.

It is through the God of Death, Yama, that Nachiketas receives the knowledge of Brahman in the Katha Upanishad. Kali's prototype, however, we find in the Gita. Arjuna, looking on the frightening God's Universal Form, describes It thus:

At the sight of this, your Shape stupendous  
Full of mouths and eyes, feet, thighs and bellies,  
Terrible with fangs,<sup>4</sup> O mighty master,  
All the words are fear-struck, even as I am.

When I see you, Vishnu, omnipresent,  
Shouldering the sky, in hues of rainbow,  
With your mouths agape and flame-eyes staring--  
All my peace is gone. . . .

Now with frightful tusks your mouths are gnashing,  
Flaring like the fires of Doomsday morning-- . . .

Dhritarashtra's offspring . . .  
There they go--with our own warriors also--  
Hurrying to your jaws, wide-fanged and hideous--  
See where mangled heads lie crushed between them!<sup>5</sup>

"Who are you, O terrible form?" asks Arjuna, and gets the reply:

I am come as Time, the waster of the peoples,  
Ready for that hour that ripens to their ruin.  
All these hosts must die; strike, stay your hand--  
no matter.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy, p. 262.

<sup>4</sup>The "fangs" of the Form are mentioned once more a few lines later; also the Form "shoulders" the sky. It is interesting to compare with this description and the phraseology Whitman's line "The fang'd and glittering One whose head is over all," in the poem "Starting from Paumanok."

<sup>5</sup>Gita, pp. 93-94.



Death is inevitable, so tells the terrible Form to Arjuna. This Form of Time and Death is reborn as the female Kali or Durga. Since Shakti is nature goddess, she combines both life and death in one form, and to know her fully one must know both the forms, both equally beautiful, one nourishing, the other devouring:

When She disgorges and nourishes She is most beautiful; Her beauty enchants even the Gods; She is then Bhuvanesvari and Bhuvanamoḥini. It is the descent of Spirit into matter. When She devours Her offspring with Her thousand mighty jaws, She is Mahakali; Her transcendental beauty is realizable only by the wise and the devotees. . . . Yes, She is terrible to the earth-bound soul. But to the pilgrim on the path of return--the path of Nivṛtti--the Majesty of Her beauty and the message of peace and comfort in Her right hand are ineffable.<sup>6</sup>

This is what one of Her devotees wrote. But it is also what Krishna tells Arjuna in the Gita,

I am the birth of this cosmos:  
Its dissolution also.<sup>7</sup>

If the loving form is beautiful, the destroying form cannot be ugly, as they are forms of the same Shakti.

Whitman has experienced the generative power through sex; unless he saw the other face of love, that is death, he could not expand into eternity. In both love and death, there is extinction of the personality which one thinks he is, surrender of ego, and in this they are one and the same. There is rebirth only when there is a total surrender of ego. Whitman is fascinated and terrified, by turns, at the phenomenon of death. In "Starting from Paumanok" the poet, among other things, will

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<sup>6</sup>Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 393.

<sup>7</sup>Gita, p. 70.



show "that nothing can happen more beautiful than death." In "Song of Myself" the grass, which is identified with soul earlier, becomes "the beautiful uncut hair of graves," and he muses thus:

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,  
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring  
    taken soon out of their mothers' laps,  
And here you are the mothers' laps. . . .

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead  
    young men and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the  
    offspring taken soon out of their laps.

With death come the thoughts of love, love of young men, love of mothers for their children, because Death is a Dark Loving Mother. He has some inkling of her nature but not yet a clear idea of her form. He cannot translate the hints yet, except that the dead are alive somewhere and that "to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier." In the line "Copulation is no more rank to me than death is," the poet recognizes that dying and the generative process are on the same level. He knows life comes through death:

And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure,  
    but that does not offend me,  
I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing.  
I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd  
    breasts of melons.

And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of  
    many deaths,  
(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

In "Calamus" the "faint-tinged roots" make him think of death:

Death is beautiful from you (what indeed is finally  
    beautiful except death and love?)  
O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my  
    chant of lovers, I think it must be for death.



With the thought that finally only love and death are beautiful, the two become indistinguishable:

Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may  
 accord with it,  
 Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me  
 now above all, and are folded inseparably to-  
 gether, you love and death are,  
 Nor will I allow you to balk me any more with what  
 I was calling life,  
 For now it is convey'd to me that you are the purports  
 essential,  
 That you hide in these shifting forms of life, for  
 reasons, and that they are mainly for you,  
 That you beyond them come forth to remain, the real  
 reality.

Whitman had seen that sex was the central principle of life; now before this sexual love engulfs the whole humanity, he sees that death also is a reality. He is a little afraid of death. Though he acknowledges that it is reality that has got to be faced, he has not yet come to see the exact process of his rebirth through death. There is no need to think that the poet realizes the reality of death because his homoerotic love is inimical to life and the generative process.<sup>8</sup> Whitman had thought of death before "Calamus," too; it was inevitable for one who was searching for "identity" in all things. Love brings in death, whether it is homosexual or heterosexual. We know that the sexual act was called "dying" during Shakespeare's days.

He understood death when he watched it closely during the Civil War. He suffered; he was there. He himself becomes the wounded soldier. He keeps "Vigil of silence, love and death" for the dead soldier. He

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<sup>8</sup>See Clark Griffith, "Sex and Death: The Significance of Whitman's Calamus Themes," PQ, XXXIX (1960), 18-38.



sees that war is only the "bursting forth of the pent fire" of "primal energies and Nature's dauntlessness." War cleanses the world and in death there are no enemies:

That the hands of the sisters Death and Night  
incessantly softly wash again, and ever again,  
this soil'd world;  
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead.  
("Reconciliation")

Bullets or bayonets cannot kill the soul. Knowing and loving death, the poet is reborn. All he remembers of war now is the "burning flame" of love of the soldiers who kissed him and put their arms round his neck. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" the poet employs the Tantric technique of the dialectic of opposites to come to the realization that death is the counterpart of love, which is the meaning of the poem. The series of opposites in the poem are the opening duet of bliss and the he-bird's lament, the sun and the moon, day and night, land and sea. As James E. Miller, Jr., puts it, "one set of these symbols is associated with physical love, the body and life; the other with spiritual love, the soul, and death. Out of these associations comes the suggestion that life and death too, like day and night, are merely a part of the rhythmical evolution of the universe."<sup>9</sup> When the sea, "the fierce old mother," whispers the sweet word "Death, death, death, death, death," that word which is "The word of the sweetest songs and all songs,/That strong and delicious word," Whitman recognizes that death and/or love is the only way "of restoring the lost dual unity with his mother," to put

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<sup>9</sup> A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass, p. 109.



it in the jargon of psychoanalysis.<sup>10</sup>

But the final triumph of the Dark Mother is the Lincoln elegy. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is really a song of the poet's rebirth. We meet the three dominating images of the poem in the very first section--lilacs symbolizing life; star, death; and spring, immortality. Personal grief is not easy to overcome, for in it is our own fear of death. The fear holds him; at the same time the poet realizes that he must accept death as counterpart of life and sex. This dramatic conflict is resolved when a reconciliation between the two opposites is firmly sealed by the poet walking between "the thought of death," which is fear of death, and "the knowledge of death," which is realization that through death alone one is reborn. The bird's song ("And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird") is really a hymn of praise of Death, any devotee of Kali, the Death Goddess, would have loved to sing. Death is here addressed as "Dark Mother," as Kali or Shakti is addressed by her devotees:

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,  
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?  
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,  
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come,  
          come unfalteringly.

This is the invocation, the mantra calling upon Kali, the Dark Mother, to come to the devotee, for at Her hands, death is love. The bird's song continues:

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<sup>10</sup> Gustav Bychowski, "Walt Whitman: A Study in Sublimation," Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences, ed., Geza Roheim, III (New York, 1951), p. 228.



Approach strong deliveress,  
 When it is so, when thou hast taken them I  
     joyously sing the dead,  
 Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,  
 Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

"Dances" and "glad serenades" are proposed for Death. The "body gratefully nestling close to thee," the poet "floats" this "carol with joy" to Death, who has become "lovely and soothing" and "Sooner or later delicate." And on this "Victorious song, death's outlet song," the hymn triumphantly closes. The emotion of sensuous joy in death is so predominant and the reconciliation between life and death so complete that with this marvelous lyric not even a Tantrik's poem singing the praises of the Goddess of Death and War can compete. Here, for example, is a poem by Ramaprasada, a Bengali Tantrik, in praise of Kali:

O Mother, how Thou didst dance in battle!  
 . . . . .  
 Her tresses are loosely flowing,  
 Her body is splashed with blood;  
 She shines like a freshly-formed cloud  
     streaked with lightning! . . .  
 She is intoxicated with wine,  
 Her tongue is lolling,  
 Her hair is loose,  
 The sight of Her makes men and Devas fear Her.  
 Roaring She crushes Danavas.<sup>11</sup>

This song nowhere comes near Whitman's sensuous surrender to death; for he now knows that it is an opening to eternity. He has had rebirth and is now moving towards eternity.

"Slow moving and black lines" of graves that "go ceaselessly over the earth" do not bother him now. After the nightmares of life, he "will

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<sup>11</sup> Devas are gods and Danavas are demons, enemies of Gods. This poem is quoted in Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, pp. 647-648.



duly pass the day O my mother, and duly return to you" ("Transpositions").

He now tells his soul that he has found the "clew" and that

Poems bridging the way from Life to Death, vaguely  
wafted in night air, uncaught, unwritten,  
Which let us go forth in the bold day and write.

He has now written "the great poem of death." Now there remains in his program, as stated in Democratic Vistas, the arrival of the great poet who will provide "that which was long wanted," and "the ship that had it not before in all her voyages, will have an anchor" (II, 255). Whitman's ship after this confrontation with death will go sailing to "more than India!"



## CHAPTER VI

### THE MAIN SHAPES ARISE

And I salute all the inhabitants  
of the earth.

("Salut Au Monde!")

Love of democracy, of America, and the whole world are three strains in Whitman which are intermingled with one another. The way he talks of America could easily be interpreted as chauvinistic. But this strain soon passes and merges into the wider areas of democracy and internationalism. Holding as he did that all human beings have God in them, the broadening out of his perspective was inevitable.

#### Democracy

There is no equality of human beings in the Vedas or the Gita; in both, God is said to have himself created the four castes.<sup>1</sup> As Barada Kanta Majumdar says:

The Veda withheld the privileges of a Dvija [Brahmin caste] from the fourth caste (Sudra), but the Tantra throws the portals of initiation wide open to every man or woman, whoever he or she may be. The Candala [the lowest caste] and all others are all the children of the Divine Mother, the milk of whose eternal breast is sucked by every living being.<sup>2</sup>

The political concept of democracy was absent in the Vedas and in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hume, p. 84 (Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad, I, 4, 11, 12, 13). Also the Gita, p. 51, where Krishna says: "I established the four castes, which correspond to the different types of guna and karma."

<sup>2</sup> Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 416.



Gita, as it is in the Tantras, where, however, equality of all is stressed on metaphysical grounds. Everyone, according to the Tantras, is an embodiment of Shiva-Shakti and therefore divine. Tantrism does not recognize any distinctions of sex, caste, religion, or color. It is only concerned with whether one is fit to become a Tantrik or not.

As Arthur Avalon says:

We only find the question of fitness or worthiness (Adhikara-tattva) in the Tantra. . . . that is why the Candala Purnananda is a Brahmana, . . . that is why Ramaprasada of the Vaidya caste is fit to be honoured even by Brahmanas.<sup>3</sup>

The Mahanirvana Tantra affirms:

That low Kaula [the highest Tantrik] who refuses to initiate a Candala or a Yavana [a foreigner] into the Kaula dharma, considering them to be inferior, or a woman, out of disrespect for her, goes the downward way.<sup>4</sup>

To consider even a foreigner fit to become a Tantrik as the above verses show (and foreigners have always been considered as "unclean barbarians" by the rest of Hindu sects) is evidence enough of the democratic equality of all human beings within Tantrism. The Gautamiya Tantra confirms this democratic attitude when it says: "Sarvavarnad-hikarashcha narinam yogya eva cha, 'Tantra is for all castes and all women.'<sup>5</sup> When the Tantriks perform the chakrapuja (worship of the Mother sitting in a circle) at night for the ritual of rousing Kundalini, there is no differentiation between them, men and women taking equal

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by Arthur Avalon, Shakti and Shakta, p. 97.



part in it. Whatever caste, creed, sex, color, or religion the individual Tantrik belongs to, if he attains the Kuladharmā (the doctrine of the Kaulas, the highest division of the Tantriks), he is to be respected as is clear from the following quotation:

Should even a Candala [the lowest caste] or a person of still lower caste become attached to Kuladharmā, then the very memory of him, the recitation of his name and qualities, the singing of his praises, sight of, and talk with him purifies a Jiva [person].<sup>6</sup>

Tantrism stresses the equality of all and the consequent brotherhood of all human beings, as everyone contains within himself, and can become, Shiva-Shakti, the Absolute. But it also stresses individualism in the sense that everyone has to work out his own salvation, and is responsible for his Karma (action) and its fruits. Both these concepts of individualism and democracy in a seeming paradox appear in Whitman and run through most of his work, till they merge into internationalism.

Whitman makes the transition from the individual to the mass by an intuitive leap. He resolves the paradox between the two by singing both of them in one breath, as in "One's-self I Sing":

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

The individual to Whitman, like the Tantriks, is a miniature world in himself, but the claims of the individual do not negate his fundamental identity with other individuals. When all the individuals are part of the same Shiva-Shakti or the Oversoul, and when they are all bound with

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 109.



the strong tie of "robust love," then the foundations of a real democracy based not on force but love, are laid. Under the heading "Carlyle from the American Points of View," Whitman writes:

the most profound theme that can occupy the mind of man [is] What is the fusing explanation and tie--what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c., on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in time and space, on the other side?

Once he found the identity between Me and Not-Me, between the Atman-Brahman and the material world around, it was but a step to find a similar identity between himself and other human beings. The metaphysical identity has a corresponding social identity, for "the beloved beings whose presence at his side reassure him as to the reality of the world and the immortality of the soul are also his comrades on the plane of democracy."<sup>8</sup> But Whitman had strong ideas about democracy long before he connected it with the metaphysical side. In Brooklyn Daily Eagle of November 7, 1846, he writes: "The true Democratic spirit is endued with immortal life and strength."<sup>9</sup> And talking to Traubel, Whitman said, "I am not a witness for saviors--exceptional men: for the nobility--no: I am a witness for the average man, the whole."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Walt Whitman, Prose Works 1892, vol. I, Specimen Days, ed., Floyd Stovall, p. 258.

<sup>8</sup>Roger Asselineau, II, 120.

<sup>9</sup>Walt Whitman, The Gathering of the Forces, ed., Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, I, 6-7.

<sup>10</sup>Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 230.



In Democratic Vistas Whitman talks of democracy at length, democracy which alone "can bind, and ever seeks to bind, all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family" (II, 223). Democracy which ultimately leads to internationalism, however, has two aspects: "individualism, which isolates," and "adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all" (II, 223). In the same essay later on, he expands these two often-clashing ideas inherent in democracy, when he says:

For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, surely join'd another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite (as the sexes are opposite,) . . . This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself--identity--personalism. (II, 231)

These two concepts can be seen as complementary to Whitman's consciousness of the individual Self and of the Self being part and parcel of the Brahman. That he found faults in the functioning of democracy in the same essay does not detract from his concept of democracy, which was ideal. As Charles R. Metzger puts it, "Whitman's social and religious conception of democracy was ideal, spiritual--ordered by his conceptions of freedom, of soul, of universal, spiritual law."<sup>11</sup> That his idea of democracy was spiritualized is clear from a footnote (no. 12) in Democratic Vistas, where he says about "the central divine idea of All," that "it is for Democracy to elaborate it, and look to build

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<sup>11</sup> Thoreau and Whitman: A Study of Their Esthetics (Seattle, 1961), p. 50.



upon and expand from it, with uncompromising reliance" (II, 263).

For him, to sing of democracy, "total, result of centuries," was to go in raptures: "O such themes--equalities! O divine average!" This "divine average," the boatman, the carpenter, the shoemaker, the hunter, the common man pursuing an humble occupation, the backbone of democracy, appears endlessly in Whitman's writings. The "word of the modern, the word En-Masse" is nearest to his heart. He always is giving "the sign of democracy," for in his democracy there is no one supreme:

Have you thought there could be but a single supreme?  
There can be any number of supremes--one does not  
countervail another any more than one eyesight  
countervails another, or one life countervails  
another.

("By Blue Ontario's Shore")

Individuals are as important as the mass:

Underneath all, individuals,  
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores  
individuals,  
The American compact is altogether with individuals,  
The only government is that which makes minute of  
individuals,  
The whole theory of the universe is directed uner-  
ringly to one single individual--namely to You.

("By Blue Ontario's Shore")

The repetition of the word "individual" in every line is the poet's technique of driving home the point he wants to make. His "bard walks in advance" "For the great Idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals" ("By Blue Ontario's Shore"). He knows the pitfalls of democracy and confesses in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" that he uses the concept of individualism

as counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy--  
and for other reasons. Defiant of ostensible literary



and other conventions, I avowedly chant 'the great pride of man in himself,' and permit it to be more or less a motif of nearly all my verse. I think this pride indispensable to an American. (I, 479)

And this bring us to Whitman's nationalism.

### Nationalism

In many of his writings, Whitman gives vent to his patriotism, his pride in everything American. He was born in a raw and growing nation. As James E. Miller, Jr., puts it:

He witnessed the young blustery braggart blunder his way into a seemingly romantic and adventurous war. . . . And he was present for the lusty and materialistic consolidation, the plundering and the building, which signaled the change to an industrial and urban society, self-assured and settled. . . . In short, Whitman lived through the nation's heroic age, at a time when men had to be (or seemed to be) a little more than life-size to accomplish all the deeds they undertook.<sup>12</sup>

"Our Old Feuillage" surveys the whole American panorama in a patriotic vein. In "The Song of Exposition," where while not blaming the "elder" world, the poet sings of the "Union holding all, fusing, absorbing, tolerating all." "A Song for Occupations" sings of the new American society as "heir of the past so grand,/To build a grander future." In "By Blue Ontario's Shore," Whitman proudly states:

We are the most beautiful to ourselves and in  
ourselves,  
We stand self-pois'd in the middle, branching  
thence over the world,  
From Missouri, Nebraska, or Kansas, laughing  
attacks to scorn.

What holds together this great sprawling nation, embodiment of democracy, hope of all the down-trodden people of the world?

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<sup>12</sup>Walt Whitman, (New York, 1962), p. 16.



To hold men together by paper and seal or by compulsion is no account,  
 That holds only men together which aggregates all  
 in a living principle, as the hold of the limbs  
 of the body or the fibres of plants.

What is necessary to hold men together in Whitman's democracy is, as he says in Democratic Vistas, "Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man," which alone

seems to promise, when thoroughly develop'd, cultivated and recognized in manners and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States. (II, 250).

His great city is "that which has the greatest men and women." To sum up in the words of Vernon Louis Parrington:

The ideal of the growing man, and the ideal of the perfect State--broadly social rather than narrowly political--these were his [Whitman's] twin ideals; and the tie that is to bind men together in spontaneous solidarity is love.<sup>13</sup>

"The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," Whitman said in the Preface to 1855 Edition Leaves of Grass, not only because of the country's beauty and expanse, but also because it was the heir to "liberty, equality, and fraternity" of the French Revolution for the whole world. The United States evolved, as it were, from the past not only of Europe but of Asia, too. Even while Whitman is intensely patriotic, he applies his ideals of democratic brotherhood to whole humanity. "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" is an instance:

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<sup>13</sup> The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920 in Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1927), III, 83-84.



Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,  
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the Present only,  
The Past is also stored in thee. . . .

Venerable priestly Asia sails this day with thee,  
And royal feudal Europe sails with thee.

The direction of Whitman's ship of nationalism and democracy is towards internationalism and universal brotherhood.

### Internationalism

Slowly but surely the streams of intense patriotism and democracy in Whitman merge into universalism of the broadest type. His social, political, and metaphysical concepts fuse into the concept that the whole universe is his concern. It was but natural for one who saw that everything in the universe had but One Source. His political democracy was more social than anything else based as it was on "love of comrades." And this "Love of comrades" "blossoms out into love of mankind and becomes synonymous with universal brotherhood."<sup>14</sup>

The very title "Salut Au Monde!" tells of the contents of the poem. In section 1 the poet asks the questions which will be answered in the following sections, and these questions concern the whole world and the poet's relation to it. In section 2 the poet contains within himself the whole geographical expanse of the world:

Within me zones, seas, cataracts, forests, volcanoes,  
groups,  
Malaysia, Polynesia, and the great West Indian islands.

Section 3 deals with sounds from all over the world: the shouts of the

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<sup>14</sup>Asselineau, II, 125.



rude Australians hunting, the Spanish dancing, the echoes from the Thames, the Arab muezzin calling from the top of the mosque, the Hebrew reading psalms, and the Hindu teaching his pupil. Sections 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 deal with the geographical landmarks, deities, etc. of the whole world, the poet saying, "I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of them as my land is to me." Section 10 ends with salutations to "all the inhabitants of the earth." And the poem ends with the exhortation:

Toward you all, in America's name,  
I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,  
To remain after me in sight forever,  
For all the haunts and homes of men.

"A Broadway Pageant" celebrates the occasion when a parade was held in honor of the visiting Japanese ambassador. Here again the poet makes the occasion serve his purpose of encompassing the whole world. With Japan, he associates all of Asia and especially India: "The race of Brahma comes." He asks the young nation, America, to bend her proud neck in homage to "the venerable Asia, the all-mother." His nationalism reaches towards and mingles in internationalism, for all faces "show their descent from the Master himself" ("Faces"). He himself says that in Leaves of Grass "Another impetus-word is Comradeship as for all lands, and in a more commanding and acknowledg'd sense than hitherto" ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," I, 478). It is the identity of all people of all the lands that he is always conscious of, and then "creeds, conventions, fall away." Further in Democratic Vistas he says,

Under the luminousness of real vision, its idea of  
identity alone takes possession, takes value. Like  
the shadowy dwarf in the fable, once liberated and



look'd upon, it expands over the whole earth, and  
spreads to the roof of heaven. (II, 232)

His soul listens to sounds of music and dance from all over the world, the Arab, the Chinese, the Hindu, the Spanish and the European, in "Proud Music of the Storm," and in the end of that poem the poet concludes:

Come, for I have found the clew I sought so long,  
Let us go forth refresh'd amid the day,  
Cheerfully tallying life, walking the world, the real,  
Nourish'd henceforth by our celestial dream.

The "clew" he has found is the identity with all the people of the world, and with this knowledge of unity in diversity he will now walk cheerfully. His vision of narrow nationalism has broadened out.

It is partly his love of democracy and his discovery of the identity with all human beings that makes him denounce the tyrants of the past and present, and praise and cheer up the revolutionaries all over the world. In the Preface to the 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass he states: "The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots."<sup>15</sup> He denounces the tyrants of Europe in "Europe" and gives hope to the down-trodden by saying, "Liberty, let others despair of you-- I never despair of you." The dying and dead patriots under the tyrants do not die in vain:

Not a disembodied spirit can the weapons of tyrants let loose,  
But it stalks invisibly over the earth, whispering, counseling,  
cautioning.

It is this Whitman, the singer of Liberty for all people, that Swinburne

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<sup>15</sup>Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose, ed., Sculley Bradley (New York, 1962), p. 463.



exultingly sang of. France to Whitman was a symbol of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. In "France," he does not deny "the terrible red birth and baptism" that that nation had gone through since the French Revolution. But he is sure of her ultimate triumph over evil forces, and he sends "this salute over the sea" to her in greeting. In "O Star of France" he again speaks of the travails France was going through, but assures that

Again thy star O France, fair lustrous star,  
In heavenly peace, clearer, more bright than ever,  
Shall beam immortal.

In "Spain, 1873-74" he again speaks of the feudal past of that country and the coming dawn of liberty, which binds all nations to America in a bond of love. He commiserates with Ireland in "Old Ireland," seeing in her image of "ancient mother":

At her feet fallen an unused royal harp,  
Long silent, she too long silent, mourning her  
    shrouded hope and heir,  
Of all the earth her heart most full of sorrow  
    because most full of love.

And he reminds Ireland not to mourn because "The Lord is not dead, he is risen again young and strong in another country." He advises "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire"

Courage yet, my brother or my sister!  
Keep on--Liberty is to be subserv'd whatever occurs.

Whitman admits

For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel  
    the world over,  
And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind him,  
And stakes his life to be lost at any moment.

There are defeats, poverty, prisons waiting for the revolutionary; but for Liberty's sake even "death and dismay are great."



## CHAPTER VII

### PASSAGE TO INDIA

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

Whitman once said of "Passage to India" that "There is more of me, the essential, ultimate me, in that poem than any of the [other] poems."<sup>1</sup> In the Preface to the Two Rivulets in 1876 Whitman in a long footnote explains: "Passage to India, and its cluster, are but freer vent and fuller expression to what, from the first, and so on throughout, more or less lurks in my writings, underneath every page, every line, everywhere."<sup>2</sup> A critical analysis of the poem, as we shall presently see, bears out this statement of Whitman. Indeed, "Passage to India" can be seen as a lyric summation of Whitman's thought, to which we have been so far drawing parallels from Tantrism. Here the poet has reached the end of the quest; instead of questioning, he affirms, as G. W. Allen puts it.<sup>3</sup> In this poem can be seen not only the different strands that go to make the basic thought of Tantrism and Whitman, but also the last stage on the arduous journey when the soul is on the point of its merging into Shiva-Shakti. This vast undertaking, and the thrill and ecstasy of the final

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Rufus M. Jones, Some Exponents of Mystical Religion (New York, 1930), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 198.



plunge of the soul makes the poem, in the words of David Daiches, "lyrical in mood though epic in scope."<sup>4</sup>

The poem, published in the fifth edition of Leaves of Grass (1871-72), was written to celebrate the triumph of material progress symbolized by three events--the opening of the Suez Canal, the laying of cable across the Pacific, and the finishing of the Northern Pacific Railroad spanning the North American continent--resulting in the joining by canal, railroad and cable Europe, Asia, and North America. These three events are given one line each in section 1 and expanded into pictures in section 3, seen by the poet in "tableaus twain." But the poem is much more than a celebration of these engineering feats, which are only a start for the poet to go on the biggest, boldest spiritual voyage in anybody's life.

It is true that the word "soul" is mentioned in the poem 27 times as John Lovell, Jr., notes.<sup>5</sup> We must also note that whereas the soul and its activities dominate the poem and are its highlights, these higher spiritual flights start from the ground level of material progress of the phenomenal world. As in earlier poems, Whitman, like the Tantrik, uses the world and the evolutionary processes as a diving board to plunge into the mystical depths.

In section 1, having mentioned the achievements of the present,

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<sup>4</sup>"Walt Whitman: Impressionist Prophet," in Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After, ed. Milton Hindus (Stanford, California, 1955), p. 121.

<sup>5</sup>"Appreciating Whitman: 'Passage to India'," MLO, XXI (1960), 139.



Whitman turns to the past. The inter-relatedness of the past and the present have occupied the poet earlier too, because "what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?" The present is "utterly form'd, impell'd by the past," because out of the past actions alone has the present come, as the Karma theory reminds us. Section 2 develops the point further by going to the "myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables," from the "facts of modern science" of Europe and America, from the known to the unknown. And the poet suddenly jumps to the spiritual significance of the engineering feats by pointing out that God has willed this evolutionary progress for a definite purpose:

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?  
 The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,  
 The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,  
 The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,  
 The lands to be welded together.

For "welding" together, what is better than sex and marriage, a thought running throughout the earlier poems as we have seen? Trade and commerce cannot weld the people of the world as can love born of sex and marriage. The material events by "Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,/The road between Europe and Asia," have only helped these continents to be tied in an indissoluble bond of marriage and love.

In section 3 the phenomenal "I" looks around and brings to us pictures of the Suez Canal and the railroad traveling over North America, going back at the end of the section to the past, to Columbus, and thus emphasizing again the continuity of time. Columbus figures again in section 6, and Vasco de Gama in section 4. These explorers from the past, questers after the unknown continents, appear to be contradictory in



spirit to the spiritual past of India and Asia to which they are related. These two sets from the past--the navigators with their quest for material possessions, and the spiritual heritage symbolized by India--are juxtaposed by the poet because the explorers are imbued with the same dauntless spirit of inquiry into the unknown as the ancient sages and poets of India. The physical facts of history, here and elsewhere in the poem, are raised to the spiritual plane to corroborate the spiritual facts.

The explorers are also symbols, as section 4 makes clear, of struggle, courage, death, and destruction that inevitably make up the evolutionary process of life. Because of the "Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead," "Thou rondure of the world [is] at last accomplish'd." Section 5 is the poet's preparation for the jump from the physical to the spiritual. The "vast Rondure, swimming in space," gives rise to the questions that have troubled man and the poet from the beginning. The poet speaks of the "visible power and beauty" of nature and the universe. There is some "inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention" behind all the phenomenal world. It is when we start seeking the bond that holds all this together that the transition towards self-realization takes place. It is time then to "span" the world and the universe so that the union between the inner self and the God can be consummated. The questions that start one on the way to this union have been asked since the beginning of the world. The gardens of Asia, Adam and Eve and "their myriad progeny after them," mentioned by the poet, remind us of the earlier poems in which the poet wanted to go



back to the Adamic innocence of sex. Sex as a liberating force, sex as nature, as the base for the spiritual has been forgotten by the progeny of Adam and Eve, and hence "that sad incessant refrain, Wherefore unsatisfied soul? and Whither O mocking life?" Nature therefore appears "separate" and "unnatural." Nature brings us to the earth and the thought of death. Sex and death have not been seen in proper light as gateways to eternal life; therefore man's "questionings [are] baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts." Only the poet can sing "to soothe these feverish children," by making them see the spiritual significance of sex and death, by making them realize that the marriage of love alone can liberate them from the "restless explorations." How will this poet do this?

Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,  
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

Man has separated himself from Nature, from Cosmic Energy which expresses itself through sex and love. The poet will repair the damage and join them together again for the forward leap towards the union with Shiva-Shakti. Then

All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret  
shall be told,  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and  
hook'd and link'd together.

The poet has already been telling "the secret" in the earlier poems.

Fusing Man and Nature naturally brings the poet again to the image of marriage. He celebrates "the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!" The marriage covers all the elements of the earth, is cosmic, and is contrasted with the Doge of Venice marrying the Adriatic. There



are festivities to celebrate this marriage:

The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding  
a festival garland,  
As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.

After going back to the historical India, the poet in section 6, returns to Columbus, a "Gigantic" shade "With majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes" "Dominating the rest" on the stage of history. (This example of "History's type of courage, action, faith" is the Tantric ideal of a vira.)

In section 7 the poet and his soul are ready to go on the voyage to "primal thought,"

To reason's early paradise,  
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent institutions,  
Again with fair creation.

It is clear that intuition alone will lead one to the end of this journey. Section 8 states that the poet and his soul "can wait no longer." Joyous and fearless, the virtues of a vira, they are at last taking to the ship. And who is waiting for them at the end of the voyage? God, "the Comrade perfect," reminding us of the spiritualized version of the "Calamus" comrade. This God is the same as the Atman-Brahman, Shiva-Shakti, or the Over-Soul. He is nirguna, nirakara, "Nameless, the fibre and the breath" of all that is existing. He is

Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,  
Thou moral, spiritual foundain--affection's source--  
thou reservoir,

the same as described by the Vedic and the Tantric scriptures as "satyam, shivam, sundaram, 'the true, the good, the beautiful'," And is not the union with this God the only aim of life?



How should I think, how breathe a single breath,  
 how speak, if out of myself,  
 I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

Union between the inner self and God is not only possible, but also the only end of human life.

The distinction between the phenomenal self and the eternal Self is clear throughout the poem. It is the former that "shrivels" at the thought of God. It is the other enduring Self, "thou actual Me," that masters time, space, and death, after which the union cannot be far. The poet looks forward to the moment when this union will be consummated. The spiritual counterpart of the physical union, the marriage of continents in section 6, is this union of the younger brother melting in fondness in the arms of the Elder Brother. Words like "love complete," "melts," "fondness," and "his arms" remind us again of the concepts of marriage and spiritual love anticipated by the poet in "Calamus" and "Children of Adam."

In section 9, after asking rhetorical questions to his soul about its preparedness for the voyage, the poet returns to the idea of death, the fear of which has restricted those who have sought the answer to the "aged fierce enigmas." The poet knows that death is only a gateway to life; therefore, now no moment is to be lost. There is an ecstatic burst of emotion, towards the end of this section, in which all nature and the universe is addressed. The union towards which he is aiming brings him a vision that includes everything. This is a moment in which, as Rufus M. Jones remarks, Whitman's "whole being floods with life and light," and in which he feels "the tides of God's ocean of spiritual reality sweeping back into the channel of his own individual stream of life--



and suddenly he is ready to venture ship and cargo and helmsman out on the high sea!"<sup>6</sup> With excitement "the blood burns" in his veins; he has had enough of merely existing like a brute, eating, drinking, and groveling. Away with books, for Reason cannot lead one towards self-realization. His soul is reckless like Captain Ahab, as Charles Feidelson, Jr., points out;<sup>7</sup> only here there is no possibility of a wreck. And so, confident in his "brave soul" to "farther, farther, farther sail," the poet launches himself towards God. It is significant, as G. W. Allen points out, that whereas in earlier poems the poet was either on or near the seashore, here "he no longer walks along the shore and muses on the mystery of the beyond. He boldly sets forth on the unknown seas; he embraces, absorbs, becomes a part of the mystery."<sup>8</sup>

While the poem can be easily interpreted as spiritual, it will be well to remember that the poem "has a three-fold meaning, physical, intellectual, and spiritual," and that the unity of the poem results from the interdependence of these meanings.<sup>9</sup> As we have said earlier in this chapter, many strands in Whitman's thought resembling Tantrism are present here, though in a subdued form. We have pointed out, wherever they occurred, the ideas of vira, of death, of democratic brotherhood of all men ending in God being the perfect Comrade, and the idea of sex and

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<sup>6</sup>Some Exponents of Mystical Religion, pp. 203-204.

<sup>7</sup>Symbolism and American Literature, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup>The Solitary Singer, pp. 429-430.

<sup>9</sup>Floyd Stovall, "Main Drifts in Whitman's Poetry," American Literature, IV (March, 1932), 19.



love inherent in the image of marriage used by the poet more than once. His paragraph about God in section 8 could very well fit the Tantrik's Shakti. Karma and evolution are present here, as are the other characteristics of Perennial Philosophy shared by Tantrism; these include, for example, the two selves of man, the universe being manifestation of the divine Reality, intuition being the way of realizing the identity between God, the Self and the universe, and this identification being the only aim of man's life. The fact that the poet shuttles back and forth in Time and Space with ease shows that he is a liberated soul who has realized his identity.

The fundamental truth of unity in diversity, the goal of Tantrism, is shown throughout the poem by means of the Tantrik's favorite method of the dialectic of opposites, which we have touched upon in Chapter IV. Realizing that such antithetical relationships as exist in the phenomenal world are basically a unity, the Tantriks tried to reach this unity through pairs of opposites like nirvana and samsara. Whitman employed the same method in "Passage to India," his pairs of opposites being, as Stanley K. Coffman, Jr., points out, "essential to the emergence and evolution of meaning that the poem celebrates."<sup>10</sup> These pairs in the poem are East and West, the present and the past, materialism and spiritualism, scientific facts and myths and fables, and the known and the unknown. All these concepts, contradictory to each other on the surface, are underneath part of a unity. They are juxtaposed by the poet, "married" to

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<sup>10</sup> "Form and Meaning in Whitman's 'Passage to India'," PMLA, LXX (June, 1955), 345.



each other. For just as the marriage of two bodies is necessary to produce a third being, different and yet not so different, so also these pairs of opposites are necessary to produce a third concept, which is the result of the "marriage" of the pair. Out of the marriage of bodies in Tantrism came the realization of Shiva-Shakti; out of the marriage of different contradictory pairs of opposites in this poem came the realization of the same concept, by whatever name it is called. The imagery of marriage employed in the poem is thus seen to be pivotal to the meaning of the poem; this imagery of marriage, as Stanley K. Coffman, Jr., remarks, "symbolizes best for Whitman the opposites joining to produce better and more vigorous forms of life."<sup>11</sup> The Doge of Venice marrying the Adriatic was only anticipating the "marriage of continents." Let East and West, science and spiritualism, the present and the past, and Nature and Man be married in order that everyone may achieve self-realization. The joining of Nature and Man is the joining of the female and the male principles. Fusing the two "absolutely" will alone lead to salvation. "Passage to India" thus can be seen as the lyrical triumph of the basic thought in Whitman and Tantrism that identity of soul can be found only through the marriage of the female and the male principles.

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<sup>11</sup>  
Ibid.



## CHAPTER VIII

### DIFFERENCES AND CONCLUSION

Though in essentials Whitman's thought parallels Tantrism, the poet does not have the fully-developed metaphysical base in a recognizable form that Tantrism has. In addition there are three major differences between the two: Tantrism has a complicated ritual of worship and of attaining the goal; Whitman has none, except the Kundalini Yoga, which is the rousing of power or energy in one's body through sex. We do not find in Whitman anything resembling yantra, chakrapuja, mudra, or any other ritual of outer worship. Neither does he recognize anything like mantra, though he does talk about the power of words. As he had attained liberation due to his mystical experience, he did not need all the Tantric ritual, which provides only the preparatory steps for the ultimate goal. Tantrism itself states as much:

Yoga is the process whereby union of the Atma and Paramatma is achieved. Puja (worship) is the union of worshipper and worshipped. But for him who realizes that all things are Brahman, there is neither yoga nor puja. For him there is neither sin nor virtue, heaven, or future birth.<sup>1</sup>

And this must also be said that "If the knowledge of the Brahman already exists, there is no use of sadhana. It is in fact the very want of such knowledge which renders all prayer and practice necessary."<sup>2</sup> Whitman had this knowledge of Brahman or self-realization through his mystical ex-

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<sup>1</sup>Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 68.



perience; therefore, in his case there was no necessity of any of the ritual that Tantrism prescribed for the beginners.

The second difference between Tantrism and Whitman is that while both state explicitly that all people are socially equal, Tantrism has nothing of the consciously-formed concept of political democracy that is so prominent in Whitman. The concepts of nationalism and internationalism are also absent from Tantrism. Of course, from the Tantric metaphysical doctrine, like that contained in what Shakti tells Shiva in Tararahasya, "All men in the Brahmanda ['universe'] are Thy image, and all women are My image," fundamental to the Tantric thought, universal brotherhood can be derived.<sup>3</sup> Universal brotherhood on the theological basis occurs in Whitman, too, but there is a very strong political base to it. As political concepts, democracy, nationalism, and internationalism are absent from Tantrism. This lack, of course, is due to the fact that these political concepts are recent concepts, absent altogether in the times when most of the Tantric scriptures were written. "The Upanishadic seers were not interested in developing an ideal society or State," says A. R. Wadia;<sup>4</sup> neither were the Tantric writers, who took many ideas from the Upanishads. Whitman, however, was concerned consciously with salvation for all in an ideally democratic state, or as Charles R. Metzger puts it:

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 136. Quoted.

<sup>4</sup>"Socrates, Plato and Aristotle," in History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, ed. S. Radhakrishnan et al., II (London, 1953), 65.



Whitman, for his part, was concerned with salvation not only here, not only for himself as poet, not only for the individual democratic citizen, but for the whole nation, the entire hemisphere, the entire world, and, if possible, for all times to come.<sup>5</sup>

This difference between Whitman and Tantrism is really a difference between their times and the then-existing ideas.

The third difference between Whitman and Tantrism is the importance given to the guru (teacher) in the latter. All through the Tantric sadhana a guru's guidance is necessary. The initiation into Tantrism has to be done by a guru, who gives the initiate the mantra of initiation. Rudra Yamala states: "He who has not been initiated cannot acquire Divine knowledge, and cannot gain a desirable state after death. Hence it is that one should, by all means, get himself initiated by a Guru."<sup>6</sup> After the initiation, too, the road being difficult, guidance by the guru is necessary: "Having acquired the Mantra from the Guru, it should be cultivated in the disciple's consciousness. Religious exercises for liberation are for fruition dependent entirely upon the Guru."<sup>7</sup> Tantrism, indeed, raises the guru to God's status, as can be seen from the following verses from Guru Tantra:

If the Guru is pleased, Siva is pleased; if he is displeased, Siva is displeased. If the Guru is pleased, Sivani [Shakti] is pleased; if the Guru is displeased, Sivani is displeased. Hence, O Mahesani [Shakti]! the Guru is the Lord, the sustainer and the annihilator. It is he who can give Moksa [liberation].<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Thoreau and Whitman: A Study of Their Esthetics, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup>Avalon, ed., Principles of Tantra, p. 414.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 417.



Of course, the human guru is God, because he is liberated, as the disciple will be when he is liberated. And he cannot reach that stage without the guidance of the guru.

Whitman in a sense was a guru. He was liberated from the dualities of the world, and he preached this knowledge of the liberation. Throughout Leaves of Grass most of the time he is addressing the reader as a pupil. "Whoever you are, to you endless announcements" (section 14, "Starting from Paumanok"), is his typical attitude. He encourages his pupil to indulge in a Socratic dialogue, as in section 38 in "Song of Myself":

Eleves, I salute you! come forward!  
Continue your annotations, continue your questionings.

But he is no Tantric guru. He is an individualist, and he wants his readers too to be individualists. He knows that everyone has to "know" oneself the hard way, and that there are no short-cuts. He says:

You are also asking me questions and I hear you,  
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out  
for yourself.

In the same section 46 of "Song of Myself" he tells that all he does is to show the way:

But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents  
and the public road.

Not I, nor any one else can travel that road for you,  
You must travel it for yourself.

Tantrism requires the guru to guide his pupil all the way. It also lays down minute instructions as to who can be a fit guru or a fit pupil. Whitman is a self-appointed guru and anyone who cares to listen to him



is his pupil. He has only the mantra of love to give his pupil and no other ritual.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this comparative study has been to explain and find a better appreciation of the vital relation between the two predominant seemingly opposite strains in Whitman--those of body and soul, of sex or life and death--and to interpret his poetic growth in the light of the parallels between his and the Tantric thought. It remains now to briefly recapitulate our findings and place them in a proper focus.

It is easy to see--and many critics agree--that Whitman's thought bears resemblance to the Upanishadic. This similarity was noted even by Whitman's contemporaries. But then or even now it has not been possible to pin down direct sources for Whitman's knowledge of the Hindu scriptures nor the date (before or after the first Leaves of Grass) of this contact. Neither Quakerism nor Transcendentalism--Emerson especially--which were two great influences on Whitman in his formative years can explain the element of sex in the spiritual make-up of the poet. But the Upanishads cannot either. Scholars like V. K. Chari and Dorothy F. Mercer, who have thoroughly gone into the problem of the close relationship of Whitman and Vedanta, have not been able to offer parallels or explain sex and the world-affirming attitude of Whitman in the light of their findings. Vedanta condemns sex and other sensual pleasures. It stresses again and again that only by renouncing pleasures of flesh and considering the world as Maya can one hope to find the way to



Brahmanhood. None will deny, we hope, that sex and full enjoyment of all the worldly phenomena are central to Whitman's thought, and, therefore, unless these are explained and given a proper place in the poet's poetic growth, it is not possible to evaluate or appreciate Whitman properly. This understanding cannot be achieved by ignoring or dismissing sex in Whitman as not a few Whitman scholars tend to do.

Tantrism alone offers parallels to Whitman's unusual yoking of sex and spirituality. This strange combination--strange to Western thought--in Whitman can be paralleled and explained significantly by the Tantric thought and metaphysics. This was our starting point.

We then went into a brief history, tenets, and metaphysics of Tantrism. The background in which Tantrism originated and flourished, the background of historical times and philosophical inherited ideas, is utterly different from the background in which the poet grew. We saw that Tantrism combines Vedantic monism, Karma, metempsychosis and other related ideas with the dialectic of opposites symbolized by coitus favored by Tantric Buddhism. It believes that to be liberated man must conquer the dualities of the world by realizing that the opposites are really a unity. Body and soul seem to be a pair of opposites; they are not and are a unity. Tantrism further believes that understanding one opposite is followed by automatically understanding the other. Body and all its activities are easier to grasp and understand. Coitus is the closest bodily equivalent of the spiritual unity which exists in all things and which is God. Sex, therefore, becomes the central vehicle to reach the goal, which is merging with God.



The One in Tantrism is Shakti, the female principle operating in all the universe. Both Tantrism and Whitman, we have seen, believe that the universe is a manifestation of this Primal Power, that this knowledge is to be got through intuition and not reasoning, that there are two selves of man, that it is the only object of man's life to find the identity between his eternal Self, God, and the universe, and that God incarnates in human form. This last idea is very faint in Whitman. But he believes, like the Tantrik, in Karma and re-birth.

Over the doctrine of Maya both Whitman and Tantrism differ from the Vedanta. The world is Maya in the sense that it is the grand play of the power of Shakti and hence to be enjoyed with pleasure and relish. Hence the sensual delights, the panorama of the world and the catalogue technique in Whitman. But just as this Power, this Shakti is everywhere outside, She is inside us also. She is the generative principle in us, and coitus is Her most important ritual, the only gateway for man to merge into Her.

In Whitman sexual imagery is rife. Even the spiritual ecstasy of finding oneself and of the existential self finding the Eternal Self is described by Whitman in sexual terms. Sex is central to his understanding of the identity of his soul, the world, and God. In other areas related to sex also there is similarity of views between Whitman and Tantrism: woman and her importance due to the mystery of creation she carries within herself; worship of the Great Mother; phallus worship; making no distinction between good and bad, low and high, prostitutes and other women, or between men and women; "divine" body and its perfect health; the rugged individual or vira as the ideal man; magic of words and symbolic language.



All these strains, centered upon sex and spirituality, run throughout "Song of Myself," "Children of Adam," and "Calamus." Whitman had connected sex and all its related activities with spirituality; but for his development this linking was not enough. Having grasped the spiritual significance of sex, it was necessary for him to see and understand the other face of love and sex, namely death, if his poetic growth was not to be stunted. The other face of Shakti is Kali, the goddess of War and Death. Both faces, one awful, the other loving and lovely, belong to the same deity. In Whitman this fact took some time to be grasped. There was fear of death, horror at the thought of ceasing at first. Whitman realized that death is only a gateway to life through his Civil War experiences relived in "Drum-Taps," through "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and finally through that gem of a poem, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in which there is a final reconciliation between the two faces of Shakti--Life and Death.

Whitman lived in an intensely democratic and individualistic age. Faith in democracy and individualism was combined in Whitman with the faith that life is evolving towards a better goal guided by the power that is present within us all. Tantrism believed in equality of all on theological grounds. So did Whitman. But his concept of the "divine" origin of all of us is mixed with the political concept of democratic equality. Tantrism aimed at the individual's salvation; Whitman wanted it for all. Both have personalized gods, but Whitman's love of god is transferred to men, the children of God. His narrow nationalism merged into the democratic spirit, which in turn became one



with universal brotherhood. Love of men in "Calamus" grew into wider love, the bond of love holding all the world together in a closely-knit community.

We have pointed out the parallels as well as differences between Tantrism and Whitman. We took "Passage to India" as a point where Whitman's poetic growth reached its high-water mark. The poem is his liberation acted out in words. The poem, however, is firmly based on the same Tantric metaphysics of sex and spirituality of earlier poems. The "marriage of continents" and the consequent marriage of all peoples of the world, as of the sea and the land, remains a basic symbol of the poem. This thought of marriage of body and soul to reach the spiritual goal is of the same pattern of his poetic thought as we observed in all his poems prior to "Passage to India." Whitman here has reached his goal. The Tantrik after years of sadhana of rousing Kundalini in him is at last successful in his union with Shiva-Shakti.

Sex and all activities connected with it are pivotal in Whitman and Tantrism. Without sex Whitman might not even have had the spiritual enlightenment that brought on the whole flood of his poems cascading upon an unsuspecting world, which since then has attacked his apocalyptic utterances on sex without bothering to understand its spiritual significance. The present study, we hope, has made the spiritual significance of sex and the world-affirming stance in Whitman clearer than before by offering parallels from Tantrism. His poetic growth is also interpreted in a better way in the light of these parallels.

Sex is the very stuff of life and of its pleasures; love and



comradeship broaden out its circle until it meets Infinity. That universality is the central principle of creation, and there is nothing shameful in it according to Whitman. It is for this reason that Whitman will be read all over the world, not because he was a patriot or a democrat, or celebrated pleasures of sex and the senses through his poems, but because through them he rose to the highest conception of life, the identity of himself with the world and God. He never wavered in his faith in life, in his fellowmen, and in God. He fused Nature and Man absolutely. He offers the challenge to sail further than India if a proper part is to be played in the "marriage of continents." Whitman's thought is appropriate today a hundredfold more than in his own time.



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## VITA

Manohar Namdeo Wankhade was born January 20, 1924, in Chikhli, Maharashtra State, India. He studied at Nagpur University, India, receiving the Bachelor of Arts with Honors, and the Master of Arts degrees with a major in English in 1945 and 1952 respectively. From 1951 to July 1962 he was professor and head of the Department of English, Milind Maha Vidyalaya, Aurangabad, Maharashtra State. He worked as Principal of the same college from 1958 to July 1962, during which time he was also in charge of the Department of English, Marathwada University, Aurangabad, Maharashtra State, and lectured to the graduate classes.

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This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the chairman of the candidate's supervisory committee and has been approved by all members of that committee. It was submitted to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

August 14, 1965

Ernest H. Cox  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean, Graduate School

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