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THE THOUGHT OF HIM I LOVE:  
*MYSTICAL DRIFTS IN WHITMAN'S LEAVES OF GRASS*

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## ABSTRACT

In 1860, Walt Whitman released what he called the “new American Bible.” This claim scandalized American readers of the day though, since then, much more than the small circle of intellectuals has recognized its importance. The 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was also the first edition (of seven) in which he claimed to inaugurate a new religion. The centerpiece of this new religion was the mystical experience in which poet and reader embarked together. Through printed text, poet and reader, individual and cosmos, citizen and the democratic would unify. Or, at least, the poet would lead the reader through a mystical journey that may or may not have a destination. The character of this journey changes, like *Leaves of Grass* itself, from edition to edition. This thesis traces the unstable and multifaceted character of this mysticism with a special emphasis on its blossoming as a mysticism of death.

In doing so, it will hopefully complicate an often overlooked facet of *Leaves of Grass* and vindicate Whitman’s status as a mystic which has been a subject of both debate and embarrassment for Whitman scholars. Many have shied away from applying the “mystic” label. A brief outline of the appearances of mysticism of *Leaves of Grass* followed by a tracing of its roots constitutes the introduction. Then, a chapter on Whitman’s more egotistical mysticism focuses on the dynamics within the self. Following this is a chapter on Whitman’s expansive mystical role and the final chapter identifies death as the ultimate mystical transfer and explains the reasoning behind this bold claim.

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## I: INTRODUCTION

Mysticism is an encounter with the divine. This radically brief definition of mysticism is so short precisely because to elaborate is difficult, especially if this mysticism, like Walt Whitman's, pretends not to associate with any particular practice, creed, tradition, or institution. The best way, then, to achieve a working idea of what Walt Whitman means by "mystic" is to trace its appearance through the seven editions of *Leaves of Grass*. A simple word search on the editions in the online *Walt Whitman Archive* reveals an interesting pattern. Apart from a brief inversion between the 1862 edition and the 1867 edition, the number of appearances the word makes consistently rises edition after edition. The '92 edition nicknamed for its publication quite literally from Whitman's "deathbed," for example, invokes the word about ten times as often as the '55. Insignificant though this trend may seem, it brings the image of the dying poet into relief. As the text of *Leaves* itself will reveal, dying for Whitman was the ultimate mystical experience. In the spirit of conducting a textual rather than a biographical analysis, however, the reader should pay attention to the ways in which the word appears.

The first appearance occurs in the '55 and continues through the editions to the '92 as a part of what Whitman later labels in the '56 "Song of Myself." He addresses the reader directly: "This hour I tell things in confidence, / I might not tell everybody but I will tell you. / Who goes there! Hankering, gross, mystical, nude?"<sup>1</sup> The stanza break between the second and third line shifts the poet from intimate, perhaps scandalous secret-sharing to an even more scandalous, erotic encounter with a stranger. The continuity between the two stanzas, however, lies in their obscurity and intimacy. Thus mysticism is for Whitman an obscure, sensual encounter. Yet the second mention in the '55 that is edited out by the '92 reads as follows: "Great is life..and real

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 387-389.

and mystical..wherever and whoever.”<sup>2</sup> “Mystical,” therefore, retains the same intimacy and obscurity but has now transcended Whitman’s individual experience. In this way, the reader comes to read “mystic” as a signal for what Whitman would hope to be the reader’s own entry into obscurity and transcendence. This working definition will frame the following select appearances of the word. Taken from the ‘92, “mystic” appears in the following contexts: “mystic baffling wonder,” “mystic deliria,” mystic amorous night,” “mystic unseen soul,” “mystic evolution,” “mystic nights,” “mystic play of shadows,” “mystical moist night-air,” “immortal and mystic hours,” “mystic ocean,” the “condensation of the universe” as “this mystic handful,” “mystic meaning,” “mystical breezes,” “mystical Union,” “The Mystic Trumpeter,” “mystic army,” “mystic human meaning,” “mystic cipher,” and the “mystic roll” of “unwrit names.”<sup>3</sup> Never a noun and always a descriptor in *Leaves*, “mystic” is a way to understand where, when, and in what Whitman enters into this obscurity, intimacy, and transcendence. Crucially, however, a great multitude of mystical sections in *Leaves* never mention the word “mystic” nor even “God.”

These sections contain what Whitman’s followers recognized as nothing less than a “bible.” Michael Robertson relates in *Worshipping Walt* how in 1872 Richard Maurice Bucke, one of Whitman’s most devoted followers, had a mystical experience allegedly “primed by Whitman’s verse.” Bucke “found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud...Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic splendor.”<sup>4</sup>

Another Whitman follower, Edward Carpenter, described his 1881 “illumination” in which he

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. 482; 26; 80; 33; 100; 20; 75; 6; 7; 13; 15; 11-12; 6; 3; 119; 468; 13; 2; 6; 14.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 107.

felt a “mood of exaltation and inspiration” upon reading the *Bhagavat Gita*.<sup>5</sup> This same Carpenter grouped *Leaves of Grass* among “the Vedic scriptures...the Buddhist and Platonist and Christian writings, in the Taoist of China, the Mystics of Egypt, [and] the Sufis of Persia.”<sup>6</sup> By 1919 the *Chicago Evening Post* felt it necessary to insist that “Whitman was not a mystical savior or avatar of some new dispensation” against the claims of the ever-shrinking group of Whitman disciples.<sup>7</sup> The myth of Whitman himself as a prophet or the myth of the holiness *Leaves of Grass* itself is what stretches mysticism beyond the passages in which it is blatantly obvious. Take, for example, James Miller’s assertion that the entirety of *Song of Myself* is an “inverted mystical experience” insofar as it encounters the divine within rather than without, which might be more typical of Christian mysticism.<sup>8</sup> Yet the structure of progression Miller maps onto *Song of Myself* fails just as any structure would fail to explain the mysticism throughout *Leaves*. He does not have an obvious transition from normalcy to exaltation in any structured way. The eccentricity and spontaneity of mystical passages hardly seem the result of “an iron effort of will and strenuous contemplation” in the vein of the Hindu “Dhyana Yoga.”<sup>9</sup> Bucke’s mystical vision, after all, was “unexpected and overwhelming.”<sup>10</sup> The mystical moments themselves ultimately reveal the degree of this spiritual strain and whether it is rewarded with mystical encounter.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>6</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: Hendricks House, 1957), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 280.

<sup>8</sup> V.K. Chari, *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 122.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>10</sup> Robertson, 107.

## II: “THE GREATEST OF FAITHS:” REPRINTING TRADITION

“God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side all night and close on the peep of the day / And leaves for me baskets covered with white towels bulging the house with their plenty,” Whitman boasts in his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>11</sup> This intimate, somewhat sensual encounter with the divine is commonplace in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. That it is a democratic experience is a departure from many forms of mysticism. That the bedfellow comes “as God” rather than God coming “as” the bedfellow implies that Whitman sees the face of God in a person. This experience is democratic insofar as anyone, generally speaking, can access or even be God because anyone can access the sensual world and the totality of experience. Yet this passage is one of many mystical passages on whose democratic nature Whitman insists. Perhaps tracing the influences of these mystical passages will shed light on the elements of Whitman’s mysticism that are original to him. The presence of these elements will be a vindication of Whitman and his claim that, “I too, following many, and followed by many, inaugurate a Religion.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, this thesis will attempt to answer whether Whitman’s mysticism was more than just the sum of its parts. Whitman’s commentary external to *Leaves of Grass*, followed by a brief history of the conversation on Whitman’s mystical inspirations and his relationship to the reader will be useful to contextualize the current conversation.

Michael Warner frames his select poems from *Leaves of Grass* in a quasi-religious, freethinking, mystical light.<sup>13</sup> Whitman himself insists that the book is “not to be construed as an intellectual or scholastic effort or Poem mainly, but more as a radical utterance out of the abysses of the Soul, the Emotions and the Physique...in its very nature regardless of the old conventions,

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<sup>11</sup> Whitman, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 54.

<sup>12</sup> Whitman, “Proto-Leaf,” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 119.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Warner, *The Portable Walt Whitman* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), xxii; xxx.

and, under the great Laws, following only its own impulses.”<sup>14</sup> Whitman is a better commentator on the spiritual dimensions of his work than any academic working within a particular tradition because he not only borrows from multiple strains of mysticism but experiences the divine as a presence permeating the body, nature, the soul, and the entire universe. It is a reading of *Leaves of Grass* as precisely what Whitman claims it is, a “radical utterance out of the abysses of the Soul, the Emotions and the Physique,” that the reader understands what Whitman utters, who his audience is, and why the utterance is so “radical.” Robertson notes that his utterances echoed long after his death and drew a radical, cult-like following. Yet reading *Leaves* only through this radical, mystical lens creates a series of tensions. For example, the very Whitman whom we read as speaking from the utmost of his interior experience writes, “And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them.”<sup>15</sup> How does the poet tending so radically inward also go out?

Moreover, Whitman’s success in disregarding “the old conventions” is highly debatable. His success in doing so depends on his ability to incorporate and harmonize the thought of Emerson, the Vedas, and Free Thought while disregarding them. The problem becomes compounded when the “radical utterance” borrows techniques, phrases, and themes from mysticisms already prominent in Whitman’s day. Evaluating the success of *Leaves of Grass* as a mystical work is essentially a dialectical task. Yet the success of Whitman’s dialectic does not depend on the effective reconciliation of contradictions. He freely admits, “I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, this success depends on the extent to which he can both borrow and disregard: utilize and subsume mystical traditions whose underpinning beliefs are fundamentally contradictory.

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Schmidgall, *Containing Multitudes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Whitman, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 327.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1326.

Whitman's so-called "radical utterance" takes on a new, explicitly religious dimension and thus allows a new, explicitly religious reading of *Leaves of Grass* in the publication of 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, heralded by Whitman as "the New Bible." In a June 1857 manuscript published by Bucke in *Notes and Fragments*, Whitman writes: "The Great Construction of the New Bible. Not to be diverted from the principal object--the main life work--the Three Hundred and Sixty-five.--It ought to be ready in 1859."<sup>17</sup> In other words, Whitman planned to have three hundred sixty-five poems for the 1860, but he managed only about one hundred-fifty. Yet Whitman's ambition fed off innovative religious fervor that inspired the 1860 edition. Writing that "the West" needed "copious thousands of copies" of his work, "'Leaves of Grass' has not yet been really published at all."<sup>18</sup> That Whitman declared this anonymously in the *Saturday Press* makes this comment a portrait of how he would like the reader to receive the 1860 edition. He seems to yearn for a new, more radically religious (and mystical) beginning for *Leaves*. He anticipates the second publication so much that it dwarfs or subsumes the first two editions as the deathbed would come to subsume the previous editions for decades in Whitman scholarship. Declaring the 1860 a "New Bible" allows the reader to tease out the mystical elements of *Leaves of Grass* with even greater confidence. Yet for the readers of 1860, this declaration incited reviewers such as the anonymous *Literary Gazette* to declare him not only "silly" and "disgusting," but "blasphemous."<sup>19</sup>

Complicating the situation is Whitman's extensive borrowings from extra-biblical spiritual texts. Historically, these mystic contributors have each been emphasized at the expense of one another. Until the mid-1960s, scholars focused almost exclusively on Whitman's

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 123.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Review of *Leaves of Grass* in *The Literary Gazette* (1861).

borrowings from Emersonian mysticism and German idealism. In 1965, V.K. Chari published her book, *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism*, which flatly refused to give any ground to those scholars claiming that Whitman was largely a student of German idealism and Emersonian spirituality. Poring over *Leaves of Grass* line by line, Chari attempts to bright to light the many passages in *Leaves of Grass* that not only mirror the Vedic mystical experience but lift lines from the actual Vedic scriptures. It is significant for the student of Whitman's mysticism today both that Chari refuses to cede any ground to the German idealist scholars and that she published in 1965. In her introduction, she notes that her work is the first to extensively explore Whitman as a student of "Vedantic" mysticism. All others before her, she imagines, read Whitman as an essentially Western poet who grounded himself in Christian, pantheistic, Emersonian, and German idealist spiritualisms. Chari would have the reader understand Whitman's mysticism as exclusively Vedantic--but why? Perhaps she believed that the different mystical modes could not indeed be reconciled or (strangely enough) refused to believe that Whitman, of all poets, would be one to shy away from bringing together fundamentally contradictory experiential systems. The poet audacious enough to write: "The call of the slave is one with the master's call" is surely bold enough to attempt to weave together different mystical modes.<sup>20</sup>

Malcolm Cowley, editor of the 1959 reprinting of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, however, resists locating Whitman's mysticism exclusively in the Vedas. Though most of his comparisons are to Vedic mystical texts, he defines *Leaves of Grass* only as "a mystical experience in the proper sense of the term."<sup>21</sup> For Whitman this "proper sense" really originates in himself. His mysticism is so unique yet universal that Cowley wonders at the fact that by the publication of the 1855 edition, Whitman had "known little or nothing about Indian philosophy." As evidence

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<sup>20</sup> Whitman, "The Sleepers," 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 169.

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *Leaves of Grass, the First Edition* (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), xii.

he cites his response to Thoreau when he asked him if he had read “the Orientals.” Whitman responded: “No: tell me about them.”<sup>22</sup> The reader can choose to take this response at face value, read it as incredibly sarcastic, or take it as a way for Whitman to expand his knowledge about the Vedas. Yet Cowley acknowledges the presence of other influences as well. He writes, for example, about Whitman’s semblance to a “Mahayana Buddhist,” especially in respect to his belief in encountering the divine in sensuality and sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Chari limits her conversation with Cowley to his points about Vedic influences and excludes this openness to other mystical traditions.<sup>24</sup> What the content of *Leaves of Grass* suggests and what Cowley emphasizes, however, is that his anti-Christian ideas have a greater bearing on his mysticism than really any one tradition. As Cowley notes, Whitman does not even qualify as a mystical heretic because he never identified as Christian.<sup>25</sup>

The “other” narrative on which Whitman’s mysticism bases itself mostly on the relationship between Whitman and Emerson, a champion of German idealism. In the correspondence section of the 1856 edition, Whitman includes a letter from himself to Emerson in which he tells Emerson, “Master, I am a man who has perfect faith.”<sup>26</sup> He unifies master and slave in the text but personally identifies as a literary slave. This “master” called for a uniquely American poet and Whitman the literary slave responded. Moreover, Whitman answered Emerson’s call “To believe your own thought” and assume its truthfulness for all people is answered in the first lines of *Song of Myself*: “what I assume you shall assume.”<sup>27</sup> Yet even Chari acknowledged the closeness between the two poets. The argument at stake is the degree to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>24</sup> Chari, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Cowley, xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Whitman, 2nd ed., 246.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 202; Whitman, “*Song of Myself*,” 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 2.

which Whitman's poetry can be said to borrow from Emerson's vision of German idealism and for that only the poetry itself can testify. The self is crucial to this debate. Whitman's expansive self does not mirror Emerson's self which becomes "nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."<sup>28</sup> Emerson is abolished in the Hegelian move toward the universal while Whitman himself *is* God. This thesis will attempt a conversation between this line of influence, Chari's viewpoint, and Whitman's claim that "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern."<sup>29</sup>

Another crucial element of Whitman's mysticism throughout the seven editions of *Leaves of Grass* is as assumed and invisible as it is important: the Christian (mystical) tradition. For example, in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman reemphasizes the book's status as the "New Bible" when he writes, "Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and / joy and knowledge that pass all the art and / argument of the earth."<sup>30</sup> Warner characterizes this passage as a "mystical" "fusion" of "orgasmic ecstasy and religious vision."<sup>31</sup> The cyclical effect of the following seven anaphoras and Whitman's profound intimacy with God as his "brother" are what Warner means by "mystical."<sup>32</sup> That Whitman is the brother of God as well as the brother of non-Christians here indicates, perhaps just as much as the obscene content, that he is certainly no Christian mystic. Yet most pertinent to this discussion is his affinity for Fanny Wright the reformer, his interest in bodily defilement, and the impact this has on his mystical experience. While this element is a sufficiently broad topic to constitute the thesis, the task at hand is to

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<sup>28</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Nature Addresses and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903). 10.

<sup>29</sup> Whitman, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1097.

<sup>30</sup> Whitman, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 81.

<sup>31</sup> Warner, xxx.

<sup>32</sup> Whitman, "Walt Whitman," 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 83.

determine the dynamic between this mystical discourse and those of Emerson and the Vedantic mystics. Added to this mix of course is free thought, for which Whitman looked to Fanny Wright. From there, a truly Whitmanian mysticism may (or may not) be discovered. Or, perhaps it lies in Whitman's eroticism which, according to Gay Wilson Allen in his *Walt Whitman Handbook*, puts Whitman in the same league of mystics as "the medieval Heinrich Suso and the Persian Rumi."<sup>33</sup>

More influential on Whitman than the Christian mystical tradition, Fanny Wright provided Whitman many of the strongest themes in *Leaves of Grass*. According to Horace Traubel's biography of Whitman, he once remarked: "we all loved her: fell down before her: her very appearance seemed to enthrall us" and he thought her "the noblest Roman of them all...a woman of the noblest make-up whose orbit was a great deal larger than theirs."<sup>34</sup> In her biography of Fanny Wright, Celia Eckhardt argues that Wright "attacked not only conventional sexual morality but also religion." She touted "the themes of equality rationality, tolerance, and peace," assuming that "Americans wanted to be equals."<sup>35</sup> Wright's ideals not only permeate the entirety of *Leaves of Grass* but shape the poet's mystical experience. For example, she "fought against power: the power of the learned over the credulous; the power of the priest over the communicant; the power of the male over the female, of slave owner over slave."<sup>36</sup> One finds Wright's voice throughout *Leaves of Grass* in assertions such as "the perfect equality of the female with the male" in the 1855 introduction.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, one needs only to turn to the "Calamus" section to find Whitman's agreement with Wright that "the strongest and...the noblest

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<sup>33</sup> Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook*, 68.

<sup>34</sup> Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 189.

<sup>35</sup> Eckhardt, 170-171.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>37</sup> Whitman, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., iv.

of the human passions” is “sexual passion.”<sup>38</sup> Yet Wright’s thought is secondary to that of the Vedas and Emerson because she does not deal directly with mystical experience. She informs his worship of health, vitality, equality, and sex—all required for a uniquely Whitmanian mystical encounter.

Yet Whitman’s mind was not borrowing ideas to keep and hold. No, he translated them for the reader in the hopes that the reader would come to his/her own mystical experience. His intention is clear in “Shut Not Your Doors” in the 1881 and 1892 editions. He writes: “The words of my book nothing, the drift of it every thing, / A book separate, not link'd with the rest nor felt by the intellect, / But you ye untold latencies will thrill to every page.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, the reader’s “untold latencies” should “thrill” as he/she suppresses the intellect and instead unites him/herself with the “drift” of the book. All mystical passages in *Leaves of Grass* must be read in this light. True to his journalistic roots, Whitman insists on the possibility of the printed page as a mystical mediator. Reading the printed page is the only way to get the “drift” of *Leaves of Grass*. One can only wonder what *Leaves* would have looked like produced as spoken lectures in the style of Emerson. With print the reader can stop if, say, he/she is not as “indifferent” to evil as Whitman is?<sup>40</sup> Early reviewers made a point about the evil of his printed words, refusing to reprint it themselves. In this way the sexually and religiously liberal passages can turn away some readers but engross others in the mysticism they cultivate. One must simply keep reading, edition after edition. In doing so one finds out to what extent the spirit of the 1860 “New American Bible” *Leaves of Grass* survives into the 1892 or in other words what survived the Civil War. Dr. Jerome Loving, author of the extensive biography *Walt Whitman*, argues that even

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<sup>38</sup> Eckhardt, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Whitman, “Shut Not Your Doors,” 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 6.

<sup>40</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 465.

before the Civil War began, “his mystical feelings about himself was gone, replaced by the ‘need of comrades.’ In the war he found ‘divinity’ in the crucified sons of God instead of the resurrected self of ‘Song of Myself’.”<sup>41</sup> What Loving does not account for is the myriad of self-centered mystical lines that fill the editions after 1860. Of interest here is the mystical lines themselves: Whitman’s intentions in writing them, his sources of inspiration, and the complicated relationship he had with those sources.

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<sup>41</sup> Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 22.

### III: THE “DRIFT” AS FRUSTRATED MYSTICAL ENCOUNTER

That Whitman both borrowed from and critiqued Emersonian spirituality in his mysticism receives support from the narrative voice and central themes of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” first published in the 1882. In the latter half of the poem, Whitman uses enjambment and subtle stylistic changes to signal a merger between his younger and older selves that is particularly Emersonian. He writes of the “aria:” “To the boy’s soul’s questions sullenly timing, some drown’d secret hissing, / To the outsetting bard.”<sup>42</sup> Whitman intentionally places “outsetting bard” at the end of a stanza in which every verb is in present progressive, as though the continuity and eternality of the experience is what enables the merger between the “boy” and the “bard,” the Whitman of the present. The next lines read: “Demon or bird! (said the boy’s soul).”<sup>43</sup> One would expect this section to be in italics, as the boy’s long “chant” is in the preceding lines and not in regular print, which indicates the voice of Whitman in the present. At this point in the poem, the consciousness of the boy and that of Whitman-in-the-present unite, fulfilling the requirement Emerson set forth in his lecture, “Nature.” For the poet, the objects of nature should reflect the “wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.” Only through this disposition of childish wisdom can Emerson embrace the “Universal Being.”<sup>44</sup> At the point of Whitman’s merger, however, there are only hissed secrets and “questions” timed to him.

Yet Whitman’s mystical roadmap diverges somewhat from Emerson’s in that it is an interior, dialectical struggle between the soul and the divine overtly crafted to involve his

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<sup>42</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 130; 142-143.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>44</sup> Emerson, 8; 10.

audience. Far from the passive “transparent eyeball” Emerson becomes, Whitman continues in his role as bard, pleading with the divine for revelation. He begs:

O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere,  
O if I am to have so much, let me have more!

A word then, (for I will conquer it,  
The word final, superior to all,  
Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen;  
Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-  
waves?

Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?<sup>45</sup>

That Whitman asks for a “word” is perhaps just as much a borrowing from the logos or “word” of the Gospel of John as it is from his years as a printer. Jesus mediates man and God just as print mediates the reader and Whitman or even Whitman and the universal. The “word” also directly involves the poet’s active, restless listening for something “Subtle, sent up--what is it?--I listen.” Unlike Emerson, who bides in nature expecting the universal, Whitman encounters the universal only when he finally realizes that it has been “whispering” from the “liquid rims and wet sands” “all the time.” While Emerson aims to describe the mystical journey to his audience, Whitman aims to *bring* the mystical journey to his audience. The lines ebb and flow in length as the stanza progresses. The present progressive tense comes and goes like the poet himself vacillating between his eternal and temporal experiences. The silence of listening becomes the silence of the m-dashes before and after “what is it?” Yet the reader cannot engage with this text selectively. If immersing oneself in the text means immersing oneself in the experience as much as the print can replicate it, the reader has to become a man-child poet in a particularly Emersonian way. The vacillation between and eventual union of Whitman’s

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<sup>45</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 157-164.

boyhood and adult voice must necessarily find some counterpart in the consciousness of the reader.

Assuming that this counterpart exists, the “clew” the ocean answers with is democratic insofar as it is an unmediated “word” that the reader can access. Whitman writes that in its own perfect time, the ocean “Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death, / And again death, death, death, death, / Hissing melodious.”<sup>46</sup> He makes the object of revelation very clear to the reader: death as the universal. Moreover, he immerses the reader in the explicitly sensual experience that facilitates this revelation. The word is “delicious,” “hissing melodious,” “rustling” at his feet, “creeping” up his body and “laving me softly all over.” The sensual experience climaxes in the word itself, which is again repeated five times at the end of the stanza. The word itself is a sensual experience because it is interchangeable with the sound of the waves. The caesura between each “death” is the end of the ebb and the beginning of the flow. Moreover, this stanza contains two structurally parallel sections that attempt to allow the reader to vicariously experience Whitman’s observation of the undulating waves. This vicarious experience is crucial to *Leaves of Grass*’s mystical success. In “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” he addresses death directly: “Indeed O death, I think now these leaves mean precisely the same / as you mean.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the poet famous for his unassuming embrace of life imagines his work a mystical key equal to death.

Yet the argument that this mystical key is just one of Emerson’s truths that “supposes every other truth” ignores the sensual character of the revelation and the relevance of time. Char Mollison et al. argue that “Reason responds with the word ‘death’ as comprehensive,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 168-169.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 16.

philosophical explanation” for the man-child’s yearning for the “clue.”<sup>48</sup> Or that is how they suppose Emerson would have interpreted the poem. For them, death is one of Emerson’s “universal” truths “expressed in words” that “supposes every other truth.”<sup>49</sup> Yet “Nature” does not conceive of truth in nearly the same sensual, material way Whitman does. The “word” Mollison deems “expressed” is not a word but an experience whose status as word follows from its truth and its ability to be “heard.” Emerson abstracts truth too much to be anything like a mystical experience. Moreover, Emerson’s “neo-stoic,” qualitative vision of immortality contradicts the cyclical (read: ocean-like) eternality of “Out of the Cradle.”<sup>50</sup> The consequence is that Emerson does not read death as a crucial mystical key. The “Nine-month midnight” that cyclically unifies life and death is particularly Whitmanian.<sup>51</sup> Given these complications, Mollison’s interpretation falsely concludes that Whitman’s “death” can so easily be interpreted in an Emersonian way.

Indeed, Whitman’s “death” is not Emerson’s “death” because of the anti-intellectual motif that opens *Leaves of Grass* to mystical experience rather than mystical knowledge. Rohn Friedman notes a particularly telling comment from Whitman himself about Emerson: “Cold and bloodless intellectuality dominates him...His final influence is to make his students cease to worship anything outside of themselves.”<sup>52</sup> Whitman takes issue not with self-worship. Rather he takes issue with worship of the self *alone*. Song of Myself declares, “In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass, / I find letters from God dropt in the street,

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<sup>48</sup> Char Mollison and Charles C. Walcutt, “Emerson and ‘Out of the Cradle,’” *The Arizona Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1981). 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” *Nature Addresses and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 44.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Whicher, “Whitman’s Awakening to Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,’” *The Presence of Walt Whitman: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (Bloomington, 1964), 11.

<sup>51</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 3.

<sup>52</sup> Rohn Friedman, “A Whitman Primer: Solipsism and Identity,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 1975): 445.

and every one is signed by God's name."<sup>53</sup> Cowley finds in these lines a striking parallel to the divine "consciousness" of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, a Vedic text.<sup>54</sup> Other people and the physical world are all dwelling places for the divine. Otherwise, Whitman could not ask for the "clew" from the ocean, which is an especially important physical element for Whitman. It not only suggests the eternal but connotes the unknown, the mysterious, the beyond, the maternal, and most importantly, the collective or the democratic. In this way, Whitman's choice to turn to the ocean for mystical experience is a movement beyond Emerson's realm. Oceans stump intellectual reduction but encourage mystical thought, as though they are sites in which to "behold God" yet "understand God not in the least."<sup>55</sup> Emerson, in contrast, theorizes about the "law" of the "circulation of the water" throughout the globe.<sup>56</sup> To him water is a principle rather than a temple.

Whereas by the 1856 Vedic lines had already infiltrated *Leaves of Grass*, "Out of the Cradle" remained firmly (Western) Romantic in content as it interacted with the "ode" genre. Virginia Jackson characterizes the poem as a "parodic framing of the Romantic ode in the translated 'voice' of the bird."<sup>57</sup> Even Whitman's own framing of the poem as in the "method of the Italian opera" falls far short of borrowing Orientalist themes. V.K. Chari is silent on potential Vedic influences, pausing only to note its similarity to "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" for its structure and resolution at the end of the poem. Yet the Vedic lines in the 1856 "Sun-Down Poem" clearly indicate that if Whitman wanted to incorporate Vedic lines, he could have. Perhaps his search for the "clew" of death in such a traditional European genre precluded

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<sup>53</sup> Whitman, "Song of Myself," 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1284-85.

<sup>54</sup> Cowley, xxiii.

<sup>55</sup> Whitman, "Song of Myself," 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1281.

<sup>56</sup> Arsic, Branka, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Virginia Jackson, "American Romanticism, Again," *Studies in Romanticism* 55 (Fall 2016): 336.

him from grafting in Vedic lines. He does not celebrate his own divinity or diversity, per se. In other words, the revelation of death as the answer is too Whitmanian and too deeply intertwined with the bird's song and Whitman's spiritual formation to admit of Vedic verses. Or perhaps the bird's song necessarily resists religious meanings, including Christian ones. Rather, meaning is natural just as death, the "clew" from the ocean, is natural. Or, Whitman did not bother to include religious borrowings here. The freedom to borrow is a double-edged sword. Where mystic traditions are seemingly absent is perhaps just as significant as when they jump off the page. That anyone would even be curious as to his editorial decisions is already in violation of Whitman's poet/reader agreement. In *Leaves of Grass*, "To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so."<sup>58</sup> In this way, Whitman scholars join the long tradition of scholars who study texts that, like the mystical *Cloud of Unknowing*, ask not to be studied at all.

Yet only through study can the reader grasp the spirituality he/she experiences especially as it changes from poem to poem. "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" marks a transition from egotistical expansion to contraction. He begins as a three-part self in separate locations, writing, "As I ebb'd with the ocean of life, / As I wended the shores I know, / As I walk'd where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok."<sup>59</sup> Though practically speaking in one place--the shore--he performs three different actions in three epistemologically different places. This split is not unusual for Whitman, as the self in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is dual, transtemporal, and experiential. The boy Whitman necessarily becomes the adult Whitman so that the two are both the same and radically different. Yet the difference in experience is what creates this duality of self or more specifically, the difference in experience. Such is the case in "As I Ebb'd." He maintains the fullness of each experience by allocating each its own line and its

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<sup>58</sup> Whitman, "Song of Myself," 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 47.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

own subject. As Friedman notes, Whitman “sought totally to absorb his experience” like Cronus “devouring his children.”<sup>60</sup> Whitman must suppress his intellectuality as a form of his over-expansive ego. The ocean seems to collapse his expansive, multiple selves. Yet it allows him to see the “real Me,” though distant, “untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,” and “withdrawn far.”<sup>61</sup> While he is “baffled” and “bent,” he nonetheless gains a glimpse of the “real Me” that he otherwise would have missed. In other words, this “dilation” “arouse[s] the soul from its egotistic isolation.”<sup>62</sup> The move away from isolation, rather than the arrival of Emerson’s “sentiment of moral virtue,” is what allows the soul to “know himself.”<sup>63</sup>

Yet glimpsing the “real Me” as a result of identification with the ocean or “the spirit of democracy” results not in mystic exultation but in a strong desire to return to the what Kemnitz calls the “historical world.”<sup>64</sup> He writes, “Kiss me my father, / Touch me with your lips as I touch those I love, / Breathe to me while I hold you close the secret of the murmuring I envy.”<sup>65</sup> This sensual (read: anti-intellectual) experience of the historical world is made possible only through the reduction of the expansive self into “a trail of drift and debris.”<sup>66</sup> What Whitman quite literally means is that he is the debris washing up onto the shore. He, like the broader “drift” or meaning of *Leaves* is dislocated and in flux. Translated into Kemnitz’s terms, he is the humiliated poet gravitating from the democratic ideal to historical reality. He and other debris on the shore create the “we,” spread out before you...up there walking or sitting” lying “in drifts at your feet.”<sup>67</sup> To translate, the poet joins other poets in displaying to the world the possibilities of

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<sup>60</sup> Friedman, 451.

<sup>61</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 28-29.

<sup>62</sup> Friedman, 449.

<sup>63</sup> Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” 125.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Kemnitz, “A Construction of Hegelian Spirit in Whitman’s ‘As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,’” *Walt Whitman Review* 26 (1980): 61.

<sup>65</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 47-49.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

the democratic ideal's manifestation in historical reality. Accepting Kemnitz's terminology requires accepting Hegelian premises, however. For example, he reads the "island-father" as the "brain," a "part of the material world." The "phantom" looking down on Whitman is "reason."<sup>68</sup> As in "Out of the Cradle," the poet *as* reason seems far too intellectual an interpretation. The "prismatic colors glistening and rolling" are sensual, not intellectual.<sup>69</sup> That Whitman resists attempting to describe a union of historical reality and democratic ideal is evidence enough that he has no interest in the intellectual nature of his exploration. Instead, he envies a "secret" from Paumanok. The search for a "clew" from the ocean (or the mother) is followed by pleading for the "secret" from the land (or the father).

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<sup>68</sup> Kemnitz, 59.

<sup>69</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 60.

#### IV: "I AM WITH YOU:" FORGING THE MYSTICAL COLLECTIVE

In any case, Whitman continues to address the ocean, rather than the land, as the source of mystical revelation as he opens *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* with yet another apostrophe to the ocean. He exclaims, "FLOOD-TIDE below me! I see you face to face!"<sup>70</sup> The flood-tide is as immediate to the reader as it is to Whitman because it opens the poem in explosive, exclamatory fashion. He follows this line with an address to the clouds and sun, whom he "also" sees face to face. These play secondary or supporting roles to the water, which centers the entire poem in a geographical and temporal space that is precisely non-geographical and atemporal. Water does not age and moves without moving. Roger Asselineau even argues that throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman makes water "triumph" over the other elements because "it was both material and fluid."<sup>71</sup> "Triumph" is certainly a good descriptor for the tone of the opening line. The reason for its triumph in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is different than those of the preceding poems, however. The ocean is a time-machine rather than a giver of mystical clues or stand-in for the democratic. The water is one of a few natural places in which Whitman can geographically unite with the past. He "many a time cross'd the river of old" but he cannot as easily say he visited the same shop or attended the same school.<sup>72</sup> The water is also permanent, even if unfixed. Whitman can only claim "It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not" on the water.<sup>73</sup> Strangely enough, time and place must become completely insignificant to allow Whitman's travels through them. He experiences a more immediate and intense version of the common saying, "I remember it like it was yesterday."

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<sup>70</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1.

<sup>71</sup> Ernest Smith, "'Restless Explorations: Whitman's Evolving Spiritual Vision in *Leaves of Grass*,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2007).

<sup>72</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 26.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

Whitman certainly could not abstract his environment because to do so would ruin the profound, even mystical intimacy he yearns with the human, natural, and man-made environments. He exhorts a plethora of objects around him, exclaiming: “Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of / Brooklyn! / Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers! / Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!”<sup>74</sup> His direct address to the world around him is as continuation of the addresses that have come in previous poems. “*Soothe! soothe! soothe!*” he exhorts the waves in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”<sup>75</sup> Again, in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” he addresses “You oceans both, I close with you, / We murmur alike.”<sup>76</sup> The linking between self and natural world (or unnatural also in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and the commanding of these worlds is what Geoffrey O’ Brien calls not “the imperious Eucharist of metaphor” but a “telling” of “its parts and their shading off into the next available object or person.”<sup>77</sup> This “shading off” is exactly what “telling” the parts achieves. As the reader moves through, clouds, passengers, shores, brains, eyes life, birds and so on, each part begins to lose its own integrity as an object and begins the process of rejoining the “eternal float of solution.”<sup>78</sup> This totalizing effect runs parallel to the totalizing effect of reading poem after poem throughout *Leaves*. V.K. Chari argues that the rejoining of the float is part of Whitman’s broader generalization through catalogue which puts him firmly on the side of Vedic mystics.<sup>79</sup> Yet Whitman seems to insist through his silence that his mysticism is unique and original to him. Not even in the long-winded 1855 introduction does

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>77</sup> Geoffrey O’Brien, “The Rhyme of the Left Margin,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 30, no. 2. (Fall 2012): 93.

<sup>78</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 107.

<sup>79</sup> Chair, 50.

he mention his influences. Perhaps he thought that revealing his sources would be something akin to religious or prophetic fraud for his readership (or discipleship).

Even more crucial than the apostrophe to the eternal float are his apostrophes to the people of the past and the future, since it is also his intimacy with them, not only the physical world that leads to mystical experience. The commonality of their experience allows Whitman to write, “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so / many generations hence.”<sup>80</sup> Though the Whitman biographer Jerome Loving places his mysticism either in the egotistical 1855 edition or the finding the “divinity” of Civil War soldiers, the addresses to the passengers of the past and future is also mystical.<sup>81</sup> Whitman believes in both the eternity and the divinity of the passengers he addresses. From the invocation of the “divinest aromas” for him and his addressees to the later claim that “man or woman is as good as God,” he needs people to experience the divine.<sup>82</sup> The passengers of the ferry are both divine and eternal as the experience of being a passenger on this ferry on this body of water in Whitman’s imagination can be replicated for “many hundred[s]” of years “hence.”<sup>83</sup> By the last lines of the poem, the people of past and future have formed a “we” with Whitman through “you dumb, beautiful ministers” and planting them “permanently within us,” furnishing “your parts toward eternity.”<sup>84</sup> Whitman’s intimacy with people is now on the mystical level, forming a “we” across space and time, whereas the objects he addresses still remain “you.” The “ministers” are, as their name suggests, those objects that facilitate the transfer between the human and the divine. The Sea-Drift cluster strongly suggests that the ocean is the most powerful “minister” for Whitman, though he never

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<sup>80</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 21.

<sup>81</sup> Loving, 22.

<sup>82</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 121; “Laws for Creations,” 16.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 126; 129; 131.

unites with it. He draws close to it or even floats on it as a piece of driftwood, but they never form a “we.”

The union across space and time in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, however, becomes representative of the relationship between Whitman and his reader. One of his many imperative apostrophes addresses the reader directly: “Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown / ways be looking upon you.”<sup>85</sup> By commanding the reader, Whitman includes him/her in the dissolving action of becoming the “eternal float of solution.”<sup>86</sup> Moreover, he makes his relationship to the reader exactly the same as his relationship to the passengers “generations hence.”<sup>87</sup> The reader’s reading is the same as the future passenger’s looking “back” on Whitman, who already looks “forward to them.”<sup>88</sup> Through the reader’s perusal, Whitman overcomes what Muclaire calls the “certain experience of alienation whose typical form for Whitman is the experience of being published.”<sup>89</sup> Whitman-as-text remains alienated, objectified, and alone until the reader picks up and begins to read. Then, as Muclaire continues, the reader is “alone together with Whitman.”<sup>90</sup> The aloneness is an opportunity for intimacy, perhaps even sexual in nature. In “So Long,” Whitman writes, “Who touches this touches a man, / (Is it night? are we here together alone?)”<sup>91</sup> Such is why Whitman the poet and Whitman the “me” of the reader’s reading are necessarily “identical.”<sup>92</sup> Yet the interpersonal union in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* does not depend on the text. So long as the experience from generation to generation remains fundamentally similar, the union remains intact. Following this logic, the

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<sup>85</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 112.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>89</sup> Terry Muclaire, “Publishing Intimacy in *Leaves of Grass*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* 60, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 471.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 54-55.

<sup>92</sup> Muclaire.

union between Whitman and the reader always remains intact as long as the reader continues to retrieve the gist from the printed page. Only an intellectual approach to the text, a closure to new experience, or a general disdain for the poetry can inhibit this experience. Barring these obstacles, the reader should ultimately identify with the “we” at the end of the poem. After all, Whitman, the future ferry-crossers, and the reader have all just been through the same experience.

Chari’s interpretation of this passage might read less as a formation of the “we” as the poet’s longing to identify with a universal that happens to include the passengers of Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. She compares him to the “*viśvarūpa* or cosmic form” because he includes diversity and “the cosmic Krishna of the Gita, who is but a poetic representation of the expanded self of the mystic.”<sup>93</sup> While Whitman embraces the diversity of everything from the “foundry chimneys burning high” to the “scallop-edged waves,” the passengers with whom he communes lack identity.<sup>94</sup> He does not recognize diversity among them because they are still, despite Whitman’s efforts, temporally distant. How should the reader imagine the old “costumes” past passengers wore without a description? Perhaps to pause on one era is to limit the reader’s ability to reach back *ad infinitum*. Whatever the reason behind his decision to refuse identities to his passengers past and future, it marks where he moves beyond anything he could have simply borrowed from the Vedas. Krishna and the *viśvarūpa* do not necessarily time-travel. Whitman’s characteristically 19<sup>th</sup> century interest in human progress and advancement is probably what at least in part motivates Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’s time-travel and similar sentiments would the first science fiction novel by 1898. In any case, Chari’s argument on Whitman’s particularly

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<sup>93</sup> Chari, 99.

<sup>94</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 44; 47.

Vedic expansiveness and diversity suggests Whitman's own divinity. In other words, he has more in common with Lord Krishna than might be obvious in a first reading.

This Whitman-god not only peers through time in both directions but suspends it. Most lines in the second through fifth stanzas begin with anaphora that leads the reader out and draws him/her back in a cyclical fashion that not only mimics the motion of the waves but connotes a feeling of being nowhere. The motion of the waves, in turn, is what can create for the reader a sense of timelessness. In other words, without stepping foot on Brooklyn Ferry, the reader is already immersed in the same timelessness and delocalization. In this setting the poet finds "myself disintegrated, / every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme."<sup>95</sup> In this disintegration from the world of measurable time and tangible places, Whitman is able to join the "scheme." The feeling of dislocation, however, is not necessarily one of also standing still. Geoffrey O'Brien notes that anaphora in this poem creates a "constant vertical stream of carrying-back" that "carries with it the threat and ecstasy of getting nowhere" and leaving "that thereless there again."<sup>96</sup> In this way anaphora anchors the ferry while it remains in motion. It travels but does not reach its destination, which opens the possibility of personal becoming or ongoing experience outside the realm of time. In other words, it opens the reader to an encounter with the beyond or in Whitman's words, to rejoin the "float forever held in solution" from which he and all people have been "struck."<sup>97</sup> Yet the closest Whitman seems to get to returning to the transcendental realm without names or differentiation is the formation of the "we" in the last lines, as "I" and "you" lose their differentiating properties.

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<sup>95</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 7.

<sup>96</sup> O'Brien.

<sup>97</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 62.

The achievement of even this union, however, requires a paradoxical expansion-contraction of self in which the poet's ego expands via self-humiliation and identification with the lowly. Echoing the self-effacing lines of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," he writes, "My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality / meagre? / Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil."<sup>98</sup> Before pulling those of the future and past closer to him in mystical union, he must first acknowledge his common lowliness with them. In other words, before he can expand he must contract. He goes on to mention the vices that make him "one with the rest:" "guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak."<sup>99</sup> He dares not speak but he dares write and the reader feels free, in turn, to identify with Whitman. Identifying with him mirrors the looking-back in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and completely closes the gap between poet and reader. Just as Whitman expects anaphora to intensify the union between reader and text, he lists relatively common vices he could expect most readers to share in a least a little. He follows these lines with "Closer yet I approach you," nearly collapsing the "you" of the reader and the "you" of the future ferry passengers.<sup>100</sup> Or, as Muclaire states, he discovers his "equivalency to the mass of others on the shores who have ridden or will ride the ferry."<sup>101</sup> Whitman's imagined relationship to his readers means that the readers *are* riding the ferry and can certainly be counted as passengers. Yet the "equivalency" between Whitman, reader, and passenger may mean more than just that. In a world in which there are "perpetual transfers and promotions" and the poet quite literally *is* his text, equivalency reads more like unbreakable unity.<sup>102</sup> Yet Whitman's

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<sup>98</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 68-69.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>101</sup> Muclaire.

<sup>102</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1299.

transfers between older and younger selves, like his transfer with the drift in “As I Ebb’d” are not quite the same exercises in equivalency.

Yet any transfer between Whitman and his imagined passengers is one of many pathways to mystical union. Harold Aspiz holds that not only is Whitman’s experience a disembodied one but that the ferry passage itself represents the “passage from life to death.”<sup>103</sup> This interpretation is consistent with O’Brien’s comments because life and death is for Whitman just another transfer or a part of the cycle between the two. Yet the “other side,” so to speak, of the Brooklyn Ferry’s voyage is in Aspiz’s reading really an arrival at life. Whitman explains this paradox best, writing, “that to pass [mortal] existence is supreme over all, and what we thought death is but life brought to a higher parturition.”<sup>104</sup> Crucially, however, the disembodied Whitman remains stationary through time like the accompanying seagulls whose “motionless / Wings [are] oscillating their bodies.”<sup>105</sup> That is to say, neither does the reader arrive at a vicarious experience of transcendental death. His drawing near to but failure to arrive at death is what also occurs in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” With or without death, Whitman’s mystical experience is ultimately incomplete. Future readers eventually had their Whitmanian mirror broken by the Brooklyn Bridge.

Though it appears in the 1892 “deathbed” edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the mystical dialogue of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” retains the mystical character of his antebellum writing as it appears as “Sun Down Poem” in 1856. Aspiz claims that 1871 is the year after which Whitman gives up his role as “poet of the body and its worldly delights” and instead becomes “the poet of the soul.”<sup>106</sup> Such a black and white distinction is not to say that *Leaves of Grass*

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<sup>103</sup> Harold Aspiz, *So Long! Walt Whitman’s Poetry of Death* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 121.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*; Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. 28.

<sup>106</sup> Aspiz, 105.

changes in an equally simplistic fashion. “As I Ebb’d” and “Out of the Cradle” both appear in the 1882 edition, long after Loving’s pre-Civil War Whitman has made his transfer *out* of the mysticism of the self. Appearing among these poems is “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” which remains the same in all respects except the title. The paradox of Whitman’s disembodiment and communion with the sensual world in this poem also occurs in “As I Ebb’d” and “Out of the Cradle.” Whitman’s editorial choices suggest that despite “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”’s origins in the 1856, he feels it retains a place among his more mature, more death-centered mystical poems. Aspiz would argue that this choice is a result of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”’s focus on death, but the word “death” never appears in the text of the poem. The ferry experience overlaps with death insofar as it enables mystical transfers. Unlike death, however, the ferry experience is temporary and voluntary because it is in Whitman’s “meditations.”<sup>107</sup> He certainly could not have chosen the exact moment he would die as he chooses to begin his meditations.

He could and did, however, choose when and in what way to edit *Leaves of Grass*, complicating the date of his knowledge of the Vedas and the lines that are directly from them. The ’56 “Sun-Down Poem” borrows a line from the Vedas: “The glories strung like beads on my smallest / sights and hearings—on the walk in the / street, and the passage over the river.”<sup>108</sup> Chari traces this line to the *Sutrē Maniganā Iva* and interprets Whitman’s own ego as the string on which the “beads” of experience hang.<sup>109</sup> Yet the syntax of the line suggests otherwise. That the glories are strung on the “sights and hearings” implies that these sensual experiences are the string on which the glories hang. In other words, the glories are the impalpable mystical drift that pervades the ordinary sensual experience. So far, there is not much different from the Sea Cluster

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<sup>107</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 5.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>109</sup> Chari, 42.

poem's emphasis on divine encounter through the sensual. He further disseminates the experience by locating it in walking and "passage," both dislocated activities. Until 1855 when Thoreau allegedly informed Whitman about the Vedas, Whitman borrowed exclusively from Biblical passages. Not until the 1856 does this line appear, indicating almost for certain that Whitman had read some of the Vedas. He evidently felt not only that this line belonged but that it would, perhaps like the slave and master, have no problem in each other's company in the context of the conflict-neutralizing, diversity-embracing *Leaves of Grass*. Yet the catch is that borrowing lines such as these is arguably still an Emersonian move. As Laurence Buell notes, Emerson frequently integrated Vedic lines into his lectures.<sup>110</sup> The difference, as usual, lies in the approach. Emerson may quote but Whitman attempts to live out and share what he borrows in print.

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<sup>110</sup> Laurence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 174.

## V: "COME, SWEET DEATH!" THE FINAL MYSTICAL TRANSFER

Whitman could, however, manipulate exactly when to invoke death for himself and, more importantly, for his reader in poems such as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." He writes:

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,  
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,  
And I in the middle as with companions,  
and as holding the hands of companions<sup>111</sup>

Death has ceased to be the "clew" and now consists of a mystical trinity centered on Whitman himself. The two versions of death are explicit manifestations of Whitman's psyche: his thought and his knowledge. Aspiz adds that these are connected indirectly, citing Whitman's use of simile; he sees himself "'as walking' with these dim figures, 'as companions.'"<sup>112</sup> "Just as Whitman binds former and future passengers to himself *through* himself, he unites with two variant versions of death. Yet his union is not with the passengers and the surrounding world but the dominating subject of the elegy, Lincoln himself. The "thought of him I love" opens the apostrophe to the "powerful western fallen star" and allows Whitman to unify himself with Lincoln's death.<sup>113</sup> Whereas the "FLOOD-tide" and the sensual world around him is his bridge to past and future experience, Lincoln is both bridge and destination. Death is now for Whitman a much more mystically immediate experience and he is no longer held back by endless oscillation as he is in the 1856. Still, Whitman's invocation of ocean imagery in the fourteenth stanza suggests a strong connection to the "death" of "Out of the Cradle." While Gay Wilson Allen accounts for this invocation as a "flowing motif" that runs also through poems such as

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<sup>111</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 120-123.

<sup>112</sup> Aspiz, 200.

<sup>113</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 6-7.

“Passage to India” and “The Sleepers,” it bears a striking resemblance to Whitman’s apostrophe in “Out of the Cradle.”<sup>114</sup> He knows the “voice” of “the husky whispering wave.” In other words, he recalls the original “clew.” The body, following what he hears, immediately begins “nestling close” to “vast and well-veiled death.”<sup>115</sup>

The image these “deaths” leading Whitman by the hands on either side is a powerful visual reminder that his mystic communion with them is not Christian by any means. This death is multifaceted, quite literally friendly, and most importantly, alive to Whitman. They go to “the solemn shadowy cedars” and there “the gray-brown bird I know receiev’d us comrades three.”<sup>116</sup> Whitman’s explicit mention of the number highlights its status as a trinity perhaps modeled on or in continuity with the trinity of the thrush, the lilac, and the star. He exhortative apostrophes to each are what bind the trinity together. The poet of death remains true to his egocentric roots in *Song of Myself* as the trinity forms by virtue of its relationship to Whitman himself. Yet in an anti-Christian poem, the trinity reminds a particularly Christian audience of the divinity in nature and in Whitman’s expanded, death-encompassing self. Death is not only a gateway to divine encounter but is divine itself. Whitman calls the thrush’s song of death a “powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses.”<sup>117</sup> This psalm, inaccessible to the reader through print because of its content, is available should the reader simply go him/herself to “the fragrant pines” at night to listen.<sup>118</sup>

In writing an elegy in this way Whitman is both relying on and departing from a long American elegiac tradition. As Michael Cavitch notes, “Every elegy is a love poem” but

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<sup>114</sup> Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook*, 210.

<sup>115</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 157-58.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 125; 127.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>118</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 206.

Whitman's love for the president carries homoerotic overtones.<sup>119</sup> Cavitch cites, for example, a journal entry from Grier's *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* in which Whitman confesses: "I love the president personally." Moreover, "his face & manner have an expression & are inexpressibly sweet."<sup>120</sup> One need look no farther than "thought of him I love" to see the thread between Whitman's personal affection for the president and the poem itself.<sup>121</sup> Yet homosexual love is not here the path to mystical encounter as it is, for example in "I Sing the Body Electric" in which he catalogues the firemen's "play of masculine muscle."<sup>122</sup> Rather than address his body or even Lincoln himself, he addresses the coffin: "Here coffin that passes slowly, / I give you my sprig of lilac."<sup>123</sup> The lack of address to the president himself (as in a traditional elegy) has everything to do with his location. To show Lincoln's body is to dislocate him from his place in the "western orb sailing the heaven."<sup>124</sup> His absence in the body and the absence of his body convey his complete, successful transfer into nature. Addressing the "wondrous singer" of the bird is, therefore, simply part of an address to Lincoln.<sup>125</sup> The mystical transfer of death is what makes a poem that is on the surface addressing nature and death in reality an address to the disembodied Lincoln. Whitman upholds the elegiac tradition by subverting it. The star, the lilac, and the thrush are not distractions from but mystical reincarnations of the president himself.

That is not to argue, however, that Whitman's erotic attachment has simply been abolished by death. Cavitch cites Sacks and Michael Moon as either incorporating "Lilacs"

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<sup>119</sup> Michael Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 246.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>121</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 6.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

into the “ongoing erotic program” of *Leaves of Grass* or highlighting its “castrative work.”<sup>126</sup> Still a more discreet and frankly, palatable interpretation is Gay Wilson Allen’s argument that Whitman unconsciously chooses the lilac and a (perhaps phallic) fragrant heart-shaped symbol of his love for the president.<sup>127</sup> Whitman explicitly addresses his own “body and soul,” but can only address the soul of the president as his body is mediated by the “coffin” and the “grave.”<sup>128</sup> As in previous poems however, the mystical union he achieves is still through the senses. He draws near the ineffable “western orb” through the “sprig of lilac,” “roses and early lilies.”<sup>129</sup> His desire to be near his “love” is synonymous for his desire for mystical union with death. He brings the “sprig of lilac” to the coffin but bypasses the mediation of the coffin, giving death itself flowers and chating “a song for you O / sane and sacred death.”<sup>130</sup> The immediacy he achieves with Lincoln’s death is similarly the immediacy he enjoys in his apostrophes to the equally immediate members of the trinity: the “Lilac blooming perennial,” the “drooping star in the west” and “thought of him I love.”<sup>131</sup> This trinity, in turn, cycles like the waves in the Sea-Cluster poems and the waves of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Yet here the cycle is cosmic and even contains the smaller scale sea cycles. This change in scale means that Whitman’s mystical communion with death, the soul of the president, and the natural world happens but once a year. The seasons dictate his meditations, a fact that proves a strong counter to Chari’s voluntarism-like, year-round “iron will” description of Whitman’s mysticism.

What for Whitman in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is a “clew” is now the subject of his apostrophe and song in “Lilacs.” He enjoins death: “Approach strong deliveress, /

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<sup>126</sup> Cavitch, 247.

<sup>127</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, *A Reader’s Guide to Walt Whitman* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1970), 199.

<sup>128</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 89; 45.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 55; 45; 50.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

When it is so...I joyously sing the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee...Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.”<sup>132</sup> While Michael Moon critiques the equation of death with “maternity and femininity” through the figure of the ocean, this inversion is significant in Whitman’s imagined relationship between death, the ocean, and himself.<sup>133</sup> He no longer approaches the ocean but approaches death itself and uses the ocean as a descriptor for what he immediately experiences. The ocean no longer gives the “clew” but is a characteristic of death itself. The poet floats and is “laved” in the “bliss” of death. The ocean’s mediative function in previous poems have been superseded and abolished by the poet’s unprecedented access to death itself. What this means for the mystical experience is that the reader of *Leaves of Grass* now has a preview of the final mystical transfer of death. Whitman reveals life and death as being “under a continuous and purposive law governing ‘the visible universe’ and the ‘invisible side of the same.’”<sup>134</sup> Yet what makes this relationship between life and death more Whitmanian than Christian is his refusal to define what comes after death and to separate the body (or the physical being) from the soul. Aspiz notes that Whitman’s strongest Christian influence was the anti-doctrinal Quaker Elias Hicks.<sup>135</sup> The aversion to doctrine, especially of Christian heaven and resurrection, receives support from the absence of both motifs in “Lilacs.” Similarly, his transfer of Lincoln’s being in the human body to a new being in the body of the universe or the “western orb” is a version of immortality similar to that of the reader searching for Whitman “under” his/her “boot-soles” or finding him at “drifts at your feet.”<sup>136</sup> In 1892 Whitman, like Lincoln,

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<sup>132</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. 47-50.

<sup>133</sup> Moon, 217.

<sup>134</sup> Aspiz, 25.

<sup>135</sup> Aspiz, 129.

<sup>136</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself” 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1340; “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” 71.

would diffuse into the material world in a way that makes him perhaps more present to the reader than even through the act of reading his print.

Whitman's drifting, approaching, and merging with death-as-ocean is a commentary on his own divinity that also includes the divinity of the fallen soldiers in "Lilacs" or the "debris." Just as Whitman becomes a "trail of drift and debris" in "As I Ebb'd," the soldiers through death merge with "the debris" and become the "debris of all the slain soldiers of the war, / But I saw they were not as was thought, / They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not."<sup>137</sup> The rubble and ruin are interchangeable with the soldiers of war in the same way nature is interchangeable with the soul of Lincoln, though the soldiers receive less glory. The passivity Whitman assumes in allowing himself to be washed up by the sea in "As I Ebb'd" is the same passivity the soldiers have in relinquishing life and opening themselves the final mystical transfer. In Kenneth Price's study of "Lilacs," he notes that "Whitman strongly associates *debris* with the spiritually transcendent."<sup>138</sup> The critical difference, however, is that the soldiers are quite literally debris but Whitman enjoys the privilege of *imagining* himself debris. "Lilacs," as untraditional as it is, ultimately remains an elegy for someone other than the poet, who remains alive. Even the structure of the lines points to this transcendence. "Suffer'd not" is the only line that breaks the cyclical pattern led by "suffer'd" at the end of the fifteenth stanza."<sup>139</sup> O'Brien's reading of these lines would suggest a perpetual cycle of suffering broken only by death. Whitman's individual beliefs on death, while not redemptive, anticipate death as he prays for "his release from physical suffering" in "Passage to India" and "Prayer of Columbus."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 179-181.

<sup>138</sup> Kenneth Price, "'Debris,' Creative Scatter, and the Challenges of Editing Whitman," *Walt Whitman: Where the Future Becomes Present* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2008), 60.

<sup>139</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 181-184.

<sup>140</sup> Aspiz, 124.

Later in “Lilacs,” however, his encounter with “debris” is much more humane and intimate in the context of mystical vision, supplementing thought and knowledge. In characteristic anaphora Whitman writes: “Passing the visions, passing the night, / Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades’ hands, / Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul.”<sup>141</sup> The repetition of passing mimics and supports the present-progressive “passing,” “unloosing,” and “tallying.” Whitman’s consciousness is dislocating, moving, and observing and his eyes seem reluctant to be open: “bound” and “unclosed,” but not open.<sup>142</sup> He is in the forest listening to the song of the bird, “loud and strong,” but sees “as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle flags.”<sup>143</sup> The cycle of “passing” seems to occur as he leaves the vision or begins “unloosing” his comrades’ hands. That the bird sings directly to the “tally of my soul” suggests, as in his holding of the comrades’ hands, an intimacy possible only through mystical vision. This passage is precisely what Loving refers to as his intimacy with the “crucified sons of God.”<sup>144</sup> In this passage Whitman remains Whitman but is certainly not the Whitman of *Song of Myself* or *Calamus*. His hot-blooded homoeroticism from *Calamus* is now a cooler maternal touch, so gentle it is not openly described but implied by “unloosing.” He puts into poetry here what happened in practice at the Army Hospital in Washington D.C. where he developed affectionate relationships with fallen soldiers who often communicated with him after leaving the hospital.<sup>145</sup>

While this release is certainly a positive element of the final mystical transfer, it does not trivialize Whitman’s pain upon the death of Lincoln. Pleading for the final release, Whitman

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<sup>141</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 185-187.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 164; 172.

<sup>144</sup> Loving, 22.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

writes, “Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving...to all, to each, / Sooner or later delicate death.”<sup>146</sup> He further writes in “praise” of “the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.”<sup>147</sup> Aspiz takes these lines to mean that for Whitman Lincoln’s death is “ultimately neither a personal nor a national tragedy.”<sup>148</sup> He takes the liberty to include the nation because of Whitman’s strong identification with the nation. Yet the “black murk” and “harsh surrounding cloud” remain for the living.<sup>149</sup> The living suffer precisely because they “remain” and cannot have the same mystical release.<sup>150</sup> Whitman is among them, though his embrace of death works as a form of consolation and changes the desperate, despondent second stanza that begins each line with the “O” of both apostrophe and deep pain.<sup>151</sup> Allen boldly claims that by section fifteen, “the poet is completely reconciled” and mourns for the living who suffer rather than for “those who fell in battle.”<sup>152</sup> He attains this reversal only after he comes to know the reality of death and is free to “float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.”<sup>153</sup> The poet’s reconciliation is, as Aspiz hints, meant to reach the general readership of America and cause a similar reconciliation in the hearts of all Americans. Yet Whitman’s intimacy with death does not make Lincoln’s any less tragic.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 135-137.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>148</sup> Aspiz, 203.

<sup>149</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 11; 9;

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 7-11.

<sup>152</sup> Allen, *A Reader’s Guide to Walt Whitman*, 201.

<sup>153</sup> Whitman, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 162.

## VI: BINDING LIFE AND DEATH, FILTH AND BEAUTY

Heralding death as the agent of mystical change and the arrival of the beyond is perhaps the closest Whitman ever came to making a doctrinal statement of belief. The poet whose faith “is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths / enclosing all worship ancient and modern” could not equally accept those faith’s doctrines.<sup>154</sup> Just as it is unlikely that Whitman strenuously contemplated the universe in the Hindu fashion, it is unlikely he had any faith in the Christian resurrection. Yet to remove Hindu or Christian elements from *Leaves of Grass* would be to literally lift entire passages out of the text. Whitman integrates these in such a fashion that they do not limit each other. He does not, for example, limit his Krishna-like expansion in favor self-annihilating Catholic mysticism. Rather, his refusal to embrace any one mystical tradition fully or his embrace of all mystical traditions fully is a move typical of the mystic disposition. He is open to whatever is on the other side just as the participant in the *Cloud of Unknowing* must embrace nothingness and prepare to pass through the cloud of unknowing. His final embrace of death, however, has much to do with what happened outside *Leaves of Grass* itself, autobiographical as it is. A mere five years after writing on Lincoln’s successful passage through death, Whitman suffered a non-fatal stroke accompanied by the death of his mother and his sister-in-law in the same year.<sup>155</sup> He never fully recovered mentally or physically. Thus his embrace of death as a site of mystical transfer may (or may not) be forgiven its doctrinal overtones.

The problem for most readers, however, has been the difficulty of integrating *Leaves of Grass*’s beauty with its “unredeemed and irredeemable indecency and filth,” as O’Connor wrote

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<sup>154</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1097.

<sup>155</sup> Loving, 349.

for the *New York Times* in 1866. This “filth” constitutes one of two elements the reader cannot “fail to note” in reading the 1867 edition. The other element is “that noble, almost unrivalled hymn on the funeral procession of LINCOLN, beginning ‘When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,’ some of the loftiest and most beautifully majestic strains ever sounded by human meditation.”<sup>156</sup> The reviewer imagines these two elements as separate but they are really integral to the same mystical project. The eroticism of Calamus informs, as Cavitch notes, Whitman’s attachment to Lincoln. Moreover, he could not form the trinity with the thought of death and the knowledge of death if he were not “blasphemous.” Nor could he recognize Lincoln in the star. The more open the reader is to the integrality of this “filth” the more likely he/she is to grasp Whitman’s mystic moments in their full glory. The tragedy has historically been how seldom readers have been open. Take, for example, the dialogue between Whitman and the *Times* reviewer in 1866. In cold third person O’Connor writes: “this volume cannot be accepted as fit for the audience which it seeks and claims,” submitting the review “with...partial protest.”<sup>157</sup> Yet Whitman’s work “is no book:”

Who touches this, touches a man,  
 (Is it night? Are we here alone?)  
 It is I you hold, and who holds you,  
 I spring from the pages into your arms--decease calls  
 me<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> William Douglas O’Connor, review of *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman, *The New York Times* (1866).

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Whitman, “So Long,” 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 53-57.

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