Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*

(1) BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION
For biographical information on Walt Whitman, please refer to the “Song of Myself” Study Guide, or visit Wikipedia at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman), a host of other websites, or read the biographical note on Whitman in Radeljković’s “American Topics” (listed underneath in the Recommended Reading list).

(2) TEXT OF WORK
Read the poem at: [http://www.bartleby.com/142/183.html](http://www.bartleby.com/142/183.html)

(3) ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY (includes summary of poem)
In 1869, Walt Whitman saw the opening of the Suez Canal as reason for celebration, for this new passage to India was both a marvel of engineering and an opportunity to connect with the spiritual traditions of faraway lands. *His verse argues that there are different ways of knowing—through scientific knowledge and through the wisdom of ancient stories—in its first three lines: "Not you alone, proud truths of the world!/ Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science!/ But myths and fables of eld—Asia's, Africa's fables!” At this point—in part because the sentence’s subject and verb have yet to come—the reader doesn’t know why the speaker includes myths and fables in this group. But the next seven lines make clear his admiration for these ancient civilizations.*

**Repetition plays a key role in his praise.** Lines four through six start with "the;" the next three lines, and five out of the next six, have "you" as the first or second word; and all of the lines end with punctuation that creates a full stop. The effect—one lush phrase following another—adds emphasis to the celebration of these fables and their mystical power.

*By the time the subject and verb of the sentence arrive—"You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest"—the speaker’s reverence is clear. He welcomes Eastern and African "bibles," "religions," and "temples" as much as Western ones. Whitman’s use of the present tense in the stanza’s final line, "You too with joy I sing," implicitly compares poetry to song, and after so many longer lines, its monosyllabic simplicity makes the praise even more immediate and joyful.*

*Whitman uses repetition—repeating first words and ending lines with punctuation—in the next stanza as well. Here, in conversation with his soul, the speaker gives voice to God’s purpose for the new passage to India: to bring people together. When "The earth be spann’d, connected by net-work," barriers are erased, love is nurtured, and people evolve. Imagining a peaceful new era, the speaker proclaims:*

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A worship new, I sing;
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours!
You engineers! You architects, machinists, yours!
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God’s name, and for thy sake, O soul.
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With his eye fixed on a higher purpose, the speaker addresses all the people who made the canal possible. Just as the Suez Canal links distant parts of the world, Whitman’s poetry links both ancient religions and modern technology. God and engineering, and the terminology associated with each. In doing so, he is guiding us, looking into a bright future and extending an invitation that is both tender and challenging. (Teachers’ Domain)
WALT WHITMAN would speak more emphatically of democracy and would more boldly imagine an equal mingling of races in the United States, but he continues the process of racializing freedom and extends the vision of a sublime world-destiny for the United States. In his articulations of a free, “American” poetry, we can feel the profound influence that Emerson’s “The Poet” is said to have had on Whitman — as we also feel the profound influence on him of the long-developing liberty discourse that shaped Emerson’s own vision. For Whitman, “America is the race of races” for it has that “deathless attachment to freedom,” and this attachment gives birth to art, for Americans also have “of all nations at any time upon the earth . . . the fullest poetical nature.”

Whitman, too, was seduced by an ambitious vision of America’s “manifest” destiny as he imagined a sublime westward movement through history, including the final triumphant traversing of the continent which is “by [America’s] mighty railroad spann’d” ("Passage to India," 1. line 6).

Whitman is not Emerson, however, and to an important degree his vision of a free America diverges, especially racially. It matters that Whitman’s speaker understands racial amalgamation as one telos of this western destiny, as for instance in "Passage to India": “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” (2. lines 16 – 20). Very few of Whitman’s Anglo-American contemporaries would have joined him in his vision of interracial marriage, depicted in other poems as well. His explicit imagining of it is of a piece with his “straying” sexual visions.

But "Passage to India" is at the same time a multiracial vision of a cosmic manifest destiny realized by Anglo-Americans. Clearly, first of all, the poem arises within an Atlantic imaginary, insofar as the poem’s speaker and his soul “take ship” (8. line 2), and initially the speaker finds that “Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead, / Over my mood [steal]” (4. lines 2 – 3). "Passage" is throughout spoken from the Anglo-Atlantic perspective, as it celebrates “the knowledge gain’d, the mariner’s compass, / Lands found and nations born, thou born America, / For purpose vast, man’s long probation fill’d, / Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish’d” (4. lines 10 – 13). No Indian chief initiates this westward passage and the mourned dead are neither slaves nor tribes but mariners, whose loss gives birth to nations.
And yet other dead do fleetingly appear, although submerged in the poem's final section, as it makes its sublime turn toward transcendence via racial introjection. The first stanza of this final section begins by suggesting that the soul’s journey entails a “Passage to more than India!” / Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?” Its call to the soul seems to transcend material history and geography. But by the third stanza, the “you” addressed by the speaker is exactly America and its geography — the place to which the soul has traveled:

**Passage** to more than India!
O secret of the earth and sky!
Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!
Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my land!
Of you O prairies! of you grey rocks! (9. lines 10–14)

Between stanza 1 and stanza 3 in this section there has been a shift, from “you” as the soul to “you” as my American land — which suggests that we need to consider carefully the nature of the “you” in the intervening second stanza, the darkest one of the poem, which seems addressed to the original inhabitants of America. The implications are chilling.

**Passage** to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!
**Passage** to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!
You, strew’d with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reach’d you.
(9.7–9)

If these “aged fierce enigmas” are Indian Americans, who leave behind the wrecks of skeletons, and over whom the poet calls for mastership, then no wonder Whitman ends this line with a muddling of the poem’s “you’s.” And no wonder that the speaker then very suddenly calls for “Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins! / Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor! / Cut the hawsers — haul out — shake out every sail!” (9. lines 19–21). The poet flees, as the poem flees, such strangling problems. But then the poet transforms this evasion into a sublime launching worthy of those ancient, sea-roaming Saxons: “Sail forth — steer for the deep waters only, / Reckless O soul, exploring. I with thee, and thou with me, / For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go, / And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all” (9. lines 25–28). Thus has mastership of “you” given way to this sublimely transcendent vision of a “thee
and thou.” Within the poem’s framing logic, this “thee and thou” belongs to one, selfsame Anglo-American “I,” or to an Anglo-American “our” that is not so different, after all, from Emerson’s vision of “our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations.”

If we may also read Whitman’s bold closing lines as a call to embrace a courageous, queer sexuality between thee and thou, then we may see how he shares a strategy with Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren, whereby a racial vision underwrites a sexual transgression. Even if with more risky, or racially moderate, or healing intentions, Whitman joins his Anglo-Saxon compatriots in sublimating the violence of American colonization, despite the fact that its latest surge in America’s bloody civil war was cupped by Whitman’s own nursing hands. The folding-under of this violence fertilizes the freedom vision for Whitman, as the grass “we” tread that continually sprouts again.

Thus did the poetic of the racial sublime on both sides of the Atlantic help to create a compelling vision for the “liberty” narrative, one imbued with risk and prowess, at once freeing and mastering. In the charged air of these poetic visions, Atlantic writers of all kinds, that is, of several “races,” eventually generated parallel but antagonistic stories of sublime, racial freedom. In “The Tennessee Hero,” for instance, the African American poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper draws her sublime portrait of a man who won’t betray the escape plot of his enslaved comrades: she depicts him as “the noblest of them all” who “stood before the savage throng, / The base and coward crew” of white interrogators while “A tameless light flashed from his eye.” For “Though fetters galled his weary limbs, / His spirit spurned their thrall” and “Oh! liberty had nerv’d his heart, / And every pulse beat true.” Following his bold retort that “I know the men who would be free . . . are the heroes of your land,” and his refusal to reveal them, “the blows rained thick and fast,” but his “monarch soul kept true” even while he met his “death of pain.” Rewriting the Oronoko story while recasting the racialized romantic sublime of her white contemporaries, Harper at once joins and deconstructs the Atlantic literary tradition.

The following pages are less a challenge to this racialized tradition of the sublime, with its real and symbolic deadly swoons, than an invitation to notice how writers have created it and to ask what it has meant to do so — and what it could mean.
(4) SOURCES CITED


<http://books.google.ba/books?id=RGeCW47F0cgC&pg=PP5&dq=passage+to+india+whitman&hl=en&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=0_1>.

(5) RECOMMENDED READING


(The essay includes a comprehensive analysis of Walt Whitman’s work with special emphasis on “Song of Myself” and ties in Whitman’s work well with his Transcendentalist/Emersonian influences. Also refer to page 360 for a more intimate account of Walt Whitman’s biography.)