



POEM GUIDE

Walt Whitman: "A Passage to India"

Exploring the spiritual in the great master's ode to architecture.

BY ROBIN EKISS

In 1869, two marvels of engineering altered the course of history forever. That May, the last spike was driven into the ground on the American transcontinental railroad, connecting the country definitively from East to West. Six months later and half a world away, the Suez Canal opened in Egypt. By joining the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea via an artificial waterway, it allowed transportation and trade between Europe and Asia in record time, without navigating around Africa. The canal promised to change the face of world commerce, but it also extended the possibilities of cultural exchange between nations.

Walt Whitman saw the opening of the Suez Canal as both a reason for celebration and an opportunity to connect with the spiritual traditions of faraway lands. In "Passage to India," he celebrates the scientific achievements that made the canal possible, as well as the more esoteric wisdom that could imagine such possibilities, and the new era of worldliness and peace that might come of it.

In the poem's second section, Whitman especially demonstrates his excitement and admiration for the achievement. He opens by attributing the canal to both science ("proud truths of the world") and myth ("and fables of eld"):

Passage O soul to India!

Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

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
 The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
 The deep diving bibles and legends,
 The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;

Though undoubtedly a feat of engineering, the canal was also a triumph of the human imagination. Whitman credits both technology and art here. The "facts of modern science" alone aren't enough to explain the project's completion. By directly addressing the "proud truths" and "fables" side by side with the "far-darting beams of the spirit," "deep diving bibles and legends," and "the daring plots of the poets" (of which his own poem is one), Whitman is able to bring "modern science" into perspective with the "elder religions," and express his admiration for both.

Repetition plays a key role in his praise. Lines four through six employ anaphora

by each starting with the word "the," creating a catalog of imagery that accumulates power and momentum as the poem progresses. In each succeeding line, that repetition takes a new form, in Whitman's direct address ("you") to the temples, fables, and towers of foreign lands. It's these exotic institutions ("myths and fables") that Whitman invokes, and which occupy the lion's share of his imagination and attention:

O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
 O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven!
 You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
 Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!

Whitman's use of long rhythmic but unmetred and unrhymed lines—the free verse

form he developed—allows him to make these observations in a style that's unforced and uncompromised, with the cadence of natural speech. At times his awe feels almost

uncontainable, as it's communicated with loftiness and reverence ("O you temples," "O you fables").

The poem's punctuation adds to the building excitement. Though each line ends with an exclamation point, as if Whitman couldn't be more eager to express his joy, the punctuation also contains that eagerness: one end-stopped line refuses to spill over to the next. Each phrase, almost hyperbolic in its sentiments, is lush in its diction. Even when his words border on cliché ("red as roses, bunish'd with gold!"), we sense that Whitman genuinely admires the "lofty and dazzling towers," the fables, and their mystic power.

The syntactic complications also give his argument impact. Because the subject and verb of the extended opening meditation are deferred, we read with anticipation, waiting to see what will happen. By the time the subject and verb of the sentence arrive ("You too I welcome"), the speaker's reverence is clear:

You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest!
You too with joy I sing.

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.

Whitman extends his praise to Eastern and African "bibles," "religions," and "temples" as much as Western ones ("the same as the rest!"). In his view, every perspective is worth celebrating. That magnanimous sense of inclusion helps make a Whitman poem—including his best-known, "Song of Myself"—so compelling, modern, and relevant to readers even today.

The sense of inclusiveness is ultimately one of the sentiments Whitman is trying to convey here. Turning finally to address the soul, the launching pad for human endeavor, Whitman uses repetition for emphasis once again to give voice to what he sees as God's purpose for the new passage to India—to bring people of all nations and races together:

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.

When "The earth be spann'd, connected by net-work," barriers are erased, love is nurtured, and people evolve. Whitman is envisioning here not only the actual canal, but the broader implications of a passage to "India"—a place that represents for Whitman, and no doubt many of his American readers, an exotic and foreign land. The literal passage thus becomes a metaphorical one, bridging the continents and allowing for new kinds of communion between people of all nations. Imagining a peaceful new era, Whitman proclaims:

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.

With his eye fixed on a higher purpose, Whitman addresses all the people who made the canal possible, and implores them to see not just their technological prowess, but the spirituality of their endeavor. (It's interesting to think what Whitman might have written about other modern advances that have since made our world even smaller, like international flight, the telephone, or the Internet.)

Just as the Suez Canal links distant parts of the world, Whitman's poem links ancient religions and modern technology, God and engineering. In doing so, he encourages us to see a bright future, extending an invitation that is both reverent and hopeful.

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