found in many places that sexual ecstasy and profound mystic apprehension of life have a vital relationship all imply a far more logical conviction than the mere poetic adoration of the raptures of sex. In this understanding of the violent combination of the poet of sex and the poet of soul in one, to whom the supreme knowledge came from the body, the senses, and the sex act, and who was so much unlike the other mystic poets of the world, whose love, for the woman or for the wine, never rose (or descended) to the extreme physicality of his poetry, it looks as if the source of this passion is neither the frustrated sex of his personal life, nor the relatively innocent suggestions of the Vedanta thought which regarded the body as an equal emanation of the Divine Being, nor even the simple desire to be a philosopher of the inclusive wisdom to which materialism and spiritualism were only two parts of one truth.

There may have been, in the sensitive psychology of Whitman's poetic mind, a slightly excessive sexual element, aggravated by the complicated nature of his homosexual propensities and by the unfortunate circumstance of dissatisfaction, ending up in the silent "perturbations" of his journal or in the more eloquent, less repressed, outbursts of "Calamus," while at the same time generally flooding his lyrical consciousness, thus creating the emotional basis of some of the "erotic," or "autocrotic" passages of his tentative or finished compositions. In these passages, found in the early notebooks or among the rejected fragments that were later skillfully incorporated into "Song of Myself," we notice a lyric orgy of sexual emotions, but also an underlying assertion that in the ecstasy of "touch" is the supreme wisdom attained. In other words he does more than glorify sexual emotion poetically; he is poetically indulging it, or reveling in it as if to seek the exalted state it is believed to reach to. Examine these lines from the 1847 notebook:

> A touch now reaches me a library of knowledge in an instant.
> It smells for me the fragrance of wine and lemon-blows.
> It tastes for me ripe strawberries and melons,—
> It talks for me with a tongue of its own,
> It finds an ear wherever (wherein?) it rests or taps.[280]

The rest of the passage issues into a frenzy of the erotic state of

mind, but the declaration that the sex "touch" leads to a heightened condition of consciousness in which all the five senses are endued with extraordinary power is clear. From this to the more profound suggestion of the section of "Song of Myself" where the great revelation occurs to the poet in a sexual union, is an easily noticed step. At any rate the primary roots of the profoundly philosophized sex of his later poems are here in these lines. A similar fragment in which, leading Bucke to a prophetic interpretation, he spoke of the "touch," making him "awake for the first time" from what had been "a mean sleep," has already been noted.

The passages in which Whitman's fancy, probably achieving poetry's vicarious satisfaction, indulges in the delight of the sex act, often, as it were, in the act itself, are many in the early notebooks and among the rejected or first drafts. Take this fragment, which for all its artistic cunning, is an account of the sex act:

> My hand will not hurt what it holds and yet will devour it,
> It must remain perfect before me though I enclose and divide it.
>
> Only one minute, only two or three sheathed touches,
> Yet they gather all of me and my spirit into a knot,
> They hold us long enough there to show us what we can be,
> And that our flesh, and even a part of our flesh, seems more than senses and life.
> What has become of my senses?
> Touch has jolted down all of them but feeling;
> He pleases the rest so everyone would swap off and go with him,
> Or else she will abdicate and nibble at the edges of me.[281]

This is obviously a revision of the lines of the 1847 notebook, in its turn revised and whittled down into the 28th chant of "Song of Myself," to be combined with other similarly treated experimental fragments. Here are a couple more of such rhapsodies of the sexual:

> Living bulbs, melons with polished rinds smooth to the reached hand
> Bulbs of life, lilies, polished melons, flavoured for the mildest hand that shall reach.

Common things—the trickling sap that flows from the end of the manly maple.

One no more than a point lets in and out of me such bliss and magnitude,
I think I could lift the girder of the house away if it lay between me then and whatever I wanted.[282]

Elsewhere the image changes, but the frenzy remains:

Yet I strike and dart through. . . .
I think I could dash the girder of the earth away
If it lay between me and whatever I wanted.[283]

The entire section 28 of "Song of Myself" dwells upon the sex emotion; the Adamic poems and the "Calamus" poems harp upon the same string. Note the following lines, too, from the 1847 notebook, which, in fewer words but with greater power, were subsequently put into section 40 of "Song of Myself":

Where is one abortive, mangy, cold
Starved of his masculine lustiness?
Without core and loose in the knees?
Clutch fast to me, my ungrown brother,
That I may infuse you with grit and jets of life
I am not to be scorned (?):—I compel;
It is quite indifferent to me who (you) are.
I have stores plenty and to spare
And of whatsoever I have I bestow upon you.
And first I bestow of my love.[284]

All these extracts are taken from writing earlier than the 1855 poems, in order that the later mystic dignity they achieve through a cunning verbal modification and an adroit positioning of them in the poems should not interfere with our comprehension of the basic mood out of which they sprang. The basic mood is visibly one of emotional revelry, in poetic fancy; for the intensity and the minute physical relish with which poetic fancy is drawn upon to work, and the frenzied violence with which the sexual feeling is lyricized in them, do not suggest just the faith of a man who

"knows[s] that procreation is just as divine as spirituality," and therefore is resolved that "this which [he] know[s] [he] put freely in [his] poems,"[285] nor just the unconscious or conscious attempt of a personally frustrated sex impulse or excessive eroticism to find vent for "pent up aching rivers." If it were the former alone, it would stay from the crude, detailed, emotional masturbation, and if it were the latter alone, it would lack the courage of its philosophical convictions, which we cannot deny to be the only grace that saves his sex from downright imbecility. His attitude of acceptance of sex is one thing, and may be said to be the gift of the first; his actual treatment of it is another. The question is, was it the answer the poet gave to the "perturbed" man, with the assurances of philosophic faith coming in for support?

Our examination of Ward's *View* seems to offer an explanation for this phenomenal poetic sex-indulgence of Whitman. It is of course possible that many of these sex passages had each an independent origin in different inspirations, verbal or of thought. For instance, as suggested earlier, the sexual foundation of the transcendental knowledge received by the poet in section 5 of "Song of Myself" may appreciably be the result of reading in Menu the description of how the Supreme Being is apprehended in the body of the devotee. And the reassuring readiness of the last of the extracts to "infuse" the impotent "with grit and jets of life" may have been a fanciful development of the thought of the following chant in Atharva Veda, though I cannot discover evidence of his having read it:

The Brahmachari scatters his virile power on the ridge of the earth,
And by this live the four quarters.

But that does not explain the larger foundations of sex in him. However, the orgiac element as well as the philosophic conviction respecting sex in *Leaves of Grass* could, in their remarkable unification, be explained in terms of some religious sects of India, accounts of which Ward gives in elaborate detail in his second volume. *A View,* we may remember, was available in the Mercantile Library in the 1840s. References to these sects are also briefly to be found in *Asiatic Researches.* These sects are called the

Tantric sects, and their philosophy is known as Tantric philosophy. These people and their doctrines, as Ward remarks, are chiefly confined to a province in India, where their beliefs and practices, corrupted offshoots of basic Hindu thought, often issue into "the most abominable rites," described by Ward with understandable righteous indignation. A few significant extracts from his frequent and detailed descriptions are given here (Appendix II, a), enough to indicate the essence of the Tantric thought.

From these accounts came, as I have suggested, Whitman's phrase, "Drinking the mead from a skull cap," and it is likely that his philosophy of the senses, and the passion of sex through a free acceptance and unrestrained enjoyment of which an exalted understanding of life's truths is attained, as well as the ardent worship of the body, were also suggested by them. His own adoration of the "Body Electric," where with exquisite relish his lyric enthusiasm dwells on the smallest "parts and poems of the body," declaring that "these are the soul," has an uncanny resemblance to the worship the Tantric sect offered to the bodies of men and women, regarding them as the abode of divinity. Like the vamacharees, he adores the sex; he declares:

> Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
> Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.[286]

Whitman's sex is more meaningful, but the physical overtones of his treatment of it suggest the probability of an inspiration of this kind.

7

THE BIRTH OF A POEM

THE FIRST VOLUME OF WARD'S *View* CONTAINS AN EXTENSIVE account of the history of the Hindus, based on their *puranas* and mythological works, and a minute study of their social institutions and religious and domestic manners, together with brief notices, substantiated with illustrations, of their achievement in various creative and speculative realms of activity. But the main body of the book concerns their philosophical thought, and here "the author has . . . endeavoured to supply something from all these schools [the six systems of Hindu philosophy] with the view of enabling the reader to form an opinion of what was taught by these philosophers."[287] Added to this are extracts from the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads,* and brief individual sketches of the many Hindu thinkers with a summary of their teachings. We shall, however, for obvious reasons, confine our attention exclusively to the philosophical accounts and ignore what else Whitman might imaginably have learned about the Hindus from the rest of the book.

The volume is prefaced with quite elaborate "Introductory Remarks," in the course of which the author "attempt[s] a comparison of the Hindu philosophy with the systems which obtained among the Greeks and other nations."[288] In this section are presented the thoughts of the various Hindu philosophers under different heads of discussion, and though it is, to a certain degree, a repetition of what the other accounts have generally said, the systematic and perspicuous statement of these pages deserves notice, because if Whitman had not read another page else on philosophy