



Mysticism in "Song of Myself" (1855, 1881) by Walt Whitman

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"...In the first edition everything belongs together and everything helps to exhibit Whitman at his best, Whitman at his freshest in vision and boldest in language, Whitman transformed by a new experience, so that he wanders among familiar objects and finds that each of them has become a miracle. One can read the book today with something of the amazement and the gratitude for its great power that Emerson felt when reading it more than a century ago.

'Song of Myself' should be judged, I think, as one of the great inspired (and sometimes insane) prophetic works that have appeared at intervals in the Western world...the system of doctrine suggested by the poem is more Eastern than Western, it includes notions like metempsychosis and karma, and it might almost be one of those *Philosophies of India*...he was not a Christian at any stage of his career...he approached the Christian notion of a personal God, whom he invoked as the Elder Brother or the Great Camerado.... God is an abstract principle of energy that is manifested in every living creature...he seems much closer to the Brahman of the *Upanishads*, the absolute, unchanging, all-enfolding Consciousness, the Divine Ground from which all things emanate and to which all living things may hope to return.

...The 'incomparable things' that Emerson found in it are philosophical and religious principles. Its subject is a state of illumination [inner light] induced by two (or three) separate moments of ecstasy. In more or less narrative sequence it describes those moments, their sequels in life, and the doctrines to which they give rise. The doctrines are not expounded by logical steps or supported by arguments; instead they are presented dramatically, that is, as the new convictions of a hero, and they are revealed by successive unfoldings of his states of mind.

The hero as pictured in the frontispiece--this hero named 'I' or 'Walt Whitman' in the text--should not be confused with the Whitman of daily life. He is...a dramatized or idealized figure, and he is put forward as a representative American workingman, but one who prefers to loaf and invite his soul. Thus, he is rough, sunburned, bearded; he cocks his hat as he pleases, indoors or out; but in the text of the first edition he has no local or family background, and he is deprived of strictly individual characteristics, with the exception of curiosity, boastfulness, and an abnormally developed sense of touch. His really distinguishing feature is that he has been granted a vision, as a result of which he has realized the potentialities latent in every American and indeed, he says, every living person... This dramatization of the hero makes it possible for

the living Whitman to exalt himself--but also to poke mild fun at the hero for his gab and loitering, for his tall talk...and for sounding his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. The religious feeling in 'Song of Myself' is counterpoised by a humor that takes the form of slangy and mischievous impudence or drawling Yankee self-ridicule.

...The true structure of the poem is not primarily logical but psychological, and is not a geometric figure but a musical progression... It comes closer to being a rhapsody or tone poem, one that modulates from theme to theme, often changing in key and tempo, falling into reveries and rising toward moments of climax, but always preserving its unity of feeling as it moves onward in a wavelike flow. It is a poem that bears the marks of having been conceived as a whole and written in one prolonged burst of inspiration, but its unity is also the result of conscious art, as can be seen from Whitman's corrections in the early manuscripts. He did not recognize all the bad lines, some of which survive in the printed text, but there is no line in the first edition that seems false to a single prevailing tone... The repetitions are always musical variations and amplifications.... He preferred to let one image suggest another image, which in turn suggests a new statement of mood or doctrine. His themes modulate into one another by pure association, as in a waking dream...

First sequence (chants 1-4): the poet or hero introduced to his audience. Leaning and loafing at his ease, 'observing a spear of summer grass,' he presents himself as a man who lives outdoors and worships his own naked body, not the least part of which is vile. He is also in love with his deeper self or soul, but explains that it is not to be confused with his mere personality. His joyful contentment can be shared by you, the listener, 'For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.'

Second sequence (chant 5): the ecstasy. This consists in the rapt union of the poet and his soul, and it is described--figuratively, on the present occasion--in terms of sexual union. The poet now has a sense of loving brotherhood with God and with all mankind. His eyes being truly open for the first time, he sees that even the humblest objects contain the infinite universe...

Third sequence (chants 6-19): the grass. Chant 6 starts with one of Whitman's brilliant transitions. A child comes with both hands full of those same leaves from the fields. 'What is the grass?' the child asks--and suddenly we are presented with the central image of the poem, that is, the grass as symbolizing the miracle of common things and the divinity (which implies both the equality and the immortality of ordinary persons). During the remainder of the sequence, the poet observes men and women--and animals too--at their daily occupations. He is part of this life, he says, and even his thoughts are those of all men in all ages and lands...the people with a few exceptions (such as the trapper and his bride) are those whom Whitman has known all his life, while the scenes described at length are Manhattan streets and Long Island beaches or countryside....the poet merely roams, watches, and listens, like a sort of Tiresias [as in 'The Waste Land']....

Fourth sequence (chants 20-25): the poet in person. 'Hankering, gross, mystical, nude,' he venerates himself as august and immortal, but so, he says, is everyone else.... All life to him is such a miracle of beauty that the sunrise would kill him if he could not find expression for it--'If I could not now and always send sunrise out of me.' The sequence ends with a dialogue between the poet and his power of speech, during which the poet insists that his deeper self--'the best that I am'--is beyond expression [ineffable].

Fifth sequence (chants 26-29): ecstasy through the senses [compare Jonathan Edwards on sense impressions]. Beginning with chant 26, the poem sets out in a new direction. The poet decides to be completely passive: 'I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen.' What he hears at first are quiet familiar sounds like the gossip of flames on the hearth and the bustle of growing wheat; but the sounds rise quickly to a higher pitch, becoming the matchless voice of a trained soprano, and he is plunged into an ecstasy of hearing, or rather of Being. Then he starts over again, still passively, with the sense of touch, and finds himself rising to the ecstasy of sexual union. This time the union is actual, not figurative, as can be seen from the much longer version of chant 29 preserved in an early notebook.

Sixth sequence (chants 30-38): the power of identification.... The poet sees far into space and time; 'afoot with my vision' he ranges over the continent and goes speeding through the heavens among tailed

meteors. His secret is the power of identification. Since everything emanates from the universal soul, and since his soul is of the same essence, he can identify himself with every object and with every person living or dead, heroic or criminal. Thus, he is massacred with the Texans at Goliad...he dies on the cross, and he rises again 'as one of an average unending procession.'

...Seventh sequence (chants 39-41): the superman. When Indian sages emerge from the state of samadhi or absorption, they often have the feeling of being omnipotent. It is so with the poet, who now feels gifted with superhuman powers. He is the universally beloved Answerer (chant 39), then the Healer, raising men from their deathbeds (40), and then the Prophet (41) of a new religion that outbids 'the old cautious hucksters' by announcing that men are divine and will eventually be gods.

Eighth sequence (chants 42-50): the sermon. 'A call in the midst of the crowd' is the poet's voice, 'orotund sweeping and final.' ...As strangers listen, he proclaims that society is full of injustice, but that the reality beneath it is deathless persons (chant 42); that he accepts and practices all religions, but looks beyond them to 'what is untried and afterward' (43); that he and his listeners are the fruit of ages, and the seed of untold ages to be (44); that our final goal is appointed: 'God will be there and wait till we come' (45); that he tramps a perpetual journey and longs for companions, to whom he will reveal a new world by washing the gum from their eyes--but each must then continue the journey alone (46); that he is the teacher of men who work in the open air (47); that he is not curious about God, but sees God everywhere, at every moment (48); that we shall all be reborn in different forms ('No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before'); and that the evil of the world is like moonlight, a mere reflection of the sun (49). The end of the sermon (chant 50) is the hardest passage to interpret in the whole poem. I think, though I cannot be certain, that the poet is harking back to the period after one of his ten thousand deaths, when he slept and slept long before his next awakening. He seems to remember vague shapes, and he beseeches these Outlines, as he calls them, to let him reveal the 'word unsaid.' Then turning back to this audience, 'It is not chaos or death,' he says. 'It is form and union and plan....it is eternal life....it is happiness.'

Ninth sequence (chants 51-52): the poet's farewell. Having finished his sermon, the poet gets ready to depart, that is, to die and wait for another incarnation or 'fold of the future,' while still inviting others to follow. At the beginning of the poem he had been leaning and loafing at ease in the summer grass. Now, having rounded the circle, he bequeaths himself to the dirt 'to grow from the grass I love.' I do not see how any careful reader, unless blinded with preconceptions, could overlook the unity of the poem in tone and image and direction.

...Whitman believed...that there is a distinction between one's mere personality and the deeper Self (or between ego and soul). [See Carl Jung] ...He believed that the Self (or atman, to use a Sanskrit word) is of the same essence as the universal spirit (though he did not quite say it is the universal spirit, as Indian philosophers do in the phrase 'Atman is Brahman'). He believed that true knowledge is to be acquired not through the senses or the intellect, but through union with the Self. At such moments of union (or 'merge,' as Whitman called it) the gum is washed from one's eyes...and one can read an infinite lesson in common things... This true knowledge is available to every man and woman, since each conceals a divine Self. Moreover, the divinity of all implies the perfect equality of all, the immortality of all, and the universal duty of loving one another.

Immortality for Whitman took the form of metempsychosis; and he believed that every individual will be reborn, usually but not always in a higher form. He had also worked out for himself something approaching the Indian notion of karma, which is the doctrine that actions performed during one incarnation determine the nature and fate of the individual during his next incarnation... By means of metempsychosis and karma, we are all involved in a process of spiritual evolution that might be compared to natural evolution....it has an ultimate goal, which appears to be the reabsorption of all things into the Divine Ground.

Most of Whitman's doctrines, though by no means all of them, belong to the mainstream of Indian philosophy.... Whitman might have found Indian sages or gurus and even whole sects that agreed with one or another of his heterodoxies (perhaps excepting his belief in material progress). One is tempted to say that instead of being a Christian heretic, he was an Indian rebel and sectarian.

...he seems at first glance to be vague or self-contradictory. There is, for example, his unusual combination of realism--sometimes brutal realism--and serene optimism. Today he is usually praised for the first, blamed for the second (optimism being out of fashion), and blamed still more for the inconsistency he showed in denying the existence of evil. The usual jibe is that Whitman thought the universe was perfect and was getting better every day. ...The universe was an eternal becoming for Whitman, a process not a structure, and it had to be judged from the standpoint of eternity. After his mystical experience, which seemed to offer a vision of eternity, he had become convinced that evil existed only as part of a universally perfect design. This explains his combination of realism and optimism, which seems unusual only in our Western world.

...There is no doubt that he was always a democrat politically--which is to say a Jacksonian Democrat, a Barnburner writing editorials against the Hunkers, a Free Soiler in sympathy, and then a liberal but not a radical Republican.... What he preaches throughout the poem is not political but religious democracy, such as was practiced by the early Christians [like Hawthorne]. Today it is practiced, at least in theory, by the Tantric sect.

...Indian philosophies...explain what the poet meant by the Open Road. It starts as an actual road that winds through fields and cities, but Whitman is doing more than inviting us to shoulder our duds and go hiking along it. The real journey is toward spiritual vision, toward reunion with the Divine Ground; and thus the Open Road becomes Whitman's equivalent for all the other roads and paths and ways that appear in mystical teachings. It reminds us of the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddhists and the Taoist Way... He said one should know 'the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.'

...It was a truly extraordinary achievement for him to rediscover the outlines of a whole philosophical system chiefly on the basis of his own mystical experience and with little help from his reading....there is more than a hint of Emerson's Neoplatonism. But Emerson, who regarded himself as a teacher not a prophet, had nothing to do with notions like metempsychosis or karma or the universe pictured as a road for traveling souls. His temporary disciple felt that he had gone far beyond the teacher and was venturing into an unexplored continent of the Self. What does it matter that his sense of discovery was largely based on ignorance of the mystical tradition! It could still encourage him to make real discoveries in style and symbol, and it could arouse a feeling of release and exhilaration in his readers.

This aspect of 'Song of Myself' becomes clearer when the poem is compared with another long work about the mystical experience, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.... Whitman, on the other hand, misleads as much as he inspires, and there is no doubt that he was the first to be misled, and very soon after writing 'Song of Myself.' At that point his exhilarating pride of discovery began to change into humorless arrogance. If he had been familiar with the mystical tradition as Eliot shows himself to be, Whitman would have been warned against the feeling of omnipotence that...often follows a mystical experience. We read in *Philosophies of India* that the adept reaches a point in his spiritual progress at which he becomes identified with the personal creator of the world illusion: 'inflation is only a subtle form of self-delusion. The candidate must conquer it, press beyond it, so that the anonymity of sheer being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ananda*) may break upon him as the transpersonal essence of the actual Self.'

Whitman, of course, had never heard of this purely anonymous or transpersonal state. Remaining for a long time in the dangerous phase of self-inflation (or 'dilation,' as he called it) and regarding himself as a God-inspired prophet, he kept looking about for other new doctrines to prophesy. The first of these he found was a rather bumptious American nationalism, which is already suggested in his prose introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (written after the poems), but which becomes more explicit in the new poems of the second or 1856 edition. Also in the second edition, he announced himself in an open letter to Emerson ('Dear Master') as the prophet of unashamed sex.... Soon afterward he dreamed of founding a new religion... During those years before the Civil War, Whitman was afflicted with megalomania to such an extent that he was losing touch with the realities, or at least the human possibilities, of American life.

...He had once been careful to distinguish the external self or personality from the deeper Self that he was celebrating in his greatest poem. Now he forgot the distinction and began to celebrate 'myself' in the guise of a simple separate person--greater than other persons, no longer standing aloof and unperturbed, but

greedy for praise and tortured with desires. This person, however, laid claim to all the liberties and powers that Whitman had once ascribed to the transpersonal Self. Anything that the person felt like saying was also the right and inspired thing to say. Composing great poems was a simple matter. All the person had to do was permit Nature--*his* nature--to speak 'without check with original energy.'

While dreaming crazy dreams, Whitman continued to live with his family in a little frame workingman's house in Brooklyn, where he shared a bed with his idiot brother. Thoreau on his first visit noted that the bed was unmade and that an unemptied chamberpot stood beneath it. Other literary men described their meetings with Whitman in a tone of fascinated horror that suggests the accounts of present-day visitors to North Beach or Big Sur or Venice West. Indeed, one cannot help feeling that the Whitman of those days was a predecessor of the beatniks: he had the beard, the untrimmed hair, and although his costume was different, it might be regarded as the 1860 equivalent of sweatshirt and sandals. Some of his conduct also resembled that of the Beat Generation. He stayed out of the rat race, he avoided the squares (preferring the company of omnibus drivers and deck hands on the ferries); he was 'real gone,' he was 'far out'; and he was writing poems in [the] freewheeling style that is prized in Beat Generation literature. Some of them should be read to loud music as a means of glossing over their faults and holding the listener's attention--not to the music of a jazz combo, like beatnik poetry, but perhaps to that of a regimental brass band.

A poet's conduct and his work are two ways of expressing the same habits of thinking. It was during those years just before the Civil War that Whitman first indulged himself in a whole collection of stylistic mannerisms....worst of all, the interminable bald inventories that read like the names of parts and organs in an anatomical chart or like the index to a school geography. In the first edition he had broken most of the nineteenth-century rules for elegant writing, but now he was violating an older literary convention, that of simply being considerate of one's readers.

Whitman's beatnik period, however, proved to be only a transitory phase of a life that had several other phases. The best record of his attitude during the period is the greatly expanded text of the third or 1860 edition, which is an engaging and impressive book for all its extravagant gestures, and which, after the first, is the other vintage edition of his poems. Soon after it was published, the Civil War gave a new direction to Whitman's career. His war poems are disappointing, with two or three exceptions, but the unselfish service in the army hospitals helped to establish him in still another personality, one he kept to the end: that of the good gray poet, and it was during the postwar years that he produced some of his most important work. Much of it shows that he was turning back toward the Eastern beliefs expressed in 'Song of Myself'....

Soon the notion of publishing a grand new book had to be put aside, as a result of the apoplectic stroke that Whitman suffered in January 1873.... He still regarded himself as a prophet, and a prophet's duty is to have been always right. It would have been better for his strictly poetic reputation if he had allowed the early illuminated Whitman to speak for himself, the bohemian or inflated Whitman to speak for himself, and the good gray poet to speak for himself, each in his separate fashion."

Malcolm Cowley
Introduction, *Leaves of Grass*, the first (1855) edition
(Viking Compass, 1963)