

## ANALYSIS

“Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass* (1855)



Walt Whitman

(1819-1892)

In 1855, genteel readers of the poem would have been shocked by its “obscenity” and Whitman’s other reactions against Victorianism: “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is... The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer.” See Thoreau visits Whitman.

The “Myself” in the poem is all humanity: “I am an acme of things accomplish’d, and I an encloser of things to be.... Immense have been the preparations for me...” The egalitarianism of the poem is total, equating by close juxtaposition a prostitute and the President. This is pastoralism to the max. The transcendentalism of Whitman is so pastoral in spirit that he includes puritan values in one line almost as an afterthought: “Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!” His sense of humor also is a pastoral characteristic: “I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself.” Walt, I think that would turn the groom into a Puritan on the spot and you would not be there long.

One structure in “Song of Myself” is respiratory. The rhythm of breathing fuses with rhythms of sexual intercourse, expressed by rhythms of his free verse. Since he is all humanity, there are varying rhythms within the one deep breath of the poet, who is lying down: “I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.” At about line 570, he says to himself, “Walt, you understand enough.... Why don’t you let it out then?” Later he revised the line to read, “Walt, you *contain* enough.... Why don’t you let it out then?” (italics added) He has been inhaling. As he inhales, he enlarges: “I am large, I contain multitudes.” This is an expansionist poem in an age of American expansion. Walt Whitman is America. Thereafter in the poem he is exhaling, until in section 44 he says, “It is time to explain myself.... Let us stand up.” Then he gives a sermon (42-50).

Michael Hollister (2015)

“The poet sets forth two principal beliefs: the first, a theory of universality (‘of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion’), is illustrated by lengthy catalogues of people and things; the second is that all things are equal in value (‘I am the poet of the Body and...of the Soul...not the poet of goodness only...of

wickedness also... I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.’) This equalitarian doctrine is based both on the theory of evolution and on a pantheistic belief; at one time Whitman is a mystic, and at another he proclaims, ‘Hurrah for positive science!’, while yet admitting that facts serve only to give entrance to ‘an area of my dwelling.’ This inconsistency, however, he confesses and accepts: ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself; (I am large, I contain multitudes.)’ and at the end he reiterates his mystical pantheism.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(1941; Oxford 1983)

“By no means Whitman’s greatest poem, though probably his most characteristic. It is a true microcosm, and one of the most self-revealing poems in literature.... It is the key to an understanding of Walt Whitman.... The poem begins with an assertion intended to challenge contemporary (and earlier) literature, which Whitman regarded as ‘class poetry’ representing a world where literature had spoken for the exceptional man, not for the simple, separate person or the en-masse....

He proposes to be the voice of the democracy, and he intends to speak at all hazards what he finds in himself as representative of the ‘divine average’.... He discovers that there is a world of sense perception in every man that is part of the eternal time stream and is far more important than what he calls the ‘latest dates’ and the routine of daily living. Through love and its instrument, the senses, comes the knowledge that all men, with God also, are brothers... Therefore the self-dramatized Walt Whitman speaks for all...sees himself in all people and all life, speaks for woman as well as man, for evil as well as good, and...feels unspeakable passionate love... Therefore, through him, long dumb voices of prisoners and slaves, the diseased and the despairing, the forbidden voices of sex and lust, speak at last, are clarified and transfigured....

Immense have been the preparations for this robust soul of his which symbolizes the soul of a new society.... In spirit and exhortation, and in its long catalogues of activities, it is an expansionist poem, as expansionist as its country and its century. It is also a prophetic poem in the Old Testament sense, for Whitman is urging a vigorous country to spiritualize its energy... Furthermore, it is a dramatic poem. The author plays a histrionic role, like a revivalist.... He is large, he contains multitudes. He can and does project a man of this age, great enough to feel with all, to love all, and to point them down the long brown road to full self-development. And this is the heart, though not the totality of Whitman’s message. He will say it in separate poems more completely and far better, but he will never unsay any of it.”

Henry Seidel Canby  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 477-80

“The present form of ‘Song of Myself’ is the result of many revisions, deletions, and additions made between 1855, the date of its first appearance, and 1881.... Strictly speaking, Whitman is not writing about himself. Many, perhaps most, of the experiences recorded in the poem are purely imaginary. His aim is to embrace the whole of human experience by means of imaginative sympathy. This power of imaginative sympathy, which Whitman possessed to an extraordinary degree, enables him to identify himself with all sorts and conditions of men. ‘Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,’ he declared; he becomes ‘the hounded slave’...and the scores of others described in the poem. He fraternizes with all; their interests are his (‘Whatever interests the rest interests me’). All men and women, moreover, are potentially equal in the sight of Whitman... ‘Song of Myself’ is perhaps the most thoroughly democratic poem in the literature of the world.”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*The Literature of the United States II*, 3rd edition  
(Scott Foresman 1953,1961,1966) 64

“The main item of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was, of course, ‘Song of Myself,’ the profound and lovely comic drama of the self which is Whitman’s best poem and contains in essence nearly all, yet not quite all, there is to *Leaves of Grass*. The comic spirit of the poem is of the characteristic American

sort, providing expression for a realism at once naturalistic and transcendental, for the wit, gaiety, and festive energy of all good comedy, and also for meditative soliloquy, at once intensely personal and strongly generic.... Read as autobiography 'Song of Myself,' like *Leaves of Grass* as a whole, seems remarkably ironic, covert, elusive, and given to skipping back and forth between the personal and the generic.... There is no doubt that Whitman had in abundance the symbol-seeing capacity of the Puritan-transcendentalist mind....

Generally speaking, Whitman's method is to mythicize the abstractions of democratic idealism. For Whitman, equality, freedom, and fraternity are pervasive and magical laws vibrantly revealed in the visible universe; and the self is a preternatural being, a numinous presence which is felt with all the wonder the primitive man feels in the presence of his god or tutelary spirit.... By a vast *tour de force* Whitman makes us believe that American democracy, the product of Christianity and European enlightenment, exists in a half-urban, half-pastoral world of primeval novelty, where the blessed and unfallen inhabitants gather to hear the songs and preachments of the bard, as the people of the forest gathered about Orpheus....

In Whitman's view of language...colloquial words best unite the 'natural' and the 'spiritual.' Therefore the poet will use words in such a way as to give them the freshness, raciness, and mythic significance of colloquial speech.... Thus in his ideas about words, as in his poetic practice, Whitman is paradoxically extremely civilized and extremely primitive. Both semanticist and bard, he is a kind of primitive I. A. Richards and a sophisticated Orpheus....What he lacks, as compared with Homer, for example, or Dante or Milton, is a mediating body of mythic narrative and metaphor. All such mediating metaphors struck Whitman as 'feudal' and therefore improper in democratic poetry. It was what he took to be the positive advantage of this attitude that led him to describe his poems as more 'subtle' than Homer with his poetry of 'acts and events' and Shakespeare with his poetry of 'characters.'

One circumstance that contributes to the general spontaneity of 'Song of Myself' is, in fact, Whitman's unsuccessful attempt to be an Emersonian or Wordsworthian moralist.... Whitman tries, indeed, to install himself in his poem on this high moral ground: He will, he says, first regenerate himself by leaving the fallacious artificialities of modern life and getting back to fundamentals; then, having perfected himself as the norm, he will summon all the world to him to be freed of its abnormalities. But although in the poem the self remains pretty much at the center of things, Whitman finds it impossible to accept the idea that is a norm. To the sententious prophet who 'promulgates' the normative self, the comic poet and ironic realist keep introducing other, disconcertingly eccentric selves....

So that as in all true, or high, comedy, the sententious, the too overtly insisted-on morality (if any) plays a losing game with ironical realism.... [Whitman] wished to invite society to correct itself by comparing itself with him... Whitman's comic poetry deflates pretensions and chides moral rigidity by opposing to them a diverse, vital, indeterminate reality.... If one finds 'Song of Myself' enjoyable at all, it is because one is conscious of how much of the poem, though the feeling in many of its passages need not perhaps have been comic at all, nevertheless appeals to one, first and last, in its comic aspect. The poem is full of odd gestures and whimsical acts; it is written by a neo-Ovidian poet for whom self-metamorphosis is almost as free as free association....

The 'self' who is the protagonist of Whitman's poem is a character portrayed in a recognizable American way; it illustrates the fluid, unformed personality exulting alternately in its provisional attempts to define itself and in its sense that it has no definition.... It is presumed that the self can become identical with all other selves in the universe, regardless of time and space. Not without precedent in Hindu poetry, this central metaphor is, as an artistic device, unique in American literature... Both politically and by nature man has 'identity,' in two senses of the word: on the one hand, he is integral in himself, unique, and separate; on the other hand, he is equal to, or even the same as, everyone else. Like the Concord transcendentalists, Whitman was easily led in prophetic moods to generalize the second term of the paradox of identity beyond the merely human world and with his ruthless equalitarianism to conceive the ALL, a vast cosmic democracy, placid, without episode, separation or conflict, though suffused, perhaps, with a bland illumination. More than anything else, it is this latter tendency which finally ruined Whitman as a poet, submerging as it did, his chief forte and glory--his entirely original, vividly realistic presentation of the comedy and pathos of 'the simple separate person'....

What finally happens is that Whitman loses his sense that his metaphor of self vs. en-masse is a paradox, that self and en-masse are in dialectic opposition. When this sense is lost the spontaneously eventful, flowing, and largely indeterminate universe of 'Song of Myself' is replaced by a universe that is both mechanical and vaguely abstract. Whatever, in this universe, is in a state of becoming is moving toward the ALL, and the self becomes merely the vehicle by which the journey is made.... In 'Song of Myself,' however, the self is not felt to be incomplete; it has no questing odyssey to make. It stands aggressively at the center of things.... The self appears to be the offspring of a happy union of body and soul; sublime and delightful thoughts issue from the mind in the same miraculous way as the grass from the ground.... Of great importance is the fact that most of 'Song of Myself' has to do not with the self searching for a final identity but with the self escaping a series of identities which threaten to destroy its lively and various spontaneity. This combination of attitudes is what gives 'Song of Myself' the alternately ecstatic and gravely musing, pastoral, godlike stability one feels at the center...

Yet it would be wrong to attribute any clear cut structure to 'Song of Myself'.... A Jacksonian Democrat, Whitman was not an admirer of federal unity, either in a nation or a poem. He was content to make his poem a loose congeries of states and half-settled territories.... His style would be organic; he would 'speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance' of animals and growing things. Although capable of finely pictorial images, Whitman composed more by ear than by eye, and his ear being attuned to music of the looser, more variable sort, such as the Italian opera, he strung his poems together on a free melodic line and by means of motifs, voices, recapitulations, recitatives, rests, *crescendi* and *diminuendi*.... Sections 24-28, though in places rather obscure, contain the essence of Whitman's drama of identity.... In Section 26 both the metaphorical effects and the subject matter shift from the visual to the auditory....

The mysticism we ordinarily associate with Whitman is less akin to Dionysian than to Oriental and Quaker religion. His mode of religious contemplation, taking it by and large, tends toward passivity and quietism. There is much of this quietism even in 'Song of Myself.' But the poem as a whole takes its tone from something more vital, indeterminate, violent, and primitive. And it is only to find the most appropriate name for this that one hits on the word 'Dionysian'.... There can be no doubt that 'Song of Myself' made sex a possible subject for American literature....

Considered as a comic poem, 'Song of Myself' combines Dionysian gaiety and an impulse toward verbal artificiality with the tone and cultural presuppositions of American humor--a striking feat of hybridization certainly, yet no more so than that which produced *Moby-Dick*. The intention here is not to deny the justice of Emerson's remark that Whitman's poem was 'a remarkable mixture of the *Bhagvatgeeta* and the *New York Herald*' or of the voluminous but one-sided academic scholarship which, following Emerson's remark, has regarded 'Song of Myself' as an amalgam of Oriental philosophy and American realism.... If indeed there are so many parallels between 'Song of Myself' and 'Self-Reliance' [Emerson] that we almost think the poem a versification of the essay, it is nevertheless true that the parallels are not confined to the philosophic or moral message....

In 'Song of Myself' there is none of that straining desperation, that gloomy, willful, grammatical Romanticism which always threatens to take the joy out of the egotism of Byron, Carlyle, and sometimes of Nietzsche...no sense of the fated will of the European nineteenth century urging itself toward its melodramatic suicide.... Whitman's mind--as exemplified in 'Song of Myself'--was perfectly Utopian and this is, of course, one reason why we do not freely read and enjoy his greatest poem. The modern mind has been made so fully aware of the historical tragedies implied by Utopian politics that it has forgotten the distinctive human virtues of the radical Utopian vision. One may add that only in his early poems is Whitman the free spirit. Although there is still some radical Utopian feeling in such a later work as *Democratic Vistas*, the same impulses which find poetic expression in 'Song of Myself' take on...a conservative, prudential tone....

It is probably true that more than anyone else, more than Blake or Baudelaire, Whitman made the city poetically available to literature.... Although actually he was much more cityfied than any of his peers among the great American authors, Whitman shared with them Thoreau's ideas on 'wildness.' One might argue that Whitman's descriptions of the city made possible T. S. Eliot's 'Waste Land'.... Eliot apparently regards Whitman's claim to originality, at least of poetic language, as spurious. But it must be noted that

'The Waste Land' is not the first 'universal' English poem loosely organized by a stream-of-consciousness or musical technique, having a protagonist called 'I' who merges regardless of time and space with a variety of historic and mythical personages, and celebrating the recurring cycles of death and rebirth—'Song of Myself' is. This thematic similarity need not be pressed as a case of Whitman's 'influence'; two poems could hardly be more dissimilar in tone. The affinity seems rather to be a coincidence of two very different minds asking the same implicit question: What, in a spiritually eclectic... 'American' world, is the status and fate of the self? It is probable... that both 'Song of Myself' and 'The Waste Land' were influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*, which may be loosely described as thematically similar to these two poems.

A more direct influence of Whitman is that upon Joyce. *Finnegans Wake*, the culminating work, the summa of the contemporary mythic movement in literature...seems confessedly to owe a debt to Whitman. The bard referred to as 'old Whiteman self (p.263) is made to say (p.551) 'I foredreamed for thee...the soul of everyelsesbody rolled into its olesoleself.' Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, Joyce's protagonist, has the same capacity as the 'I' of 'Song of Myself' to merge ('at no spatial time') with and become anyone and anything in the universe'.... In a very real sense, then, *Finnegans Wake* is the ultimate development of a literary method 'foredreamed' in 'Song of Myself'....

The idea of perfect freedom, of the 'eligibility' of the self to everything else--the nation, the cosmos, all other selves--this is the valuable illusion created by Whitman's first great poem.... Granted, these are not qualities which excite our age, which is very much an age of moral gloom. Granted, too, that Whitman's moral vision is dubious and contradictory. One must admit, furthermore, that although it has its own virtues, Whitman's Utopian version of the American pastoral myth has so far proved less artistically dependable, less suggestive of imaginative possibility than the myth as conceived by the other classic authors. And despite Whitman's much asserted Americanism, theirs seems just at present to be historically the more influential myth.... Whitman achieved the remarkable feat of being an eccentric by taking more literally and mythicizing more simply and directly than anyone else the expressed intentions and ideals of our democracy. He is, in 'Song of Myself,' the only really 'free' American....

Whitman emulated our democratic American ideals to an extent unexampled among our great writers, and there can be no doubt that many of his moral utterances and even his poetic effects are produced by the sublime literalness of the democratic assumptions which were so faithfully registered on his plastic mind and temperament.... The pleasure of the poem consists in our watching, in the poem, the conscious mind as it confronts so awe-inspiring an array of novel and incongruous images from the waking dream life of the poet."

Richard Chase  
*Walt Whitman Reconsidered*  
(William Sloane 1955) 58-98

"The poem...can be divided into the following parts: sections 1-5: entry into the mystical state; sections 6-16: awakening of self; sections 17-32: purification of self (but by glorifying, not mortifying, the senses); sections 33-37: illumination and the dark night of the soul; sections 38-43: union (emphasis on faith and love); sections 44-49: union (emphasis on perception); sections 50-52: emergence from mystical state."

Miller  
*A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*  
(U Chicago 1957)

"'Song of Myself' is the clearest, surest, most self-contained and complete, and most widely gauged product of Whitman's desire to create an American epic and of the metamorphosis of genre which that desire necessarily brought about. Most students of 'Song of Myself' have wished to find in it some firm structural principle. It is as though they would measure it by such dialectically unifying standards and forms as those which Whitman strove to transcend.... In Whitman's conception, this new kind of poem was more a process than a form.... It is as if Barlow's Columbus were allowed to have a vision which would be demonstrably his and his alone, not one which had been given to him..."

The Whitman of 'Song of Myself' surveys his whole world, his milieu and ambiance--but not according to any necessary order or chronology. He looks when he wills and interprets as he wills. There is a movement here, but not a form. It is essential to the meaning of the poem that the movement be unique; for the movement derives from the motion of the protagonist's sensibility.... The world is too large, too much, to have an imitable order or pattern. It is just there.... The argument of 'Song of Myself' moves in gross outline something like this:

Phase I. 1-5: The initial insight into the creative nature ('the procreant urge') of the self and the initiating of creative power which follows spontaneously upon that insight.

Phase II. 6-16: Recognition of the relation of the self to its world and a seeking after the metamorphoses which follow spontaneously upon that recognition.

Phase III. 17-25: The roles of the self in and through its world; a return to the matter of 1-5, but with this difference--that self-knowledge now exists objectively, a product not of sheer inwardness as in 1-5 but of a spontaneously formalized relation between the self and its world. Now the poet is not simply a force, but a force defined in terms of its world; now he is fully a person and can name himself: 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son.'

Phase IV. 26-52: The poet (as person) fully at home in his newly defined world, fully sure of himself and his 'procreant urge.' He no longer needs to seek his world (as in 6-16); he can openly and lovingly address it, as he at once creates and controls it and as he is created and controlled by it. He is thus a religion, God-like in himself...

The structure of 'Song of Myself,' then, evinces little of that internal-external sense of necessity (in its most extreme forms, an Aristotelian beginning, middle and end; or a New Critical paradox, tension, ambiguity, or irony) which we tend to demand of an achieved literary work. True enough, the argument of the poem centers on points of psychic intensity; nonetheless, there is no fixed rational or affective scheme whereby we may decide that a given section should or should not have begun where it begins and ended where it ends... It is this 'formal' difficulty which has most often disturbed readers of Whitman and sent them to a poem like 'Out of the Cradle,' with its tight, firm internal design."

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
(Princeton 1961) 72-75

"This poem is often regarded as Whitman's most important and most characteristic work. It was first published without title in 1855; in 1856 it was called 'A Poem of Walt Whitman, an American'; in 1860, simply 'Walt Whitman'; and finally in the 1881 edition, 'Song of Myself.' In the first lines the poet states that, though he sings himself, 'what I assume you shall assume...' The 'I' is the fictional poet-messiah roaming through the mystery and beauties of creation, until finally: 'I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.'

In no other poem did Whitman exhibit such intense ecstasy, such original and sharply focused imagery. In some passages the images pile up in long lists or 'catalogs,' but even these give a sense of space and plenitude. And yet the poem is so loosely constructed that many critics have been unable to find any order in it. The fifty-two sections may be considered as separate poems, but they do supplement each other in an aesthetic progression. Most critics now agree that the first (1855) version was best. As Malcolm Cowley puts it, 'the text of the first edition is the purest text for "Song of Myself," since many of the later corrections were also corruptions of the style and concealments of the original meaning.' In some of his revisions Whitman weakened his imagery, and the insertions of allusions to the Civil War seem out of place. However, the poem was not fundamentally changed from 1855 to 1881 (the final version). All versions justify one in calling this one of the great lyrics of cosmic emotion in world literature."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“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)

"What to early commentators seemed a kind of chaos of poetic exuberance is now recognized as deliberate structure--perhaps an early modern example of the method of free association, but artful and controlled in its reporting of what comes into awareness. The movement of 'Song of Myself' is circular rather than progressive, returning upon itself in evocation of ecstasy and confession, of identification and recognition, of rapturous union with earth and spirit--truly a celebration both personal and universal."

Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds.  
*Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass*  
(Norton 1965)

"'Song of Myself' is probably the greatest long poem in American literature, unless that place should be reserved for 'Lilacs.' But unlike the later poem, it is also extremely uneven poetically, incoherent logically (that is to say, seemingly without rational structure and progress), and in places 'tasteless.' The chief reason it does not invite parody is that in it Whitman at times seems to be parodying himself. No wonder it has been so often misunderstood by those critics who have not ignored it....

An epic tells a story of heroes or mythic prototypes and tells it objectively. 'Song of Myself' tells no story, has only the speaker as a 'character,' and is wholly subjective. To call this a new kind of 'epic' takes us a good way into the mind of the critic but not very far into the poem, for whatever epiclike qualities 'Song of Myself' has are not central to its purpose and meaning. Though Whitman was probably conscious that he was echoing Virgil when he opened his poem by saying that he would 'celebrate' and 'sing' himself, as Virgil had 'sung' arms and the man, an interpretation which took this echo to be a sufficient clue to the poem to follow would end by making the poem an expression of secular humanism, as some readers would like to have it be...

It is not quite 'inverted mysticism,' either, as James Miller, one of Whitman's more sympathetic contemporary critics, would have it. We are nearer the center of the poem here, but not close enough. 'Song of Myself' is a mystical poem, but mystical in the Transcendental manner: It reaches its vision of union with the divine by the *via affirmativa*, short-cutting the journey of the more traditional Christian mystics by affirming the goodness of the created world from the very beginning, not simply at the end, after having turned away from it.

Miller's analysis, it is true, does more to explain certain puzzling passages and apparent transitions than any other yet offered, but the final effect of juxtaposing the medieval mystic way as described by Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* with Whitman's way is, it seems to me, to diminish the poem, both by devaluing a

part of its richness and by making Whitman's way look like a deviation from an agreed-upon standard. Mysticism did not end with the Middle Ages, nor is it confined to Christianity, or indeed to any of the higher religions. I do not find Asselineau's 'body mysticism' a very fortunate phrase, but certainly it is nearer the mark than 'inverted' mysticism. 'Erotic mysticism' would seem to me to be better yet. Only if we have not learned Whitman's 'lesson' do we need to assume that there is anything 'pseudo' about mysticism which depends upon erotic experience.

'Song of Myself' is, as Thoreau implied when he characterized its author, both very brave and very American. It is 'brave' in the way its speaker unlocks at all costs his human doors, laying himself open to ridicule; brave in the way the poem pushes its truth to the point of absurdity to test its validity; most of all, perhaps, brave in daring to transform embarrassing deviation into a source of strength and faith.... It turns out that the 'modern man' celebrated in the poem shares Taylor's awareness of death and his faith in God, but also Barlow's confidence in the new land; shares also Thoreau's sense of the need for waiting and his cultivation of consciousness, and Emerson's belief that the world is the body and blood of Spirit and that the self must daily transcend itself....affirming, religiously, the value of every *self* beyond fact and circumstance and time, this 'Walt Whitman,' symbol of 'the modern man,' is finally even better than Thoreau thought. He is not only 'brave' and 'American' but universal....

There is a certain inappropriateness in forcing the parallel between the poem's stages and the stages of the mystic way so far as Miller must for the sake of his thesis. An 'inverted' mystic ought to be standing on his head, but Whitman stood on feet mortised and tenoned in the granite of his own experience as illuminated by Transcendental doctrine. If Miller's analogy with the traditional Western mystic way seems to me a little forced, Malcolm Cowley's analogy with Indian religion is interesting and suggestive, but partially misleading. Admitting that Whitman knew very little of Indian doctrines at the time he wrote 'Song of Myself,' Cowley takes the poem to be an 'inspired prophecy' of knowledge that only became known in this country much later. But why multiply mysteries? All of Whitman's chief doctrines may be found in Emerson....

I would go further and say that despite the enormous--and from some points of view crucial--differences between the two poems, 'Song of Myself' and *Four Quartets* are far more similar than we have realized... Each seeks in personal history for clues to the meaning of life and death; each finds that clue in mystical experience, Whitman apparently reporting an actual experience of his own, Eliot speculating on, and imaginatively recreating, the experiences of others; and each comes to the conclusion that whatever appearances may indicate, come what may the fire and the rose, the suffering and love, are one."

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 174-76, 642-43, 647-48

"His egoism is suffused and tempered with a strenuous empathy. Egoism is scarcely an adequate word for what obtains here: the unabridged Webster's dictionary supplies, with the warning *Rare*, the word 'egotheism.' The hero of 'Song of Myself' is a god, whose palms cover continents, but also a God, who enters into the egos of the suffering: 'I am the hounded slave....' The I-centered universe has a geometrical property which Whitman does not blink at: each phenomenon, as it moves into the ego's sensational field, is absolute. There is no relativity, almost no form.... But Whitman never ceased willing a Oneness with his fellow-man and it redeems his solipsism from selfishness and smallness."

John Updike  
*Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*  
(Vintage/Random House 1984) 111, 116

"Cleansing rhetoric dominates the famous opening section of 'Song of Myself'.... The rejection of perfumed houses and rooms seems to be part of Whitman's animus against lurid sensational fiction; he always associated such fiction with entrapment and artifice.... Cleansing rhetoric is so rife in *Leaves of Grass* that one is tempted to regard many erotic moments in the poem as intentional purifications of popular sexual images. Take, for example, the first long sex passage in 'Song of Myself,' describing the

rich woman's erotic fantasy about the twenty-eight young men she sees bathing in a nearby stream...  
Voyeuristic fantasy is stripped of malice and is conveyed through refreshing, baptismal images of nature."

David S. Reynolds  
*Beneath the American Renaissance*  
(Harvard 1989) 329-30

Michael Hollister (2015)