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“SONG OF MYSELF”:
THE TOUCH OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Critics who have studied the Eastern elements in “Song of Myself” have noted that even though Walt Whitman may have been influenced by the mysticism of the American Transcendentalists, he must also have had his own mystical experiences from which to draw. James E. Miller describes “Song of Myself” as “the dramatic representation of an inverted mystical experience,”¹ and divides the fifty-two sections of the poem into seven groups corresponding to his seven stages of the mystic way. Miller calls Whitman’s experience inverted because it deviates from Indian philosophy (as commonly construed) by ennobling instead of mortifying the body, and by cultivating to their highest potential instead of renouncing the senses. On the other hand, Malcolm Cowley says that Whitman reinvents Indian the philosophy for himself after an experience of samadhi, or absorption,² in which the body and soul, or matter and consciousness, are united, a unity indeed predicted by the nondualistic Vedanta. Yet the poet’s mystical state, in which the body is experienced as one of the expressions of consciousness, is not exclusively Eastern — nor inverted —but universal in a truly modern sense, for the representation of the mystic way in “Song of Myself” is confirmed not only by Vedantic literature, but also by our scientific understanding of nature — as of the interchange between matter and energy, which seem to be different but in fact are two sides of the same coin. In other words, Whitman shows that the mystic unity of body and soul (matter and energy) is universally open to experience at any time and place by all men regardless of race or creed, and regardless of whether or not they have read the Bhagavad Gita, as Whitman himself had not.

A situation in nature analogous to the mystic unity of matter and consciousness, two apparently distinct phenomena, is defined by thermodynamics as the critical point in the boiling of water, that state where the pure vapor phase has identical properties with a pure liquid at the same pressure and temperature. That is, at the molecular boundary between water and vapor, before the water actually become vapor, the liquid phase and the vapor phase have identical properties. Thus, water and vapor seem to be different when observed under some conditions of pressure and temperature but in fact share identical
properties under the conditions of the critical point, a sort of transcendent
dental state in which all differences dissolve. Likewise, whereas to an
individual in the ordinary state of mind, consciousness and the body
seem to be separate, in the transcendental state of mind they become
the same. Moreover, because transcending can occur at any time and
any place and still reveal the same underlying oneness, the fundamen-
tal and true reality of the cosmos must be that of the critical point, the
unity of the transcendent of which all difference is but a phase of
manifestation, just as changing matter is but a phase of constant
energy. Following Miller’s scheme of the seven stages of the mystic
way in “Song of Myself,” I shall try to show the importance of the
integration between soul and body in Whitman’s experience of cosmic
consciousness. Diane Kepner notes that matter and spirit for Whit-
man are inseparably fused.3 I would add more explicitly that not only
are they inseparably fused, but they are also one and the same, that in
the poet’s experience of the transcendent all differences dissolve.

James Miller designates sections 1-5 as the “entry into the mysti-
cal state.”4 Whitman opens with his central theme of unity: “I cele-
brate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume,
/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”5 The Self
that Whitman refers to belongs to everyone; it is the oversoul or
Atman, the simplest form of awareness, or pure consciousness, the
source of all manifestation just as water is the source of vapor. It is the
large Self as opposed to the small self — or transcendental conscious-
ness as opposed to ego consciousness. Whitman invites his soul to loaf,
leaving “creeds and schools in abeyance,” because only by trans-
cending the dividing intellect can one attain unbounded awareness. In
section 2, he emphasizes the role of the body in such an experience: “I
will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I
am mad for it to be in contact with me.” He celebrates each of the five
senses as being important, for they all lead to pure awareness just as
the five fingers lead to the palm. The natural innocence of Whitman’s
experience can be seen from his refusal to be like the “talkers” and the
“trippers and askers” in sections 3 and 4. Although these sceptics
identify with the finite and doubting intellect, Whitman, expanding
beyond finite identification toward nonchanging and eternal Being,
becomes the witness of all activity: “Apart from the pulling and
hauling stands what I am .... I witness and wait.” Even as witness
though he never renounces the body, the reflector of Being. On the
contrary, section 5 brings the symbolic marriage between body and
soul, the critical point of Whitman’s entry into the mystical state of pure consciousness, a union consummated by sexual imagery. Through this union, the mystic achieves intuition, or the immediacy of divine knowledge: “Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.” Although the mystical vision occurs through contact with the Self, the complete knowledge of the mystic, the knowledge of the Absolute, can come only through the perfection of the physical body, because only when perfected can the nervous system reflect the Self, or the Atman-Brahman, to its fullest extent. Whitman apparently knew from direct experience that to renounce any one of the senses would be to render the capacity for pure knowledge incomplete.

The second stage of the mystic way, sections 6-16, is the “awakening of the Self.” In section 6, Whitman employs grass imagery as a key to divine reality by relating the grass to Self, God, life, and death. Just as for the “smallest sprout ... there is really no death,” so for the Self, once it begins to exist, there is no death but only evolution or metempsychosis: “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses.” Whitman, therefore, experiences the Self as infinite: “I pass death with the dying and birth with the new wash’d babe .... / I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and (fathomless) as myself” (sect. 7). From sections 8-10 Whitman observes the cycle of life, focusing on the Self in all of its varied aspects of manifestation. The universal unity of the soul expresses itself in the poet’s sympathetic reaching out to all of creation, to lowly and humble men as well as to animals: “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me” (sect. 14). Thus, the Self is universal not only subjectively but also objectively: “And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them” (sect. 15). As Whitman discovers, when the Self is infinite, then the body is also infinite, unbounded like the symbolic grass, or the critical point of water and vapor. Being awake in the Self, Whitman dramatically represents the universal expression of consciousness in the world of matter through his symbolic identification with all existence: “I see in them and myself the same old law” (sect. 14).

The “purification of self,” the next stage of the mystic way, covers sections 17-32. As seen from their overlapping values, these stages chartered by the critics do not necessarily correspond to the actual sequences of a mystical experience. No two experiences will be the same, and even Whitman, in writing his poem, may not have duplicated the exact sequence of his own experience, which in the post-mystical state would have become a hazy memory.
Miller believes that Whitman’s purification of the self by ennobling and accepting instead of mortifying and reviling the body reverses the traditional values of mysticism, and he says that in Whitman “the degraded and rejected are ennobled and accepted through a reconciliation of opposites usually considered irreconcilable.” Whitman’s experience, however, is inverted only in relation to the Vedanta misunderstood, which in India has its own tradition, for the Vedanta professes nothing if not the reconciliation of opposites. To think that in the mystic way the body must be renounced for the Self is to confuse the end with the means. Nonattachment to the body is not the means for transcending duality; rather it is the end of the integration between body and soul. The poet realizes this when he reinvents non-dualistic Vedanta in section 21:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

“Translate in a new tongue” means that the stress and pain of the body, which are usually oppressive, are rendered innocuous by the man who, established in the absolute fulfillment of Being, is able to witness experience as Whitman does beginning in section 4. Throughout this stage, Whitman, by contact with the Self, can reconcile opposites such as body and soul, vice and virtue, past and present, spirit and science, self and others, seen and unseen, inflow and outflow, and the miraculous and common. This fusion of opposites occurs through the purifying or spiritualizing of the physical self, the senses of which then become divine: “I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing, hearing, feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle” (sect. 24). For the Self to be a living reality, therefore, the physical and the spiritual must be reconciled: “(What is less or more than a touch?) / Logic and sermons never convince” (sect. 30). In section 32, Whitman acknowledges that only animals seem to possess the attributes of the purified Self, as though man left them behind negligently in the course of evolution.

In the fourth stage of the mystic path, the “illumination and the Dark Night of the Soul” of sections 33-37, Whitman revels in the living reality of the infinite Self, the truth of which he has always intuited,
and catalogues the diversity and range of his Self in its life beyond the boundaries of time and space. This experience, however, is followed by the dark night of the soul, the absence of the divine that results in the tragedy of defeat, like the Texas massacre of section 34, as well as the tragedy of victory, like the "old-time sea-fight" of section 35. Without a basis in Being, even the positive aspects of life are meaningless. As Whitman's experience of the dark night of the soul indicates, his cosmic consciousness is not complete or permanent. On the contrary, this lapse prefigures the ending of "Song of Myself" in which the poet returns from his cosmic journey.

From this abasement, however, the poet ascends to the first stage of union in sections 38-43, the union of faith and love. This union occurs through the poet's identification with the transcendent as symbolized by the figure of Christ:

That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion
and bloody crowning.

I remember now, I
resume the overstaid fraction (sect. 38).

Whitman's "separate look" again implies the quality of witnessing that results from having remembered and resumed the "overstaid fraction" of the Self he had forgotten in the dark night of the soul. In section 39, the Christ figure merges with "the friendly and flowing savage," again symbolizing the integration between body and soul. The savage represents a manifestation of the natural law inherent in consciousness, his "Behavior lawless as snow-flakes, words simple as grass." The poet, identifying himself with the Christ-savage, freely gives of his boundless Self in sections 40-42. The ability for helping others stems not from a dogmatic faith in the "sermons, creeds, theology" as related to Jehovah, Isis, or Buddha; rather it stems from a direct cognition of the harmony and order of the universe by the "fathomless human brain." Although Whitman accepts the religion of all ages — "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing worship and ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern" (sect. 43) — he substantiates his faith through the experience of union, the awakening of the Self through the perfection of the body.

The second stage of union, sections 44-49, is that of perception. The poet begins by explaining himself:
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It is time to explain myself — let us stand up.

What is known I strip away,
I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

Theoretically, the Unknown is that which cannot be experienced by the senses. Whitman, however, translates his perception of the Unknown into the most refined sense experience, such as the apprehension of the Self in terms of infinite time and space. Just as through divine perception the grass is seen as a key to the Absolute, so, in section 47, "The nearest gnat is an explanation, and a drop of motion of waves a key." As Diane Kepner says, "the poet sees a unity in the universe that reveals itself in every particular object at every instant of time. He sees in every object both change and changelessness." In section 48, the poet reiterates the essence of union that makes his divine perception possible: "I have said that the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul." Thus, if the Self is not more than the body, and if in cosmic consciousness the Self is infinite, then the body must also be infinite, which is why the poet can see the greatness of God through the senses: "I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then." And in section 49, "I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven, / O sun — O grass of graves — O perpetual transfers and promotions." To acquire this perception of the truth, this knowledge of the soul's immortality, each man must travel upon the mystic way for himself because the culturing of his own body is indispensible: "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself " (sect. 46).

In the three final sections of "Song of Myself" the poet returns from cosmic consciousness with the message of eternal life and happiness. Although his mind has difficulty putting the Absolute into words, and his body, exhausted from being out of union with the Self, must sleep, he still remembers his cosmic nature:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

While the Self waits to be reawakened within the body of the poet, it also waits to be discovered by the reader's senses in the grass under his soles. And as Kepner explains, a leaf of grass is body and soul inseparable. As "Song of Myself" illustrates, therefore, once unity is established on the level of consciousness through the integration of
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body and soul, a commensurate unity is perceived everywhere because knowledge is structured in consciousness and changes with the level of consciousness.

NOTES

1 A Critical Guide to "Leaves of Grass" (Chicago, 1957), p. 7. Though many other scholars have studied "Song of Myself," I shall limit my essay to revaluing the mystical elements in the poem as misinterpreted by Miller. Like Miller, I use the 1881/1892 text, although Malcolm Cowley, to whom I refer, uses the first edition.


3 "From Spheres to Leaves: Walt Whitman's Theory of Nature in 'Song of Myself','" AL, 51(1979), 192.

4 Miller, p.8.

5 Whitman, "Song of Myself," p.28.

6 Miller, p.13.

7 Kepner, p.197.

8 Kepner, p.196.