

## LEAVES OF US

By Brenda M. Anderson

"Heh," said my Soul,  
"From my Body write of Walt (cuz we are one)  
That he should fulfill his wish and return,  
Across sextillions of connections, the chants continuing their wandering,  
Across infinite webs of atoms to this very page,  
(Across fertilised lawns, a few trees, a bit of ocean).  
With a confused look on my face I sing on,  
On and on yet never really capturing Walt in words, and I, Here, Now,  
Sign for Body and Soul, and set this essay to my name,  
Brenda Margaret Anderson

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is Whitman's attempt to sketch a frameless portrait of his 'self.' This portrait allows the reader to see Whitman's ideas concerning identity in such a way that the very process of reading Whitman's poem creates a relationship that parallels his points. The endeavour of defining selfhood has been taken the form of a philosophical debate spanning millenia. Yet, the attempt to grasp selfhood through definition is logocentric, which does injustice to the infinity of what "self" is. The attempt to contain self so as to understand it limits its possibilities. The self not only should not, but cannot be contained as an essence -- the mystery surrounding what "self" may be is part of what is valuable about it. It is neither static nor fixed. Instead of attempting to define, I will instead explore Whitman's poetics and seek to compare his notions of selfhood with certain ideas that have arisen out of the debate. These comparisons will be to Transcendentalist notions, the reaction against Cartesian (and ultimately Platonic) dualism, and the similarities to a kind of "Eastern" idea of self as at one with the cosmos. This exploration can neither take the form of a complete analysis nor a setting up of borders around Whitman's self. He simply cannot be contained in language. But since this paper is also Walt Whitman, hopefully part of who/what (grammar fails me) Whitman is will

make itself present - there are many ways of knowing.

Only through an exploration can we see part of Whitman and the infinity of selves he presents through the act of literary creation and consumption.

"Song of Myself" opens with the line "I Celebrate myself, and sing myself" (Whitman, chant 1). Seen in the context of traditional epic poetry, Whitman invokes himself as muse, and through that association reveals his status as an eternal god - stirring minds to divine madness and the creation of art (myself not excluded). He later claims that he is filled with divine wind when he speaks - "Through me the afflatus surging and surging" (chant 24). Whitman is filled with the wind that was also blown into Adam. This creative force becomes poetry and he in turn goes on to create us, the readers, assimilating our morphing notions of selfhood together which influence "others" *ad infinitum*. Everything he touches is holy. Many have recognised this association of self with the gods as quite egotistical.

Whitman strongly identifies with his ego. For example, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos" (chant 24) "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" (chant 48). The fact that "Song of Myself" is such a lengthy poem is another hint that Whitman is self-absorbed. He goes on about his "self" for over sixty pages and since it is a published work, one can guess that he wrote it with the intent that others would read it.

But we must keep in mind that it is not the 'I' that is being celebrated, but 'myself' (the self possessed by the me). The grammatical structure of the word "myself" hints at the Transcendentalist notion of the self's relation to the 'me' that possesses it: "Self, unattributed, may be another name for the principle of transcendent, universal unity that [Ralph Waldo] Emerson named the Oversoul" (Byers 16). As a "possession" (at least grammatically speaking), the word "myself" reveals the connection between the ego and the divine, the me and the Oversoul. The word 'myself' connotes "the individual as representative instance of divine totality" (17). Even if it's done unconsciously, everyone who uses the word "myself" is making the connection between the 'me' and the divine. Thus, Whitman is hardly at fault for making this connection a little more obvious.

To further defend Whitman from the charge of egotism, his poetics affirm that we all share in him - "every atom belonging to me as good

belongs to you" (Whitman, chant 1). The universe is made out of one substance - energy - which is made up of these atoms. Energy manifests itself in different forms, and we all perceive this energy, albeit in different ways. There is no way to claim exclusive ownership of any of it -- as Whitman suggests, it belongs to us all. In a sense, Whitman acts as an egotistical spokesperson for all that is. Whitman says that he is "the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as [him]self" (chant 7). Whitman can only be charged with egotism insofar as one limits selfhood to the boundary of skin, which is really just a collection of atoms. If the self shares in the atoms that are connected to the entirety of existence (and if existence is seen strictly in terms of atoms, distinguishing categories such as 'skin' fall away), then it is fair to say that the recognition of self sharing in everything, or connecting to everything, is truly great. One knows of nothing else to compare it to, and indeed, does not know that it is even comparable.

Some people (especially Whitman's contemporaries) might object to Whitman's line which says that one's self is greater than God (chant 48). For the 19th Century Eastern American variety of Christian (or any near-orthodox Christian), a transcendent god is greater than one's self, but Whitman claims that he is "of every rank and religion," which necessitates both a belief and a dis-belief in a transcendent being (16). Yet, the lines "The scent of these arm pits aroma finer than prayer, / This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds" (24) would suggest that Whitman is critical of religious ceremony and structure. An important point is raised: the body is a place of worship, and is for a Christian the work of God. Thus, the body should not be devalued, even on Christian terms. This is the first hint that Whitman rejects the value systems of his social/political/religious milieu. He opts instead for a kind of monism.

Whitman can still further be defended from the charge of egotism because he does not take sides. He rejects binary thinking and the value hierarchies that are implicit in such thinking. Instead, Whitman values all highly (after all, it is all *him*). He states that "it is as great to be a woman as to be a man" (chant 21). He nurses runaway slaves and adores Negroes as well as whites (chants 10-3). The fact that he keeps a runaway slave shows us



something else about Whitman's self -- he is compassionate and willing to risk going to jail for what he believes in, namely, abolitionism.

Whitman's refusal to commit to binary thinking is also evident when he says that he is the poet of the body as well as the poet of the soul (chant 21). He is both the universal and the particular: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son," (chant 24). Whitman's identification of his self with both body and soul is a kind of reaction to Cartesian dualism. Whitman sets himself apart from the Cartesian manner of viewing the body. At least since Plato, there has been an emphasis on the soul as being more worthy of attention than the body. For Plato, the object of life was to clean the soul's eyes so as to better see the Forms in the hopes that one day, we might join them. Descartes inherited this notion, except he was a little more scientific about it. For Descartes there were two substances: mind and matter. Mind is given a central role in much of Descartes' work and the "light of reason" circularly justifies his claims. Truth is what is "clear and distinct" and for Descartes, the cogito was the only thing that clearly and distinctly exists. He likens the natural world and animals to machines. If one views the world in this way, one also necessarily makes value judgements. If mind is superior and body is inferior, a whole mess of problems is created. It would seem best to not make value judgements, especially considering the body's important connection to the soul.

Whitman rejects value hierarchy and chooses instead to love his body just as much as he loves his soul. Whitman here is in keeping with contemporary commentary on selfhood. Many react to dualism pointing to the fact that ignoring the body as mere matter without value is to ignore an integral part of oneself. Not that the body is the entirety or boundary of self either, but rather that the body supplies a large part of selfhood. Instead of viewing the body as external to one's True self, there is now a recognition that neurologically speaking, the body, brain, and mind contribute to a shifting unity that may be called 'self.' In *Descartes' Error*, Antonio R. Damasio points out that the "self" is a union of body and mind, rather than just the Cartesian mind: "the self is a repeatedly reconstructed biological state; it is not a little person, the infamous homunculus, inside your brain contemplating what is going on" (Damasio 227). This is an important insight

for our notion of selfhood. If one merely identifies with the "little person" in one's head, then one is limiting oneself and ignoring the multiplicity and indeed, the infinite possibilities of what may constitute one's self.

It might be suggested that we are body, mind, and spirit, but simultaneously not limited by that. Neil Evernden suggests that in contemporary North American society, we tend to view the self as a "skin encapsulated being." However, this view may be challenged by notions of ecological interconnectedness. "That is, if we go beyond regarding interrelated as meaning 'causally connected' and consider it as indicating an actual intermingling of various individuals, we find our assumptions of sharp boundaries challenged" (Evernden 38). Mind, body, community, and territory congeal together into a specifically sculpted image that each individual creates for her/himself. And this image is ever subject to flux and change. Evernden says that perhaps the best way to describe this is seeing ourselves as "organic thought" (41). "There is some kind of involvement with the realm beyond the skin, and [...] the self is more a sense of self-potency throughout a region than a purely physical presence" (43). Whitman expresses this notion when he pulls out his "big sticky ego...absorbing all to [him]self and for this song" (Whitman, chant 13).

Whitman's conception of self-hood may also be likened to an identity with the cosmos. All that perceive are somewhat like what Hume calls a "bundle of perceptions." Through various connections, bundles of perceptions overlap to create an integrated self that spans the cosmos. Whitman calls this a "knit of identity" (chant 3). These connections might take the form of a relationship of singer/listener (as in poetry), or might even be made present through touch. Reading Whitman is like touching him. His *Leaves of Grass* is a tactile manifestation of him (but of course not the entirety of him). And through my reading he touches me. Similarly, hearing Whitman's song is like touching him, especially considering the observations that have been made concerning notions of skin. If we are not "skin-encapsulated beings" might we be able to use the sense of "touch" in a different way? Sometimes I try to see my relationship to my perceptions as though sight were touch. There is a greater sense of immediacy of perceptions and the self with this form of synesthesia. Now, when

considering mental imagery and imagination, the sense of touch (and with it boundaries that were once thought of as skin) is opened up to limitless possibilities. "Bundles of perception" perceive each other too, which demonstrates interconnectedness of sites of possibility. Human perceptions overlap and form a web of experience. These experiences are indistinguishable from the self, because the self is so hopelessly enmeshed in it. Human boundaries are not really boundaries as such when seen in relation to the mandala of perceptions with which they are intertwined. Whitman reveals this by listing aspects of his perception and identifying with various people in chant fifteen. After the list he states, "such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (15).

This knit is immeasurable. Where humans endeavour to map and dissect the cosmos, Whitman as cosmos "was never measured and never will be measured" (46). Thus, if all that exists is all that is perceived, and the self is impossible to delineate and extract from those perceptions, then the self is all that exists - "a kosmos" (chant 24).

When seeing "self" in such a manner, words fail. This is due to the human tendency to use symbols and language as a means of grasping or limiting essence. This in turn gives rise to the contentious debate concerning the "other". Language implicitly creates value judgements when a particular word is chosen, a particular frame is created, and each word and frame's history invokes reactions from the listener. Whitman states that "I too am untranslatable" (52).

However, the words that I use to describe this immeasurable attribute of Whitman are meant to be hints at seeing, or a moving towards becoming. As I mentioned earlier, the words that I am using are merely meant to account for aspects of Whitman's 'self' - not attempt to draw a boundary. The self is not anything that can be completely described. Even absolute terms like "cosmos" or "entirety of existence" do not completely describe the self as Whitman suggests; it is immeasurable. Perhaps one can see one's self as infinite and immeasurable by negating finitude and measurement. Rationally, this is not satisfactory - but one is closer to the reality of what self means when thinking in this way. Whitman is beyond logic. If one's experience of



self-hood is viewed phenomenologically, then one knows that sometimes perception lies outside the laws of time and space (for example, when one feels like the time is "flying"). There is difficulty in ascribing selfhood to a measurable substance. Since all I have ever known is my experience, it is infinite. I may see through analogy that my experience will eventually come to an end; but the eternal "now" tells me that this experience is indeed infinite. If to exist is to be perceived, every time I try to conceive of something beyond myself, that thing is absorbed into me. Thus, there is no "not me." Again by analogy, I could try to assume that other bodies have distinct experience; but since selfhood is not limited by the body, I cannot make that distinction.

After all this is said, I must attempt to undermine my interpretation of Whitman as a unity of all that is and point to the passages where Whitman draws a line of distinction between a "me" and a "not me". Whitman contradicts himself. After describing indifferent lovers, sickness, horrors of the civil war and those involved, Whitman states that "they are not the Me myself / Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am" (chant 4). He says that the war and the indifferent people are not Him himself, yet he still claims that in this poem he is "Absorbing all to myself and for this song" (13). However, this does not present a problem for my arguments because Whitman states "I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (51). This parenthetical remark is not only beautiful, it also reveals just how expansive Whitman is. If a contradiction limits what is logically possible, then Whitman is beyond logic. He is both his self as writer, lover, and so on; and he is also the cosmos, including myself.

Yet Whitman queries, "what am I? what are you? / All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own, / Else it were time lost listening to me" (20). How is it possible for Whitman's speaker to be both representative of the divine and cosmological unity and to be a distinct person at the same time? Well, Whitman is large enough to contain paradox. Also, perhaps instead of interpreting these lines to mean that Whitman believes the 'you' and the 'me' are offset, perhaps Whitman is speaking to those who hold fast to the definition of self as equivalent to the boundaries of skin. As with the "time lost listening to me," there is a connection between speaker and listener

that, as mentioned earlier, enmeshes the self into the infinity that is perception. When a listener hears a song such as this, a profound connection is made. After all, shortly after the above quotation Whitman says that "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less, / And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them" (20). There are more instances of a sense of union with "others" than there are points of distinction. I would conclude that Whitman's speaker is more likely representative of that opinion which views self as part and identical with the cosmological unity of perception.

A lovely metaphor for part of what Whitman's self may be is the grass. Whitman guesses that the grass is "the flag of my disposition" (chant 6). Grass is like the mycorrhiza of suburban North America (mycorrhizae are the largest living organisms in the rainforest that form protective strands around the roots of trees, creating an underground energy network that sustains the forest). Grass is the name for collections of blades that could symbolise the way that people are a collection of experience. This also connotes a unity of humanity. We are connected like the interwoven root systems of grass. Whitman also calls grass "the handkerchief of the Lord" which immediately brings to mind the Transcendental tendency to elevate the physical to the divine and to see the divine in the everyday. Perhaps another way of explaining how Whitman is like grass is to say that it is immeasurable in the sense that no one would have the patience to count grass. Each blade is a different aspect of Whitman while he is the collection of all of the leaves, and more.



## Bibliography

Byers, Thomas B.. *What I Cannot Say*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Damasio, Antonio R.. *Descartes' Error*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994.

Evernden, Neil. *Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985.

Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.