Traces of Mysticism in Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*

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**Abstract:** God is revealed through all the objects in nature, not through theologies shaped by man. One should be engrossed in the real happenings of life to experience life itself and not be perturbed with the thought of death. Death is as much a part of its rhythm as birth. The body is as important as the soul. Walt Whitman’s expression through ‘Song of Myself’ is to set ones soul free, by a mystical journey of exploring, indulging and experiencing the body to transcend to a higher plane of consciousness.

**Keywords:** Mysticism, transcend, identification, self, experience.

"Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else … the mystic is the person who attains to this union". Mystical knowledge, however, is based on the individual’s direct experience rather than upon adopting systems of belief, attitude or conduct that derive from established teaching, theory or dogma (whether traditional or "new age"). Moreover, this experience is understood, least by the experiencer, to be that of a fundamental Reality (rather than of the "ordinary reality" - or unreality - that we usually experience). In this sense mystical experience differs from normal perception or cognition which is directed to the familiar worlds of sensory experiences and ideas.

The first important consideration in any mystical experience, therefore, is what the Real is understood to be or, perhaps more accurately, where it is to be found - whether, for example, it is in Nature, Self or God. This defines the context, focus, or object of the experience. [Transpersonal Psychology Review, Vol. 7, No. 1, 39-55. (2003)]

“Song of Myself”, appears to be an outright mystic poetry. From sections 1 to 53, the poet, relates the most unrelated things in the canvas of his experience. In the opening lines he relates self to atom, to all, to soul, to grass, to death, to randomness of nature (nature without check) and finally to original cosmic energy. This type of thought must have come from very deep inner experience, otherwise relating such unrelated mundane observation to self would be pronounced as utter madness without inner realization. Without this mystic experience one would not dared to pen such linkages or connectivity between the unconnected.

For the purposes of understanding the mysticism hidden in his “Song of Myself” let’s take support from Zaehner’s classification of mysticism. R.C. Zaehner (1961) bases his analysis of mysticism on a religious-transcendental (specifically Christian) interpretation. Zaehner is more informed about Eastern and non-religious forms of mystical experience. On the basis of a cross-cultural comparison, Zaehner identifies three distinct categories of mysticism:

1. Nature mysticism, based on all-in-one or panhenic experience, such as the experience of cosmic consciousness (Bucke, 1901/2001). For Zaehner, nature mysticism is essentially non-religious.
2. Monistic mysticism, based on the absorptive experience of one’s own self or spirit as the Absolute (e.g., Advaita Vedanta).
3. Theistic mysticism, based on the experience of loving communion or union with a personal God. [Transpersonal Psychology Review, Vol. 7, No. 1, 39-55]

In “Songs of Myself”, these three types are not discreet but blended into amalgamated man. Thus, according to Zaehner, there are three types of mysticism, Panhenic, Monistic and ss in each section. Like in his opening lines “I celebrate----- atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”. Here the traces of both Panhenic (all in one) as well as Monistic (One in all) mysticism can be seen. In the last lines “My tongue, every atom ------and their parents the same” we can again see the blend of Monistic and Theistic combinations of mysticism. This type of blending is continuously present while weaving the fabric of the “Song of Myself” by the poet. However, as discussed earlier, let’s analyses the traces of different type of mysticism, in little more details.

Panhenic: The poet identifies himself with every little object in this nature. He sees the existence and relevance of every object, animate or inanimate, reacting to the other objects in nature and bringing out a meaning of each one’s being. He terms every object, conscious as it has an unseen soul, which the poet realizes and experiences and relates it to his own existence in this universe. As seen in sections 2,3,4,15,16……21..24….
Monistic: Whitman finds oneness in his soul and god or the ultimate. He finds the presence of god in his own spirit. Everything he does is actually done by God, hence it is not known who is the actual doer. Only a mystic can feel and think on these terms. He is in quest of the divine which is the ultimate through the soul in every object. He realizes, actually the divine dwells in every soul, and one only has to experience it. It seems Whitman must certainly have been a much evolved soul close to God as to perceive and visualize such a unique concept, putting forth the divine touch in every mundane activity on earth. Seen in many sections as 41,43,.....48.

Theistic: Whitman speaks not only of life but also of death, as it is a vital and essential aspect of the cycle of life. Life culminates to death and it is only after death life is recreated and gets a new existence in this universe. It is only through death, the soul will be liberated to be in union with the ultimate God and actually gain its purpose of existence. Mentioned in sections 49, 50,51,52. The letter “I”, which is a pronoun has been symbolically used in various contexts giving the poem a mystical twist and bringing out the mystical expression of the poet. The “I” is the poet himself. At times it is every living creature of the society. The “I” is also the inner voice apart from the outward physical being/body. “I” is the soul directing us and in this soul resides God. Hence “I” can see God in everything and feel his presence every moment. The “I” is the part of the universe in unison with God.

Walt Whitman was the most innovative and influential poet of the nineteenth century. His examination of the world around him -- from the intimate to the cosmic -- transcends time and place. His verse, though seemingly personal, lends a voice to the entire human race that speaks for universal harmony, universal love. This beautiful sampling of Whitman's work offers a glimpse into his themes of love for country, love for others, and deepening our understanding of self. Viewing Whitman as a mystic poet illuminates the influences of spirituality, music, and nature that made his poems beloved by people of all faiths and nationalities.

Three themes can be identified in his poem ‘Song of Myself’.

i) The idea of self.
ii) Identification of self with other selves.
iii) The poet’s relationship with the nature and universe.

For e.g. the houses, rooms, etc. denote the civilization, perfumes denote self (individual) and the atmosphere denote the universal self.

‘Song of Myself’ is his own song where he has expressed frankly, uninterrupted by any thoughts of the society. He freely expresses everything from landscapes, to politics, to people, to all inanimate things, subtly focusing on sexual relationship with self, same as well as opposite sex. He has brought the very delicate and taboo issue of sex interweaving it with the intense feeling of divinity. The urge is the principle of nature and is in abundance and variety in life. The sexual desires are as strong as love and sympathy in one’s life leading to the ultimate truth. Whitman has created a wonderful inter connectedness between every creation within and beyond the universe. He expresses that every individual is perfect and beautiful. There is no need to repress or hide any part or feeling of oneself. One should not wait for the future but live and experience in this present moment. He considers a mere spear of grass as the basis of life. This tiny blade of grass is as important as many other living things in nature. It is important for everything in its right place though big or small. The participation of a self is more important than its mere existence. God is revealed through all the objects in nature, not through theologies shaped by man. One should be engrossed in the real happenings of life to experience life itself and not be perturbed with the thought of death. Death is as much as a part of its rhythm as birth. The body is as important as the soul.

The poem has a dazzling and superabundant list of things in its seriousness and humor and tenderness and moments of melodrama and flashes of tragedy. It expresses the deepest way that human imagination may connect people to one another as well as objects. This poem is about democracy and imagination, and what to make of life and death, and about a person’s own wondering experience of his own existence. Walt Whitman’s expression through ‘Song of Myself’ is to set ones soul free, by a mystical journey of exploring, indulging and experiencing the body to transcend to a higher plane of consciousness.

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