Whitman’s “Song of Myself”:
Multiple Identities in a Dual Context

Tim-hung Ku

Graduate Institute of English
College of Liberal Arts

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) towards the end of “Song of Myself” (the untitled long opening poem in the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1885, slightly revised and called “Song of Myself” in the 1881 edition) was aware of the seeming contradictions in his ideas and expressions in the poem; but almost immediately, he took them as “multitudes,” necessary to the Wholeness, rather than “contradictions:”

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then . . . . I contradict myself;
I am large . . . . I contain multitudes. (Chant 51)

It is significant to find out the dynamic power, which makes possible the transformation from “contradictions” into “multitudes” in securing a comprehensive understanding of the poem. As we shall see, the poem is composed of two intersected contexts, namely, the mystical and the non-mystical context. The seeming contradictions will no longer be contradictions viewed in this dual perspective.

Another thing we should know, which is necessarily bound up with the dual context of the poem, is the dual nature of the “I” or “Myself” in the poem. Without understanding of the complexity of the “I” in the poem, Malcolm Cowley wrongly attacked the title “Song of Myself” as misleading, “completely false to its original intention,” because “Whitman had originally been writing about a not-myself.” Without this understanding, he mis-interpreted and over-emphasized the revisions made by Whitman in the 1881 edition, saying that by means of the revisions, Whitman “has gained an identity at the cost of ceasing to be universally representative.” As a matter of fact, the “I” or “Myself” in the
poems is neither limited to the personal "I" nor the transpersonal "I" in Cowley's terms. The "I" or "Myself" is the totality of "I"—the personal "I" and the transpersonal "I" do not cancel each other but are simultaneously present, or if you like, one being active and the other patent. The revisions made by Whitman are in nature stylistic or artistic rather than thematic. 3 What Whitman was searching for in the poem is a total identity, including, as we shall see later, the personal "I" and the communal "I" on the one hand, the microcosmic "I" and the macrocosmic "I" on the other. It will become evident that a comprehensive interpretation of the poem relies upon an awareness of the dual nature of the context and its attendant character, the total "I."

My dual perception of the poem as two intersected contexts, the mystical context in which the microcosmic "I" and the macrocosmic "I" reveal themselves and the non-mystical context in which the personal "I" and the communal "I" present themselves, can be intrinsically supported by the text and is in fact a synthesis of the varied but perhaps partial interpretations. 4 Man, as an individual in society, simultaneously assumes two identities, his personal identity and his communal identity. These two identities are especially significant for American individualism and democracy. Whitman, as an American bard, a bard of individualism and democracy, is obviously concerned with this issue. In the poem, we can see Whitman is searching for these identities. In the mystical context, Man, as an ephemeral being in the permanent Universe is endowed with a microcosmic self and a macrocosmic self. The terms, microcosm and macrocosm, can be traced back to Aristotle. Microcosm, meaning "little" world, refers to man as an individual being, in contradistinction to macrocosm, meaning "great world," which refers to the Universe, the great Being. The microcosm (i.e., man) is the epitome or reflection of the macrocosm, the Universe or great Being. The concept of microcosm-macrocosm contains a notion of mysticism as defined in Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, edited by James Baldwin:

In man's nature is to be found the sum or 'quint-essence' of the cosmical forces . . . . Thus man knows the universe; or contains within himself the principles of all that is. In Bruno's system, not man alone, but every monad or individual substance is an immediate manifestation of the infinite life, which thus individualizes and concentrates itself everywhere throughout the universe. Each monad is thus a 'mirror' or microcosm of the all. 5
I find the mystical bearing of the concept microcosm-macrocosm favourable, so I choose these two terms, namely, microcosmic "I" and macrocosmic "I," to designate the two identities activated in the mystical context. The so-called mystical experience, the union or communion between the individual and the great Being, I would say, is quite possible and universal. That mystical instinct might be just obscured by a practical consciousness, by a codified theology and so on, just as the aesthetic instinct towards nature was once obscured by Christianity. Once a person opens himself to the Universe, he might in some moments experience communion with the Universe. Whitman's case is much more than such openness. Quakerism, Transcendentalism, Egyptology, and Indian thought, as some scholar suggest, might have something to do with Whitman's mysticism represented in the poem. It is true that mysticism is one of the important elements of the poem. In this mystical context, Whitman is searching for the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic identity, in much the same way as he is searching for his personal and communal identity in the non-mystical context.

These two intersected contexts, the mystical and the non-mystical, correspond to each other, as we shall see later. As a matter of fact, the personal "I" is no other than the microcosmic "I": they are differently labeled so that they take on different notions in these two contexts. They are two faces of the same thing, the same base for the communal "I" on the one hand, and the macrocosmic "I" on the other. The communal "I" is implied in the personal "I" and the macrocosmic "I" is implied in the microcosmic "I". However, we cannot identify the communal "I" with the macrocosmic "I". Otherwise, we are unable to explain the complexity of the poem. The poem is an interaction of these two contexts, that is, an interaction of these four identities.

II

The opening of "Song of Myself" is ambiguous in its meaning:

I celebrate Myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

The first and the second line might give us a notion of egoism and megalomania. But when we come to the third line, the egoistic notion is somewhat replaced by
a mystical notion. Every atom belonging to Whitman belongs to you as well! That word "atom" bears a mystical sense as well as a physical sense. What kind of being is Whitman, or this Myself? When this mystical notion of the third line reflects on the first two lines, "Myself" is no longer merely a personal "I", which we might assume in the very beginning, but the totality of "I", mystical as well as non-mystical. Other lines in the poem render this point clearly. For example, Whitman says, "One world is aware, and by far the largest to me, and that is myself." (Chant 20) "Myself" is the largest world, that is, the Universe. Again, "in all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less;/And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them." (Chant 20) "You" and "I" are identical. When I celebrate myself I am celebrating you. There is no distinction between "you" and "I". One microcosm is identical with another microcosm and with the macrocosm, the great Being. This opening, or even the whole poem, should be seen as a piece of orchestral music, in which the four "I"(s) are simultaneously present and interact, with different degrees of gravity. Therefore, the first line is basically the voice of the personal "I". The second line is the voice of the communal "I". The third line is the voice of the macrocosmic "I". As soon as the macrocosmic "I" appears, the same personal "I" turns out to be the microcosmic "I" in contradistinction to the macrocosmic "I". Eventually, the "I", especially the "I" in the beginning of the poem, because of the cross reflections, turns out the be the total "I", personal and communal, microcosmic and macrocosmic.

The poem continues and ends its first chant in another two lines: "I loafe and invite my soul,/I lean and loafe at my ease . . . . Observing a spear of summer grass." The central symbol of the poem, the leaves of grass, emerges. Logically, the ending of the first chant should lead to Chant 6, in which the symbolism of grass has its full expression. In this respect I would suggest that the poem does not follow a logical structure of an argument; but rather, it follows a psychological structure in which the passages more or less correspond to the awakening and the slumbering of the consciousness. Now, if the mystical notion of the beginning of the poem is not strong enough to convince us of its mysticism, the symbolism of grass in Chant 6 will demonstrate a mysticism in the poem and thus give a strong support to our interpretation of its beginning:
I guess it is the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark,
and say Whose?
Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . . the produced babe of the vegetation,
Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Behind the symbolism of grass is metamorphosis and wholeness. The grass is "my disposition", the "handkerchief" of the great Being, the "babe of the vegetation", the "uniform hieroglyphic" of humankind, the "uncut hair of graves" and thus Wholeness. The great Being manifests itself in every thing and is every thing, and every thing is the great Being. We are told that "They are alive and well somewhere,/The smallest sprout shows there is no death." Indeed, the symbolism of grass is the great Being in metamorphosis. The structure of the symbolism is revealing. It begins with the "I". "I" is the beginning of everything. Although the "I" is only a transient being in the permanent metamorphosis of the great Being, it is the "I" who senses this metamorphosis and defines his position in it. The "I" is where things should start. Now we have more reason to say "Song of Myself" is not a misleading title. In light of this, we can say the grass is the medium through which the "I" defines its multiple identities, which can be put into four categories, that is, the four "I" (s).

In the mystical context, as we are shown in the poem, the great Being surges through the microcosmic "I" and makes it macrocosmic; or, the microcosmic "I" absorbs the great Being into itself and is expanded into a macrocosmic "I". Whitman here makes this point in clear terms:

Through me the afflatus surging and surging . . . through me the current and index. (Chant 23)
I am an acme of things accomplished, and I am encloser of things to be. (Chant 44)

The "I" is simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic, "the current and index," "things accomplished" and "things to be." "Divine am I inside and out." (Chant 24) "I have died myself ten thousand times before." (Chant 49)
There are no such things as space and time, life and death, part and whole, temporal and eternal. There is always the One and metamorphosis.

III

Whitman asks himself: "What is a man now? What am I? and what are you?" (Chant 20) Clearly, Whitman in the poem is searching for his identity or multiple identities. In the foregoing part, we have shown his quest for the microcosmic and the macrocosmic identities. In this part, we shall deal with the personal and the communal identities. In the same manner, the quest begins with the personal "I". In the beginning, a provisional distinction is made between "I" and non-I (i.e., you or he) in order to define one's own identity. So, Whitman tells us, when "people come to me days and nights and go from me again," I know that "they are not the Me myself." (Chant 4) Then, "what am I?" One can only define himself by the difference between himself and other people, by the reactions he receives from other people and the reactions he gives in return. Each person is a mirror of another. One can only see through mirrors. On this base, all the events in the poem, especially those in which the poet observes and acts, are not mere events, but the material for his self-contemplation, the mirrors through which whitman defines himself. For instance,

The little sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand.
(Chant 8)

The poet contemplates the baby and finds his own image in the baby. A subtle communion takes place between the poet and the baby during the long, silent contemplation. Indeed, Whitman in the poem always observes or contemplates because he always find himself in the object he observes or contemplates. From these mirrors, Whitman eventually comes to a full image of himself, a full image of Man: "I see in them and myself the same old law" and "what is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me." (Chant 14) The distinction between the "I" and the non-I, the difference between you and me, although acknowledged, is counterbalanced or even undermined by "the same old law" they share in common. To call Whitman an egoist is unfair indeed. The sympathetic principle, the process from observation to identification, which underlies the event of contemplating the baby in Chant 8 as discussed above, applies to all similar
situations. This principle and process is made explicit in Chant 33. After the observation of many events, Whitman says, “I am the man . . . . I suffered . . . . I was there.” “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels . . . . I myself become the wounded person. My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.” He then identifies himself with a fireman, an artillerist, and so on. The personal “I” is expanded into a communal “I”: “I am large . . . . I contain multitudes.” It is worth noting that this expansion of consciousness is not a redemption from the isolation or inadequacy of the personal “I” but is rather a natural out-growth of it, a development of sympathy and love. There is no conflict or contradiction between the personal “I” and the communal “I”.

What is then the communal “I” in Whitman’s poem? It is an absorbing and all-embracing consciousness. It begins with the personal “I” and takes all many other “I”(s) into its kingdom. It absorbs and embraces the whole until it becomes the whole. The consciousness is perpetually expanded: “I am of” “a farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . a gentleman, sailor, lover or quaker./ A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest.” (Chant 16) The whole community merges into one’s consciousness. But such absorption is by no means of an egoist type, for Whitman tells us that “whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud.” (Chant 48) A notion of equality dispels any sense of megalomania the communal “I” might take on: “I do not call one greater and one smaller,/That which fills its period and place is equal to any.” (Chant 44) Each person must begin with himself, begin with his “I”: “No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,/ I have no chair, nor church nor philosophy; . . . Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you, /You must travel it for yourself.” (Chant 46) Each person is then an absorbing “I”. There is no contradiction between these absorbing “I”(s) since in such a communal consciousness each “I” will have intimate feelings for each “you”:

If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of your hand on my hip,
And in due time you shall repay the same service to me:
For after we start we never lie by again. (Chant 46)

IV

In the quest for his multiple identities, the personal and the communal, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, Whitman eventually comes to his identity
as a poet. According to Henry Canby, "surprising revelations" (i.e., the mystical experiences) occurred to Whitman in Brooklyn in 1847 or early in 1848, as tested by Whitman's Note-Books. However, the traditional poetic language and meters which Whitman had followed in his poetry of that time were not capable of carrying out the expression of these revelations. Later Whitman lost his job as an editor of a newspaper and returned to Brooklyn in 1850. He probably began to work on his new poetry at that time in his Note-Books. From the autobiographical data, we may see that Whitman's experience as an editor of a newspaper must have helped him to develop his communal "I", and the "revelations" must have given shape to his macrocosmic "I". It may be possible to say that Whitman's identity as a poet is totally bound up with these multiple identities and with his autobiographical urgency. Indeed, his identity as a poet is evident and strongly felt in the poem.

What role does Whitman assign to himself as an American bard? In the mystical context, he speaks of the revelations through himself as a witness. In the non-mystical context, he asserts himself as the representative of Man, speaking for the many other "I"(s). To be sure, these two contexts intersect and reinforce each other. For example:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
Voices of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and of the fatherstuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung. (Chant 24)

In general, this is the voice of the communal "I". Yet a macrocosmic "I" intersects the non-mystical context in certain places, giving a mystical support to the communal voice.

Whitman sometimes over-steps the role of a witness or a representative. He starts to urge and even impose his "revelations" and his new consciousness upon the other "I"(s):
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Long enough have you dreamed contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life.

Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, and rise again and nod to me and shout, and
laughingly with your hair. (Chant 46)

Taken in isolation, the passage is an intolerable arrogant intrusion indeed. But, if we follow Whitman’s assumption that “It is you talking just as much as myself . . . . I act as the tongue of you” (Chant 47), the passage is nothing else than the voice of our own, uttered from the deepest core of our hearts, urging ourselves to be brave and so on. The “you” and the “I” in the passage are the same person. Whitman takes a further step and moves from a person who urges to a prophet-poet. The ending of the poem bears such a notion:

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop some where waiting for you.

V

The drama as well as the ambiguity of the poem comes from the interaction of the mystical and the non-mystical context. In the poem, the “I”(s) in both contexts are in harmony with each other. We may not have many comments on the union of the microcosmic “I” and the macrocosmic “I” in a mystical experience. We would rather enjoy these mystical moments, which Whitman sometimes describes in beautiful metaphors:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
barestripe heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you hold my feet. (Chant 5)

But Whitman's exposition in the non-mystical context needs a second look. It is nice to develop the personal "I" into the communal "I" through one's observation, participation, sympathy, and identification. This is significant in maintaining a good sense of individualism and democracy. But this very sense of sympathy and harmony in the poem gives us an illusion that there is no conflict between the personal "I" and the communal "I". This over-optimism, or this lack of contradictions, weakens Whitman's role as an American bard, a bard of individualism and democracy, which, as history has shown, contain contradiction, tension, and compromise.

When the poem is taken back to its historical background, this over-optimism is understandable. Here we would like to emphasize the influence of Transcendentalism upon this poem. Historically, Transcendentalism grew within Unitarianism and carried on its historical role of liberating the American mind from its rigidity and erosive sense of sin. As Frothingham put it, "Practically, [Transcendentalism] was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man; theoretically, it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind." Within this Transcendental framework, any kind of contradiction is undermined and becomes insignificant. The poem, put in this large perspective, is a perfection of American Transcendental poetry inaugurated by Emerson. Eventually, "Song of Myself" is a re-definition of "Myself", or, if you like, a Transcendental definition of "Myself".

Notes

2 edition and that the formation of the poem is more or less relevant to the present topic. The four dots ( . . . ) in all the quotations are Whitman’s, functioning as a dash or a comma.

2. See Malcolm Cowley’s Introduction to *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass*, pp. xxxii-iii.

3. In my own observation, the revisions made in the Death-Bed edition are stylistically-oriented, leaving out unrelated images, obscure expressions, weak sentences, over-statements, correcting improper phrasing, cancelling the “and”(s) and the “. . . .”(s), and so on.


6. Marjorie Nicolson, in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (New York: Norton, 1959), suggests that the beauty of nature was obscured by the Roman and Christian thoughts and was recovered by the early Romantics. Petrarch’s case is a striking example indeed: “His ascent of Mount Ventoux in April, 1335, was of his own volition, not forced upon him by necessity. Delight and aesthetic gratification ring through his tribute to grandeur and majesty, an attitude so modern that his comment has been frequently quoted in anthologies for mountain climbers. Yet at the moment of his deepest emotion, tradition conquered feeling. Taking out a copy of the *Confessions*, Petrarch
closed the book, angry with myself for not ceasing to admire the things of the earth, instead of remembering that the human soul is beyond comparison the subject for admiration. Once again, as I descended, I gazed back, and the lofty summit of the mountain seemed to me scarcely a cubit high, compared with the sublime dignity of man.' For a moment upon Mount Ventoux, Petrarch had seen the 'Mountain Glory.' The moment passed, and his eyes were darkened by the 'Mountain Gloom,' inherited from Roman poets and the Christian Preachers.” (pp. 49-50.)


9. The notion of Transcendentalism in the poem is evident. Whitman in 1856 addressed Emerson, the Architect of American Transcendentalism, as his “master” and humbly acknowledged his indebtedness: “I say you have led the States there—have led me there.” See F. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (London, 1941), p. 522. On the other hand, on the first reading of *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson in his letter (1855) unconditionally praised Whitman for his poetic achievement. For Emerson’s letter, see Cowley, *Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass*, p. ix. The connections between Emerson and Whitman are many. Here I would like to refer to one connection which has not yet been pointed out clearly and which is important to my topic. In Emerson’s poetry, the full blown symbol of transcendental Nature is the pine tree, particularly the one in “Woodnotes,” in which the sounds of a pine forest represent the transcendental character of Nature. In Whitman’s poetry, such a symbol is of course the grass. The shift of the transcendental symbol from pine tree to grass was somewhat foretold in Emerson’s “Woodnotes:” “I, that today am a pine, / Yesterday was a bundle of grass.” For the poem, see Ralph Emerson, *Poems*, vol. IX of *Emerson’s Complete Works* (Boston, 1884), p. 56.

論惠特曼「自我之歌」—多重我態與雙重文義

中文摘要

惠特曼（Walt Whitman, 1819–1892）的名詩「自我之歌」（"Song of Myself", 1885）乃一曖昧難懂的詩篇，引起許多家不同的解釋及評論。筆者認為，如把此詩篇看作是雙重文義的交疊，其中惠特曼尋求其多重的我態，則可以解除或最少減低詩篇中許多表面的矛盾。沿此而獲得的廣延的解釋，實不啻為目前諸種不同而或不免囿於局部的解釋的綜合。本文即沿此方法來綜論此詩篇，界定詩篇中相互交疊的兩範疇，即神秘範疇及非神秘範疇。在神秘範疇裏，我們可看到惠特曼對有限我及宇宙我的尋求。在非神秘的範疇裏，我們可看到其對小我及群我的尋求。這兩重範疇，這四重我態，或交疊，或平行；此乃詩底動力及其曖昧性之所由。我們最後發覺，這所謂「自我」，實是一廣延的、統攝了上述四重我態的全我。就此意義而言，此詩篇乃是對「自我」的重新定義，終乃止於一個涵蓋萬有的定義。從詩篇所處之美國文化傳統而言，此詩篇乃是個人主義及民主政治的理想式的表達，乃是源於愛默生（Ralph Emerson）超越主義（Transcendentalism）傳統的延申。就此角度而言，「自我之歌」乃是一超越主義的詩篇，乃是一超越主義式的對「自我」的重新定義。