Although critics and commentators have been fascinated with the question of Whitman's sources, I suspect that what is original and important about Whitman lies not in any particular idea or source of inspiration but in his bold combination of philosophical and mystical ideas, science, and pseudo-science---almost everything that was in the heady nineteenth-century intellectual current--along with the promptings of a fertile brain to express the troth of his own rapturous experience and to depict the totality of the American experience. Leaves of Grass seems home made in the best sense with unusual and disparate ideas patched together with his own experience under the pressure of powerful emotions. Whitman's was an epistemology grounded in ecstasy, and the intense emotions and certainties engendered by his experience forced him to break with conventional forms and conventional spirituality and gave him the confidence to create a radically new epic: non-narrative, 'musical,' and democratic.

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WALT WHITMAN'S SOLUTION to the problem of a democratic American epic can be seen in miniature in Song of Myself, the initial poem in the first version of Leaves of Grass. Despite his admiration for older epic narratives, he found the aristocratic heroes of the Greeks, Romans, and north Europeans clearly unsuitable for a democratic work. "Is there one [earlier epic] that is consistent with these United States....? Is there one whose underlying basis is not a denial and insult to democracy?" he asked in A Backward Glance o're Traveled Roads. For the new country, a new form and a new protagonist were required, and while, as Robert Faner points out, the poet
found structural forms in the overtures, recitatives, and arias of Italian opera and, very possibly, inspiration for his role as poet as well, he could not find suitable heroes among the great and titled of opera.

Whitman needed to invent a modern, democratic hero, and Jorge Luis Borges, for one, was struck by the poet’s boldness:

Whitman's response was an amazing one: he himself would be the hero of the poem--first, as common circumstances had made him, as an American of his time; second, as magnified by hope, by joy, by exultation, and by the proud, full sail of his great verse. (quoted in Miller, 38-39)

But given Whitman’s philosophical ideas, his choice is neither so egotistical nor so eccentric as it might seem. The poet laid out the key ideas in the early sections of the 1855 edition, what Faner calls the "overture" to the work. Here Whitman announces the motifs that will appear throughout, the air and the grass, and the celebration of the body, the human voice, the natural world, and the city. Two ideas that will reverberate throughout the work are also introduced. The first is the conviction, presented in the 1855 preface as well, that,

There was never may more inception than there is now, Nor any more youth or age than there is now, Mad will never be any more perfection than there is now, Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. (31-34)

Leaving aside the theological implications of the last line, this statement connects with his nationalistic conviction that, contrary to popular opinion, the mid-nineteenth century United States is quite as fitted to produce great work as the "small theatre of the antique or the aimless sleepwalking of the middle ages" (preface, 6). Whitman charged the euro-centric elites of the time with a lack of imagination. The opening of the west, the surge of immigration, the melding of a new country from disparate stocks, even the noble experiment of democracy were the stuff of an epic far more potent than the doings of any number of knights in armor.
The second idea, with parallels in Hegelian philosophy and, as writers like Malcolm Crowley and V. K. Chari have pointed out, in Hindu spiritualism, was clearly in the air at the time. The soon-to-be-published works of Darwin and Wallace would present a vision of the natural world as a dynamic, ever-changing system propelled by biology, not divine plan. In Whitman's formulation, existence is dynamic and cyclical, as opposed to the then-conventional monotheistic view of life as a one-time progression ruled by providence. "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world," a statement of the biological basis for existence, is immediately followed by an echo of Hegel, whom Mary Eleanor suggests Whitman probably knew via a text on German philosophy: "Out of the dimness opposite equals advance.... Always substance and increase, / Always a knit of identity ... always distinction ... always a breed of life" (39). To Whitman, the universe is an ever-changing system, producing new ideas and forms that will combine, a la Hegel, into ever new and better life. The force behind this process, however, is not political and intellectual for the poet but biological, a matter of lusts and urges as it was for Darwin.

The key to what the poet does with these concepts and motifs lies in the mystical experience described in section five, which suggests the fundamental principals that govern all the rest and which justifies Whitman's choice of hero and, indeed, of the varied forms that hero takes in Song of Myself. He begins the section, "I believe in you my soul ... the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other" (74). This theme will be sounded again and again as part of his attack on the censorious dualism of the monotheistic religions.

Next comes the list of things that the poet now knows, namely: "I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own" (81) and that all men are his brothers and all women, his sisters and lovers. This point will also be reiterated, both in his conviction that we are all divine and holy, body and soul, and in the notion that he shares, on some very basic level, in all human impulses, thoughts, and ideas. This is not just Tertullian's, "I am a man and nothing human is Mien to me," but includes the idea that, in his role as bard, the poet is charged with speaking for others and embodying the ideas of his time and place. The section concludes that "a kelson of the creation is love," and then, somewhat surprisingly unless one realizes how completely and seriously Whitman takes his notions of the unity of body and soul, of divinity and creation, the section concludes with the leaves, the brown ants, the common roadside weeds and shrubs, "elder and mullen and pokeweed" (89).

Animals, plants, and insects will reappear, as the poet not only enumerates a wide variety of geographies and species in his catalogues but explicitly mentions his identity with them. Out on the prairie he is a "buzzer and a hummer with the rest" (726). While contemplating the animals in
section 32, he remarks, "They bring me tokens of myself ... they evince them plainly in their possession" (694). Later on, in a sort of pre-Darwin evolution, he traces his progress from the first chaos, through the time of the dinosaurs and all the ages since to the present day. In section 31, when he gives his beliefs in the form of a credo beginning, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars," Whitman makes his identification with the rest of the living world in the passage that starts, "I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits and grains and esculent roots" (670). He is even more explicit in an early notebook, claiming that:

The soul or spirit transmits itself into all matter--into rocks, and can live the life of a rock into the sea, and can feel itself the sea--into the oak, or other tree---into an animal, and feel itself a horse, a fish, or a bird into the earth--into the motions of the suns and stars. (Complete Writings, 1, 57)

Given this unity of creation and the divinity of the whole, it makes perfect sense for one person, even one of no great fame or acknowledged capacity, to be the protagonist of a epic and, even more, to claim the ability to speak for us and to find the words we lack. Indeed, one could say that one obscure Brooklyn journalist, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs" (500), was the perfect new model hero, but the poet had aspirations far beyond any superficial realism. Taking literally the idea of our divinity and the oneness of creation, he soon leaves Manhattan's streets and Long Island's shore to travel imaginatively around the country, interspersing the catalogues of occupations, animals, sounds, geologic features, and people with little vignettes of Americans at work and play, in joy and misery. This version of "Walt Whitman," already unrealistically omnipresent, slides from witness to participant in increasingly intense scenes. At the end of section sixteen, he begins blurring his age and gender: "I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, / Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, / Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man" (336-37), and concludes with a catalogue of his nationalities: "Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia" (345) and a list of his varied occupations.

By section 33, "Walt Whitman, one of the roughs" undergoes another transformation, becoming literally what he had been metaphorically, "a kosmos." "Afoot with my vision," he visits a variety of people and animals, wanders back in time to the hills of Judea and out into the solar system to "visit the orchards of God" (796). Back on nineteenth-century earth, he takes on both male and female roles, bivouacking with invaders and replacing the bridegroom on his wedding night but also watching, a wife, as her drowned husband's body is carried by the stairs. "Agonies are one of my changes of garments," the poet says, becoming the witch at the stake, the cornered runaway
slave, the prisoner, the injured fireman, and suffering a series of miseries that merge into two historical scenes, the massacre of Texas Bangers at Goliad in 1836 and the victory of Bonhomme Richard over Serapis in 1779. In each case, the poet balances valor and glory with what Wellington called "the butcher's bill," until, following another catalogue of suffering, he rises after his "own crucifixion and bloody crowning," "replenished with supreme power, one of an average unending procession" (964). Finally, he takes up the role of teacher which he had flirted with earlier, ending, after a recapitulation of his ideas about body, soul, God, death, and immortality, as a wayfarer who departs as air and bequeaths himself "to the dirt to grow from the grass I love," completing the transformation of the extraordinary character of the "Walt Whitman" of the poem.

This character would, of itself, be a remarkable achievement, but having found his hero, the portrait of what he later called the expression "in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality" (Complete Writings, 3, 65), Whitman uses him to present the ideas suggested in section five. Like a musical theme, the ideas of the equality of the body and soul and the divinity of both recur again and again, along with a determination to collapse such dualistic pairs as life and death, good and evil, soul and body, male and female.

In 21, he follows up the basic insight: "I am the poet of the body, / And I am the poet of the soul," with "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man" (421, 426). In section 22, after ecstatic experiences of the night and sea, he returns to the pairs of opposites he celebrates:

I am the poet of commonsense and of the demonstrable and of immortality; And am not the poet of goodness only.... I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also. (467)

Even life and death, what one might consider the ultimate opposites, are united in the poem. Early on, he chants, "All goes onward and outward ... and nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (120). He believes this because all people are immortal even if they do not realize it. Later, he returns with a similar idea, collapsing the concepts of defeat and victory: "I play not a march for victors only.... I play great marches for conquered and slain persons," (366) a posture strengthened by his confident statement, "And I know I am deathless," in the following section which concludes, "I laugh at what you call dissolution, / And I know the amplitude of time" (420).
This confidence leads to an unconventional attitude toward religious belief. Following his "resurrection" in section 38: "The grave of rock multiplies what has been confided to it ... or to any graves, / The corpses rise ... the gashes heal ... the fastenings roll away" (961-62), the poet becomes a supernatural healer and savior, bringing help for the sick and raising the dying. He begins a catalogue of world religions, "Magnifying and applying come I, / Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters ..." (1030). His point, however, is not that Jehovah or Odin or Mexitil were false, but that each was only suitable for a particular place and time when we were like "unfledged birds who have now to rise and sing for themselves" (1029).

Although this was an unconventional nineteenth century position, the Whitman of Song of Myself was certainly not an atheist or even an agnostic. He doesn't even object to what he calls "special revelation." Rather he sees miracles, though miracles of a distinctly physical nature, in the every day: a mouse, rightly considered, is enough to "stagger sextillions of infidels" (667) and the unaccountable working of his body as he climbs his stoop is miraculous. The poet also sees earlier, partial, representations of the divine embodied in the firemen, "more to me than the gods of the antique wars;" in the mechanic's wife with her baby "interceding for every person born;" in harvesters like a row of angels, and in the hostler who sells everything to support his brother. The poet, himself, is eagerly "waiting to be one of the supremes" (1045).

This conviction of our divinity naturally colors his views of God and of death. In section 48, he claims entire confidence about God, whose visage he sees in the faces around him and who sends him messages dropped in the street, an echo of the beautiful earlier section on grass, described as God's handkerchief, "designedly dropped." Whitman claims that death cannot frighten him, either, because a corpse is good manure, a phrase immediately followed by descriptions of the thriving white roses and melons that deaths have fed, and by his confident statement of the unending cycle of life: "And as to you life, I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths / No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before" (1289). We need only realize our place in the unending stream of life which the poet insists we already know in some sense--to free ourselves from much fear and anguish.

The mystical unity of creation and the union of the soul with the divine are cross-cultural phenomena, as Whitman's younger contemporary, William James, was to point out in the 1902 The Varieties of Religious Experience. What is unusual about Whitman is the physicality of his vision, his conviction of the divinity of the body and his desire to break the taboos against depicting sexuality. He believes "in the flesh and the appetites," and proclaims, "The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer" (528). If he worships anything, the poet says, it is to be his own body,
which he celebrated first in the opening lines of the poem. He presents his vision, not as a provocation, but as a non-puritanical purification: "Through me forbidden voices, / Voices of sexes and lusts ... voices veiled, and I remove the veil, / Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured" (520). However unconventional these sentiments, the celebration of the physical fits with Whitman's view of the absolute equality of flesh and spirit and with his view of immortality, not as residence in the nineteenth century's notion of heaven, but as part of the unquenchable biological life of the universe. Late in the poem he writes, "if you want me again look for me under your bootsoles," and he assures us that, "I stop some where waiting for you" (1335).

This message of eternal--if depersonalized--life, of the equality of the sexes and of body and soul, presented a solution for some of the bitter religious conflicts of Whitman's day. In the beautiful section 32, Whitman speaks of his love for animals, particularly for their resistance to theological disputes and religious terrors:

| They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
| They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
| They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
| Not one is dissatisfied..., not one is demented with the mania of owning  
| things. (686-89) |

He returns to the idea of spirituality without a monotheistic theology late in the poem. He urges us not to be curious or to strive to understand God but to be at peace with the divine and with death. He supports his claims with mystical rapture: "I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven, / O suns ... O grass of graves ... O perpetual transfers and promotions" (1290) and again when he tries and fails to give a name to "there is that in me" but is able to conclude:

| Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,  
| To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.  
| Perhaps I might tell more.... Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters.  
| Do you see O my brothers and sisters?  
| It is not chaos or death ... it is form and union and plan ... it is eternal life ... it is happiness. (1305-9) |
This is the final form of the message repeated again and again in the Song and which was obviously of the first importance to the poet, who assures us that, "I do not say these things for a dollar, or to fill up the time while I wait for a boat" (1241). The very repetitions are significant, the noted musical structure of Song of Myself not only providing an unconventional non-narrative structure for the epic but mirroring the message of an unending and benign cycle of existence.

There are at least three structural components in Song of Myself, which some commentators have associated with the overture, arias, and recitatives of opera, but which equally might be considered symphonic. There are didactic passages that present the poet's ideas and depict his personality; there are the catalogues and little action vignettes that fulfill his promise to include the whole of the country; and, interspersed throughout, passages of rhapsodic mysticism that are the crucial ground of the whole. The pattern of theme and variation holds all these together and also functions as a teaching tool, particularly in its repetition of the key mystical moments. Thus, section five, with its anatomically impossible sexuality, is echoed in 21 and 22 by his rhapsodic experiences with the night: "Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night!" (436) and with the sea: "Cushion me soft ... rock me in billowy drowse, / Dash me with amorous wet ... I can repay you" (455). Both are filled with a curiously amorphous and all encompassing sexuality. In section 25, there is the short but remarkable passage beginning, "Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sunrise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sunrise out of me. / We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun" (56465). In 26, the description of both the tenor and the soprano voice is strikingly erotic and mystically transporting. In 38, we have the poet's resurrection, followed by ecstatic healing and various religious transports, running through section 45 when he declares the reality of essential progress and concludes, "Our rendezvous is fitly appointed.... God will be there and wait till we come" (1197).

These passages form the evidence for Whitman's beliefs in the poem. In Song of Myself, ecstasy, physical and spiritual, was the poet's method of insight and the ground of his knowledge. Mystic rapture confirms our divinity and the unity of creation, which unity, in turn, collapses all dualistic categories: good and evil, life and death, male and female, victory and defeat, and produces an equality between body and soul. Like earlier prophets and bards, Whitman has experienced a revelation, but, unlike earlier epic writers, he does not have a convenient mythology, far less a convenient theology, to utilize as his literary armature. The Iliad, The Odyssey, The Aeneid, and Paradise Lost are all imbued with religious feeling, whether in Homer's stories of the intrusions and jealousies of the gods, Virgil's account of the divine plan for Rome, or Milton's ambition to
"justify the ways of God to man." For each of these epics, the poets had on hand a variety of ready-made myths and religious concepts. In addition, the idea of a divine purpose unfolding in history made for clear narratives, suitable vehicles for drama and action.

Whitman's situation was quite different, although his remarks about American history in the Preface to the 1855 edition might lead one to expect a more conventional approach to the spacious history of his big country. And had he a different basis for his ideas, Whitman might have composed an historical epic, beginning with the landing of the Pilgrims or the arrival of Columbus. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's rhymed narratives like Hiawatha and Evangeline were, ironically, just the literary fare that honest workingmen and women preferred to Leaves of Grass, the epic so hopefully composed for the popular mind. But Whitman lacked an appropriate mythology for his mystical insights, and although he certainly intended to include historical events, a straightforward historical account was not useful, either. From the mystical perspective the eternal moment, not chronology, is what matters, and though Whitman saw the universe as ever changing and dynamic, it was also, paradoxically, always one, always divine, always immortal. According to Leaves of Grass, we do not have a particular destination, and there is not one narrative dictated by Providence; we exist, rather, in eternal change and eternal unity. The challenge for Whitman was not to present a logical case for his ideas or to create an exciting narrative but to convey rapture. His great insight had come through ecstasy, and he transmits it through incantation, through example, through metaphor, using the tools of art, not logic. Thus the "musical" pattern of the epic was not just an imaginative way of structuring the poem, it was a strategy for transmitting experiences and emotions that were, in a sense, beyond words.

This structure is also important to the crucial pedagogical function of Song of Myself. Whitman makes his purposes clear late in the poem in section 46, when, presenting himself as a wandering philosopher, he invites us to tackle the open road with him and to leave our intellectual childhoods behind: "Long have yon timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore, / Now I will you to be a bold swimmer" (1229). In the following section, he proclaims himself a "teacher of athletes" who encourages his students to surpass him, to "destroy the teacher." At other points in the epic, he addresses the readers as "Eleves," students, and urges us not to take things "at second and third hand ... nor look through the eyes of the dead ... nor feed on the specters in books.... You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself" (26-27).

The messianic Walt Whitman of the poem had a message that he clearly believed was vital, and, in fact, the form he chose proves highly effective as a teaching device. Anyone who has steered a class of non-English majors through Song of Myself knows that most initially find nineteenth
century raptures wordy and baffling. However, by the final sections, the persistent student has a grasp of the key ideas, which have been carefully repeated and illustrated by a writer who himself was reputed to be a gifted teacher. Such enlightenment was certainly part of the aim of a poet who recorded the difficulties of communication in an early notebook:

Every soul has its own individual language, often unspoken....
The truths I tell to you or any other may not be plain to you because I do not translate them fully from my idiom into yours.--If I could do so, and do it well, they would be as apparent to you as they are to me; for they are truths.... (Complete Writings, 1, 60-61)

Whitman relied on the conviction that we all share, consciously or not, certain common truths: "These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing" (352-53). Unlike Plato's version of the eternal forms, however, the discovery of our common thoughts and ideas is a largely emotional process for Whitman. While Socrates led the slave boy to discover a mathematical theorem by a series of logical steps, Whitman approaches the reader with his rhapsodic effusions, catalogues, vignettes. He circles around ideas, returning again and again with new variations, seeking not to convince by argument but to present our common truths in the correct "idiom." He hoped to find the right translation, the right phrasing, the right examples that would unlock his meaning for his contemporaries, but, in the face of rejection and incomprehension, he was prepared to wait, convinced as he was that his final book, including Song of Myself, was "a candidate for the future" (Backward Glance, 64) and his "carte d'visite to coming generations of the New World" (42).

The originality and the range of ideas in Leaves of Grass, as well, perhaps, as a modern skepticism about mystical revelation, have prompted much speculation about Whitman's sources. Critics have pointed out similarities to a variety of eastern and western philosophies, although there is scant evidence for Whitman's contact the texts cited. The various parallels and similarities do serve to put Whitman in a line of other mystical thinkers, but they do not answer question of how much of his poem was inspired by other writers and earlier ideas. In many cases, similarities to far-flung mystical traditions can be used as easily as evidence for Whitman's originality, mysticism being a cross-cultural phenomenon with many independent origins, as for indication of some literary source. Thus, V. K. Chaff points to the Vedantic parallels in Whitman's mysticism but offers no
conclusive proof that Whitman read any of the relevant texts. However, his comment that, "Mysticism not only constitutes the fundamental meaning of Whitman's poems, but it also determines their poetic form and symbolism" (11) is highly pertinent. George B. Hutchinson sees similarities to shamanism and to the variety of religious experiments of the period, including ecstatic states and spiritualism. Certainly the notion of altered states was in the nineteenth century air, but whether or not Whitman was influenced by sects like the Shakers is also unclear. As noted above, Mary Eleanor discovered that Whitman not only owned a copy of Frederick H. Hedge's The Prose Writers of Germany (1837) but appears to have paraphrased some of its contents, while David S. Reynolds adds Swedenborg as a possible influence. He quotes Whitman's "I think Swedenborg was right when he said there was a close connection--a very close connection between the state we call religious ecstasy and the desire to copulate. I find it confirmed in all my experience" (96).

From the poem itself, we can see that, besides his fascination with music, Whitman was knowledgeable about a variety of sciences and scientific theories, including cosmology, paleontology, and astronomy, as well as about religious history and comparative religion. The big catalogue of religious experiences in section 43 includes a number of ecstatic states, as he sees himself "powwowing with sticks," "dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession," not to mention "Ranting and frothing in my insane crisis--waiting dead-like till my/spirit arouses me" (1098, 1099, 1103), a line-up that indicates, at the very least, an imaginative grasp of earlier manifestations of faith. The breadth of Whitman's knowledge is impressive, but the liveliness and unconventionality of his mind are unsurprising in a poet who declared, "I contain multitudes" (1316) and who aspired to include everything and everyone in his epic. His omnivorous intellect and the fact that he was largely self-educated make his sources particularly difficult to untangle, but the origins of artistic production are always going to be uncertain, given that they are often opaque even to the creator. One may remember the little detail or incident that inspired a story or poem, but other sources of material and ideas may well remain mysterious, because the process of creation requires the bringing together of widely separate and unexpected ideas, facts, events, and involves the sub-conscious as well as the conscious mind. This is true in prose and probably even more striking in the allusive art of poetry.

Although critics and commentators have been fascinated with the question of Whitman's sources, I suspect that what is original and important about Whitman lies not in any particular idea or source of inspiration but in his bold combination of philosophical and mystical ideas, science, and pseudo-science--almost everything that was in the heady nineteenth-century intellectual current--along with the promptings of a fertile brain to express the truth of his own rapturous experience and to
depict the totality of the American experience. Leaves of Grass seems homemade in the best sense with unusual and disparate ideas patched together with his own experience under the pressure of powerful emotions. Whitman's was an epistemology grounded in ecstasy, and the intense emotions and certainties engendered by his experience forced him to break with conventional forms and conventional spirituality and gave him the confidence to create a radically new epic: non-narrative, "musical," and democratic.

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