

Parallels in Search of an Intersection: The Manifold Marcus Aurelius Resonances in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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Abstract

While Whitman's knowledge of and affinity to Epictetus are well-known, the profound roots of *Song of Myself* in Marcus Aurelius' *To Myself* (better known as *Meditations*) were not researched to date even though it is known that Stoicism was a powerful influence upon the autodidact poet. Through classical hermeneutical methodology, this paper shows how stoic practice and training in daily reflection, cosmopolitanism, pantheism, religious skepticism, public service, but most importantly its Platonic legacy of "doing one's own thing" through fluxes and flows reach far beyond coincidences in Whitman's work and may be traced through scores of sometimes verbatim parallels in Whitman's *magnum opus*. Even if one leaves use of paradigms, vignettes, examples and transcendentalism aside, the study still shows that these parallels extend to a shared platform of individualism and higher-level virtue that cannot be reduced to the poet's early love of classical motives and Greek culture. Epicurean materialistic atomism and its doctrine of interchangeability of all matter in metamorphosis came to him through the influence of German chemist Justus von Liebig in the perception of Fanny Wright's novel *Ten Days in Athens*. This research traces Whitman's stance opposed to slavery directly to Seneca and points out multiple parallels between the reflections of Marcus Aurelius on Rome and the words Whitman found for New York—each the metropolis of its day, slightly past its apex of historical power, yet peerlessly vibrant as a melting pot, engaged in cultural wars on multiple levels with forces labeled "barbaric."

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Marcus Aurelius, influence of stoicism, meditations, religious skepticism, philosopher king

1. Introduction: Historical Background

On closer reading, Whitman's *Song of Myself* reveals influences eerily evocative of Marcus Aurelius' *To Myself* (better known as *Meditations*), the Roman Emperor's philosophical diary or notebook in twelve volumes written circa 170-180 C. E. in Koine Greek. It is a specific link that, despite a striking similarity of titles and the poet's well-known affinity to Epictetus, has not been analyzed in Whitman scholarship to date. Yet, as we will see, the principal work of this late Roman Stoic influenced Whitman's values in matters of self-improvement, slavery, cosmopolitanism and universalism more deeply than perhaps any other thinker. Many examples set forth in detail below show the strength of inspiration by allusion in a poet, who at first blush, seems to have about as much in common with a Roman emperor and philosopher-king as *Leaves of Grass* has with a treatise on botany. But the evidence also points to the conclusion that Whitman, the autodidact, was actually far less prone to speculative grabbing of ideas as mere spices and ingredients for use in a volatile mix of interesting sounding—but not well-digested—private vernacular or idiolect than one might think. In light of where and how he drew his inspiration, Whitman comes across as a remarkably sophisticated and discerning user of some of the most mature ethical thought in the history of ideas that he had encountered during his formative years (Kahn, 1962). It is, of course, still true that philosophy served Whitman in many ways as a tool, a spice, an emphasis, and, in a figurative sense, for its shock value in approaching an audience heaving with the foreboding of momentous social change at the very time he "sang himself" (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 29).

Whitman's early and abiding love of Stoic thought is abundantly documented in numerous discussions about, and references to, Epictetus. (Note 1) Yet there are far fewer mentions of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Note 2) despite the indisputable and unconcealed fact that this late Roman Stoic ethicist had sounded already almost two millennia ago an astounding portion of Whitman's favorite pronouncements on topics a modern audience has

come to consider quintessentially Whitmanic. *See*, among many others: “No one will prevent your living by the rule of your own nature: nothing will happen to you contrary to the rule of Universal Nature” (Aurelius, 2008, vi, 58).

Traubel and later the Walt Whitman Archive preserved records of numerous conversations with the poet’s “disciples,” especially during the period of 1888-1891, that, along with other evidence, deserve to be looked into more closely. It amazes at first sight that virtually no research appears to have been published to date analyzing Stoic influence on the very title and substance of “Song of Myself” (Note 3), which ought to conjure up immediate association with “*Ta Eis Heauton*” (*Tὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν*, “*To Myself*”), perhaps because it is more universally known in the inaccurate translation of its title as *Meditations*. It is the principal surviving literary and philosophical legacy of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, one of the greatest Roman emperors and ethicists, and indisputably the only one with an enduring intellectual legacy. Aurelius’ reign was that of a soldier monarch reminiscent of George Washington in some facets including both men’s measure of austerity, their ethical-philosophical orientation, and their belief that what is important for the public figure is not his personal virtue but his honor (Klugewicz, 2012). (Note 4)

While it seemed possible at first that, despite this similarity of titles, there might be no genuine connection at all, or a most tenuous one at best, it quickly became clear that stoicism was indeed the common denominator of both Whitman’s and Aurelius’ musings. After closer examination, the influence of Aurelius on Whitman, developed over time and in the shadow of his much more publicly pronounced fondness for Epictetus, proved far from tenuous. By emphasizing self-reliance, Whitman advocates very similar transcendentalist ideals in “Song of Myself”: “And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” (Whitman, 1855b, p. 13). Self-reliance, nature, optimism, and simplicity were, of course, also some of the central tenets of stoicism. (Note 5) Whitman shows his true self by elaborating on these aspects in detail. “I celebrate myself” exemplifies this. Nature, as a conduit of higher trust, is typically a central aspect of transcendentalism. Aurelius strikes a very similar tone:

Always remember the following: what the nature of the Whole is; what my own nature; the relation of this nature to that; what kind of part is of what kind of Whole; and that no man can hinder your saying and doing at all times what is in accordance with that Nature whereof you are a part (Aurelius, 2008, ii, 9).

2. Discussion

2.1 Nature as Viewed and Used by Whitman

In “Song of Myself,” Whitman (1855a) uses nature as a springboard for his own reflective meditations. He “invites his soul” and contemplates life by “observing a spear of summer grass” (p. 13). His contemporary and admired colleague Emerson (1836) writes that, through observing nature, “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me” (ch. 1). Drawing upon a product of nature to further knowledge of his own soul is pure Stoicism.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers
(Whitman, 1891-1892a, 32).

Whitman and Aurelius also share much common ground in matters social:

A branch cut off from the bough it belonged to cannot but be cut off also from the whole tree. Similarly a man, if severed from a single man, has fallen away from society as a whole. Now in the case of a branch, it is cut off by another agency, whereas man by his own act divides himself from his neighbor, when he hates him and turns from him, yet he does not realize that he has severed himself from the whole Commonwealth....(Aurelius, 2008, xi 8). (Note 6)

Compare this to Whitman:

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.
This is the breath of laws and songs and behaviour,

This is the tasteless water of souls.... this is the true sustenance

It is for the illiterate....it is for the judges of the supreme court....it is for the federal capitol and the state capitols,

It is for the admirable communes of literary men and composers and singers and lecturers and engineers and savans,

It is for the endless races of working people and farmers and seamen (Whitman, 1855a, p. 24).

Thus sounds the voice from antiquity:

As you are yourself a complement of a social system, so let every act of yours be complementary of a social living principle. Every act of yours, therefore, which is not referred directly or remotely to the social end sunders your life, does not allow it to be a unity, and is a partisan act, like a man in a republic who for his own part sunders himself from the harmony of his fellows (Aurelius, 2008, ix, 23).

And Whitman:

I resist anything better than my own diversity,

Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,

And am not stuck up, and am in my place (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 42).

Or:

I will not have a single person slighted or left away,

The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,

The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;

There shall be no difference between them and the rest (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 43).

Both men's thinking on a plethora of abstract matters, and even their way of exemplifying it, appear remarkably aligned. They are also nearly congruent on the metaphysical subject of "change." Says Whitman: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 74). In a condensed form, this echoes Aurelius:

Is it change that man fears? Why, what can have come to be without change, and what is dearer of more familiar to Universal Nature? Can you yourself take a bath, unless the firewood changes? Can you be nourished, unless what you eat changes? Can any other service be accomplished without change? Do you not see that it is precisely your changing which is similar, and similarly necessary to Universal Nature? (Aurelius, 2008, vii, 18).

Or, Whitman:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 34).

Aurelius: "Accept without pride. Relinquish without struggle." (viii, 33). And Whitman: "I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contained between my hat and boots." (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 34).

Another commonality flows straight from Aurelius' terse summation: "The Universe is change, life is opinion" (iv, 3).

And, raising questions of credibility coming from the wartime general and soldier-emperor he was (especially in context with the Quaker Whitman), but still a vignette summarizing his idealistic intentions: "I cannot find it in my heart to be angry with any man, for we are all made for mutual help, as the feet, the hands, the eyelids." (Aurelius, as cited in Wenley, 1924, p. 122).

It is one of the readily distinguishable points where “practical philosophy” and common teachers such as Epictetus and Seneca appear to have shaped both Aurelius’ and Whitman’s exceptional minds alike and formed their broader thinking to similar results.

2.2 *Resonances of Imperial Rome in the Spirit of New York*

Throughout his oeuvre, Whitman wrote, at different stages of maturity and perception, with indefatigable fascination and enthusiasm about the spirit of his beloved New York. This city on the “teeming shores,” at that time in the middle of unprecedented industrial immigration and development, already the burgeoning metropolis of an “Empire State”—a moniker created with much foresight very early by George Washington (Klein, 2005, pp. xix-xx)—finds intriguing and evocative antecedents in Marcus Aurelius’ globalized perception of eternal Rome (Note 7):

Mortal man, you have been a citizen in this great City; what does it matter to you whether for five or fifty years? For what is according to its laws is equal for every man. Why is it hard, then, if Nature who brought you in, and no despot nor unjust judge, sends you out of the City—as though the master of the show, who engaged an actor, were to dismiss him from the stage? ‘But I have not spoken my five acts, only three.’ ‘What you say is true, but in life three acts are the whole play.’ For He determines the perfect whole, the cause yesterday of your composition, to-day of your dissolution; you are the cause of neither. Leave the stage, therefore, and be reconciled, for He also who lets his servant depart is reconciled (Aurelius, 2008, xii, 36).

It is easy to see the striking similarity: both cities were at relevant times bustling melting pots, imperial settlements of power, growth, crude optimism, based in not insignificant part on exploitation of labor, games, commercialized sexuality, replete with rampant entrepreneurialism and vice, upheavals and just bare recovery from military confrontations with an enemy of different cultural values deemed “barbaric.” In both instances, teeming middle-class life, along with a measure of political corruption, were not insignificant ingredients of the bigger picture. Marcus Aurelius did not write social commentary, but he jotted down some philosophical notes “to himself.” He also spent a great deal of his reign away from Rome defending the borders of the aging empire. However, dutiful patriotism aside, he felt no personal fascination with his city—then considered the center and envy of the civilized world—that would be even distantly comparable to Whitman’s. Whitman, too, felt he was “a citizen of the highest City, whereof all other cities are like households” (Aurelius, 2008, iii, 11):

People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new (Whitman, 1891-1892b,
p. 31).

He could not help rejoicing about its resilience and endurance in the convulsive spasms of the cosmopolitan urban evolution of his melting pot:

This is the city and I am one of the citizens,
Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, markets, newspapers, schools,
The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, stocks, stores, real estate and
personal estate (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 68).

Therein he once more follows Marcus Aurelius who remarked:

What is not injurious to the city does not injure the citizens either. On the occasion of every imagination that you have been injured apply this canon: ‘If the city is not injured by this neither am I injured.’ But if the city is injured you must not be angry, only point out to him who injured the city what he has failed to see. (Aurelius, 2008, v, 22).

Only a bit later, Aurelius states this classic tenet of Stoic political philosophy even stronger: “What does not benefit the hive does not benefit the bee.” (Aurelius, 2008, vi, 54). (Note 8)

Aurelius and Whitman shared the view of the city as an organism of indomitable energy, resilience, a source of strength but also of barely controllable forces.

2.3 *Whitman’s Stoic Roots*

Arguably one of the first and finest eclectic poets, Whitman was a naturally articulate autodidact without much formal education or pedigree, and an approach to life that flows from this background as a natural *sequitur*. He quickly grasped the social importance of concepts and buzzwords. (Note 9) The socially observant skeptic in him

understood early that even some of the most highly educated personalities of his time also did, in essence, little more than ride the crest of impressive notions without profound knowledge of their underlying meaning, speculating that they would rarely encounter an audience that truly understood their meaning, much less an audience both capable and disposed to voicing knowledgeable critique. One of the areas of scholarship most rewarding for the creation of impressive appearances, and one particularly prone to this approach for many, was philosophy. Yet Whitman's interest in philosophy does not deserve to be labeled insincere, though it may well have been superficial as he used it for ulterior poetic purposes as freely as he used form and verse. But the Stoics retained Whitman's enduring interest. His studies of the classics continued throughout his life, with different emphasis and intensity at different stages of maturity, and it remained an important philosophical influence throughout all phases of his career (Hutchinson, 1998). Whitman once mentioned that he had bought and read a secondhand copy of Epictetus since age 16, about 1835 (Stovall, 1974, p. 54, citing Traubel, 1915, pp. 71-72; Allen, 1979, p. 54). Notably, the Apprentice's Library in Brooklyn, his usual source, did not have any works of Stoics at the time, and for good reason: the earliest English translation of Epictetus available in the United States is believed to have been published as late as 1848. (Note 10) It is hence not likely ascertainable when, where, and how Whitman first found opportunity to read Marcus Aurelius, but it is likely that this also happened in his teens, judging from his persistent search for locally available translations of the classics (Allen, 1979, p. 44). (Note 11)

Marcus Aurelius' reputation as a philosopher rests entirely on his *Meditations*, since no substantial other writings of his have survived except some relatively recently discovered correspondence with his teacher Fronto (Rutherford, 1989, pp. 119-143). Whitman readily acknowledged his debt of gratitude to the great early authors who influenced him. He mentioned "nearly always Epictetus, sometimes Marcus Aurelius and occasionally Seneca" (Allen, 1979, p. 43, citing Traubel, 1915, p. 332 and Traubel, 1914, p. 159). Whenever Aurelius is mentioned, it is always but in passing, (Note 12) and yet the emperor seems in many ways considerably closer in spirit to Whitman's own ideas about nature, the soul, the supernatural, and death, that may have been conditioned already by previous Stoic readings. This is immediately apparent when Aurelius says:

A little while and you will be nobody and nowhere, nor will anything which you now behold exist, nor one of those who are now alive. Nature's law is that all things change and turn, and pass away, so that in due order different things may come to be (Aurelius, 2008, xii, 21).

While Whitman echoes: "And as to you death, and your bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me" (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 77).

Aurelius' traces in Whitman's oeuvre are much more pronounced than those of the much more frequently named and acknowledged Phrygian slave Epictetus. But this spiritual closeness to a source as abundantly useful to Whitman's own prolific idiolect as Aurelius might very well also be the most relevant explanation for his scarcity of mention.

The Stoics believed that knowledge is attained through disciplined use of reason. Truth may be distinguished from fallacy even if, in reality, only an approximation of it can be made. The senses constantly receive sensations: pulsations that pass from objects through the senses to the mind where they leave an impression. The mind has to approve or reject an impression, enabling it to distinguish a true representation of reality from one that is false. Some impressions can therefore be assented to immediately, while others can only achieve varying degrees of hesitant approval that can appropriately be labeled as belief or opinion. It is only through the use of reason that we can achieve clear comprehension and conviction. Certain and true knowledge can be attained only by verifying a conviction with the expertise of one's peers and by the collective judgment of humankind. This had to resonate with Whitman, and it did. Yet, as always, his instinctive insight into paraconsistent logic took precedence over 'consistency': "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 51). (Note 13)

For a Stoic, philosophy is not just a set of beliefs or ethical claims. It is a way of life involving constant practice and relentless training—logic without emotion. It is this aspect that led to the popular English title "*Meditations*"; whereas, the actual entries in *Eis Heauton* appear as random reflections in a diary without any particular discernible order—another readily noticeable and significant parallel to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, despite his frequent and much-studied rearrangements from one edition to the next.

Stoic philosophical and spiritual practices included logic, Socratic dialogue and self-dialogue, contemplation of death, training one's attention to remain in the present moment (thus similar to many forms of Eastern meditation), daily reflection on everyday problems and possible solutions, and so forth. For a Stoic, philosophy was an active process of indefatigable mental exercise and self-reminder. Some, particularly Christian scholars,

were at times fond of affirming that Stoicism, its service done, fell from power after the death of Marcus Aurelius (Wenley, 1924, p. 113). Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth. "Take St. Paul, whose Tarsian associations so exposed him to stoicism and to the mystery religions that it is impossible to assess their influence even yet" (Wenley, 1924, p. 115). Stoicism was absorbed in, and (at least from the Christian perspective) transcended by, the Christian philosophers of late antiquity.

Another distinctive feature of Stoicism is its cosmopolitanism. All human beings are manifestations of one universal spirit and as such should live in brotherly love and help one another readily. Epictetus commented thus on man's relationship with the world: "Each human being is primarily a citizen of his own commonwealth; but he is also a member of the great city of gods and men, where of the city political is only a copy." (Epictetus, *Discourses* II 5, 26).

That Stoic sentiment echoes Socrates who said "I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world" (Epictetus, *Discourses* I 9, 1). We find the same in Aurelius: "As Antoninus, my city and my fatherland is Rome; as a man, the Universe" (Aurelius, 2008, vi, 44). It is the very vision Whitman had for his America. (Note 14) "[I]t is you talking just as much as myself. . . . I act as the tongue of you" (Whitman, 1855a, p. 53).

The Stoics found external differences such as rank and wealth to be of no importance in social relationships. Well before Christianity became a public, not to mention an intellectual influence, Stoics advocated the brotherhood of all humanity and the natural equality of all human beings. (Note 15) Perhaps responding to the same essential human need for rationalization of cooperation and universalism, Stoicism quickly became the most influential school of the Greco-Roman world, and it produced a number of remarkable writers and personalities such as Cato the Younger, Seneca the Younger, Epictetus, and Aurelius. The Stoics were particularly noted for urging clemency toward slaves. Epictetus, as we know, was a slave himself, while Seneca exhorted: "Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies" (Seneca, 1996, xlvii, 10). (Note 16)

Although they were certainly far from his only influence in that regard, Whitman's studies of Stoic ethics were a not insignificant force, speeding along the evolution of his thoughts surrounding the contentious issue of slavery. (Note 17)

Yet a further strong link between Aurelius and Whitman, besides their love of classical motifs and of Greek culture, is the resonance of pantheism in Whitman's writings. Whitman enumerated gods of various religions with the aim of appointing them their historical and spiritual place in the universe of ideas:

Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,
Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved,
With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image,
Taking them all for what they are worth and not a cent more (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 67).

Pantheism takes the view that the universe or nature and God are identical. Hence, Pantheists do not believe in a personal, anthropomorphic deity or a creator god, or in another eternal being transcending, or distinct from, the universe. Pantheism proposes that "God" is best seen as a way of relating to the universe.

'Earth loves the rain': 'the glorious ether loves to fall in rain.' The Universe, too, loves to create what is to be. Therefore I say to the Universe: 'Your love is mine.' Is not that also the meaning of the phrase: 'This loves to happen'?' (Aurelius, 2008, x, 21).

This does sound like a page straight out of the "Song of Myself:"

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God every hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 76).

Despite a measure of divergences within Pantheism, the two central ideas found in almost all versions of it are the cosmos as an all-encompassing unity and the sacredness of nature. Here again, the parallels between Aurelius and Whitman are striking. Says the former:

What creatures they are: they eat, sleep, copulate, relieve nature, and so on; then what are they like as rulers, imperious or angry and fault-finding to excess; yet but yesterday how many masters were they slaving for and to what purpose, and tomorrow they will be in a like condition (Aurelius, 2008, x, 19).

And:

A man drops seed into a womb and goes his way and thereupon another causal principle takes it, labours upon it and completes a new-born babe. What a marvelous result of that small beginning. Next the babe passes food through the gullet and thereupon another causal principle takes it and creates sensation and impulse; in a word, life and strength and other results, how many and how marvelous. Contemplate, therefore, in thought what comes to pass in such a hidden way, and see the power, as we see the force that makes things gravitate or tend upwards, not with the eyes, but none the less clearly (Aurelius, 2008, x, 26).

This compares directly to passages in *Leaves of Grass*, such as “This is the nucleus—after the child is born of woman, man is born of woman” (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 84), the poem “Unfolded out of the Folds” (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 302), and the cluster “Children of Adam” (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 79). Aurelius and Whitman shared the fundamental Stoic belief in the divinity of the cosmos as an intelligent being with a soul. Although to varying degrees, both men emphasized harmony of all things as well as the importance of resigning oneself to whatever happened.

Though arguably recorded history’s one and only true philosopher king, Aurelius was neither an original nor a systematic philosopher. Many earlier writers, schools of philosophy, and religious movements already had expressed pantheistic ideas: some of the Pre-Socratics such as Heraclitus and Anaximander and, all Stoics beginning with Zeno of Citium and culminating in that emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius, the ultimate last classic Stoic and last of the Five Good Emperors. During the pre-Christian era of the Roman Empire, Stoicism was one of the four principal and widely taught schools of philosophy, along with the Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Epicurean traditions.

There is little doubt that Whitman did not set out early in life to read ancient philosophers, since most of them were barely available in English translation in this country at the time. His interest was first awakened by a quasi-historical novel by Fanny Wright, *Ten Days in Athens* (1822) “which was daily food to me: I kept it about me for years” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 42). In almost the same words he came to characterize Epictetus, to whom he had been introduced by Wright’s novel, as his “daily food” (Traubel, 1953, p. 67). The nexus to Aurelius was established, it seems, through a translation by George Long who also had translated Epictetus. (Note 18) Wright’s novel was a fictional dialog between Epicurus and several of his followers. This novel without a plot, mostly discussing abstract concepts, never attained popularity and would long since have vanished from sight had it not been for its powerful appeal to Whitman. With a materialistic touch, Wright’s imaginative presentation of Epicurus’ teachings highlighted the interchangeability of all matter that became an early model for Whitman’s own view of death much later. (Note 19) Wright was influenced by the work of German chemist Justus Liebig (Note 20) who had argued that, although we have no physical evidence of God or of an afterlife, we may still be confident that all matter is immortal as dissolving material things become transformed into other things by an exchange of atoms. In projecting death as an ultimately powerless metamorphosis since decomposing matter always created life, Fanny Wright had prepared the ground for Whitman’s widely noted archetypal dictum that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman, 1855a, p. 13). And further he said:

I know I am deathless,

I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter’s compass,

I know I shall not pass like a child’s carlacue cut with a burnt stick at night (Whitman, 1891-1892a, pp. 44-45).

Ten Days in Athens made deistic materialism not only acceptable but constructive and meaningful to Whitman. From that point forward, he continued to read on his own initiative and absorbed post-epicurean Stoic influences from translated sources in an instinctive and emotional way. It did not matter that the deist influences of his youth proposed that a supreme being had created the universe. This had in common with the Stoics proposition that cosmology (and religious truth in general) could be determined using reason (Note 21) and observation of

the natural world alone, without the need for either faith or organized religion. That suited Whitman well because, as a professed religious skeptic, he is said to have “accepted all churches, yet he believed in none” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 237). (Note 22)

2.4 *Ta Eis Heauton [Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν] and Its Multiple Reflections in “Song of Myself”*

“Song of Myself” is a sprawling combination of biography, sermon, and poetic meditation, composed more of vignettes than lists: the author uses small, precisely drawn scenes to do his work here, preferring symbols and sly commentary to get at the great Stoic teachings: as Walt Whitman, the specific individual, morphs away into the abstract “Myself,” the poem first and overall explores the possibilities for a communion between all individuals. Starting from the premise that “what I assume you shall assume” (Whitman, 1855a, p. 13), Whitman then tries to prove that he both encompasses and is indistinguishable from the universe: “it is you talking just as much as myself... I act as the tongue of you” (Whitman, 1855a, p. 53).

Eis Heauton, on the other hand, is in many ways a monument to almost Aristotelian, very balanced philosophical individualism. One might suspect that Whitman found it an attractive opportunity to create strong allusions that further showcased his accomplishment at inflicting upon himself an education that the lack of formal schooling had denied him. It is difficult to imagine a more fertile and risk-free point of reference than the universally admired *Eis Heauton*. In 1800 years, Aurelius had managed to attract nary a single serious detractor. (Note 23)

It is no wonder that Stoic influence in Whitman’s life has not received its due. Despite the manifold parallels in ethics and paradigms, references and examples along with Whitman’s candid testimonials to its philosophical value and his respect for it (Allen, 1979, pp. 43-60), he nonetheless rarely seemed to follow Stoicism as a matter of genuinely held doctrine—except occasionally and, as always, eclectically. With that he did not seem to be alone:

It is easy to carp at a ‘double standard’ in knowledge and conduct, less easy to follow the transformation of Stoic ‘dogma’ from abstract theory to practicable counsel. For, although bent to the demands of the time, the theory never vanishes. The treatment of that cardinal tenet, virtue, affords an excellent illustration of the process. Theoretically, virtue must be single—self-consistent, self-contained (Wenley, 1924, pp. 100-101).

Whitman may be called much, indeed almost anything, except “virtuous” in the conventional sense and understanding of his time, nor was he “self-contained.” His antebellum work reveals a plethora of ethical influences, “always waxing and waning depending on his circumstances and often alternating with quite different tendencies. His ecstatic intensity, the burning loves and disappointments of some of his most famous poems, conflict with the stoic ethos” (Hutchinson, 1998, p. 693). This picture changes markedly in his later years, though even in the “Song of Myself,” the speaker repeatedly falls back from intense emotion and participation to stoic detachment. After the Civil War, ecstatic spirit all but disappears from Whitman’s work and a well-studied stoic attitude becomes dominant, inflected by an almost comic sensibility (Hutchinson, 1989, pp. 172-173), and a rather un-stoical, prophetic hope for the future and a growing disconnect from material possessions (Loving, 1999, p. 176).

As Aurelius speaks about renewing the world through fluxes and flows (Allen, 1979, p. 56; Aurelius, 2008, ii, 17; Aurelius, 2008, v, 10), images of tides and slowly orbiting stars take on much greater importance than leaves as Whitman abandons the ecstatic modes of his greatest earlier poems while attempting to link the rhythms of his life with those of the cosmos—another pervasive Stoic tenet. Aurelius speaks of virtue as “only a living and enthusiastic sympathy with nature” and Whitman quotes him in the concluding paragraph of *Specimen Days* (Whitman, 1892, p. 200). But as the symbolism of tides persistently appears, Stoicism, connected emotionally with Whitman’s sensibility to the massive imperturbability of nature (Note 24) and the indestructible nature of the self, remains a constant resource through the tides of highs and lows, the hopes and disappointments of his life (Kahn, 1962, p. 146):

Run always the short road, and Nature’s road is short. Therefore say and do everything in the soundest way, because a purpose like this delivers a man from troubles and warfare, from every care and superfluity (Aurelius, 2008 iv, 51).

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, great-nephew of the emperor Hadrian, (Note 25) another noted Stoic and Epicurean, was considerably more equanimous, balanced, and, absent need, free of self-promotion.

Particularly Aurelius’ central Platonic notion of *τὰ αὐτοῦπράττειν* (“*ta hautouprattein*”- “to do one’s own thing”) (Note 26)—though the meaning actually reaches farther and deeper than the literal translation and includes “doing the thing appropriate for one’s talents, inclinations and nature” (Note 27)—held instant appeal to

Whitman's American Dream and its poetic as well as philosophical underpinnings. (Note 28) No better city than New York to bring to resonance ideas of multicultural and cosmopolitan Good Government dispensed by a world power under persistent attack by barbarians, but also with the benefit of "*e pluribus unum*" so aptly personified in the soldier monarch Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who had dedicated most of his reign to patient if not lastingly effective deflection of barbarian influences, as it had been by George Washington. (Note 29) Whitman, of course, bore no executive responsibility at any point in his career, and his frame of reference was a very different society that featured similarities to Rome such as its character as a melting pot and propagation of *Pax Americana* not too different from *Pax Romana*. But Whitman, like Aurelius, took refuge and consolation in philosophy. He chose this avenue notwithstanding apodictic statements like "I have no chair, no church, no philosophy," figures of speech he may have used to cope with the effects the scourge of war had on his nation in his lifetime (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 73; "This Dust Was Once the Man," in Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 263).

3. Conclusion

As has been seen throughout the paper, Whitman clearly did not draw much poetic inspiration for his speech from the Stoics. Despite the emphasis of Greco-Roman civilization on oratory, it would hardly have encouraged Whitman's departure from the heritage of British cultural tradition that he rather courageously accomplished to the scorn of "civilized society," along with Emerson, Thoreau, Wilde and other philosophically minded contemporaries as somewhat kindred companions on his artistic voyage.

But Stoic influence served Whitman to different ends: he used it to observe nature and the human spirit from a vantage point decidedly *not* rooted in the social conventions predominant in the 19th century, to reach for freedom from religious and conventional wisdom by adopting deist, then pantheist, ideas and world-views, and, having crossed the Rubicon into the territory of self-guided thought and steadfast non-conformism, finding in Aurelius the philosophical rationale and tools to justify "doing his own thing" (Plato, 1955, Charmides, 162a; cf. Lampert, 2010, pp. 178-185) in accordance with his nature—and with the country's as he dreamt and sang it.

Epictetus' and Aurelius' influence was strongest in those areas that can be loosely described as cosmological, metaphysical, cosmopolitan and philosophical in a broad general sense. It was quite understandably less potent in those areas where a writer who is poet first and last (Note 30) would necessarily part company with a classically trained philosopher who cannot be concerned with questions of "style" but instead views equanimity and balance, not to mention the neutralization of emotion (code-worded as "passions") (Note 31) as supreme achievements worthy of, and indeed commanding, daily exercise. (Note 32) Neutrality and equanimity were clearly not among Whitman's serious objectives. The prospect of, and flirt with, his own death and transubstantiation was simply too irresistible to Whitman to forgo it in favor of a more Stoic balance. He was too much a self-promoter to withstand the temptations of a tool that had been wielded so effectively by a long line of poets before him. It seems worth noting that Marcus Aurelius felt apparently the same attraction toward the charm of boy slaves as Whitman, the observer through the eyes of the "twenty-ninth bather." The latter was, by his very own confession, "[d]isorderly fleshy and sensual eating drinking and breeding ... no more modest than immodest." (Whitman, 1855b, p. 29) (Note 33)

Whitman parts company with the Stoics light-heartedly and not at all regretfully where he professes to be "primeval" and embarks on a barely concealed exhibition of uninhibited sensuality.

But, to be sure, Whitman closes ranks again with Aurelius as he innocently weaves back and forth into the philosophical and the sublime, although the balance of his song is always earthy rather than ethereal, hardly ever *vice versa*: "Lack one lacks both...and the unseen is proved by the seen / Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn" (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 31).

So says his Roman antecedent:

There are three things of which you are compounded: body, vital spirit, mind. Two of these are your own in so far as you must take care of them, but only the third is in the strict sense your own. So, if you separate from yourself, namely from your mind, all that others do or say, all that you yourself did or said, all that troubles you in the future, all that as part of the bodily envelope or natural spirit attaches to you without your will, and all that the external circumfluent vortex whirls round, ... (Aurelius, 2008, xii, 3).

And, once again, Whitman sounds like a pantheistic recitation straight out of *Meditations*:

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,

And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 76).

It may at times be difficult to trace reliably the origin of Whitman's influences to either the more fatalistic slave Epictetus or the more contemplative and cerebral emperor Aurelius. Considering that none of Epictetus' writings have survived except through later compilations of his student Arrian, the editor of the *Encheiridion*, (Epictetus, 1995, prologue) (Note 34) whereas all twelve books of the *Meditations* are preserved in several copies, (Note 35) and that the more prolific later Aurelius stood at the apex of Stoicism, one might fairly conclude from Whitman's far more frequent references to Epictetus that Aurelius was probably the bard's very private inspiration. The reasons for that are not persuasively traceable from the scant comments on the matter Traubel and others, not to mention Whitman himself, left to posterity. Was it that Whitman's human but quite possibly also political sympathies lay with the Phrygian slave more than he wanted to appear to be seen as a disciple of a soldier monarch who, however humble and reflective, was still a member of the ruling elite recruited from a few hundred Romans at most who were eligible to such power, privilege and erudition, and to whom his civilization had since time immemorial, entrusted its fortunes and indeed its very existence? It is doubtful that a sound argument for Whitman's motives can be made today. Beyond uncertainty, however, rests the undeniable influence Aurelius' sometimes nearly verbatim adopted thoughts and formulae had on Whitman's use of abstract concepts, paradigms, figures, parables and expressions of his philosophical framework—to the extent consistency existed at all in his hybrid maze of sundry cherry-picking “multitudes.” But Whitman's celebration of diversity itself bears powerful testimony to the influence of Aurelius' Stoic teachings which Bertrand Russell accused of the very same inconsistencies and contradictions Whitman had shrugged off blithely and with the conviction of his healthy confidence. (Note 36)

Just as we saw Whitman's position on slavery traced right back to Seneca, we also could not help but notice the even more frequent and commanding parallels between Aurelius' annotations on Rome and Whitman's narrative and epithets on New York. Each the imperial metropolis of its day, peerlessly vibrant as a melting pot, engaged in enduring cultural wars on manifold levels with forces labeled barbaric then as now. It seems well worth looking much further into Whitman's indulgent lifting of concepts from Aurelius—to the extent they were originally his. The latter does, of course, call for an altogether separate critical review, since faithful adoption had been an innocently fashionable habit throughout the age of either author.

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Notes

Note 1. Traubel specifically notes Whitman's late-life readings of Aurelius on August 21, 1888 (Traubel, 1915, p. 229) and on August 26, 1888 (Traubel, 1915, p. 264). Whitman's extensive debt to Epictetus was traced by Hutchinson (1989). Whitman's richly annotated personal copy of Epictetus' *Encheiridion*, trans. with notes by T. W. H. Rolleston, London (1881), is kept today in the Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress. His "Song of the Open Road" has numerous parallels to the stoic teachings of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca alike. (McDonald, 2007, p. 210, fn. 31).

Note 2. McDonald still noted a few choice examples, e.g., “Who would not guess that Whitman’s most notorious line was inspired by the first sentence of Bk. V, Sec. 28 of Long’s translation? Marcus Aurelius: ‘Art thou angry with him whose arm-pits stink?’ Whitman, Song of Myself, Sec. 24: ‘The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer...’ Notice the hyphen in arm-pits.” (McDonald, 2007, p. 210, fn. 18, referring to Long, G. (transl.) (1869)). See also Gwynn (1988c), pp. 828-829. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was born in 121 CE. Emperor Hadrian, his uncle, oversaw his early education and Marcus Aurelius was later adopted by his other uncle, the Emperor Antoninus Pius in 138 CE who was himself adopted by Hadrian on condition that he adopted Hadrian’s two nephews Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (Gwynn, 1988b, pp. 466-467). After he received a “core” education including rhetoric by Marcus Cornelius Fronto (a Libyan Numidian), Marcus later abandoned it in favor of philosophy. Marcus became Emperor himself in 161 CE, at first together with Lucius Verus, the other adoptive son of Antoninus Pius, and after Lucius’ death sole Emperor in 169 CE. Due to persistent barbarian attacks, much of his reign was spent on campaigns, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, until his death in 180 CE. Yet he found time to endow four chairs of philosophy in Athens, one for each of the principal philosophical traditions (Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean).

Note 3. Some, including Kahn (1962), find indications of Marcus Aurelius’ influence in the 1855 Preface and in Whitman’s preparatory notebooks, but without offering tangible substantiation, much less proof. Still, it is almost inconceivable that research such as Cook (1950), and Mason (1973), give interpretations as to the meaning of the ‘self’ as well as its importance to the poem but do not address the pervasive influences of the *Meditations*. Cook writes of the “concept of ‘self’ in its individual and universal aspects” while Mason discusses “the reader’s involvement in the poet’s movement from the singular to the cosmic”—all issues of importance and profound meaning to the Stoics.

Note 4. Some vivid parallels appear aside from both men’s being tasked by destiny with very different assignments: Aurelius’ burden was the preservation of an empire, unlike Washington’s which was the disassociation of his constituency from one empire and the creation of another.

Note 5. “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me, / Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 39).

Note 6. This also resonates in John Donne’s Meditation 17: “No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a Clod bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends* or of *thine own* were; any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.” (Donne, 1923, p. 98).

Note 7. This is actually the final entry in the emperor’s diary, an apt conclusion to the numerous parallels discovered in this excursion of literary-philosophical time travel.

Note 8. Although solipsism had already been around since the pre-Socratic days of Gorgias, the dialectic dichotomy between individual and collective was not far evolved in the world-view of Aurelius, as could be expected from his background largely rooted in his family’s position that was an early conceptual equivalent to “L’état, c’est moi.”

Note 9. along with slang and vulgar idiom and speech not for the parlor.

Note 10. The first translation by George Long was reprinted in New York in 1895. (Long, 1895).

Note 11. Whitman’s surviving personal copy of *Meditations* was published in Boston as late as 1864: Long (1864).

Note 12. “All the great teachers—Epictetus, Plato, Aurelius—seem to rest their faith on the ethical laws,” as Whitman did himself (Traubel, 1914, p. 186). In recognizing the power of ethical reasoning as a source of philosophical as distinguishable from religious faith, Whitman discusses it sometimes in the context of the question whether morals “are enough.”

Note 13. Flaws, contradictions, and imperfections were also very much an indispensable part of Aurelius’ fuzzy logic: “How can our principles become dead, unless the impressions [thoughts] which correspond to them are extinguished? But it is thy power to continuously fan these thoughts into a flame.” (Aurelius, 2008. viii, 2).

Note 14. “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son.” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 48).

Note 15. Compare to: “Births have brought us richness and variety, / And other births will bring us richness and variety. / I do not call one greater and one smaller, / That which fills its period and place is equal to any.” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 71)—an echo of the more hesitant Cicero on the purpose of life: “Wandering between

two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.” (cited without full attribution in Wenley, 1924, p. 31).

Note 16. One cannot help compare this with the section “A slave at auction!” (in Whitman, 1855b, pp. 80-81).

Note 17. See “A slave at auction!” (in Whitman, 1855b, p. 80).

Note 18. There he found Epictetus’ words “What is good for thee, o nature, is good for me” reverberating in Aurelius’ *Meditations*: “Everything is fruit to me which thy seasons bring, o nature...” (Long, 1869, Bk. IV, Sec. 23, p. 98). McDonald remarks that, despite having scanned all of Epictetus carefully, he was unable to find anywhere the sentence Whitman had so fondly attributed to him but did find it at Aurelius, *supra*. (McDonald, 2007, p. 63). There is little doubt that Whitman blurred the lines between the two Stoics early and often, as he admitted having lost track when he had first come across Epictetus, but he thought that it was at the age of sixteen (Traubel, 1915, pp. 71-72).

Note 19. “You came into the world as a part. You will vanish in that which gave you birth, or rather you will be taken up into its generative reason by the process of change.” (Aurelius, 2008, iv 14). In “Pensive on her Dead Gazing,” Whitman (1891-92b) expresses a similar idea at length: “Absorb them well O my earth, she cried, I charge you lose not my sons, lose not an atom, / And you streams absorb them well, taking their dear blood...” (p. 377).

Note 20. From there might stem “I accept Reality and dare not question it, / Materialism first and last imbuing. / Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!” (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 47).

Note 21. Although he asked, likely not just rhetorically, “And what is reason? and what is love? and what is life?” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 69).

Note 22. Whitman gave an inventory of major religions and expressed respect and acceptance for all of them—a sentiment he further emphasized in his poem “With Antecedents,” affirming: “I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 192). Yet in 1874, when Whitman was invited to write a poem about the Spiritualism movement, he responded, “It seems to me nearly altogether a poor, cheap, crude humbug” (Loving, 1999, p. 353). He also says, “We consider the bibles and religions divine.... I do not say they are not divine, / I say they have all grown out of you and may grow out of you still, / It is not they who give the life.... It is you who give the life” (Whitman, 1855a, p. 60). And it ends “When the psalm sings instead of the singer, / When the script preaches instead of the preacher, [...] I intend to reach them my hand and make as much of them as I do of men and women” (Whitman, 1855a, p. 64).

Note 23. *But see* Bertrand Russell’s *obiter dicta* in fn. 101 *infra*.

Note 24. Reflected in his poem “Me Imperturbe.” (Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 16).

Note 25. His adoptive grandfather Publius Aelius Hadrianus, 76-138 CE, Roman emperor 117-138 CE (Gwynn, 1988b, pp. 608-609). See also Kahn (1962).

Note 26. “Love only what falls to your lot and is destined for you; what is more suited to you than that?” (Aurelius, 2008, vii, 57). *Tὰ αὐτοῦπράττειν* first emerges in Plato’s Republic (2.370a and 4.433a).

Note 27. “No one will prevent your living by the rule of your own nature: nothing will happen to you contrary to the rule of Universal Nature.” (Aurelius, 2008, vi, 58).

Note 28. “You natural persons old and young!” (“A Leaf for Hand in Hand,” in Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 109); “Natural life of me faithfully praising things” (“Song at Sunset,” in Whitman, 1891-1892b, p. 374).

Note 29. It is an irony of fate that Aurelius’ adoptive father, Antoninus Pius, who was never accused of philosophical significance, never set foot outside of Rome and its environs, much less left Italy, yet he is known for the longest continuous peacetime in Roman imperial history. Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, started out being pronounced emperor by his Pannonian legions in Carnuntum near modern day Vienna, Austria, once the Roman military encampment Vindobona, where he repelled a constant influx of invading “barbarian” tribes—his principal occupation for the remainder of his reign. (Gwynn, 1988c, p. 828).

Note 30. “Have you practis’d so long to learn to read? / Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? / Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems, / You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,) / You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look / through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books, / You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 30).

Note 31. The Stoics gave classic examples of asceticism to which, it is safe to say, Whitman would even at his

moments of greatest renunciation of worldly pleasures have at best paid lip service (although there is no indication that he went even that far).

Note 32. “Practise even the things which you despair of achieving. For even the left hand, which for other uses, is slow from want of practice, has a stronger hold upon the bridle rein than the right; for it has been practiced in this.” (Aurelius, 2008, xii, 6).

Note 33. It is a remarkably strong allusion to Aurelius’ (2008) vignette in *Meditations* x, 19: “What creatures they are: they eat, sleep, copulate, relieve nature, and so on; then what are they like as rulers, imperious or angry and fault-finding to excess; yet but yesterday how many masters were they slaving for and to what purpose, and tomorrow they will be in a like condition.”

Note 34. Epictetus taught philosophy at the time Domitian banished all philosophers from Rome *circa* 93 AD.

Note 35. Contrary to Whitman’s intentions, it is unclear that Aurelius ever anticipated his reflections written in Koine Greek to be published. “Close imitation of Attic was not required because Marcus Aurelius wrote in a philosophical context without thought of publication. Galen’s many writings in what he calls ‘the common dialect’ are another excellent example of non-atticizing but highly educated Greek.” (Swain, 1996, p. 29).

Note 36. “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (Whitman, 1891-1892a, p. 51). In 1946, Russell curmudgeonly declared the *Meditations* contradictory and inconsistent, further evidence of a “tired age” wherein “even real goods lose their savour.” Using Aurelius as an example, he found Stoic ethical philosophy to contain an element of “sour grapes.” “We can’t be happy, but we can be good; let us therefore pretend that, so long as we are good, it doesn’t matter being unhappy.” (Russell, 2004, pp. 248-256).

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