

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Michael Robertson: Worshipping Walt**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2008, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: [permissions@pupress.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@pupress.princeton.edu)

## INTRODUCTION

---

*Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the  
earth much?*

*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.*

WHEN I WAS IN MY TWENTIES and living in New York City, I quit my job teaching English at a private school and was, for a period, seriously underemployed. I taught part-time and worked as a freelance journalist, both of which paid miserably, and a lot of my interior life consisted of trying to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up. I probably spent as much time, though, trying to decide what I believed.

I grew up Presbyterian in Oklahoma, a religion and a place that took belief seriously. In my junior high school confirmation class a bunch of bright kids, loosely guided by a young minister, wrestled with Calvinist theology. *Predestination, foreordination, infant damnation*—we gnawed on the dense polysyllabics like puppies, though splinters kept catching in our throats: *How can we be free to choose if God has foreknowledge of our choices? Doesn't salvation have anything to do with good works?* By the time I left Oklahoma for college, I'd concluded that Calvinism was logically elegant but emotionally repellent, and I put religion behind me.

Until a few years later in New York when, professionally unmoored, I found myself with time on my hands and a desire for some sort of spiritual life. This was the late 1970s and I was living

on the Upper West Side, fertile ground for a spiritual seeker. Within a few blocks of my apartment were a Zen temple, a Vedanta group, and a Society for Ethical Culture. I sampled them all. The theologies of Vedanta and Ethical Culture were appealing—both replaced the angry God and selective salvation of Calvinism with a democratic sense of equality and a conviction of the holiness of everyday life—but their services, with hymns and sermons and readings, seemed aimed at reproducing the forms of the conventional Protestantism I'd fled in Oklahoma. The meetings at the Zen temple were nothing like Oklahoma Presbyterianism, but I never felt completely comfortable in the temple's Japanese austerity.

I turned to books. Bookstores with extensive religion sections were strung along Broadway and Columbus Avenue, and I climbed the stairs to my fifth-floor walk-up with shopping bags full of titles by Alan Watts and Ram Dass, with translations of the Dhammapada and the Tao-te ching. Yet the book to which I kept returning was one I'd had since college, a paperback reprint of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. I'd bought the book for my freshman English course. At the time Walt Whitman's poetry was so far over my head that it might as well have been some sort of nineteenth-century dirigible. Still, it had made an impression, and, years later, searching for spiritual guidance, I turned to the dimly remembered volume.

The timing was perfect. A few years before, the poems in *Leaves of Grass* had meant nothing to me. Now they seemed as profound as the Eastern-tinged mysticism of Alan Watts, though much more powerful and vivid. I was helped along in my spiritually charged interpretation of *Leaves of Grass* by Malcolm Cowley's elegant introduction to my edition. Cowley wanted to replace the commonly accepted views of Whitman as American nationalist or political democrat with an image of him as a religious visionary and *Leaves of Grass* as a nineteenth-century Yankee equivalent of Indian spiritual classics like the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Cowley pointed to passages in *Leaves of Grass* that were virtually identical to reports of ecstatic mystical experiences in both Eastern and Western religious traditions:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy  
 and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of  
 the earth;  
 And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of  
 my own,  
 And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of  
 my own,  
 And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . .  
 and the women my sisters and lovers.

He juxtaposed an excerpt from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* with a spiritually playful passage from “Song of Myself”:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
 I see something of God each 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 dropped in the street, and every  
 one is signed by God’s name,  
 And I leave them where they are, for I know that others  
 will punctually come forever and ever.

In college I’d studied Whitman in the context of American literary traditions, but now those traditions seemed less important than the book’s urgent religious messages. “Folks expect of the poet [. . .] to indicate the path between reality and their souls,” Whitman wrote in his preface to the first edition, and with Cowley’s guidance I saw *Leaves of Grass* as a guide to a spiritualized apprehension of reality. “I swear I see now that every thing has an eternal soul!” Whitman wrote in one of the poems of the first edition. “The trees have, rooted in the ground . . . . the weeds of the sea have . . . . the animals. / I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!” *Leaves of Grass* proved more helpful than anything I’d yet come across as I attempted to construct a belief system that was more flexible and joyous than my childhood Presbyterianism, oriented not toward fu-

ture salvation through supernatural agency but toward the beauty and immortality of the here and now.

At the time I wasn't conscious of how representative my spiritual quest was. As a baby boomer, born in the 1950s, I was one among hundreds of thousands of my contemporaries who spent the 1970s searching for enlightenment among a variety of religious traditions and writings. By the 1980s pop sociologists were already deriding the trend as *spiritual shopping* or *cafeteria spirituality*. However, recent work in religious studies has demonstrated that spiritual seeking didn't originate about the same time as the musical *Hair*, as the pop sociologists would have it, but instead has a long history in the United States.

The concept of *spirituality* (individualistic, mystical, pluralist) as distinct from *religion* (institutional, creedal, orthodox) arose in the 1830s with the flowering of Emersonian romanticism. Emerson resigned as pastor of Boston's Second Church before he was thirty; he spent the rest of his career preaching a highly individual spirituality that mixed German idealism, Asian religion, and nature mysticism. The transcendentalists surrounding Emerson were the nation's first spiritual seekers; their numbers swelled as the century progressed. The major churches were ill prepared to respond to the rapid advances in nineteenth-century science that undermined the biblical account of creation and to address the new scholarship that regarded the Bible not as a divinely inspired work but as a disparate collection of historical texts. Before the Civil War most spiritual seekers abandoned the church and turned for inspiration to some combination of Emersonian transcendentalism and non-Western religious writings and traditions. From the 1860s on, many turned as well to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

I first came across Whitman's nineteenth-century disciples through biographies of the poet that mentioned, briefly, some of the women and men who regarded him as a religious teacher, a prophet—even a messiah—rather than as a poet equivalent to Longfellow or Tennyson. John Burroughs, for instance, who met Whitman during the Civil War and began writing about him soon after, said that "*Leaves of Grass* is primarily a gospel and is only second-

arily a poem.” Burroughs scoffed at the notion of classing Whitman with “minstrels and edifiers”; he belonged among the “prophets and saviours.” The disciples R. M. Bucke and Edward Carpenter published books that placed quotations from *Leaves of Grass* alongside passages from the New Testament, Buddhist scriptures, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Tao-te ching.

In the twenty-first century, with aesthetic and political interpretations of literature dominant, moral interpretation—that is, reading literature as a guide to life—seems faintly embarrassing, and it is left to conservatives like William Bennett. Yet the disciples, all of whom came from the political and cultural left, insisted that *Leaves of Grass* should be interpreted in primarily moral and spiritual terms. “Whitman means a life as much as Christianity means a life,” Burroughs said. Most people today encounter Whitman through individual poems printed in anthologies, a situation that would have appalled the disciples. They insisted on the “essential unity” of *Leaves of Grass*; the book had to be taken whole, not read as “merely a collection of pretty poems.” *Leaves of Grass* offered “a religion to live by and to die by,” in the words of Thomas Harned, a Camden attorney. “I can never think of Whitman as a mere literary man,” he said. “He is a mighty spiritual force.”

The disciples’ reactions to Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* can seem extreme, a charge that bothered Whitman himself not at all. “Someone was here the other day and complained that the Doctor [Bucke] was extreme. I suppose he is extreme—the sun’s extreme, too: and as for me, ain’t I extreme?” Whitman said in conversation. Whitman himself insisted on the spiritual dimensions of *Leaves of Grass*: “When I commenced, years ago, elaborating the plan of my poems,” he wrote in 1872, “one deep purpose underlay the others, and has underlain it and its execution ever since—and that has been the religious purpose.” Critics have explained away Whitman’s statement—at other times he emphasized other purposes; he became more religious as he got older—but it struck me that the disciples, who took Whitman at his word, might have been on to something. “No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming

mainly toward art or aestheticism,” Whitman wrote, and the disciples concurred. Paul Zweig speaks of the puzzle that Whitman’s work creates for his readers: “Do we respond to his poem as we might to a poem by a more conventional poet—Wordsworth, say, or Shelley—or as followers of an impassioned saint speaking radical new words?” The disciples chose the latter response.

Whitman’s disciples were a large, diverse, loosely affiliated international group. “Dear Walt, my beloved master, my friend, my bard, my prophet and apostle,” wrote one in an homage from Melbourne, Australia. Another, the French critic Léon Bazalgette, applauded the German writer Johannes Schlaf for translating a Whitman biography; the book, Bazalgette said, “will further the knowledge of the poet-prophet in Germany whom in a few centuries, humankind will place among their Gods.” A comprehensive history of the Whitman disciples would include hundreds of figures across several continents. I’ve limited this study to nine of the principal disciples, all of whom were from North America and Great Britain and knew Whitman personally. Focusing on those who not only worshipped but actually encountered Walt offers the opportunity to study the interactions between Whitman and his disciples.

Most disciples, primed by their reading of *Leaves of Grass*, came to their first meeting with Whitman prepared to be overwhelmed. They were not disappointed. “Whitman’s magnetic quality was peculiar,” wrote one. “I never knew a person to meet him for the first time who did not come under its spell; most people going away in such a curious state of exaltation and excitement as to produce a partial wakefulness, the general feeling not wearing off for a fortnight.” The magnetism likely was a result of the disciples’ own receptiveness combined with the mature Whitman’s personal qualities. Whitman was a late bloomer who did not publish his first book of poetry until he was thirty-six; he gained his first disciples when he was past forty. The late start gave him plenty of time to cultivate his image. Daguerreotypes of the young Walter Whitman reveal an urban dandy in a stylish black suit with a cravat and cane. By the 1860s, when the first disciples came onto the scene, he had perfected his mature style: long hair and full beard, wide-brimmed hat, open-

collared shirt—working class with a bohemian flair. He worked on perfecting his manner also. In a notebook he outlined a sketch of a “superb calm character”: “He grows, blooms, like some perfect tree or flower, in Nature, whether viewed by admiring eyes, or in some wild or wood, entirely unknown.” That this superb, calm character was a goal rather than an achieved reality is demonstrated by the entry’s placement in his notebook; it occurs just after a passage recording his extreme emotional turbulence surrounding his friendship with Peter Doyle, a young working-class man. Still, there is much evidence that, from his forties on, Whitman largely succeeded in projecting the image of benign wisdom that the disciples sought in a spiritual master. Bucke, the most fervent of the disciples, invited Whitman on a three-month visit to his home in Canada expressly to observe the poet for a biography he was writing. In the published book Bucke paid lavish tribute to Whitman’s “personal magnetism” and concluded that he never experienced common human feelings of fretfulness, antipathy, anger, or fear. Whitman was a bit taken aback by the resulting portrait—“I am by no means that benevolent, equable, happy creature you portray,” he wrote Bucke—but he let the encomium stand.

Whitman basked in his disciples’ attention. *Leaves of Grass* never won a wide audience during his lifetime, and it produced only a modest income. In compensation, however, it brought him ardent followers. He welcomed the adoring young men who gathered round him, from William O’Connor and John Burroughs during the Civil War years to Oscar Wilde, who made two pilgrimages to Camden in the early 1880s, and Horace Traubel, a Camden bank clerk who served as a volunteer literary assistant during the last years of Whitman’s life while, on the side, keeping a voluminous record of their daily conversations. Whitman was made uneasy at times by the more effusive demonstrations of devotion—“You all overrate me too much, immensely too much,” he wrote to a group of disciples in Lancashire, England, who raised the money to send one member, J. W. Wallace, on a trans-Atlantic pilgrimage—yet at the same time Whitman was flattered by the attention.

One English disciple, John Addington Symonds, figures prominently in this book even though he never met Whitman in person. Stretching my criteria to include this purely epistolary relationship allows me to examine the reception of *Leaves of Grass* among a set of British male intellectuals who revered Whitman both for his religious message and for his poems about love between men. Symonds began corresponding with Whitman in the early 1870s, decades before the word *homosexual* entered the English language. Immersed in a moralistic culture that condemned his desires as sodomitical and perverse, Symonds seized on Whitman's "Calamus" poems, which portray intimate male friendships as pure and ennobling. During a twenty-year period Symonds wrote Whitman a series of devotional, cagey, inquisitive letters attempting to pin down the meaning of "Calamus."

Through his reading of *Leaves of Grass* and his correspondence with its author, Symonds constructed a unique "Walt Whitman," a figure in accord with Symonds's religious yearnings, psychological needs, and erotic desires. All the disciples did the same. Anne Gilchrist, for example, a distinguished British woman of letters, was certain that Walt Whitman was the soul mate she was seeking. She first read *Leaves of Grass* in 1869, eight years after her husband died, leaving her with four young children. The book transformed her life: the astonishing intimacy of the verse; the frank recognition of female sexuality; the calls to reject conventionality and embrace freedom. ("Hark close, and still, what I now whisper to you, / I love you—O you entirely possess me, / O I wish that you and I escape from the rest, and go utterly off—O free and lawless, / Two hawks in the air—two fishes swimming in the sea not more lawless than we.") She wrote Whitman a series of letters professing her love for him, proposing marriage, offering to come to him. When he tried to put her off, flustered that a woman was actually taking him up on the erotic invitations offered in his verse, she ignored him and in 1876 sailed for America, taking with her three of her children and a houseful of furniture. She returned to England three years later, frustrated in her attempt to become Whitman's

wife but comfortable in the role of friend and disciple. Her final essay on Whitman, published shortly before her premature death, is titled “A Confession of Faith”—it could be the ur-title for all the disciples’ writings.

All the disciples in this book are writers, people who left behind copious letters and diaries and memoirs that allow us to trace their relationships with Whitman, and who, even more significantly, composed essays and books intended to spread the Whitmanite gospel. “A Confession of Faith,” “The Gospel according to Walt Whitman,” “The Poet of the Cosmos,” *Cosmic Consciousness*—the disciples’ writings argue that Whitman is a successor to Jesus and Whitman’s book *Leaves of Grass* a new scripture. “Do you suppose a thousand years from now people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ?” asked William Sloane Kennedy, a Harvard Divinity School dropout-turned-Whitman disciple, in December 1890. “If they don’t—the more fools they.”

As I describe in my afterword, many readers still regard Whitman as a religious poet, but few imagine that Whitman’s May 31 birthday will supplant Christmas. Why did the disciples think that Whitmanism might become an organized religion, possibly rivaling Christianity? The answer has to do with the late nineteenth-century “crisis of faith,” the intellectual upheaval that resulted from new discoveries in biology and geology that shattered the biblical account of Creation and turned the book of Genesis into one myth among many. At the same time textual studies of the Bible revealed it to be not a unified, univocal revelation but a patchwork of historically diverse texts by a variety of authors. In the standard account the crisis of faith spurred by modern science and historical scholarship led to a secularized modern culture. More recently, historians have questioned the secularization thesis, arguing that, rather than diminishing religion, modernity led to different forms of religious expression. Many Whitman disciples, for example, had loose ties to two successful new religious movements of the late nineteenth century, Spiritualism and Theosophy. Both movements arose in response to the

era's crisis of faith, offering belief systems that seemed to many to fit more comfortably with a modern, scientific, pluralist worldview. Spiritualism claimed to replace dogma and superstition with empirical investigation into the spirit world; many eminent scientists were attracted to the movement, despite regular revelations of fraud on the part of mediums. Theosophy rejected Christianity's claims to unique truth and incorporated elements of Hinduism and Buddhism into its doctrines, attracting intellectuals and bohemians interested in non-Western culture.

More broadly, the religious liberalism associated with Emersonian transcendentalism can be seen as one of the nineteenth century's earliest and most enduring responses to the shocks delivered to conventional Judeo-Christian belief. Emerson promoted an individualistic spirituality that, to many people later in the century, seemed to find its highest expression in *Leaves of Grass*. Unlike Spiritualism or Theosophy, Whitman's verse rejected all forms of supernaturalism, offering instead a pantheistic affirmation of the sacredness of the everyday. Unlike the Bible and Judeo-Christian theological tradition, *Leaves of Grass* celebrated modern science, incorporating catchphrases from recent discoveries in biology, geology, and astronomy. In contrast to Judeo-Christian prohibitions surrounding sexuality, *Leaves of Grass* celebrated sex and the body. It challenged religious and social hierarchies, insisting on the absolute equality of all women and men. And in place of Christianity's claim to offer the sole means of salvation, *Leaves of Grass* suggested that every religion had contributed its mite to the truth that Whitman now announced:

Magnifying and applying come I,  
 Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,  
 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,  
 Admitting they were alive and did the work of their days,  
 . . .  
 Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better  
 in myself, bestowing them freely on each man  
 and woman I see

*Leaves of Grass* fit perfectly with the progressive optimism common among nineteenth-century spiritual seekers, the notion that earlier religions had been rough sketches for a fully realized democratic spirituality that was manifested equally in every man and woman and expressed in the inspired verse of a modern poet-prophet.

The disciples were ready to regard Whitman as a successor to Jesus, Kronos, Buddha, and every other religious figure of the past because of the widespread openness at the time to the concept of the poet-prophet. Few readers in North America and Great Britain today turn to poetry for religious inspiration, but the idea of the poet-prophet remains alive in non-Western cultures such as India, where “poet-saints” like Kabir are revered, and Vietnam, where the Cao Dai sect regards Victor Hugo as a prophet. One hundred fifty years ago many Americans and Britons were similarly prepared to accept the creative writer as a divinely inspired figure. William Blake was the first modern artist to be widely regarded as a poet-prophet; the disciples saw Whitman as his heir. More than a century after the disciples were at their peak, many of their ideas have entered the mainstream of academic Whitman studies: William O’Connor’s insistence that Whitman was not a minor figure of controversy but a major artist who belonged with Dante and Shakespeare; John Burroughs’s interest in Whitman as a nature writer; Anne Gilchrist’s emphasis on Whitman’s celebration of women and sexuality; John Addington Symonds’s and Edward Carpenter’s stress on same-sex passion. However, the notion of Whitman as a religious prophet is seldom discussed by scholars.

Yet Whitman insisted on his religious purpose from the beginning of his career to its end. “Laws for Creations,” an early poem, poses a series of powerful rhetorical questions:

What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a  
 hundred ways, but that man or woman is as good  
 as God?  
 And that there is no God any more divine than Yourself?  
 And that this is what the oldest and newest myths finally  
 mean?

Talking with Horace Traubel in his old age, Whitman commented, “I claim everything for religion: after the claims of my religion are satisfied nothing is left for anything else: yet I have been called irreligious—an infidel (God help me!): as if I could have written a word of the *Leaves* without its religious root-ground.” Like every religious prophet, Whitman was interested in transforming the lives of those who attended to him, and he virtually grabs his readers by the lapels as if to shake them—*you*—into the realization that divinity inheres within yourself.

The disciples offer an alternative way of understanding Whitman, one largely excluded from modern criticism. Thirty years ago, fresh out of college, I read *Leaves of Grass* the same way I read the Bhagavad Gita or the Tao-te ching—as inspired wisdom that could help me make sense of fundamental spiritual questions: *Who am I? Where am I going? What’s the nature of my relationship to other people and to the world at large?* While researching this book, I kept encountering people who read Whitman the same way. In my afterword I write about some of them. I describe attending services at a Unitarian chapel in Bolton, England, where the minister salted his sermon with quotations from *Leaves of Grass*; participating in a guided meditation session at a Quaker meetinghouse in Washington, D.C., that used Whitman’s words as a guide to higher states of consciousness; meeting with the New Jersey secretary of commerce in his office to talk about how, as a teenager living in Camden, he felt a mystical connection to Whitman as he jogged past the poet’s tomb in Harleigh Cemetery. These twenty-first-century readers of Whitman don’t deify

the poet as did disciples like Bucke, who fell under the spell of Whitman's personal magnetism, and modern readers are not inclined to make *Leaves of Grass* the basis of a movement to transform society in the way that Wallace and Traubel imagined was possible. But *Leaves of Grass* is important to many readers today not just as a book of poetry but as a foundation of their spiritual lives.

These contemporary readers are often well aware of recent Whitman criticism, and they don't imagine that a religious approach to Whitman is the only valid one. In that they are unlike the disciples, who were actively hostile to academic approaches. The disciples tended to think in stark binaries: either you regarded Whitman as an inspired religious figure and accepted *Leaves of Grass* as a scriptural whole, or you missed the point. Most academic critics have returned the favor. As Michael Warner has pointed out, literary critics define themselves as professionals in opposition to what they see as amateurish enthusiasm, and Whitman critics have a long tradition of scoffing at the disciples as "hot little prophets," "subliterary minds," "the lunatic fringe." I think it's possible to be a *both/and* rather than an *either/or* reader, to value the rich aesthetic and historical and political interpretations of Whitman that have flourished since the 1950s while still learning from the disciples' religious appreciation. "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems," Walt Whitman promised; he believed that reading *Leaves of Grass* could change your life. Here are the stories of some people who prove that.