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**Michael Robertson: Worshipping Walt**

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## INTRODUCTION

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*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-













