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Whitman's spell

by [Thomas M. Disch](#)

On *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*, by Michael Robertson.

Michael Robertson *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*. Princeton University Press, 350 pages, \$27.95

The best biographies of Whitman reveal what one expects, the self-appointed Bard living in a bubble of self-proclaimed glory. That Whitman is best encountered in his own poems. If he had had any secrets a biographer would like to ferret out, he did such a good tidying up that even a century later the interesting questions about his life are still unanswered. Was he gay, in the sense we use that word today? We can't say. How much of his grandiosity was an act, and intended to be understood as such? That's to say, was he a charlatan? He was too canny to be nailed down there either. Sometimes he seems a Holy Fool after the fashion of Parsifal or Prince Mishkin, but he was also a shrewd and resourceful self-promoter, who, when Emerson sent him a letter that praised his poems in the highest terms (it concludes, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career"), immediately brought out a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* quoting the whole letter on the cover. Critics cried foul, for such self-promotion was not gentlemanly, but Whitman's career caught fire directly, as it might not otherwise have done. Thereafter, though he often had to scrounge for a living, writing newspaper filler for peanuts, he was adored by those who read his poetry, in which he was free to expand on his abiding and favorite theme, namely himself. Cocooned in his career, his life was not that interesting. But the lives of those for whom Whitman became a mission and a faith have the fascination of stories heard for the first time. All the jokes are fresh and the endings full of surprises, both happy and plangent.

The first of the disciples Michael Robertson zooms in on are William O'Connor and John Burroughs. Whitman came to know them in his years working in a government office during and just after the Civil War. He was also constantly ministering to the needs of wounded and ill soldiers being treated (and maltreated) in the makeshift hospitals of the city (the still a-building Capitol among them). The most upbeat poems of *Leaves of Grass* had already been published and his genius proclaimed, but beyond mere literature and transcending it, the Whitman that O'Connor and Burroughs met was a kind of secular saint, going about the nightmarish hospital wards and offering the shell-shocked and the amputees the things they desperately needed—warmth, companionship, love. Whitman had always had a thing for sailors, workmen, and young toughs of all kinds, but the war had transformed that taste into a vocation. Whitman became a saint *malgré lui*, and this became visible to those who knew him in Washington.

Even before the war Whitman had fancied the mission of poetry to be religious. "The 1860 *Leaves of*

Grass,” Robertson writes, “was perfectly positioned to become the bible of a liberal post-Christian American spirituality”—and Whitman would be its prophet, even, according to O’Connor in his fervent pamphlet “The Good Gray Poet,” its “Christ, soothing, healing, consoling, restoring, night and day, for years.” O’Connor expanded on that theme in “The Carpenter,” a parable of Whitman as Christ, published in *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1867. The story was egregiously sentimental and very popular. Readers recognized Whitman in the title role, and so was launched his career as a secular saint on a par with those of our own day, Albert Schweitzer and Mohandas Gandhi.

The other disciple from Whitman’s Washington years, John Burroughs, became the most popular nature writer of the nineteenth century (a sample of his botanic prose can be found in the new eco-friendly anthology from The Library of America, *American Earth*). Burrough’s praises of Whitman exceeded even O’Connor’s: “If that is not the face of a poet, then it is the face of a god.” He went on in this idolatrous vein for a good fifty-three years, and his final testimony, at the age of eighty-three, is still unstinting: “I look upon him as the greatest personality . . . that has appeared in the world during the Christian era.” This, from a writer notable for his calm and lucid appreciation of the natural world in its humblest aspects. (He is great on chickadees and nuthatches.)

The next Whitman disciple was his Mary Magdalen—Anne Gilchrist, a widow from London with four children to raise, who at the age of forty-eight, inspired by her love of his poems and a deep conviction that they were erotically directed to her in particular, uprooted herself and three of her children from England and sailed to Philadelphia to offer herself to Whitman as the bride Fate had predestined for him. Whitman brushed her off in the most gentlemanly way, but then comes the twist ending. Whitman needed a family more supportive than the brother and sister-in-law he was living with as an invalid boarder. The Gilchrists became that family, and Anne’s teenage son Herbert fell under Whitman’s spell the same way his mother had, though in his case the feeling was reciprocated. Anne was an author in her own right, a biographer of William Blake, a neighbor in Chelsea of the Carlyles, a friend of William Rossetti, and well worth a biography of her own. Clearly, she was no star-struck simpleton, which makes her words of witness all the more remarkable: “Whitman is, I believe, far more closely akin to Christ than to either Homer or Shakespeare or any other poet. . . . Here at last is the face of Christ, which the painters have so long sought for.” The hyperbole goes on, and the temperature rises.

Robertson’s next disciple is R. M. Bucke, the director of an immense insane asylum in Ontario, one of the Wonders of the New World in its day, and the author of *Cosmic Consciousness*, a book that has been a reliable bestseller in occult bookstores since its publication in 1901, and so a Wonder of the New Age. Bucke took on the task of translating the poems of Whitman into a consistent philosophy on the order of Theosophy, the brainchild of Madame Blavatsky. Whitman himself, however much he liked to have minions sitting at his feet, found Bucke’s effusions hard to take.

As Whitman aged, he grew feebler and his needs multiplied. He needed help just getting around, help in the PR department (he used to do just fine on his own), and mostly he needed company, a hand to hold, an ear to bend. Whitman’s daily companion, unofficial secretary, nurse, and most beloved disciple in his last years was Horace Traubel. Traubel came round every day to Whitman’s unkempt wreck of a sickroom and sorted through the papers on the floor—all Scripture in Traubel’s view, and all subsequently published in a scholarly edition thanks to his foresight. After an hour or two of Whitmaniac pronouncements, Traubel went home and wrote a detailed record of that day’s table talk. No writer of stature has been listened to so attentively since the days of Dr. Johnson or Goethe.

Whitman needed disciples, and the disciples came—many all the way from England. Often there had been a long correspondence first, full of questions about certain passages in his work that suggested the possibility of a love between comrades that might be . . . well, it did not quite dare to speak its name, and indeed the euphemisms then in use are now almost extinct. One disciple, John

Addington Symonds, provoked Whitman to some of his most alarmed evasions: “That the calamus part [of *Leaves*] has even allowed the possibility of such construction as mention’d is terrible—I am fain to hope the pages themselves are not to be even mention’d for such gratuitous and quite at times entirely undream’d & unreck’d possibility of morbid inferences—wh’ are disavow’d by me & seem damnable.” Henry James could not have put it better.

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