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REVIEWS

MICHAEL ROBERTSON. *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. xiii + 350 pp.

The title and the subject of this book would have made Walt Whitman wince. Though he was eager for respect, celebrity, and fame, the idolator's pedestal made him nervous. Thus, he chided the smitten Englishwoman Anne Gilchrist for her idealizings: "You must not construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W.W. . . . The actual W.W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy of such devotion" (*Corr* 2:140). Just before Christmas in 1888, Horace Traubel reported to Whitman that someone had reminisced about an essay in an English review that predicted "a future for W.W. above that of Jesus Christ." The poet replied, "Yes, I have had such slaps, but I can assure you I do not appreciate them: some of the wild fellows think they must say such things" (*WWC* 3:312). About two English "wild fellows," John Johnston and J.W. Wallace, Whitman repined that they were "too extravagant . . . In earlier ages, Wallace would have made a follower of Jesus" (*WWC* 8:370-71). And nothing rankled Whitman more than the transformation of the word in *Leaves of Grass* into The Word, then the consequent axe-grinding exegesis. About Richard Maurice Bucke's 1883 *Walt Whitman*, Whitman groused, "What I quarrel with is the Doctor's damned definiteness—and it is *very* damned! . . . He is explicating this, that, the other, as if there was no doubt in the world about it. Yet *I*, the author, am in constant doubt about it" (*WWC* 8:524).

Whitman, of course, asked for all this trouble. He did so in 1855 by announcing his intimate knowledge of the "pleasures of heaven" and the "pains of hell," by calling the "spirit of God" the "eldest brother of my own," and by affecting a pulpit- or Mount Sinai-worthy voice "orotund sweeping and final." He did so later by foiling the priests and presenting his own surrogate religion: "there is no God any more divine than Yourself" ("Laws for Creations"). He also did so by electing himself, in "To Him That Was Crucified," a mystic soulmate to Jesus in a benighted world that has lost his message, then announcing in *Democratic Vistas*, "The priest departs, the divine literatus comes."

Privately, too, Whitman seems to have embraced the Nazarene flavor of his life's work. Perhaps the notion, scribbled in 1857, of his "main life work" being the "Great Construction of the New Bible" (*NUPM* 1:353) says it all. Late in life he asserted to Traubel, "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" (*WWC* 1:10). A year later, Whitman underscored the Jesus-disciple parallel when he called his relationship with Traubel "a sort of apostolic succession, a laying on of hands" (*WWC* 4:394).

Whitman made a few rather lame attempts to stave off contemporary or future attempts to make his agenda of spiritual seeking into a worshipped creed. As early as 1855, he sought to make clear that the individual's (Quaker) inner light will always trump religious sects and sacred texts: "We consider bibles and religions divine. . . . I do not say they are not divine,/ I say they have all grown out of you . . . It is not they who give the life. . . . it is you who give the life." A quarter-century later, in "Myself and Mine," he warned, "I charge you forever reject those who would expound me . . . I charge that there be no theory or school founded out of me." Or sect.

Michael Robertson has had the valuable idea of producing a group biography of the most prominent "wild fellows" (and one woman) who chose to ignore these admonitions and vigorously evangelized for *Leaves of Grass* as a bible able to spiritually reinvigorate a desperately needy world. *Worshipping Walt* focuses on nine of these disciples, all of whom were writers and knew Whitman personally. The ministrations of this cohort during the first generation after Whitman's death, it is fair to say, were crucial to the establishment of his permanent "foothold" on America's literary Parnassus. We already know much about these familiar names from the Whitman circle, but considering them from this perspective is illuminating.

Smiling throughout *Worshipping Walt* is a delectable irony. This poet who resided most comfortably on his own duff, this splendid loafer and gregarious ferry or streetcar schmoozer, somehow managed to attract a most remarkably industrious group of disciples (Traubel was called "lethally industrious"). They all shared that *sine qua non* trait for any true disciple: a sense of the importance of being earnest. For all his imagery of perambulation and get-a-move-on, Whitman was at heart of an anchorite rather than activist inclination, as he suggested when Traubel asked him one election day if he had voted: "I always refrain—yet advise everybody else not to forget" (*WWC* 6:114). In striking contrast, most all of Robertson's subjects took *Leaves of Grass* and ran with it, strenuously believing that (to borrow from Shakespeare's Portia) its "good deed" should shine in "a naughty world."

The first chapter is shared by William O'Connor, whom Robertson calls "the first person to compare Whitman to Jesus," and John Burroughs, the progenitor of all "green" Whitman studies. This is in part because Robertson finds "a powerful homoerotic undercurrent" in their relationships to the poet. O'Connor's well-known "Good Gray Poet" pamphlet is touched on, but more to Robertson's point is his 1867 novella, "The Carpenter: A Christmas Story." This Americanization of Dickens's "Christmas Carol" depicts Whitman "not just as a saint but a messiah." In contrast to the over-the-top jouster O'Connor (Whitman called him a "human avalanche"), Burroughs turned out to be perhaps the most low-key and distanced of the disciples (his New York aerie above the Hudson was 200 miles from Camden). His observation that under Christianity "man has taken himself out of the category of natural things" perhaps explains his dim view of how other disciples reveled in messianic and creedal tropes. And yet, he does write in his *Whitman: A Study* (1896), "We have all been slow to see that [Whitman's] cherished ends were religious rather than literary."

The familiar story of lovelorn Anne Gilchrist also benefits from Robertson's angle. We learn that her "Woman's Estimate" was first published, anonymously, in a religious magazine, and that she viewed Whitman as, in her words, "far more closely akin to Christ than to either Homer or Shakespeare or any other poet." It is also corrective to discover how Whitman, desperate to absent himself from his perch at his unsympathetic brother George's house, became a family member for long stretches chez Gilchrist and developed a deep intellectual bond with her. Robertson cites several of Whitman's high praises of Gilchrist uttered after her three-year American sojourn ended in 1879, and we are well prepared for the quotation, at chapter's end, of Whitman's memorial poem on her, "'Going Somewhere.'"

Dr. Bucke, says Robertson, was the most stentorian advocate for "a religious interpretation of *Leaves of Grass* and a messianic view of the poet." This unsettled Whitman: "I love the Doctor," he said, but "there are times when his boisterous vehemence gets on my nerves" (*WWC* 4:233). It is no small irony that this most obsessive of the disciples (and one who suffered severe depressions in early adulthood and was given to mystical illuminations) was in fact the director of a 300-acre campus in London, Ontario, filled with hundreds of the insane. Robertson makes the convincing point that, because Bucke slowly began to see he would never cure those under his care, his true vocation became Walt Whitman: "In his professional life as physician and alienist he had been unsuccessful in his efforts to cure mental illness and had fallen into an unsatisfying role as an institutional administrator. However, in his role as author and Walt Whitman champion, Bucke embraced a grandiose evolutionary optimism and cast Whitman as the ultimate physician, capable of healing humanity's ills." One result of this sublimation, Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901), now seems easy to make fun of, but Robertson notes that this New Age-friendly work has never gone out of print and is now available in seven U.S. and Canadian editions. I wish Robertson had quoted some of Traubel's seriocomic attempts, at Bucke's behest, to get Whitman to comment from his deathbed on cosmic consciousness (the poet sensibly clammed up) or from Bucke's earnest 1895 *Conservator* essay "Was Whitman Mad?"

The fourth chapter presents a trio of disciples drawn to Whitman by shared sexual identity: John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and Oscar Wilde. Symonds, noted for badgering Whitman for two decades to "out" his *Calamus* sequence, became eager to seek the imprimatur of Whitman for a gospel of toleration for homosexuality. Notwithstanding the famous Camden summit, Wilde's inclusion here is a bit tenuous, his sole essay on Whitman being an 1888 review of *November Boughs*, happily titled, for Robertson's purpose, "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman." There is certainly a messianic tinge in Wilde's observation therein: "The chief value of his work is in its prophecy. . . . He is the herald of a new era. As a man he is the precursor to a fresh type." Robertson does call "brilliant" Wilde's one supremely Whitmanic performance, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," but he might well have quoted its splendid gloss on "Song of Myself": "He who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself."

Carpenter stands uncomfortably beside Symonds and Wilde, both of whom led self-indulgent, closeted lives generously doused in eros. Unlike

Symonds and Wilde, he lived well into the twentieth century as a public gay man and homosexual apologist (he died in 1929). In addition to his *Days with Walt Whitman* (1906), he wrote a dozen books—among them *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1902) and *The Intermediate Sex* (1913), both favorably reviewed in Traubel's *Conservator*—and countless reformist pamphlets. Robertson prizes Carpenter notably for his Whitmanic closeness to the working class (his lovers were all drawn from these ranks) and for the wide range and impact of his do-good activities. "To imagine Carpenter's equivalent in the American counterculture," he writes, "one would have to combine Daniel Berrigan, Tom Hayden, Ram Dass, Gary Snyder, Larry Kramer, Gloria Steinem, and Wavy Gravy. And, presiding overall, the spirit of Walt Whitman." No doubt is left that Carpenter was the most eloquent and effective evangelist for the introduction of Whitman's democratic principles into every aspect of modern life: "Only Carpenter agreed with Whitman that the love of men for one another could be a positive political force."

The next chapter is devoted to the Englishman J.W. Wallace (1853-1926) and other male members of the Eagle Street College, an informal, all-male discussion group that met weekly in northern England (Wallace's house was in Eagle Street). Like Carpenter, Wallace sailed early in life on a Camden pilgrimage and much later, with another Eagle Street pilgrim, John Johnston, memorialized the experience in *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-91* (1917). Robertson's interest here is in that vein of Whitman discipleship that thrived along with "the new religious movements that blossomed across the late nineteenth-century British landscape: New Thought, Theosophy, Spiritualism, Ethical Culture." Earlier in the book, Robertson trenchantly observes that the "poetic persona of *Leaves of Grass* is both a self-sufficient 'kosmos' and a perpetually yearning lover," and this may explain its manifest appeal to readers that Robertson calls "spiritual seekers." In contrast to the preoccupations of Symonds and Carpenter, the Eagle Street fraternity "saw comrade love as a powerful but unproblematic sentiment that had nothing to do with sex." Symonds' notion that the *Calamus* poems were about "sexual inversion" horrified Wallace and Johnston (all in the Eagle Street club were married but Wallace). Wallace's concern, after Whitman's death, was rather to harness the poet's gospel to concrete political action, this being in Wallace's case a Carlyle-inspired ethical socialism. *Leaves* thus became a bible for the new Independent Labor Party. "I have been dosing [Lancaster socialists] with Walt," he boasted to Traubel. Though Whitman himself was indifferent to socialism, "Wallace was successful in turning the American poet into a patron saint of British socialism."

Robertson saves his last chapter for the most indefatigable and productive of all the disciples, Horace Traubel, whose activities as go-fer, correspondence secretary, publisherial liaison, literary executor, editor of *The Conservator*, and recorder of nine volumes' worth of Whitman conversations need no introduction. "Like all the disciples," Robertson writes, "Traubel was a spiritual seeker," but what sets him apart from all his brethren was "a mania for organizing." And sheer discipline, one might add: you don't put out a monthly journal virtually single-handedly for thirty years without plain,

dogged, rolled-up-sleeves sweat. In this Traubel was the anti-Whitman. He was also the anti-Whitman in organizing the Walt Whitman Fellowship, for the poet was on record as dead-set against a Whitman Society. Traubel himself records him saying, "I hope to God there'll never be Walt Whitman societies. Societies are a disease."

It is clearly Traubel's multi-pronged progressive activism that appeals to Robertson, who justly observes, "like Carpenter in England he had a finger in virtually every radical movement of his era." Robertson sums up, "Traubel functioned as a propagandist—or, more accurately, an evangelist—using the *Conservator* to spread the gospel of Whitmanesque socialism." Traubel was true to the cause until the very end. In his editorial for the Whitman centennial issue of the *Conservator* in May 1919, he asked these fierce rhetorical questions about *Leaves of Grass*: "Have we put Walt into a cabinet for observation or into the flesh and blood of our virile living activity? . . . Is he a volume of poem words or the flaming tissue of a challenging reform? Has he become a book of reference or a way of life?" Spoken like a true disciple.

So enlightening are Robertson's sketches of these nine disciples that one regrets he did not try for the biblical twelve. My nominations? The spellbinding orator Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899) might have been included. Though known as "the Great Agnostic," he was in no way agnostic about Whitman. His every sentence, Whitman said, was "a thrust in itself—a dagger—a gleam—a fire—a torch" (*WWC* 6:106). Ingersoll's oration "Liberty in Literature," the centerpiece of a Whitman testimonial in 1890, is appended to the seventh volume of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* and is worth a look-see in the worshipful context. Thomas Biggs Harned (1851-1921) was a pillar of Whitman's inner circle and the longest surviving of his three literary executors; his Whitman memoirs, composed circa 1920, were published in 1972. Most sorely missed is the wittiest and most insouciant of the disciples, William Sloane Kennedy (1850-1929), the author of *Reminiscences of Walt Whitman* (1896) and some sparky contributions to the *Conservator* on the poet. This passage from his letter of Christmas greetings to Whitman in 1890 would have fit perfectly in *Worshipping Walt*: "Do you suppose a thousand years fr. now people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ? If they don't—the more fools they. But—I hope they won't mythologize you & idiotize themselves as they do over that poor Christ" (*WWC* 7:397).

One impression that becomes stronger as one reads *Worshipping Walt* is that little was perfunctory, hyped, or rose-colored in the discipleship Robertson lays before us. Intelligence plus genuine and heartfelt personal conviction always seem to shine through, banishing any temptation to dismiss these disciples as cranks. The same can be said of this book itself. Robertson fully earns the right to reveal himself, on the last page of his afterword, as a disciple too: "More than any other poet, I think, Whitman evokes not just admiration but love. The disciples felt that love in the *Leaves*, they sought it from the man and . . . none of them was entirely disappointed."

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