

Robertson, Michael. *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. xii, 368 pp. Cloth, \$27.95. Paper \$19.95.

In 1890, Whitman disciple William Sloane Kennedy asked, “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?” (9). His answer was definitive: “If they don’t—the more fools they” (9). Whatever fools or revelers we may be 120 years after Kennedy’s pronouncement, Michael Robertson’s *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* offers us an engaging study that explains how this question came to be asked and answered in the approximately sixty years following the 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*. More largely, Robertson aptly demonstrates how Whitman gained a cadre of followers who saw *Leaves of Grass* as scripture and Whitman as a prophet, a visionary, and even a Christ figure.

As *Worshipping Walt* narrates the often life-changing events that Whitman and his verse prompted, it offers a powerful tale of reception told through its far-reaching effects. In largely self-contained chapters, Robertson presents the stories of nine readers turned disciples, limiting his examination, with a single exception, to those who not only read Whitman but also sought him out to become interlocutors, companions, and devotees. Discipleship in this study is therefore a product of responding to Whitman on the page *and* interacting with him in the flesh. The disciples examined here range from the popular nature writer John Burroughs to respected Canadian psychiatrist R. M. Bucke; from William O’Connor, who coined the lasting moniker “the good gray poet,” to John Addington Symonds, who after reading the “Calamus” poems pressed Whitman in a years-long correspondence to make clear his stand on “ardent and *physical* intimacies” between men (143); from J.W. Wallace, the founder of a group in England called the Eagle Street College, which met regularly to discuss Whitman, to Horace Traubel, Whitman’s literary secretary and companion, who founded the Walt Whitman Fellowship following Whitman’s death. Robertson retrieves these disciples’ estimations of Whitman through the voluminous record they produced in letters, biographies, criticism, poetry, and a novella; through paintings and drawings of Whitman and years of transcribed conversations; and through the records of local and international organizations the disciples founded. Indeed, as these disciples made pilgrimages from Canada, New York, and England to Whitman, they also took Whitman out into the world.

In many ways, Robertson seeks to explain how these seemingly ordinary readers became disciples, and he rightly demonstrates that no one explanation fits them all. Robertson does firmly place the disciples in the transatlantic world of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, showing how clashes between religion and science not only prompted the rise of secularism but also resulted in novel forms of

spiritual seeking that led these readers to Whitman. In finely drawn narratives, Robertson also highlights the variable personal circumstances that prompted these readers to find something worth worshipping in Walt: the death of a loved one, the boredom of a routine life, the pain and anxiety of living outside one's prescribed gender, sexual, or political role. Then, of course, there was Whitman himself, whose charisma, magnetism, and pure responsiveness managed, time after time, not to disappoint the lofty expectations of the disciples who made pilgrimages to Camden. For these disciples, Whitman represented a form of revolutionary thinking that was located at the intersection of the spiritual, political, and sexual and that offered potentially radical ways of being.

The study of Whitman's disciples could offer a temptation to play on the etymology of the word *fan*, rooted in *fanatic*, a term with strong religious connotations that also conjures pejorative ideas of excess, irrationality, and even madness. Thankfully, Robertson does not seize that opportunity, and here lies an important contribution of *Worshipping Walt*: Robertson takes these disciples quite seriously. This seriousness manifests itself first in the book's content, which is less about Whitman and more about what these readers made of and from him. Indeed, the pages of this study are sprinkled with Whitman's verses but positively doused with his disciples' writings. There are, as one might expect, elements of the ridiculous in those writings and in the stories that *Worshipping Walt* tells. Anne Gilchrist, the only female disciple examined at length here, serves as a prime example: after reading *Leaves of Grass*, this respectable, middle-class Englishwoman offered via letter to bear Whitman's child and sailed from England after five years of intermittent correspondence with him to make good on this promise. Robertson begins the chapter devoted to her by setting the scene of her first meeting with Whitman on September 30, 1876, in the lobby of a Philadelphia hotel. What happened at that meeting is unknown, but Robertson continues Gilchrist's story with what is known: Whitman quickly became a honorary member of her family, if not as the father of her child, and Gilchrist returned to England three years later with a life-long friend who would later eulogize her in verse. As this brief précis indicates, the elements of these disciples' stories that tend to the extreme are tempered by the narratives in which they are placed. Throughout his book, Robertson therefore shows how interactions between Whitman and his disciples far exceeded shameless effusion and author worship on one side and bemusement and even embarrassment on the other. Indeed, Whitman credited one disciple with saving his life; another held his hand as he died.

Robertson's critical appreciation of Whitman's disciples also extends to the contributions they made to the understanding of Whitman in his time and in our own. These disciples not only defended Whitman against charges of incoherence and prurience but also pioneered critical strains that remain important today. The

figures presented here identified Whitman as a major literary figure who championed nature, women, female sexuality, radical egalitarianism, and same-sex passion. Moreover, Robertson does not explain away or dismiss the spiritual discipleship that lies at the heart of this study; indeed, a tenet of *Worshipping Walt* is that these disciples offer a valid perspective on the religious dimensions of Whitman's work.

While individual studies of many Whitman disciples exist, and Robertson relies here on figures and stories familiar to Whitman scholars, this is the first general study of this loosely affiliated, transatlantic group. Bringing these disciples together between the covers of a single book presents opportunities to consider how we might theorize pockets of historical readers, as well as the interpretive consensus that brings them together and the disagreements that drive them apart. Particularly intriguing moments come when Robertson traces explicit connections among the disciples – when they meet, interact, or clash over the meaning of Whitman's verses or the best way to follow him. For example, Robertson's fourth chapter, which considers three English disciples together—John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and Oscar Wilde—in the light of Whitman's views of same-sex passion, is particularly illuminating. Robertson shows how these men tried to use Whitman to license their distinct versions of same-sex love, each of which differed from the “radical and unsettling” view of same-sex passion that Whitman propounds in *Leaves of Grass* (197). Robertson here makes particular various general principles of reception studies—that meaning shifts and mutates among readers, that historical circumstances affect the questions that readers ask, and that interpretations of a particular literary work often reflect a reader's personal investments. Given Robertson's investment in these issues, one might have wanted these informative case studies to build to a larger interpretive, or even theoretical, contribution, one that might, for instance, articulate how these readers were affected by their membership in this particular interpretive community and by their interactions with the poet himself.

Robertson's fascinating afterword brings us back into the present, to a time when disciples' predictions of what Whitman as poet-prophet would be to future generations have not come true. In accounting for our distance from these past readers, Robertson tells the story of Whitman's adoption into the canon and of the academy's long-held distaste for both the disciples, whom one early critic memorably called the “hot little prophets” (279), and the views they propounded. Nonetheless, Robertson also presents modern-day adherents of Whitmanism who run websites dedicated to Whitman, lead meditation groups, and even hold annual celebrations of Whitman's birthday: as Robertson demonstrates, the perception of Whitman's verse as transformative and of Whitman as a spiritual poet, if not as a man worthy of worship, is actually alive and well.

One of Whitman's early disciples, John Burroughs, wrote in his journal after Whitman's death, "I think I see more plainly how Jesus came to be deified—his followers loved him; love transforms everything" (49). On *Worshipping Walt's* final page, Robertson offers another perspective on what love of Whitman might produce, quoting a distinguished scholar who observed, "There are many different ways of expressing our love for Walt Whitman. Mine happens to be historical scholarship" (296). Robertson concludes on a powerful note by demonstrating the unrecognized affinities between an academic *us* and an amateur *them*, while rightly suggesting that we have much to learn from each other.

Jennifer L. Brady  
Harvard University