

Song of Myself: Teaching Whitman's New Bible Today

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The head is more than churches or bibles or creeds.—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, line 528

I've been teaching American literature at small, Midwestern, church-affiliated liberal arts colleges for about a dozen years, and most of my students were raised in Protestant/evangelical communities. Inevitably, when I teach the 19th-century Transcendentalists, they get intrigued. By the time we get to Whitman's *Song of Myself*, they're ready to convert. Sure, there are the holdouts, the students who find his writing too disorganized and too "hippie" in its sentiments. The form is admittedly confusing, not at all like the closed-form poems they have studied earlier, and at first some have trouble processing a sixty-page poem that looks like a mixture of "*Bhagavad Gita* and the *New York Tribune*."¹ And all those inexplicable ellipses in the 1855 version! Other students are less dismissive but seem only temporarily captivated, in the Transcendentalist moment for a small portion of the semester, posting quotes from Thoreau and Whitman on their Facebook pages for a few weeks. Some stick with it, though, seeking out the longer works of Emerson by day, talking half-drunken Transcendentalist philosophy under the trees late into the night after the bars have closed. I have even had, on one occasion, a student raise her hand in class and declare, "I want to convert to Transcendentalism." Alas, though some may be ready to convert, there is nothing to convert to—at least not in the way of formal joining of an organized religion and a place to perform the conversion ceremony. (Well, actually there *is* a

place, perhaps on a patch of clover right outside the classroom building, but there's no recognizable building like the churches of their families.) What is it about Transcendentalism, and Whitman in particular, that appeals so strongly to college-age students in the midst of many new intellectual explorations, any one of which could affect their real lives outside of the classroom?

The appeal is not too surprising, given that Whitman referred to *Leaves of Grass* as a "New Bible."² Yet, oddly enough, relatively little scholarship from the past twenty years explores the religious or spiritual elements of his most famous work. Perhaps the super-saturated Transcendentalist work is so infused with spirituality that one need not explicate it further. Still, students new to the poem cannot truly understand what Whitman preaches without understanding the spiritual underpinnings of his work. What I describe in this essay is certainly not unique to my experiences of teaching Whitman's most famous poem, though I don't know that I've ever seen anyone formally discuss the "religious conversion" phenomenon. After more than a decade of teaching the poem in American literature survey courses—and witnessing this phenomenon repeatedly—I have some thoughts as to why the conversion desire occurs. Simply put, Whitman's pluralist approach to human experience as divine experience opens doors to a D.I.Y. approach to spirituality and belief that is nonjudgmental, firmly grounded in American cultural ideals, and centered on the familiar self as a resource for moral guidance.

While I often ease my students into Whitman's writing style and worldview through some of the shorter, topical poems (such as the Civil War poems from *Drum-Taps*), the one piece of scripture that pushes them to the point of conversion and the one text that seems to fulfill their new spiritual needs is *Song of Myself*. As those who teach Whitman know, the poem isn't always an instant hit. However, the unfamiliar and seemingly disorganized form that some students first see in Whitman's work (compared to, say, Tennyson's poems) immediately clears up with an "Oh. Okay," when I lay a Whitman passage next to a passage from Ecclesiastes for them. While this mimicry of biblical text in such a "sexy" poem might seem blasphemous to some very devout students, they never say so. Instead, the similarity codifies a respect for scriptural writing on the poet's part and provides a rhetorical gateway into the poem. This also helps them see a double familiarity in the language of the poem, its tone at times very much informed by the lofty cadence of scriptures, but also distinctly American and somewhat casual in voice.

While Christians who pull biblical lines out of context and ignore the more disagreeable parts of the Bible may be labeled hypocrites, I have no qualms about encouraging students to pull individual lines or passages from Whitman's poem. In fact, there is no "out of context" in *Song of Myself's*

mostly non sequitur-filled structure, so there is no possibility of hypocrisy. If they can't see the whole at first, I encourage them to isolate a line or passage they like—for reasons they are not required to explain—and simply read it aloud. They are allowed to wallow in the beauty of one line without having to understand the logic of the whole for a while. Perhaps this approach to textual analysis is familiar to them, as well, as it may be how they were encouraged to approach other religious texts at a young age.

Not only do I encourage students to lift lines out of context, I support their love of lines that oppose one another in sentiment. Should new followers of Whitman feel somehow hypocritical in thought or action, they need only turn to the famous lines “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then ... I contradict myself; I am large ... I contain multitudes.”³ Instead of all that doctrinal contradiction written by multiple recorders of Holy texts in an ancient society nothing like ours, we find a spirituality that, like modern American society, provides for a natural pluralism (even debate) within one's own body and mind. And again, the individual gets to decide the right and the wrong of the moment, because the “I” (whether Whitman's or his reader's) is in charge in this religion:

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. [...] A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. Through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future.... They shall not deign to defend immortality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth.⁴

These lines offer the reader the power to be the priest of the self. Rather than being expected to abide by a series of rules for living, individuals are trusted to find the right and the good on their own—and are given some rhetorically passionate instructions for how to do so. As George Sixbey notes, Whitman saw in the poet the power to re-create God in his own image. This is both a Romantic notion of the poet's privileged position in accessing the divine and translating it for others, as well as a purely democratic belief that if humans are made in the image of God, God is also made in the image of humans: “Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah and laying them away.”⁵

The above passage also echoes the important democratic theme throughout the poem, Whitman's implicit argument that only through American democracy—as conceived and in-the-making in the young nation—may real equality be realized, and this equality is requisite to the understanding of the divine in all living beings.⁶ In such an affirmation lies both an appeal to the

notions of patriotic equality students are taught in public schools as well as to a sense of American exceptionalism still persistent in our culture. Moreover, the passage above proclaims that the best priests in our culture will be English majors! “[T]he new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things,” as another line in isolation, may bolster my many English majors who seem to have no idea *why* they are English majors.

If the youthful soul is already moving away from a Christian upbringing after taking a World Religions course, as I have seen happen many times (even in myself as a nineteen-year-old looking for independence from a Catholic upbringing), *Song* offers additional comfort, advice, and justification. When a young Anglo Protestant is torn between whether Buddhism or Sufism seems like the new spiritual path to follow, well, guess what: Whitman says you can have it all, “enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern,” organized and primal simultaneously:

Making a fetish of the first rock or stump ... powwowing with sticks in the circle
of obis,
Helping the lama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols,
Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession ... rapt and austere in
the woods, a gymnophyst,
Drinking mead from the skull-cup ... to shasta and vedas admirant ... minding
the koran,
Walking the teokallis, spotted with gore from the stone and knife — beating the
serpent-skin drum,
Accepting the gospels, accepting him that was crucified, knowing assuredly
that he is divine,
To the mass kneeling — to the puritan’s prayer rising — sitting patiently in a
pew...⁷

While Emerson seems to find all organized religion (even Unitarianism) too limiting to one’s own moral seeking — to the extent that he seems at times to be a moral relativist — Whitman embraces it all, insisting that through experimenting with a variety of spiritual practices we find ourselves in connection to all of the divine. Some students do warm to Emerson, of course, but many find him perhaps too fatherly, too absolute, too focused on the individual as intellectual sovereign and, therefore, in some ways very much alone. In Thoreau, they find something to admire, but most find his experiment at Walden Pond such a specific, ascetic experience that they don’t see room for themselves in it. In Whitman, one finds Emerson’s ideal nonconformist *being* a nonconformist (as with Thoreau), and doing so in a more socially aware way that reaches out to others and affirms their faiths and identities. For Whitman, the entire world is Walden, and in that expansive approach students seem to find their own potential Waldens more easily.

This reaching out extends, then, to seeing the divine in all living beings, including those the official institutions of Whitman's day did not recognize as human, such as slaves of African descent and Native Americans.⁸ The persona of the poem, however, goes beyond recognition to an extension of the Golden Rule, to a connection with the Other we are often incapable of making ourselves enact without an inspirational shove. In his argument for the divine-as-realized via democracy, Whitman creates a speaker who makes an example of himself connecting to the divine in everyone he encounters: "All these I feel or am./ I am the hounded slave ... I wince at the bite of the dogs."⁹ The poet knows that Jesus Christ is divine, because, through the connected "over-soul" of Transcendentalism, "I am the man ... I suffered ... I was there"; "That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning!"¹⁰ For Whitman, the poet and the slave are as divine as Jesus, the president as divine as a prostitute or a farmer, and real democracy requires not that we judge others' performance within a narrow interpretation of scripture, as our puritanical cultural roots have influenced many to do, but that we (like the historical Jesus) declare allegiance to criminals and whores:

I will not have a single person slighted or left way,
 The keptwoman and sponger and thief are hereby invited ... the heavy-lipped
 slave is invited ... the venerealee is invited,
 There shall be no difference between them and the rest.¹¹

David Reynolds describes the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* as "a utopian document, suggesting that boundaries of section, class, and race that had become glaringly visible in America's political arena could be imaginatively dissolved by affirmation of the cross-fertilization of its various cultural arenas." He reminds us what real (utopian) democracy can be when he "speak[s] the password primeval.... I give the sign of democracy;/By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms"; he reminds us, too, that the enactment of democracy requires empathy: "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels.... I myself become the wounded person."¹² Like any religion or ethical system, we see in these examples how Whitman's poem reminds us to try to be our best selves, and to take those best selves out into our contemporary society.

And guess what: our best selves can be sexually active! With whomever we want! Know why? That's right, all connection to other living beings is essentially divine. This seems like an especially welcome — but also confusing — revelation to those students who have been immersed in the contemporary culture of abstinence-only sex education, or who have come to college still wearing their purity rings.¹³ Just as the "I" of the poem puts himself inside of the consciousness of the slave, he does so with the opposite sex, physically

putting himself inside of another man's experience with his new bride, to "tighten her all night to my thighs and lips," but also, in the very next line, inside the grief of a widow, "My voice is the wife's voice, the screech by the rail of the stairs,/They fetch my man's body up dripping and drowned." He literally transitions his sexuality to the necessary moment. Consequently, if all human experience is an expression of the divine, then it need not be strictly heterosexual, as affirmed in the well-known passage that hints at fellatio as divine experience beyond judgment and sin:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
 You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
 And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
 barestript heart,
 And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.
 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.¹⁴

To express connection to others with the body is not the work of the devil; in fact, in Whitman's theology, "wickedness is most likely the absence of freedom and health in the soul."¹⁵ I have known gay students who encounter this poem in those formative college years as they attempt to get beyond the rejection of parents, churches, or counselors who have tried to "cure" them of their homosexuality. Instead, Whitman offers validation of all experiences: "Seeing, hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle./ Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from;/ The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer."¹⁶

Even if you don't have anyone to make out with, nature is there for you, and awareness of the body within nature is divine, too:

You sea! I resign myself to you also.... I guess what you mean,
 I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
 I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me;
 We must have a turn together.... I undress ... hurry me out of sight of the land,
 Cushion me soft ... rock me in billowy drowse,
 Dash me with amorous wet ... I can repay you.

Ultimately, he asks that we tune into sensory experiences and see those as sacred in themselves. For Whitman, the minutiae of human existence are divine and worthy of our attentions; even in our most navel-gazing moments we can tune into the holy: "not objecting to special revelations ... considering a curl of smoke or a hair on the back of my hand as curious as any revelation."¹⁷

For every trial belief system or lifestyle at an age of strong convictions

on social issues, the pluralist poem offers something.¹⁸ For the animal rights activist:

I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals...
 [...]
 They do now sweat and whine about their condition,
 They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
 They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
 Not one is dissatisfied ... not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
 Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived a thousand years ago [...] ¹⁹

There are passages that speak to the environmentalists, the budding feminists, the maybe-probably agnostics, the newly signed-up up or just-out soldiers getting their heads around the realities of war. I even had one country boy of a student who started out thinking of Whitman as a leftist “hippie,” then discovered several passages describing hunting (again, Whitman himself occupying the body of the hunter) in non-judgmental ways. This student found a way into the poem, and enlightened me to passages I had never really noticed before. When students find these specific passages and highlight them in class, I learn with them — with literature as the religious text that brings us together.

For those who are experiencing their first losses, deaths of family members or friends their own age, but who are finding little comfort in organized religion or the traditional notion of heaven as an actual place, Whitman offers this well known passage:

All goes onward and outward ... and nothing collapses,
 And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
 Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
 I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

In his idealized conception of the universal fabric, we are all immortal, always-present in the “kosmos” in some form or another, and death is simply part of the divine experience of life. Like Whitman himself, we can be “under your boot souls,” always present to those who are tuned-in to the all-connected divinity in all living things; likewise, our loved ones can be present to us in the grass, “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” When one works to perceive pain as simply a part of a divine life — rather than a test upon an individual or family by a specific God — one realizes that, simply, “Agonies are one of my changes of garments.”²⁰

While I do not often ask my students to connect their own beliefs and experiences with what we read, “*Song of Myself*” seems to require that we do so in order to make sense of it. As Lawrence Buell describes it:

In plain language, Whitman seems to be saying that his poem, more than most, depends for its meaningfulness upon our participation. This is true, and not merely of this one lyric, but of all of Whitman's poetry. It requires us to take part in two main ways. First, the reader must respond sensuously: smell the scents; feel the fingers tighter than vines, and the breezes; hear the gushes from the throats of birds; taste the frost-mellowed berries; and behold all. This is not as easy to do as it may seem. The sensuous appeal of poetry is made via the intellect and is too often weakened in the process; it is one thing to recognize the technique of synesthesia used here, another thing to participate in it."²¹

Our job as teachers, then, is to become facilitators of synesthesia.

Similarly, John B. Mason writes that "[f]or Whitman the suggestiveness of the poem exists to prompt readers to construct the very poem they are reading. This was a radical and ambitious conception of poetry in the mid-nineteenth century, and it presents a challenge yet today for those first reading and studying Whitman's poems."²² Yet the poem's invitation to participate in the creation of its meaning makes it also exciting, for in creating the poem's meaning — in developing one's own interpretation of its spiritual and theological teachings, in particular — students have the power to use it as a guide toward a self-created, liberating religion. Both the search for meaning in the poem and the meaning of life are challenging, and the allegorical work of interpreting the poem may provide real comfort — or at least the pleasure found in attempting to solve a puzzle: "Let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles, And that we call Being."²³

Facilitating synesthesia isn't always easy, and some students resist the invitation to loaf with Whitman much longer than others, often because they find him arrogant. Even after days of working with the text, a student might contend, "He talks about himself a lot," or "He acts like we have to see everything the way he does and agree with him." True, in isolation a line like "Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself ... bestowing them freely on each man and woman I see" might seem a rather grandiose notion of the self's power to view the world as a god and "bestow" worth on others.

Likewise, the size of the poem — the need to express these ideas at such *thorough* length — might seem rather egotistical. Often, though, students have lost focus by the end of the poem and miss the lines where Whitman reminds us that he's dragging us along through his vision of the world to help us find our own visions. He admits, "I know perfectly well my own egotism." We synesthesia facilitators have to remind students that the "I" isn't just Whitman; we need to occupy the "I" and accept as our own the creed, "I resist anything better than my own diversity,/ And breathe the air and leave plenty after me,/ And am not stuck up, and am in my place."²⁴

Every time I teach *Song of Myself* and ask students to pick out lines they want to read aloud, without fail someone will pick this passage:

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God

For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,

No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about Death.

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least.

Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.²⁵

The slog through the sixty-page poem may be hard going for some students, but this line's persistence as one that stands out to them speaks the poem's spiritual force for many. The line can fit with their own religious views, already in place; it can express a wavering of faith; it definitely expresses a very American faith in the individual self; it contains contradictions that may exist in their own minds. In any case, it's comforting to find a secular text that assures us "our rendezvous is fitly appointed.... God will be there and wait till we come."²⁶ Even if we have to invent who or what God is ourselves.

Notes

1. Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman, The Making of the Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 8.
2. Ibid., 12–13.
3. *Walt Whitman, The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 1314–16. All citations of line numbers are from the first version of *Song* (1855) in the Penguin edition.
4. Prologue to the 1855 edition, *Walt Whitman, The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 760.
5. George L. Sixbey, "'Chanting the Square Deific' — A Study in Whitman's Religion," *American Literature* 9.2 (1937): 171–95, [173–74], JSTOR, 19 March 2012.
6. See also Thomas Parkinson, "'When Lilacs in the Door-Yard Bloom'd' and the American Civil Religion," *The Southern Review* 19.1 (1983): 1–16; and Jared Hickman, "The Theology of Democracy," *The New England Quarterly* 81.2 (2008): 177–217.
7. *Whitman*, 1097–1103.
8. In retrospect, Whitman's championing of westward expansion and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny is now very much in conflict with a respect for the Mexican and Indian natives of the West, as many contemporary critics of Manifest Destiny have effectively argued. In his idealism at the time, Whitman saw expansion less as an encroachment on tribal lands than as a necessary means of spreading democracy, and, therefore, divine equality.
9. *Whitman*, 833–34.
10. Ibid., 827; 960.
11. Ibid., 374–76.
12. David S. Reynolds, *Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 309; *Whitman*, 507–08; 841.
13. For discussions of modern purity culture, see Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (New York: Seal Press, 2009), as well as its documentary film adaptation by Media Education Foundation, 2011.
14. *Whitman*, 816–17, 78–83.
15. Qtd. in Sixbey, 185–86. Nineteenth-century disciples believed that following Whitman "might become an organized religion, possible rivaling Christianity" explainable by the "crisis of faith" in late 19th-century American culture (9). Whitman's work also "fit perfectly with the pro-

gressive 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" (Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*, [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008], 11).

16. Whitman, 525–27. The connection between the body as sacred and the concept of an idealized democracy is nicely and succinctly articulated in the American Experience documentary *Walt Whitman*, dir. Mark Zwonitzer, WGBH (2008).

17. Whitman, 451–56; 1034.

18. "Cognitively, the ability to think abstractly opens the way to critical assessment of [adolescents'] own ideas and ideas of others. Superego processes may be altered in response to new configurations of experience. The increased capacity to test assumptions and construct theories supports the idealistic thrust toward social change (Colarusso 1992)," Alice M. Graham, "Identity in Middle and Late Adolescence," *Human Development and Faith: Life-Cycle Stages of Body, Mind, and Soul*, ed. Felicity B. Kelcourse (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 223–235.

19. Whitman, 684–87.

20. Ibid., 120–23; 101; 840.

21. Lawrence Buell, "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form," *American Literature* 40.3 (1968): 325–39; 327.

22. James B. Mason, "The Poet-Reader Relationship in 'Song of Myself,'" *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's Leaves of Grass*, ed. Donald D. Kummings (New York: MLA, 1990), 41.

23. Whitman, 609–10.

24. Ibid., 1031; "Not I, nor any one else can travel that road for you,/You must travel it yourself," 1208–09; 1079; 347–49.

25. Ibid., 1271–75.

26. Ibid., 1197

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