

**CHRIST AND WHITMAN: THE NEW ADAM
1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-49; POETRY EXCERPTS
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This is the fourth summer we have explored American poets and biblical figures. Whether a poet “practices faith” in a traditional sense or not, what I am saying today and for the next two weeks on Emily Dickinson and Hart Crane is that American poetry represents the credos or personal faith statements of some of our most creative minds.

Any way you slice it, Walt Whitman is the quintessential American poet. Before Walt, America’s poetry mostly imitated the European tradition of metered rhyme.

Whitman and those who came after him and were unavoidably influenced by his radical departure from old forms of poetry, took poetry outside the box and the American artistic imagination with it.

But more than that Whitman is significant because of his genius for capturing, if not defining the spirit of America coming of age.

The long line of New England luminaries and Virginia patricians who reigned from the White House had given way to a new kind of leader in President Andrew Jackson. Jackson’s predecessor was the last president to wear knee breeches. Federalist sophistication was being eclipsed by populist passion.

Jackson, military hero routed the British in the Battle of New Orleans in 1812. He was the ideal leader for a nation expanding westward at breakneck speed. Presidents in knee breeches were an anachronism. Here was a president taking on the elites.

We get insight into the times the way Jackson used his inaugural stroll, as many presidents have since, to announce the beginning of new leadership.

Having ridden his horse all the way from his home in Tennessee, he took the trusty steed down Pennsylvania Ave. after being sworn into office, to the White House where a party was in progress. Jackson’s entourage, comprised of common folk, eschewed Baroque style for frontier etiquette—survival of the fittest.

As “Old Hickory” approached the white pillared residence he saw a front lawn littered with partygoers and the broken debris of fine English furniture. Upon entering the White House the reveling was at such a pitch Jackson had to escape by climbing out a window onto the South Lawn.

That an obscure, self-professed street-wise poet, not a member of what he referred to as the ‘scribbling class’ should appear with his remarkable first collection of poems entitled, *Leaves of Grass* seems a fitting product of the Age of Jackson.

Nor is it surprising given the prodigious burst of virility and energy pulsing through the young nation that Ralph Waldo Emerson anticipated the emergence of such a figure on the national scene.

Emerson’s famous 1844 essay “The Poet” sounds strikingly similar to John the Baptist’s “one is coming who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

The poet we wait for, said Emerson, is the namer, the representative man, who stands at the center of creation; he sees and handles that which others dream of; traverses the whole scale of experience.

The appearance of each new age requires a new confession, said Emerson. We have yet had no such genius in America, who knew the value of our incomparable materials and saw in the barbarism and materialism of the times another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer.

Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination and will not wait for long meters of verse.^[i]

Just two weeks after the publication of *Leaves of Grass* on July 4th 1855, Emerson thrilled with this strange, new poetry wrote his famous letter to Whitman:

“Dear Sir, I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed...I greet you at the beginning of a great career.^[ii]

In fact, that evaluation still holds true in the opinion of most literary critics and major American poets of the 20th all of whom speak rapturously of Whitman’s achievement.

Just what was this achievement? What art, what poetry generates such praise and adulation? First and foremost Whitman’s vision is a vision as big and diverse and open and unlimited as America herself.

It is hard for us to imagine the power and possibility Whitman and his generation witnessed in the new world. This was not the collection of colonies that bravely rebelled against a world super power. This was that brave fledgling nation, seven decades old, flexing its muscle realizing its reach and power. Land of endless possibility, nation of limitless resources and peoples and know-how.

Everything about this new land was the antithesis of old Europe—brittle, staid, antiquated, and formal. Whitman’s America was an America of brawn and brains, not of intellectual sophistication as much as stunning ingenuity and the practical results that goes with it.

To read Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is to stand at the threshold of this new world, to hold in your hand the New Testament for a new Israel. Whitman himself is the new man, the new Adam—more Christ than Christian. His gospel is the gospel of democracy after centuries of rule by nobles and oligarchs who ignored and oppressed the common folk.

Whitman’s message is the message of becoming, *carpe deim*, seizing the day, self-discovery and hope. His vision stands in opposition to stifling manners and dress and mores of the old world.

Walt embraced his body, mind and spirit. And here it must be said that his sexuality and self-affirmation—in his time and ours—has been misunderstood. He was one of those rare visceral visionaries who celebrated male and female and fulfilled the important dictum—flip side to the Golden Rule—to “love yourself as your neighbor.” Claim yourself, find yourself, nurture yourself, because if you don’t know and care for who you are you will be of little use to any one else.

The titles of his poems are a string of precious pearls: “I hear America Singing,” “To the Garden the World,” “From Pent-up Aching Rivers,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” “Spontaneous Me,” “One Hour To Madness and Joy,” the next one better than the last.

His lines attain a sublimity not before achieved by an American or perhaps any one with quite the same existential splendor. The English writer and poet G.K. Chesterton wrote of Walt that “we have not yet begun to get to the beginning of Whitman. The egoism of which some accuse him is that sense of human divinity which no one has felt since Christ.”^[iii] In line after line after line Whitman’s invitation to grow up and grow into our full human stature is palpable.

“Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin
of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions
of suns left).”^[iv]

Paradoxically while Whitman’s times helped to shape much of his poetry, he was remarkably free of any constraint of time or custom. In this way, he is a direct heir of William Blake the English engraver, artist, poet; Europe’s first Romantic.

The Romantics saw themselves as part and parcel of the cosmos—a vast, breathing, organic entity completely interrelated and interdependent. Their view of things was much like the eastern yin-yang; push/pull of existence. Even in pain and death there is importance, integrity and beauty.

Whitman’s poetry therefore has an elusive quality. It is many-layered with meaning and insight. How common the observation that “I read Whitman in high school but did not realize what I was reading until adulthood.” One critic calls him the “American bardic Christ, self-anointed to strike up the cognitive and spiritual music for the New World.”^[v]

To cast Whitman and his poetry in religious terms is at the heart of my message today. If we think of him as merely an important but eccentric poet who lived long ago we misunderstand him and ourselves as Americans and our American religious experience.

Whitman is the representative man for new world democracy but he is also the representative man for new world faith. America is blessed with more than religious toleration. We enjoy unprecedented religious freedom. We are a hot-house of religious experimentation and invention and experience.

To say, for example, that we are Presbyterians is to speak a fraction of who we are. Were we to take a survey today of the religious insight and wonderment that lie in our hearts up and down these pews we would discover a rich and deeply hued fabric. The problem is sometimes we tend to confine ourselves to the box of religious doctrine and feel guilty if we color outside the lines of our Calvinist faith.

Not Walt, nor those who read him, not for poetry so much as to live their lives. When Jesus said goodbye to his disciples he offered them a word of consolation that though the road ahead would not be easy he would go ahead of them to welcome them.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he said, “I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you will be also.”

It is never easy to blaze new trails—in Whitman’s time or ours—trails of faith in time of loss and war; trails of solidarity when families are divided against each other, whether in Civil War or domestic struggle and strife.

But Walt Whitman invites you and me to do just that. To become new people, people of integrity and service and compassion. I can’t think of a better poet, Grace Niswander, to contemplate and read on the day of your confirmation, the day of your birth into faith than Walt Whitman.

Much like Jesus upon his departure from his friends, Walt anticipated that the trail he was blazing would not be easy, so at the conclusion of *Leaves of Grass* speaking to future generations, he reassures us:

“You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.”^[vi]

Today is the first day of the rest of our lives. There are millions of suns left! Amen.

^[i] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” from *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1940) 320ff.

^[ii] Ralph W. Emerson, “Appendix B Emerson to Whitman 21 July 1855” from *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 463.

^[iii] Harold Bloom, The Introduction from *American Religious Poems*, Harold Bloom editor (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Penguin, 2006) xxvii.

^[iv] Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” #2 from *Leaves of Grass* (New York, Oxford Press, 1990) 30.

^[v] Bloom, xxxvi.

^[vi] Whitman, #52 “Song of Myself,” 79.