

# Relentless Not Redundant, Endless Not Enduring: Whitman, Solipsism, and Celebration

Dean Kritikos, St. John's University

What is it about Whitman that's unavoidable,<sup>1</sup> or  
what makes this great bard the next one after Shakespeare?

Why is *Leaves of Grass* a new Bible for Poetry  
as a religion  
at least in the twentieth century?

And who says so, besides me?

And who is I and who is You and who is Me—  
reading through, I celebrate myself as much  
as Whitman had his. Who's I in any poem?  
In essays we avoid the first-person singular,  
a profanity in scholarly context,  
but then isn't this word all of Whitman?

Virginia Woolf said something about a giant letter I  
hanging over all of the novels, poems, plays, etc.  
written by men  
in history.<sup>2</sup>

I say *Leaves of Grass* climbs into the I and lives there.  
I say Whitman draws everything into the I—well, of  
course; this much is obvious.

But where beyond physics does  
"every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"  
reach?<sup>3</sup>

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### Dean Kritikos

is currently working on  
his Masters in English  
at St. John's University,  
where he studies English  
with minors in Creative  
Writing and Philosophy.  
His work will also appear  
in the forthcoming  
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*Sequoia*, the Art and  
Literary Magazine of St.  
John's University.

"Direct presentation's difficult to achieve," sayeth Prof.<sup>4</sup>  
Yeah,  
and Whitman spends his entire life  
retracing and rewriting and adding to  
and replacing  
bits and pieces of his letter I.

But so what?

I'd say Whitman posits the self  
as the single differential  
referent upon which he defines his world,  
taking Descartes seriously and opening up  
the door for anyone else to do so afterward,

But hey  
why not settle for *Leaves of Grass* does very little;

it is a simple poem

that rids the reader of the outside/inside  
dichotomy  
which is what you need to do  
before any celebration is possible.

*Notes*

1. Whitman is “unavoidable” because of the “Jewish tradition” of poetry Miller claims he “remakes.”  
See: Miller, Stephen Paul. “Relentlessly Going On and On: How Jews Remade Modern Poetry Without Even Trying.” Ed. Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris. *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2010. 343-53. Print.
2. Virginia Woolf believes “modern man is obsessed with the letter ‘I’” (xii). Whitman is beyond obsessed. See: Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. Print.
3. See: Whitman, Walt. “Leaves of Grass (1855).” Ed. Justin Kaplan. *Poetry and Prose*. New York, NY: Library of America, 1982. 1-145. Print.
4. Dr. Miller and I disagree about a lot of what Whitman’s doing—but we agree about the important things. I don’t think, though, that a solipsistic reading of what Whitman is doing would consume and/or disarm Dr. Miller’s reading of Whitman as proto-20th-century-American-Jewish poet. Whitman’s solipsistic effort might just swallow up the notion of religion into itself—or, perhaps more interestingly, make us think about the nature of religion or religiosity as it relates to and coexists with an all-encompassing self. Solipsism doesn’t need to be a destructive force; actually, it can empower us to take the things closest to ourselves as seriously as we do anything else. See: note 1.