

## The Species Self Whitman's Song of Myself

*In 1976 the W. W. Norton Company sent me a complimentary copy of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, their new critical edition. As a medievalist specializing in the fourteenth century, I was used to getting their books on Chaucer or Arthurian romance, but someone must have mixed up the order. Like many other Americans, I had been exposed to Whitman at every level of my education. Somehow in those readings of "Song of Myself" nothing was able to penetrate the surface layers of Steve Phelan.*

### I. The Awakening

It was early afternoon when I started to look through my free book. I was thirty-six, midway in life's journey, soon to get tenure and my first promotion. Unlike Dante, I was already twelve years past the cave of despair and about to experience the most important creative turn of my life. As I began reading the poem, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," all I could keep saying to myself was that this poem constitutes everything I believe in. It didn't fill an empty heart, but rather unpacked one that lacked a fully expressive and complementary spirit. As Emerson remarked, "The poet is but half the man, the other half is the man expressed." I was a third half, the reader now fully expressed.

It was as though the Wekiwa of my heart and mind had long been capped, and now it burst out, the way the mighty Susquehanna, after long periods of freezing, breaks open and crashes forth in giant blocks of ice to rip the shore and bulldoze the islands. What was it in me that cracked open, then moaned and groaned all day and through the night? Just to build a catalog from the Middle Ages would challenge the muscularity of Whitman's free verse. Let's see: courtly love, the seven deadly sins, monasticism, the theology of Aristotle in Aquinas, heroic couplets, the debate between the body and the soul, the liturgy of the Church, canon laws, and Dante's *Inferno*.

It was exhilarating to feel all at once in Whitman's poetry the energies of nature, democracy, self, immortality, sexuality, childhood, God, the American language, and openness to others. For a medievalist, it was my personal door to the modern (and now the post-modern). I loved Whitman's plainness and frankly his socialism, his more

cosmic and universal understanding of America, his optimism. I reveled in the biological truth of the self in nature; it reminded me of how I felt at eleven when we moved to Florida from the Bronx. I ebbed with the ocean of life, I sipped the delicious word *death*, and I found the reason for all my loafing along the Wekiva. Whitman's philanthropy sat comfortably with an ecology I didn't yet fully understand. The heart of that ecology was an important lesson about the healthy biochemistry that is the foundation of our community with the land.

Walking out the door and down to my car by the lake, I bumped into a colleague in American history and started to describe my excitement at reading "Song of Myself." He must have thought I was crazy, running on about the democracy of this poem: "Oh, Jake, don't you love Whitman's sense of community." Jake smiled his glorious smile and nodded, but at that moment he could not share my thrill and I remember his parting shot, "Oh God, all that transcendental crap." In spite of my friend's disdain, my reading of Whitman opened up a totally new channel of energy for me that has gradually changed my career and my life, leading eventually to this unusual writing project and its spiritual unfoldings, a gradual and unpredictable process spanning the next twenty-five years.

In 1976 I was already part of a faculty group working on our own to create an environmental studies program. Our leader was Ed Scheer, a biologist who split his time between Florida and Wyoming. I had taken the job at Rollins because I especially enjoyed interdisciplinary teaching and one day, two years later, Ed asked, "How would you like to teach a course in environmental literature with me." He would supply the ecology and biology readings and I could bring whatever literary figures I liked. Ed had no idea that he was playing the Hayduke to my Glen Canyon dam.

This is precisely where all Whitman came rushing forth in a steady and growing stream of courses that in time reached across the campus, into the graduate education department, and eventually into high school classes across the county. I learned from Ed about Aldo Leopold, Garrett Hardin, and Edward Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang*. He got from me a heavy dose of Whitman and Mary Austin, with attentions to Thoreau and Muir. Ed taught me how to do field trips, starting with a marvelous ecotour of the campus which I still use in all my environmental literature courses.

Even in that first version of the course, I insisted that students do a great deal of journal writing about their own place in nature, especially their childhood habitats. It was natural then for us to meet outdoors, to plan special classes at local gardens, parks, and of course the Wekiva. American literature is about inhabitation of this land, so it pays to read it—both the land and the literature—not only in the laboratory of the classroom, but in the field as well where all the ecological factors are operative at once.

Over the years as the ES program grew into a substantial department, I created subsets of my broad American literature course: The Poetry of Earth, The Bill of Earth

Rights (an environmental ethics course), *The Whole Earth Album* (nature photography and literature), *We Animals*, and *The River Community* (America's great river writers, ending with Bartram's *Travels* and *The Everglades: River of Grass* by Douglas). Suddenly the library in my office was kaleidoscopic.

In 1985 a new dean arrived who had broad experience of collaboration between college and high school teachers and Rollins began to offer outstanding high school seniors an opportunity to earn college credit. Immediately I saw the opportunity to farm out my basic environmental literature course to other teachers and thereby dreamed I could make a difference in central Florida for years to come. I trained high school teachers in the summer and visited their classrooms, public and private, during the school year. That was the year that I joined the Friends of the Wekiva, but I was not politically active at first. I contented myself with reaching the minds of several hundred local youths each year.

The process of training high school teachers year after year got me involved in doing research on Whitman and presenting papers at national conferences in the burgeoning new field of eco-literary studies. That series, stretched out over the chapters of this collection, tells a story of a mind-change that belongs to Wekiva and explains, if that's the right word, the growth of my own voice and the unexpected spiritual development that came with it.

## II. Song of Myself

"Song of Myself" is not an easy poem to swallow. Readers wrestling with its amorphous quality eventually have to ask themselves: whose voice is this? Who is speaking to whom? Eventually I found a literal answer to this question by research into the notebooks and manuscripts of Whitman that preceded the 1855 publication of the first edition.<sup>1</sup> However, my first answer came after several years of teaching the poem and the inevitable number of readers who, tired of his repetitions, are completely appalled at his "egotism." Indeed, sometimes the voice of the poem is Walt Whitman, the poet capable of self-aggrandizement, but the consistent tenor of the poem belongs to a protean figure who is both male and female, old and young, sinner and saint, of the north and the south, celebrating body as much as soul, American but brother and sister to all other nations.

When he opens his poem by engaging the reader with the exchange of atoms, "for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," Whitman doesn't know about the double helix. What he understands from the science of his day is the metabolism of plants and animals that informs the whole of creation. His is the voice of the mere fact

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Interlude III.

consciousness, of the scientific laws of the development of the cosmos, the earth and the other planets, and the chemistry of plants and animals. For the most part the human species is the voice of “Song of Myself.” Hence, the *I*, *Me*, and *Myself* are all pronouns for the species speaking.

So why didn’t the poet say “Song of the Species” or “Song of Ourselves”? Why use the singular pronoun and risk the charge of egotism? My short answer is that Whitman is the first to expand his voice to the size of his audience, present and to come, and then he chooses to make it come from an individual, the common denominator of humans, but still from one who has a poetic vocation to sing. He invites the reader to become the author: “These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing...” (“Song of Myself” 17:354). Any part of the song that makes no sense to the reader is not the poem. The song is whatever gets across the divide in time and place between two conspecifics, the poet and the listener.

This is a tall order. Whitman has a dynamic sense of the species and its changes, so it is a challenge to speak to all the human differences between people. “I resist anything better than my own diversity,” he says, because this voice can sing from any part of the country or the population. Individual, but protean in this way, “Song of Myself” allows all of us to assume identity with every element of creation and with its creator as well in every dimension:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the  
egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest...  
I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains,  
esculent roots,  
And am stucco’d with quadrupeds and birds all over... (31:663ff)

Do you find it difficult to imagine yourself this way? Whitman is insisting that we and Wekiva have been coming since the beginning of time to this moment, incorporating all the elements from the start. Our atoms are eternal, immortal. They bind us together. Thus, for the species self, like the child entering at birth, “creeds and schools [are] in abeyance” so that at every hazard nature may speak with original energy (1:10-13). This important feature of Whitman’s voice looks like a call to secularism, but rather it calls for transcendence of church, government, and school. It is the ground for a democracy with many religions, polities, and philosophies.

You can sing the song whether or not you are an heir of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. In “Song of Myself” the poet in fact speaks as an individual, an American who is independent of traditions, but also as the child who goes forth in this land or river

where he becomes every object of creation and it becomes a part of him. Whitman understood that it is the child who stands most naturally in this position of the species self. However, the voice of the poem, while free as a child, is sometimes also a little wise from a careful collation of human and natural history.

When we are born, we are all the same in only one sense, the species. If you as an adult tell me the story of your life, I can learn from it how to adjust my own story. But if when I hear your story, you take us both back in time, just beyond the point where your story or objective memory begins, then you have reached our common species self and I have nothing to change, except perhaps the relative weight of my human and my personal lives. What attracts me so about the idea of the species self is that it has a biological reality; that is, it is an undeniable fact of the human biological organism.

Observing a variety of animal species before mirrors and looking for the stage of development when they first achieved self-recognition, scientists have found that animals generally treat their image as another of the same species and their behavior is described as “conspecific”; for example, a chicken will eat more in the presence of its fellow and in a mirror. In general, the “lower” animals who have relatively rigid social behavior patterns cannot escape the stimulus of the mirror image.

However, self-directed behavior before a mirror has been observed only in the higher primates. Gallys concluded from his extensive study of chimpanzees that social interaction with other conspecifics is a necessary precondition for self awareness and predicted accurately that chimps raised in isolation would not exhibit self-directed behavior before the mirror.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, chimps raised by humans have something of a distortion in self identity.

Whitman had a grasp, better than Thoreau and his contemporary naturalists, of the self, nature, and the human community. His friend John Burroughs has an exceptional essay that shows how walking out of our homes we extend our selves into nature as far as we range in our habitat. Thoreau celebrated at the end of his life how the plant reaches itself out in the dispersal of its seeds. Whitman’s song does all that, but goes much further in its voice when we are led as a species self to walk the land and ride the rivers. In this respect Whitman, better than any other writer in American literature, prepares us to look at our biochemical connections to the earth and each other as an important part of the concepts of private property and the commons, the theme of our next chapter.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Lewis et al., *Social Cognition and the Acquisition of Self* (New York: Plenum Pr., 1979).

<sup>3</sup> The longer version of this essay considers variations on the concept of species self in Muir, Austin, Ammons, and Stevens (available on my web site).