Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871)

All during the 1980's, while my environmental literature classes were multiplying, I was doing research on the Christmas traditions in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight *and writing a book to celebrate the elegant poetic imagination of this fourteenth-century Arthurian romance. When a publisher suggested that my manuscript had an outmoded critical theory, I took a step back from the poem and rewrote the interpretation with a mildly ecocritical perspective that was published in 1992.*

I was already unconsciously driven by my interest in earth, incarnation, and the green revolution when I started this study in graduate school, but now I had Whitman and Leopold to help direct my study to the poetry of earth in the poem. In all of the steps of my intellectual life I am recounting here, I made choices independent of any understanding of where they were leading me. So it is, then, that my next Whitman paper was directly in contrast to the aristocratic privilege of the Round Table culture and turned my attention to the question of democracy in the community of the land.[1]

I.

Every nature writer in America should carry a field guide to democracy. After all, our land ethic has to involve the human community in the affairs of all earthkind. My favorite guide is Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*. Long before Aldo Leopold set our course straight on the interplay of cooperation and competition in both the biosphere and the noosphere, Whitman wrote about the same interplay in the community of the land, except that he called cooperation democracy and competition individualism. The essential thrust of Whitman's message in *Democratic Vistas* came from his Washington experience of the Civil War, its youthful pride and its suffering. The democracy he watched over was primarily grass roots, that is, in the hospital wards, not the White House or the Capitol. He was supremely encouraged by the democratic values Americans would suffer and die for. In the personalities of the rank and file, of both sides of the conflict, he saw "the proof of democracy."

Some have dismissed Whitman as a nature writer because he lacks the detailed naturalistic

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[1] The following is an abbreviated version of the paper I gave at Fort Collins, Colorado, at the second biennial conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in 1995.

descriptions of his good friend, John Burroughs, or the scientific ecology of Leopold, but he was at the outset a political journalist and therefore had a profound appreciation of small-scale democracy in individual human characters, their interpersonal relations, and their small-group activities. In the final analysis, though, Whitman was not a story-teller and especially not a fiction-writer. He almost despised myths because he associated them (especially the ethos of the hero) with feudalism. He thought to replace stories of Sir Gawain and Sir Galahad by the more scientific and piecemeal account of ordinary human individuals, conceived of as equal in their species, every one, male and female, as much a hero as any other.

Thus, Whitman's autobiography is entitled ***Specimen Days*** because it is largely an almanac like Leopold's of his life of roaming in nature, but also includes his ministrations to particular, unnamed soldiers. No need for fiction. This was human ethology, the scientific samples, as it were, of democratic character: enjoying life, people-watching, absorbing the sea, transforming conflict, facing death. Likewise, in both the reminiscences of nature and the visitations to the tents, he invoked the radical voice he had invented for "Song of Myself," "standing at ease in Nature" and speaking to his conspecifics.

Whitman's concept of feudalism is wrapped up in the European history of cattle and land rights which provided a system of dependency in agrarian society that we saw in "Shell Island." Following the victory of the Civil War, he had a grand vision of a New World Order. At first, he saw restoration democracy as a fresh start (sound familiar?), a kind of post-feudalism; but even by 1870, Whitman saw clearly that reconstruction of democracy was in a state of crisis, north and south.

Just as when a development or agriculture scars a Florida scrub or sandhill and then, after the building is done, the new residents can replenish and reconstruct the natural habitat, the Civil War required a long period of mitigation and restoration. Whitman thought that the structure of the American political system of democracy was sound enough for the task, but everywhere he saw "the people's crudeness, vices, and caprices" (DV 49). Our problems, he would still say, could be solved, not by more laws, but through "perfection by voluntary standards and self-reliance" (DV 318). The usually optimistic poet of *Leaves of Grass* in *Democratic Vistas* is something close to grim. His own poetry had failed to catch on as a social movement, but he expected a new breed of poets and nature writers to do the job. Wedded as he was to manifest destiny, he did not, like Thoreau, imagine the dangers of the railroad, the broad axe, and the open road. He put his faith in literature to evolve the American character and celebrated every form of the American worker.

After all, Whitman imagined that the outmoded political systems of Europe had been upheld by a succession of literatures which taught feudal virtues, propagating especially the character of the

male warrior hero and neglecting the rest of society (see here Leopold's "man, the conqueror of the land"). Why shouldn't a new American literary enterprise propagate the virtues of democracy? His program for this revolution has six interconnected features for the land ethic that are certainly relevant to the Wekiva. Our literature (or education programs) for the next millennium then should be:

a) **addressed to the future**, i.e. for a New World Order, (expressing "a new earth and a new man" DV 345);
b) **creative of a moral identity**, especially to the States (DV 323f);
c) **pragmatic**, with an eye to practical life, the west, workingmen, the facts of farms, and also to the perfect equality of women and a powerful motherhood;
d) **native**, celebrating the native personality and aplomb, a poet of place who ties the races together, restoring true Nature (DV 323);
e) **common** to all in the community (DV 323, 335); and
f) **religious** and yet **consistent with science** (DV 328).

The voice of Whitman's great poem is the voice of the ecological community speaking across generations. It calls for an openness to diversity in culture and dress. The focus on human character in Whitman's vision for the next millennium may seem anthropocentric and at odds with some deep ecologists, but it is inevitable that the community of the land will be sung most fully by the species with the language instinct, the penchant for song.

The effect of Whitman's democratic vision on the literary world was very much mixed in the nineteenth century, but on the history of photography it had a profound effect (as Sontag's excellent study has shown). He loved the democracy of the camera, and people went forth with cameras to discover America and the family of man and woman with *Leaves of Grass* in their minds. The nationalism of Whitman's democracy is secondary to such local and yet universal humanism.

This means that Whitman saw his community in a fully egalitarian vision, male and female, north and south, slave and free, urban and rural. If we can understand anything about *Leaves of Grass*, it is that every human being was "immediate" to the poet and included in his self-concept. No one was other. No one was invisible (in Ralph Ellison's sense), no matter what cultural classes or categories they seemed to display. A parallel occurs in Leopold's almanac where he tracks all the invisible fauna of his farm community and in the case of the oak tree examines its affairs, looking backward over several human generations. For Whitman as well, especially in the poetry, no one was outside of (not a part of) the earth's ensemble of creatures and habitats.

Whitman was fully oriented toward the human species, but not to its cultural divisions and invasions. It is ironic, then, that many readers of Whitman get distracted from his message by

cultural "scandals" or the politics of text; somehow they never actually see themselves in the "Myself" of his "Song." Democracy for Whitman is not essentially a matter of national elections, but of grass-roots participation, of door to door campaigning (“Unscrew the locks from the doors!” SM 501), of a community active in its place.

We understand now how small, biotic communities live within larger ecosystems. Whitman saw in 1870 how democracy also is essentially local and accumulative. Its quality can best be measured in our pragmatic life, i.e. in the small group, the neighborhood, factory, classroom, office, department, or store. Spend some time looking at your community (the distribution of resources, the relative visibility, the outspokenness, and the order by which social activities are carried out in your practical life) and you will quickly take the measure of democracy.

II.

Community of the Land in American Literature

So now let's go democracy-watching, with Whitman's guidebook in hand, through the fields of our favorite American nature writers, to see how well his democratic vision for the future is upheld. Which of them has the essential ingredients for a successful community of the land?

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

For over a century Henry David Thoreau has been the paradigm of the environmental imagination of poets, fiction writers, and essayists celebrating the land, rivers, and seas of America. Thoreau strikes many readers as anti-social. He seems more open to the woodchuck at Walden perhaps than to the Native Americans he meets on his journey to Katahdin. He was attuned to the wilderness, but saw the customs and manners of the people often as foolish. He rejected many "civilized" behaviors (Emerson said “he questioned every custom”) in favor of a simple life in righteous unity with nature. He had little scientific training, but considerable experience of ecology. Most of all, it seems, he understood the rights of animals much more thoroughly than his American contemporaries. His contributions to the values of self-reliance and civil disobedience are still profound; but Whitman felt that he lacked the counterbalancing force of identity with the community. He did not call forth as the foundation of his self-reliance the strong sense of the species self that the urban poet does.

MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS

By contrast, for Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings in the rural Florida of *Cross Creek,* the land community is the central issue and how an outsider gradually adjusts to the customs and mores of a place, learning how each plant, animal species, animal individual, person, and family lives. The reader comes to know a real community in a somewhat biased and particular sense, but the spirit of the place emerges in individuals seen as such, with many stereotypes and false first impressions eventually falling away.

Cross Creek is not a postcard landscape nor a park known by its attractions nor a utopian village; and yet its spirit is enough to sustain us. There are moments of transcendence, but for the most part whatever we see is conveyed through Marjorie's practical experience. She has to be "schooled" to the place and the people, ironically because she is a text-person and to that extent seems somewhat false and naive by reason of her very literacy. She learns eventually to fit in (at least in her own mind) and thus the book begins proudly with the pronoun *We*, as though its voice belonged to the land community itself.

If Cross Creek were to write, this is what it would say on page one about itself as a community:

> Cross Creek is a bend in a country road, by land, and the flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake, by water. We are four miles west of the small village of Island Grove, nine miles east of the terpentine still…We are five white families…[listed]; and two colored families [listed].

Rawlings's Cross Creek points up one of the weaknesses of Thoreau's Walden or Leopold's farm. In both these northern cases, the community is quite narrowly an ecosystem with a single person and very little human interaction. Many nature writers and naturalists take for granted the human community, and like Thoreau think that civilization has already plenty of advocates. How ecological is that? The patterns of human cooperation and competition (enslavement and kindness, native and tourist, conning and controlling, feudal and democratic) are often not allowed to stand in consort with their biological counterparts.

In the case of Leopold and Thoreau, it is probably just a failure of the story-telling imagination, the knack for revealing democracy through community and dialogue. The novel and the short-story are potentially more democratic and anti-feudal genres for such human ecology. This is why Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* is such a breath of fresh air. His irreverence toward the feudal enterprises of the government, the unthinking tourist, and the overwrought philosopher make us laugh because, as Whitman put it, "fresh air is better than the costliest perfumes." But Abbey's monkey-wrench gang presents no model community befitting Whitman's vision.

WENDELL BERRY

Wendell Berry will do much better. The Kentucky farmer-poet combines both democracy and individualism in his community vista. He is a staunch proponent of the traditional stewardship of the land in the small community of rural families. He certainly shares Whitman's feel for the succession of generations of readers and reapers in the land. The difference between Berry's "Native Hill" in Port Royal and Thoreau's Walden gets spelled out carefully in vignettes of human kindness and cooperation in times of pain and suffering when farm families help one another. On the other hand, Berry argues forcefully that life should be simple enough that we can do for ourselves; thus he opposes the introductions of useless technology and the specialization that goes with it. So I imagine that Whitman and Berry would agree that the ecological crisis is a crisis of character. In the Wekiva, the law actually provides for the maintenance of the rural character of a portion of the basin, as we shall see in the next chapter, but Whitman provides an urban counterpart to Berry's agrarian community that is essential for the future.

JOHN BURROUGHS

The great back-yard naturalist in American literature is Whitman's dear friend, John Burroughs, who believed strongly in letting the earth come to him and made fun of the peregrinations of the frenetic Muir. When asked to travel out west, he went, but could not enjoy himself because he lacked the life-long accumulation of native knowledge. He hated the "boredom" of the plains and, though moved by much of the Rockies, preferred his Riverby estate on the Hudson and his Slabsides cabin in the woods to any other place.

The result of a lifetime of careful observation of the Catskills does not readily translate on a short-term basis into the kind of presence that Muir found in Yosemite or Austin had in Owens valley. This is why Burroughs argued that experience of the land and knowledge of ecology are critical to sound nature writing and the poetry of earth. How can we be democratic if we haven't taken a census of all the critters, human or not, the way Marjorie Rawlings does?

Burroughs had a marvelous capacity to help us enter his communities of birds and other animals in our common habitat, but much less for showing us the same in human community. Perhaps this explains why Whitman remarked once that his friend's writing had a rather dull edge. In his early essays, Burroughs is more likely to write of Ovid, Vergil, or Milton than of the man at the mill down the river who gave him the slabsides to build his retreat. Though he welcomed many visitors to his haunts, including Whitman, he seldom included them in his essays.

MARY HUNTER AUSTIN

An interesting test for American democracy is the "invisibility" often accorded Native Americans. Each of our writers wrestles with place by arriving in a world already inhabited by

generations of native human communities. The level of respect and learning is crucial--as opposed to the sense of invasion and invisibility. Whitman identifies with the natives, but they are largely gone from his New York experience. John Muir passes this test with the Chilcat chief in Alaska, but the writer with the deepest sense of native life and ecology is Mary Hunter Austin.

For me she is the natural fulfillment of all that Whitman has to offer. Her democratic vista of the community of the land is unparalleled among nature writers. Just as the neocortex is still connected massively to the cerebellum, so culture, in Austin's view, builds on nature and is but a transform of it. In her fiction and her character sketches, but especially in her great land community compilations--*Land of Little Rain* and *Land of Journey's Ending*--Austin gives us the multiple exposure of geosphere, biosphere, and noosphere, the waves of ecological forces sifted through the comings and goings of Native American, Latin American, and Anglo-American populations.

Her sense of our psychological diversity in what she called the "deep self" provides the prophetic force of her vision for the desert southwest. She represents fully the texture (evolution) of the democratic layers of life upon the land. In her vision, it was all one, compiled in the community of a manifold self with its earth horizon. She was fully the deep ecologist in the Land of Little Rain (1903) and to find her equivalent of Whitman's specimen days, try reading the late story "Walking Woman" and the autobiographical novella "The Cactus Thorn."

Listening to the native elders, the way Austin did, constitutes a degree of recognition of the invisible which goes beyond Whitman, because it opens up the past as well as the future. Whitman was intent on burying feudalism, mythology, and the poetry of the old order. Austin had the advantage in traveling to the west to become a better listener to native and oral traditions than he, and though both took the stance of the prophets, hers was a less engaging or creative voice for a vision of the next millennium.

WHITMAN'S PREDICTIONS FOR AMERICA, 1970

Whitman closes his guide to democracy with an accurate prediction of the next hundred years: 40-50 states, perhaps including Canada and Cuba, 65 million population by 1900, the Pacific and the Atlantic "ours" (he says with a sense of manifest destiny), and even daily electric communication with every part of the globe. Were he alive today Walt would surely be publishing on the internet, attending to his readership, and urging all of us on late-night television to create an America which is more earthkind.

Here is the poet's only Florida poem, a tribute to the great Seminole warrior; the painting by Robert J. Curtis was finished in January, the month before Osceola died in prison:

Osceola

[When I was nearly grown to manhood in Brooklyn, New York, (middle of 1838,) I met one of the return'd U. S. Marines from Fort Moultrie, S. C., and had long talks with him -- learn'd the occurrence below described -- death of Osceola. The latter was a young, brave, leading Seminole in the Florida war of that time -- was surrender'd to our troops, imprison'd and literally died of "a broken heart," at Fort Moultrie. He sicken'd of his confinement -- the doctor and officers made every allowance and kindness possible for him; then the close:]

When his hour for death had come,
He slowly rais'd himself from the bed on the floor,
Drew on his war-dress, shirt, leggings, and girdled the belt around his waist,
Call'd for vermilion paint (his looking-glass was held before him,)
Painted half his face and neck, his wrists, and back-hands.
Put the scalp-knife carefully in his belt -- then lying down, resting a moment,
Rose again, half sitting, smiled, gave in silence his extended hand to each and all,
Sank faintly low to the floor (tightly grasping the tomahawk handle,)
Fix'd his look on wife and little children -- the last:
(And here a line in memory of his name and death.)

Robert J. Curtis
PORTRAIT OF OSCEOLA
1838. Oil on canvas, 30" x 25"

Portrait of Osceola by Robert Curtis painted the month before he died. [8]

From *Celebrating Florida: Works of Art from the Vickers Collection*. Photo by James Quine.