

WHITMAN AND THOREAU AND THE INDUSTRIAL  
REVOLUTION

"This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! . . . There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. I cannot easily buy a blankbook to write thoughts in; they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents. An Irishman, seeing me making a minute in the fields, took it for granted that I was calculating my wages. If a man was tossed out of a window when an infant, and so made a cripple for life, or scared out of his wits by the Indians, it is regretted chiefly because he was thus incapacitated for — business! I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business."

—Thoreau, "Life Without Principle" (1854)<sup>1</sup>

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"I think I could turn and live with animals . . . Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth."

—Whitman, "Song of Myself" (1855)<sup>2</sup>

"Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain unearn'd!"

—Whitman, "Song of the Open Road" (1856)<sup>3</sup>

"We primeval forests felling,  
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing  
deep the mines within,

We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin  
soil upheaving  
Pioneers! O pioneers!"

—Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" (1865)<sup>4</sup>

One hand in his pocket, the other on his hip, Whitman's image first looks out at the world from a book dressed in the casual duds of a workingman. "A Song for Occupations" was the second of the twelve untitled poems comprising the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*. That frontispiece plus that poem convey an image of the author as a poet of the workingman, the masses, not merely the literati. His own employment had been as a teacher, and as reporter and editor to several newspapers. The only real "manual labor" he had engaged in was the craft of printing, which he had learned and done 1830-35; and for a time carpentry, his father's occupation. Increasingly his work had become that of a poet, and in 1855 he published the first fruits of that labor.

Wherever the workman appears in Whitman's work — from the carpenter in "I Hear America Singing" to the demigod firemen in "Song of Myself" to the butcher "in his killing-clothes" in "A Song for Occupations" — he is invariably noble and heroic: a prototype, perhaps, for those workers muralized in Socialist Realist art. And it is that glorification of the worker that so endeared Whitman to communist Russia and China, one of the rare American writers whose work they approved, overlooking risqué passages that were still raising eyebrows in the less puritanical West. This romanticized portrayal of the worker had more in common with Longfellow's "Village Blacksmith" than Edwin Markham's "Man With the Hoe."

"A Song for Occupations" extolls the dignity, and more than that a sort of demigodhead, of the worker. It is an anthem to manhood and womanhood in a spirit akin to "I Sing the Body Electric." In the 1860 edition, the poem, still untitled, was printed as "3." under "Chants Democratic," thus emphasizing a point he makes elsewhere: the equality of mankind. A common laborer is not inferior to the president. Whitman extolls not only the "workman" and "workwoman" as divine, but also their work. "In the labor of engines and the labor of fields I

find . . . the eternal meanings,"<sup>5</sup> he says in the very opening lines of the poem. In section 5 he concludes a long catalogue of occupations by saying: "the hourly routine of . . . the shop, yard, store, or factory, / . . . I do not advise you to stop."<sup>6</sup>

Thoreau would have advised them to stop. As a matter of fact, he did. In the pages ahead I will compare the attitudes of Whitman and Thoreau in relation to work, and the incipient industrial revolution. I will focus on a cluster of poems in the center of *Leaves of Grass*, and I'll contrast them with Thoreau's commensurate views.

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In the 1860 edition, "Song of the Broad-Axe" immediately preceded "A Song for Occupations" as number 2 of "Chants Democratic." In the early 1870s two other poems came to intervene between those two poems: "A Song of the Exposition" in 1871 and "Song of the Redwood-Tree" in 1873. The former was composed at the invitation of the American Institute to read a poem at the opening of its fortieth Exhibition in New York City. This annual event was a showcase for the latest new-fangled inventions of science and industry. The commissioned poem begins with a somewhat humorously grandiloquent invitation to the Muse to migrate from the Old World to the New and "install" herself "amid the kitchen ware!"<sup>7</sup> This echoes Emerson's more soberly expressed sentiments in "The American Scholar." The poem goes on to a glorification of the industrial revolution as inevitable, a sort of mystical destiny of man, and ends with an apostrophe to the flag.

"Song of the Redwood-Tree" is Whitman's swansong for redwood trees, which become symbol for the wild, "undeveloped" continent, whose demise Whitman views as inevitable to make room for man. In "Song of the Exposition" Whitman addresses America: "Behold, in Oregon, far in the north and west, / Or in Maine, far in the north and east, thy cheerful axemen, / Wielding all day their axes."<sup>8</sup> Twenty-five years earlier, Thoreau had written in *The Maine Woods*:

But Maine, perhaps, will soon be where Massachusetts is. A good part of her territory is already as bare and commonplace as much of our neigh-

borhood. . . . We seem to think that the earth must go through the ordeal of sheep-pasturage before it is habitable by man. . . . The wilderness experiences a sudden rise of all her streams and lakes. She feels ten thousand vermin gnawing at the base of her noblest trees. Many combining drag them off, jarring over the roots of the survivors, and tumble them into the nearest stream, till, the fairest having fallen, they scamper off to ransack some new wilderness, and all is still again. . . . When the chopper would praise a pine, he will commonly tell you that the one he cut was so big that a yoke of oxen stood on its stump; as if that were what the pine had grown for, to become the footstool of oxen. In my mind's eye, I can see these unwieldy tame deer, with a yoke binding them together, and brazen-tipped horns betraying their servitude, taking their stand on the stump of each giant pine in succession throughout this whole forest, and chewing their cud there, until it is nothing but an ox-pasture, and run out at that. . . . The Anglo-American can indeed cut down, and grub up all this waving forest, and make a stump speech, and vote for Buchanan on its ruins, but he cannot converse with the spirit of the tree he fells, he cannot read the poetry and mythology which retire as he advances. He ignorantly erases mythological tablets in order to print his handbills and town-meeting warrants on them.<sup>9</sup>

And in 1854, the year before *Leaves of Grass* appeared, he delivered a lecture under the title "Getting a Living" in which he said:

If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!<sup>10</sup>

But Thoreau was the most maverick mind of his age. His ecological perspicacity and prescience of the catastrophic implications of the industrial system are unique and astonishing. He certainly did hear "a different drummer"! The heart of Nature was the drum. Whitman was just as great a poet as Thoreau, and his regard for Nature was prodigious, but, drawn to be the poet of the people according to Emerson's prescription, he was more "the child of his age." It is understandable that Whitman would have such a cheerful attitude toward work and such faith in that vague word "Progress" when we consider that America was so vastly wild then, lush with that green Whitman loved, so unspoiled; the human eclipse that hit Europe was just getting started here. And instead of the sapped Transylvania which Emerson and Whitman regarded Europe as being, America really did have a hopeful prospect of becoming the most enlightened society on earth, of becoming "a society proportionate to nature,"<sup>11</sup> as Whitman would put it in "Song of the Redwood-Tree." Whitman did not seem to grasp that less than a hundred years after its birth the United States was on the verge of the same deforestation-urbanization-industrialization disaster that had befallen Europe. The grass was definitely greener on the less populated side of the ocean, and Emerson was glad of it: "The millions that around us are rusing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests."<sup>12</sup> Cockeyed optimists of the Yankee Doodle spring of this nation, Emerson and Whitman did not realize that those millions rushing into life (25 million c. 1850, 250 million c. 1984) would eclipse Nature here — so sacred to both — just as Europeans had eclipsed the Nature of Europe.

Thoreau saw it coming as plain as day. His view of workers and working is far less flattering than Whitman's: "everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways."<sup>13</sup> And, of course, they *were* doing penance. At least unconsciously, for this was the upshot of an attitude that used to be called the Protestant Work Ethic, but is now usually called the Puritan Work Ethic, because to say the Protestant-Catholic-Jewish work ethic would sound too awkward. Work as purgatory; work as a purging of the Earth. It was this ancient tendency of Judeo-Christian civilization that came to dominate Europe and explore and colonize America. It is the primary source of the Industrial Revolution that began around 1800, but the impulse is traceable all the way back to the book of Genesis. Convicted of snitching from the Cookie Jar of Forbidden Knowledge, Eve was sentenced to labor pains

("In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children") and Adam to the pain of labor ("In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread").<sup>14</sup> Puritan Milton was unable to imagine Adam and Eve free of work even before they were ejected from Eden into the workaday world, so he put them to work pruning Paradise before they felt the need for figleaf bikinis.

And the human race has been diligently pruning the foliage ever since. From the deforestation of Lebanon to provide lumber for the Temple of Solomon, to the deforestation of Europe and America. From the cutting down of the legendary Cedars of Lebanon to the cutting down of the majestic White Pines of Wisconsin to provide lumber to build Chicago and Milwaukee. Amazing that Thoreau could have seen it so clearly over a hundred years ago, but he did. And he was right about its function as penance. There's the related saying that "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." The reverse has proven true. The incessantly busy hands of work, work, work, have decimated much of the Nature that Whitman hoped America as a society would be proportionate to. Whitman failed to see, as Thoreau did see, that the aboriginal Indian inhabitants of this continent were perfectly proportionate to Nature already, and the "swarming and busy race"<sup>15</sup> Whitman exhorted the Redwood trees to move over for could only inundate and overwhelm this Eden-esque ratio. The sheer influx of population was bad enough, but that combined with the zealous Puritan Work Ethic and the escalating Industrial Revolution would permit the United States to accomplish in a hundred years the same impact on its environment that took Europe thousands of years.

Coupled with the soul-saving penance value of work in the minds of Americans in the mid-1800s was the vague regard for wilderness, especially the forest, as the abode of evil spirits. That was probably a hold-over from the fact that the religion supplanted by Judeo-Christianity was a pantheistic nature-worship, druidic in its reverence toward trees. The history of that forest-abhorring superstition of a mindset is well summarized by Roderick Nash in chapter one of his profoundly insightful 1967 book (revised edition, 1973) *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press). The "clearing" away of wilderness and replacing it with a situation of dominance by human habitation was vaguely felt to be a "manifest destiny" of sorts — fulfillment of the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over every living thing. That "mani-

fest destiny" interpreted from that divine injunction is probably the source as well of the Manifest Destiny notion by which "civilized" societies felt obliged to impose their way of life (including "clearing" the wilderness) on "uncivilized" societies in remote wilds. Melville in *Typee* exposed that notion as arrogant hocus: Christian cannibals were simply more voraciously efficient than heathen ones.

Whitman did have inklings of all these things. In "Song of the Broad-Axe" he says: "A great city is that which has the greatest men and women, / If it be a few ragged huts it is still the greatest city in the whole world."<sup>16</sup> And in the preface to the 1855 original edition of *Leaves* he warned in a passage that could just as well be one of Thoreau's passages on "Getting a Living":

It has been thought that the prudent citizen was the citizen who applied himself to solid gains and did well for himself and his family and completed a lawful life without debt or crime . . . Beyond the independence of a little sum laid aside for burial-money, and of a few clapboards around and shingles overhead on a lot of American soil owned, and the easy dollars that supply the year's plain clothing and meals, the melancholy abandonment of such a great being as a man is to the toss and pallor of years of moneymaking with all their stifling deceits and underhanded dodgings, or infinitesimals of parlors, or shameless stuffing while others starve . . . and all the loss of the bloom and odor of the earth and of the flowers and atmosphere and of the sea and of the true taste of the women and men you pass or have to do with in youth or middle age, and the issuing sickness and desperate revolt at the close of a life without elevation or innocence, and the ghastly chatter of a death without serenity or majesty, is the great fraud upon modern civilization.<sup>17</sup>

The part about "all the loss of the bloom and odor of the earth and of the flowers and atmosphere and of the sea" has a haunting similarity to the eco-cide prophecy in the following passage from Thoreau:

Could one examine this beehive of ours from an observatory among the stars, he would perceive an unwonted degree of bustle in these later ages. Would it appear to him that mankind used this world as not abusing it? . . . He could not but notice that restless animal for whose sake it was contrived, but where he found one to admire with him his fair dwelling place, the ninety and nine would be scraping together a little of the gilded dust upon its surface . . . . Wherever the commercial spirit exists it is too sure to become the *ruling* spirit, and it infuses into all our thoughts and affections a degree of its own selfishness; we become selfish in our patriotism, selfish in our domestic relations, selfish in our religion. Let men, true to their natures, cultivate the moral affections, let them make riches the means and not the end of existence, and we shall hear no more of the commercial spirit. The sea will not stagnate, the earth will be as green as ever, and the air as pure.<sup>18</sup>

Whitman's uncanny simultaneity of sentiment with Thoreau in these two parallel passages is not enough, however, to exonerate "Song of the Broad-Axe," "Song of the Exposition," and "Song of the Redwood Tree." "Broad-Axe" celebrates that fairly ancient human tool, earliest invention of the Iron Age (along with the Sword) — contemplates its role in history as tool both of building and destroying. Destroying in the sense of the headsman and the warrior; but even building all those buildings entailed destroying lots of trees. When there were so many trees, it was hard for all but a rare Thoreau to grasp how quickly the ratio between human realm and nature realm would be reversed. The rate of building houses is regarded as a primary index of the prosperity of the nation, a prime economic factor that gets religiously reported instead of the current pH of the acid rain. Deforestation wasn't much to worry about to Solomon Juneau reading about the Cedars of Lebanon in his Bible in his log cabin by whale oil, but today Milwaukee's suburbs extend to Eagle River.

Whereas Whitman sang "the factories divine" in "Eidólons," Thoreau saw nothing attractive in factories:

You come away from the great factory saddened, as if the chief end of man were to make pails; but, in the case of the countryman who makes a few by hand, rainy days, the relative importance of human life and of pails is preserved.

Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he has no time to be anything but a machine.<sup>19</sup>

Thoreau saw far more clearly than Whitman the ecological disaster that the Industrial Revolution and its attendant population expansion meant. Whitman was magnanimous and compassionate and visionary to recognize and proclaim the dignity of the worker. But he failed to see that the work the workers were doing was robbing them more and more of that dignity. Work is a noble and natural act when it is work done in harmony with Nature, but it is ignoble and unnatural when it decimates Nature and alienates man from Nature, within and without himself.

Even Blake half a century earlier in England had perceived the first factories as "Satanic mills" rather than the romantic "foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night, / Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets" Whitman saw in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,"<sup>20</sup> and which he urges to keep burning high in the finale of that great poem. "Blast forth, you air-polluting smokestacks! Flow on, toxic chemicals, into our rivers and streams!" — would Whitman say things like that? I should hope not, but he did say near the end of "To Think of Time": "What is called good is perfect, and what is called bad is just as perfect."<sup>21</sup> That was an attitude based on the optimism that, for good or ill in the meantime, all would turn out well in the end. A belief in human progress despite whatever setbacks: "They go! they go! I know that they go, but I know not where they go, / But I know that they go toward the best — toward something great."<sup>22</sup> To Thoreau, such passages — most of "Song for Occupations," for instance — would have sounded like puffing up further an already puffed-up species whose arrogance had already subjugated Europe and had fanned out from there to the furthest corners of the earth. The human race's ego was already swollen to titanic proportions.

Whitman loved Nature as much as Thoreau, but he loved the human world equally (his ambivalence is summed up in "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun") and so his gregarious temperament (as compared to Thoreau's solitudinousness) tipped his scales in favor of the urban real and so he gave credence to the blind faith in "Progress" which prevailed in his day as it does in ours. He was a "child of his times" who only got as far as Denver and couldn't foresee the Los Angeles Freeway.

To give Whitman credit, we must keep in mind that his gung-ho enthusiasm for "Progress" was all based on the idea of Democracy and international brotherhood such as unfurled in "Salut au Monde." That is the purport of "Passage to India": a peaceful meeting of East and West, to mutual benefit, not Hiroshima-Korea-Vietnam. The folly of "Song of the Exposition" is ameliorated by the fact it was published the same year, 1871, as "Democratic Vistas." In that essay he makes crystal-clear his awareness of the dangers of technological expansion not accompanied by — actually, guided by — a commensurate spiritual (i.e. Democracy) evolution. The latter, alas, did not occur; rather, the feudal system adapted to an industrial milieu. "All men are created equal" in the *Declaration of Independence* was interpreted by the exegeses of the temples of Wall Street to mean not that all men are equal in freedom, but that all are equally free to grab a position from which to oppress the freedom of others. Anyhow, let it never be forgot when ruing Whitman's shortsightedness in "Song of the Redwood Tree" that he did say in "Democratic Vistas":

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness of heart than at present, and here in the United States . . . . The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in . . . nor is humanity itself believ'd in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. . . . From deceit in the spirit, the mother of all false deeds, the offspring is already incalculable. . . . The depravity of the business classes of our country is

not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. . . . The great cities reek with respectable as much non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. . . . In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. . . . I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results. In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire so colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the proudest sway of Rome. In vain have we annex'd Texas, California, Alaska, and reach north for Canada and south for Cuba. It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul.<sup>23</sup>

As much as we may admire and be grateful for this passage in "Democratic Vistas" and the earlier cited comparable passage from the 1855 Preface, and as much as we may trust to the deep benevolence pervading all of Whitman's words, still it's unfortunate that the Songs of the Broad-Axe, the Exposition, the Redwood Tree, and Occupations came to occupy the crucial place they do in the schema of *Leaves of Grass*. In these pivotal poems in the middle of *Leaves of Grass*, one of the gentlest, most benevolent souls we know of bestowed his blessing on a development that would threaten the very Nature Emerson extolled as the ultimate criterion and which he himself loved so much. Thoreau could never have written those poems. In them Whitman urged on a process Thoreau warned Cassandra-like would spell disaster. The Songs of the Broad-Axe, Exposition and the Redwood Tree — those three poems in a row, particularly — seem to idealize and spiritualize the conquest of the natural world by our species as some sort of manifest destiny divine right. Along with "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," they constitute Whitman's equivalent of "The Charge of the Light Brigade." In that unfortunate triumvirate of poems Whitman loafes and invites the Industrial Revolution, unaware its toll would be far higher than

the 1776 revolution or the 1861 one, that the Broad-Axe would perhaps chop the head off our very own species as well as all others.

Whitman was similarly unaware that the Industrial Revolution industrialized war as well as everything else.

Away with themes of war! away with war itself!  
And in its stead speed industry's campaigns,  
With thy undaunted armies, engineering,  
Thy pennants labor, loosen'd to the breeze,<sup>24</sup>

wrote Whitman in "Song of the Exposition" in 1871. He could not foresee that industry and war would forge an alliance exposed and named by Dwight Eisenhower himself in his farewell speech to the nation: the "military-industrial complex." "Nature" to the industrialists meant only "natural resources," and the military provided the power to guarantee their unimpeded delivery. World War I resulted largely from a free-for-all race to colonize the last remaining sources of natural resources. One of the main reasons America got involved in Vietnam was that the area was rich in oil, a resource vital to keep Henry Ford's inventions going. Whitman could not foresee that even in so-called "peace-time" the processes of industry would amount to a war against the Earth itself.

If only Whitman could have been shown all these things by the Ghost of Industrialism Future before he declared in "Song of the Exposition":

Mightier than Egypt's tombs,  
Fairer than Grecia's, Roma's temples  
Prouder than Milan's statued, spired cathedral,  
More picturesque than Rhenish castle-keeps,  
We plan even now to raise, beyond them all,  
Thy great cathedral sacred industry, no tomb,  
A keep for life for practical invention.<sup>25</sup>

"Song of the Redwood Tree" is the most offensive of the poems under discussion here. We expect more cosmic consciousness from the author of "The Lesson of a Tree" in *Specimen Days*, an entry that gets as deeply into trees as Thoreau ever got. How grotesque, Whitman's ventriloquism into the Redwood tree of resignation to extinction!

Maybe some poet should arise nowadays to put such words into the mouths of the endangered species? Oh, Whitman! We know that he "asked and received \$100"<sup>26</sup> for "Song of the Redwood-Tree" from Harper's Magazine in late 1873: five years after John Muir went to Yosemite and became a Moses leading the Wilderness out of human bondage. If Muir had failed in his attempt to be the savior of the Redwoods, that \$100 Whitman got for the poem would now seem uncomfortably like thirty pieces of silver.

Another disturbing dimension accrues to "Song of the Redwood-Tree" when we consider that it also implies "The Song of the Red Man"! Whitman worked in the Bureau of Indian Affairs for a time, but nowhere in all his writings does he mention the plight of the Native Americans smothered by all the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Chief Sealth wrote his famous letter to Franklin Pierce the very year *Leaves of Grass* first appeared.<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of this essay is not to undermine or embarrass Whitman posthumously. I love Whitman more than all but a handful of poets who ever lived; and that handful I love as much, not more. Whitman's vision was wide and clear, but it did have its blind spots. The only ones I've been able to see after years of reading him are the ones I've indicated in this essay. A "child of his times" went forth in Whitman, and his blindspot was common to his age. It was a very rare person such as Thoreau — or Blake before and D.H. Lawrence later — who could perceive the catastrophic implications of the industrial way of life. Whitman wasn't unaware of the less than utopian conditions of the industrial city of his day, but he believed it was a stage that would be passed through and beyond on the way to a truly utopian Democracy.

Industrialists like Carnegie and J.P. Morgan, however, viewed "this all-devouring modern word, business" in a Social Darwinish sort of way, and the survival of the fittest meant to them the survival of the richest: a violation of Whitman's Democracy vision, which held the poorest as equal to the richest. A mere page after Whitman decries "this all-devouring modern word, business," he says:

Always and more and more, as I cross the East  
and North rivers, the ferries, or with the pilots in  
their pilot-houses, or pass an hour in Wall Street,

or the Gold Exchange, I realize (if we must admit such partialisms) that not Nature alone is great in her fields of freedom and the open air, in her storms, the shows of night and day, the mountains, forests, sea — but in the artificial, the work of man too is equally great — in this profusion of teeming humanity — in these ingenuities, streets, goods, houses, ships — these hurrying, feverish, electric crowds of men, their complicated business genius (not least among the geniuses), and all this mighty, many-threaded wealth and industry concentrated here.<sup>28</sup>

Does Whitman contradict himself? Very well, then, he contradicts himself ("I am large, I contain multitudes"). But it's not such a big contradiction when we take into consideration this passage from later in "Democratic Vistas":

As we have intimated, offsetting the material civilization of our race, our nationality, its wealth, territories, factories, population, products, trade, and military and naval strength, and breathing breath of life into all these, and more, must be its moral civilization — the formulation, expression, aidancy whereof, is the very highest height of literature. The climax of this loftiest range of civilization, rising above all the gorgeous shows and results of wealth, intellect, power, and art, as such — above even theology and religious fervor — is to be its development, from the eternal bases, and the fit expression, of absolute Conscience, moral soundness, Justice.<sup>29</sup>

Alas, Whitman was naive to believe enough of a spiritual conscience would arise to head the dangers of materialism off at the pass. Some such conscience has arisen and exists, but is it enough to stop the deforestation of the Amazon jungle, for instance, before it's too late: before it's all turned to pasturage for Burger King cattle? Thoreau was right: the "commercial spirit" does aggressively tend to be "the ruling spirit." And Thoreau was right about another thing: maybe if we worked one day per week instead of five, we'd give the Earth a break

from the relentless pruning by Adam and Eve's going-on five billion brats. Whitman discovered the universe in a blade of grass not while he was working, but while he was loafing at his ease. A spotted hawk, not a foreman, brings his loitering to a close.

Where I think Whitman went wrong, and where Thoreau didn't, was in saying that man and the works of man are equal to Nature. Man has a big enough head without telling him that. Man needs more humility — "ontological humility" as Teilhard de Chardin (or was it Gabriel Marcel) called it. Man needs to feel as religiously reverent toward the Natural World as he does toward his super-natural anthropomorphic God. He needs to quote the chapters and verses of streams and trees more than his Judeo-Christian Bible. The solution is not necessarily to abolish all factories overnight, but it is certainly to bring human technology as quickly as possible into a sane relationship with the Nature of which Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Muir were the four evangelists in 19th Century America; and to bring human population into a sane ratio to Nature as well. I recently read in the papers that, if present population growth rates continue, in the year 2050 as many humans will be born as were born in all the years between the birth of Christ and 1500! Humankind can never become proportionate to Nature if it eclipses and annihilates the Nature it seeks to be proportionate to. Nature is the key. Whitman, of course, knew that; the whole *Leaves of Grass* vision is mystically ecological: sections 1, 6, 31, 48 and 52 of "Song of Myself," "This Compost," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Nature is the key, and a key to that Key may be these words from Whitman's "Democratic Vistas" quoted by Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke in his book *Cosmic Consciousness*:

A fitly born and bred race, growing up in right conditions of outdoor as much as indoor harmony, activity and development, would probably, from and in those conditions, find it enough merely to *live* — and would, in their relations to the sky, air, water, trees, etc., and in the fact of life itself, discover and achieve happiness — with Being suffused night and day by wholesome ecstasy, surpassing all the pleasures that wealth, amusement, and even the gratified intellect, erudition, or the sense of art, can give.

Lo! *Nature* (the only complete, actual poem) existing calmly in the divine scheme, containing all, content, careless of the criticisms of a day, or these endless and wordy chatterers. And lo! to the consciousness of the soul, the permanent identity, the thought, the something, before which the magnitude even of Democracy, art, literature, etc., dwindles, becomes partial, measurable — something that fully satisfies (which those do not). That something is the All, with the accompanying idea of eternity. . . . And again lo! the pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever — the eternal beats, eternal systole and diastole of life in things. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Here seems the closest utterance in human tongue of the cetacean intelligence that lives in harmony — not armed conflict — with the Earth. It describes a space of mind that would remedy the Nature-annihilating thrust of the Industrial Revolution.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, Joseph Wood Krutch ed. (Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 356.
- <sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass — Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text* (Ithaca, New York: Great Seal Books, 1961), p. 65. Note: "respectable or industrious" in the 1855, 1856 and 1860 editions, changed to "respectable or unhappy" in later editions.
- <sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, John Kouwenhoven ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 127.
- <sup>4</sup> Whitman (Kouwenhoven), p. 185.
- <sup>5</sup> Whitman (K), p. 169.
- <sup>6</sup> Whitman (K), pp. 174-75.
- <sup>7</sup> Whitman (K), p. 159.
- <sup>8</sup> Whitman (K), p. 163.
- <sup>9</sup> Thoreau, p. 405.



- <sup>10</sup> Thoreau, p. 356.
- <sup>11</sup> Whitman (K), p. 168.
- <sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Emerson*, Donald McQuade ed. (New York: Modern Library College Editions, 1981), p. 45.
- <sup>13</sup> Thoreau, p. 108.
- <sup>14</sup> Genesis 3:16-19.
- <sup>15</sup> Whitman (K), p. 168.
- <sup>16</sup> Whitman (K), p. 151.
- <sup>17</sup> Whitman (K), p. 454.
- <sup>18</sup> Thoreau, p. 302.
- <sup>19</sup> Thoreau, p. 109.
- <sup>20</sup> Whitman (K), p. 129.
- <sup>21</sup> Whitman (K), p. 343.
- <sup>22</sup> Whitman (K), p. 126.
- <sup>23</sup> Whitman (K), p. 467-68.
- <sup>24</sup> Whitman (K), p. 161.
- <sup>25</sup> Whitman (K), p. 159.
- <sup>26</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Harold W. Blodgett & Sculley Bradley eds. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968), p. 206.
- <sup>27</sup> The most minimal mention is made in the short late poems "Yonondio" and "Osceola."
- <sup>28</sup> Whitman (K), p. 468-69.
- <sup>29</sup> Whitman (K), p. 506.
- <sup>30</sup> Richard Maurice Bucke, M.D., *Cosmic Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1969), pp. 229-30.

