

HEARTBEAT: WITHIN THE VISIONARY TRADITION

The visionary literature of the United States has affirmed the oneness of creation and the necessity of an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual investment in the natural cosmos. It has also condemned the arrogance of industrial capitalism which has only a monetary investment in the natural creation and which replaces the natural with the artificial and oppresses the common people in the *name* of progress, but for the *purpose* of greed.

The literature I am going to discuss is that of selected American visionaries, not that of mystics. The difference, as Alfred Kazin has pointed out, is that the mystic submits to a divine order, so that earthly life becomes unimportant. The mystic passively lives for the "journey of the soul" upward to God. On the other hand, the visionary is active on this earth, a revolutionary attempting to bring about the ideal earthly existence.¹

The visionary writings of America reflect the vision of the people. The traditional role of storytellers and orators among Native Americans is to express the communal vision; the role of visionary writers also is to express the communal vision.

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was the first truly visionary written expression in American Literature. Never before had an Ameropean, to borrow a term from Carter Revard, approximated so closely the Native Americans' conception of the spiritual and commonplace as one. Contemporary writer Joseph Bruchac, of Abenaki and Polish ancestry, appreciates Whitman's ability "to name so many things with such precision — rather than just referring to amorphous nature — to trees as 'trees' and birds as background."² Bruchac also points out the influence of Whitman on contemporary writers Leslie Silko and Simon Ortiz, though he adds that "Whitman's influence may be less important in the formation of their voices than their having a direct connection with that same source from which Whitman drew the best of his strength" (p. 276)—that source being, of course, direct experience in nature, not literature.

Bruchac also compares sections of "Song of Myself" to the Navajo Night Chant for the purpose of illustrating the wonder expressed at the creation in both. Bruchac says, "for American Indian people, poetry is not just for entertainment. It changes lives, it restores balance. I am certain Whitman would have deep sympathy for that idea." (p. 277)

Whitman wanted his writing to go beyond the page, to influence his readers to live creatively and to improve their society by living in harmony with nature. In *Democratic Vistas* he wrote:

In the prophetic literature of these States...Nature, true Nature, and the true idea of Nature, long absent, must above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems and the test of all high literary and aesthetic compositions.³

The artist, nature, and society are interrelated, and Whitman's aesthetic principle was based on this understanding. The visionary writer is always active. Writing a poem or having a vision is not enough. A statement in *Black Elk Speaks* expresses the active visionary principle: "a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see."⁴

The Lakota people traditionally have a communal sensibility; and Black Elk's urge to use the power of his vision to help his people survive during a time when they were suffering defeat is entirely consistent with his culture. Also consistent with Black Elk's culture is his understanding that human beings are related to the four-leggeds, winged creatures, and plants. This is the visionary way of seeing of virtually all traditional Native Americans.

It is important for me to emphasize at this point that I am not implying that Whitman's perspective is a Native American perspective, but rather illustrating that the important source and intention of his art were essentially the same as those of Native American writers. At the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote:

One's self I sing, a single separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

In Whitman the individual and the cosmic consciousness exist simultaneously. The movement of visionary literature is always from the individual to the cosmic in a continuing cycle. From a Native American perspective *Lame Deer* expressed this concept:

On all the earth there is not one leaf that is exactly like another. The Great Spirit likes it that way. He only sketches out the path of life roughly for all the creatures on earth....but leaves them to find their own way to get there....If Wakan Tanka likes the plants, the animals, even little mice and bugs to do this, how much more will he abhor people being alike....worst of all, thinking alike all the time.⁵

The determination of Native Americans to maintain a separate identity is consistent with this concept. When tribal identity is lost, tens of thousands of years of knowledge about the cosmos is lost. And this loss affects not just Native Americans, but all people. But at the same time that they affirm their tribal identities, writers who are Native Americans reject being labeled as Lakota, Laguna or Blackfeet writers. Leslie Silko has stated, for example, "...what writers, storytellers and poets have to say necessarily goes beyond such trivial boundaries as origin. There's the danger of demeaning literature when you label certain books by saying this is black, this is Native American, and then, this is just writing."⁶ Our grouping of Native American literature into a category by itself has been necessary only because literature by Native Americans has been ignored for so long by the literary establishment. It is time for us to affirm the real connections between certain writings by Native Americans and aesthetic categories, such as visionary literature.

Harmful misconceptions have existed in both the Ameropean and the Native American perspectives. *Lame Deer* distinguishes the Native American from the Ameropean world view:

We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves — the earth, the sun, the wind and the rain, stones, trees, animals, even little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart.
(p. 109)

Lame Deer's distinction is understandable. But the writings of Whitman, Sandburg, Le Sueur, Levertov, and numerous other American visionaries show that writers who try to understand nature with the heart are not confined to any one cultural origin.

The communal vision of Native Americans embraced their tribe. But in an understanding of the cycle of creation, Native Americans understood the relationships existing between all life, all humans.

In his cyclic book of poetry, *Going for the Rain*, Simon J. Ortiz recorded his journey from his Acoma home across the United States and back. Before the journey he saw the birth of his daughter, Rainy Dawn:

You come forth
the color of a stone cliff
at dawn,
changing colors,
blue to red
to all the colors of the earth.⁷

Ortiz began the journey with this capacity to see the oneness of humans and nature. As he traveled, away from his people who affirmed their relationships with nature through their ways of life and their ceremonies, he found other people living close to nature. He wrote of two Black women fishing at a lake in Texas that "they were good to be with." (p. 34) But he saw also evidence of the arrogance of people in America who live habitually in an artificial world. His poem "Washy-uma Motor Hotel" bears a thematic resemblance to Sandburg's "Four

Preludes on Playthings of the Wind." The assumption of any society that it is the greatest nation that ever existed on the earth or that it will last forever is ludicrous. Ortiz's poem says of the "American passerby":

They haven't noticed that the cement
foundations of the motor hotel
are crumbling, bit by bit.
The ancient spirits tell stories
and jokes and laugh and laugh. (p. 61)

In Ortiz's later collection of poetry *From Sand Creek*, written out of his experience working in a Veterans Administration hospital in Ft. Lyons, Colorado, we see in his descriptions of the patients the kind of empathy that Whitman felt toward the soldiers he visited during the Civil War.

The gentleness Ortiz expresses in his regard for nature is rare. It is a gentleness he learned from his father, a man living in a matriarchal society. In "My father's Song," Ortiz recalls his father finding "the burrow nest of a mouse" (p. 20) one spring when planting corn:

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals
into the palm of his hand
and told me to touch them.
We took them to the edge
of the field and put them in the shade
of a sand moist clod. (p. 20)

This gentle caring for the smallest, most vulnerable of life forms is always evident in visionary literature, but it seems to me that the visionary impulse in American literature today is more prevalent in the writings of women.

One of the oldest and most active of our contemporary writers is Meridel Le Sueur. Born in Iowa in 1900, Le Sueur is the great-granddaughter of an Iroquois woman and an abolitionist preacher. Le Sueur's life and writings have combined a love of nature with a love of democracy and a love of women, who are dual symbols in her work: of the strong, central life-giving force of the earth and of the earth exploited.

Perhaps more than any other writer of our time, Le Sueur has developed the organic democratic principle—the idea that society should reflect the balance and freedom of nature. In her history of Minnesota, *North Star Country*, Le Sueur wrote:

Like a lion the people leave marks of their passing, reveal that moment of strength when the radicle plunged into the soil, in a fierce struggle on a strong day, and a nation held.⁸

The organic imagery in Le Sueur's writing is an outgrowth of her experience growing up in Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas and Minnesota. She did not grow up in an Indian environment, but she does consider a Mandan woman to have been an important formative influence. She has written of Zona:

She swept her sacred feather around the horizon,
to show the open fan of the wilderness and how it
all returned: mortgaged land, broken treaties—
all opened among the gleaming feathers like a
warm-breasted bird turning into the turning
light of moon and sun, with the grandmother
earth turning and turning....I knew the turning
earth and woman would defend me. I saw the
powerful strong women, and I was a small green
girl with no breasts and hardly a bowel for anger,
but gleaming among them, unused, naked as the
land, learning anger, and turning to cauterize
and protect the earth, to engender out of their
rape and suffering a new race to teach the warriors
not to tread the earth and women down. At
their own peril!⁹

The communal vision is constantly expanding. Whitman's began in Manhattan, with the love of family: "Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother." ("Starting from Paumanok," sec. 1, l. 2). But his vision expanded to embrace the continent, and his imagination allowed him to write: "my palms cover continents" ("Song of Myself," sec. 33, l. 7).

The communal vision of Native Americans embraced their tribe. But philosophically it expanded to include the whole cosmos. The great visionary writing of our contemporaries extends the communal vision to embrace the planet in recognizing the fact that all people are related to each other, despite their cultural differences. Meridel Le Sueur's poetry in *Rites of Ancient Ripening* and her experimental prose work "Origins of Corn" are part of this movement toward a less abstract and philosophical and a more real global vision.

In "Doan Kêt," or "Solidarity," written for and sent to the women of North Viet Nam during the war, Le Sueur wrote:

What strikes you, my sisters, strikes us all. The global
earth is resonant, communicative.
Conception is instant solidarity of the child.
Simultaneity of the root drives the green sap of the
flower.
In the broken, the dispossessed is the holy cry. (p. 267)

Evident in the poem are both Le Sueur's sisterhood with the women of Viet Nam and her outcry against their exploitation.

Le Sueur says that we choose to attach ourselves either to the corpse or to the reborn. She distinguishes between a cyclic vision of the world and a linear vision. The patriarchal European society that has attempted to control us has led to the final, destructive goal of linear progress, the atom bomb. Le Sueur says that to destroy something, you must first objectify it, "You can't destroy it if it's in you."¹⁰

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Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* contains all the elements of visionary literature: a celebration of nature and a condemnation of the destroyers, the movement from an individual to a communal vision, an experimental, organic form and the unique and essential element of contemporary visionary literature—the awareness that human beings exist in a global community.

In *Ceremony* the past, present, and future coexist. The ancient Laguna stories, the poems within the prose narrative, are still being told and acted out in the lives of the people. Through a cyclic narrative depicting the process an individual, Tayo, must go through to overcome his sickness and become healthy and whole again, Silko illustrates the importance of the individual within the cosmic whole.

Before Tayo, or any one else, can attain vision and a realization of his at-oneness with nature, he must view its disruption. He sees this in Gallup. From a bridge he looks down at Indians caught in a self-destructive life of drinking. Silko weaves the story of a child living in this environment of poverty and alcoholism near the river into the narrative. The most important thing to this child is his mother. He loves her natural smell but remembers with horror how she smelled when she returned to him after having been in an institution.

The impoverished existence of these Indians is horrible, but even worse is the way they are treated by the government. The Gallup police regularly burn down their cardboard shelters and separate mother from child by institutionalizing both of them.

The capacity to love begins with the mother-child relationship. Tayo learned love from his mother, and his uncle Josiah nurtured that capacity, so that he could give love to Rocky, whom he followed to World War II.

On a Philippine island when Tayo associated a Japanese soldier with his uncle Josiah, he was intuitively expanding his love to encompass all human beings. Having been sickened by the negation of love that is war, Tayo must, when he returns to Laguna, learn to love again.

This he learns through Ts'eh Montano, the woman who represents the she elk, symbol of life-giving rain. Ts'eh seems at the same time a real woman and a spirit of nature, not just a woman symbolic of it. She warns Tayo against entering the destructive force of violence. After he leaves her, he comes to understand the feelings he had about the Japanese soldiers during the war:

...he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices...: the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again... united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims... who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.¹¹

America's visionary writers, the ones I have mentioned and others, have chosen to love. In her poem "Black Hills Survival Gathering, 1980," Linda Hogan, whose ancestry is Chickasaw and Amero-Indian, wrote:

At ground zero/in the center of light we stand/
Bombs are buried beneath us,/destruction flies
overhead./We are waking/in the expanding
light/the sulphur-colored grass./A red horse
standing on a distant ridge/looks like one burned/
over Hiroshima./silent, head hanging in sick-
ness./ But look/she raises her head/and surges to-
ward the bluing sky./Radiant morning./The dark
tunnels inside us carry life./Red./Blue./The child-
ren's dark hair against my breast./On the burn-
ing hills/in flaring orange cloth/men are singing
and drumming/Heartbeat.¹²

Our only choice is to love the people and the earth beyond the boundaries of nation, culture, and politics. The heart beat of the people throbs within America's visionary literature and affirms our common need for global understanding, global love.



¹Alfred Kazin, "Introduction" to *The Portable Blake* (NY: Viking Press, 1968), pp. 9-10.

²Joseph Bruchac, "To Love The Earth: Some Thoughts on Walt Whitman." In *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, eds. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom and Dan Campion (Minneapolis, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1981), p. 275. Subsequent page references to this essay will appear in the text.

³James E. Miller, Jr. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), p. 494. Subsequent references to Whitman's writings will be to this edition.

⁴John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (NY: Pocket Books, 1972), p. 173.

⁵John Fire/Lame Deer and Richard Edoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 157. Subsequent page references to this book will appear in the text.

⁶Dexter Fisher, "Stories and their Tellers — A Conversation with Leslie Marmon Silko." In *The Third Woman*, ed. Dexter Fisher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 21.

⁷Simon J. Ortiz, *Going for the Rain* (NY: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 10. Subsequent page references to this book will appear in the text.

⁸Meridel Le Sueur, *North Star Country* (NY: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1945), p. 11.

⁹Meridel Le Sueur, *Ripening* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982), p. 45. Subsequent page references to Le Sueur's writings will be to this edition.

¹⁰Meridel Le Sueur speaking at Briar Cliff College, Sioux City, Iowa, October 3, 1983.

¹¹Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (NY: Signet, 1978), p. 258.

¹²Joseph Bruchac, ed., *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back* (Greenfield Center, NY: The Greenfield Review Press, 1983), p. 121.