

AMERICA'S COASTLINE: Whitman's Sacred Place

“For Whitman, the shoreline, and particularly the shoreline of his native Long Island, amounts to a sacred place, a scene to which he ritualistically returns to revive his sense of beauty and meaning, a site to which his identity as poet and person is anchored...”

---M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *A Study of Whitman's Eco-poetics*

There are a lot of human ways to engage the environment: as the vast unknown, a source of adventure and exploration, as an old familiar friend, a partner to human endeavor in the great experience of life.

Some see this earth as a resource to be used or abused, tamed or vanquished. Some see it as their origin, habitation or final resting place. Some men test their mettle against the environment; others see in it a symbol of fertility, sexual power, or their own virility.

Some see danger in the forces of the earth, and think of it as their enemy. And some treat the earth as an unbearably precious creation they may only place their feet upon with reverence.

Then there's Walt Whitman, who sees all of these things and more, and expressed them with irrepressible energy and joy in his poetry.

America's great *Transcendental Romantic* -- and our Long Island friend and neighbor, though separated from us by over a century of time and history -- Walt Whitman reminds us that for those with a universal perspective, one needs to fashion a finely crafted orchestration of those views.

William Blake tells us we may see a world in a grain of sand. Whitman chips in with the idea that there's a world in every grain, and there's a lot of grains of sand out there.

That's pretty multiple and diverse. But when expressed by a visionary poet, a multiplicity of viewpoints may become a symphony of orchestrated views.

"Do I contradict myself?" wrote Whitman. "Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

For those in possession of a perspective that matches up with Sea Grant's mission statement -- the promotion of environmental stewardship, long-term economic development and responsible use of

America's coastal and oceanic resources -- there is much to explore in the poetry of Walt Whitman, though his voice and perspective is diverse.

The sea is by turns a lover ("Song of Myself," "Spontaneous Me"), a 'powerful death-speaking mother' ("Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"), a threat ("The Sleepers") and a mournful retreat ("When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd.")

In "This Compost," Whitman's most 'ecological poem,' the Good Gray Poet examines life cycle and energy conservation.

There's Whitman the island poet, rediscovering in the surging seafoam his 'mother origins,' exploring his messy wonderful sexual conceptions, or probing his sense of mortality. The experience is sometimes so intense that he reaches to the language of sexual climax: "You sea! I resign myself to you ... Dash me with amorous wet."

It's not just the sea for a universal visionary like Whitman. "Smile O voluptuous cool-breathed earth!" he writes, demonstrating that he can get quite ecstatic about terrestrial phenomena. "Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees! Earth of departed sunset! Earth of the mountains misty-top! Earth of vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!... Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake! Far-swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth! Smile, for your lover comes!"

But one way or another, the sea -- and the shore -- are recurring psychic visitations for Whitman.

In "Song Of Joys," we find most nearly Whitman's voice as it pertains to Sea Grant's mission statement. Here we find Walt expressing the world view of an ordinary working man who loved being among ordinary people as they exercise their crafts, all of them interacting faithfully and reverently with the world around them.

The view we get in "Song Of Joys" is an unquestioned one -- the balanced interaction between the environment and human enterprise are inherent. "O to have been brought up on bays, lagoons, creeks, or along the coast!," he writes. "O To continue and be employed there all my life!"

Walt Whitman's world is one of limitless riches and unquestioned undertakings. The efforts of small bands of working men to harvest that world, in skiffs and on foot, dropping fishing lines or digging in the muddy flats, are a platform for him to "laugh and joke among the mettlesome young men."

Mackerel fill the water for miles. Lobsters are teeming just below the surface. When he travels out in winter, he carries in his hand little more than "a small axe to cut holes in the ice."

No harm, no foul. Only the joy of working men in the thrall of the world's expansive riches.

"Behold me, well clothed, going gaily, or returning in the afternoon – my brood of tough boys accompanying me, my brood of grown and part grown boys, who love to be with no one else so well as they love to be with me."

Some might see this viewpoint as recklessly blind. Others will see it as a visionary ideal. In "Song Of Joys," we see Whitman at his simple social best, where responsible use of the nation's maritime resources is beyond question.

Walt Whitman was a man of incredible joy, in possession of a utopian view of the world founded in visionary, ecstatic personal and social roots. His enormous capacity to express optimism – particularly in the face of the challenges to America during the time he lived – is refreshing in today's stressed out world of limited resources and fragile hope.

While not always contradictory, Whitman is certainly a man for whom one may find a variety of perspectives, and a multiplicity of visions. But there's no cherry-picking when it comes to Whitman's writings. Each of his perspectives, for Whitman, is legitimate.

That's why a visit with Walt is an opportunity to view the sea again as he did -- and as Sea Grant would have us see it -- as a place which, when we are in balance with it, provides for a spiritually healthy experience.

Or, as Killingsworth tells us, "the site of the soul's first onset and deepest revelations."

-----George Wallace December 2011

George Wallace, first Poet Laureate of Suffolk County, read Whitman's "Song Of Joys" at the New York Sea Grant 40th Anniversary Celebration at the Long Island Maritime Museum on September 9, 2011. Wallace, the 2011-2012 poet-in-residence at the Walt Whitman Birthplace, also teaches writing at Pace University.