Animism in Whitman: "Multitudes" of Interpretations?

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ANIMISM IN WHITMAN: “MULTITUDES” OF INTERPRETATION?

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

ANIMISM IN WHITMAN: “MULTITUDES” OF INTERPRETATION?

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Master of Arts

Abstract

Walt Whitman used animistic techniques in his poetry and prose, specifically “Song of the Redwood Tree,” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” and Specimen Days. The term animism can be traced to the Latin root of the word, anime, which connotes a “soul” or “vitality.” So, when one is talking about animistic techniques, one is speaking of the (metaphoric or realistic) ensoulment of natural objects. In the wake of a growing global crisis modern scholarship has begun reexamining the implications of this belief; often it introduces ambiguities into an otherwise comfortable relationship of unquestioned human domination.

In Specimen Days, Whitman seems to have a more clear view of his natural philosophy, in which he expresses his belief that nature possesses an inherency that he envies and an ability to communicate that quality with him. However, Whitman’s “Song of the
Redwood Tree” is ambiguous and contradicting. Whitman creates a vision of Manifest Destiny by portraying settlers in California clearing space for houses and agriculture by cutting down the majestic redwood forests. However, this poem contains a particularly odd element: the trees have a voice. They mourn their own demise while simultaneously celebrating the arrival of the new American populace. It is a conflicting image. The animistic, majestic qualities of the trees challenge an anthropocentric view of the world, not allowing the reader to quickly disregard the extinction of the redwood forests in order to embrace American ideals of progress, which in a way defeats the more imperialistic message of the poem.

Another comparison, with “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” demonstrates how important subversion of self to place is when using animistic techniques in poetry. This poem implies that animate nature is a locus for Whitman’s creative genius, both inspiring his poetry and permeating it with confusion.

Whitman’s very engagement with the process of imagining a voice for nature inserts doubt into some of his more imperialistic pronouncements and encourages the reader to question his own previously unexamined assumptions. Animistic literary techniques have the potential to encourage an involvement with non-human nature, along with a more conscious awareness of the way we use (and abuse) that Other.
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Lastly to Walt Whitman himself for daring to hope that two contrasting ideas could coexist within one people.
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Introduction

“Only in a place where there are cranes and horses can poetry survive.”
-Robert Graves

The crux of my interest in Walt Whitman’s nature poetry traces back to the ancient theory that you can’t separate poetry from nature. This theory is based on the fact that the first duty of a poet is to communicate a reverence for nature; in essence, a young poet is nature’s priest, 1 “wielder of the Orphean lyre” (Bate 10). A priest is normally thought of as someone who mediates between a community and their God, but in this case the idea conveys the sense of someone mediating between a community and their environment, seeking to cultivate a sense of reverence and respect for that environment within the community. This implies that nature needs someone from the human community to represent its needs and interpret its meaning—with the greater implication being that nature has something to say. The practical implications of developing this idea as a theory of poetry are extremely interesting; perhaps, then, the first duty of a poet is to translate the voice of nature, to develop that kind of consciousness that pays attention to the “particularities and details of her immediate surroundings” (Bate 16).

This idea is incredibly compelling, since it implies that nature informs a poet’s growth but also that a poet can have a great effect on society’s attitude toward nature. If a poet fails to translate accurately, or fails to translate nature’s voice at all, then what will happen to poetry, and consequently, the earth? Derek Walcott believes that unless a poet is directly influenced by nature he will never be able to write poetry that is culturally significant (see footnote 1). This “intelligent intercourse with Nature” (Bate 17) is becoming

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1 I heard Derek Walcott say this in a Q & A session after he had finished a reading; he stated that he truly believes that poetry will die if society continues to reject its natural roots and confine areas of cultural importance to big cities, which cannot compare to the beauty and poetic influence of the landscape. He quoted the Graves epigraph that titles this introduction during this session.
increasingly difficult to practice. Our society has become undeniably distanced from nature: we are agriculturally rootless, because we buy our food in packages at the grocery store; we are in a state of environmental degradation so pervasive that when shown the facts people feel like their “heart was ripped out and stomped into the floor;”\(^2\) we have lost a sense of belonging in nature and most of the time prefer motorized vehicles which rip up the landscape to our own two feet. In this context, how does a modern poet cultivate a sense of reverence for nature?

And more importantly, can a reverence for nature and a reverence for humanity be ultimately resolved into one coherent poetic voice? At times the tendency is to relegate one voice or the other to a place of ultimate importance; either situation is undesirable. John Elder seems to think that it is possible for a poet to accomplish a sense of balance between the two, or at least he states that Wordsworth did. Elder writes, “Poetry is thus for Wordsworth a landscape of memory, within which an individual may discover a circuit, not of estrangement but of reconciliation—between himself and the earth and, equally, between himself and his race” (10-11), and I would add, between his race and the earth. This poetics of reconciliation is, I believe, a specific way of looking at and interacting with the environment, of understanding that there is a division present but trying to bridge that division through a subversion of self in nature. Thus, the poet is reconciling nature and humanity by bridging the distance through the language of poetry (and sometimes prose).

Another issue that is important to examine within this context is the problem of what happens to the poet’s voice when “nature” is speaking? Is it circumscribed into the whole, 

\(^2\) One of my students included this reaction in a paper she wrote analyzing an exhibit called “American Dreams: Dreams of Eden” which traces the impact of the American Dream of Eden on the landscape, ending with several photographs by Patrick Nagatani documenting the nuclear disaster sites. It is currently on display at the BYU Museum of Art (2006).
does it take center stage, or is it relegated to some other plane of existence for those few lines? Elder writes of this division, “With regard neither to poets’ attitude toward tradition nor to culture’s relation with the earth can there be a simple progression from estrangement to reconciliation; there must rather be a form of dialectic” (1). Thus, the poet’s voice often represents this “form of dialectic,” as construed by different voices, or construction of voices, originating with the poet himself, which grate against each other and refine the ideas of the poet.

Whitman constructs the voice of nature in several conflicting ways within different sections of his poetry and prose, and these different models for interacting with nature present both positive and negative possibilities for our own relationship with nature. Whitman’s poetic voice is fascinating because he did not see the dual hope for national progress and a return to an ecological worldview as an incompatible project; he consistently tried to reconcile the two through use of a dialectical argument, something that can be very valuable in a world where most people are increasingly pessimistic about the peaceful coexistence of those two goals. I firmly believe that his often complex natural philosophy is pertinent during this time of global regrowth.

Recent attempts to reassess Walt Whitman in light of ecocriticism have had mixed results. Throughout his poetry, Walt Whitman leaned heavily upon natural images and metaphors to illustrate his view of America and her inhabitants; later in life he became so fascinated with nature that he proclaimed it to be the only thing that “remains” after “politics, conviviality, love, and so on” are “exhausted” (Complete 89). Yet this topic remains largely unexamined in Whitman’s prose and poetry, often overshadowed by sex and gender issues, Civil War poetry, or his views on the American democracy. That his environmental message
has been lost is perhaps a symptom of our own anthropocentric reading tendencies that ecocriticism has set out to ameliorate. However, I believe that a close reading of both his poetry and prose can offer rich insights for the ecocritic. Specifically, I am interested in how Whitman’s technique of translating for nature, which I will refer to throughout this paper as animism for reasons further described in the next chapter, can provide a model for harmonizing the goals and progression of humanity and nature.

Animism today is viewed as a positive alternative to anthropocentrism, endowing the natural world with life and hopefully causing humans to question the ethics of ending those natural lives through resource abuse. As I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, animism can help to cultivate that sense of reverence for nature that Walcott felt was so crucial to the task of being a poet. But poetic animism does not always solve this problem, and in fact can sometimes contribute to our tendency to see the natural world as something to be used purely for human interest. It is very difficult for a poet to distance himself from his own voice and personality enough to translate nature’s voice in a way that comes across as more “other” than “human.” When constructed with a sense of poetic consciousness, animism presents a view of nature that can enhance our ability to develop an intersubjective relationship with the environment, but when constructed poorly it tends to reinforce our anthropocentric tendencies rather than defeat them. Whitman wrote using both methods of poetic animism, resulting in a rather confusing natural philosophy that begs further examination.

Many scholars have pointed out that if Whitman did manage to develop some sort of natural philosophy, the clear expression of it would be found in “Specimen Days,” written later in Whitman’s life when he retreated to a small cabin near Glendale, NY, to recover his
health and presence of mind. This prose collection includes a section of nature notes ruminating on the powers of nature to heal and restore. Specifically, Whitman writes of his fascination with trees. He devotes several sections (“The Lesson of a Tree,” “The Oaks and I”, etc.) to a discussion of the positive aspects of trees, recognizing the inherent power trees possess to better the lives of those they come in contact with by their examples of strength and resiliency. He even goes so far as to record “conversations” he had with these trees. The first part of Chapter 2 will explore the implications of this exhaustive encounter with nature.

However, the second half of Chapter 2 will deal with the stark contrast of the tree-worship of “Specimen Days,” with “Song of the Redwood Tree,” a poem by Whitman which seems to challenge any attempt to find a positive environmental ethic in his writings. The poem expresses a proto-imperialist ideology in which the redwoods of California actually welcome the chance to be cut down by settlers looking to build a new America out west. He gives the trees a voice, but uses their own voice to praise their demise. He seems to be extremely conflicted about the role the environment plays in the life of an American, buying into current environmental thought that the resources are there to be used, but also sensing a deep loss and tragedy occurring simultaneously—the element of the trees’ voices, while overtly praising their destruction, inadvertently introduces an unsettling element into the poem. The majesty of the “two hundred foot high” trees’ voice commands recognition of animism, or in Latin, *anime*, which connotes a soul, or vitality, in these natural creations (*Leaves* 174). This recognition leaves the poem’s imperialism unstable. In spite of Whitman’s effort to synthesize it into a contained vision of America’s future, the trees intelligent voice creates doubt in the reader as to whether Whitman was fully convinced that removing (silencing) the redwoods would produce a better America.
It is a legitimate question then to wonder how Whitman could have produced such different views of nature’s voice and what the value and meaning of this contradiction are. David S. Reynolds’ biography discusses why Whitman seems to assume a completely different voice in his poetry than in his journalistic articles and later prose writings. Whitman deliberately created an identifiable persona, similar to that of an actor, through which he expresses his poetic imagery; this creation suggests the abandonment of doubts and contradictions that may misdirect the reader’s attention. This abandonment was, according to Reynolds, in the interest of forging a national consensus of identity in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction’s failure. Whitman, in other words, responded to crisis with more overt efforts to obliterate differences within his vision for American unity. Whitman’s emphasis on certainty and grandness above complexity in “Song of the Redwood Tree,” embodies these contradictions. Rather than reprimand Whitman for representing himself differently in various writings, however, I wish to show how this failed attempt at synthesis in his poetry and the stark contrast between “Song of the Redwood” and “Specimen Days” creates an important space for the eco-critic to enter. The tension Whitman creates through radically different constructions of tree-imagery challenges an anthropocentric view of the world by calling attention to the intelligence inherent in trees. Most humans think of trees and forests as a limitless resource—even today in an era of overwhelming deforestation—however, Whitman gives them life and a voice, albeit a determinedly confusing one. I will try to make sense of this confusion by arguing that Whitman is subconsciously showing a reverence for nature so important to the duty of a poet which manifests itself in the majestic voice of the trees, even though he grants ultimate importance in this particular poem to the human community.
My final chapter will explore how Whitman constructs the voice of nature in less confusing and more productive ways in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” where nature becomes not only a meditation on loss but also an impetus for Whitman to begin translating the “thousand warbling echoes” that “have started to life within [him]” (Portable 197). In “Out of the Cradle” Whitman subverts himself to the voice of nature consciously, time after time doubts whether or not he is translating the voice accurately, and reexamines his motivation for doing so throughout the poem. This sense of deliberateness is missing from “Song of the Redwood Tree,” wherein nature’s voice is only partially clear and more loudly proclaims itself as the voice of Walt Whitman and American imperialism. In “Out of the Cradle” Whitman concerns himself with his relationship to a single bird rather than an entire forest, which appears to positively affect his ability to both hear and translate nature’s voice. Whitman is paying attention more to the “particularities” of nature rather than the generalities within this particular poem, and by doing so allows himself to strengthen his relationship to and portrayal of his environment.

Within Whitman’s poetry and prose, nature is constructed in so many different ways that it is confused and tangled within Whitman’s own voice. Can any voice that is so multi-faceted and self-conflicted be an accurate representation of what nature would say to humanity? Poststructuralists might say it is impossible. But perhaps Whitman is actively engaging in this process of dialectic, allowing his ideas about how to construct the voice of nature to grate against each other, trusting that eventually they will become as smooth and transparent as a piece of glass from “On the Beach at Night.” Within Whitman’s writings, nature seems to destabilize the poet’s voice, thus nature’s voice is also destabilized and comes across differently throughout Whitman’s life. Therefore, for the purposes of this
paper, it will be more productive to examine the multi-faceted voice of nature looking for contrast rather than evolution in Whitman’s work; I will be examining his poetry and prose in an atypical, non-chronological order.

Whitman himself understood the difficulty of poetically giving voice to an entity that is “other.” Horace Traubel writes of a conversation he had with Whitman regarding his Calamus poetry, where Whitman conceives of the body as nature:

W. handed me a leaf from The Christian Union containing an article by Munger on Personal Purity, in which this is said: "Do not suffer yourself to be caught by the Walt Whitman fallacy that all nature and all processes of nature are sacred and may therefore be talked about. Walt Whitman is not a true poet in this respect, or he would have scanned nature more accurately. Nature is silent and shy where he is loud and bold." "Now," W. quietly remarked, "Munger is all right, but he is also all wrong. If Munger had written Leaves of Grass that's what nature would have written through Munger. But nature was writing through Walt Whitman. And that is where nature got herself into trouble." (Traubel 1-2, my emphasis)

This excerpt lends insight into Whitman’s natural philosophy. He recognized that the voice of nature will manifest itself differently when speaking through different people—and perhaps even differently at various times in their lives. On some level, animism is what we call anthropocentrism or personification; sometimes the poet uses that animistic imagination as a self projection. You cannot shut the self down completely, but that does not make Whitman’s voice of nature any less compelling or profound; instead, it is more exciting to understand that nature can speak to each of us differently. Whitman multiplied himself by allowing nature to speak through him in so many different and conflicting ways; so much so that in his representation of nature there is an otherness represented that suggests the unidentifiable otherness of Nature. Whitman’s style of interacting with nature, his willingness to morph and shift and entertain seemingly conflicting notions—an “intelligent intercourse with Nature”—is an attitude that may help us to reconnect us with the earth in a
way that may reverse the damage already done. I will have to disagree with Munger on the point that “Whitman is not a true poet in this respect, or he would have scanned nature more accurately.” Hopefully this point will be borne out in the following pages.
Chapter 1: Poetic Animism

How Do We Think About Nature?

In the context of the global environmental crisis, many scholars are beginning to realize that in order to reshape the actions of the people of the earth the values and ethics of each local community will have to be closely examined and possibly reshaped. Most scientists, scholars, and citizens of the earth now admit that we have damaged our earth—whether it be the ozone layer, dwindling natural resources, huge amounts of toxic chemicals seeping into water and the soil, or other sources of concern. Almost no one is willing to deny this, though who or what to blame for the situation is constantly under debate. The fact remains that we, together with generations of human history, have perhaps irreversibly damaged our earth. Roger Gottlieb refers to the calamity by stating,

First, there is its sheer magnitude: the staggering amount of toxic chemicals in the U.S. alone; the fact that pesticides are used in ‘every part of the world.’ Second, the range of areas represented [. . . ] reminds us that the environmental crisis is a global event. Third, however, no matter how immense this crisis, its impact is immediate, personal, direct (6).

So the question is, if the impact is immediate and personal, but incredibly widespread, then what do we do about it? More people are aware of the crisis than ever before in the history of the world. Some people are willing to do something if they can be shown hard, scientific evidence that a change in their behavior will produce positive results for their environment. For example, hybrid vehicles are becoming ever more popular even though it takes approximately ten years for a consumer to make up the difference in price of the car through accumulated savings on gas purchases. Others are completely oblivious to the findings of science and are determined to ignore the facts and hope for a better future, millennial or otherwise. And then there is that smaller group that understands that the crisis
will not be solved by a change in behavior alone; it will have to be a change in attitude and relationship with the earth.

However, changing one’s personal philosophy can be much more difficult. Changing an ethic or value is not as easily checked off the list as changing one’s vehicle or choosing to recycle. And yet I am more fully convinced each day that the only way to reverse and improve the environmental destruction at hand is by changing our fundamental relationship to nature. Lynn White writes, “What shall we do? No one yet knows. Unless we think about fundamentals, our specific measures may produce new backlashes more serious than those they are designed to remedy” (5). I believe that the only way to protect our environment is to cultivate an intimate, daily relationship with our particular location, which includes everything around us, not only “nature” as representing wild flora and fauna but where our homes are located—where we raise our families. This is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Indeed, it is entirely possible for the average American to get up, travel to his garage without stepping foot outside the house, get in the car, drive to work on packed freeways, park in a large underground parking lot, work in a high-rise building all day, and return home in the same way—eating food that came from a nearby grocery store, and only rarely glancing out a window that displays similar skyscrapers/apartments and perhaps the occasional glimpse of sky. We are separated by our technology from the land that supports us. I agree with Christopher Belshaw that,

Although modern life presents undeniable dangers to the environment, these derive more from the sophistication of the technologies available than from any increase in short-sightedness, irreverence or plain greed on the part of human beings (26).

It is no wonder that we tend to view nature in the same way we view our constant surroundings—as stagnant scenery—since most of the technology that is around us cannot be
construed in any sense of the word as alive. We recognize politically or morally that we need to respect nature, but we have no real receptivity to it as an entity which lives and breathes separate from our own existence.

David Abram discusses this point at length in Spell of the Sensuous, in which he argues that our culture has lost its sense of being human in relation to that which is not human. He states, “The simple premise of this book is that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human” (ix). In order to reconstruct our sense of humanity we must reconstruct our ability to interact with that which is not human, which Abram terms receptivity or intersubjectivity with those other beings/entities. This intersubjective relationship by definition assumes that there are other beings in the world that are not human but are alive and able to participate in this experience interchange. On the phenomenological level, Abram states,

By asserting that perception [. . .] is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives (57).

How can we use this information to reconstruct our world-view, or our relationship to nature as defined by our value system, so that we do not end up in a situation which David Abram defines as humans being “so deaf to those other voices that nonhuman nature now seems to stand mute and dumb, devoid of any meaning besides that which we choose to give it” (91). How do we cultivate a relationship to nature that is participatory and self-aware? In order to offer a possible solution, it will be necessary to examine some current ways of thinking about our relationship to nature. None of these are fully “bad” or “good” ways of thinking about nature, but are necessary to examine in order to come to a place where one can begin to form a more cultivated awareness of subjectivity. After a brief discussion of a
few predominating ideas, I will then offer an explanation as to how Walt Whitman’s poetry can contribute to this construction of a new way of relating to the environment.

The predominant Western way of thinking about nature is to view it simply as dead matter. This particular relationship has been undeniably informed by our increasing dependence on technology and on hard science to solve our problems. Lynn White states, “It was not until about four generations ago that Western Europe and North America arranged a marriage between science and technology, a union of the theoretical and the empirical approaches to our natural environment” (4). Science taught that, given time, man could understand the laws of the natural universe to such an extent that we could manipulate and change it. This proved true with the advent of industrial pesticides, technology to clear-cut entire forests, extinguish species, and invent a bomb that actually does possess the power to destroy human life. Laboratory experiments tend to reaffirm that nature is simply there to be observed in order to teach us how to develop our own knowledge further. No doubt we have arrived at the point where it is possible for us to realistically expect to change our environment drastically.

However, I do not wish to categorically dismiss science or empiricism; it is worth noting that the development of Western technology is also the main stimulus which helped to develop a cultural environmental awareness. There would be no way for us to measure global warming without the valuable knowledge of atmospheric scientists, and it would be impossible to rebuild an ecosystem without the biologists who have studied the variables and know what is out of place and needs to be restored in order to return to a delicate natural balance. On the other hand, the scientific community sometimes inadvertently raises environmental awareness, such as the nuclear weapons testing on Bikini Atoll which
Belshaw states, “did much to raise awareness of how precarious was our continued existence on this planet; and the levels of secrecy and distrust surrounding such weapons, along with the increasingly blurred skepticism in governments’ and science’s insistence that all was well” (32-3). Indeed, science does try to impel a certain view of nature into the human mind, but it also does much to dispel it.

Another predominant way to view the natural world is by treating it as simply a background to the human story. Often, many scholars ascribe the origin of this faulty philosophy to the command issued in the Old Testament to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (2). One way of looking at this statement is to conclude that everything on earth is put there solely for the benefit and use of man, which leaves him free to do to the earth whatever he chooses without any concern for the result. Ultimately, of course, the main argument with Christianity is that it preaches a millennial philosophy, in which the earth will be “utterly destroyed” at the coming of Christ, thus eliminating any real concern for the wellbeing of the planet since it will eventually be consumed in fire anyway. Lynn White’s article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” follows this narrative almost exactly, condemning Christianity for its apparent hostile takeover of all nature.

However, it is imperative to note that not all Christian religions view God’s divine imperative in this way. Interestingly, even White’s article ends with proposing St. Francis, a Christian saint, as the patron saint of ecologists. Belshaw challenges White’s conclusions by noting that

John Passmore, in particular, in one of the earliest full-length treatments of our relationship to the environment, in which we have dominion over nature,
has no better warrant than an alternative stewardship account. Certainly we are to look after and care for the natural world, but this is not at all to suggest that we can do with it as we will (29).

This also suggests that the natural world has a life in itself, apart from the human story, and although the two are deeply intertwined, they are not necessarily inextricably connected. Indeed, some Christian religions, most notably the Latter-Day Saint faith, recognize a spirit inhabiting all of the creations in the natural world. In one of the church’s standard works, the Pearl of Great Price, it states, “For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth” (Moses 3:5). This implies a deeper intelligence present in each natural life form. This philosophy, in fact, would negate the idea that the natural world is simply a background, and recognizes a vitality in nature that resists human attempts to narrate.

But no matter what faith or philosophy Americans adhere to, most of them view the natural world as a non-speaking entity. Several theories have been discussed as to why this is so; one of the most often cited is the advent of literacy, which replaced the image with the word on paper. Abram has written a book length discussion of this topic, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, in which he writes that words focus our attention away from the natural world and onto the paper. Originally, words were an oral phenomenon, and a specific word was linked to a specific event, object, or life on earth. But when we began to write things down, our direct, immediate link to the world of our environment was broken by the mediator of the written character:

There is a concerted shift of attention away from any outward or worldly reference of the pictorial image, away from the sensible phenomenon that had previously called forth the spoken utterance, to the shape of the utterance itself, now invoked directly by the written character (100).
Abram believes that it is our adverseness to orality that distances us so profoundly from the natural world. However, it is my hope that within this paper the reverse will prove to be true—a skilled poet can bring to life the natural world in a way that is just as compelling as having that connection oneself, a skill that Kenneth Lincoln calls “the primacy of language” (20).

**Animism**

This topic brings me to what will become the most important way of looking at nature as applied to Walt Whitman’s poetry, and that is the philosophy of animism. It has generally been acknowledged by the community of scholars working with an environmental lens that the definition of animism has shifted and changed since the word originally entered the Western academic scene. When scholars first began discussing animism and animistic beliefs the word was used largely as a description of pagan or primitive religious thought, or as Graham Harvey stated in his recent book, the word ‘animism’ “has been a label for an alleged mistake in which people confuse inanimate matter for living beings in some way” (205). Looked at from this perspective, animism appears to be some sort of flawed or ignorant belief, easily associated with extreme environmentalists or hippie tree-huggers who may have good intentions but are not well informed about the nature of the global crisis or the recent developments of science. Believing that nature has a soul and voice has become an outdated, misunderstood philosophy; most of the full import of what animistic qualities mean and imply has been lost.

Harvey attempts in *Animism: Respecting the Living World* to redefine the concept of animism as a way of life, a world-view that helps us relate to the earth we live in. Harvey is
accurate in stating that animism can be more precisely defined by a specific way of looking at and interacting with nature, and also rightly notes that “not only are there animist cultures, but there are also cultures within which it is possible to act occasionally as an animist” (xv). As a result of this definition, I will assume that animistic beliefs as manifested in a person’s life and writing do not necessarily mean that the person is actively practicing a religion which includes animistic principles. This will become particularly important in our discussion of Whitman, who absorbed an amalgam of beliefs from the 19th century and tried to fuse them into a specific way of living with the world, although he may not have come into direct contact with any indigenous peoples actively practicing animist traditions.

However, Harvey’s articulation of this “new animism” uses extremely technical terms and pulls the reader through an extensive history spanning several disciplines and genres, resulting in confusion; the idea of animism is largely lost in technical and scholarly jargon. It comes to represent a very complicated and multi-dimensional proposal that seems willing to include all traditions of respecting the earth while excluding none, basically redefining animism as a way of living respectfully toward other persons (which include non-human persons). I believe that animism has a definition which can be expanded to fit our specific needs in this century in some ways, but perhaps not as widely as Harvey implies. In order to truly get at the root of what animism means, the word must be traced back to its origins. Christopher Manes identifies the deep-rooted origins of animism in native cultures— together with the deep-seated Western tendency to confuse those origins—using Mircea Eliade’s definition of the word as a frame for his argument.

‘All over the world learning the language of animals, especially birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature…’ We tend to relegate such ideas to the realm of superstition and irrationality, where they can easily be
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Manes demonstrates that the belief in the soul of nature is not a new ethic the modern environmentalist invented to try and get the world to listen.

Animism can be traced to the Latin root of the word, *anime*, which connotes a “soul” or “vitality.” So, when one is talking about the animistic qualities of a tree, a rock, or an animal, one is speaking of the ensoulment of natural objects. There are various opinions about whether animistic belief necessarily includes the idea that these objects can either talk or be heard. In transcendental beliefs specifically, which were heavily influenced by Eastern Buddhist, Taoist, and Shinto traditions, and most definitely influenced Whitman through Emerson and Thoreau, the overarching principle dictates that all life is connected through an Oversoul, or a spirit inhabiting all beings. This belief can be found in a wide variety of religious cultures, such as those Eastern religions mentioned above, and many of the Native American peoples. It has not found an outlet in most of Western society, however, due in part to the objective, detached view of natural science that began early in the Enlightenment.

Modern scholarship has begun reexamining the implications of this belief. Christopher Manes states, “Significantly, animistic societies have almost without exception avoided the kind of environmental destruction that makes environmental ethics an explicit social theme with us” (18). While not always true, often the belief in the vitality of nature introduces ambiguities into an otherwise comfortable relationship of unquestioned human domination. Animism forces one into personal contact with nature, the kind of personal contact that may begin to cultivate a sense of awareness and connection that I stated at the beginning of this chapter is so crucial to cultivating a daily awareness of the natural world. It introduces an intersubjective relationship—one of “tension, communication, and
commingling” that opens the possibility for a harmony between humans and nature (Abram 56).

**Animism, the Philosophy of Perception, and Whitman**

Our awareness of life outside of our own consciousness, be it other people or the natural world, falls under the domain of perception. In Abram’s book he argues that in order for there to be an act of perception, there must also be participation and receptivity. In other words, it is impossible to perceive another life unless there is an exchange occurring between those lives. Abram states, “It is this open activity, this dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity by which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself), that we speak of by the term ‘perception’” (50). Perception occurs naturally, but unless one is paying close attention one may not be able to fully appreciate the large volume of interchange going on around the body—the central figure in the perceptive act.

Whitman has famously argued for this kind of participation in his poetry. For example, he tells his reader that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” and that his body was formed from the elements surrounding him. As Whitman so articulately phrases it, “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air” (*Portable 3*). He does not isolate himself from his surroundings, but incorporates them into his poetry using an extremely keen perception and a creative instinct that some would call genius. In a particular section of *Specimen Days* titled “The Oaks and I” that I will address in the next chapter, Whitman engages in this kind of perception with a “young hickory sapling” (*Complete* 104-5). He attempts to physically interact with the sapling, pulling and twisting it,
and also endeavors to mentally absorb the virtue of the tree; he tries to understand what the
tree might be communicating with him, positing that the tree may be more aware of the
interaction than he ever thought possible. This experience of Whitman’s life illustrates
beautifully Abram’s thought that, “To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time,
to experience one’s own tactility, to feel oneself touched by the tree” (Abram 68).

At this point the reader may begin to think the argument a bit far-fetched, that a tree
could actually communicate with a human, even if they are an artist and given to poetic
description. Carl Jung’s examinations into the human subconscious may offer an explanation
why this belief may seem so crazy, and even chaotic. He comments that man “protects
himself with the shield of science and the armour of reason. [. . .] He tries to maintain this
faith against the fear of chaos that besets him by night. What if there were some living force
whose sphere of action lies beyond our world of every day?” (514). This statement seems to
imply that there may be a multitude of things going on around us that are outside of our
awareness which we refuse to acknowledge simply because it would confuse and upset our
worldview.

However, when one begins to understand the principle behind this sort of interaction
the need for a shift in consciousness starts to make more sense. The underlying importance
of this type of dialogue is to retune our bodies to the natural world around us, to begin to
imagine nature’s capacity to perceive us. Most of us are inside all day, working at a
computer—some lucky enough to have a window, some not so lucky—and we gradually
forget to notice the subtle changes that mark nature’s communication with us. That “tree” is
living a life of its own, entirely separate from our existence, and that is what we fail to notice
and appreciate. Abram writes that we must come to understand that a tree (or any other
natural life) is a “perceivable presence,” that we must reteach ourselves how to comprehend and react to. He writes,

I sense that that tree is much more than what I directly see of it, since it is also what the others whom I see perceive of it; I sense that as a perceivable presence it already existed before I came to look at it, since it remains an experience for others—not just for other persons, but [. . .] for other sentient organisms, for the birds that nest in its branches and for the insects that move along its bark, and even, finally, for the sensitive cells and tissues of the oak itself, quietly drinking sunlight through its leaves. (39)

This ability to perceive and articulate a presence outside of our own is one of the defining characteristics of animistic interaction. Whitman demonstrates this ability time and again throughout his poetry.

Animism in Literature—A Tradition

I choose to term Whitman’s construction of nature’s voice as animism rather than anthropomorphism or personification for specific reasons. There are essential distinctions to be made between these different types of voices that render animism a more accurate term for what is going on in Whitman’s poetry than the other alternatives. For example, anthropomorphism is defined as, “The ascription of human characteristics to nonhuman objects” (Harmon/Holman 29). Now, while Whitman does occasionally cross the line and render nature’s voice as uncannily human in purpose and tone, I believe that in most of his poetry he is trying to imagine nature’s voice as different or other than human. But perhaps the reader will determine that this type of literary device simply falls under the category of personification; personification and animism are related, but with some important differences. The Harmon/Holman Handbook to Literature states that Personification is,

A figure that endows animals, ideas, abstractions, and inanimate objects with human form; the representing of imaginary creatures or things as having human
personalities, intelligence, and emotions; also an impersonation in drama of one character or person, whether real or fictitious, by another person. (385)

The first important difference arising from this definition is that personification endows nature with a human voice, whereas animism seeks to translate the voice of an Other. In essence it is a difference of intention, not result necessarily, since at times a poet may produce the clear voice of nature using personification and represent human interest while trying to use animism. I will discuss this concept more thoroughly when I address “Song of the Redwood Tree” which contains several of those messy complexities.

Most poets do not literally “hear” nature’s voice, but only articulate what they can understand from close communion with nature and a good measure of the creativity that Abram felt was so crucial to the endeavor. We can hear nature in some sense by being closely enough attuned to the life forms in our environment. Abram writes,

> Trees, for instance, can seem to speak to us when they are jostled by the wind. Different forms of foliage lend each tree a distinctive voice, and a person who has lived among them will easily distinguish the dialects of pine trees from the speech of spruce needles or Douglas fir. (129-30)

This ability to interpret can only be gained through daily interaction and observation, but we must also use our creativity to allow the entities of nature to participate in our senses. Many aboriginal cultures see their environment as alive both because they live so closely with it, paying attention to nature’s voice in the sense already explained, and by permitting themselves to be aware of life even though it might not be “speaking” in any sense of the word. Abram clarifies the distinction between imagination/fantasy and true interpretation:

> The animistic proclivity to perceive the angular shape of a boulder (while shadows shift across its surface) as a kind of meaningful gesture, or to enter into felt conversation with clouds and owls—all of this could be brushed aside as imaginary distortion or hallucinatory fantasy if such active participation were not the very structure of perception, if the creative interplay of the senses in the things they encounter was not our sole way of
linking ourselves to those things and letting the things weave themselves into our experience.

A poet that is truly endeavoring to translate nature’s voice must use both tactics to create a voice that may be understood as more natural than human, which precludes simply “endowing” nature with a human voice. In the end, there is a recognition of difference implied in animistic imagery, which is the main reason why it can have any bearing at all on our environmental ethics.

Some readers may be skeptical as to whether or not poetry could have any bearing on the environmental political scene. Angus Fletcher addresses this question in A New Theory For American Poetry.

Unlike most prose discourse, poetry expresses close personal involvements, and hence pertains to the way we humans respond, on our own, to environmental matters. […] An art like poetry that enhances the presence of the individual is bound to be central in showing how we should understand our environmental rights and obligations. The issue then is this, what is my own response to my surrounding? If, as I believe, such questions are now more than ever essential to furthering a general cultural benefit, there is every reason to examine our most intense personal expressions alongside the norms of scientific discourse, whether in prose or mathematical form. (3-4)

Fletcher makes a distinction between poetry and prose that I do not believe is relevant here. Prose such as Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek or Henry David Thoreau’s Walden is just as effective as poetry in representing an individual’s singular response to his or her environment. However, he does correctly pinpoint that poetry is one response of one individual to his or her environment—not the conglomeration of studies or the grouping of several experiences in order to form a conclusion, and thus can provide a more individual exploration to the reader. Poetry does not seek to present facts or evidence, but only presents an imaginative scenario of one person’s interaction with the surrounding environment.
This capacity to imagine a relationship is largely vanishing from our society. Fletcher states that, “We seem as societies to lack what poetry teaches, namely, the capacity to imagine what may or might happen” (14). This capacity is crucial when we are trying to reconstruct our relationship to the earth. We must be able to imagine what would happen if, for instance, we lost the entire redwood forests of California, or, on the other hand, what would happen if we planted several more trees outside of our home. How would that affect us? How would that affect nature? If we could imagine the opinion of nature and use that to inform our actions, would that help at all? I believe that it would, because any viewpoint that helps us to get outside of our own interests and needs and encourages us to recognize that we live on an earth that supports several life forms, not just our own, is useful.

Problems Arising From Animistic Discourse

Animism does not always prove the ideal vehicle for our relationship to nature, for while it allows a reader to project the voice of nature, that voice ultimately stems from the author’s own interpretation. As Christopher Manes stated, “As the self-proclaimed soliloquist of the world, ‘Man’ is obliged to use his language as the point of intersection between the human subject and what is to be known about nature, and therefore the messy involvement of observer with the observed becomes an obsessive theme of modern philosophy” (22). By allowing the possibility that nature is inspired, that “not just people, but also animals, plants, and even ‘inert’ entities such as stones and rivers are perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill” (Manes 15) we determine that those voices may be a part of the global discourse—but unfortunately, most people, no matter how hard they try, cannot hear
anything that could be construed as human speech coming from those beings. Thus, the
“poet-priest” is forced, like Whitman, to translate the “speech” of nature into the human
tongue so that the rest of humanity can hear. Anyone who is familiar with translations knows
that something is inevitably lost in translation, but, in some cases, new meaning is also
inscribed. In any case, the translator has definitive control over the message communicated.

Manes is correct when he states, “To regard nature as alive and articulate has
consequences in the realm of social practices” (15). But those consequences may not always
be what he imagined—for instance, “Song of the Redwood Tree.” Any environmentalist is
disturbed by reading a tale of creatures so blindly accepting of their own extinction as the
redwoods are in Whitman’s California. And the hard truth may be that even if we do
accurately translate what nature has to say, she may demand more of us than we are willing
to give. The redwoods in Whitman’s poem willingly gave their life so that man’s social and
cultural development could move forward; it is doubtful that man would do the same were
the situation reversed. As William Cronon states, “As we gaze into the mirror it [nature]
holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the
reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires” (69).

Nevertheless, there is something about even wrongfully imagining the voice of nature
that calls attention to her unique intelligence. I will argue this point extensively in Chapter
Two as I discuss “Song of the Redwood Tree,” because it seems that Whitman is
subconsciously questioning the ethic of clear-cutting even while he is praising the foresters’
actions. He imbues the trees with such a powerful, majestic voice that it is more disturbing
to be witness to their destruction than the poem, at first glance, intends. However, it is
obviously preferable for a poet to consciously translate nature’s voice in a way that helps us
to understand that nature, too, has presence, dreams, and pain. Whitman seems to be able to accomplish this in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” which will occupy the discussion in Chapter Three. But now let us turn our attention to Whitman himself and his multi-faceted construction of nature’s voice.
Lessons Learned from Whitman’s Trees

One of Whitman’s most valued (and vaunted) possessions was his body. He famously welcomed “every organ and attribute,” (Portable 6) and became very upset when it seemed to be wearing out. After a paralyzing stroke that forced him to recognize his declining health, the formerly robust poet turned to nature for solace. Whitman felt an almost spiritual awe in respect to the human body, as evidenced by much of his poetry, and believed that nature contained a balance to which the human body should aspire. In 1876 he began retreating to a small farm in Glendale, New York (alternately referred to by Whitman as Timber Creek) owned by the Stafford family (Reynolds 522-25). Whitman visited the farm for weeks at a time, and from this experience grew his nature notes which he later published as a part of Specimen Days. This section of Whitman’s prose is often ignored by scholars, and identified by one critic as “an old man’s last idyll,” (qtd. in Philippon 179). Daniel Philippon disputes this neglect, stating, “Kazin and other critics underestimate the value of the nature notes in Specimen Days in part because they view the text as a passive object to be evaluated, rather than as an active attempt by Whitman to encourage engagement with the non-human world” (Philippon 179). Whitman encouraged this engagement because he fully believed that his interactions with nature—and for this paper specifically, with trees—would restore his physical and mental health.

He stated, “In the revealings of such light, such exceptional hour, such mood, one does not wonder at the old story fables, (indeed, why fables?) of people falling into love sickness with trees, seiz’d ecstatic with the mystic realism of the resistless silent strength in them—strength, which after all is perhaps the last, completest, highest beauty” (Complete
Whitman honestly believed that the time he spent in nature was restorative and health-promoting; he believed that he absorbed the strength of the trees; this absorption calls to mind Abram’s discussion of intersubjectivity. By extension of this principle Whitman believed that this intersubjective relationship could benefit the physical and mental health of American people. This section will focus on two apparently contradictory qualities trees possess that impressed Whitman during his time spent at Timber Creek: 1) Whitman felt that trees existed without any need for speech or pretense, and 2) Whitman simultaneously felt that he possessed the ability to converse with trees on some sort of spiritual plane. Whitman recommends that both of these qualities be integrated into the American lifestyle.

Of the first of these qualities Whitman wrote, “One lesson from affiliating with a tree—perhaps the greatest moral lesson anyhow from earth, rocks, animals, is that same lesson of inherency, of what is, without the least regard to what the looker on (the critic) supposes or says, or whether he likes or dislikes” (Complete 90). He believed that by simply being, the trees inherently rejected any pretense. Whitman expressed in several different ways that he believed this to be an important quality as applied to himself and others. For example, Whitman writes in “Song of Myself” that “Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am” (Portable 7). Whitman recognized that a tree in nature represented something outside of time and historical processes. A tree may eventually be affected by human decisions, but it is not dependant on any human process for its life and meaning. Whitman emphasized again in Democratic Vistas that “the quality of BEING, in the object’s self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto [. . .] is the lesson of Nature” (Portable 428).
For Whitman, a tree embodied this special ability to project its unaffected being into the world, an attribute much to be desired by a poet who felt that most of America was consumed with seeming to be something that they were not. Whitman wrote,

What worse—what more general malady pervades each and all of us, our literature, education, attitude toward each other, (even toward ourselves,) than a morbid trouble about seems, (generally temporarily seems too,) and no trouble at all, or hardly any, about the sane, slow-growing, perennial, real parts of character, books, friendship, marriage—humanity’s invisible foundations and hold-together? (Complete 89-90)

Whitman felt that Americans were abandoning their quest for deeper, more permanent meaning in life, and instead focusing on the shallow, material aspects of personality that with time quickly became unimportant. The tree finds no need to deal with these foolish projections, since a tree displays its self openly. Whitman philosophizes that a tree, “is, yet says nothing” (Complete 89). When one contrasts this idea of silent inherency with humans, who are constantly exposed by their speech as beings struggling to know themselves, it is clear why Whitman so admired the trees’ quality of silent, purposeful living.

He loved this imperturbable quality, comparing the tree with a man who runs at the slightest natural challenge: “How it rebukes by its tough and equable serenity all weathers, this gusty-temper’d little whiffet, man, that runs indoors at a mite of rain or snow” (Complete 89). Indeed, Whitman seems to be encouraging man to be more dedicated, like the trees, to the task of living and the quest for self-knowledge. Whitman elevates the trees to the status of a moral teacher; he gives them a soul and imbues them with perfection until trees become divine educators. The most important thing to note within the context of this discussion is Whitman’s blatant recognition of the trees’ soul.

The second quality, which will become very important throughout the discussion of “Song of a Redwood Tree,” comes when Whitman endeavors to teach his readers how to
recognize a trees vitality. As mentioned above, Whitman recognizes that trees possess animate characteristics which allow us to learn from them. He does not define their sentience in any precise way, but instead refers to several things which indicate that the tree is alive, conscious and speaking. He refutes the idea that mythical, sylvan tales are false, disparaging the viewpoint of science: “Science (or rather half-way science) scoffs at reminiscence of dryad and hamadryad, and of trees speaking. But if they don’t, they do as well as most speaking, writing, poetry, sermons—or rather they do a great deal better” (Complete 89-90).

Whitman asserts his belief that trees are able to communicate certain ideas and messages to human beings that literature cannot. This is not the first instance in Whitman’s writing where the natural world begins to take on animistic qualities, but it may be the clearest manifestation other than in his poetry, which I will discuss later.

He further explores this belief in the life of trees later in his writings; as an aside to his reader he records, “(I had sort of a dream-trance the other day, in which I saw my favorite trees step out and promenade up, down and around, very curiously—with a whisper from one, leaning down as he pass’d me, We do all this on the present occasion, exceptionally, just for you)” (Complete 104). Whitman may have been speaking metaphorically about the communication between himself and the trees earlier; however, in this dream sequence the trees actually become animated and share with him the motivations behind their speech. It is a very personal event happening here; Whitman seems to believe, at least subconsciously, that trees are capable of holding a conversation with him. This belief seems to contradict his earlier claim that trees say nothing. Whitman appears to be struggling with how to approach his relationship with an Other that resists specific description, a struggle that will persist throughout his life.
This mythical belief in a mysterious natural world stems partially from Whitman’s early religious and philosophical exploration. He favored the Quaker movement; it carried “more appeal [for] Whitman than deism because it made allowance for ecstasy and intuition, which the rationalistic deism did not” (Reynolds 38). Elias Hicks, the head of the movement, places an emphasis on the natural world that remained with Whitman, who always thought Hicks to be “one of the great religious speakers of the age” (Reynolds 38). Another major influence was Justus Liebig, the chemist famed for his belief in the regenerative and cyclical processes of nature.4

It is natural to wonder too whether his connection with Native Americans may have influenced the way he interacted with nature. Growing up on Long Island Whitman had the opportunity to interact with several different tribes; unfortunately the research has not been done as to which specific tribes or individuals may have influenced him the most. Reynolds does state that,

For Whitman, Native American culture had an intrinsic attraction because it embodied a closeness to the elements that much of his poetry tried to recover. The modern Native American poet Joseph Bruchac sees in Whitman “much which reminds me of the American Indian way of looking at the world, of being in the world and not just observing it.” (19)

It would be interesting in the future to try and ascertain exactly what religions the Indian tribes on Paumanok (that Whitman interacted with) practiced and what bearing that came to have on his natural philosophy. At any rate, all of these influences, scientific, cultural, and religious combined to convince Whitman that the natural world had something to teach that the human community did not.

4 For a complete discussion of Whitman’s natural and religious influences, see Walt Whitman’s America, Chapter 8.
In the above mentioned passage, Whitman later suggests that his reader “Go out and sit in a grove or woods” (Complete 90). Philippon proposes that “Whitman’s ultimate objective in writing Specimen Days, as he makes clear in this [see above] passage, is to render the text unnecessary, to have it serve as a vehicle to direct the reader’s attention away from the written word and onto the “book of nature” (Philippon 184). Whitman encourages his reader to develop a daily, personal interaction with nature. This sounds very like Joseph Bruchac’s observation that Whitman was attempting to be in the world, not simply observe it.

By following this instruction, the reader engages in a very direct, immediate way with a non-human consciousness—that kind of engagement that Abram encourages and was previously discussed. Whitman himself engaged in this kind of labor, represented in a passage in Specimen Days he titles, “The Oaks and I:"

I came down here [. . .] for the before-mention’d daily and simple exercise I am fond of—to pull on that young hickory sapling out there—to sway and yield to its tough-limber upright stem—haply to get into my old sinews some of its elastic fibre and clear sap….I hold on boughs or slender trees caressingly there in the sun and shade, wrestle with their innocent stalwartness—and know the virtue thereof passes from them into me. (Or may-be we interchange—may-be the trees are more aware of it all than I ever thought.) (Complete 104-5)

Philippon’s observation appears to be accurate that Whitman is writing this text to “encourage engagement with the non-human world” (Philippon 179). He is actively participating—with all the associations of exchange and commingling that have been discussed in the previous chapter—in nature. The interesting and encouraging thing about this particular passage is that Whitman not only acknowledges that he is aware of the trees and their life-force, but also recognizes that perhaps the tree is aware of him: “may-be the trees are more aware of it all than I ever thought.” He even specifically refers to the encounter as an interchange; this is exactly what Abram was talking about when he stated

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5 See Into and Chapter 1
that our relationship needs to be more intersubjective. Intersubjectivity results in a more heightened state of awareness of the life of another being.

Whitman’s encouragement is deliberate and methodical; he states at the beginning of his nature notes that “his apparent lack of editing should keep the reader focused on nature and not art, because the best art comes the closest to nature’s formlessness” (Philippon 186). When focused so closely on nature and its animate qualities, recognized and communicated by Whitman, the viewer cannot help but feel a kinship with this other being that simultaneously inhabits the earth. Keeping these two lessons—and Whitman’s intention—in mind, we will move to a discussion of “Song of the Redwood Tree.”

How Do We Read “Song of the Redwood Tree?”

Whitman wrote “Song of the Redwood Tree” in the fall of 1873 and it was published shortly thereafter in Harper’s Magazine, February 1874 (Reynolds 512). It is a poem which hails the American westward movement, and praises the ability of the settlers to tame the landscape. It was published in a collection of centenary poems, which is fitting since the California redwoods were displayed in the Pacific Northwest Exhibition in the centenary celebration of 1876. The redwoods are described in Ingram’s companion to the exhibition as:

The big trees of California, for which the country is famed, were here represented by a piece of bark about eighteen inches thick taken from one of these monster redwoods. Photographs of them were shown, which gave a very good idea of their gigantic proportions. Specimens of over four hundred varieties of woods were shown, many of them of great value in cabinet work. (362)

Right away the reader is aware that the trees are seen in a twofold light by 19th century America; they are admired for their sheer monstrosity and natural beauty, but immediately
related to the American economy by identifying them as useful for “cabinet work.”

Whitman’s poem is no different in its complex treatment of these famous trees.

As stated in the introduction, the poem is often condemned for its naïve, anthropocentric view of the forest as acquiescent to the needs of American imperial progress, which has recently become an extremely sensitive and explosive issue. Whitman’s attitude in this poem does raise certain questions about the supposed devotion to nature represented in *Specimen Days*—perhaps the prose writing is indicative of an older, wiser Whitman who has reconsidered his position and changed his mind. Tichi writes that many scholars understand “the poet’s motives for the abdication of the tree” as “the biography of an aging, ailing Whitman, his poetic power failing, his sense of his death heavy upon him” (248). I would disagree with both possibilities. Without condoning Whitman’s treatment of the redwoods, I will examine some evidence which points toward a more positive reading of the poem. Before coming to this, however, it is necessary to outline the problems that have so angered many critics.

“Song of the Redwood Tree” pays tribute to the American people fulfilling Manifest Destiny by settling California. In order to provide homes for so many settlers, the forests are being razed—but Whitman’s poem carries an odd addition. The very trees which are being used to build houses and railroads in order to fuel this westward expansion are allowed to express their opinion about their demise. The readers hear the “voice of a mighty dying tree in the redwood forest dense” (*Leaves* 512). The trees speak in italics, and the omnipotent poet speaks in regular print. The trees bid farewell to their lives on earth, declaring their abdication to a “superber race, they too to grandly fill their time, / For them we abdicate” (*Leaves* 174-5). Whitman praises modern America for clearing the path (by clearing the
trees) to a new ideal. This blind acceptance of the removal of so many redwood trees has
often been found deplorable by the few eco-critics who do address Whitman and are
concerned with the implications of the poem’s sacralization of environmental degradation.
The poem implies that humans are superior to all of nature and can do with it whatever they
will, regardless of consequences for the ecosystem.

Whitman celebrates “the New arriving, assuming, taking possession, / A swarming
and busy race settling and organizing everywhere,” and ends the poem with the idea that the
“new world” is “Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America, heir of the past
so grand, / To build a grander future” (Leaves 176-7). This ending apparently condones the
extinction of the trees in America’s praiseworthy plan to press forward with everlasting
glory. However, I believe that a simple reading does not unearth the contradicting messages
embedded within the poem. Killingsworth states that because of Whitman’s tendency to tie
“manifest destiny to a view of nature as a boundless resource base for human expansion, [. .
.] the poem can only offend the sensibilities of modern environmentalists” (Killingsworth
18). In the next few pages, I will attempt a defense of the poem that in no way excuses the
practices of modern American industry, but hopefully reinstates a tension within the poem of
whether or not Whitman really was as proud of his fellow Americans’ tactics as he purports
himself to be. My defense will be based on the fact that Whitman gives his trees a voice. He
allows nature to speak; and even though the poet articulates the words, there is an implicit
recognition of a long-developed intelligence in the dying trees, which makes the reader more
uncomfortable with their extinction than convinced of the glory of their demise.

“Song of the Redwood Tree” begins with Whitman’s exposition of the extinction of
the redwood forests in California. His obvious sympathy for these dying trees as he mourns
the loss of the “dryads, fading, departing, or hamadryads departing, / A murmuring, fateful, giant voice, out of the earth and sky” suggests that these trees possess a soul, or spirit (Leaves 173). This recognition of animism is rare in modern Western culture. Even now, “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Manes 15). Perhaps this statement does not apply to many comics and animated movies, but the fact remains that in modern “high culture” literature or art, nature is largely silent. And yet, Whitman incorporates the concept into a poem in 1873, depicting a moment when humans will recognize that the environment around them is sentient that apparently we still haven’t reached. Though his interpretation of the trees’ thought processes may be skewed, his representation of the trees’ presence is overpoweringly majestic. He refers to them as “forest kings,” and “majestic brothers,” so that their voices are clearly voices of strong and wise beings (Leaves 174-5).

Whitman paints a mythic, sylvan picture that draws the reader in amongst the living forest. When the trees die, the death of the “dryad” and hamadryad” is almost that of a god, comparable to Derek Walcott’s tree-imagery in Omeros when he describes the cutting of trees with the phrase, “The gods were down at last” (Walcott 6). In the same moment that the redwoods are being presented as worthy poetic subjects they are silenced by the “quick-ear’d teamsters and chain and jack-screw men” that “heard not” (Leaves 174). This abrupt shift in tone is startling and disturbing, calling attention to the fact that a live being has just been terminated. Whitman himself is the only one that can hear the trees mourning, as stated in these lines:

The choppers heard not, the camp shanties echoed not,
The quick ear’d teamsters and chain and jack-screw men heard not
As the wood-spirits came from their haunts of a thousand years to join the refrain, But in my soul I plainly heard. (*Leaves* 174)

These frontier characters are deaf to the trees moan of, “Farewell my brethren, / Farewell O earth and sky farewell ye neighboring waters, / My time has ended, my term has come” (*Leaves* 174). The Redwood trees are glorified, and their death is documented with every stroke of the ax. This contemplative representation of species extinction creates a tension in the poem between the idea of human Manifest Destiny and natural animism that is never completely resolved by the victory of the former.

But certainly there is a definite line between letting the trees speak for themselves and inserting humanity’s own goals as their voice. Whitman almost certainly crosses this line. This complicated process of attempting to let nature speak for itself is discussed by Christopher Manes in his article “Nature and Silence.” I have already referred to this quote in an earlier chapter, but in order to remind the reader of his statement, I will quote it again,

> As the self-proclaimed soliloquist of the world, ‘Man’ is obliged to use *his* language as the point of intersection between the human subject and what is to be known about nature, and therefore the messy involvement of observer with the observed becomes an obsessive theme of modern philosophy. (Manes 22)

Because Whitman chooses to articulate the voice of the trees through his poetry, while simultaneously endeavoring to celebrate the settlement of the west, the trees’ voice becomes ambivalent, alternately mourning their own death and celebrating the arrival of the settlers. This ambivalence is “messy,” as Manes discussed, and leans toward a human-centered narrative.

Whitman personifies the redwoods as self-sacrificing enough to believe that these new creatures (humans) are meant to inherit the land they (the redwoods) have been enriching throughout their lives. They assert, “For a superber race, they too to grandly fill
their time, / For them we abdicate, in them ourselves ye forest kings!” (Leaves 175). Gay Wilson Allen deplores this attitude, finding “the logic of this poem maddening. The tree not only accepts annihilation, but glories in being ‘absorb’d, assimilated’ by these superior creatures who will ‘really shape and mould the New World, adjusting it to Time and Space’” (qtd. in Killingsworth 19). Allen and Killingsworth accept the trees’ sacrifice as Whitman’s opinion that they should go quietly in support of modern America. On the other hand, it is interesting that the trees are so aware of the fact that they have a specific role to play within the niche they fill in the ecosystem. Even though the role they proclaim is self-destructive, they still show a maturity and almost deistic knowledge of the world that the humans “swarming” around them do not manifest. The humans seem to be attempting to fill all roles and develop all space, with no awareness for the other life-forms which they might be ousting by taking over the entire forest. This again points to the overpowering majesty and earth-knowledge that these sylvan beings possess.

Furthermore, it is hard to believe that a poet who could conceive so easily of the trees as a separate entity in Specimen Days would so readily accept their extinction. To repeat Manes’ viewpoint again, he states, “Significantly, animistic societies have almost without exception avoided the kind of environmental destruction that makes environmental ethics an explicit social theme with us” (18). Either he is dead wrong in his assumption, and Whitman’s belief in animism does not help him at all, or Whitman is unknowingly interjecting a questioning of the very values he appears to champion. This subconscious questioning that is introduced through the use of animistic imaging is exactly what makes animism such an important model for healthy environmental thought. Abram has discussed the recognition that we are not the only sentient beings in the universe. As a
phenomenologist, his experience has been that humans are “thoroughly dependent upon (and thoroughly influenced by) our forgotten relationship with the encompassing earth” (Abram xi). Perhaps Whitman was not fully aware of how nature had influenced him and the importance of that influence, but the results of it are found in his poetry.

This idea of unconscious insertion is not so far fetched as one might think. Scott Sanders proposed that “In the works of Melville, Cooper, Hawthorne, Crevecoeur, and Thoreau”—and, I would propose, Whitman—“[we find] a divided consciousness: on the surface they were concerned with the human world, with towns and ships and cultivated land, with households and the spiderwebs of families; but underneath they were haunted by nature” (184). I think that in Whitman’s case, this description is accurate. Whitman is always concerned with promoting the cause of Americans; however, sometimes he deplores the America he is promoting. David Reynolds points out,

In this 105-line poem only one line mentions industrial America. Whitman says that someday the West will have ‘Populous cities, the latest inventions, the steamers on the rivers, the railroads, with many a thrifty farm, with machinery.’ The rest of the poem determinedly avoids the industrial age, imagining ‘Lands bathed in sweeter, rarer, healthier air,’ lands fit for ‘The new society at last, proportionate to nature.’ The poet dwells not on technological miracles but on nature and nebulous spiritual abstractions. (512-13)

Whitman couldn’t stand the idea of America without nature, which he felt was a very vital aspect of the society. So why not focus on the death of the trees as a mournful, but necessary act, instead of praising industrial development? And, as another supporting point, Whitman titled the poem “The Song of the Redwood Tree” and not something like the “Song of Modern American Forestry.”

 Granted, Whitman did believe in the God-given presence of a new, brilliant America, but I think he was confused as to whether or not Americans had the right to devastate this
land they thought they owned. I would place Whitman among a great tradition of Americans who noticed, at least, that nature seemed to be something other than simply a background for human destiny; the evidence for this being that his trees had a voice. This voice represents his awe at the majesty of nature and his (perhaps unconscious) worry for Americans, should that majestic power be permanently lost. Nature always remained to Whitman “a place in which men and women can reconnect to vital laws absent from human affairs” (Major 85).

Because of its tone of imperious colonialism, Killingsworth declared “Song of the Redwood Tree,” to be the “most reprehensible poem written in the 19th century” (Killingsworth 22). On the contrary, Whitman felt the loss of the trees more poignantly then he felt the assurance of “the genius of the modern” producing a “grander future” (Leaves 177). Even though he did not denounce the foresters for clearing the land, he was one of the first Americans to consider the identity and personality of the trees that were dying in the process. Additionally, since I began research on this topic, Killingsworth has reevaluated the poem and labeled it a “proto-environmentalist critique” (Whitman 73). I agree, but I would argue that Killingsworth does not accurately describe the impetus in the poem that renders it so ambivalent. Even if not done deliberately, Whitman used the beauty and grandeur of the trees’ animism to represent clearly the loss America would incur should they disappear completely. This tension in the poem indicates that Whitman was wrestling with an aspect of nature that is extremely hard to define; the poem should be recognized for maintaining a dialectical opinion about nature in a time when it was usually thought of purely as a background for the human story.

Whitman was not unfamiliar with maintaining a conflicting opinion, since he represented himself differently in his poetry and prose quite frequently—the question is,
which voice is the true Whitman? The one he creates to produce such bold, unquestioning poetry or the voice we hear as more concerned and self-examining in his prose?

**Whitman in Prose and Poetry**

The question as to whether or not Whitman really was who he proclaimed himself to be in his poetry has a long history of debate. Most recently, Reynolds has shed light on the subject by documenting Whitman’s obsession with acting. Whitman loved the theater, and was stunned by the skill of professional actors such as Junius Brutus Booth and Edwin Forrest. Both of these actors often walked the streets continuing their roles on stage, or picked specific roles to play that had nothing to do with their professional career. There was an intersection of life and art occurring in the 19th century that Whitman could not have avoided being the avid theater attendee that he was. And indeed, he informs his reader several times that his goal was to absorb American culture. He states that his “‘Leaves’ could not possibly have emerged or been fashion’d or completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century” (Portable 383). His absorption of 19th century theater affected Whitman deeply, as Reynolds discusses:

> The “I” of *Leaves of Grass* has proven puzzling to critics. Some have seen it as autobiographical and have taken his poetry as a confession or sublimation of private anxieties and desires. Others see it as complete fiction, with little reference to the real Whitman, as indicated by the many differences between the poetic persona and the man. Such confusions can be partly resolved by recognizing the “real” Whitman, as part of a participatory culture, was to a large degree an actor, and that his poetry was his grandest stage, the locus of his most creative performances. When developing his poetic persona in his notebooks, he compared himself to an actor onstage, with “all things and all other beings as an audience at a play-house perpetually calling me out from behind the curtain.” (Reynolds 161)  

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6 For a discussion of Booth dressing as a Cardinal and visiting the local church see Reynolds 160.
When Whitman took on this poetic persona, it was necessary for him to leave “behind the curtain” certain aspects of his character that might detract from the desired image. He couldn’t incorporate all of his feelings into his poetry. As applied specifically to “Song of the Redwood Tree,” it would be uncharacteristic of Whitman to question America’s ethics. He rarely did that in his poetry, although he did it again and again in his prose.

Indeed, he questioned the very spirit of expansionism that “Song of the Redwood Tree” seems to praise. In Democratic Vistas, Whitman declares,

> 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. (Portable 404, emphasis mine)

Whitman expresses his opinion that the expansionist movement has been in vain. He seems concerned that America is simply reaching for more and more, and not stopping to consider the ramifications of such greed. In short, Whitman was not as naive as some of his poetry suggests. It is normal to question whether he would have been a greater poet had he tried to address some of the darker issues of American life, however, for his time, he was doing more than most. His driving motivation was to better America, even if he went about that in a way that seems shallow and insincere today. He writes again in Democratic Vistas, “I say we had best look at our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States” (Portable 66). He recognized the problems of America, but felt that if he emphasized the positive aspects of the nation that perhaps he could improve it by encouraging Americans to live up to what he was portraying as “American.” This attitude became a serious problem when he chose not to question the settlers’ use of resources.
because it contributed to Manifest Destiny. But as proposed in this section, Whitman did not necessarily agree with the brashness of “Song of the Redwood Tree,” and his disagreement appears in his use of animism to bring the fall of the redwoods to life in a crashing tragedy that defeats the idealism of the poem. However, in other poems Whitman allowed nature to speak clearly and did not try to subject nature’s voice to the interest of humanity. I would now like to examine “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” as a more positive example of Whitman’s use of animistic imaginings.
Chapter 3: “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”

“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” represents another construction of the voice of nature as translated by Whitman, however, most ecocritics believe that the animistic techniques Whitman employs in “Song of the Redwood Tree” are more successfully carried out in “Out of the Cradle.” Jimmie Killingsworth, when contrasting the poem directly with “Song of the Redwood Tree,” wrote, “the ventriloquist device proves satisfactory, I would argue, in poems like “Out of the Cradle [. . .]” (67). Why does Whitman’s representation of nature’s voice work so well in this particular poem when in “Song of the Redwood Tree” it becomes confusing and garbled, mixed in with Whitman’s desire for American progress? I believe the answer lies partially in Whitman’s ability to be aware of the shifting identity of speaker and subject, and seems to make a more concerted effort to distinguish between the two voices in “Out of the Cradle,” whereas in “Song of the Redwood Tree” he only speaks for the subject, never questioning it or subjecting it to examination. In addition, in “Out of the Cradle,” Whitman uses the natural world, rather than the ideas of humanity, as a structuring device for his poetry, and acknowledges nature as she, “hissing melodious,” sings the death of meaning. He places himself and nature completely within his surroundings (the beach at Paumanok) rather than trying to place a human ideal in the midst of nature. Killingsworth identifies “the profound sense of place that the poem communicates” as that quality which has not been studied often enough in the large body of literature the poem has already generated.

This literature includes readings that identify the poem as one which represents Whitman’s emergence as a poet, or as a suppressed representation of a failed love affair with a man (as seen in the courtship of the birds and the subsequent loss of one partner), or as a
Lacanian/Kristevan desire to reunite with the M/other. All of these readings have strong evidence to support their claims, and all of them may be as accurate as the one that I am prepared to give; however, I believe that an ecocritical reading, focusing on what makes Whitman’s construction of nature’s voice in this poem so successful, may shed light on all other readings as well, in addition to helping us understand why our relationship with nature is often complicated and resists specific definition. There are several things that will help to clarify my argument that I will discuss within this chapter, including Whitman’s intersubjective relationship with the bird, his complete surrender to the natural world, and the role of the sea within this poem. The border of the seashore has, like the poem itself, been interpreted in several different ways—such as the fusion of language with thought, or the sexual embrace—but I believe that in some ways it may represent a fusion of humanity and nature. In that way, the sea chanting “death, death, death” may emphasize the idea that nature, in addition to humans, has the ability to die and its cry has the power to call attention to the need for the regeneration and care of the ecosystem. I will then make conclusions which suggest that Whitman’s specific relationship with the bird and his ability to allow his consciousness to shift entirely to place within “Out of the Cradle” makes this poem more successful than “Song of the Redwood Tree.”

“Out of the Cradle” is one of the darker entries in *Leaves of Grass*. In contrast with many other Whitman poems published in 1860, it does not end with any positive affirmation but rather with the sea chanting “death” as Whitman ponders his role as a poet. However, the poem is also beautifully poignant in its representation of a love affair between two birds, and the subsequent loss of a partner. This poem, like “Song of the Redwood Tree,” again emphasizes loss, but this time it is the loss of a single bird that is the subject—a single
creature as opposed to an entire forest. This specificity of individuality and of relationship changes the dynamics of the entire poem. Instead of trying to represent an entire forest’s destruction as one united voice proclaiming its destiny, Whitman is endeavoring to relate to a single bird’s tragedy—as I argued in my introduction, he is paying attention to the “particularities” rather than the generalities of nature, which affects his ability to translate the voice of nature in a positive way.

It is touching to see how deeply Whitman responds to the bird’s song. He states, “The aria’s meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing / The strange tears down the cheeks coursing” (Portable 196). Whitman is actively participating with the bird by responding and transcribing what he “hears.” Even as a young boy, when he wasn’t even sure why he was responding so passionately to the loss of a bird, he had a connection to that bird that would infuse his poetry with the same deep emotions of love, loss, absorption, and death that he was digesting by allowing himself to be enshrouded by nature. He is actively perceiving, to use David Abram’s terms, that he is living in a world that is not purely human and chooses to absorb and digest all of the voices around him, not just the human voices. But the crucial distinction to be made when comparing this poem with “Song of the Redwood Tree” is that Whitman is absorbing one specific voice from nature, that of a bird mourning the loss of its partner. He is sifting out of the “chattering, whispering, soundful” natural world one voice that is expressing an individual pain, (Abram 80) whereas in “Song of the Redwood Tree” he imbues a “mighty dying tree” as the spokesperson for the entire forest, but this tree speaks as “we,” not “I” (Leaves 173-77) and negates personal pain in favor of the progress of the human race. The voice of the bird is in fact very similar to Whitman’s
interaction with the trees of *Specimen Days*, an interaction which he seemed to be more consciously aware of.

Whitman’s specific relationship with the bird becomes exceptionally poignant since apparently he is the only member of the human race who hears its song and imbues it with any significance. “Out of the Cradle” contains a passage almost identical to one previously discussed in “Song of the Redwood Tree.” Whitman replies to the bird’s song,

Yes my brother I know,
*The rest might not*, but I have treasur’d every note,
For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding, [. . .]
I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair, Listen’d long and long
(*Portable* 194, emphasis mine).

This passage is remarkably similar to a segment from “Song of the Redwood Tree,” wherein Whitman expresses the same ability to hear what other humans in the area do not. This passage, already discussed in the previous chapter, reads,

The choppers heard not, the camp shanties echoed not,
The quick ear’d teamsters and chain and jack-screw men heard not
As the wood-spirits came from their haunts of a thousand years to join the refrain,
*But in my soul I plainly heard* (*Leaves* 174—my emphasis)

This comparison draws these two poems together in a way that emphasizes the role of the natural world in Whitman’s poetry. He assures the reader of his ability to relate to nature in a particular way that other people cannot, thus rendering it necessary for him to “translat[e] the notes” (*Portable* 194) of the bird’s song and record the cry of the Redwood trees as they fall to the ground. But as pointed out in the last chapter, the voice of the redwood trees seems inauthentic whereas the voice of the bird is distressing and personal; as Killingsworth put it, “The critics who get closest to capturing Whitman’s sense of sacred space are those who focus on the poem[s]” as a problem of translation” (107). As mentioned

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7 Killingsworth is referring to “Out of the Cradle” but I believe that both poems are “a problem of translation.”
in the previous paragraph, Whitman translates these two voices in radically different ways; the bird expresses his own individual pain and the trees’ voice categorically welcomes human interests. One difference in the above passages that illustrates this dissimilarity is the fact that Whitman addresses the bird directly in “Out of the Cradle” when he acknowledges his ability to hear the bird’s voice (“Yes my brother I know”) and, in contrast, projects his voice outward to the reader when expressing his ability to hear the cry of the dying trees—more of an assertion than an acknowledgment. This difference manifests itself more and more forcefully as each of the poems continue in the same vein—“Song of the Redwood Tree” as assertive of human interest, and “Out of the Cradle” as acknowledgment of the otherness of the natural world.

Translation in any form is ultimately going to incur a sense of loss—perhaps reminiscent of the loss of the trees, or the loss of the birds’ partner; but in order to attempt any sort of translation at all one has to possess the ability to completely alter one’s consciousness in order to think in another language, or, to participate in a slightly different plane of existence. This ability to alter one’s consciousness in order to understand the voice of nature is reminiscent of a shaman’s job. Although the poet and the shaman may differ in their perceived roles, they are similar in the result of their efforts. James Nolan makes an important clarification that the “Indian shaman is not, as we presently understand the word, an artist. At the basis of the apparent simplicity yet deep complexity of American Indian poetics is the inherent confusion between what we self-consciously know as art and life” (69). This confusion between art and life, is representative of the confusion between nature’s voice and that of humanity—the representation and reality are hard to decipher in

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8 This concept has been previously discussed in Chapter Two in reference to Whitman’s tendency to portray his poetic voice as that of an actor.
many situations, not just poetry. Indeed, the very acts of poetry and shamanism involve the infusion of language with an uncanny ability to closely mimic life itself. As referenced in the introduction, Lincoln states that, “The primacy of language interfuses people with their surroundings and natural environment—an experience or object or animal or person lives inseparable from its name” (20). The poet’s ability to access the primacy of language carries with it the suggestion that language can intertwine a person’s consciousness more closely with their environment than if they simply attempted to interact with their environment without the benefit of reflection and articulation.

This heightened state of awareness that is brought on by the use of language is essential to Whitman’s poetry. If the “primacy of language” really does possess the ability to “interfuse people with their surroundings and natural environment,” then Whitman possesses the ability to present the natural environment as one of intersubjectivity, or of allowing distinct beings to begin to communicate with each other. However, in order for this to be effectively accomplished, the poet must always be aware that he is acting as an intermediary between two sets of worlds: (1) the living beings of the natural world and that of the human race; (2) the world of the poem and the world of the imaging mind. Whitman seems to be more aware of this bridging in “Out of the Cradle” than he is in “Song of the Redwood Tree.” In “Out of the Cradle” he directly questions the bird, writing, “Is it really toward your mate you sing? Or is it really to me?” (Portable 197) identifying the shifting identity of speaker and subject, whereas in “Song of the Redwood Tree” he only speaks for the subject, never questioning it or subjecting it to examination. Whitman admits his doubt of his own translation in “Out of the Cradle,” aware of that untranslatable otherness, but yet still proceeds. It is indeed a difficult thing for a poet to surrender himself to nature’s voice, yet
always remain aware of that voice—resisting personification and reaching for animism in the positive sense of the word. George Handley comments that, “The poet begins with the quest to understand the natural world and to give voice to its secrets, and although he discovers the impossibility of this task, he cannot stop asking himself: ‘what if my metaphors could become transparent and were capable of overcoming the “failure of correspondence” and birds, the sea, and all of life could speak through me?’” (189). Whitman cannot bring himself to abandon the quest of translation even though it appears impossible – for the poet it is more of a sacred trust than a choice.

“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” seems to represent a moment in Whitman’s life when, almost against his will, his consciousness shifted and he realized he had received a calling to transcribe into words nature’s voice. He writes,

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,  
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder, and more sorrowful than yours,  
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die (Portable 197).

These lines almost imply that the poet is prepared to abandon his own voice—to be buried within the voices of thousands of countless others—and will instead focus on transcribing the voice of nature and the great “I” of America into a natural/historical record. So in some ways this poem may very much represent a disconnect from language, as the Lacanian/Kristevan critic would argue, or at least a disconnect from Whitman’s own personal voice, but at the same time, it also represents a budding connection with the language of the earth. This connection is crucial; David Abrams writes of the dangers of losing our connection with the voice(s) of nature:

As technological civilization diminishes the biotic diversity of the earth, language itself is diminished. As there are fewer and fewer songbirds in the air, due to the
destruction of their forests and wetlands, human speech loses more and more of its evocative power. For when we no longer hear the voices of warbler and wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their cadences. As the splashing speech of the rivers is silenced by more and more dams, as we drive more and more of the land’s wild voices into the oblivion of extinction, our own languages become increasingly impoverished and weightless, progressively emptied of their earthly resonance (86).

Whitman’s voice is gaining more and more of an “earthly resonance,” within “Out of the Cradle,” thus enabling his poem to be “nourished by [its] cadences.” Cecelia Tichi reinforces this point when she states, “Whitman’s earth is made in new words, in language resonant from, but not mimetically correlative with, the actual environment” (206). This technique is, again, very representative of shamanism, in which the role of the shaman is not just to make sure the human community is safe and healthy, but also that the human community is giving back to and remaining aware of the environment they live in. Abrams writes, “The traditional or tribal shaman, I came to discern, acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth” (7). Again, this is a very participatory experience, requiring the collaboration not only of the poet and the human community, but also that of the “local earth.”

Whitman’s connection with the local earth is represented not only by his intersubjective conversation with the bird, but by his now famous interaction with the seashore. Indeed, this poem is most well known for Whitman’s revelation that the sea answers his plea for the “word final, superior to all,” which turns out in the end to be the whispered word “death.” However, what most interests me about the seashore is the shifting border it has come to represent in critical literature. It has been explored as the space
between culture and history, the space between known and unknown, or the tip of the iceberg suggesting all that is suppressed within the subconscious mind. But it has not been explored as the place where nature and humanity simultaneously join and are separated by the sheer unknowability of what lies beneath the surface of the ocean. Where the sand begins to shimmer, darken and become soft, that is a space of constant fluctuation in the life of humans and nature. Referring to “Out of the Cradle and “The Sleepers,” Beth Jensen writes, “Both of these poems deal with the dividing line that separates the known from the unknown, the solid from the fluid, the day from the night” (136). In “Out of the Cradle” the sea is both known and unknown, announcing the word death yet only “whispering” it “sweetly,” not actually providing any expansive explanation and again leaving Whitman to make sense of nature’s voice. The sea suggests meaning, but it is up to Whitman to translate that meaning into words that are expressive for his reader.

What is compelling about the sea whispering the word “death” is that again we are brought back to the concept of a loss occurring both in nature and, again, in translation—first the fall of an entire forest of California redwoods, then an individual bird’s death, then the sea announcing itself as the harbinger of death and pronouncing the word in such a way as to make it beautiful and enticing. Handley comments on this pervasive quality of sorrow and loss in Whitman’s poetics, stating that Whitman stresses

Quiet and careful observation of nature, profound capacity for sympathy, and acceptance of the terrible fact of nature’s indifference to human and to its own suffering. Balancing these emotions allows the poet to both hear the thousand songs of sorrow as well as to transform them, just as nature transforms death, into songs of beauty. While songs of praise for the newness nature creates, his poems are also, by indirection at least, lamentations for what is lost (186-italics my emphasis).
Whitman’s construction of nature does seem to be indifferent to its own suffering in some ways, however, Whitman may in fact be challenging our idea of nature by emphasizing the fact that nature, too, has the ability to die.

The idea of nature arguing its own death may seem to be contrary to the goals of environmentalists; however, it has some strangely positive side-effects. First, by acknowledging that nature, too, contains death, we move away from the idea of nature as an ever producing Garden of Eden, and are forced to acknowledge that it also travels through a cycle of birth and death, just as humans do, and just as humans, needs time to regenerate and heal. In this way, nature seems to be more human than Other, closing the gap between the two and perhaps providing opportunities for a deeper relationship. But in “Out of the Cradle” nature’s death also announces itself as not human, which opens the way to understand nature as an entity on its own terms. Nature is eerily Other as the sea proclaims death to Whitman:

[The sea] Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,  
Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death,  
And again death, death, death, death,  
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous’d child’s heart,  
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,  
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,  
Death, death, death, death, death (Portable 198).

One line in this passage is of particular interest to me, and that is that the “hissing melodious” was “neither like the bird nor like my arous’d child’s heart.” The reader is being introduced to a distinct and separate voice with this announcement—the voice is not the bird, not the child, and not the narrator. It is therefore Other, undefinable, and it announces death—in this case, the voice of nature.
There is also another way to examine the concept of nature arguing for its own death, and that is the idea of eschatology—an end. This idea of Christian millennial end has long been deplored as a way to sidestep the responsibilities of caring for one’s environment and leave the eventual clean-up in the hands of a merciful God; however, it does imply a certain ethic of work and hope for the future. John Haught writes that “It persuades us to understand the universe as an adventurous journey toward the complexity and beauty of a future perfection” (244). This idea of hope in the future though not knowing exactly what that future may bring is essential to our current state in which the destruction seems so advanced that it often leads to feelings of helplessness and despair. “Out of the Cradle” embodies this feeling of an impending event or journey with such phrases as “edging near,” and “Creeping thence steadily” (Portable 198); the eschatological argument does a great deal to help us understand that the “edging” and “creeping” does not have to be toward a world of degradation, but rather toward the “sweetest song and all songs” of the possibility of an end. According to Haught, “In the eschatological perspective the sin of environmental abuse is one of despair. To destroy nature is to turn away from a promise. What makes nature deserve our care is not that it is divine but that it is pregnant with a mysterious future” (245—italics my emphasis).

Whitman is criticized for his Hegelian streams of thought which tend toward trusting a future perspective, but there is a difference between simply trusting, and working toward, that future. Nature speaking the word death may serve as a reminder that we are moving toward something, a mysterious, intangible something, and that unless we seek to work for and develop a knowledge of that eventuality we will not be a part of that future. In the case of the environment, when we recognize that our current path will bring us either to the brink
of environmental devastation—the death of nature—or to a place of communion, we are forced to make a choice as to which end we will work toward. Whitman’s infusion of the tragic losses nature experiences on a daily basis may be incredibly useful, and perhaps not only metaphorically, but literally.

This brings me to the core of my argument, which is that Whitman is effectively making use of his ability to deliberately shift his consciousness entirely to nature’s voice in “Out of the Cradle” whereas in “Song of the Redwood Tree” nature unknowingly took over. The poem provides a view into how Whitman may have begun structuring his relationship to nature and nature’s relationship to his poetry as a young man. A short comparison with a poem by Pablo Neruda, who has claimed Whitman as a grandfather influence several times, will serve to further illustrate my point. Neruda had a similar experience to Whitman’s as translated from the book I, “La lámpara en la tierra.” Neruda’s experience also includes a body of water, except he speaks with a tributary—the river of Bío Bío, crediting it with his gift of language and song:

So talk to me, Bío Bío, yours are the words that roll off my tongue, you gave me language, the nocturnal song fused with rain and foliage, You, when no one would heed a child, told me about the dawning of the earth, the powerful peace of your kingdom, the hatchet buried with a quiver of lifeless arrows, all that the leaves of the cinnamon laurel have told you for a thousand years—[.] (Neruda 20-21)

In an experience almost identical to Whitman’s, Neruda identifies natural inspiration and a literal infusion of language from nature’s soul to his own as the original inspiration for
his poetry. Even more remarkable, both poets speak of this episode as an adult remembering an event that occurred in their childhood, not understanding the impact of that experience fully until later in their adult lives. Neruda feels that the river told him the story of “the dawning of the earth,” while Whitman understands that the bird has infused within him “a thousand warbling echoes [ . . . ], never to die.” Both poets tell of a moment that not only implies that “Out of the Cradle” “marks a turning point in Whitman’s work, suggesting the child’s entry into language” (Jensen 133), but also that it marks a turning point in which Whitman realizes the natural world, in some ways, structures his speech and thoughts, and that he can either surrender to that and use it to his advantage, or he can fight against it and focus rather on the goals of American democracy.

In “Out of the Cradle” Whitman chooses to absorb and surrender to that natural structuring. The poem begins as Whitman stands on the beach in Paumanok and is transported back to the moment when he observed this tragedy as a small child; the lament of the bird (which he heard and was able to translate for the reader) had a profound effect upon him and his use of language. The reader is made aware of Whitman’s close relationship to the land, since just by standing in this spot he is able to recreate a moment that for him was a founding point in his life. Abram writes that the land constantly speaks to us in this way, referring to the tradition of the Australian walkabout, and noting that the land often “provides a visual mnemonic for recalling the Dreamtime stories” (177). We can take this idea one step further and imply that the land is telling the story—through Whitman’s poetry, the land is itself animate, not just the bird or the sea. Whitman is engaged in a process that Abram describes as one “in which earthly locales may speak through the human persons that inhabit them” (182).
In this case Whitman is using the beach as structuring device to revisit and transcribe an aesthetic experience that had a profound effect on his earlier life. Killingsworth takes this idea a step further, arguing that the poem represents a moment in Whitman’s life when he was extremely anxious and depressed, and that the land provided an opportunity for his poetic voice to resurface—in other words, he uses the land to restructure and calm his thoughts, which I believe also happens in *Specimen Days*, which is often referred to as jumbled or garbled, but actually is quite cyclical and repetitive, simply following the rhythms of nature. Killingsworth writes, “We might say that Whitman, in bringing to the poem his grief for his lost love and his anxiety over the troubled nation, began in the position of the mockingbird—forlorn, depressed, alienated, and compulsive—and found transcendence and survival by prostrating himself before the earth spirits on the sacred site of his origins” (110-11). Even in Killingsworth’s comment we can see that identity shift between speaker and subject that I addressed earlier—the mockingbird-as-Whitman, forlorn and depressed, and Whitman-as-mockingbird, as the mockingbird expresses his individual pain in a separate voice. Whitman is allowing nature to structure and restructure his thoughts as he engages in an intersubjective relationship with one of the *specific* voices from nature.

While Whitman approaches “Out of the Cradle” with humility and a willingness to “prostrate himself before the earth spirits,” he enters the California redwoods with a completely different mindset. He is determined to praise American democracy and progress, despite the fact that he often criticized the trajectory of American life. Whitman felt that in some ways, the only way to heal America was to poetically imagine the way the country should be, ignoring the ugly realities; so, no matter what happened during the poetic process, Whitman seemed bent on writing a poem about Manifest Destiny and the positive effects of
America’s drive and ambition to better the world. He was not particularly open to the voices coming from the world around him at that time. Unfortunately he underestimates the influence of nature on his writing, and the trees come across as more majestic and deserving of life than the buzzing little humans trying to silence them. It remains unclear to the reader, in the end, as to what Whitman is trying to accomplish with the poem. Tichi explains that this sense of confusion stems from the fact that at the time Whitman wrote “Song of the Redwood Tree,” “the public valuation of the American wilderness had never been higher, and [...] Whitman’s own deep reverence for the wondrous sequoia is never in doubt” (248). She explains that the poem can only be understood in light of the New World reform practiced by early settlers, which is that,

Man evinces his dominion (and correlatively his stewardship over God’s created world) by making a visible impress upon the natural world. He legitimates his claim to America by manifestly improving it (10).

Instead of using nature as a structuring device, Whitman was endeavoring to “manifestly improv[e] the results,” of his poetic endeavors, which proved in “Song of the Redwood Tree” to be unsuccessful as a Westward expansionist poem because it is far too idealistic, and not entirely successful either as a promising environmental ethic. However, the poem is extremely useful in comparing usages of animism and determining which forms of construction produce a positive effect, and which usages produce a blurry result that need a very close reading and interpretation to glean insight from.

Whitman translates nature’s voice in two very different ways in “Song of the Redwood Tree” and “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” one of which is clearly more successful than the other in projecting nature’s voice in a way that contains less of Whitman’s politics and imposing voice. In “Out of the Cradle”, Whitman understood that
nature is a destabilizing force in his poetry and used that to his advantage as he allows nature (the bird, the sea, and Paumanok) to deconstruct his translation and his very role as a poet. Whitman surrenders himself to the sea as it “Whisper’d [him] through the night” and “Lisp’d [. . .] the low and delicious word death.” This acknowledgment of nature’s voice speaking death seems to convey the sense of nature as the mortality of all things—meaning, humanity, nature itself—but also the possibility for the regeneration of all things. This idea brings with it an incredible hopefulness that the poem is often not given credit for. Death, for Whitman, was always a cyclical pattern—his most famous pattern obviously being the title of his book, “Leaves of Grass,” and his famous questioning of the child resulting in several answers, but among them being that the grass is “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (*Portable* 8). So, too, is a possibility of regeneration for the poet as he stands on the beach at Paumanok and feels that his poetic muse is revived and, in fact, awakened, with nature’s “thousand warbling echoes,” which, in “Out of the Cradle” Whitman translates effectively and succeeds in conveying that sense of otherness and instability that is nature. Just because Whitman’s poetry is complex and sometimes rich in contradiction does not mean that it needs to be thrust aside as a non-useful subject for environmental readings; in contrast, he is incredibly interesting and rich when read carefully, always paying close attention to which construction of nature is at play.
Conclusion

Walt Whitman was known as a poet who tried his best to actively blend his experience of life into his poetry, to absorb everything around him and to then create from that immersion a poetry that could heal America. Not only did he absorb Americans, the people, but he absorbed America, the land. And we as a later generation are well aware that both parties are in need of healing. In a Q & A session that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Derek Walcott shared his fear that since we are increasingly moving away from interaction with the natural world, poetry itself may be in danger of extinction. In answer to a very straightforward question as to whether good poetry requires an interaction with nature on the part of the poet, Walcott stated that he believes nature to be the incubus for poetic insight. That is a strong statement, but in some ways Whitman’s poetry, specifically “Out of the Cradle,” demonstrates its truthfulness. He documents the moment when nature helped him to arouse the “thousand warbling echoes” which would later give voice to his poetry (Portable 197). He proves that when one engages in an intersubjective relationship with nature, one not only develops the ability to write great “nature poetry,” but also the ability to absorb the beliefs, values, sights, sounds, and events of an entire nation. Perhaps the ability to listen closely enough in order to hear the natural world’s often muted voice hones a poet’s ability to hear the louder and (perhaps) clearer voices of humanity living within the same vicinity.

Whitman’s now thoroughly exhausted phrase, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes,)” could be used to describe what is happening with his natural philosophy (Portable 66). A brief contrast of his poetry and prose appear to allow for a “multitude” of interpretations. However, in this case, it may be to
the reader’s advantage. Being able to relate to nature through the multitudinous voice of Whitman’s prose and poetry offers the possibility of several relationships to nature, some more productive than others, but from the sheer magnitude of representation there is an otherness and an articulation of the natural world that is simply impossible to imagine when one imagines nature’s voice in only one uncomplicated way.

In the space of this paper, I have discussed three distinct translations of Whitman’s nature. In *Specimen Days*, Whitman taught his reader that trees contain an inherent ability to be what they are and to communicate that quality to humans, which he felt was a crucial example for 19th century Americans. Whitman also alerted his reader to the quality of sentience he observed in the trees, imbuing his trees with a soul. This quality of animism creates the unique possibility of interaction between humans and nature, an interaction not possible when nature is mute. Citing again Manes’ discussion of animism, “To regard nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices.” (15-16).

Unfortunately the consequences are not always as Manes hopes. Despite Whitman’s recognition of the tree’s vitality in *Specimen Days*, he seems to undermine his own philosophies in “Song of the Redwood Tree.” The poem is incredibly confusing, as the trees’ do have a voice but it is so human in purpose and tone that the poem is often pointed to as one of the negative examples of American imperialism.

But as I have pointed out, because he represents the trees’ voice as so majestic and inspiring, he undermines some of his own celebration of their demise. Whether Whitman was aware of this and did it purposefully, or simply because of an unconscious compassion for the redwoods, the result is the same. The reader is made aware that a living thing is being exterminated.
Surely, though, “Out of the Cradle” represents the most positive instance of poetic animism that Whitman’s body of poetry has to offer. In it, he consciously allows the beach at Paumanok to direct his consciousness back to a time when nature’s voice first presented itself to Whitman in the persona of a bird, using place as a structuring device for the poem. He allows the reader to observe the awkward process of translation as he constantly questions his motivation for translation and addresses the bird, admitting that he is “following [the bird] my brother” in his struggle. He allows his voice to be swallowed up in the voice of nature, while still recognizing the impossibility of truly silencing it. Whitman not only does this with the bird, but also with the sea as he discusses “death” with nature. In the end, perhaps Whitman was correct, after all, when he continued to wrestle with the problem of translation. He did allow nature to speak specifically through the voice of Walt Whitman. And though nature did end up getting herself into trouble in some sections of his writing, nature also came across as poignant, individual and separate in other sections. Whitman saw the progress of humanity and nature as evolving together, side by side—just like the voices of the earth and the voices of humanity, he would not silence or discount either, even when the result was messy. We will have to come to a similar point in order to begin to coexist more peacefully with the voices and lives which surround us.

To end this thesis, I will quote from a poem of Walt Whitman’s own composition. It movingly articulates the struggle that Whitman went through as he endeavored to become the poet of humanity. I asked the question at the beginning of this discussion as to whether or not one could effectively consolidate a reverence for nature and a reverence for humanity into one coherent poetic voice. I believe that Whitman did do that in sections of his poetry, but the struggle may be the more interesting examination point. We must continue to
struggle, not putting nature or humanity on the pedestal of importance—the day we cease to struggle will be the day the earth will become a useless planet, home to unhealthy species and unhealthy thought. Language helps us to articulate and move through this struggle, and Whitman’s language specifically aids us in this effort. In the words of Beth Jensen, “By challenging the language, the poet challenged the culture” (133). Let us hope we continue to produce poets that will accept this challenge. Whitman’s poem reads as follows:

When the full-grown poet came,
Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe, with all its shows of day and night,) saying, He is mine;
But out spake too the Soul of man, proud, jealous and unreconciled, Nay he is mine alone;
—Then the full-grown poet stood between the two, and took each by the hand;
And to-day and ever so stands, as blender, uniter, tightly holding hands, Which he will never release until he reconciles the two, And wholly and joyously blends them. (Leaves of Grass 1891-92, 416).

This poem embodies the poetics of reconciliation that I referred to in my introduction.

I repeat a portion of Elder’s explanation of this phenomenon, which reads, “Poetry is [. . .] a landscape of memory, within which an individual may discover a circuit, not of estrangement but of reconciliation—between himself and the earth and, equally, between himself and his race” (10-11). Whitman, throughout his poetry, attempted to bridge distances—many of them so culturally defined that only at the end of his life did he begin to achieve recognition as a truly definitive American poet. Nature and man had an equal hold on Whitman’s psyche, and he struggled to balance the two throughout his life, often retreating to nature to gain respite from the city, but always returning to the city to stimulate his muse through conversation with the democratic masses of Brooklyn and Washington D.C. But he “never release[d]” either portion of his life, and we reap the rich rewards of that endeavor as we struggle through his poetic imagination today.
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