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"AS IF THE BEASTS SPOKE": THE ANIMAL/ANIMIST/ ANIMATED WALT WHITMAN

M. Jimmie Killingsworth

Walt Whitman's earliest readers, from the most resistant to the most accepting, understood the poet in terms that distinguish humans from animals, with Whitman enrolled squarely on the side of the animals. Identity with the beasts was used to question Whitman's morality, civility, and artistic sensibility. In a review of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Rufus Griswold produced this cartoon-like image: "it is impossible to imagine how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love."[1] But animal language was also used to credit the poet's freshness and energy. In an 1856 letter to Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed an ambivalent admiration by calling Whitman's book a "nondescript monster" that yet had "terrible eyes and buffalo strength."[2] The "terrible eyes"—in the old sense meaning *terrifying*—recall the words of Emerson's neighbor and protégé Henry David Thoreau: "Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure" for "in Wildness is the preservation of the World."[3] In a much-quoted series of letters to Harrison Blake which recount a visit to Whitman as well as a thoughtful reading of his book, Thoreau joined Emerson in confessing mixed feelings about Whitman's sometimes crude language and images before concluding that after all he was an inspired poet with much to teach the overly delicate readers of Thoreau's own literary class in New England. Thoreau is said to have carried Whitman's book around Concord "like a red flag."[4] Very likely Whitman was on his mind in the late 1850s, when in the journal entries leading up to his book *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau marveled that his Native American guide spoke familiarly to muskrats and moose and wondered if the Indian languages were closer to natural utterances than languages like English. As for Whitman, Thoreau wrote to Blake, "It is as if the beasts spoke" (qtd. in Richardson, 349).

The quip is curious at a number of levels. At the philosophical level, Thoreau invokes the problem of distinguishing humans from animals, particularly of defining the human as the speaking beast, the

animal with language. At the cultural level, he raises the possibility of a revived animism—the worldview, supposedly expunged by modern religion and science, that grants language and souls to creatures other than human. At the level of rhetoric and poetics, Thoreau's comment hints at a boundary-bursting energy in Whitman's writing that sparks insights into the mind of the beast, a form of life typically treated by modern thinkers as a body without soul or with a rudimentary mind inaccessible to human probing. Taken as a whole, Thoreau's mixed expression of amusement and awe suggests how Whitman's treatment of animality in the poems of the 1850s—the decade that ended with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*—anticipates several cultural developments in our own time: in environmental and egalitarian politics, in animal activism, and in the rhetoric of genre and media.[5] In brief, Whitman and Thoreau are early participants in a reconditioning of the modern imagination that results in an ethical, political, and spiritual re-enchantment or re-animation of nature in a post-religious and post-scientific world. The power of this imaginative vista, as well as its limits, can be partly revealed in a closer look at Whitman's developing treatment of these issues throughout his career as a poet.

The Philosophical Animal, or The Beast Speaks—As If

Consider the importance of Thoreau's *as if*. While hinting ironically at the definition of humans as animals with language, he clearly places the poet in the category of the other, the nonhuman animal. In the fully human, the soul initiates speech, not the body, and in the universe Thoreau inherited almost wholly from Plato, the two can be neatly separated. Within the human being, the mute and idiot body is the beast that must be tamed by the rational and articulate mind. Thoreau thus simultaneously renders Whitman as subhuman (a beastly body with the rudiments of language, like a mouth without a mind) and superhuman (a person able to break the barrier of non-communication with the beasts). Thoreau invokes animality as a category that can include both non-human creatures and certain groups of humans—notably tribal peoples often characterized as "savages" and "primitives," as well as slaves and the working classes, who depend wholly on their bodies for livelihood. The classically educated Thoreau is revolted by the poetry, but the naturalist and democratic Thoreau is fascinated as animality is exposed as a restrictive and oppressive construct rather than a simple description of nature. In identifying with those characterized as animals by dominant or master discourses, Whitman gives voice to the oppressed. He also anticipates the current trend in animal studies to question old treatments of the "animal mind," with "one study after another convincingly demonstrating that the traditionally distinctive

marks of the human (first it was possession of a soul, then 'reason,' then tool use, then tool *making*, then altruism, then language, then the production of linguistic *novelty*, and so on) flourish quite reliably beyond the species barrier" (Wolfe, 2).[6]

In the poem eventually titled "Song of Myself," an early version of which Thoreau singled out for special praise, the speaker—who calls himself "Walt Whitman, a kosmos" and the "friendly and flowing savage"—insists on an identity with the animals as a corrective to the processes of civilization that threaten to block the flow of physical and spiritual energy to humankind. He has possession, he says, of "the pass-word primeval."[7] He channels "forbidden voices,/ Voices of sexes and lusts" and "Voices indecent … clarified and transfigur'd" by his poetry; he aims to "remove the veil" from "voices veiled" by cultural conventions and genteel manners: "Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves, / . . . Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised, / Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung" (*PP*, 211). Once considered sacred in the animistic culture of ancient Egypt, the dung beetle was consigned to the lower echelons of the Great Chain of Being in the poet's time, with God at the top, humans just below, and insects grubbing along at the last step between animals and plants.[8] Whitman flattens this hierarchy. He also implies that once devaluation of the animals begins, human beings themselves are not safe. The mention of slaves in these lines reminds us that in the nineteenth century, people classified as such were not considered fully human. African slaves were herded and sold like domestic beasts. They were legally defined as "chattel," a word etymologically equivalent to *cattle* and related to *capital*, the root meaning for which goes back to the word for *head*, as in heads of livestock, the countable items of property that can be reduced to a number and valued accordingly. The images and voices of people bought and sold—slaves and prostitutes and the exploited masses—haunt the lines of *Leaves of Grass*. The poet's refusal to break ranks with those considered beastly because their bodies are exploited and their minds or souls neglected suggests that animality is a category in which people place living beings whom they want to master in some way. By putting himself in that category, Whitman questions the universal difference of humans and animals and exposes the political motives of animalizing others.[9]

In "Song of Myself" the articulate voice indicates the presence of the soul that has been neglected in slaves and denied in animals. Sounds that most people would find disturbing or inconsequential—sounds filtered out as noise in the flow of information—admit a plentitude of meaning for the poet, a world of newfound sympathies and a path to restored kinship with nature and with humanity broadly defined. He

hears, for example, the "wild gander" that "leads his flock through the cool night":

> *Ya-honk* he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
> The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,
> Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky. (*PP*, 199)

He represents the language of the goose roughly as he hears it, *Ya-honk*. The utterance has no equivalent in English. At the end of the poem, he insists that "I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable," as another great bird on high, the "spotted hawk swoops by" and speaks to him, complaining of his "gab" and "loitering" (*PP*, 247). A slang term for the steady flow of impressive conversation, "gab" is considered a gift in human society, but a phrase like "the gift of gab" undercuts the very eloquence it ostensibly praises. It is meaningless banter, the special province of the street hustler or the "loitering" criminal. Think of Everett Ulysses McGill in the Coen brothers' film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—an escaped convict who boasts of having the gift of gab. For him, as for Whitman, the phrase denotes a power of linguistic performance but connotes the art of the snake-oil salesman and the con game. As if in response to the hawk's calling accusation, the poet says, "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (*PP*, 247). The Whitmanian *yawp* resonates with the *ya-honk* of the goose, the wild call of animal being that won't be refined into language or debased into cheap or cheating speech. *Yawp* and *Ya-honk* serve no purpose other than singing the song of oneself—expressing the soul, that is—and calling out to companions. The gander, remember, "leads his flock through the cool night"; his *Ya-honk* sounds to Whitman "like an invitation" (*PP*, 199). A poet like Whitman's old friend on the New York newspaper scene, William Cullen Bryant, would see in the flight of the goose an invitation to think of God's goodness in leading His creatures home. In Whitman, not God, but the gander leads the flock. Bryant's "To a Waterfowl" suggests that as animals have their instincts, humans have their rational relationship to the Higher Power, their ability to reason out their salvation.[10] Whitman says only that "I see in them and myself the same old law," refusing to go further and reinforce the Great Chain of Being (*PP*, 199). He places humans within nature rather than above it, one step closer to God.

Indeed, for Whitman, listening to the animals reveals the unhappiness and discontentedness of modern humanity. By contrast, he says, the animals are "placid and self-contained." Not just the sound but also the silence of animals seems eloquent to him; he listens to what they do not say:

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth. (*PP*, 218)

The great accomplishments of civilization—religion, material success, and government—are shown here to have their downsides: sweaty and whining guilt, maniacal greed, and groveling submission to others. The animals present alternatives to the speaker; they "show their relations to me" and bring "tokens of myself" (*PP*, 218). These tokens indicate elements of the self left behind or buried deep by the forces of civilization—or as Edward Abbey was fond of calling it, "syphilization."[11] In a famously pre-Darwinian reference to evolution, Whitman imagines himself "stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over"; he says he has "distanced what is behind me for good reasons" but can "call any thing back" when he desires it (*PP*, 217).[12] The images suggest that the beasts are both behind him and within him. The frame of his body is covered over with muscle derived from eating animals and from animal ancestry, and life is more of a journey than a hierarchy. "In vain" the animals flee from him—the mastodon dissolving into the deep past or the buzzard "who houses herself with the sky," the snake "that slides through the creepers and logs," the elk that "takes to the inner passes of the woods," or "the razor-bill'd auk" that "sails far north to Labrador." "I follow quickly," says the poet, "I ascend to the nest in the fissure of the cliff" (*PP*, 218). Poetry provides the imaginative means, of course, but so does science as he reads it: the scientific imagination brings the mastodon back to life when it "retreats beneath its own powder'd bones" (*PP*, 218).

"Song of Myself" is a poem of recovery, a poem about gathering energy from animal life. It is a poem about ascent rather than descent—about arising from the bed of depression where people lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, arising from the bent knee of oppressive government, and arising from the spiritual poverty of consumerism, the mania for owning things, which leaves people perpetually unsatisfied and unhappy. It is about allowing the senses to awaken and spark the imagination that hears and responds to the voices of the beasts—within and without.[13]

But Whitman doesn't stop with this version of animality as he continues to expand *Leaves of Grass* with new poems in each edition. Besides raising questions about the definition of the human animal, as Thoreau's comment on the speaking beast in Whitman further suggests, a shift in cultural affinity also occurs. It hearkens back to a time when animals did speak—a time we all know, recounted in stories we've heard all our lives. Once upon a time, a long time ago, when gods walked the earth, people communed with animals that shared the gift of speech. For one reason or another, depending on your cultural tradition, either people ceased to understand the beasts or animals lost their capacity to speak. In imaginatively restoring communication with the animals, Whitman's poetry uncovers or recreates a buried past—from ancient times or from childhood—when kinship with the animals was the norm in the worldview known as animism. In *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud comments on this *Weltanschauung*:

> The human race [has] in the course of ages developed three…great pictures of the universe: animistic (or mythological), religious, and scientific. Of these, animism, the first to be created, is perhaps the one which is most consistent and exhaustive and which gives a truly complete explanation of the nature of the universe.…much of [which] still persists in modern life, either in the debased form of superstition or as the living basis of our speech, our beliefs and our philosophies.[14]

Freud's implication is that animism cannot be fully expunged by religion and science, both of which, in different ways, strive to disenchant the earth. Religion disenchants nature by making spirit the exclusive province of God and a supplicant humanity. Science makes the material world the only reality but disenchants by denying spirit altogether.[15] As Freud suggests, however, these latter-day perspectives do not eliminate but rather cover a persistent animism that bubbles to the surface "as the living basis of our speech, our beliefs and our philosophies." Not only in superstition, but also in the bedtime story, in dream and fantasy, in poetry and romance, this ancient foundation is revealed and the world re-enchanted.

To what end? For one thing, the reawakening of animism provides relief from the austerities of modern life; it colors the black-and-white world of modernity; it delights, gives pleasure, satisfies longings unfulfilled by work, church, and education. This yearning for delight (some would say escape) underwrites productions like the recent Disney film *Enchanted*, in which the animated world of an animistic magic kingdom is lost when a wicked witch casts an enchanted princess into a deep well. At the end of a long transformative tunnel, she emerges from a

manhole in present-day New York as a flesh-and-blood woman in the costume of a princess. Colorful cartoon characters yield to live actors portraying the working world of urban life. The film thus awakens the etymological kinship of the words *animism* and *animation*, both of which—like *animal* itself—derive from the Latin word for soul, *anima*. With the soulfulness of the modern world in question, communication with the animals becomes an issue. A chipmunk that hitches a ride into the disenchanted land gains a puppet-like substantiality, but loses the ability to communicate in English. And when the princess, like Cinderella, summons the wild animals to help her clean her benefactor-family's apartment, only rats, pigeons, and cockroaches respond, the survivors of declining biodiversity.

This image of species reduction hints lightly at an eco-political motive beyond the appeal to childlike wonder in the cinematic resurrection of magic princesses, enchanted forests, and talking beasts. As James William Gibson suggests in the 2009 book *A Reenchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature*, a serious revival of animism is the latest iteration of the critique of modernity that begins in nineteenth-century Romanticism and continues in twentieth-century environmentalism.[16] The yearning evinced in films like *Enchanted* reveals that material progress has a psychic cost. When the cost becomes too great, the discontents of civilization turn back or dig deep to conceive a kind of neo-animism, and with it, a form of renewed creative energy—call it animation. We think of animation as a media practice. But to be animated also means to be energized, brought to life from a dead state. Awakening to new life is a key aim of transcendentalist writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. To this end, Whitman's poetry of the talking beast anticipates the neo-animistic and re-animated world of contemporary cinema from Disney to Japanese animé.[17]

After the 1850s, in poems that Thoreau was never able to read before his untimely death, Whitman's talking animals grow increasingly eloquent, and a more recognizably animistic perspective emerges. Instead of the gander's *ya-honk*, which is less articulate even than the croaking "Nevermore" of Poe's raven, we get the operatic birds of the 1860s, the mockingbird that has lost his mate in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and the hermit thrush, the "solitary singer" in the great elegy on Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Like the goose and the hawk in "Song of Myself," these more talkative birds mentor the poet on aspects of life that seem just out of his reach. The mockingbird teaches the boy poet that out of the pain of loss comes great poetry. The thrush consoles the mature poet in the more immediate presence of death, leading him through the dismal swamp of his grief over the dead president. The songs are no longer "untranslatable" like the *ya-honk* of the goose and the *yawp* of "flowing savage."

The boy-poet in "Out of the Cradle" insists on "translating the notes" of the mockingbird, addressing the bird as "my brother" and even the hissing ocean as "the savage old mother" that whispers "the low and delicious word death" (*PP*, 390; 392; 393). Likewise in the Lincoln elegy, "the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird"—again addressed as "dearest brother" (*PP*, 463)—produces a "tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul" (*PP*, 467). Whitman goes to some effort to imitate the actual song of the natural mockingbird through the use of word and sound repetition and variations in line length. He makes less of an effort with the thrush. In both poems, Whitman distinguishes the song of the birds by the use of italics, but in "Lilacs" the thrush's song is otherwise weakly differentiated from the language of the poet's voice in roman type. There is a bit more repetition of triadic phrases like "*praise! praise! praise!*" (*PP*, 464), but not nearly as much as we find in "Out of the Cradle." The movement thus runs from the *ya-honk* of the goose to the musical aria of the mockingbird to the stately poetry of the thrush, beginning with a kind of rough call-and-response (*yawp* to *ya-honk*) and ending with a sympathetic convergence of the inner psychological state of the poet with that of the natural creatures with whom he communes.

Thus the talking birds of the later poems, to some degree, justify the trenchant commentary of the eco-critic Dana Phillips—that "the landscape in Whitman's poetry always turns out to be an inscape"—the bird always turns out to be Whitman himself, the "echo" of his voice.[18] In this way, Phillips says, Whitman anticipates "the therapeutic function and character" of much modern nature writing, the projection of the self "not as an ethically responsible entity and a citizen of the world, but as the locus of what passes for spiritual life in a secular culture" (200; 195).[19] Over two decades of development, then, the poet increasingly speaks not from nature or with nature, but rather comes to speak for nature; or worse, he plays the ventriloquist to the dummies of nature, the birds and the hissing ocean.[20]

Two poems that fall roughly at the beginning and end of this development in Whitman's work—"This Compost" and "Song of the Redwood-Tree"—are particularly instructive. In my book *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics*, I saw these poems as opposite numbers in Whitman's shifting and conflicted eco-political views, with "This Compost" as perhaps the most ecologically enlightened English-language poem of the nineteenth century and "Song of the Redwood-Tree" as among the most sadly conventional celebrations of environmental devastation in the name of progress.[21] Considered in light of the animistic revival, a somewhat different picture emerges. The earlier poem "This Compost" employs figurative language derived from Christianity, the theological terminology of religious conversion

and faith—death, resurrection, and belief—reinterpreted by science. The Earth (capitalized) substitutes for the awe-inspiring Creator of the Judeo-Christian tradition: "Now I am terrified at the Earth," Whitman writes, "it is that calm and patient, / It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions, /… It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last" (*PP*, 496-497). In the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, when "This Compost" first appeared, its awkward but revealing title was "Poem of Wonder at The Resurrection of the Wheat"—an allusion to the words of Jesus in John's Gospel: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12.24 NRSV). When in the drama of "This Compost," the poet realizes that "summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead," he initiates a series of celebratory exclamations with the phrase "What chemistry!" (*PP*, 286).

By contrast, in "Song of the Redwood-Tree," Whitman replaces imagery derived from soil chemistry and Christianity with images drawn from animism—dryads and hamadryads, the spirits of the wood. The poet imagines listening to their voices as they resign themselves to the axes of a new race of creatures, the pioneers who harvest their wood to build and fuel a new civilization. The poet pointedly remarks that the lumbermen do not hear what he hears, the voices of the spirits leaving the wood—which are italicized in this poem like the songs of the mockingbird in "Out of the Cradle" and the thrush in "Lilacs." In identifying with the forest spirits, Whitman sounds a note of resignation in the face of modernity, creating an elegiac mood that undercuts the conventional praise of western expansion, dramatizing not only the literal dis-enchantment of the old-growth forest, the driving out of ancient spirits, but also his personal disenchantment with the material progress of the nation. So it is that, between the publication of "This Compost" in 1856 and "Song of the Redwood-Tree" in 1874, Whitman reverses the anthropological master narrative outlined by Freud, abandoning science and religion for animistic mythology as the source of his imagery and his inspiration.[22]

That Whitman would concern himself at all with forest spirits at this late date anticipates the twentieth-century revival of animism in the unlikely fields of nature writing and eco-activism. Examples include Christopher Manes's adoption of animism as the spiritual core of political ecology; the anthropologist Richard Nelson's frequently cited work on indigenous metaphysics, which he adapts to his own ecological world view; and the inclusion of the resolute atheist Richard Dawkins among science writers and poets joined by the eco-critic Gioia Woods under the rubric of "sci-animism."[23]

Perhaps the best example of neo-animism comes from the world of animated cinema: Hayao Miyazaki's 1997 film *Princess Mononoke*.[24] A major contribution to the recent trends in the popular imagination, *Princess Mononoke* has attracted a wide audience during the recent burgeoning of adult interest in animated feature films, comics, and graphic novels and in products formerly marketed primarily to adolescents—"young adult" or Y.A. literature and culture—the Harry Potter phenomenon, which has also engaged a number of writers already known for work directed to a mainstream adult audience, such as Sherman Alexie and Rita Dove.[25] Miyazaki's film tells the story of a young hero from a tribal culture who seeks to mediate the divided world of indigenous animism and industrial progress. Replete with giant, talking animals, a ruling forest spirit in the shape of an elk with trees for antlers and a humanoid face, a smoking city of ironworks and firearms factories where former prostitutes find new status as respected workers under the guidance of a queenly matron and manager, and elfin spirit figures that look like elements from a retro video game, the plot is too subtle and complicated for a brief summary. Suffice it to say that the survival of animism in the modern world becomes the key topic when a fortune-seeking soldier cuts off the head of the great forest spirit, precipitating an apocalyptic event that threatens to destroy the earth. The hero retrieves and replaces the head in time, but the earth is irrevocably changed. The great forest spirit loses any identity separate from the forest. The human hero and forest princess vow to keep the memory of the spirit sacred, but can no longer hope to encounter the actual presence of spirit or talk to the animals.

The movement, I would argue, goes from indigenous animism to modern neo-animism, in which an imaginative effort is required to hold sacred what has been rendered mundane once and for all. More so than "Song of the Redwood-Tree," *Princess Mononoke* questions the values of unbridled military-industrialism, but like Whitman's poem, it gives the nod to improvements in people's lives made possible by technology and modernization—not just material betterment, but also social progress, as the case of the prostitutes shows—and to some degree it accepts the defeat of animism. The neo-animistic trend certainly testifies to the difficulty of sustaining a consistently scientific, demystified, and pragmatic view of nature. But it also questions the possibility of recovering an animism that actually requires people to believe in spirits and give up the social and material progress of modernization. It speaks to an unresolved conflict in the liberal imagination between the ideology of progress and preservationist trends in cultural environmentalism.[26] In many ways, present-day talk of metaphysical phenomena like spirits in nature, or epiphanies and visions, is mainly a literary, cinematic, or rhetorical device. It enlivens and energizes the discourse of nature that has

been demonized by religion and dried out by science. It bestows value on creatures, places, and objects—animals, forests, and trees—commodified and reduced by the resource logic of consumerism. Religion gives them value only in relation to God and humanity, thus reinforcing the capitalist model; and aspiring to a value-free discourse, pure science has little to do with assigning values. But for a poet or cinematic artist or nature writer to say that animals speak to me, or that some place is sacred, or that some tree possesses a spirit is to say that these things have value beyond any price you can put on them.

(Re-)Animated

To get a sense of how completely Whitman's later poems anticipate the neo-animism and the rhetorical mood, even the media choices, of recent nature writing and film, try imagining "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" or "Song of the Redwood-Tree" as animated short films. It's not very hard. Anyone who has watched the Disney version of the fairy tales or films that play upon the fantasy tradition nurtured by English authors like Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling can quite easily picture a Technicolor boy-poet creeping through shoreline shrubs to watch the mockingbirds on their nest or a wizardly Whitman with his long beard mourning the singing spirits that stream from falling redwoods as faceless wood-cutters hack away at their trunks.

What is gained and what is lost in this thought experiment in animation? The images might appeal strongly to the magic allegedly lost with the colonization of indigenous lands and cultures and with the defeat of childhood fantasy by adult practicality. I say allegedly because postcolonial theory has taught us to be wary of a retrospective understanding of tribal cultures and practices that were maintained in linguistic and historical contexts very different from our own.[27] We should be doubly wary of thinking that aligns so-called primitive ways of life with a childhood left behind by enlightened adulthood. A reanimated worldview, realized in cartoons and fantasy stories for adults, alternately questions and reinforces the collapse of the distinction between the primitive and the childlike. In associating these images with childhood, we prepare adolescents to abandon them for the adult frameworks of religion and contemporary science. We suggest, contrary to work by anthropologists like Richard Nelson and ethnobotanists like Gary Nabhan, that indigenous peoples had no science when in fact many tribal cultures surpassed western science in their understanding of particular plants and animals. In losing their animistic worldview, we may have lost that knowledge of natural history as well.

But in clinging to the animated version of animism in contemporary cinema and young-adult culture, we also risk accepting a version of

animism filtered through centuries of religion and western science—a cartoon version. Cartoons are always to some degree caricatures. They reduce complexity by emphasizing key features, as caricaturists identify their subjects by exaggerating a big nose or protruding ears. What gets left out of these images may well be the most subtle and the most important markers of identity. Acknowledging the complexity of flesh-and-blood reality—or fur-and-bone, tree-and-bark reality, of cultural as well as biological diversity—may be the first step toward imagining new ways of relating to animals and plants, earth and stones, rain and sky, what we so blithely generalize as "nature" or "the environment" or "the animals." To hold communion with these elements, to talk to the animals as it were, we may need not so much to recover old ways of being, but to break free of the cycles of conflict among animism, religion, and science—none of which can fully satisfy the yearning and the real needs of an overpopulated, post-colonial, species-decimated world. In short, we need to imagine new ways of being in the world.

As for Walt Whitman, I would argue that he was closer to this kind of new vision when he was animalizing the human in poems like "Song of Myself"— when he was asking "What do these animals have and what do they do that I cannot?"—than when he was spiritualizing humans and animals and oceans and trees in the later poems. Even the famous (or infamous) cataloguing technique of "Song of Myself" might be seen as a function of beastly speech. This poetic technique fits quite well in the category of animal (and autistic) language and behavior that Temple Grandin calls "hyper-specific": "being hyper-specific means you see the differences between things a lot better than you see the similarities. You see the trees better than the forest. A lot of times you might not see the forest at all. Just trees, trees, and more trees. Animals are like that" (218). At that early point in his career, Whitman offered a picture of increasing complexity—evolution as an enfolding and inclusive process of aggregation as much as selection; nature as expanding, prolific, and spendthrift; and poetry as a generative act of image-gathering as prodigal as nature itself—in short, a set of ideals and values far more attractive than the declining complexity and predictability implied in the later trend to put a human face on the whole world and let the human voice speak for all.

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NOTES

1 [Griswold, Rufus W.]. "[Review of Leaves of Grass (1855)]." *The Criterion* 1 (November 10, 1855), 24. Available on the Walt Whitman Archive (www.whitman-archive.org/).

2 Quoted in Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 221.

3 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 644. The literature on falconing suggests that the glance of the wild that Thoreau so values undoes civilization in an almost literal sense. As falconers know, the trainer must never look into the eye of the hawk. The falcon is not a social animal; it does not commune with its fellows by soulful gazes into the eyes of the other. It is a predator, for whom a fixed stare is the prelude to attack. No civilization, that is no inclination to sociability, can endure it. See Tim Gallagher, *Falcon Fever: A Falconer in the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Houghton, 2008).

4 Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 348.

5 The extent of the current interest in "animal studies" among literary and cultural critics is suggested by the special issue of *PMLA* recently devoted to the topic (*PMLA* 124.2 [2009]), which provides a good introduction to the field. See also the work of Cary Wolfe, especially his monograph *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and his edited volume *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). The work of Donna Haraway is also crucial, especially her earliest and latest volumes: *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London: Routledge, 1989) and *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). On the question of language and the difference of human and animal, no study would be complete without reference to the work of the bestselling animal scientist Temple Grandin, notably her *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior* (co-authored with Catherine Johnson, New York: Harcourt, 2005). The significance of animal speech in *Leaves of Grass* has been mostly overlooked in Whitman criticism, with one notable exception: Thomas C. Gannon's probing essay on Whitman's treatment of the "avian other" in "Complaints from the Spotted Hawk: Flights and Feathers in Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*," *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*, ed. Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 141-75.

6 Wolfe goes on to argue that "the pervasiveness of the discourse of species… made the institution of speciesism fundamental (as George Bataille, Jacques Derrida, René Girard and others have reminded us) to the formation of Western subjectivity and sociality as such," so that "the full transcendence of the 'human' requires the sacrifice of the 'animal' and the animalistic" (6). From the perspective of Grandin and Johnson, Wolfe may have overstated the undoing of human-animal distinction based on linguistic prowess. In their view, language remains "sacrosanct" as "the last boundary standing between man and beast" (272). Having thus made the point, however, they proceed to do their part in the undoing, with examples like "prairie dog colonies [that] have a communication system that includes nouns, verbs, and adjectives. They can tell one another what kind of predator is approaching—man, hawk, coyote, dog (noun)—and they can tell each other how fast it's moving (verb). They can say whether a human is carrying a gun or not" (273).

7 *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 210, 231, 211. Hereafter, *PP*.

8 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936).

9 Likewise, as Marianne DeKoven suggests, "many critics and theorists who work in animal and animality studies [today] are motivated by the parallels between animals and subjugated humans." See "Guest Column: Why Animals Now?" *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 363.

10 William Cullen Bryant, "To a Waterfowl," *Oxford Book of American Poetry*, ed. David Lehman and John Brehm (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.

11 Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), 199.

12 Whitman's treatment of the "tokens" ties his thinking not only to Darwin but also to Freud. As Judith Roof writes of Freud's discussion of "vestigial tokens" and "developmental layers": "Freud believed that traces of an animal past not only remain in the individual psyche, but remain and are indignantly denied in human culture.... The descent from animals is denied through the 'arrogance' of modern man, although the erasure of 'the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom ... is still foreign to children, just as it is to primitive and primaeval man. It is a result of a later, more pretentious stage of development.'" "From Protista to DNA (and Back Again): Freud's Psychoanalysis of the Single-Celled Organism," in *Zoontologies*, ed. Wolfe, 103-104.

13 In the words of Marianne DeKoven, many contemporary scholars in animal studies have, like Whitman in "Song of Myself," "turned away from our own species in dismay at what it has wrought and turned toward other animals as a locus both of the other who calls us to ethics and of many of the things that ... we value: purity of affect, unselfish altruism, absence of genocide and infrequency of random, unmotivated violence, and connection to what is for us a source of powerful spiritual experience" (367). Anticipating the charge of sentimentality, DeKoven writes, "The strictures against sentimentality that forbid empathy for other animals and that often accompany charges of anthropomorphism are also more and more replaced [in animality studies] by an awareness of the intricate and massive interdependence between humans and other animals" (366). On the issue of animals' seeming refusal to "sweat and whine about their condition," Temple Grandin expounds on the "stoicism" of animals. Of course, they cannot tell about their pain, but they also actually hide it on many occasions: "In the wild any animal who's injured is likely to be finished off by a predator, so probably animals evolved a natural tendency to act as if nothing's wrong. Small, vulnerable prey animals like sheep, goats, and antelope are especially stoic, whereas predator animals can be big babies. Cats yowl their heads off when they get hurt, and dogs scream bloody murder if you happen to step on their paws" (Grandin and Johnson, 180). In this light, human whining may reveal our evolutionary heritage as a predator species, but Whitman in the passage from "Song of Myself" uses the contrasting image of prey placidity to attack the peculiar social structures that give rise to unnecessary human suffering and to purvey the stoic values of courage and calm.

14 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 97.

15 See Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981).

16 James William Gibson, *A Reenchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature* (New York: Holt, 2009).

17 Cary Wolfe writes, "The question of the animal is just one component in a rethinking of a whole set of nonhuman entities that seem to take on organic, lifelike, or 'autopoietic' characteristics—intelligent machines, of course, but also systems and swarms, viruses and coevolutionary organisms, corpses, corpora, and corporations, images and works of art. There is, in short, a new kind of vitalism and animism in the air, an interest in Nature with a capital N" (*Animal Rites*, xiii).

18 Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 200.

19 Gannon would apparently agree with Phillips, arguing that not only in the later poems but even in the poetry of 1855, which Thoreau so admired, Whitman projects such an overpowering egocentrism that it becomes "difficult to accept the view that Whitman wholeheartedly embraced a thoroughgoing ecoegalitarianism"; instead "he was much more interested in his own persona as egalitarian and leveler" ("Complaints from the Spotted Hawk," 148). While I admire the unrelenting eco-ethics of Phillips and the equally relentless application of critical race theory in Gannon's work, I still find it instructive to keep in view the differences of Whitman's writing over the length of his entire career. In some ways, the case against Whitman's success in fully identifying with the animal other is made stronger by a recognition of his progressive slide from what might seem to Gannon a half-hearted ecoegalitarianism into the thoroughgoing replacement of "eco" with *ego* and *echo* noted in Phillips.

20 Whitman was not alone in the literary movement to give voice to animals in this way. In a discussion of Mary Wilkins Freeman's 1901 collection of animal stories *Understudies*, Susan M. Griffin writes, "For many animal theorists—then and now—language usage crucially differentiates humans from beasts. Indeed, the evolutionary Protestant teleology that underwrote much nineteenth-century Christian social activism regularly invoked images of dumb animals as the responsibility of (more evolved) speaking citizens.... This philanthropic emphasis on animals' inability to speak for themselves helped foster the proliferation of animal 'autobiographies,' in which the animal is given voice. The most famous of these, Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* [1877], a best-seller in America, engendered a literary formula soon applied to dogs . . . cats . . . and birds." Noting the potential of these works as an "all-but-transparent brief for the rights of the working classes and women"—*Black Beauty* has been called the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of animal rights, though it may in fact apply more to human rights—Griffin also insists that "The humanness of beasts unsettles, rather than reinforces, the integrity of humans." "*Understudies*: Miming the Human," *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 513-14. As an antidote to the Euro-centricity of Griffin's examples, consider the Native American portrayal of animal speech as contrasted with the British Romantic tradition in Thomas C. Gannon's *Skylark Meets Meadowlark: Reimagining the Bird in British Romantic and Contemporary Native American Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). While Gannon's best examples come from recent Native literature—such as Linda Hogan's declaration that "the animals are speaking to us, through us, and with us" (qtd. 302)—he also invokes, with the all too appropriate caveats on "mistranslation via metaphysicality" (214), a soaring example from the late nineteenth century: Nicholas Black Elk (219-233). In the separate essay on Whitman in which Gannon tends to "approach even Whitman's

more apparently innocuous uses of nature with some suspicion" ("Complaints from the Spotted Hawk" 163), he argues that "Whitman's ego . . . disallows such a cross-species rapprochement" as we find in Black Elk (162). Though the women writers discussed by Griffin were certainly less than ego-expansive than Whitman in their rhetoric and psychology, Freeman and Sewell were nevertheless heirs to the same Romantic tradition that Gannon critiques, though he focuses almost entirely on the work of white male authors in the western tradition. How women's writing in this vein differed from men's on the question of animal identity in the nineteenth century remains an open question beyond the scope of both my essay and Gannon's book.

21 M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), Chapters 1 and 2.

22 Writing of the "divorce of instrumental and ethical impulses," Kimberly W. Beston cites Claude Bernard's influential text of 1865, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Science*: "a man of science . . . no longer hears the cry of animals" but perceives "only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve." "Experimenting at the Threshold: Sacrifice, Anthropomorphism, and the Aims of (Critical) Animal Studies," *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 549. The trope on the loss of the ability to hear the cries of animals ties this image of the scientist to Whitman's image of the woodcutter in "Song of the Redwood-Tree."

23 Christopher Manes, "Nature and Silence," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 15-29; Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and *The Island Within* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Gioia Woods, "Sci-Animism: American Poetry and Science," *ISLE* 15.2 (2008): 199-210.

24 Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, script adapted by Neil Gaiman available online at www.script-o-rama.com. Japan/USA, 1997.

25 Alexie's best-selling novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007) won the National Book Award for young-adult fiction and brought the author, heretofore known primarily as a niche writer of Native American literature, a wider measure of fame, fortune, and talk-show exposure.

26 On environmentalism as a crisis in Western liberalism, see M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer, *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 3-10. A more recent and dire version of the issue appears in Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus' *Break Through: Why We Can't Leave Saving the Planet to the Environmentalists* (New York: Mariner, 2009), the expanded book version of their notorious web publication *The Death of Environmentalism*, which argues in part that environmentalism cannot effectively withstand the attack of neo-conservatives because, unlike their enemies, environmentalists have not effectively integrated their positions into a broader vision of political and social life, and can thus be dismissed as a radical fringe or special interest enclave. The merit of this argument is suggested in the fact that in a single television season (2009-10), three of the most popular programs in America—*NCIS*, *House*, and *The Mentalist*—all featured episodes centering on "environmentalist nut-jobs" or "eco-terrorism" even in a time when polls show that most Americans agree that the state of the environment is a major problem in international politics.

27 As Gannon argues, any believable re-vision of human-animal-earth kinship "cannot be some facile retreat to a traditional worldview that, honestly, scarcely exists any longer. It must be a renascent syncretism and synthesis that both evokes an ancient/authentic relationship to the alter-species Other and yet is also a new and creative and viable *reimagining* of animal alterity"—a reimagining realized, according to Gannon, in contemporary Native American literature (*Skylark Meets Meadowlark,* xvi).