

Whitman's Paumanok Poems and the Value of Being "Faithful to Things"¹

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*"Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men?
...Are you faithful to things?"²*

Walt Whitman defies ontology: he strives to be eternal, to journey ever in the now, and thus to forswear beginnings. And there is a great deal of "place" in Whitman, space both concrete and metaphorical, Alabama and Maine, body and "kosmos." But Whitman the man was born in Huntington, Long Island, which is a good a place to start exploring how place and space shaped the poet. If we agree that Whitman is, among many other possibilities, a namer of things, it seems logical that the objects he names may give us keys to "place" and that their usefulness as objects within the poem not only anchors his imagery in the specifics of place, but can mediate a kind of trust between reader and poem. This trust (faithfulness) is essential to establish, especially when the poet's larger purpose is one of transcendence. With this in mind, the poems that feature Paumanok provide both a concrete borough or geography—an indication as to how Whitman "studied out the land" in his work—and a starting point from which contemporary readers can believe in a physical place well enough to trust Whitman when he journeys into larger, more encompassing, and often more abstract notions of place.

Some of today's critics bemoan the way in which much contemporary poetry is focused tightly on specific places and situations—specific to the point of obscurity, is the charge. It is true that detail can, in some cases, act to shrink the scope of art; the opposite effect is also possible. Robert M. Schaible, writing on parallels between "Song of Myself" and quantum mechanics theory, notes that "both the physicist's act of measurement and the poet's act of naming can be said to *enhance* as well as reduce, in our knowing, the reality of the two entities under consideration."³

Let us consider how Whitman uses Long Island to signify beginnings. It is, after all, literally as well as figuratively, his birth-place:

From Paumanok starting I fly like a bird,
Around and around to soar and sing of all,
To the north betaking myself to sing there arctic songs,
To Kanada till I absorb Kanada in myself, to Michigan then,
To Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, to sing their songs (they are inimitable;)
Then to Ohio and Indiana to sing theirs...
...to roam accepted everywhere...⁴

Most famously, he writes, “Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born...” after which the poet begins at once to “roam many lands.” The shorter, later poem cited above is a reprise of the earlier piece with the addition of the avian metaphor.⁵ So far, scant news of Whitman’s physical natal home, except as a region from which to flee, or fly, and for the poet’s decision to use “Paumanok” rather than “Long Island” as a place name. Blodgett and Sculley note, in their “Reader’s Edition” of *LG*, that “WW was especially fond of this Indian name for Long Island as closely associated with his childhood memories.”⁶ Perhaps there is some connection with Walt Whitman’s assertion (in his *New York Tribune* letter of 4 Aug. 1881) that one of his ancestors “is mentioned as a great linguist, and sometimes acted in the courts as interpreter with the Indians.” From a poet’s standpoint, however, the Narragansett and Natick place names are simply good words in poems: interestingly-stressed, alliterative, lovely on the tongue. The alliterative qualities and non-English (mostly non-iambic) stress patterns of Native American-based words create an emotional tone in the work which may have attracted Whitman, aside from any intentional symbolism.

Contemporary poets tend to eschew symbolism; it is a freighted word for poetry critics, and the very idea of symbolism can cramp the potential for recognizing subtler complexities in a poem. It is simply too easy to assert that for Whitman, Paumanok symbolizes origin and starting-out, that it is a metaphorical signifier despite its actual geography—the solid “fact” of its existence on the Sound. Whitman wrote of India—a nation that actually exists—even though he had never traveled there except through books. Because he had never been to the physical country of India, his relationship to India the place must be different from his relationship to Long Island the place, and that difference may include a more consciously symbolic aspect of “India-ness” than there is of “Paumanok-ness.” A complex transaction occurs between the invocation of his birth-place as a word or signifying concept and the concrete reality of the Huntington area. None of this means Paumanok *cannot* be symbolic, only that it is likely to be *more* than just symbolic.

Place always serves vital purposes in Whitman’s work, and this is especially important for the contemporary reader. The reader senses that nothing is beneath this writer’s notice, nothing is forgettable; each environ touches him, and he embraces all. The island is a place not only metaphorical (a starting place, a coast, a sea) but physical. Paumanok’s rural and littoral attributes cling to Whitman: the writer can continually splash his “bare feet in the edge of the summer ripples on Paumanok’s sands” as he greets us, personally, inviting each neighbor (and each reader) to join him and adhere to him.⁷ This tactile image offers a different impact from the metaphorical “Mysterious ocean where the streams empty.”⁸ No one gets wet feet from that mysterious ocean, but we believe the sand between the toes at Paumanok. Twentieth-century writers began—in part due to the influence of Asian poetry and in part due to imagist poets and Williams’ dictum “no ideas

but in things”—to concern themselves with what is observed, tactile, and to work toward having poems derive their impact from the reader’s experience with and relationship to the things observed (rather than through emotional, philosophical, or other abstract relationships). Whitman’s ambitions for poetry are larger and more abstract, generally; but in the Paumanok poems, his fond and accurate observations can win over the 21st-century reader.

The section of *Leaves of Grass* most directly based on life experience is *Drum-Taps*, which is beyond the scope of this paper. But in Whitman’s other pieces, memory is more often global than personal. “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” for instance, contains a *stated* reminiscence:

I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

Once Paumanok,
When the lilac-scent was in the air and the Fifth-month grass was growing.⁹

The choice Whitman makes to use the “aboriginal” name for his “fish-shape island” is a clue that the imagery is memory-based, yet this poem is less reminiscence than it is revelation or announcement. In that sense, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is, despite its description of Long Island in the 1820s, *not* a poem of physical place. Other poems that make up *Sea-Drift* do, however, rely upon Paumanok as a physical setting; so do the later (and perhaps lesser) poems in *Sands at Seventy*. And while “Starting from Paumanok” has more in common, as to purpose, with “Out of the Cradle...” and “Song of Myself,” it establishes Paumanok as a geographical place in a way “Out of the Cradle...” does not.

To find Whitman’s Paumanok observed through memory’s lens, *Sands at Seventy* offers two quick sketches, “Paumanok” and “From Montauk Point.” The first is Whitman in full declaratory voice, three exclamation points in five lines. The island is “stretch’d and basking!”, the Sound an “inland ocean laving, broad, with copious commerce, steamers, sails,” the Atlantic side marked by wind and “mighty hulls dark-gliding in the distance.”¹⁰ This is precise description of both topography and activity—a bird’s-eye view of the island as sensed and felt by a bird tactilely aware of wind. It is not merely a seeing but a being-in the landscape. Smells and tastes are inferred in this interactive postcard: “Isle of sweet brooks...Isle of the salty shore and breeze and brine.”¹¹ Furthermore, this picture is a moving-picture: the sea is active, depicted in the present-tense, and continuous.

Keith Wilhite has written about Whitman’s “absenting” himself from the poems and about how this linguistic absence (from what Wilhite terms “the scene of writing/the scene of reading”) can give the poems momentum; as Wilhite puts it, “In language, the past is always becoming present as the present ‘words’ the future.”¹² What better metaphor for this “influx and

efflux...passivity and push” than the sea? Whitman’s text proposes a framework for meshing the past with the present and the future; that text is, in this brief but elegant instance, Paumanok’s physical, memorable, timeless coastline.¹³

Whitman was 69 years old and living in Camden, NJ at the time “From Montauk Point” was composed. It begins with a perspective similar to the previous poem: the poet perched high (“as on some mighty eagle’s beak”) on the point. Since Jayne’s Hill, at only 400 feet or so above sea level, is Long Island’s highest spot, the Montauk site (which, although well-known for its lighthouse, sits lower) is not much of an aerie; nevertheless, it serves the poet’s purpose for viewing the Atlantic “Eastward the sea absorbing” with its “inbound urge and urge of waves/Seeking the shores forever.”¹⁴ The last time Whitman had been to Long Island was probably seven years earlier; had he ventured all the way to Montauk from Huntington at that time, or is this a memory dating from his youth? Is one sea view pretty much like another? Or can one, specific, bodily and intellectually engaging encounter with one, specific sea-place resonate within a body for decades? The pace of the poem suggests the latter because of the duration of the line and the overhead (retrospective?) viewpoint, even though the imagery employed in the piece is more or less “standard” sea-description fare: foam, tossing waves, distant ships—nothing really startling in that. Yet the rhythm, the physicality of “The wild unrest, the snowy, curling caps—that inbound urge and urge of waves...” supplies the reader with a long, laving line of syllables that announce a place in mind.

These two “little” poems are more than postcards arriving at the Poet’s door after many years. They are reminders of place as origin and motivation. The poem most *descriptive* of the ecological and physical environment of Whitman’s birth-place, however, is “A Paumanok Picture,” which more closely resembles a photographic view than do the later pieces. It is, quite naturally for Whitman, written in the present tense but entirely evocative of a particular—and past—situation. This poem also has the cinematic quality, albeit on a small scale, that Muriel Rukeyser comments upon in her *The Life of Poetry*. In her chapter “The ‘Uses’ of Poetry,” Rukeyser notes that some poems, like films, use sequences of images and actions, and cites Whitman in particular as a practitioner of this method:

Whitman, writing years before the invention of the moving picture camera, has in his poems given to us sequence after sequence...The rhythm of these sequences is film rhythm, the form is montage.¹⁵

Likewise, the rhythm of so many of Whitman’s poems is sea-rhythm, and the mosaic images produced by succeeding waves are specific ones. Indeed, although Long Island is large, *this* picture is of the place where Whitman reports “two boats with nets” are “lying off the sea-beach, quite still,” and where exactly ten fishermen wait for a school of mossbonkers.¹⁶

“Mossbonkers” is a regional word for menhadin, a fish of the herring family (*Clupeidae*) used for oil and fertilizer and as a baitfish. Menhadin is apparently a corruption of a Narragansett word,¹⁷ and mossbonkers a corruption of a Dutch one.¹⁸ In one fish’s name, we can trace the meshing of cultures and the history of the region: fishing and farming were the chief occupations of the peoples inhabiting Paumanok. Here, vocabulary betrays origin but adds validity to the “picture.” The poem is loving and accurate: a portrayal of processes (seining, the use of the windlass, small-time fishing), place (the shallow bay, sandy beach, fish strewn “in heaps and windrows, well out from the water”) and persons (“lounging in boats”). This poem is dated 1881. Probably it is a sketch prompted by Whitman’s recent return to his “birth-spot” that year, where, although he reported much had changed, there were certainly still fishermen rounding up mossbonkers in and near Cold Spring Harbor.¹⁹

It is easy to love that picture and to be convinced by it. Whitman’s choice of language, process, and detail evoke a solid and believable poetic place. Additionally, through these poems Paumanok—an ordinary place—can become transcendent: not merely symbolic of “beginnings” but part and parcel of a larger “place” that is Whitman’s most urgent interest. After calling up his physical origins and places, the poet can leap ahead to his wider agenda where his poem encapsulates, according to Rukeyser, “everything meaning the present and everything meaning the chance of the future.”²⁰

When Whitman names his birth-place Paumanok, his readers have the opportunity to enhance their knowing about the reality of Whitman’s “place,” to experience it as geographically real and metaphorically and transcendently “real.” Such experiences in art lead us to believe the artistic reality, however removed or variant it may be from our own. This ability—to make a reader trust the poet’s reality—is what makes a writer “faithful to things.” And if readers can trust Whitman about Paumanok, as they trust him about Virginia in 1864, they can trust him about almost anything—including the kosmos.

Notes

- 1 This paper was delivered at “Whitman and Place, a Conference Celebrating 150 Years of *Leaves of Grass*,” ed. Blodgett and Bradley, Rutgers University Camden, April 21, 2005.
- 2 Whitman, “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” in *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Readers’ Edition*.
- 3 Schaible, “Quantum Mechanics and ‘Song of Myself’: Getting a Grip on Reality,” 42.
- 4 Whitman, “Leaves of Grass,” 284 li 1-6, 8.
This is one of the poems, too many to mention, in which a list of place-names (many of them states or regions, and many with “aboriginal” name origins) establishes a broader idea of democratic “place” in Whitman’s work.

- ⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 15.
⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 247.
⁷ Ibid., 25, li 214.
⁸ Ibid., 21, li 135.
⁹ Ibid., 247, li 20-24.
¹⁰ Ibid., 507.
¹¹ Ibid., 507, li 4-5.
¹² Wilhite, "His Mind Was Full of Absences: Whitman at the Scene of Writing," 924.
¹³ Ibid., 926-927.
¹⁴ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 508.
¹⁵ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 85.
¹⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 46.
¹⁷ The Native American word for menhadin apparently derives from a meaning close to "that which enriches the earth" or "he who fertilizes the crops." The fish are also called pogies, bunkers, or bugmouths and, while the individual fish can grow to a pound in weight, are usually seined for harvest (herring-sized).
¹⁸ The Dutch word is *marsbankers*, and likewise refers to herring or herring-like fish.
¹⁹ cf. letter cited above, August 1881. I located the text at www.liglobal.com/walt
²⁰ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 143-144.

References

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