

THE
LAST WORD



FACING NORTH FROM MICHIGAN'S SHORES

COMING HOME TO WISCONSIN ON A RE-cent trip, I found myself lingering along the south shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. *Lingering*, because any time I am in proximity to the big water of Superior, I find it hard to break away from its shore. In midsummer its brisk air, freshwater surf, chill water, and expansive horizons combine to make it one of the most invigorating and restorative places on Earth. Coming to the lake, one's body sighs, and calms, and breathes. One's view is sprayed and washed clear.

On this particular visit I also found myself wandering along the shore of literature and memory. As a blustery wind blew across the water from the north, from Canada, a snippet of one of my favorite poems came aground on the waves. The full poem, from the "Children of Adam" section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

Facing west from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet un-
found,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the
house of maternity, the land of migrations,
look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the
circle almost circled;
For starting westward from Hindustan,
from the vales of Kashmere,
From Asia, from the north, from the God,
the sage, and the hero,
From the south, from the flowery peninsu-
las and the spice islands,
Long having wander'd since, round the
earth having wander'd,
Now I face home again, very pleas'd and
joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long
ago? And why is it yet unfound?)

For me, this is one of those poems that *lodges*. Many years now into my post-English-major life, I still stand often alongside Walt on that shore. I

still explore those two closing questions that transform the poem from a pensive contemplation to a fundamental query into the nature of our modern civilization, our perspective and orientation, our history and destiny.

Whitman paused there at the end of the open road at the far rim of the continent, of western culture's advance, of the young nation whose growing pains and pleasures he proclaimed to close a circle. Connecting an end to a beginning, migration to maternity, he is "pleas'd and joyous"... yet frustrated and unsettled. The outward journey was "almost circled," but the inner journey was incomplete. A whole wide world of experience behind him, Whitman yet voices the desire for elusive wisdom, and for a place to be still.

The poet's dominant axis was east-west. So, for five thousand years, had it been for western civilization, from "Hindustan" to "my Western sea." Powered by the sail, and by the stored carbon of the soils, forests, and coal, that civilization worked its way ever westward until it reached...California. There, in Whitman's words, it began to confront the reality of the self-contained Earth, and maybe to find itself there.

And yet, even as Whitman penned his poems, people were beginning to tap (as Wes Jack-

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son has explained) the next two “pools of energy-rich carbon”: oil and natural gas. In the summer of 1859, four years after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared, drills penetrated the hills of Titusville, Pennsylvania, where “rock oil” seeped naturally from the ground. With that first purposeful production, refining, and transport of petroleum, the modern oil industry was born.

Among its other consequences, the petroleum age would allow the axis of global exploration, resource exploitation, economic authority, and political power to shift by degrees from east-west to north-south. We could put off the process of wisdom-seeking and the responsibility for land-caring by turning away from the setting sun, and toward the poles. For a century and half, cheap and abundant oil has powered the enrichment of the global north, and the exploitation of the global south. We wrestle now with the imbalance and the inequity. For this remains a whole and self-contained Earth. The consequences of our hunger for carbon, and of its unprecedented release from the ground to the atmospheric and oceanic commons, affect us all (even as they affect us differently).

Facing north from Michigan’s shore, I am mindful of the impacts beyond Superior’s freshwater horizon. As of this mid-August, we are very close to 2007’s record low extent of arctic sea ice. According to the National Snow and Ice Data Center, sea ice is “low across almost all of the Arctic.... It is exceptionally low in the Laptev and Kara Sea areas. ...The southern route of the Northwest Passage, now appears to be free of sea ice” (<http://nsidc.org/arcticseaicenews/>). A preponderance of studies predicts the complete loss of arctic ice cover by 2100, with others coming in as early as 2029.

Meanwhile, another great pool of fossil fuel, the Canadian tar sands, is being developed full-bore. It cannot be most efficiently exploited, however, unless the Keystone XL pipeline is built across the United States to the Texas Gulf Coast. As I write, protesters are engaged in a two-week long vigil of civil disobedience at the White House,

calling for the barring of the pipeline. My friend Rick is among those who have been arrested. He writes: “Mining, transporting, refining and burning more tar sands oil, the dirtiest, most carbon-intense oil on the planet, oil that along with other fossil fuels threatens to doom our children to a future of hell and high water, is a matter of right and wrong” (www.climatechronicle.com).

Along Superior’s shore, I think of friends in the nearby Ojibwe communities of Michigan and Wisconsin, for whom the wild rice beds of the north’s cool, clear waters are so central to their story as a people. I think of the Cree communities along Hudson Bay, and their continual, centuries-long story of co-evolution with, and perseverance in, the ever-changing lands of the sub-arctic. I think of the communities of the extreme north—the Chukchi and Gwich’in and Inuit and Yupik and Sami—that are at the melting edge of climate disruption, their stories thoroughly interwoven with those of bear and caribou and seal, machine and oil and ice.

Their migrations were different from those of Whitman and of western civilization. But they have all—we have all—come now to the same point. We all stand upon a far shore. Some avoid the prospect, and choose not to think too much

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about the path behind. Others face forward with hope and nerves, tireless and inquiring, and perhaps with at least some wisdom gained. It was another poet, T. S. Eliot, who might have provided the best response, two generations later, to Whitman. At the end of “Little Gidding,” Eliot suggested this:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered
gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning....
...the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

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