

## Water Wars, Talking Water: Art, Activism and the Eco-politics of Whitman's Walk to the Water

STEPHEN HARRIS  
University of New England

Ten years before his death in 1892, Walt Whitman arranged to have the penultimate edition of his opus *Leaves of Grass* published in Philadelphia, along with a new collection of writings, *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882). In one of the poetic prose fragments in this collection of 'livraisons', entitled 'To the Spring and Brook', Whitman's poet-persona, the wandering rhapsodist of 'Song of Myself' in *Leaves of Grass*, comes into view, 'sauntering' to the banks of what has become *his* spring. He attends to the 'song' of the stream with hermeneutic attentiveness: 'gurgling, gurgling ceaselessly—meaning, saying something, of course (if one could only translate it—always gurgling there ... never giving out'. Measuring his own ephemerality against the seemingly eternal 'soft sound-gurgle' of the water, he pledges an acolyte's devotion: 'Babble on, O brook, with that utterance of thine ... I will learn from thee, and dwell on thee – receive, copy, print from thee' (Whitman (1882) in Buell, *Leaves* 631-2).

Lately, here in Australia, there has been talk of water and rivers in the mainstream print media: 'Let the rivers be heard,' implores one recent editorial; 'Rivers are eternal. Rivers are venerated ... [Rivers] tell many stories,' intones another. In speaking out to the public, such editorial pronouncements might seem to speak *for* the broader populace, if only in echoing general sentiments. More obviously, while reportorial in flavour, the literary tropes can be seen to carry a certain political weight, if more by inference than immediate effect. In the first example, the editor affects to 'speak' for the Murray-Darling river, thus challenging the cantankerous choir of human voices presently competing for prominence and political influence over the management of the river's water: the 'river's voice must be heard' against the warring talk over, about and for the river itself. In the second, the editor, reflecting on the significance of the Diamond Jubilee pageant for contemporary Britain, 'listens' beckoningly to the Thames, itself inseparable from the city of London, as if seeking oracular enlightenment: 'What message' does 'London and its river ... send today'? (*Herald* 2012: 8; *Guardian* 2012: 22).

As fine as such journalistic sentiments are, the news from elsewhere qualifies the mood: in India, the sacred Yamuna River, one of a trinity of waterways, has recently been pronounced dead – venerable perhaps, but in no way immune to the careless desecrations of human beings which gather apace globally and seemingly ineluctably. And across the broad region of South Asia, water—fresh water on which human communities and economies depend—is transmuted into a 'powerful weapon of diplomacy, even of coercion', and so subjected to another level of human imposed meaning and put to use for yet more questionable purposes (see Doherty). 'Water use' takes on a new set of disturbing connotations: we see this in all its painful, contorted detail in the protracted dispute over the Murray-Darling River.<sup>1</sup> While rhetorically the editors' appeals do not stand against Whitman's sensuous reverence and lyric grandiosity—the fragment I quote from distils the sweeping theatrical vision of his best poem, 'Song of Myself'—the sentiment is Whitmanian: the river, as personified forsaken innocent, must be allowed to 'speak' through the static of human competition and voracious commercial demand. Or

rather, to invert the logic of the trope, humans must learn to 'hear', and in doing so, begin to *see* and *be* different, to use the phenomenological notion I will explore in this essay.

'To explore' in this instance is to 'essay' the subject in the Montaignean sense, for the cluster of terms in the subtitle of this essay—'Art, Activism and Eco-Politics'—illustrates a complex discursive intersection which, for my purposes, invites a more digressive approach. Additionally, the underlying problem being addressed here—that concerning human attitudes towards and treatment of that most elemental and vital of natural substances: water—unavoidably entails much wider, more circuitous debates, most obviously concerning the manner in which humans approach the natural world at large. The word 'nature' itself underscores the point. In his important book, *The Economy of the Earth* (2008), Mark Sagoff points to the philosophically and politically complex debates around the use of commonplace terms such as 'nature', 'place' and 'environment': just as 'the concept of place is distinct from that of Nature, in so far as places are cultural artefacts and Nature exists as an iconic abstraction apart from culture and in distinction to it', so 'the concepts of environment and place are far from interchangeable ... the differences in their meanings are profound' (162-3). The politics of environmentalism are invoked here, as is the crucial and contestatory role of language: 'environment', 'nature', 'ecology', 'wilderness', and 'wild' point to a spectrum of disputes and contests over meaning that can often preoccupy and detain critics, legislators and policy makers, even as they seek to solve practical problems.

It is appealing to insist on the instrumental nature of language in efforts to change human attitudes and behaviour towards the natural world, as does the leader of an activist group in California recently formed to defend the long-abused Los Angeles river: 'We have to start thinking in new ways, and using words differently ... If you call it [the river] a sewer ditch you treat it like a sewer ditch. Call it a river and you treat it like a river' (Wolfe, qtd. in Carroll).<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Sagoff reminds us, 'it is the *interplay* of the cultural and natural in history that identifies an environment as a particular place' (174; my emphasis), and, it should be added, that engenders seemingly insuperable political complications. Concerning the role of language, Michael Cathcart makes a more fundamental point: the argument that, for human beings and their relationship to the natural world, 'there is only language', 'the reality is that the world answers back. Project what you like. If you fail to find water, you will die' (3).

To propose, then, that in Whitman's ardent genuflections to the greater force of Nature we might find ideas of immediate practical use in meeting the present-day environmental crisis will be to challenge credulity, at least given the philosophical complications and political extremes attending the debate over anthropogenic effects on climate and environment. This is more so the case, perhaps, when contending, as I am here, that in Whitman's Transcendentalist convictions we can, through an eco-critical reading, arrive at a model of transformative potential that is of immediate political use and value in the twenty-first century. The claim to such 'potential' will attract dismissive charges of idealism, and so forestall the argument, much as a traduced form of scepticism compromises the contemporary debate over human interactions with and responsibilities to the natural world. There is, that is to say, more philosophical nuance to discussions about 'nature' than the politics of denialism allow, a point Bruno Latour makes in a polemically ironic way when celebrating the death of nature: 'Thank God, nature is going to die. Yes, the great Pan is dead. After the death of God and the death of man, nature, too, had to give up the ghost. It was time; we were about to be unable to engage in

politics any more at all' (Latour, qtd. in Todd 117). Reading through the 'revolutionary' posture, Latour's observation is more usefully understood as a kind of corrective: there is no transcendent point of refuge or resolution; the 'politics', ever-present, are immiscibly *human* in character and practice, and bound by human intention and capability.

In regard to the literary (eco-)critical perspective directing this essay, Latour's announcement provides an instructive example: to 'engage in politics' is to *put into question*, actively and persistently, the beliefs, shibboleths and assumptions that inform debates about human relationships to non-human animals and the environment. Clearly, Latour announces the death of the *concept* of nature; but both his assertion and the very word 'nature' itself (along with its semantic correlates), already burdened as it is with distractingly divergent meanings, highlights the inescapable fact that the language employed to talk about the natural world is always political, at least when viewed in terms of its manifold ideological inflection.

More pertinently for my purposes here, Latour identifies his adversaries as the 'political ecologists', who in his view "environmentalise" all politics by inserting ecological concerns into all debates. Again, and helpfully, Latour *puts into question* the politics of environmentalism. Yet, it is the complementary point to this observation—that, *mutatis mutandis*, all environmental and ecological matters are political—that is more telling. It is too neat to insist that all forms of eco-criticism are irreducibly 'eco-political', where 'political' is used in the broad sense to denote actions designed to achieve practical results and outcomes. Rather, it is more the point that the political and ecological conflate, overlap and interfuse in disorientating ways.<sup>3</sup> To put into *practice* the *idea* that we might learn different ways of 'seeing and being' in regard to human interactions with the world becomes especially vulnerable to the disabling complications ensuing from competing critical, political, scientific and philosophical perspectives – to what some have called the 'wicked problems' characterising many present-day problems, most conspicuously the complex dilemma of devising and negotiating water reform in Australia's Murray-Darling Basin. (See Miller 2012).

The distinction between the nineteenth century Whitman's reverential 'talking to' the waters and the twentieth century disputative 'talking about' water points to this very confronting nature of the complex contemporary politics of water – to what might be called the 'eco-political' nature of the problem. In the first instance, the 'problem' centres on encouraging a greater collective awareness of the human abuse and misuse of water and, by extension, an active appreciation of and responsibility towards the entire system of interlocking ecologies while at the same time acknowledging and tending to the various social and economic implications of fostering just such an awareness. Yet, reflexively (even circularly), it also illustrates that the problem of politics is politics itself – that is, the congestion of interests and intentions bearing upon the negotiation and organisation of power and influence through both policy and leadership.

In essaying the notion that Whitman's encounter with the 'brook' enacts a suggestive *stance towards* the natural world (as embodied in the brook), which in turn hinges on a phenomenological sense of being *in place*, might be to do no more than reaffirm the *theoretical* importance of philosopher and author, Freya Matthew's onto-poetics, for example. Yet, the validity of the onto-poetic argument is not in question here; rather, and obversely, the global crises arising from the human abuse of water in all its forms—thus the vast system of interlocking ecologies it supports—infuses onto-poetics with a fresh

political imperative. For assistance in exploring this proposition, I want to draw on author Gabriel Josipovici's illuminating notion of 'sacred space' in the Bible. For Whitman's brief supplicatory encounter with the stream conveys the sense of 'being mindful of space and its vibrancy' through acting on the call 'to pause, to rest' (33).<sup>4</sup> Such a 'coming to rest', as it might be phrased, enacts an inwardly expansive response to being in the place of nature – being bodily in a natural place. In so doing, Whitman (through his lyrical persona) performs the transformative potential found in the act of pausing – of taking time (of 'reclaiming' time, in a sense) to suspend one's motion through the time and space in order to apprehend. I understand this in the way that Josipovici puts it, as a question of 'what you are and where you belong' (ibid.). The notion of performance here does not denote a facile form of posturing or display; rather, Whitman's private and unaffectedly reverent 'pause' evokes a state of ontological alertness and bears with it a political effect, not in the manner of a practical program of action but as a readying (through rest) of consciousness from which such action might and can proceed.

It should, however, be conceded that such a proposition *puts into question* the political nature of literary eco-criticism in general, where ecocriticism refers to the reading and interpretation of texts as these reflect, comment on and often interrogate human relations with the environment. How, for example, when considering the broad-scale and drastically deteriorating state of the world's water supplies, do humans *in reality, at large* and with appropriate urgency change collective behaviour? The political realist would likely say that, dismaying as the news of the desecration and political manipulation of rivers might be, there is no reason to be surprised at territorial politics or the politicisation of debates over the practicalities (economic and otherwise) of sharing a vital resource such as water. As Steven Mithen notes in his recent book on the history of water wars, *Thirst: Water and Power in the Ancient World* (2012), humans have been trading in and fighting over access and rights to water since antiquity; and politics, charitably understood, could be said to generate solutions (if only by intention) to the same measure that it exacerbates and perpetuates the problems.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, in view of these same entrenched politics, the comparative reading of Whitman's soliloquy and the editors' public pronouncements offers immediately useful insights, if in less overtly practical terms. For, where Whitman confidently invites the beneficent didacticism of Nature's wisdom—Nature as all-encompassing and higher moral principle where: '... Nature, [is] the only permanent reliance for sanity of book or human life' (630)—the editors' appeals to the rivers speak in ambiguously propitiatory tones. Certainly, such voices are apparently fired with the knowledge of the burgeoning environmental crisis of our time and the daunting scale of the task involved in regulating the insatiable human demand on the natural world that has provoked that same crisis; yet they are also weighted with what might be called an inarticulate sense of purpose, which is to say they bespeak a deeper contradiction that colours the complex politics of water: on the one hand, the dominant pragmatic imperatives of using water as resource, whereby value is decreed in primarily economic and utilitarian terms, and, on the other, a vestigial yearning for a source of symbolic value inhering in the natural world – a reflexive nostalgia for a belief in that very 'wisdom' Whitman so artlessly appeals to in Nature.

To hear these earnest editors' statements as voices of political protest would be to overestimate their editorial imprimatur when measured against the assertive polemics of contemporary artists. Consider, for example, Allan Sekula's and Noel Burch's 'hydropoetic' cine-essay, *The Forgotten Space*, in which the ocean becomes,

analogically, the composite river of the world – the battleground on which ‘the deleterious effects of globalisation on both individuals and nation states’ is played out (Corless 2012). In exploring the ‘eco-politics’ of Whitman’s ‘walk to the waters’ – or interchangeably, ‘ecopoetic politics’, which refers to artistic expression that explicitly endeavours to influence and change human understandings of, and thus relationships to, the natural environment – I am in part referring to the role of art as political activism; and in contrast to the editorial pronouncements already mentioned, the arresting of the protest theatre of Australian performance artist, Fiona McGregor, provides a more telling example of the confrontational nature of eco-political performance art.

In a sequenced ‘living’ installation entitled *Water Series (Descent, Passage, and Expulsion)* (2011) McGregor uses her body to enact the elemental hydrology of physical existence, making corporeally visible the dynamics of water, salt, flesh and blood. Saline water will ‘flood’ her bloodlines in stage two of the performance, as she undergoes a live transfusion (an exchange of essences: water for blood), and, in stage three, her body becomes conduit and aperture, ‘expressing’ an excess of water as urinous fountain. In so doing, she makes graphically literal a fundamental biological fact: ‘water flows in the human body and constantly renews itself’, as one scientist puts it (*Descent* 2011). Graphically, she invokes the words of American writer Edward Hoagland, ‘Our bodies are 70 percent water (our brains more)’, and “only mimic the earth’s surface in this respect ...’ (15).<sup>6</sup> Where we might interpret McGregor’s performance as restatement of the now-bowdlerised Taoist notion of being ‘in the flow’, we can also read her act more pointedly, as one which, in rendering the body elemental, enacts the affirmation that humans are *of* earth and the natural environment.

Whitman’s poetic stance does not so much pre-empt or anticipate the more extreme artistic acts of ‘eco-political’ protest such as McGregor’s, as her radical living installation becomes both a reprise and an extension of Whitman’s late nineteenth-century brook-side meditation. Of course, generically and stylistically, McGregor’s work, as representative of contemporary conceptual and performance artist, bears little comparison with Whitman’s importunate worship of the supreme spiritual force of Nature (and, by extension, even less with Whitman’s vaunting idealisations of American democracy). In political terms, there would seem even less ground on which to entertain comparison, at least when we understand ‘political’ to refer to efforts to influence the practical exercise and allocation of power for the purposes of effecting practical outcomes. But as McGregor’s work *arrests* attention in its graphic audacity, so Whitman’s ‘rest’ marks a complementary sense of pausing – a ‘coming into place’. Ecocritically, the affinity highlights the oft-claimed capacity of artistic expression to provoke reflection, heighten awareness and shift consciousness; yet, it also ‘places’ Walt Whitman’s poetics in the company of that diverse ensemble of activities and ideas signified by the terms ‘art’ and ‘activism’ as practised today – what John Kinsella defines as ‘a poetics of activist outcomes’ (85).<sup>7</sup>

In another context, Kinsella’s conception would warrant more quizzical consideration (are all ‘outcomes’ intrinsically ‘poetic?’); yet, of more immediate use in this instance is the manner in which Kinsella reframes the interplay of poetry and political activism so that we might begin to think of ‘outcomes’ in more nuanced terms (a ‘poetics’, not simply a set of defined, measurable and reportable actions). And so, just as it is valid to argue that the constricting nature of the current political debates over human responsibilities to, and relationship with, the natural world necessitates the

confrontational work of McGregor—extremes beget extremes—equally, Whitman's intimate solicitations can be looked to as a mode of activist poetics, to appropriate Kinsella's phrase, if at the subtler end of the spectrum. For Whitman delivers no bold environmentalist treatise or programmatic political message; rather, his ostensibly simple (because spontaneously unscripted) appeal to Nature promotes a distinctive awareness of our human place in the natural world. His beckoning to the brook comes of an active state of rest; he performs (as it were) a willed state of '(ar)rest' – an imaginatively productive pause that radiates connotations of 'home', 'dwelling', and 'inhabiting', and which, in turn, affords twenty-first century readers the opportunity to see themselves *in place* in ways that encourage greater ecological awareness.

'To the Spring and Brook' stands as little more than one diaristic entry, relatively raw in its reportorial spontaneity, in the much longer episodic narrative entitled *Specimen Days*, and as such is not poetically substantial in itself. However, the literary qualities—voice, character, imagery, theme and delivery—crystallise Whitman's more celebrated and recognisable poetic creation – the beneficent and capaciously oracular 'I' of 'Song of Myself', a persona who is Orphic mystic, visionary idealist and spiritual orgiast, and who is, most obviously, a magnificent conceit by and through which he achieves the metamorphic consummation with an idealised democratic America and, inseparably, the entire natural world. The waterway in this entry is a favourite spot on Timber Creek, 'twelve or thirteen miles from where it enters the Delaware River' (630); its introduction in the text marks a thematic juncture in Whitman's "diary" (as he calls it), both a departure from the 'gloomy experiences' he recounts in the first "section" of Civil War reflections, and yet also a return to familiar concerns. In an explanatory footnote, Whitman apologises for "the abrupt change of field and atmosphere", asking readers' forbearance as he "restore[s] my book to the bracing and buoyant equilibriums of concrete outdoor Nature, the only permanent reliance for sanity of book or human life" (ibid.). Crucially, it must also be acknowledged that as an elaborate and grandiose conceit, this all-consuming self is always a literary effect, whether this refers to his more readily recognised poems or the epistolary entries in *Specimen Days*. Any political reading of Whitman's depictions of, and poetically performed interactions with, the natural world is qualified by the figurative nature of the work itself, in ostensible contrast to McGregor's literal figuring of her corporeal self as of nature.

Yet, the poet's language is working both upon, and always in tension with, the awareness of a human remove from the natural world. Where McGregor renders physical and actual Whitman's invocative summons to the natural world to 'grow[s] into him', the sensory fusion he depicts—'the soft-sound gurgles of it [the stream], as I sit there hot afternoons. How they and all grow into me ...' (632)—is a figurative effect achieved through an auditory immersion in the 'music' of the stream. In so doing, he imaginatively performs a kind of imagined transmutation, a dilatory merging of self and the 'other' of nature—'spin and wind thy way—I with thee, a little while, at any rate'. If only momentarily, he is 'in place', and so phenomenologically speaking, fully inhabiting the world of being in and of nature, not simply being in the natural world. His poetic performance, then, carries a particular force, less because it propounds a universalised moral lesson—though the speaker *individually* seeks just such instruction—than for the way in which it compels readers to reflect on that most fundamental of existential questions: the extent to which the human relationship to the natural world—what is often expressed in modernity as some form of alienation from nature—is more an effect of consciousness (the perception of separation) than any biological fact.

Sceptical as we need to be in our ecological moment, writers such as Fromm affirm, if paradoxically, the importance and the imperative fact of nature (to use the term in its customarily generalised sense). Yet, Whitman, too, as a nineteenth-century American who makes an unabashed poetic virtue of his Transcendentalist idealism and pantheistic humanism, betrays the awareness of the distance between himself (at least as readers hear 'him' through his persona) and the Nature he so ardently venerates. While he expresses the desire to 'learn from' and 'dwell on' the stream, to imbibe the spiritual nutrients offered in the 'wild, just-palpable perfume, and the dapple of leaf-shadows, and all the natural-medicinal, elemental-moral influences of the spot' (632), so the force of his conviction is qualified by an understatedly melancholic acknowledgement of distance, first suggested in the seemingly incidental phrase 'a little while' ('I with thee, a little while, at any rate'), and underscored parenthetically in the closing sentence of the fragment: 'As I haunt thee so often, season by season, thou knowest, reckest not me, (yet why be so certain? who can tell?)...' (632). Desire for communion, it seems, is compromised by the 'haunting' realisation of insuperable separation.

This very tension does not undermine the effect; it concentrates it. If in prevailing upon, and in a sense 'proposing to' Nature, Whitman could not be said to be taking a political stance in any conventional sense of the term, by the same token, in the candour and peculiar intimacy of his appeal, the poet implicitly challenges modern-day readers to 'rest' and so reflect on their own relationship with the natural world. Certainly, in speaking in the voice of democratic Everyman (*albeit*, in a demotic tongue thick with biblical cadences), Whitman *figuratively* democratises the place and position of the poet; and yet in so doing, his poetic art grants readers the potential to reshape their ideas about and consciousness of the natural world through imaginatively sharing a place *in* and *before* nature – through taking a place *before* nature and thereby acknowledging the fundamental dependence humans have *on* the natural world.

That poetry (as art) carries 'transformative' potential is to position art on the affective gradient somewhere below (or before) the more overtly political claims as to the 'subversive' function of art. It is also, of course, to idealise the very purpose and meaning of art. And it should be noted, therefore, that it would be difficult to contend, without extensive qualification, that some form of idealism—Whitman's or any of the vast array of idealised perspectives and approaches to the environment in our time—will itself work as some simple antidote to the fractious and contorted politics attending contemporary debates over the environment.<sup>8</sup> However, as I have been proposing so far, Whitman's poetic vision carries over to the twenty first century in unexpectedly useful ways precisely *because* it is not burdened with a contortions of postmodern self-consciousness, and because, as argued earlier, it can convey with compelling immediacy that very experience of the vibrancy of space that Josipovici describes – an extended sense of lived time in place that in turn bespeaks the experience of 'dwelling' by which one can arrive at a renewed state of 'seeing and being'.

In arguing for the renewed relevance of Whitman's belief in and poeticised appeal to Nature, it is not necessary to 'rebadge' Transcendentalism (at least Whitman's) as 'ecopoetic', or 'eco-political', as I have suggested in the title of this essay. Complementarily, to ascribe an environmentalist politics to Transcendentalist thinkers and writers is to flirt with anachronism, if not questionable ideological motives. Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau are no more 'environmentalists' in the sense we understand today than Transcendentalism was a neatly definable, unified movement.

What is beyond dispute is that all three express the importance of Nature and nature in their respective literary and philosophical endeavours – as both principal and phenomenon, even as Emerson typically extrapolates universal and abstract principles from Nature, while Thoreau, and more poetically, Whitman, concern themselves more with the particularities of nature in self and world.

What I am suggesting in the use of the term 'eco-politics' is what might be thought of as a newly inflected sense of 'transcendence' – a more overtly 'political' sense in that the challenge before the present globalised world is to move beyond entrenched attitudes towards the natural world, collectively and immediately by moving inward, as it were, in order to move outwardly into greater political awareness. In other words, 'a politics of outcome' would invest the now-weathered credo 'the personal is political' with an emphasis on the deeper modulations and understandings of 'being' – of who and where 'we' *are in the world* in the full sense of that phrase. Just as Whitman's persona comes upon and attends to the 'brook', so the question as to where humans *stand* in relation the natural world is being pushed upon us in the twenty first century to more forcefully and urgently than perhaps at any other time in recorded human history. We are, as Kinsella asserts in that same self-declared 'manifesto' on ecopoetics and the politics of 'eco' poetry and activism alluded to above, 'inside the disaster of our own making [and] discourse itself helps make the disaster' (183).

Fittingly, Kinsella endorses the claim as to both the relevance of Transcendentalist ideas and the political role of poetry (art as activism) through his recent experiences as a custodian of land. In confronting claims made for the political efficacy of 'ecopoetry', he forces the long debate concerning the relationship between politics and art (poetry) out into the open once again: 'it could be argued that Ecopoetics ... is an excuse for not making the big choices of abandoning those acts which violate and damage ecologies – a discourse that in many ways substitutes for direct action' (181). He also, in establishing a 'dialogue' with Thoreau as the basis for his own working experiment in lived ecopoetics (184), restores, cross-culturally to some extent, the relevance of American Transcendentalist ideas and practice, albeit selectively and along canonical lines.<sup>9</sup> In the example I am using here, where Whitman, in 'singing' a transcendent 'song', is always historically a Transcendentalist, and so apparently always of his time and place, his poetic elaborations on human responsiveness to and indissoluble dependence on the natural world are not confined to nineteenth century America, any more than the work of Whitman's canonic Transcendentalist partners, Emerson and Thoreau.

Claims to the enduring relevance of Transcendentalist conceptions of nature are hardly new; exegetical readings of the 'green' characteristics of Transcendentalism are voluminous in number and scope. There is not space here to review the vast scholarship on both Transcendentalism (broadly conceived) and the enduring significance of this trio's work. Suffice it to say that Transcendentalism has left a living legacy, despite the fact that proponents of Transcendentalist ideas and principles are too often and too readily cast in certain attitudes by condescending critics.<sup>10</sup> As I am contending here, Whitman, though not a nature poet as such, and though speaking through what many have defined as an avowedly masculine and masculinist persona, enacts an invitational openness to the natural world that bears fresh relevance and renewed meaning to us today.

The politics of the discourse on human relations to the natural world enforces a qualification here; for the term ‘openness’ labours under a certain glibness. One might substitute the word ‘engagement’ were it not weakened by imprecision and corrupted through over-use. Yet openness implies a state of readiness – a disposition that connotes a sharpened sense of anticipation; an active awaiting that prefigures an invitation to encounter, intransitively speaking, which, as enacted in the scene alluded to here in the fragment from *Specimen Days*, is experienced imaginatively as a corporeal merging, suffused at once with sensual and spiritual significance. In this way, Whitman’s poetically imagined interfusion with nature (figured metonymically in the form of the stream) bespeaks what we might call an activism of the imagination. In using the body (figuratively) as performative conduit of communication—his ‘self’ embodies the ‘song’ of all perceptual senses which in turn ‘sing’ the world in and through him—he illuminates, and in so doing, challenges assumptions about the human relationship with the natural world. To extend the interpretation, Whitman’s persona, figuratively bowed in supplication before the stream, is also performing the modest but crucial virtue of pausing in time and in motion, which, as Josipovici posits, ‘has profound ethical implications’ (23). In this way, the poet’s incorporative performance of the self (as it might be called) rewrites the perennial and fundamental question alluded to above: where do human beings *stand* in relation to nature. And for all Whitman’s vaulting lyricism by which he communicates his visions of exultant ‘oneness’, his literary work is always marked, if understatedly, by the *work* of consciousness and conscience by which ‘being human’ is in significant part constituted.

What is clear concerning the current struggles and contests over water is that the hard political, social and cultural work has only just begun. It should be noted that Fiona McGregor is certainly not alone in drawing attention to the continuing mistreatment by humans of the mercurial, vital yet strangely mundane element we know as water. Indeed, protest grows in the face of the incorrigible human capacity to ignore (with seeming contempt) a simple irrefutable fact: that human life is dependent on a constitutively vital element – water understood not as marketable commodity or abstract symbol, but as fluid agent of life-renewing cyclic systems of extremely subtle interaction: ‘Water’, as the justly respected Rachel Carson asserts in the classic study, *Silent Spring* (1962) ‘must be thought of in terms of the chains of life it supports ... in an endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life’ (56). When we consider that the less tangible, yet no less important notion of national identities is bound up in the elemental ‘resources’ of rivers, we must confront the possibility of collective self-destructiveness in more ways than the literal. As Chris Hammer notes: ‘Rivers water our crops but they also feed our sense of self: the bush ethos that helped shape Australia resonates still, and what happens west of the mountains still says something about who we are, even now. The decline in the Murray-Darling is not just about agricultural output and endangered ecosystems, nor is it just about maps and statistics: it’s about us’ (*Flood* xiii-xiv).

Such observations encourage greater understanding of the complexities of the problems concerning the human use and abuse of the very natural resources on which life subsists; they also sharpen the question concerning the political effect and use of art. Further consideration takes the discussion well beyond the confines of this essay. Rather, my aim has been to re-site the continuities between American Transcendentalist ideas (as conveyed through Whitman’s work) and the ‘ecopoetical’ politics of the present day. In doing so, I am reaffirming the central definition of Transcendentalism, a term referring to the determined interest in actively rethinking and so challenging received views and

orthodoxies in order to remake and refashion the ideas, values and beliefs. In rethinking the relations between things, as Emerson proclaimed, Transcendentalists promoted and enacted a form of eco-political criticism and so a form of activism. By extension, the ecopoetical text becomes political—it ‘acts’ politically—in the sense that it works towards changing lived attitudes and practices, and politics itself. This is to endorse recent readings of the ecopolitics of poetry as does Chad Wriglesworth in his article ‘The Poetics of Water’, in which, with regard to localised efforts to reclaim the Spokane and Columbia Rivers, he demonstrates the ‘ways bioregional poetry and public art can transform place and environmental policies’, and how in particular ‘site-based literature contributes to the ongoing reinscription and reclamation of place’ (34).

Crucially, given the example I make here of Whitman, such ‘action’ occurs over and through time, which is to say ‘activism’ itself must be re-imagined: it does not necessarily denote a present political action, bound by the topical immediacy of geographic time and place. Equally and complementarily, this is to support the argument that the historical text is always latently contemporaneous – the political nature of a text is activated (as it were) by present use and need, at least to some considerable extent. Whitman can be said to have fought a war—his noble work as a hospital orderly in the Civil War—yet he was not fighting in an environmentalist campaign when writing *to Nature*. Nevertheless, the critical plight of the intricate ecological systems in the present day draws out the political implications of his poeticised vision of human interrelationship with the natural world, if not his poetico-philosophical concept of Nature.

I am certainly not the first to discern in Whitman’s poetic conceptions of and rhapsodic apostrophes to the natural world the prototypical voice of such ‘green’ politics. I think the renewed relevance of Whitman’s Transcendentalist ideas, however, is emphasised when we appreciate the effect of the phenomenological characteristics of his poetic vision. Whitman’s Transcendentalist convictions, which inform both his poetic practice and, inseparably, his idealised concept of the American poet, perform and promote just such a notion of transformative experience – poetry as a mode of activism that inheres in a striving to extend and develop one’s perceptions and consciousness of the natural environment, of one’s place *in the world* in the full and present sense.

In this sense, then, the role of art as a means of what we might call ‘eco-political’ protest generates more fruitful philosophical speculation about humanity’s very being on earth, much less *agit-prop* than a plea for continued spiritual and intellectual agitation. And in this respect, the eco-political nature of McGregor’s performance art commands attention. In placing her naked body ‘on the line’ and under figurative inscription, she enacts a version of Whitman’s ‘taking of all’ into the self. Certainly, her performance is potently allusive, at once symbolic sacrificial act and an elemental dedication; yet it is also a forceful political statement. In working at and with physical extremes, her act insists on being interpreted as a form of protest—more spectatorial arrest—necessary in order to register the gravity of the human predicament in the twenty-first century. Her act becomes a complete form of body art, and so continues and extends Whitman’s metamorphic indentification with and invocative attendance upon the stream, and, as correlative, the natural world.

---

NOTES

1. The politically and socially complex contests over the Murray River are usually dated back to the late nineteenth century; as Asa Wahlquist describes it, the political process leading up to Federation in Australia (1901) was itself delayed due to the territorial and commercial debates over the 'rights to the river' (146). See also Connell.
2. Carroll reports that the recent activities of Friends of the LA River have brought to light the volatile politics surrounding the use of water and the fate of rivers in California. Carroll concludes that though the LA river can never inspire 'poems or novels' in the manner of the Thames or the Seine, he does capture a vivifying glimpse of 'another LA, one not consumed by automobiles, or turned into strip mall, where nature and human optimism thrive in a watery realm, on an ever so slightly mystic river'.
3. In Ch. 4, Buell notes that the many modes of 'ecocentric criticism' while sharing ground in common, become 'more like a scattergram than a united front' (101).
4. In his reading of the Bible, Josipovici makes more specific claims: 'The Hebrew God is a God who makes it a sacred injunction to pause, to rest [which] has profound ethical implications. This is a God who wants to stop man thoughtlessly or selfishly marching across space as though it weren't there ... God reserves his most severe punishments for those who try to breach boundaries, to annihilate space ... [and so] lay themselves open to chaos and destruction' (33-4). I am adding to such 'ethical considerations' a phenomenological meaning. See also Rigby, and Paranjape.
5. See Hammer. Of late, Fred Pearce's *When the Rivers Run Dry* (2007), Maude Barlow's *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water* (2007), Ken Midkiff's *Not a Drop to Drink* (2007), Michael Cathcart's *The Water Dreamers* (2009) all explore the emerging tensions and problems arising from human abuse and political misuse of water.
6. Hoagland remarks that water possesses 'ancient power to please or panic us ... it's the most protean of life's building blocks, the womb of the world' (15)
7. For Kinsella, 'a desired activist outcome is not a diminution of the possibilities of a poetic text to be moving, informative or intellectually challenging, by being specific in its aims' (86).
8. As one recent example, Susan Murphy instructs readers in the spiritual and political benefits of Zen koans as a means of 'correcting' the human-engineered ecological catastrophe ('geocide', as she neologistically calls it). Her appeal to the collective 'higher' reasoning of fellow human beings is admirable, but equally at risk of simplification given the scale and confounding peculiarities and defiant complexities of (mass) human psychology (45). Monbiot is more protestantly forthright: 'forests are felled to make personalised heart-shaped wooden cheese board sets. Rivers are poisoned to manufacture talking fish. This is pathological consumption: a world-consuming epidemic of collective madness, rendered so normal by advertising and by the media that we scarcely notice what is happening ...' (17).
9. See Bristow, *AJE* 2.
- <sup>10</sup>. As one scholar protests on behalf of Emerson, 'The Emerson presented to us by many of the critical commentators has often been little more than a caricature of his complex spirit ... Emerson lives in the veracity of his words as they jump from the page – words that continue to speak with authority on the difficult issues that beset both our personal and civic existence' (Porte 12).

## WORKS CITED

- 'Let the rivers be heard.' *Sydney Morning Herald*. Editorial. 16 April 2012. 10 April 2013. <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/editorial/let-the-rivers-be-heard-20120415-1x1e1.html>.
- 'Afloat on an eternal river.' *Guardian Weekly*. Editorial. 8 June 2012. 10 April 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/03/diamond-jubilee-pageant-river>.
- Branch, Michael. 'Ecocriticism: The Nature of Nature in Literary Theory and Practice.' *Weber Studies* 11.1 (1994): 1-17. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. Ed. *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*. New York: Random House (Modern Library College Editions), 1981. Print.
- Carroll, Rory. 'The Los Angeles river lives again.' *Guardian Weekly*. 27 August 2012. 10 April 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/27/los-angeles-river-storm-drains>.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books [1962] 2000. Print.
- Connell, Daniel. *Water Politics in the Murray-Darling Basin*. Annandale: The Federation Press, 2007. Print.
- Doherty, Ben. 'Source of Life Becomes the Threat.' *Sydney Morning Herald*. Saturday, 19-20 May 2012. Print.
- . 'Where the Rivers run with Sewage ... India's Sacred Flows Defiled by Indifference.' *Sydney Morning Herald*. Saturday, June 2-3 2012. Print.
- Corless, Kieran. 'The World At Sea: The Forgotten Space.' 12 June 2012. 8 March 2013. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/world-sea-forgotten-space>.
- Fromm, Harold. 'From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map.' *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens/London: The U of Georgia Press, 1996. 30-39.
- Griffiths, Jay. 'Silencing of nature will hamper the mind.' *Sydney Morning Herald*. 29-30 September 2012. Print.
- Hammer, Chris. 'Flood of cash drowns out opposition to Murray-Darling basin plan.' *Sydney Morning Herald*. Tuesday, 29 November 2012. Print.
- . *The River: A Journey through the Murray-Darling Basin*. Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2010. Print.
- Hoagland, Edward. *Sex and the River Styx*. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011. Print.
- Josipovici, Gabriel. *The singer on the Shore: essays 1991-2004*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006. Print.
- Kinsella, John. *Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2010. Print.
- Miller, Chris. 'Struggling in the Face of Complexity: Water Reform in the Murray-Darling Basin'. Ed. Julianne Schultz, *The Griffith Review* 32. South Brisbane: Griffith U, 2012. Print.
- Mithen, Steven. *Thirst: Water and Power in the Ancient World*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2012. Print.
- Monbiot, George. 'Trashing the planet for a talking piggy bank'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Thursday, 13 December 2012. Print.
- Murphy, Susan. *Minding the Earth, Minding the World: The Offer We Can No Longer Refuse*. Sydney: Picador, 2012. Print.

- 
- Paranjape, Makarand, ed. *Sacred Australia: Post-secular Considerations*. Melbourne: Magellan, 2009. Print.
- Porte, Joel and Sandra Morris, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Rigby, Catherine E. *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia Press, 2004. Print.
- Sagoff, Mark. *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.
- Wahlquis, Asa. *Thirsty Country: Options for Australia*. Crows Nest: Jacana Books, 2008. Print.
- ‘Water #1 – Descent’. Perf. Fiona McGregor. 1 November 2011. 10 April 2013. <http://www.fionamcgregor.com/actions/water-1>.
- ‘Water Series – Trace Installations.’ Perf. Fiona McGregor. Artspace, Sydney. 15 November 2011.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*. Ed. Lawrence Buell. New York: Random House (Modern Library College Editions), 1981. Print.
- Wriglesworth, Chad. ‘The Poetics of Water: Currents of Reclamation in the Columbia River Basin.’ *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Eds. Thomas Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster. Athens, GA: U of Georgia Press, 2012. 86-99. Print.