THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of Thomas W. Casey.

Thomas W. Casey and Elizabeth Burroughs Kelly in the summerhouse at Riverby

From John Burroughs' "Waiting"

Serene, I fold my hands and wait
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
Rave no more 'gainst Time nor Fate,
For lo! My own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

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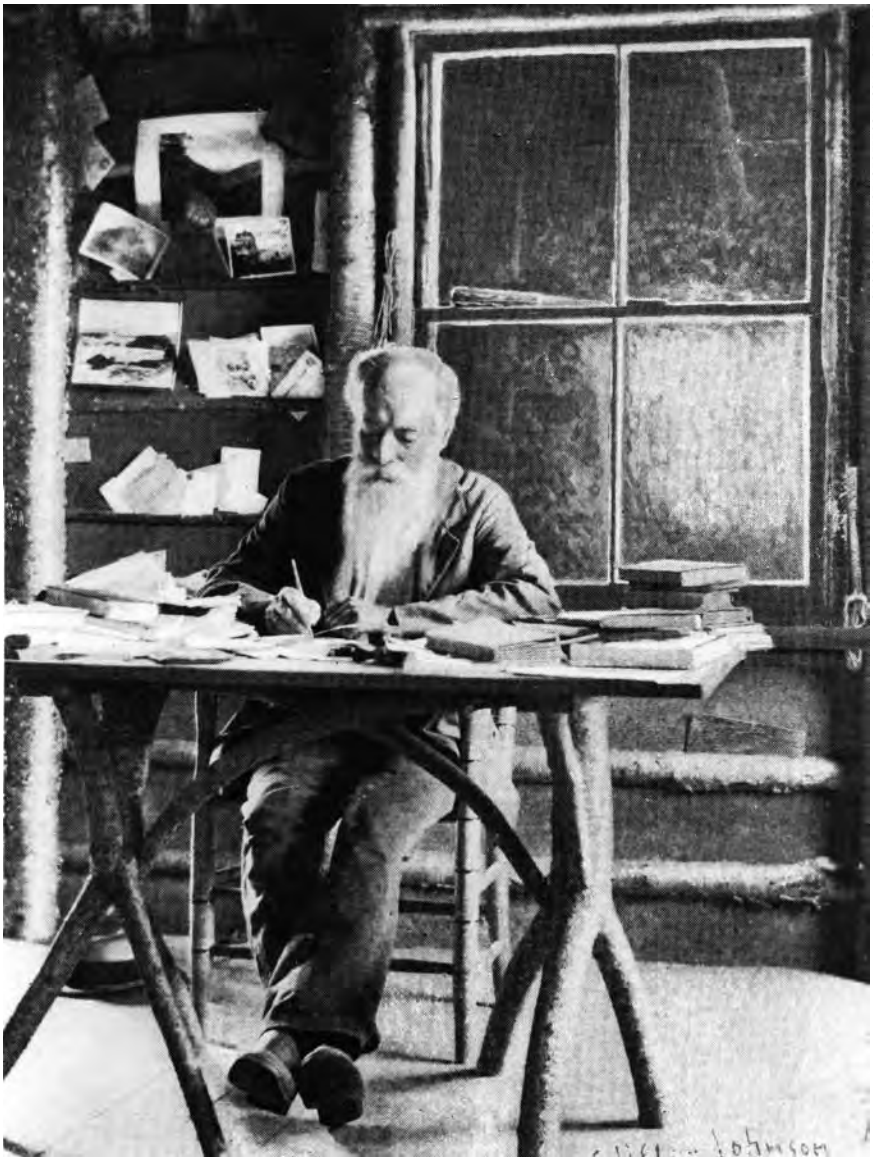
Regional History Forum

Regional Writing

Book Reviews

***On the Cover*: Portrait of John Burroughs by Orlando Rouland, Courtesy of Craig Chesek © American Museum of Natural History (AMNH)**



COURTESY VASSAR COLLEGE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

John Burroughs at his writing desk in Slabsides

John Burroughs—Regionalist (and Modernist?): A Meditation on Influences and Confluences

H.R. Stoneback

As some readers of this essay will know, in my two articles in Charlotte Walker's superb collection of essays, *Sharp Eyes: John Burroughs and American Nature Writing*, I made a detailed case for the importance of seeing Burroughs as a *regionalist*, a writer who has crucially important things to say to this new century about visions of home, place, rootedness. Indeed, Burroughs as much as *any* American writer, any charismatic personage and public figure in our history, lived and wrote in and through a complex vision of concreteness, rootedness, intense locality, and the bright particularity of place. Through local knowledge, Burroughs—like the best regionalists—leads us to the universal and eternal verities. I will use that argument as a springboard to these meditations on Burroughs as a Modernist—and I mean that term in the sense it is used in literary history, to denote that period of High Modernism centered in the 1920s and in the work of such writers as Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, and others. If Burroughs is not exactly a Modernist, he is, I will suggest here, a very important pre-Modernist, or crypto-Modernist, and his pervasive influence on Modernist writers is a subject that has been almost entirely overlooked. To get where I want to go, the reader will have to travel with me through some literary history, some personal history, and some anecdotes, since I may be approaching that age that could be called my *anecdotage*. Along the way, I will throw in some science, since the recent Burroughs Conference at Vassar College—"Sharp Eyes—John Burroughs: Nature Writing and Nineteenth Century Science"—underlined the importance of such connections.*

The science, I can assure you, will be light, tentative—since I am well aware that I am a poet and a literary critic addressing an audience that includes distin-

An early version of this essay was delivered as the Keynote Address at the Vassar Burroughs Conference (June 15–19, 2008). Thus it may retain certain signs of orality—intentionally so, since all writing is a performance that involves a sense of occasion and audience, as well as tone, rhythm, voice.

guished scientists and naturalists. But then, of course, Burroughs was also a poet (especially in his best essays) and a literary critic. Here I am reminded of the story of the writer and lecturer who perished in the famous Johnstown Flood. When he arrived at the Pearly Gates, St. Peter invited him to give a lecture on the Great Flood to a heavenly throng the next night. Then St. Peter added: "Uh…there *is one* thing you may wish to bear in mind during your talk." "What's that," the Johnstown Flood victim asked. St. Peter smiled: "*Noah* will be in the audience." I am also reminded of Sir John Pope-Hennessy, that wonderful lecturer on art history I heard many times. He had a certain way of handling questions after his lectures. When somebody asked a silly question he moved his head back and forth in a slow, hypnotic motion—he was very tall and had a very long neck—then fixed his eyes on the questioner and said: "I fear, sir or madam, I fear your question condemns any possible answer to insignificance." I find more congenial my mentor Robert Penn Warren's way of handling dumb questions—Red Warren would say, "Ah cain't git a purchase on your question." In brief, I am determined here to avoid raising questions about Burroughs and science that condemn the answers to insignificance because *I* "cain't git a purchase" on nineteenth-century science.

Still, 2008 is a remarkable season of science and nature-writing for me, for a road-weary poet-troubadour. Right before the Burroughs Conference, I returned from a grueling roadtrip to Kansas City where at the International Hemingway Conference I delivered a keynote address centrally concerned with Hemingway and science, with the *scientistic* circus surrounding the Scopes trial, and the response of Hemingway characters to writers such as Mencken who wanted to cram quasi-Darwinian theory down the throats of what Mencken was pleased to regard as the redneck "booboisie" of the South. Hemingway's characters view Mencken as just another "Monkey Missionary," another intolerant preacher of tolerance in the name of pseudo-science. Immediately after the Burroughs Conference I went to Paris to speak at the International Lawrence Durrell Conference at the University of Paris. That conference rubric— "Lawrence Durrell at the Crossroads of Arts and Science"—and some of the presentations bore a striking resemblance to the Burroughs Conference deliberations, perhaps proving that the Hudson Valley is on the international cutting edge of knowledge and history. My subject in Paris was the quality of exact observation in Durrell's work and its probable indebtedness to the nineteenth-century natural sciences dedicated to a new order of descriptive exactitude. Lawrence Durrell, of course, was the famous modern or post-modern novelist and poet, author of *The Alexandria Quartet* and many other works. His brother Gerald was a famous naturalist. I knew Lawrence Durrell, and Larry and I discussed, among other things, Thoreau and American Nature Writing. Larry

thought Thoreau could have been more exact, accurate—less transcendental. I don't recall that we ever discussed Burroughs. In any case, my central concern at the University of Paris conference was what Larry called the importance of "tuning in to nature idly," with a kind of rapt attention to the mysterious quiddity of things, a quality of attention that looks outward *and* inward in order to grasp the *Deus Loci*, the Spirit of Place. Whether this is a case of influence or confluence, I am quite certain that Larry, if he knew Burroughs' work, would salute John Burroughs as brother-poet of nature and place.

After I left Paris—John Burroughs traveling with me all the way— I spoke at another conference in Provence, in the Camargue, that capital of nature-study in southern France. At the International Aldington Society Conference I discussed the influence of nature writing and nineteenth-century science on yet another key Modernist writer, Richard Aldington, prolific author of ninety-some volumes of poetry, fiction, criticism, biography, and translation. Aldington, a once celebrated though now neglected novelist and poet, famous as a founding member of the Imagist movement, was profoundly influenced by nineteenth-century nature writing. He was a keen amateur lepidopterist—collecting and studying butterflies was his lifelong avocation. As a boy in the late 1890s and early 1900s he served his apprenticeship in nature study with Francis Austin, the field-naturalist and specimen collector and author of various works. In spite of his later primary associations with avant-garde artistic circles in Paris and London, exact study of nature remained at the center of his life to the end; as his daughter, my dear friend Catha Aldington, always reminds me when we talk, her father loved butterflies, seashells, flowers, and had an insatiable hunger to know the flora and fauna of the many places where he lived. Late in his life, Aldington's primary interests were still listed as "botany, astrology, entomology, anthropology, butterflies, bushmen, beetles; music, sculpture, painting, architecture, history" (Doyle, xvii). Catha tells me she cannot remember her father ever mentioning Burroughs—but again, whether influence or confluence, if Aldington did know Burroughs' work, I am certain he would salute John Burroughs as brother-poet of nature and place.

Since I have cited Aldington and Durrell it is necessary to stress here that they were both disciples of that quintessential Modernist Ezra Pound. All the main currents of Modernism flow through and from Ezra Pound, and he is usually viewed as a high priest of the Gospel of Art and the burden of European Civilization—but it is important to remember that he was born in Idaho, that he lived the first fifteen years of his life in the nineteenth century, that he had deep affinities with Thoreau, that he translated Louis Agassiz, that he loved long walks with close observation of details of place and nature, etc. ad infinitum. To

take just one brief moment from Pound's multifaceted career, we might recall that his creation, the seminal Imagist Movement in poetry, is grounded in the best nineteenth-century nature writing, in attention to detail, in what Pound calls "natural magic [that] requires great trees, & a readiness for rain" (Pound, 39). His daughter, the distinguished poet and scholar Countess Mary de Rachewiltz, tells me she knows of no evidence that her father read Burroughs. Yet I note that when I directed an Imagism Conference (2007) at Mary's home, Brunnenburg Castle in Italy, some of the talk had to do with American nature writing. I am willing to bet, though the evidence has not yet surfaced, that Pound knew the work of Burroughs. For now, I will settle for the fact that the letters and poems that Mary sends to me—and she is very much her father's daughter—are rich with the imagery of place, with exact observations of birds and plants and flowers.

In his magisterial study entitled *The Pound Era* (a widely accepted designation for much of the literary twentieth century), Hugh Kenner suggests that the increasing exactitude of nature writing in the decades preceding Modernism—that is to say, precisely the span of Burroughs' writing career—is one of the most important unexamined influences on certain Modernist writers. Kenner writes: "In the Pound Era [writers] learned that the energy concentrated in exactness was a poetic resource." Pre-modern generality would no longer do, since the natural sciences "formed on minute attention produced in the 19th century a new order of descriptive exactness" (Kenner, 168).

And that brings us to Ernest Hemingway, truly a nature writer and Pound's most famous apprentice, who crafted a prose style rooted in exactitude and *attention* to the natural world. Hemingway learned from Pound that style "derives from attention: such attention as Louis Agassiz paid to nature's minute realities." Agassiz, as Pound remarked, "could teach a litteratus to write" (Kenner, 167). Hemingway, of course, was well-versed in the natural sciences long before he met Pound; indeed, Dr. Clarence Hemingway, Ernest's father, was a passionate amateur naturalist, founder of a local branch of the Agassiz Club, the nature-study group that Ernest joined at age *four* when he became immersed in specimen collection—birds, insects, rocks—thus developing his discipline of *attention* from his earliest years. Pound's later lessons in nature and writing served to confirm Hemingway's boyhood intimations when he arrived at ground zero of Modernism: Paris, 1922.

Some of you may recall Hemingway's famous survey of American literature in *Green Hills of Africa*, where he says he has never been able to read Thoreau because he "cannot read other naturalists unless they are being extremely accurate and not literary" (21). (We note that Hemingway says *other* naturalists—that is, he counts himself a naturalist, a nature writer). Also in *Green Hills* we find

Hemingway's celebrated lament for the ravaged American continent: "A continent ages quickly once we come. The natives live in harmony with it. But the foreigner destroys… the earth gets tired of being exploited. A country wears out quickly unless man puts back in it all his residue and that of all his beasts. When he quits using beasts and uses machines, the earth defeats him quickly" (284). In such passages, we might hear echoes of Burroughs on Thoreau, on the "sucked orange" we make of the earth.

In fact, as I have argued in a number of conference papers, lectures, and essays for the past thirty-some years, Burroughs directly influenced Hemingway, especially through the essays on camping, hiking, fishing. Hemingway's early masterpiece, "Big Two-Hearted River," is deeply indebted to Burroughs. Although no mention of Burroughs has yet surfaced in the Hemingway archive, we can be certain that it will—perhaps in the twelve-volume collection of Hemingway's letters now in progress. Consider a few facts: Hemingway, from age three or four, was a passionate reader of *St. Nicholas*, that important children's magazine of nature and culture in which Burroughs' essays were excerpted and reprinted; moreover, Hemingway's boyhood hero was Teddy Roosevelt. Need I say more for any audience familiar with the Burroughs-Roosevelt connections and friendship? Yes, just this: In Hemingway's writing credo, the deleted conclusion of "Big Two-Hearted River" later published as "On Writing," but written in his early twenties, everything depends on exact knowledge and attention to nature. Hemingway tells us that his persona, Nick Adams, "wanted to write like Cezanne painted… wanted to write about country so it would be there… Nobody had ever written about country like that. He felt almost holy about it. It was deadly serious. You could do it… if you lived right with your eyes" (Hemingway, *Nick Adams Stories,* 239-40). Such passages chart precisely the intersection of nature writing and Modernism, and provide the key cartography for the Burroughs influence on and confluence with Hemingway's vision and style. Live right with your eyes, indeed—*Sharp Eyes, Sharp Lookout.*

Now let us consider briefly another lesser-known Modernist or two who were direct and acknowledged inheritors of the Burroughs legacy. One is the Kentucky novelist and poet Elizabeth Madox Roberts, who lived from 1881 to 1941. It must suffice to say here that Roberts is the greatest neglected southern woman writer—or however you'd like to phrase that: I prefer "the greatest neglected American writer." Period. For many decades I have led a national crusade—now joined by younger scholars—to restore her to her rightful place in the canon of American literature. Roberts received international attention and fame with her first novel, *The Time of Man*, published in 1926. It is, hands down, one of the greatest

American pastoral novels, and it is absolutely steeped in the style and modes of nature writing and Modernism. We know that when Roberts was an unknown schoolteacher in rural Kentucky she was reading the essays of Burroughs, especially his volume *Birds and Poets*. We know, too, that she organized and led a bird-study club in Springfield, her Kentucky hometown. All this precedes the composition of her masterpiece, *The Time of Man,* in which having combined the nature-writing lessons of Burroughs with the stylistic lessons of her Modernist master Ezra Pound, she grounds her writing in the grammar of nature, reckons the rhetoric of rocks and fields, parses the sentences of stone and sky, and renders as powerfully as any writer ever what she calls the "earth-hungers," the "exalted experience of rapture in being" (Stoneback, 93). So you may mark Roberts down as an acknowledged disciple of Burroughs. She was also the student of an even more fervent disciple of Burroughs, Edith Rickert.

Rickert should be known at Vassar—isn't it pretty to think so? (as Hemingway said in another context)—for she was both one of Vassar's most distinguished graduates (in 1891) and a faculty member for three years in the 1890s. Yet in that fine slim volume on Burroughs published in 2008 by the Vassar Library that briefly surveys Burroughs; connections with Vassar and includes excellent essays on Whitman and Burroughs by Ed Renehan and Jeff Walker, I find no mention of Rickert, nor is she mentioned in other discussions of Burroughs and Vassar. Once very well known, I fear Rickert is a name that only resonates these days with a few of my generation who were graduate students in English in those days of yore when the name Rickert inspired fear and trembling, admiration and awe in generations of graduate students, especially for those who had to study her massive eight-volume study of the text and manuscripts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Her co-editor was John Manly—Manly and Rickert, a once-famous combo like Ruth and Gehrig maybe, or Sacco and Vanzetti.

Edith Rickert was a fascinating character. Born in 1871 in Ohio, raised mostly in Chicago, she entered Vassar in 1887. While she was a student, Rickert was one of many "Vassar Girls" who made frequent pilgrimages to see the "Sage of Slabsides." As all readers of Burroughs know, he welcomed college girls (from SUNY New Paltz, too) to his cabin in the woods, across the river and into the trees of Ulster County. Since all who knew Rickert stress her extraordinary beauty, vitality, and intelligence, her remarkable grace and distinction, and her tornadic passion and energy (and we know that Burroughs was not insensible to such attributes), we should not be surprised that Rickert and Burroughs stayed in touch long after she left Vassar. The full story of their relationship may be lost in the mists of history and genteel or censored biography, and much of their thirty-

year correspondence appears to be irretrievable. We do have bits and pieces of their correspondence. In 1905, when Rickert was living in England, Burroughs answered one of her letters, saying, "You make me want to come to England again" (Barrus II, 86). A year later—Burroughs is now sixty-nine, Rickert is thirty-five—he writes: "Do you want me to come and help make that garden?" He'll do the digging, he says, but he's no good at making flower gardens, just vegetables. He advises her: "Dig and plant, and transplant, Edith; it will do you good. That soil on your fingers will make you hold your pen more firmly—more of the earth-spirit will get into your books…." (Barrus, II:106; ellipsis in cited text). About the photograph Rickert had sent him, Burroughs, always the precise observer, says: "You look well in this picture, and strong. It is a face of power—that finely-cut and ample mouth, and those eyes! I almost quail before them. I do not remember that you had those day-of-judgment eyes when you used to come to Slabsides" (Barrus II 106). Five years later, when Rickert is back in the States, Burroughs writes to her: "I am thinking longingly of a trip to Egypt this winter… Do you have any dreams of the Orient? If so, I wish that you might realize them with me and my friends" (Barrus, 171). That's Burroughs at seventy-four. And, in 1919, the eighty-two-year old Burroughs wrote in his journal that he and Rickert—who was then working in the Cryptographic section of Military Intelligence in Washington—went out to visit George Washington's home at Mount Vernon (Barrus, II:367). That's all we have now, from the published record—but stay tuned.

In sum, Rickert was one of the most accomplished and engaging Burroughs aficionados. Before she was out of her thirties, she had published ten books, including medieval studies and five novels in seven years, novels set in Provence, the Shetlands, Louisiana, and elsewhere, novels that are rich with a sense of place, close attention to nature, folkspeech, folklore, folkways. And she spends the last two decades of her life as—by all reports—an amazingly stimulating teacher at the University of Chicago, where, as I have already noted, one of her most distinguished students was Elizabeth Madox Roberts. One more thing I should mention: In her influential 1920s textbook, *Contemporary American Literature,* she featured Burroughs as a major American writer, praised him as the master of the nature essay, citing his "devoted study of Nature in America," his "rich and deep philosophical interpretation of the phenomena he lovingly studied… his broadly grounded and capacious idealism" (Rickert, 78).

Rickert, then, belongs in the company with Roberts, Aldington, Durrell, Pound, and Hemingway and many other regionalists and modernists anchored in close attention to nature, and it is in that terrain, that *terroir,* that we must continue to search for Burroughs influences and confluences.

In the final movement of this essay I want to say—speaking as a regionalist and as a Modernist from the heart of my anecdotage—a few words about my own Burroughsian influences and confluences. When I moved to the Hudson Valley from Tennessee four decades ago, I settled—purely by chance, it seemed then, in West Park. I lived a short walk from both Slabsides and Riverby. I do not remember being aware, when I bought property and settled in West Park, that it was Burroughs country. Of course, unlike most Ph.D.s in English these days, I *knew* who John Burroughs was, but most of my *conscious* associations came from my early knowledge of and passion for the work of Walt Whitman—my Burroughs associations, I thought then, had nothing to do with Sense of Place, little to do with nature study. As I settled into West Park, my knowledge and deep awareness of Burroughs grew. In 1970 there were still many people in West Park who knew and remembered Burroughs. The Burroughs anecdotes were plentiful, and almost always genial and loving. In short, Burroughs became my *neighbor*—as I worked in my garden (and especially as I pursued the detestable woodchucks) Burroughs was often with me; and he was always with me as I explored the backcountry around Slabsides and fished Black Creek. My West Park rituals formed a kind of reversal of the Burroughs pattern, since my house was down the road from Slabsides, and my escape, my rustic retreat, my cabin, *my* Slabsides was down on the Hudson, two doors down from Riverby. Then Burroughs' granddaughter, my neighbor Elizabeth Burroughs Kelley, became my good friend. And thus my true education in Burroughs began, as did my involvement in the work of the John Burroughs Association. I had many long, long conversations with Betty Kelley, and even though we were neighbors we also wrote—in the good, old-fashioned way—long letters to each other filled with literary talk, place-talk, Burroughs-talk.

To attain the proper mode of meditation on history that was necessary for me to write the keynote address that was forerunner of this essay, I dug out some of my old correspondence with Betty. Her distinctive handwriting alone brought back a flood of memories. One letter package contained a draft of one of her lectures on Burroughs and Thoreau, on Slabsides and Walden, and how and why "each built a cabin in the woods which has an [important] place in American Literature" (Letter to author, c. 1975; undated, unpaginated). In this long letter, she asked for my editorial commentary on these matters. And seeing and reading her old handwriting—nothing has more evocative memory-force than handwriting—brought back our old conversations. One day we discussed all the schools all over America that were named after John Burroughs. For example, one of Hemingway's wives went to a John Burroughs school in St. Louis. Only that day did long-forgotten memory come back to me—I had attended Burroughs Junior High School in

Camden, New Jersey. Betty was excited—she did not have that school on her list.[2]

Now, as I think of that Burroughs school, long since torn down, its site unmarked in one of America's ruined cities—Camden is a perennial chart-topper in the annual lists of America's most violent and dangerous cities—now as I think of that school for the first time in a half-century, since I fled as soon and as far and as fast as I could from the ruins of Camden, I make my meditative Composition of Place and Epiphanic Memory.

In the principal's office at Burroughs Junior High there were, among other historic photographs, old framed but faded photographs of John Burroughs and Walt Whitman. I don't believe I thought much about that at the time, since I was usually in the principal's office for some disciplinary action, not for meditation on history. It was a very violent school and to survive you had to be a member of one gang or the other. On the way home, we always walked past Walt Whitman Stores, a chain of neighborhood groceries located on every third corner. And we often walked past the rundown Walt Whitman House on squalid Mickle Street. A few months ago, when the national news reported that the Robert Frost house had been trashed and vandalized by teenagers, I was reminded of one night in the 1950s. I was out with the gang, a gang that specialized in what solipsistic early teenaged punks do—smashing and trashing things, breaking and burning things. They had been breaking windows near the Whitman house. Then we were there on the street by the historical marker in front of the Whitman House, rocks ready in hand, lighter fluid flaming from the gangleader's burning hand, overturned garbage cans being kicked down Mickle Street. I was probably the only one in that gang, peripheral on-trial member that I was, who had ever toured the house, seen the artifacts (including the old photographs of Burroughs and Whitman). Then, I remember saying, "Don't trash this house—Whitman was a great writer"—just before we heard the cop car sirens and ran down the alley. A few days later, my eighth-grade English teacher kept me after school and had a long talk with me. She said: "Stop being stupid and hanging out with gangs. Do you think your precious Whitman or John Burroughs would approve of what you do? Your passion is literature. Your vocation, your calling, is to be a writer." Miss Evaul—that was her name and I salute her now—knew all this because I had discussed Whitman and Burroughs and many other writers with her and she always gave me A+s on my essays. After that conversation, I never ran with the gangs again. And I remember now the look and color and feel of Horace Traubel's multivolume *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, where I first *read about* Burroughs in the grand old library at Second and Cooper Streets (where there were also framed pictures of Whitman and Burroughs on the walls). And, too, the long shelf of Burroughs

books, multiple copies of the complete works, all green and blue and dusty on the ruined library shelves.

In brief, I ran far from ravaged Camden, where Burroughs had so often visited Whitman. And I thought I had forgotten all that, as I made a new life in the South. If, as a *New York Times* article recently put it, the Hudson Valley is now in a new phase of "what might be called post-industrial repastoralization" (August 1, 2008)—although I would prefer to see that as a phase that began long ago, with Burroughs farming and writing nature essays on the Hudson as industry began its century-long decline, then the location of my post-Camden post-industrial *repastoralization* was the rural South in the 1950s. After dropping out of college and getting out of the Marine Corps at age twenty-one, I built a log cabin in the wilderness of Alabama. It was a *real* log house, and I felled every tree with my axe, skimmed the logs down the hillside with a team of borrowed workhorses, skinned every log with a drawknife, and built the whole thing without any nails, without any tools but an axe and a drawknife. I remember being proud of the *authenticity* of my cabin, and though my imagination was more on fire with images of Daniel Boone and the frontier, I *had* seen photographs of Walden and Slabsides, and I remember thinking my cabin was better than anything Burroughs or Thoreau built. I would learn soon enough that the real house that a writer must build is made of the books that the writer writes, that literature endures longer than log cabins. But then, in 1962, when I walked every morning at birdcall sunrise through those woods that I knew every inch of, every detail, every plant and creature and spring; then, when I walked over the old logging trace two miles into the forest, sun-shafted by the time I reached my cabin and clearing, I only knew that I had to build that house so that I could get down to the serious business of writing—later. And every morning as I walked into the woods with my axe over my shoulder, I sang at the top of my voice, in part because I'd been told by an old-timer that loud singing would ward off rattlesnakes. But my singing seemed to draw a great and genial black snake to rise like the Spirit of Place and meet me at the same place in the trail every morning, to lead the way sliding as I went singing down to the creek that ran through my clearing under the hawk-slanting sky. I don't remember knowing this consciously then, but I know now that John Burroughs walked through that wilderness with me.

It is because of all these influences and confluences that I write these words, from the amplitude of experience stranger than time, from the depths of my open heart—Thank you, John Burroughs.

Notes

Just before this essay went to press, someone with a firmer grasp of the history of Camden than I possess informed me that Burroughs Junior High was actually named after Clara Burrough, a South Jersey educator. *Burrough* or *Burroughs*? If the school was indeed named after Ms. Burrough, then why did we all refer to it as Burroughs, as in the sentence "I go to Burroughs"? Maybe I wasn't the only one who had heard of John Burroughs and his associations with Camden and Whitman, and thus assumed the school was named after Burroughs. I also remember making jokes in eighth grade about how the school was not named after the other Burroughs, Edgar Rice Burroughs, famous author of the *Tarzan* books (and Hemingway's boyhood neighbor in Oak Park, Illinois).

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