

Re-Visioning *The Strait*

Allan Foster

1990

a review of

The Strait by Fredy Perlman, Black & Red, Detroit, 1988

I began to make this a conventional review of Fredy Perlman's book *The Strait* and it was a mistake. For if you begin reading it as a conventional book with a linear story and a stairway of characters *The Strait* will fail you and, what is worse for me, will fail Fredy and the leap of imagination which he put into it.

What business has a white man writing another book explaining the genocide of native peoples and the consequences of their destruction to us and for them?

What business has a white man putting words and thoughts and dreams into the mouths of native women and men?

What does *The Strait* do for me or you that works by native people can't do better and with more authenticity?

The answer to the first two questions is no business at all. But Fredy wasn't in business. He didn't market points of view, answers, or ideologies. He was a most relentless explorer, critic, and resister of this grim catastrophe. Don't come to this book looking for answers to weighty questions. Fredy offers a platform, a jumping-off-place for prodding your imagination, for goading your emotional structure into taking you someplace new.

The answer to the third question is much trickier. Fredy did something with *The Strait* which we all must begin to do if we are to real-eyes a different world. Fredy began to revision the world for himself. He began to take off much of the intellectual shackles we all carry around (our social armor as it were) and to try to feel the reality of another kind of person. To step outside civil-eyes-zation and breathe a different universe.

The result is incomplete, irregular, compelling and a thoroughly worthwhile experience. You can feel the compulsion which drove Fredy throughout the book, his desire to real-eyes a different universe for life to fill. The result is a difficult exercise. You feel Fredy's desire to make each detail as true and authentic as he can.

There are native accounts and living native people who can give fuller insights into the nearly lost realms of the native universe and you should make every effort to acquaint yourselves with them. But knowing with your head, with your intellect is radically different than feeling with your emotions and body the nature of that experience. It is this incongruity which makes *The Strait* so interesting and valuable.

Fredy, in the first book of *The Strait*, was trying to dream dreams and create songs to communicate a different something from what we expect in a his-story or novel. That project for a variety of reasons may be an impossible feat to commit to writing. But look on this work as the residue of an experience which Fredy had, the verbal picture of a dream. Fredy's dream is not a native person's reality. But it is not the dream of a civil-eyes'd person either.

A Background and Perspective

I cannot take you into *The Strait* without first grounding you in my perceptions and feelings about his previous book *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*.

In the beginning was not the state but a (conscious?) unity (community?) which Fredy, borrowing from F. Turner, called “wilderness.” Through some sequence of human activity (and Fredy argues for a certain very logical sequence of events) the demented death-machine we call civil-eyes-zation was created. This social “leviathan” evolved to dominate the planet, to the near destruction of all other life-forms on it, to the near destruction of “wilderness.” Fredy’s evocation of this process in *Leviathan*, of the organization of death, the reduction of the living to the mechanical, was lyric in its eloquence. *Leviathan* was a revealing of the process. There can be argument over the accuracy of minutiae, but Fredy outlined the salient features of this global catastrophe with absolute clarity: pointed clearly at patriarchal spirit, culture, and organization. *Leviathan* also exposed the recurring failure of organized, armed, revolutionary resistance from the inception of civil-eyes-zation.

He demonstrated the inherent persisting failure of resistance which takes the form of the enemy to defeat that enemy. He demonstrated that organizing violence-as-an-institution to resist violence-as-an-institution was a victory for the death-machine regardless who carried the field.

A frightening aspect of Fredy’s unfolding analysis in *Leviathan* was the ultimate realization that it was in many instances those who had organized to resist the depredations of the civil-monster who spread its infection to peoples and places in the remaining “wilderness.” These “resisters” carried with them the death from which they fled. *Against His-story, Against Leviathan.* leaves you with a half-empty cup. It reveals from where the monster came but discusses no meaningful way of negating it.

The Strait is a record of Fredy’s attempt to re-vision “wilderness,” to recreate a way to live in “wilderness.” But the book as it exists now is unfinished. Fredy passed over before his offering was complete. *The Strait* is not a conventional novel in its present form. I cannot but feel that it would not have been a conventional novel if Fredy had completed his re-visioning, but the question is moot.

The Strait is the re-vision of one not-willingly-civil-eyes’d human trying to dream himself into the “wilderness,” to feel, not understand, the destruction of the world.

It is an impossible task to commit such a vision to writing in English as it is constituted now. This said, *The Strait* is also a powerfully moving experience and a difficult one. Fredy makes no accommodation to a civil-eyes’d person’s unfamiliarity with Native American naming traditions and habits. He remains as true to them as a non-native speaker can. You move through *The Strait* within Fredy’s re-vision of “wilderness” reduced to language.

The Wilder-ness

The Strait is a re-creation of the depredation of one part of “wilderness” known to its two-leggeds as Turtle Island. It is not a his-torical novel because it speaks from the vantage point of the destroyed not the destroyers. It speaks of the time when the death machine makes its first incursions among “the people,” the Rootkin, Firekeepers, and Turtle-people of this place between the great waters Mishigami and Kichigami. Fredy’s “talking leaves” speak of “the people’s” personal geography, the “wilderness” dreaming its own beauty being destroyed.

Prior to the invasion of their world by civil-eyes’d whites, Native Americans lived in a universe of conscious unity and spirit. These two-leggeds reflected their kinship with all other life forms with their participation, ceremonially and personally, in the Great Mystery which enfolds all energy-matter-spirit.

This way of being-in-the-world is reflected in the most powerful prayer of the Lakota people who migrated from the eastern seaboard of Turtle Island to the upper reaches of the Missouri watershed, and were western neighbors to the people of *The Strait*. In Lakota this prayer is “mitakuye oyasin” (pronounced meh-TAK-we-os-see) which has been translated as “for all my relations.” It frames all of the ceremonies of the Lakota people from the purification of the sweat lodge, to the sacrifice of the Sundance.

In this reality, animals, humans, plants, rocks, water, thunder and fire are not separate species or members of different king-dominions but related beings of the Great Mystery. A person (People) maintains intimate and personal contact with all of these beings in order to keep balance and harmony within the universe. A person resolves, re-creates, re-members, or heals the diseases or difficulties which arise when spirit-matter-being-events are out of balance by seeking advice, teaching, and assistance from the sacred-mysteries of rock, thunder, plant, animal, or those of her kin who have passed over.

Within the earth-time-space surrounding a person (People) are locations both personal and communal at which she can intensify her intimacy with these sacred-mysteries. These power-place-time spaces can be the location of communal ceremonies of growth, death and rebirth. They can also be personal places for renewal, in-visioning, and trans-forming. These place-time-person (people) locations make the land (the “wilder-ness”) which a people in-habit their home, a living part of them, an intimate, interactive being-in-the-sacred-mystery. To be forced from these places is to have the universe torn apart, to have your relations savagely separated from you, to be lost, to have no place-time-earth to be within. Any migration involves the re-constituting of the universe, a re-balancing within the Great Mystery of all of the harmonies of life and health. It is not the simple lateral replacing which civil-eyes’d people think they undertake.

Living within the Great Mystery groups of two-leggeds bind together in kinship and from the need to collectively promote the life and health of all beings.

Groups are not constituted to defend one band from another, or appropriate material wealth, but to balance the health and life of the people within the harmony of the universe. This task requires the participation and attention (attend-dance) of all of the people. So in the cycle of living they come together in places which intensify their intimacy with the Great Mystery and perform the rituals and ceremonies devoted to balance, harmony and health.

The Invasion

Into this place-time-community came invaders whose hearts knew only conflict, separation and domination. Into this place-time-community came strangers whose hearts told them to subdue and dominate all that walked, crawled, swam, or sprouted upon the earth. Into this place-time-community came strangers whose hearts told them that their perception of the Great Mystery must be spread with fire and sword, that all people should be “saved” from the abundant life which they led and prepared for an eternal life in the air or a damnation in the bowels of an alien earth.

With these invaders came new and terrible dis-eases which the strangers had never re-balanced but carried with them as punishment for the “sin” in which they lived. The strangers gave these new dis-eases to the people of Turtle Island along with the other “fruits” of their civil-eyes-zation: sticks-that-kill-from-a-distance, water-which makes-you-crazy, boundaries to separate the earth from the people, and government to separate the people from themselves. The one gift which they could not foist on the people was the will-to-kill-forever.

The Strait sings of this place-time-community of Obenabi’s family, Potowatomies, who walked these places during the early period of changes. His people, grandmothers, sisters, nieces, and companions, live a nightmare of terrors as the universe dissolves from the old way. They suffer extreme pain and alienation when the intimate, nurturing place-time-community transforms around these bearded white strangers into a universe of death, slavery, and on-going war.

The people who are Obenabi’s relations do everything they can to restore the balance of being within the universe. They go into their dream lodges seeking help and assistance. They perform the rituals of the “Keepers of the Fire” and those ceremonies which unite the people among themselves and with those who have passed over. But these elements of the ebbing “wilderness” seem powerless to stop the civil-eyes’d people whose entire universe is death. Obenabi’s kin move in the time when women and children of “the people” are divided from the men by trade, alcohol, and incessant killing, when life itself becomes merely an un-death.

The Strait is at its best re-visioning the process of world-changing by the invaders from civil-eyes-zation and the responses of the native peoples to it. This is clearly where Fredy shines, a re-memberer himself. The process which he analyzed and described so thoroughly in *Leviathan* is given a full human dimension in *The Strait*. The initial extension of hospitality by the Rootkin and its betrayal. The struggles with other native people driven west by the beast the Rootkin now face. The unique turmoil which civil-eyes-zation brings to the world. The restless movement and flight one associates with a tremendous natural catastrophe. In re-visioning the interactions of newly invaded people with the members of the civil-eyes’d machine *The Strait* presents us with a full and accurate portrayal.

The Struggle to Re-Vision

The Strait also tries to capture elements of the universe of the people while the “wilderness” was whole. This is a near impossible task, the weakness, and true strength of the book.

It is one thing to know and understand the depredations of civil-eyes-zation because this knowledge is an intimate part of our body-spirits. It is quite another to “know” a universe which you feel only by its absence. It is difficult even with much experience of native people to know the personality of this universe. It may be impossible to express the feeling for a “Great Mystery” in English, Chinese, or any civil-eyes’d language. Before missionaries and civil-eyes’d “teachers” overhauled them, native languages rarely, if ever, structured the world in the linear rational-eyes’d abstracted way which civil-eyes’d tongues do.

A linguist, Benjamin Whorf, upon confronting this phenomenon in Hopi speech postulated that such a language would force a people who spoke it to perceive the world in a radically different manner from their civil-eyes’d cousins. He was soundly hooted out of the “academy” by true “scientists” and “professors” who “knew” that there was only one “true perception,” and they had it. They knew that all other perceptions were primitive, distorted, or in-sanity.

Whorf was wrong about the direction of cause and effect (human activity originates the framework for language) but correct in his analysis that the Hopi did and do perceive the Universe in a radically different manner. The languages of native peoples (or what remains of their mother tongues) grew out of a need to communicate with their universe. This universe was not linear, atomized, alien, or threatening. It was nurturing, powerful, spirit-filled, interactive, and intimate. That is the way a civil-eyes’d language must describe it. Such a description does not do it justice. A more romantic description within a civil-eyes’d tongue still leaves you with a vague sense of coldness.

In my own attempts to learn songs and elements of Lakota speech, I have confronted the difficulty head-on. In my struggle to make sense of the jesuit-compiled dictionary of Lakota, I had a revealing discussion with a Lakota medicine-person. He related that traditional Lakota recognize three transformations of their language: the ancient language, a transitional language, and contemporary Lakota. What is known of the ancient language is largely confined to the medicine-people and sacred-mystery-people who preserve some of it in their dealings with healing and spiritual activity. Many civil-eyes’d scholars now write as though this language was a language of “priests and shamans,” but as my acquaintance observes, “how would the people have communicated with the universe if this language was only known by medicine people.”

The transitional language evolved from interaction with civil-eyes’d people who would not comprehend the rich perception of the ancient language and began its reification. This accompanied their genocide of the Lakota and all Native Americans. The contemporary language is a product of the process of reifying Lakota to express an alien universe, making it a language to be written not sung. Today the ancient ways are almost as inexpressible in Lakota as they are in English. Civil-eyes-zation shackles the spiritual as well as the material aspects of living. It reduces both to lubricants for its death machine.

Surviving native people attempting to preserve something of the ancient ways face the same trial which Fredy faced in attempting to write an account of his dreaming of Obenabi and his kin. There are no correlations left within speech which match-up to another experience, another way of living, of being-in-the-world. Speech elements can exist which you can hear but not translate to another less abundant language or to the page. You cannot do it intellectually with your head. But within Fredy’s accounts, as with many Native works, you can sense a feeling of rightness. You can use them to prod yourself to feel and experience in new ways. To re-vision the world for yourself.

Beyond its full exploration of the events from the destruction of “wilderness” into linear time, the value of *The Strait* is this act of re-visioning. Not that Fredy created a “right” or “most accurate” re-vision but that he undertook the work and left some record of it to assist the rest of us in our work. We re-create the world just a small bit when we re-vision our reality.

The Legacy of *The Strait*

Fredy went into dream-time to meet Obenabi, Yahatase, Menoko and the others of “the people” from The Strait. Those that lived in “wilderness” spoke to him in a way that is very difficult to understand. Fredy’s in-sight and devotion to real-eyes-ing “wilderness” gave us this record of them to work through for ourselves.

Those who lived in the universe of a dying “wilderness,” a world increasingly dominated by civil-eyes’d destruction and repression, told a tale more recognizable and familiar. They described a world much like the one in which we live, one of alienation, fear, and death.

In the native world a person acts to balance and harmonize her being with the Great Mystery on behalf of “all my relations,” so that “the people may live.” She does not act-upon, nor is she acted-upon, but is-with-all-beings-in-all-time. It is hard to find the speech to make that real because there is none of that realness here to speak about. Fredy’s gift in The Strait is his re-visioning. His legacy is the real-eyes-zation of an area of “wilder-ness” which came from his living “for all his relations.”

The Strait and *Against His-story; Against Leviathan!* by Fredy Perlman are available from Black & Red, P.O. Box 02374, Detroit, MI 48202 for \$5 and \$4 or from the Fifth Estate Bookstore. Frederick Turner’s *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* is \$14 at FE Books.

fifth Estate

Allan Foster
Re-Visioning *The Strait*
1990

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/334-summer-1990/re-visioning-the-strait>
Fifth Estate #334, Summer, 1990

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)