

**HAROLD
BLOOM**

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**DAEMON
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LITERARY GREATNESS AND THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

By HAROLD BLOOM

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For my wife, Jeanne

and for John T. Irwin

and the outrageous Bricuth

Authentic tradition remains
hidden; only the decaying [*verfallende*]
tradition chances upon [*verfällt auf*]
a subject and only in decay does its
greatness become visible.

—GERSHOM SCHOLEM,
*Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms
on Kabbalah*



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Why These Twelve?

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE DOZEN CREATORS OF THE AMERICAN SUBLIME. Whether these are our most enduring authors may be disputable, but then this book does not attempt to present an American canon. For that I can imagine alternative choices such as Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Ralph Ellison, and Flannery O'Connor, without including later figures.

Yet my own selection seems more central, because these writers represent our incessant effort to transcend the human without forsaking humanism.

Thomas Weiskel, my friend and former student, who died tragically in a vain attempt to save his little daughter, left as memorial his seminal book *The Romantic Sublime* (1976). “A humanist sublime is an oxymoron” is his cautionary adage. Do my twelve masters of the sublime confirm Weiskel?

The American Sublime of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman is knowingly self-contradictory. You could not be a self-created Adam early in the morning with no past at your back, in 1830 or in 1855, even in the American vein.

Weiskel gave a pithy account of what the literary sublime asserts:

The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human—God or the gods, the daemon or Nature—is matter for

great disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure.

Except for T. S. Eliot, none of my twelve believed in God or the gods, and when they spoke of “Nature” they meant the American Adam. An Emersonian vision, the American Adam is the God-Man of the New World. He is self-created, and if he ever fell it was in the act of initial creation. What lies beyond the human for nearly all of these writers is the daemon, who is described and defined throughout this book.

The common element in these twelve writers—albeit covertly in Eliot—is their receptivity to daemonic influx. Henry James, the master of his art, nevertheless congratulates his own daemon for the greatest of his novels and tales. Emerson was the family sage for the James clan, including Henry James, Sr., as well as the novelist and the psychologist-philosopher William, whose essay “On Vital Reserves” is a hymn to the daemon.

I have paired these twelve figures in juxtapositions of no single pattern. I begin with Walt Whitman and Herman Melville because they are the Giant Forms (William Blake’s term) of our national literature. *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the first *Leaves of Grass* (1855) have the aura and resonance of the Homeric epics and in that sense share a primacy among all our imaginative writers.

Exact contemporaries in time and space, Whitman and Melville must have passed each other often on the streets of New York City, and both attended the same lectures of Emerson but had no interest in each other. Whitman had read the early *Typee* yet nothing more. Melville, without a public from *Moby-Dick* on, resented Whitman’s self-advertisements and the little shreds of notoriety they gathered.

I have avoided direct comparisons between *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass* except in a few places, though they might be redundant, since Melville and Whitman inaugurate the American fourfold metaphor of night, death, the mother, and the sea that has become perpetual for us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson met when he lectured in Amherst and stayed for dinner and overnight at her brother’s home next door. Her references to him in her letters are wistful and humorous, while her poems offer a sly critique of him. I bring them together here because he is her closest imaginative father, as Walter Pater was Virginia Woolf’s.

What they share are powers of mind surpassing any others in our literature.

The relation of Nathaniel Hawthorne to Henry James is one of direct influence and so I bring them close together, in a way James would have disliked. I interpret all four of Hawthorne's major romances but fewer of the tales than I should for want of space. Emerson, Hawthorne's walking companion, deeply contaminates Hester Prynne and Hawthorne's other heroines, and his mark is as strong on Isabel Archer and James's later women protagonists. The ghostly Henry James, as in "The Jolly Corner," also emanates from Hawthorne.

Mark Twain and Robert Frost have little in common despite their mutually concealed savagery, but they are our only great masters with popular audiences. Both dissemble and move on two levels, implying deeper meanings to only an elite.

With Wallace Stevens and Thomas Stearns Eliot, I turn to an intricate interlocking: a polemic conducted by Stevens against Eliot. The eclipse of *Harmonium* by *The Waste Land* doubtless displeased Stevens, yet the personal element was minor compared to the opposition between a naturalistic humanism, akin to Sigmund Freud's, and a virulent neo-Christianity. There are greater depths in the conflict. Both Stevens and Eliot were Whitman's progeny; this proved a discomfort yet also an impetus for the seer of *Harmonium* while it was totally denied by Eliot until his closing years, when Whitman, Milton, and Shelley were allowed back into the Eliotic canon.

William Faulkner and my lifetime favorite, Hart Crane, are placed here side by side since each forces the American language to its limits. I contrast these titans implicitly, and I hope subtly, in their authentic shared tradition of American precursors. The only begetters they have in common are Melville and Eliot, to whom Faulkner could add Hawthorne and Mark Twain. Crane's formidable lineage includes Whitman and *Moby-Dick*, Emerson and Dickinson, Stevens and Eliot, and a panoply of other American poets from William Cullen Bryant and Edgar Allan Poe through William Carlos Williams.

Whitman, our national poet, calls out for an answering greatness. Of all classical American writers, Melville uniquely features the contours of a possible sublimity. What is the American Sublime and how does it differ from British and Continental instances? Simplistically, the sublime in lit-

erature has been associated with peak experiences that render a secular version of a theophany: a sense of something interfused that transforms a natural moment, landscape, action, or countenance.

America, the Evening Land, favors more drastic sublimities than Europe, abrupt splendors such as Dickinson's "certain Slant of light" or Stevens's auroras. Both are illuminations of discontinuity; at first reading, Wordsworth in the Lake Country and Shelley at Mont Blanc are more traditional than they or we are. True, Shelley and Wordsworth have broken from the immense literary cavalcades beautifully explored in my favorite work of modern critical scholarship, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953) by Ernst Robert Curtius, which traces a profound continuity moving all the long way from Homer through Goethe. The critic William Hazlitt remarked that Wordsworth seems to begin anew, on a tabula rasa of poetry. But though there is a gap, certainly, between Goethe and Wordsworth, it is hardly a dumbfounding abyss. Both are Shakespeare-haunted, an anxiety compounded for Wordsworth by Milton. Shelley, as classical as Goethe, had the triple burden of anxiety of influence from Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth. A High Romantic English poet joins Homeric tradition not by choice but by contingencies of lasting and personal ambitions, whereas the greatest American Romantics—Whitman and Melville—necessarily have a very different relation to the tradition of European literature.

Emerson mediated literary tradition for Whitman. Melville, with no mentor, worked out his own relation to Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley, as well as to Cervantes, Hawthorne, Emerson, and most darkly the Bible. Whitman's complex metric stems from Hebrew parallelism, and the Quakerism of his youth governs the stance and form in *Song of Myself*, yet Melville is the more Bible-soaked. Shadowed by Jonah and Job, *Moby-Dick* is the American book closest in cadence to the King James Bible, at least until Cormac McCarthy's Melvillean *Blood Meridian*.

It is difficult to foreground Walt Whitman. We cannot always rely on his own statements as to what he read. He and Emerson, he proclaimed in 1855, had their subsequent difficulties, best summed up however by Whitman finally affirming: "loyal at last." Mutual gratitude does not always culminate in such vital relationships, and it cheers me that it did.

For a few years Hawthorne was Melville's close friend, so his is not analogous to Emerson's role for Whitman. Still, he is the daemonic muse

for *Moby-Dick*, while *Leaves of Grass* 1855 locates the daemon in one aspect of a tripartite Whitman, which I will discuss later. Emerson, Dickinson, and Hawthorne were New Englanders, while Melville, Whitman, and Henry James were more or less New Yorkers. Mark Twain emerged from the Mississippi landscape, while Robert Frost moved from California to New England. Eliot, of New England ancestry, came out of St. Louis to study at Harvard and to end as a Londoner, while Stevens emanated from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, east to Harvard and then on to his life in Hartford, Connecticut. Notoriously, Faulkner invented his own county and state in the Yoknapatawpha saga, which has now replaced Mississippi; Hart Crane, a child of Garrettsville, Ohio, emulated Whitman and Melville by transmuting himself into the epic poet of New York City. He seems now the last transcendentalist poet of the American Sublime and the absolute conclusion to daemonic tradition in our literature. American poetry did not end with him, yet something glorious may have departed that cannot be renewed.

The two American writers I love best are Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, and the bridge of *The Daemon Knows* leaps from *Song of Myself* to Crane's *The Broken Tower*. At eighty-four, I can only write the way I go on teaching, personally and passionately. Poems, novels, stories, plays matter only if we matter. They give us the blessing of more life, whether or not they initiate a time beyond boundaries.



Daemonic Preludium

OUR TWO MOST AMBITIOUS AND SUBLIME AUTHORS REMAIN Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. Whitman creates from the powerful press of himself; Melville taps his pen deeply into the volcanic force of William Shakespeare.

American Shakespeare for the last two centuries has been a prevalent obsession, a more nervous and agile relationship than the bard's cultural dominance in Britain. Emerson remarked that the text of modern life was composed by the creator of *Hamlet*. *Moby-Dick*, Shakespearean and biblical, relies upon Ahab's fusion of aspects of Macbeth and of Lear. Consciousness, an ordeal in Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and William Faulkner, shares the quality of that adventure in self that is the Shakespearean soliloquy.

Charles Olson, poet and seer, pioneered the study of Shakespeare's influence upon *Moby-Dick*. Others have expanded his recognitions, and there is more to be apprehended; *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and above all *Hamlet* reverberate throughout Ahab's odyssey. Is *Moby-Dick* a revenge tragedy? Only as *Hamlet* is: not at all. Prince Hamlet rejects Shakespeare's play and writes his own. Does Ahab accept Herman Melville's epic? The great captain composes his fate, and we cannot know his enigmatic creator's intentions any more than we comprehend Shakespeare's.

I first read *Moby-Dick* in the early summer of 1940, before I turned ten. My sympathies were wholly with Captain Ahab, to some degree because the Book of Job—and William Blake's designs for it—were engraved deep within me. More than seventy years later, I teach the book annually and

my judgment has not swerved. Ahab is as much the hero as Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, or Macbeth. You can call them all hero-villains, but then so is Hamlet. I weary of scholars neighing against Ahab, who is magnificent in his heroism. Would they have him hunt for more blubber? His chase has Job's Leviathan in view, a quarry representing Yahweh's sanctified tyranny of nature over man.

Moby-Dick is an ecological nightmare; so are we. Melville's cause is not save the whales but strike the sun if it insults you and strike through the white pasteboard mask of all visible things at God, who has degraded you. Ahab has passed through Parsee Manichaeism and arrived at an American gnosis, ruggedly antinomian. Yes, Ahab is a dictator who drowns his entire crew with him, except for Ishmael. What would you have? Yahweh's Leviathan cannot lose; should Ahab yield to Starbuck, who informs him that he only seeks vengeance on a dumb brute? The Promethean captain ought to abhor himself and repent in dust and ashes? Write your own tale then, but it will not be Melville's.

Moral judgment, irrelevant to *Moby-Dick* and to Shakespeare, would have provoked Dr. Samuel Johnson not to countenance Ahab nor to finish reading more than a page or two. From the best of opening sentences on, the White Whale remorselessly voyages to a heroic conclusion. Except for Starbuck and Pip, the *Pequod's* company votes for its marvelous catastrophe. Ahab is possessed, but so are they (Ishmael included). As leader, their captain finds his archetype in Andrew Jackson, who represented for Melville and others the American hero proper, an apotheosis of the politics of one who characterizes the American Dream. From lowly origins he ascended to the heights of power and brought into sharper focus what is still American nationalism.

Denying Ahab greatness is an aesthetic blunder: He is akin to Achilles, Odysseus, and King David in one register, and to Don Quixote, Hamlet, and the High Romantic Prometheus of Goethe and Shelley in another. Call the first mode a transcendent heroism and the second the persistence of vision. Both ways are antithetical to nature and protest against our mortality. The epic hero will never submit or yield.

Such uncanny persistence is dangerous to all of us. We do not wish to rise crazily with Don Quixote, to plot and counterplot with Hamlet in poisoned Elsinore, to serve under doomsayer Ahab in the *Pequod*. But

how can the reader's sublime be better experienced than with Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Melville? Only the self-named "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," is comparable to Captain Ahab in the United States. Ahab and Whitman are our Great Originals, our contribution to that double handful or so among whom Falstaff and Sancho Panza, Hamlet and Don Quixote, Mr. Pickwick and Becky Sharp take their place.



IN THE EDITION OF *MOBY-DICK* I RECOMMEND TO MY STUDENTS, THE Norton volume edited by Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, the novel runs to four hundred large pages. I share the students' sentiment that the novel's division into one hundred thirty-five short chapters and an epilogue enhances its effectiveness. Ahab does not enter until Chapter 28, after what I tend to call the Ishmaeliad, a beautiful hundred-page induction still fresh and humorous a century and a quarter after its initial publication. From Chapter 28 on, it is Ahab's saga, not Ishmael's. The total quest abounds in contradictions since Ishmael, though a winning narrator at securing our favor, is unreliable. Like Huck Finn, he charmingly lies merely to keep in practice.

Paul Brodtkorb, in his *Ishmael's White World* (1965), terms the narrator a relativist, which is a good starting point. Go a touch beyond and call Ishmael the Shakespeare implanted—by Shakespeare—within Melville. A comedian of the spirit, detached from irony, Ishmael gives *Moby-Dick* what Marlow failed to give *Lord Jim* and his other Conradian narrative assignments—a stance capacious enough to enfold all genres. Like its prototype, *Hamlet*, *Moby-Dick* is a Poem Unlimited.

Shakespeare is the burning fountain out of which emanate all High Romantics: British, German, American, Russian, and the whole earth. Melville is American High Romantic, a Shelleyan divided between head and heart, who held against Emerson the sage's supposed deficiency in the region of the heart. Melville is the most Shakespearean of our authors. Like Macbeth, Ahab desires to pull down everything over him, and in Hamletian mode the lord of the *Pequod* too cries aloud: "Strike through the mask" so that "let be" indeed shall be "finale of seem."

It misleads to call Ahab's a metaphysical quest, unless the metaphysics

is embedded in Western religious formulations: Zoroastrian, Judaic, Christian, Islamic. Ahab is a tormented Job who fights back and will not accept the tyranny of Leviathan. His struggle has its roots in Job:

Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord *which* thou lettest down?

Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn?

Will he make many supplications unto thee? will he speak soft *words* unto thee?

Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?

Wilt thou play with him as *with* a bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens?

Shall the companions make a banquet of him? shall they part him among the merchants?

Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish spears?

Lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more.

—JOB 41:1–8

From childhood, I have wondered why Melville's "Extracts" prefacing *Moby-Dick* omit this most relevant of passages. Instead, he quarries Job for:

Leviathan maketh a path to shine after him;
One would think the deep to be hoary.

More appositely, he gives a grand prophecy from Isaiah:

In that day, the Lord, with his sore and great and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea.

I take it Melville strikes obliquely. God's nasty boasts concerning his kingship over all the children of pride would have seemed too direct a

provocation. The same care manifests in Chapters 41 and 42, “Moby Dick” and the magnificent “The Whiteness of the Whale.” In Chapter 41, a single reference to Job inaugurates the strong last paragraph:

Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals—morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck, the invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness in Stubb, and the pervading mediocrity in Flask. Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge. How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man’s ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be—what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life,—all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go. The subterranean miner that works in us all, how can one tell whither leads his shaft by the ever shifting, muffled sound of his pick? Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag? What skiff in tow of a seventy-four can stand still? For one, I gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and the place; but while yet all a-rush to encounter the whale, could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill.

Ishmael goes deeper, in his famous meditation on the whiteness of the whale:

Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.

But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and

learned why it appeals with such power to the soul; and more strange and far more portentous—why, as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind.

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

The trope of the intransigent blank, an ultimate image of our American selfhood, survives from two prime English prototypes, Shakespearean and Miltonic. In Shakespeare, the blank is the center of a target, perhaps evoking the mark forever missed, the hamartia of Athenian tragedy, as when Kent cries out: "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true

blank of thine eye." Milton, invoking the Holy Light at the commencement of *Paradise Lost*, Book III, laments: "Presented with a universal blank / Of Nature's works to me expunged and rased, / And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out."

The Shakespearean blank becomes Emily Dickinson's and Hart Crane's; Milton's engenders a chain or sequence of dramatic images that goes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Robert Browning, into the American procession of Emerson and Whitman, Hawthorne and Melville, on to Wallace Stevens, who was haunted by the terrible whiteness I remember first when I brood again upon his poetry: "Here, being visible is being white, / Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise." Walking the bare beach at twilight, the old poet, illuminated by the great glare of the auroras, "turns blankly on the sand."

The United States, considered as a final Western culture, never was a blank to be filled. Emerson in the optative mood might desire to be a man with no past at his back, but he knew better. Shakespeare and Michel de Montaigne were always with him. Of the eleven other spirits appreciated in this book, only Faulkner's was unaffected by the dialectical prophet of the American Newness. Hawthorne, the sage's silent walking companion, might seem antithetical to Emerson, yet he had to be aware that his Hester Prynne, worshipping only the god within herself, stemmed from the self-hood of "Self-Reliance." The James family, raised by their Emersonian father, accepted their heritage, with reservations by Henry yet fewer by William. Whatever Henry's distinctions, his Isabel Archer is as Emersonian as Hester Prynne in her determination to face destruction rather than relinquish her soul's right to choose—however bad the choice—while Ahab restores self-reliance to an original daemoniac wildness.

A subtler freedom attends Emily Dickinson, whom I regard as a heretic from the Emersonian religion, which exalts whim over trust and faith. Walt Whitman, Waldo's most eminent disciple but an expander of self-reliance into a solar trajectory, takes the "real Me" as dusky daemon and brother, just as Dickinson uncovers a sufficiency in the single hound of her own identity.

Melville found his daemon in the image of the Handsome Soldier, a memory of his shipmate Jack Chase, most famously reincarnated as Billy Budd. In *Moby-Dick*, the Handsome Sailor was to have been a counter-

force to Ahab in the guise of Bulkington, who is introduced to us in the splendid Chapter 3, “The Spouter-Inn”:

I observed, however, that one of them held somewhat aloof, and though he seemed desirous not to spoil the hilarity of his shipmates by his own sober face, yet upon the whole he refrained from making as much noise as the rest. This man interested me at once; and since the sea-gods had ordained that he should soon become my shipmate (though but a sleeping-partner one, so far as this narrative is concerned), I will here venture upon a little description of him. He stood full six feet in height, with noble shoulders, and a chest like a coffer-dam. I have seldom seen such brawn in a man. His face was deeply brown and burnt, making his white teeth dazzling by the contrast; while in the deep shadows of his eyes floated some reminiscences that did not seem to give him much joy. His voice at once announced that he was a Southerner, and from his fine stature, I thought he must be one of those tall mountaineers from the Alleghanian Ridge in Virginia. When the revelry of his companions had mounted to its height, this man slipped away unobserved, and I saw no more of him till he became my comrade on the sea. In a few minutes, however, he was missed by his shipmates, and being, it seems, for some reason a huge favorite with them, they raised a cry of “Bulkington! Bulkington! where’s Bulkington?” and darted out of the house in pursuit of him.

The parentheses indicate Bulkington’s role as *Moby-Dick*’s secret sharer, a Chekhovian pistol Melville chooses not to fire at Ahab. A natural leader, Bulkington alone could have turned his shipmates from the monomaniacal quest. Instead, he is swept away with the others and is awarded the beautiful elegy of “this six-inch chapter,” 23, “The Lee Shore”:

Some chapters back, one Bulkington was spoken of, a tall, new-landed mariner, encountered in New Bedford at the inn.

When on that shivering winter’s night, the *Pequod* thrust her vindictive bows into the cold malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in midwinter just landed from a four

years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfulest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington. Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights 'gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!

Know ye now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!

Ishmael is and is not Melville, by turns, yet this is his author's true voice of feeling. "Apotheosis" unites Bulkington and Ahab, demigods as shoreless as the authentic divinity of the wickedly spotless book.

As a boy of ten, I was puzzled and intrigued by Bulkington, whose sparse presence in the epic is comprised by my two quotations. Apotheosis of what? I wondered. Mountain man and whaler, Bulkington is the Heracles of the *Pequod*, the shipmate who adds a finer tone to the voyage. He has an erotic aura first suggested in conversation to me by Camille Paglia, whose *Sexual Personae* (1990) I had the honor of mentoring,

though Paglia, sprung full-grown from Athena, scarcely needed any aid. She attributed “the novel’s operatic gigantism” to “its force of *sexual protest*” against what William Blake named the Female Will, the matrix of night, death, the mother, and the sea that Walt Whitman celebrated and longed to enter.

Bulkington is the epic’s hidden daemon, Melville’s secret muse. He is to the author what Queequeg was to Ishmael and may be a surrogate for Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom *Moby-Dick* is dedicated “in token of my admiration for his genius.” But Bulkington, the helmsman as the *Pequod* plunges out of port, becomes a kind of Virgilian Palinurus, the lost pilot of a voyage whose only object is elusive and deadly beyond all measure.



MELVILLE’S ADMIRER FAULKNER ENVISIONED HIS DAEMON AS CANDACE Compson, the heroine of *The Sound and the Fury*, who grows out of and merges with a personal series of younger women who served Faulkner as muse-mistresses. Caddy never speaks, but her brother Quentin is sexually obsessed with her, while her poor idiot brother Benjamin in some deep way carries her image in what remains of his mind, and her brother Jason obsessively despises her. Faulkner loved her best among all his women characters and remarked that she represented the younger sister he never had.

Wallace Stevens, who like Melville and the young T. S. Eliot was unhappily married, pursued his daemoniac self in the fabulous “interior par-amours” of his major poems. Eliot, who had abandoned Emily Hale and had lost his friend Jean Verdenal to an early, heroic death, created haunting images of infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering, mostly feminine wraiths. The Orphic Hart Crane, heir of all these, celebrated his Handsome Sailor Emil Opffer in *Voyages* and brilliantly found his bride in *The Bridge*, where a “steeled cognizance” imperishably is hymned.

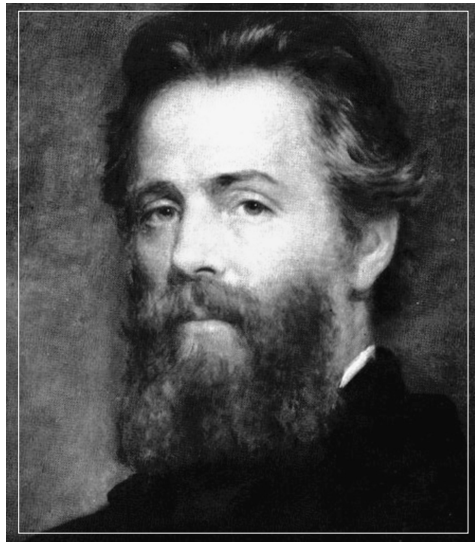
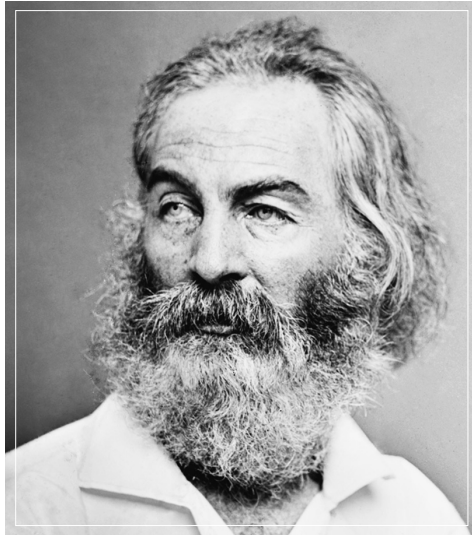
My mentor and friend Kenneth Burke remarked to me that Crane mentioned the bridge/bride kenning to him in conversations. Bridal imagery abounds in Crane’s brief epic, lending a poignance: “And see’st thy bride immortal in the maize!” And yet Orpheus is Crane’s archetypal bridegroom, questing to rescue his beloved from the shades. Dionysus and

Orpheus fuse together in ancient Greek religion, a mingling renewed in *The Bridge*.

Of the twelve writers upon whom this book centers, the unchurched Hart Crane is the most deeply religious, more in the vitalistic mode of D. H. Lawrence than of the pious T. S. Eliot, uneasy neo-Christian. It is an oddity that Crane, with only his mother's Christian Science at his origins, is a kind of natural Catholic by temperament and acute sensibility. *The Bridge* hymns a god unknown, yet the overtones of its yearnings are conditioned by El Greco's *Agony in the Garden*, Crane's favorite painting.

In *The Tunnel* section of *The Bridge*, a descent to the Virgilian inferno Avernus, Crane invokes the New York City subway as "the Daemon," probably taking the word from the discussion of Dionysus in Walter Pater's *Greek Studies*. Initially there is rich strangeness in this identification, since Crane favors Dionysus as his path to poetic vision but not to the infernal. Yet ambivalence has to mark the American Sublime: Think of Melville, Whitman, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Faulkner's doomed landscapes. A selfhood endlessly aspiring to freedom from the past is bound to resist actual overdeterminations that bind us all in time.

We are at last bequeathed to an earthly shore and seek memorial inscriptions, fragments heaped against our ruins: an interval and then we are gone. High literature endeavors to augment that span: My twelve authors center, for me, that proliferation of consciousness by which we go on living and finding our own sense of being.



I.

WALT WHITMAN *and*
HERMAN MELVILLE

Foregrounding the Giants

WALT WHITMAN AND HERMAN MELVILLE ABIDE AS THE GIANTS of American literary tradition. Their vaunting overreach is not matched until Hart Crane and William Faulkner, each equally ambitious in scope and drive, assault the frontiers already extended outward by *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the first three *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1856, 1860).

Rich as North American literary culture became—at least before the twenty-first century—it brought forth no peers of Dante and Cervantes, Montaigne and Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Joyce. Only *Moby-Dick* and Whitman in his half-dozen major poems—*Song of Myself*, *The Sleepers*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, and the three elegiac meditations (*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*)—suggest Tolstoyan resonances. Søren Kierkegaard found in Shakespeare “the resonance of the opposite.” All twelve writers centering this book share in that antithetical strain. It is not that Whitman and Melville possess it more deeply than Emerson, Emily Dickinson, or Henry James, but I do not hear in them the sea crying out, as we listen to the earth calling aloud in Tolstoy.

Yet Melville and Whitman have little else in common. Walt was interested in *Typee* but nothing by Melville after that, and the defeated seer of *Moby-Dick* rather resented whatever notoriety the self-promoting Whitman achieved. I doubt he ever read a line of *Leaves of Grass*.

Foregrounding Dante and Shakespeare depends upon intricate inferences. Their direct precursors, Guido Cavalcanti and Christopher Marlowe, were major poets, but the authors of the *Commedia* and of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are beyond all simplicities of inheritance. Certainly there was an anguish of contamination. The *Inferno* places Cavalcanti's father and father-in-law among the damned and poignantly allows the father anxiously to question the Pilgrim: Why is it Dante rather than Cavalcanti who makes the Divine Journey? Kit Marlowe haunts Shakespeare, though scarcely in style and hardly in the creation of personalities. The art of achieving rhetorical power over an audience was bequeathed by Marlowe to his contemporary Shakespeare, who might not have seen its possibilities without this apprenticeship to the dramatic oratory of Tamburlaine, the Guise, Barabbas, and Doctor Faustus.

Foregrounding Whitman and Melville is difficult, because of the radical originality of *Leaves of Grass* and *Moby-Dick*. Emerson, Walt's only begetter, evoked considerable resistance from Melville, who attended the sage's New York City lectures and annotated his essays. Melville's ambivalence led to his satirizing Emerson as Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre* and as Mark Winsome, savaged in *The Confidence-Man*. Ahab and Ishmael nevertheless are partial Emersonians, while Hester Prynne and Isabel Archer are his daughters. Only Southerners, from Poe to Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, have been immune from the Concord contagion.

Though Emerson rubbed his eyes to puzzle out "the long foreground somewhere" of *Leaves of Grass* 1855, nobody was unlikelier to probe inferential origins. A man without a handle (the complaint of Henry James, Sr.), Emerson was skilled in the art of slipping away from categories and persons alike. His greatness allowed for a singularity that could thrill to the commonplace and that enabled Walt, the child who went forth. Whatever Whitman looked upon, he became. Melville massively resisted so promiscuous a cavalcade of identifications.

AHAB IS A HARD TRANSCENDENTALIST:

Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act,

the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the un-reasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think that there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines.

Walt, confronted by sunrise, now and always could send forth sunrise from himself. Melville, opposing titan, would strike at and through the sun as another pasteboard mask. *Moby-Dick* is our national counter-sublime and *Leaves of Grass* the American Sublime, incarnated in a book that is also a man. That man cannot be confused with Walter Whitman, Jr. He is Hermetic Man, poised over the abyss of death and sleep in a precarious balance before falling outward and downward into the sea of space and time.

Whitman had encountered the Hermetic Speculation, the second-century C.E. secular gnosis, in George Sand's novels, though his taste for Egyptian antiquity might have guided him anyway to the doctrines of "Thrice-Greatest Hermes." Hermetic Speculation came out of Alexandria, proclaiming itself as ancient Egyptian wisdom, and deceived Renaissance Europe, though "deceived" itself is deceptive. Hermetism, like Christian Gnosticism, expressed the spirit of religiously eclectic Macedonian and Roman Alexandria, a fecund "Jewgreek is greekjew" (James Joyce) hybrid.

American literary selfhood, or the American Religion, participates in a gnosis. The American androgyne (*Song of Myself's* protagonist) is not part of the creation and fall but emanates from the prior abyss, foremother and forefather invoked by transfigured Captain Ahab, electrified by the corporants, Saint Elmo's fire:

"Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee."

(Sudden, repeated flashes of lightning; the nine flames leap lengthwise to thrice their previous height; Ahab, with the rest, closes his eyes, his right hand pressed hard upon them.)

"I own thy speechless, placeless power; said I not so? Nor was it wrung from me; nor do I now drop these links. Thou canst blind; but I can then grope. Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes. Take the homage of these poor eyes, and shutter-hands. I would not take it. The lightning flashes through my skull; mine eye-balls ache and ache; my whole beaten brain seems as beheaded, and rolling on some stunning ground. Oh, oh! Yet blindfold, yet will I talk to thee. Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee! The javelins cease; open eyes; see, or not? There burn the flames! Oh, thou magnanimous! now I do glory in my genealogy. But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not. Oh, cruel! what hast thou done with her? There lies my puzzle; but thine is greater. Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent. There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear

spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it. Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immemorial, thou too hast thy incommunicable riddle, thy unparticipated grief. Here again with haughty agony, I read my sire. Leap! leap up, and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee!”

I resume this intricate rhapsody for close commentary later in this chapter but emphasize now how strenuously it manifests what has been called our Native Strain. The American Sublime in Melville, Whitman, Emerson, and Hart Crane relies upon extraordinary hyperbole—not an exaggeration but an untamed casting, in which the images of *voice* break and scatter ashes and *sparks*. Whitman calls this the breaking of the tally. In Melville, we hear it marvelously in the lament of Urania (quite possibly Margaret Fuller) that ignites *After the Pleasure Party*:

For, Nature, in no shallow surge
 Against thee either sex may urge,
 Why hast thou made us but in halves—
 Co-relatives? This makes us slaves.
 If these co-relatives never meet
 Self-hood itself seems incomplete.
 And such the dicing of blind fate
 Few matching halves here meet and mate.
 What Cosmic jest or Anarch blunder
 The human integral clove asunder
 And shied the fractions through life's gate?

That Gnostic anarch-archon cleaving asunder of the cosmic androgyne shies Aristophanic fragments (women *and* men) through the gate of human birth. Call this Melville's breaking of the vessels, akin to Emerson's "there is a crack in everything God has made." Intransigent Ahab is the truest daemonic Emersonian, unlike Melville, who loved the Concord sage's deep diving yet dissented from what he took to be an affirming force. Seventy years of deeply reading Emerson make me wary of any account of him that neglects his powers of thinking by and through negations.

Disputes between anyone—even Melville and Emerson—are hard to sustain; Waldo will not rest for long in any one stance or proposition. Polymorphic, he proclaims that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. He is large, contains multitudes, and likes seeing them escape containment. He was the perfect reader for *Leaves of Grass* 1855.

Imagine what the then-twelve-year-old Henry James, already a deep reader, could have made of Whitman's inaugural self-presentation. A decade later, James wrote an absurd review of *Drum-Taps*, demonstrating a total refusal to actually *read* the poet he later came to regard, rightly, as our nation's finest. At twenty-two, James skipped over such magnificences as *Reconciliation* and *Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night*, while devoting himself only to what he dismissed as bardic pretensions. The *Lilacs* elegy for Lincoln was not in the edition that James saw, but I doubt he could then have absorbed it, though he came to love the threnody and to chant it with what Edith Wharton and other rapt auditors termed an organ's resonance. Probably he was disturbed by the homoeroticism already emergent in his own nature.

I have pondered for decades Emerson's wonderful initial receptivity toward Whitman and have come to believe that the sage's daemon recognized itself in his shamanistic godson. Could anyone else then in America or in the world have been that perceptive? In a long lifetime of championing new poets at first reading, I have attempted to emulate Emerson, but only because he broke the new road for American pragmatic criticism.

In my life, the comparable experience began on my tenth birthday, when I found *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane* in the Melrose branch of the Bronx Public Library. I had never seen any reference to Crane, but I opened the book at the *Atlantis* conclusion to *The Bridge* and was transformed by invocatory splendor:

O Thou steeled Cognizance whose leap commits
The agile precincts of the lark's return . . .

What I construed of this or the rest of Hart Crane seventy years ago, I cannot recall. Yet the drive, rhetoric, syntax, and flight beyond limits overwhelmed me, precisely as my initial reading of Christopher Marlowe had been a transport to the sublime. More than that, Crane's image of voice permanently altered my sensibility and sent me back to the Shakespeare

of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, as to Marlowe, George Chapman, and the earlier, pre-conversionary T. S. Eliot.

HAD I BEEN BORN IN 1899 rather than 1930, I would have been an earlier champion of Crane and perhaps would have known or tried to meet him. There is a curious wonder in discovering the undebatable art of a living writer, as I did with the works of Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, A. R. Ammons, Alvin Feinman, and Henri Cole, among the poets, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The experience grows rarer, but it may be that in my eighties I am less open to fresh splendors.

Falling in love seems the aptest analogue to the first discovery of aesthetic glory. For a time, all perspectives shift and demarcations become ghostlier; sounds, keener; vistas democratize. Teaching is nearly akin. In the third week of a new semester, the students I have taught in prior years begin to seem refreshingly stranger, illuminated by the group of recent young women and men who so rapidly become familiar. To be four times their age renders the classroom a phantasmagoria at moments, in which I seem the Button Moulder from *Peer Gynt* or a grotesque emergent from *Faust: Part Two*. I lead a discussion on Falstaff, whose years I now match, or on Walt Whitman in the final Mickle Street phase, worn out by the sufferings of thousands whom he had nursed yet holding fast to the still-powerful press of his sole self, a single separate person.

Perhaps all that Whitman shared with Shakespeare, Goethe, and Henrik Ibsen was an implicit insight that the self was a necessary fiction, an illusion so desired that leaves of grass would sprout from the barren rock of being. A smoky taste flows but then ebbs in our reception of agonies as one of Walt's changes of garments. Rancidity gathers, though it does not fall, and our self-vividness grows less bright. We turn blankly and discover that no direction is at home in us.

Certain mornings in midwinter my wife asks me: Why at eighty-four continue teaching full-time? It is fifty-eight years since first we courted but fifty-nine since I commenced full-time teaching in the Yale faculty. I mutter that I fear breaking the longest continuity of my life. Is that my deeper motive? What can I know? The daemon only knows how it is done.

What remains to be done? Talking with my wife, our friends (the few surviving), my students, is endless and necessary yet insufficient. Yet what

would suffice? Shadows of the Evening Land are rarely daemonic Shadows of Ecstasy. Daemons have their ranks and their rebellions against subordination, with the difference that they cannot be conquistadores; their place in the hierarchy always returns to confine them.

Emersonian American self-reliance is daemonic, as are American self-influence and American self-overhearing. Does that depart from the Shakespearean paradigm of influence and overhearing? The American malaise differs from a grand passage in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, taken by my personal daemon, Angus Fletcher, as epigraph for his superb *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (new edition, Princeton):

'Tis no disparagement to be a stranger, or so irksome to be an exile.
The rain is a stranger to the earth, rivers to the sea, Jupiter in Egypt,
the sun to us all. The soul is an alien to the body, a nightingale
to the air, a swallow in an house, and Ganymede in heaven, an ele-
phant at Rome, a Phoenix in India; and such things commonly
please us best, which are most strange, and come farthest off.

The newfound America of Emerson and Whitman, of Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, and their few imaginative peers, is inhabited by American Adams and fiercely American Eves, from Hester Prynne through Isabel Archer on to Willa Cather's lost ladies. Neither strangers nor exiles, they celebrate what is most familiar and near at hand. Our prime celebrant, Walt, is also our greatest elegist for the self, for the daemon errant in time's wastages.

In ancient Greece, daemonic power, thought to be passed along through the gods, molds cognitive cadence and form. After Emerson, American makers themselves daemonize. Hart Crane's *The Bridge* measures its song, fusing Eliotic-Jacobean dark rhetoric with Whitmanian enlargements of vista and aspiration. Grandly, the consequence represents the utmost achievement of the sublime mode in our America, akin to Whitman's *Sea-Drift* elegies, *Moby-Dick*, Dickinson's ambivalent transports, Stevens's *The Auroras of Autumn*, Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

Foregrounding the twin titans of our literature, Whitman and Melville, should trace lineaments of the giants emergent in sublime theories (really speculations) that inform such daemonic heroes as the Walt Whitman of

Song of Myself—"an American, one of the roughs"—and Captain Ahab. The cavalcade would commence with the Alexandrian Longinus, the French neoclassicist Nicolas Boileau, and the British Joseph Addison and David Hume. Edmund Burke, in his brilliant youth, published a treatise in 1757 that influenced Kant, the major theorist of the sublime. Emerson inevitably fathered the rather different American Sublime, particularly by his rhapsodic essay "Self-Reliance."

The Longinian-Burkean-Kantian Sublime can be judged as an excursion into the psychological origins of aesthetic magnificence. Samuel Johnson, king of Western literary critics, remained always a Burkean apprehender of the sublime as vast and awesome. Emerson radically internalized the European Sublime by attaching it to "the God within" the American self. Rather than rehearse again the difficult dialectics of American Sublimity that I worked through in *Poetry and Repression* (1976) and *Agon* (1982), I refer curious readers to these books and condense here to solar intensities that oppose Whitman to Melville, Wallace Stevens to T. S. Eliot.

"It is for that the poet is always in the sun" is a Stevensian affirmation, Platonic and pagan and thus alien to Eliot, who yearned for neo-Christianity well before he half-persuaded himself to have attained it. Whitman, ghostly father alike of Stevens and of Eliot, gloried that now and always he could send forth sunrise from himself. Captain Ahab's vaunt—"I'd strike the sun if it insulted me"—marks the difference between the Lucretian Whitman and the Gnostic Melville.

WALT WHITMAN

An Induction

MY LIFELONG CRITICAL HERO SAMUEL JOHNSON TAUGHT ME TO VALUE biography over history, even as I emulate his voracity at devouring histories. Emerson, a later idol, said there is no history, only biography. Johnson thought we owed everything to Shakespeare, for where else can the commonwealth of imagination turn?

The labor of the authentic critic, Johnson reflected, improved opinion into knowledge. He did not need to ask: What precisely is *literary* knowledge? We arrived later and are morosely skeptical of what can be known in the living labyrinth of literature.

Sequentially, the greatest literature is more a pageant than a history. I rather wish us to see it as a baroque dramatic celebration, spectacular alike for its pomp and its covert achieved anxiety, a mystery play with the disciplined imagination as dying god.

Literary critics avoid pomp, lest they be seen as pompous. The three inventors of criticism were Aristophanes, Aristotle, and the pseudo-Longinus, acclaimed by Ernst Robert Curtius as the inaugural literary critic. Aristotle had his lyrical aspect, and I agree with Heinrich Heine that there is a God and his name is Aristophanes, who visited divine wrath upon Euripides for challenging Aeschylus.

Myself a Longinian critic since early youth, I rejoice at all strong transports of sublimity, from Aeschylus and the first Isaiah, through Shakespeare and Milton, and on to Friedrich Hölderlin, Giacomo Leopardi, and Shelley. Longinus found the sublime in Moses and Sappho, delightful bedfellows, and I emulate him by obeying Shelley's observation: The function of the sublime is to persuade us to end the slavery of pleasure.

Etymologically, the word "pageant" goes back to the medieval mystery play. Lord Byron marches his heart's pageant across Italy and Greece, hoping for the pomp of death in battle, proper for a descendant of the royal Stuarts of Scotland. His mystery play *Cain* holds up splendidly when

read—though I was once offered a performance in my honor at an Athenian amphitheater and sadly had to judge it unplayable.

I read and teach Whitman's *Song of Myself* as a mystery play, with Walt palpably playing the Christ. Together with *Moby-Dick*, it is the sublime of American imaginative literature, yet I would not desire either work to be mounted upon a stage, except as pageants, spectacular celebrations, positive and negative, of our American Sublime. I think of Whitman and Melville, in their relation to the contemporary United States, as our resource akin to Isaiah's prophecy:

And a man shall be as a hiding place from the wind, and a
covert from the tempest;
as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great
rock in a weary land.

—ISAIAH 32:2

We have a need to heal violence, whether from without or from within. Our strongest writers—Emerson, Whitman, Melville, Dickinson, Hawthorne, James, Twain, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Crane, and Faulkner, among others—can meet that imaginative poverty and help protect the individual mind and society from themselves. I now have come to see *that* as the highest use of literature for our way of life.

Only Walt Whitman, of all our titans, professedly comes to us as a healer. His heroic service was performed as an unpaid volunteer nurse and wound dresser, comforter of maimed, sick, and dying soldiers in the dreadful Civil War hospitals of Washington, D.C. Yet that vocation flowered from the first *Leaves of Grass* (1855), where the poem of Walt Whitman an American, later titled *Song of Myself*, concluded by inviting us to what Stevens would come to call a cure of the ground, and of ourselves, in the predicate that there is nothing else:

I depart as air . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
 But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
 And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
 Missing me one place search another,
 I stop some where waiting for you.

What could a reader gain by having these luminous lines historicized? Walt, more than any other poet, pulls you close to him, face-to-face. Such a gesture defies our refusals to confront greatness directly.

Whitman is not one of the poets extraordinary for cognitive power, such as Shakespeare, Blake, or Dickinson. His still-undervalued art abides in nuance, indirection, gesture, subtle evasiveness, insinuation, ineluctable modalities of the visible, the signature of all things that he summons us to come and see. Shamanistic shape-shifter, Hermetic androgyne, he indeed is prelapsarian Adam, early in the morning of what has become our Evening Land.

I never question why I constantly reread, teach, and write about Shakespeare—there is no God but God, and his name is William Shakespeare—whereas I wonder incessantly why Walt Whitman has been an obsession for me ever since I suffered a dreadful middle-of-the-journey crisis in 1965, now almost a half century ago. The indubitable aesthetic eminence of Whitman in itself does not provide an answer. More even than Emerson and Melville, Hawthorne and James, Dickinson and Twain, Frost and Eliot, Stevens, Crane, and Faulkner, Walt is our gift to world literature: He *is* the poem of our climate. And yet the mystery of his fascination still puzzles me.

Kenneth Burke chuckled when I first brought this up to him sometime in the 1980s. “Harold,” he remarked, “Walt has hold of you precisely because you do not write poems.” I could not follow Kenneth then and still am baffled. Burke composed weird poems abundantly and mailed them to me in batches. I have never wanted to write a poem but only to read as many strong ones as I could apprehend. Whitman summons us to be both poets and readers. *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* addresses us as readers who *will* come later, and I emerge from each experience of it more confirmed

in my lifelong vocation as a reader. Perhaps Kenneth meant that Whitman uniquely calls the reader-in-a-reader into more life.

The influence of a reader's mind upon itself is akin to searching for the labyrinthine ways in which that most copious of all minds, Shakespeare's, influenced itself. Fourteen consecutive months sufficed to compose *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Something abandoned Shakespeare after that furnace of terrifying tragedy came up at last. I have ventured to name this "inwardness," but that word is insufficient. Recoiling from the abyss, the dramatist gave us Coriolanus and Timon, Leontes and Prospero, all of them light-years outward from Lear and Edgar, Macbeth and Cleopatra. The inventor of Falstaff and Hamlet, Rosalind and Iago, is a Montaigne-like humanist but well on his winding path to nihilism. Beyond nihilism is the Gnostic abyss, our foremother and forefather, dwelling place of Lear, Macbeth, and Cleopatra. The name for that emptiness in ancient gnosis was the *kenoma*, habitat of Timon, Coriolanus, and Leontes. Prospero stands apart: Enchanted islands are domains not to be quarried betwixt outwardness and inwardness.

The reader transmembered by Hamlet becomes precursor to Macbeth's auditor and then suffers the madness of Leontes, rather in the mode of Faulkner longing for the death of Captain Ahab to be his own:

. . . a sort of Golgotha of the heart become immutable as bronze in the sonority of its plunging ruin . . .

That catches Ahab's alienation from his crew and would fit his precursors Hamlet and Macbeth. Leontes scrambles up out of that bronze sonority at enormous cost to himself and to others. The influence of Hamlet's devastating mind upon itself is echoed by the downward and outward effect of Macbeth's proleptic imagination upon itself. Paul Valéry was fascinated by the influence of his own mind upon Valéry, which we can read throughout his major poems. We are neither Shakespeare nor Valéry, but all of us suffer the mind's force and violence upon ourselves.

Samuel Johnson spoke of our "hunger of imagination" and conceded that Shakespeare alone assuaged that dangerous prevalence. Perhaps Shakespeare helped Johnson avoid madness, a function he has served for me whenever I waver in my own perilous balance. My late acquaintance

Jack Bate reminded us that the mind, for Johnson, was a ceaseless activity that could not be allowed to idle.



ANYONE WHO WRITES BOOKS FOR WELL OVER A HALF CENTURY IS LIKELY to believe that one work in particular is a neglected child. Of my own more than forty volumes, I regard that waif as *The American Religion* (1992, 2006). I recall touring the South and Southwest throughout 1986–1991, lecturing upon American poetry while visiting whatever churches were kind enough to allow me to attend services. Many sorts of esoteric Baptists and wild Pentecostals were warmly receptive, and so were the Mormons, though necessarily they could not admit me to their temples.

Brooding upon the highly original stances of Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Dickinson had been my starting point, but my wonder-wandering among rather less articulate American Religionists changed my way of thinking about the United States. The rise of the Tea Party did not surprise me, because I had encountered its origins on my journey a quarter century before our dismal national election of 2010. I listened closely to hundreds of American knowers, who in one sense knew nothing yet in another way knew everything, because they were all the subject and the object of their own quests. Alone except for and with a very American Jesus, each was beyond belief and dwelled in a solitude that only the resurrected Jesus could share.

Hearing them discourse, in and out of their divine assemblies, taught me that the American Jesus suffered no crucifixion and experienced no ascension. Instead, he manifested himself only in the forty days he spent with disciples after his resurrection, and for Mormons, Pentecostals, and independent Baptists, he sojourned still in their America, walking and talking with them. Because of that, some told me they were already resurrected and would never die, while nearly all affirmed they had heard him speak, and quite a few had seen him.

The sincerity and evident amiability of so great a cloud of witnesses was equal to anything I have encountered. You don't need a third ear to apprehend such testimony, but comprehension is an ongoing quest for me still. What might be called the natural religion of our America has little to do with historical, received European Christianity. Seventeenth-century

Enthusiasm mingles with discords of ancient Gnosticism and shamanistic Orphism in our Native Strain.

What has this to do with the influence of any American critic's mind upon itself? I have learned to shrug off historicist overdeterminations, because they cannot account for aesthetic and cognitive splendors. Their contextualizations blur more than they illuminate. Yet as readers, writers, and teachers, our authentic context is the myriad countrymen and -women who live in a daily reality that is mostly not at all our own. Socioeconomic reductions of their stance help only in a limited way. Karl Marx is irrelevant to many millions of them because, in America, religion is the poetry of the people and not their opiate.

The function of literary criticism at the present time cannot be to struggle with this *Moby Dick* of the American spirit, yet awareness of it should be part of our common ordeal of consciousness. I love Whitman's poetry and wish I could say, with him: "Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem." But we cannot proclaim to another person that you be my interpretation.

Literary love has more to do with Plato or Saint Augustine than with Homer or the Bible. Perhaps it has most to do with Dante and Shakespeare. We fall in love when very young, as Dante did with Beatrice. My earliest memory of a similar experience goes back to an afternoon when I was seven or eight, playing in the snow with other children. I cannot recall the name of the little girl who suddenly caught my spirit, yet in the semi-wakefulness just before dawn, three-quarters of a century later, I sometimes see her face again with startled vividness, framed in the hood of her winter jacket.

Falling in love in Shakespeare's modes comes later, from what we now call adolescence onward. The sense of wonder remains pervasive, but the attendant wound differs. Freud's suggestion was that the hurt was the reactivation of the narcissistic scar, itself inflicted by having lost the parent of the gender opposite of one's own to the other parent. That is the love of the Song of Songs, as strong as jealousy and death.

American Religionists, when I questioned them, frequently said that falling in love was affirming again Christ's love for each of them. In such a labyrinth of idealizations I get lost, lacking the thread that might lead to an escape. Yet if our night journey is to meet an exit, we need the poet of our climate to cut it for us. Whitman stops somewhere waiting for us.



WALT SINGS OF WHAT HE HEARS AND SEES MORE OFTEN THAN OF WHAT he knows, but his proclamations of knowledge can be overwhelming. Authority is sanctioned not least by the breathtaking descent beneath the bottom limits of being:

And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and
elder and mullein and pokeweed.

How can I improve my opinion regarding that sanctioning into *knowledge*? One thinks of Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Walt failed better. *Song of Myself*, like Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, fails only as “American epic” gives a new meaning to “failure.” Melville’s Ahab fails in his quest; so does Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, if American heroic quest be judged by Old World criteria. American literary criticism, be it by Emerson or Kenneth Burke, is a new mode that is on vacation from the work of interpretation. It may fail, but no matter. It will try again.

In an outrageous failure, Walt’s dreadful 1871 *Song of the Exposition*, written for hire and recited at the fortieth National Industrial Exposition of the American Institution in New York, the American bard chides the Muse to “Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts, / That matter of Troy and Achilles’ wrath,” and migrate instead to the United States, in order to celebrate a society little different from our plutocratic shambles a hundred forty years later. But at his strongest, Whitman was able to overwhelm his reader with an unprecedented *immediacy*: “Whoever you are, I fear you are walking the walk of dreams . . . Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem.” I again solemnize these secretive syllables, and as a critic ask myself: Who else has pursued me as Walt pursues? Shakespeare, whether in sonnets or onstage, lets it be. Like Hamlet, he does not need our love.

Famously, John Keats thought we hate poetry that has a design upon us, but Whitman rejected Keats’s Negative Capability, an irrelevance to Walt’s powerful press of *Myself*. Yet, watching childbirth, he transmembers the midwife in a line Keats might have admired: “I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors.” Uncanny at his frequent best, Walt still

can be absurd in overidentifying, thus inviting the fury of D. H. Lawrence, whose anguish of contamination by our national poet was titanic. In his famously outrageous book *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence wrote:

“Whoever you are, to endless announcements—”

“And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.”

Do you? Well, then, it just shows you haven’t *got* any self. It’s a mush, not a woven thing. A hotch-potch, not a tissue. Your self.

Oh, Walter, Walter, what have you done with it? What have you done with yourself? With your own individual self? For it sounds as if it had all leaked out of you, leaked into the universe.

Post mortem effects. The individuality had leaked out of him.

No, no, don’t lay this down to poetry. These are post mortem effects. And Walt’s great poems are really huge fat tomb-plants, great rank graveyard growths.

All that false exuberance. All those lists of things boiled in one pudding-cloth! No, no!

I don’t want all those things inside me, thank you.

I cite Lawrence because his zestful intemperance enchants me. You need to love a poet and poem before your appreciation can transcend the accidents of your own nature. But it is time to be Bloom and not Lawrence and read Whitman as closely as he deserves. I need a brief text and have chosen one of the rare late returns of his genius, *The Dalliance of the Eagles*, composed in 1880, when the poet was sixty. He had never seen eagles mate and relied on a description given to him by his disciple and friend, the naturalist John Burroughs:

Skirting the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest,)

Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of
the eagles,

The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating
wheel,

Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,
 In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,
 Till o'er the river pois'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,
 A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons loosing,
 Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate diverse flight,
 She hers, he his, pursuing.

An astonishing vision, in just ninety words or so; I prefer this to Gerard Manley Hopkins's *The Windhover* and William Butler Yeats's *Leda and the Swan*, both of them experimental sonnets. Hopkins loved and feared Whitman, while Yeats rather nastily disliked the American upstart, dismissed in *A Vision* with weak misunderstanding. Writing to Robert Bridges in 1882, the Jesuit poet remarked:

. . . I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession. And this makes me the more desirous to read him and the more determined that I will not.

To describe the ministering angel of the Washington, D.C., Civil War hospitals as a very great scoundrel is breathtaking, yet the textual evidence of Father Hopkins's own poems indicates a wider and deeper reading in Whitman than he acknowledged.

Walt's verbs, like his erotic attachments, are largely intransitive and tend toward adverbial status. In *The Dalliance of the Eagles* you confront: "skirting," "rushing," "clinging," "interlocking," "living," "gyrating," "beating," "swirling," "grappling," "tumbling," "turning," "clustering," "falling," "pois'd," "parting," "loosing," "slanting," "pursuing." That makes eighteen verbal forms, all but one or two intransitive. One-fifth of this fierce lyric's words mount together into what seems desire without an object, though the coupling that is the poem describes a mutual passion fulfilled.

Angus Fletcher observed that "To read Whitman aright, we have to re-

main perpetually intransitive, like the vast majority of his middle-voicing verbs, his verbs of sensation, perception, and cognition." Sixty years of friendship with Fletcher lead me to call that the Fletcher Principle and to apply it also to Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley, Hart Crane, and many other great poets. As a teacher, I urge myself and others to remain perpetually intransitive, like the Jesus of the very Whitmanian Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, who proclaims: "Be passers-by."

Walt is always passing us by, waiting somewhere up ahead. This evasion ought to be at odds with his shocking, startling immediacy, yet it fuses with it. Any strong poem, whether by Hopkins or Yeats, Bishop or Ashbery, eludes our drive to objectify it, and Whitman is no more ill-assorted than his compeers. At eighty-four I wonder why poems in particular obsessed me from childhood onward. Because I had an over-emotional sensibility, I tended to need more affection from my parents and sisters than even they could sustain. From the age of ten on, I sought from Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and Hart Crane, from Shakespeare and Shelley, the strong affect I seemed to need from answering voices.

The Dalliance of the Eagles finds me by its only apparent refusal of affect: The poem hesitates between its vista of "a motionless still balance in the air" and subsequent "separate diverse flight." Walt only rarely stands still, yet hesitation, as his disciple A. R. Ammons wrote, has its own rewards.

The intransitive verb "hesitate" is related to the Latin for "holding fast," Whitman's "motionless still balance in the air." We do not think of Walt as we recite this poem: What it celebrates and sings is not "myself" but the Lucretian way things are, though implicit magnificence remains its burden. We see and hear not the American Sublime but a particular encounter, vividly represented for its own sake. John Ruskin admired Whitman's powers but feared the poems were compromised by excessive personality. He would have made an exception for this strenuously impressionistic vista, where the personality of Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, is conspicuously absent.

No poem, Paul Valéry remarked, is ever finished. Rather, the poet abandons it. That certainly is Whitman's customary praxis, and so *The Dalliance of the Eagles* must be a sport. Yet Whitman's art intimates that both the dalliance and its representation are fragments torn from the astonishing trope: "leaves of grass." John Hollander splendidly caught some of the enigmas of that title: