“THE BRAIN—IS WIDER THAN THE SKY—”:
NATURE AND THE SUBLIME AMERICAN SELF
IN EMERSON AND WHITMAN

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ABSTRACT

"The Brain—is wider than the Sky—": Nature and the Sublime American Self in Emerson and Whitman

by Michael Douglas Sheridan

This thesis' primary focus is on the relationship between nature and the development of a distinctly American selfhood, as revealed through the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. The primary framework through which this relationship will be viewed is that of the notion of the Sublime, which over the centuries developed from being a mere rhetorical mode into being a manner of ontological exploration and discovery. In the work of Emerson and Whitman, this manner became tied up with the then developing idea of a uniquely American self. This tying-up in turn allowed an oppositional conception concerning the relation of that self to American nature to evolve, and it is this oppositional conception, the way in which it was developed, and its ultimate consequences that this thesis explores.

KISA ÖZET

"Beyin—geniştir Gökyüzünden—": Emerson ve Whitman'ın Eserlerinde Doğa ve Yüce Amerikan Benliği

Michael Douglas Sheridan

Bu tez, birincil olarak, Ralph Waldo Emerson ve Walt Whitman'ın eserlerinde ortaya konduğu biçimiyle, doğa ve özellikle Amerikan olan bir benliğin gelişimi arasındaki ilişkiye odaklanır. Bu ilişki incelelenirken kullanılacak temel izlek, aradan geçen yüzyıllarla yalnız retorik bir üslup olmaktan ontolojik bir araştırma ve keşif usulüne evrilmiş olan Yüce kavramıdır. Bu usul, Emerson ve Whitman'ın eserlerinde, bu eserlerin yazılış tarihinde henüz gelişmekte olan özgün Amerikan benliği fikriyle içiçe geçmiştir. Buna karşılık, bu içiçe geçiş, sözü edilen Amerikan benliği ve evrimleşen Amerikan doğası arasındaki ilişkiye ilişkin bir karşıtlık fikrine yol açmaktadır ki bu tez işte bu karşıtlık fikri, bu fikrin oluşma biçimi ve yol açtığı nihai sonuçları incelemektedir.

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Introduction

The Roots of the American Sublime

Not "Revelation"—'tis—that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes—[1]
—Emily Dickinson, #685

American self-identity has always been inextricably bound up with American nature, or to be more exact, with how Americans have perceived American nature. In the early years of the republic and on through the 19th century, the writers and artists of the young nation set about attempting not simply to define but in fact to create an American identity, and the vast idiosyncrasies of the American continent were a sensible enough foundation from which to begin—or more accurately, a foundation over which to build. For the early project of America consisted of carving a country out of the wilderness, but this wilderness was conceived of as something like a cipher, merely a blank map for American boundaries to engulf. This mindset makes itself apparent in a passage from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*:

> Europeans think a lot about the wild, open spaces of America, but the Americans themselves hardly give them a thought. The wonders of inanimate nature leave them cold, and, one may almost say, they do not see the marvelous forests surrounding them until they begin to fall beneath the ax. What they see is something different. The American people see themselves marching through wildernesses, drying up marshes, diverting rivers, peopling the wilds, and subduing nature. (485)

This keen passage presents the Americans of those early pioneering days of the 19th century as something of a leveler, flattening everything before them in their drive westward across the continent. The choice of words—particularly "wildernesses" and "wilds"—that subsume a great natural variety beneath convenient plurals gives a sense

[1] Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Johnson; 339.

of how much true leveling is going on, with the Americans seemingly viewing the land across which they are driving as something akin to white noise. The "inanimate" mass and abundance of the American landscape is essentially cancelled out before the forward-driving and all too animate mass of the "American people", who see not the land, but rather "themselves." American nature is allegorized into an empty vessel waiting to be filled with Americans.

What this reveals is that de Tocqueville's passage is, in fact, mapping out the process of Americans creating their identity *in opposition to* American nature. There is a very good reason why they would do this. Because there was no separate American identity, really, in these early years, the American self was essentially a blankness, a void opened up by the casting-off of Europe implied by the American Revolution. At the same time, however—although there was no American identity—there most definitely *was* an America, and this was American nature, which had long preceded the revolutionists. The only thing really unique about the young nation was the nature in which it found itself. To the Americans of the time, however, there was something a bit unnerving about this fact. The revolutionists' hands had fashioned the revolution, the government, the loose boundaries of the infant states, and if this was indeed to be a nation confidently self-forged—rather than one that lurched forward in the semi-accidental jerks of the European states—then everything must fall under the aegis of that nation's driving will. Yet there was American nature, blocking the way to the west; it had primacy. Thus, the young republic found itself constrained by its initial tentative definition of itself to solidify that definition as being something *against* nature; American nature's primacy must be usurped to make way for America and the American self.

This turned out to be quite the task. *The* major feature distinguishing American nature from what passed for nature in the Europe from which the Americans had come was American nature's sheer size, its vastness, its stark presentation of everything from the raccoon and the possum to the endless forest and the unscalable mountain; in short, its wildness. In order to even attempt to usurp something like this, the American self would have necessarily to be shaped into something altogether different and grander than the European. The solution hit upon by the young nation was to project the blankness of its own identity onto American nature—as shown in the above passage by de Tocqueville—and then appropriate that nature's fullness and grandeur for itself. De Tocqueville termed this process "gigantism" (488), and wandering among its advocates inspired him to write something which earlier, as a European, he could surely not have written:

> There is no need to traverse earth and sky to find a wondrous object full of contrasts of infinite greatness and littleness, of deep gloom and amazing brightness, capable at the same time of arousing piety, wonder, scorn, and terror. I have only to contemplate myself. (488)

Considered together with the earlier passage, this passage could with only a minimum of exaggeration be seen as the inner, spiritual echo of America's westward expansion, an event already well underway and indeed gaining momentum rapidly in de Tocqueville's day. The near desperate emphasis in the claim that "there is *no need*" hints at the sense of threat which American nature seemed to pose at the time, and thereby provides some explanation of the actual felt need to go off "subduing nature": the American wild was felt to be imposing limits upon the emerging American identity, but at the same time was good enough to be so vast as to allow America to expand outwards

into it, albeit after it had been tamed somewhat. The expansion once begun—and for lack of anything else to latch onto in terms of providing a ground for the American self—the vastness of American nature was taken up bodily and appropriated as the definition of that self, which could now be seen as the "wondrous object full of contrasts of infinite greatness and littleness" that nature had, earlier, been. As de Tocqueville writes earlier in the same chapter, "Democratic peoples may amuse themselves momentarily by looking at nature, but it is about themselves that they are really excited" (484). It was with this sort of outlook that the American self managed to usurp the primacy of American nature: it simply swallowed it up and relegated American nature to being something like a belated expression of the primal American self, a tic of the American soul, if you will.

A problem emerged from this reversal of roles, however. In appropriating American nature's identity as none other than the identity of the American self, a basic contradiction emerged: if this was supposed to be a nation wholly self-forged, then how could such an appropriation be reconciled with that conception? Would not the fundamental blankness of the American identity continue, undefined and seething under the surface, as it were? De Tocqueville, at least, seems to have suspected as much, for he modifies the notion that man needs "only to contemplate [himself]" with the following proviso: "[M]an comes from nothing, passes through time, and disappears forever in the bosom of God. He is seen but for a moment wandering on the verge of two abysses, and then is lost" (487). This eloquently brief passage seems to indicate an awareness on de Tocqueville's part of the ephemeral nature of identity, and so hints towards the fundamental blankness from which it springs and to which it will, inevitably, return.

What needs to be remembered, concerning all of these musings of de Tocqueville's, is that they are all prompted by the question of what sort of poetry a democratic nation such as the United States might end up producing. He is convinced that such a nation will produce a poetry fundamentally different from the poetry of the European nations—which are conveniently subsumed under the heading "aristocratic"—insofar as a democratic nation defines itself as a casting-off of the attributes of the aristocratic. De Tocqueville admits that, to a certain extent, this shift towards the democratic had already occurred in Europe—specifically, during the Enlightenment—where it had had a discernible effect on poetry. Prior to the shift, he explains, the nature of society, as expressed in its poetry, had "naturally [led] the mind back to the past and [fixed] it in the contemplation thereof" (483-4), and so poetry had focused its efforts on the delineation of great and noble figures who had peopled that past. But with the advent of the Enlightenment, things began to change: "Gods and heroes gone, [poets] began by painting rivers and mountains. This gave rise in the eighteenth century to what is known, par excellence, as descriptive poetry" (484). De Tocqueville goes on to describe the commonly perceived significance of such "descriptive poetry", as well as what he thinks of this perception, which leads him to what may have been, at the time, a rather startling conclusion:

> Some have thought that this poetry embellishing the physical and inanimate things that cover the earth is the true poetry of democracy. But I think that is a mistake, regarding it as only a transitional phenomenon.
>
> In the long run I am sure that democracy turns man's imagination away from externals to concentrate it on himself alone. (484)

Such notions were not, of course—as de Tocqueville is careful to point out—spontaneously generated from the American soil, but were rather the fruit of the long

tradition of humanist thought stretching back at least to the Italian Renaissance where, by means of a generous misinterpretation of the ancient Greek social and political structure, the seeds of the idea of modern democracy were first apprehensively sown. What is noteworthy about the humanist tradition in terms of *poetic* practice is how it provided for man and the self to become, more than ever before, an object of aesthetic contemplation. Now, because to contemplate man *aesthetically* ultimately entails beginning to look at the self in a different way, it also opens up a space wherein man can attempt different and perhaps even wholly new definitions of the self. This, as has been seen, is precisely what the Americans were attempting.

One particular category of aesthetic contemplation, the Sublime, proved especially suitable to the American project of self-definition as outlined above insofar as the Sublime—at least as comprehensively theorized in the mid- and late-18th century by Sir Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—was a variety of aesthetic response seemingly tailor-made for the vastnesses of the American landscape. Briefly stated, the Sublime as propounded by Burke and Kant is the sensation evoked when an individual, in aesthetically contemplating some given object, feels uplifted or transported beyond himself, and is thereby enabled to gain some sort of detached insight into his own nature—and, by extension, human nature—in terms of its relations to its surroundings, i.e. to "nature" in the broadest sense. Such moments were considered "sublime" moments, and came to be of especial importance in the theory of William Wordsworth, whose poetry is largely structured around and indeed driven by such moments. On a very basic level, the Sublime, in its movement from Burke to Kant to Wordsworth, can be said to move from the almost purely aesthetic significance accorded it by Burke, to

the more epistemological function that Kant gives it, and finally to Wordsworth, who uses “sublime” moments for rather ontological ends.

In America, this complex of notions filtered through to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who formulated what was later christened “the American Sublime.” The American Sublime is essentially a variety of sublimity that, taking its cues from Kant’s conception of the Sublime, develops it in an ontological direction as Wordsworth had done, though in a fundamentally different way. Accordingly, the American Sublime proves to be strongly oriented to the internal and the individual, and as such it came to be a vital element in the burgeoning definition of the American self, a definition constructed largely though not exclusively in terms of the self’s relation to nature and the natural world. As demonstrated above, this relation was built around the sense that American man had primacy over American nature.

What this study proposes to do is, broadly, to examine how the American self came to be defined, in the nineteenth century, through the concept of a specifically “American” sublime. As such, the two key figures in the crystallization of this concept will be studied: firstly, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose gamut of works did not so much present a programmatic exposition of an American sublime, but rather focused a number of ideas and sentiments into something that, once extracted from his rather disparate writings, at least bore the character of a theory thereof, a theory that was furthermore explicitly geared towards the fashioning of American selfhood; secondly, Walt Whitman—cleverly referred to by Rob Wilson as Emerson’s “hugely incarnational son” (8)—who was one of those doing the extracting in question, refining Emerson’s ideas into poetry and, in the process, altering them in some fundamental ways in the course of his own quest to forge, in his own body and in his own self, American selfhood. Taken

together, it is not entirely unfair to say that Emerson and Whitman not only created a large part of what passes—even, for good or ill, today—for the American self, but that they in fact *were*, to a great extent, the American self of their time.

In the course of this study, three questions will be of primary concern: 1) What do Emerson and Whitman seem to see when they look at nature, and what do they think when they think about nature?; 2) How do those visions and thoughts come to shape the incipient idea of the American Sublime, and how are they in turn shaped by that idea?; 3) In what ways and to what extent do these visions and thoughts help in the construction of an idea of the American self? The idea of the American Sublime will form the basis for discussion of both Emerson and Whitman, owing to the fact that this idea itself—whether it was called by name or not—fundamentally conditioned their stance towards nature and the natural world, which stance in turn—as the above discussion of de Tocqueville would demonstrate—conditioned their vision of the American self.

The American Sublime, of course, begins with the theory of the Sublime, and that theory—at least, as it has come down to us today—begins in classical antiquity with Dionysius Longinus' treatise *Peri Hypsos*, generally rendered in English as *On the Sublime*. Unfortunately, the translation of the key word *hypsos* (ὕψους) is somewhat problematic: the word literally means "height" or "altitude", and continues to be used in this sense as a root in the modern English terms hypsography and hypsometer and their derivatives. The translation of the term as "sublime" originates in the Latin *sublimis*, which means "high" or "that which is high", and is thus a roughly exact translation. The real problem arises from the fact that other translations of Longinus' text have carried such wholly different titles as *On Great Writing* (G.M.A. Grube 1957) and *On the Sovereign Perfection of Great Writing* (Welsted 1712). Despite their seeming distance

from the literal sense of *hypsos*, however, these titles probably come closer to Longinus' intended sense, for as Rhys Roberts says in his edition of the text, the "object of the author [of the *Peri Hypsos*] is to indicate the essentials of a noble and impressive style [of writing]" (quoted in Grube, xi).

Such a comment, however apropos it may be, is not entirely accurate. In Grube's edition, for example, this quote from Rhys Roberts is presented and then immediately shied away from when Grube points out that "Longinus is not concerned with the grand or any other kind of style", and that in certain passages, "[w]hat grandeur there is is [grandeur] of conception, not of expression" (Grube, xi). This idea of a grand conception, in fact, proves to be the fundamental issue, for what Longinus' main concern seems to be—and here we must remember that his text is, after all, a rhetorical treatise—is to enable the young writer Postumius Terentianus, to whom the *Peri Hypsos* is addressed, to more effectively and powerfully express himself by tallying his words with certain truths of nature: "Nature is the first cause and the fundamental creative principle in all activities, [and] the function of a system is to prescribe the degree and the right moment for each, and to lay down the clearest rules for use and practice" (Longinus 101). What this fundamentally indicates is that Longinus' "system" is concerned with mimesis, with the consonance between nature and the "activities"—by which he clearly means art—that would represent it. This fact is further emphasized when he militates against the mere "fables" of Homer's *Odyssey*:

> The sublime passages [of the *Odyssey*] have not that consistency which nowhere lapses into mediocrity, nor is there the same closely-packed profusion of passions [as in the *Iliad*], nor the versatile and oratorical style studded with *images drawn from real life* … [I]n every one of these passages, *the fabulous predominates over the actual* (113, emphasis added).

Although Longinus immediately goes on to proclaim that the Homer of the *Odyssey* was "a great spirit in his decline [who was] misled into writing nonsense" (*ibid.*), the point is perhaps made well enough here that Homer, in failing to be mimetic, failed thereby to be any longer great. This is a point made time and again in the *Peri Hypsos*. For instance, in his discussion of imagination and imagery—from which "dignity, grandeur, and powers of persuasion are to a very large degree derived" (121)—Longinus states that the images of "the poets display a good deal of romantic exaggeration, and everywhere exceed the bounds of credibility, whereas *the finest feature of the orator's imagery is always its adherence to reality and truth*" (123, emphasis added).

The question, however, remains as to what sort of natural truths Longinus was emphasizing, and the very first indication of this comes, appropriately enough, in the very first chapter of the treatise:

> For the effect of elevated language is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us … [A] well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker (100).

The comparison with Zeus or Jupiter here is unmistakable, and is echoed again—albeit in terms somewhat more redolent of Christian influence—towards the end of the treatise: "[S]ublimity carries one up to where one is close to the majestic mind of God" (147). The implication of such passages is that, through an effective employment of sublimity (*hypsos*), the writer or orator is raising up—i.e., making sublime—not only himself but also his audience. This is not merely a hint towards the essential divinity of man; it is an almost frank admission of it.

At the same time, sublimity is shown to be the perfect vehicle for the most powerful and profound truths and emotions of the human heart insofar as a grand conception or "noble emotion"—when allied to an appropriate expression thereof—"forces its way to the surface in a gust of frenzy, and breathes a kind of divine inspiration into the speaker's words" (109). For example, an ode by the poet Sappho is praised for its "unerring choice of the most felicitous of … elements" (114) used to evoke the "concourse of emotions … awakened in lovers" (115):

> Are you not astonished at the way in which, *as though they were gone from her and belonged to another*, [Sappho] at one and the same time calls up soul and body, ears, tongue, eyes, and colour; how, uniting opposites, she freezes while she burns, is both out of her senses and in her right mind? (114, emphasis added)

By seemingly writing from outside herself—as the emphasized clause indicates—Sappho becomes able to achieve both unity of expression and mimesis, which are the two points Longinus consistently stresses as indispensable to sublimity.

This fact becomes yet more clear when we look at the criteria according to which he chooses to praise Sappho's work as a whole: "Sappho in her poetry always chooses the emotions attendant on the lover's frenzy *from among those* which accompany this passion *in real life*" (*ibid.*, emphasis added). To make a selection of actual, rather than false and "pedantically elaborated" (103) emotions is to engage in mimesis, while to choose "from among those" emotions is to strive to give unity to one's expression. Such a concerted effort ultimately proves to be "the echo of a noble mind" (109)—one of Longinus' clearly phrased definitions of sublimity—insofar as unity, the product of systematic labor, is itself an echo of nature. This is stated in no uncertain terms when Longinus, stressing that so-called "natural genius" should not be left willy-nilly to its

own devices, points out that nature itself "is not given to acting at random and wholly without system" (101).

What all of these ideas ultimately culminate in is a sense of what Kant would later call the "*dignity of human nature*" (*Observations* 60) but which is foreshadowed in a quite astounding passage of Longinus' that is worth quoting in full:

> [N]ature has adjudged us men to be creatures of no mean or ignoble quality. Rather, as though inviting us to some great festival, she has brought us into life, into the whole vast universe, there to be spectators of all that she has created and the keenest aspirants for renown; and thus from the first she has implanted in our souls an unconquerable passion for all that is great and for all that is more divine than ourselves. For this reason the entire universe does not satisfy the contemplation and thought that lie within the scope of human endeavour; our ideas often go beyond the boundaries by which we are circumscribed, and if we look at life from all sides, observing how in everything that concerns us the extraordinary, the great, and the beautiful play the leading part, we shall soon realize the purpose of our creation.
>
> This is why, by some sort of natural instinct, we admire, not, surely, the small streams, beautifully clear though they may be, and useful too, but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and even more than these the Ocean … [for] men hold cheap what is useful and necessary, and always reserve their admiration for what is out of the ordinary (146-147).

The seeming dismissal of the small and esteem for the great arising from these lines sets up a clear duality, and leaves no doubt as to which is the more proper province for man's concern. Furthermore, this duality is here expressly couched in terms which would become the basis of Sir Edmund Burke's 1756 treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the text which would go on to inspire Kant's own comprehensive treatment of the subject in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

In Longinus' text, the distinction between the beauty of "the small streams" and the sublimity of "the Ocean" is made not only rather briefly, but also in more or less explicitly moral terms. In Burke's treatise, however, the difference between the Beautiful and the Sublime becomes much more of an aesthetic distinction, and is accordingly treated at great length in order to establish the boundaries of the two

notions. Burke's differentiation, like that of Longinus, is based on the particular human feelings awoken by any encounter with the Beautiful or the Sublime: the Beautiful is, according to Burke, productive of *pleasure*, while the Sublime is productive of *delight*. This is, in itself, a fine distinction to say the least, and Burke's use of the term "delight" requires some explication here.

Basically, in Burke's usage, "delight" can be distinguished from "pleasure" primarily because delight is intimately connected with pleasure's opposite, *pain*. Specifically, delight is that variety of pleasure felt upon the removal of impending pain—known as *terror* in Burke's terminology—and only thereby differs from pleasure, which is essentially pure. Some of this nexus of terminological definitions can be seen at work in Burke's summation of just what causes sensations of sublimity to arise:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, of danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*. … When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience. (91-92)

The source of such a sensation of terror, according to Burke, is to be located primarily in certain abstract qualities which particular natural or man-made objects occasionally embody, qualities such as obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, etc. The thread ultimately uniting all these various qualities, however, is greatness, whether it be the greatness of darkness and the unknown (obscurity), the greatness of strength and control (power), or the greatness of dimension (vastness and infinity). Sublimity thus becomes, in Burke's argument, indissolubly associated with greatness, with perhaps the only difference being that the latter is a simple fact or quality that births the complex of feelings associated with the former.

One of the feelings called up by the Sublime is admiration, in which it contrasts with the Beautiful, which is productive of love:

> There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered, into compliance. (161)

The admiration of which Burke speaks is that feeling called up by whatever is great, as he makes clear in pointing out the sense of contradiction that would seem to spring up should anyone attempt to call a thing both *great* and *beautiful*: "A great beautiful thing is a manner of expression scarcely ever used" (161). What is perhaps most interesting, however, is the conflation of the feeling of admiration with a sense of the "terrible", showing that we reserve our admiration for that which terrifies and thereby impresses us with the sense that, in the presence of terror, we are in fact in the presence of sublimity. This is something which Burke had already pointed out earlier in his treatise: "Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime" (109). And if an object, or at least a natural object, "of great dimensions", and to which the human mind has attached "an adventitious idea of terror", thereby becomes productive of sublimity (109), then the specific feeling that sublimity is productive of is "astonishment":

> The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature* … is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (108)

What unites Burke's accounts of both admiration and astonishment, however, is the idea of force and power. Face to face with the Sublime, "we submit" and "are forced … into compliance," as the Sublime is something beyond our pale that "anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force." Power, then, turns out to be "a capital source of the sublime," deranging the human rational faculty by indicating that faculty's limit (121). In Burke's day, the ultimate of power was of course Deity, the point at which, as he writes at the conclusion of a long explication of how power and Deity are inseparable, "our imagination is finally lost" (121).

Moreover, it must also be pointed out that the rational faculty can be rendered powerless not only by the contemplation of some abstract entity such as Deity, but also by the contemplation of purely empirical nature, when that nature is sufficiently great in aspect, in which case it makes the empirical faculty as limp and useless to comprehend as the rational. In the chapter on vastness, Burke discusses the vastness of the small and of "the infinite divisibility of matter," and uses a phrase which exactly echoes that used in his discussion of Deity: he claims that in contemplating such vastnesses, "the imagination is lost as well as the sense, [and] we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness" (123).

What all of this ultimately indicates is that, in the presence of the Sublime—be it vast or minute, natural or man-made—there is a simultaneous failure of both the empirical faculty ("the sense") and the cognitive faculty ("the imagination"). This dual failure is, in part, responsible for the perception of the Sublime as issuing from initial feelings of terror and dread. As, taken together, the empirical and cognitive faculties can be seen as largely, if not wholly, constitutive of any given individual's selfhood, when they fail, it amounts in a way to the failure of the self.

It is at this point that Burke's notion of "self-preservation" becomes vital to his argument, since how the failure of both the empirical and the cognitive faculties—and hence of the self—can ultimately be experienced as "delight" is somewhat difficult to recognize unless we take self-preservation into account:

> The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call *sublime*. The passions belonging to self-preservation are the strongest of all the passions. (103)

Sublimity, then, amounts to the feeling that pain or even death—for, as Burke claims, pain is but "an emissary of this king of terrors"—has been staved off, that the individual has, despite the swallowing-up of his faculties and the accompanying complete loss of power and even of self, managed nonetheless to survive (91). It is precisely through such an evasion that such a feeling of delight is enabled to arise. Sublimity is thereby revealed as, somehow, being connected deeply with the notion of the self, albeit in only a rather passive way.

It took Kant to develop this basic notion further, and in a way that was much to influence the eventual construction of a specifically American Sublime. The major alteration which Kant introduced to the theory of sublimity was, as critics have unanimously recognized, his complete interiorization of the Sublime. The groundwork for such an ultimately radical change had been provided by the Burkean notion of "self-preservation," which, as indicated above, "[turns] chiefly on *pain* and *danger*" felt as a threat to the self, the deflection or evasion of which threat was productive of feelings of sublimity (91). Burke had thus provided an initial link, however tenuous, between the Sublime and ideas concerning the self and interiority.

It was at this point, however, that Burke stopped short, for he still conceived of the Sublime as something exterior to the self, something somehow latent in particular objects, which merely awaited the interaction of the perceiving human self, with its bundle of notions and passions, to be set loose. This can be seen, for example, in certain of Burke's descriptions of which particular natural objects can be christened "sublime":

> And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater. A level plain of a vast extent on land is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean: but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself? This is owing to several causes; but it is owing to none more than this, that the ocean is an object of no small terror. (109)

Verbal choices such as "annex" and "fill the mind" are here indicative of sublimity seen as enshrined in, or perhaps confined to, the exterior, although—if we have read our Kant—the strain in Burke's choice of words, and hence his conception of the Sublime, becomes more apparent than it perhaps was to the man himself. Even when contemplating human beings of power as productive of sublimity, Burke—who for such purposes chose to view humankind simply physiologically, as but another animal, thereby laboring against his instincts in service of his theory—continued to consider the Sublime as something inherent in the human being as object:

> Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense? No; the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction. (116)

Kant, in his early treatise on the subject, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1763), still treats of the Sublime in nature in much the same way as Burke had: "Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove are sublime; flower beds,

low hedges and trees trimmed in figures are beautiful. Night is sublime, day is beautiful" (47). The repeated use of the copula here, establishing such natural objects as precisely sublime, reveals a mindset that still considers sublimity as something ensconced in those objects, something exterior to the self; indeed, the very title of the chapter from which these lines are taken is indicative of such a mindset: "Of the Distinct Objects of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime."

When, however, Kant in this treatise turns his attention to the sublimity that can be discovered in humankind, his argument takes a decisive moral turn which allows him, later, to begin to seat the Sublime solely in human reason: "Among moral attributes true virtue alone is sublime" (57). At a glance, this statement might seem innocuous enough, merely a slight refinement of the Burkean method of classifying different qualities, passions, and attributes as either beautiful or sublime; this seemingly innocent statement, however—after a few pages of development—expands into something quite different, which will greatly inform the analysis of the Sublime that Kant was later to carry out:

> [T]rue virtue can be grafted only upon principles such that the more general they are, the more sublime and noble it becomes. These principles are not speculative rules, but the consciousness of a feeling that lies in every human breast and extends itself much further than over the particular grounds of compassion and complaisance. I believe that I sum it all up when I say that it is the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*. (60)

In this early aesthetic treatise of Kant—whose style is much more observationally oriented than that of his more theoretical later works was to be—this passage offers a foretaste of what John T. Goldthwait described as "the well-known heavy-footed march" of the three *Critique*s (13); as well it should, because the passage is, in fact, a token of what Kant's own notion of the Sublime was to become. By denying here that the Sublime is nothing more than mere "speculative rules" and claiming instead, quite

forcefully, that "it is the *feeling of the beauty and dignity of human nature*," Kant essentially strips sublimity away from the purely aesthetic base upon which it had hitherto rested, and locates it instead in more epistemological territory by claiming that it can enable us to know something of the nature of being human.

Kant's major work on the subject of the Sublime is, of course, contained in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Before looking in detail at what his conception of the Sublime evolved into in this work, however, it is vital to note what Kant was essentially attempting to do in his three *Critique*s. Fundamentally, these three massive works provide a detailed map of human reason and the human rational faculty, as well as what reason can fruitfully apply itself to, and whereof it must remain silent. His motive for doing this was, simply stated, that he had realized that the mass of problems and contradictions which had hitherto plagued metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics could well have been avoided had the real possibilities and limits of reason and the rational faculty only been recognized and acknowledged. Such a recognition and acknowledgement was precisely what he set out to do, hoping thereby to set reason on a sounder footing and allow philosophy to perform somewhat sounder and more fruitful work in future. In essence, then, Kant's *Critique*s were epistemologically based, although the arc of their investigations was eventually to carry them much further afield. The whole of the work, then, amounts ultimately to the rational faculty mapping reason in order to better understand itself:

> [R]eason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own, and … it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature's leading-strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason's own determining. (quoted in Gibbons, 3)

What this passage, from a preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, reveals is not only that reason does indeed have its limits—there are areas which are necessarily beyond its ken—but also, and what is perhaps more important, that within those boundaries reason must be allowed a freedom limited only by its own dictates, by "principles of judgment based upon [the] fixed laws" which it is able, truly, to discover. Reason must not, then, be put under the yoke of nature, but must instead "constrain" nature and, essentially, demand justice of it. In such a claim, the rudiments of power can quite clearly be seen, and it is in this that Kant's thesis begins to move away from more purely epistemological territory to tread on more ontological ground, for in allowing reason—a prerogative of humanity—such freedom and power, Kant is necessarily creating a space within which individual human beings can themselves begin to define, or redefine, their selves.

What is particularly interesting about this in terms of Kant's conception of the Sublime is that the Sublime, as it is described in certain passages of the *Critique of Judgement*, comes perilously close to being that element in nature which would escape reason's grasp, yet which reason manages nonetheless to overpower in the end. In the *Critique*, Kant claims that the Sublime "[contravenes] the ends of our power of judgement, [and is] ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and … an outrage on the imagination" (I, 2, ¶23). Recalling that, for Burke, sublimity partook deeply of terror and, ultimately, of death or rather the threat thereof, it is easily seen how the Sublime as an aesthetic classification can be considered "an outrage on the imagination," for it threatens to destroy the very mind, and hence self, that perceives it. For Burke it was simply and precisely the felt withdrawal of that threat, in any real terms, which produced

the feeling of delight termed "sublime"; but for Kant it turned out to be another matter altogether:

> [W]e express ourselves on the whole inaccurately if we term any object of nature sublime … All that we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind. For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. (I, 2, ¶23)

Here lies that peculiarly Kantian complete interiorization of the Sublime which was, in one sense, his major contribution to the theory. With these phrases, he tears sublimity loose from the object in which it had hitherto been ensconced, and places it firmly and finally within the perceiving mind itself, admitting indeed that the Sublime can surface from wholly unsensuous, intangible ideas or sequences of ideas put into play by that perceiving mind. This is ultimately because, as he goes on to claim, the Sublime "does not give a representation of any particular form in nature, but involves no more than the development of a final employment by the imagination of its own representation" (I, 2, ¶23). This idea was perhaps something he picked up on as a weakness in Burke's argument, for he uses the identical example of the ocean to stress this point:

> Thus the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime. Its aspect is horrible, and one must have stored one's mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime—sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality. (I, 2, ¶23)

There is a strong critical reduction going on here, as Burke's rhetorical question "can [a level plain] ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself" is rationalized

into a mere “rich stock of ideas,” just as his word “terror” from the same passage shrinks beautifully into nothing more than “ideas involving higher finality” (Burke 109).

Thus, according to Kant, sublimity and the Sublime are ultimately “not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas” (I, 2, ¶25). Kant effected this radical change upon the theory of the Sublime as a result of his reflection upon two related, but quite different, concepts relevant to human perception in general—namely, apprehension and comprehension—and how these two interact and interweave with our specific perceptions of sensory objects such as “the broad ocean agitated by storms.” Briefly stated, what Kant calls “apprehension” (*apprehensio*) involves simply the ability to perceive or pick up on what the senses, most particularly but by no means exclusively the visual sense, are presented with, and is thus largely physical and sensory; while “comprehension” (*comprehensio aesthetica*) partakes solely of the rational faculty in its imaginative aspect, and involves the mind’s ability to unite these varied disparate elements into some sort of interconnected whole, in order to understand them in what amounts to an aesthetic way. The Sublime arises on those occasions when, presented with a given object of perception, apprehension and comprehension come into conflict such that apprehension—which is mathematical in nature and thus “can be carried on ad infinitum”—outstrips comprehension, whose unifying powers—which are subject to reason and thus limited—have a breaking point, and so “comprehension becomes more difficult at every step and soon attains its maximum” (I, 2, ¶26).

What all this amounts to is a complete reorientation of sublimity. The element of terror remains present in Kant’s account, albeit in a somewhat different guise, and indeed it remains present in much the same way as in Burke in that this terror relates intimately and specifically with the weakness or, as Kant puts it, “inadequacy” of the

perceiving subject. The real difference between the Burkean and the Kantian Sublime lies in what causes this particular weakness to be surmounted. For Burke, the felt loss of power present in the feeling of sublimity had been driven away by the realization that the object seemingly threatening to obliterate the perceiving subject, the self, was in fact not actually doing so; Burke used the term "delight" to describe this particular variety of sensed serendipity. For Kant, however, there was nothing serendipitous about the feeling of sublimity: such a feeling was, in fact, a necessary concomitant of the unity of the rational perceiving subject, endowed with both apprehension and comprehension. Such a unity enabled the perceiving self to, indeed, comprehend or understand its own "inadequacy" and thereby leap beyond it. Discussing the ability of the rational faculty to comprehend even the infinite—i.e., that apprehended infinity of sensuous particulars—in a single bound of reason, Kant says:

> [C]omprehension in one intuition … calls for a presentation answering to all the … members of a progressively increasing numerical series, and does not exempt even the infinite (space and time past) … but rather renders it inevitable for us to regard this infinite (in the judgement of common reason) as completely given (i.e., given in its totality). But the infinite is absolutely (not merely comparatively) great. In comparison with this all else … is small. But the point of capital importance is that the mere ability even to think it as a whole indicates a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense. … [T]he mere ability to think the given infinite without contradiction, is something that requires the presence in the human mind of a faculty that is itself supersensible. (I, 2, ¶26)

What this passage indicates, in contradistinction to Burke, is that the feeling of the Sublime amounts to a victory of the self, of the human rational faculty, over nature, in both its widest and its most narrow senses: "Sublimity … does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us" (I, 2, ¶28). Comprehension, a primary activity of human reason and indeed the unique gift of

humanity, makes up for the lack arising in the more purely sensual activity that is apprehension when the latter is presented with something which overwhelms its very ability to perform its given function, that is, its very ability to apprehend. Whatever nature can present to the senses, comprehension can always grasp it as a "totality" and thereby, effectively, cripple its potential power to swallow up the perceiving human subject in its sheer givenness as a phenomenon.

Kant thus sets up, in his discussion of the feeling of sublimity from the *Critique of Judgement*, a duality between subject (the self) and object (nature), and goes on to posit the essentially inevitable victory of the former over the latter insofar as nature can only present itself phenomenally—i.e., only to the senses—whereas the self can proceed from the phenomena composing nature to induce the fundamental structures underlying and organizing human perception itself, a degree of self-reflexivity denied to merely phenomenal nature:

> Hence [the feeling of sublimity] gives a veritable extension, not, of course, to our knowledge of objects in nature, but to our conception of nature itself … It gives on the whole no indication of anything final in nature itself, but only in the possible employment of our intuitions of it in inducing a feeling in our own selves of a finality quite independent of nature … it does not give a representation of any particular form in nature, but involves no more than the development of a final employment by the imagination of its own representation. (I, 2, ¶23)

The Sublime, then, amounts not to intuition into nature itself, but rather to intuition into "*our conception* of nature *itself*," which for the stringent rationalist Kant is as far as we can delve, but which, precisely because of that fact, is supreme enough knowledge, enabling us to follow Socrates' famous dictum—*Know thyself*—almost to the letter.

In philosophical terms, then, Kant's radical dissection of the human rational faculty and of the Sublime cast great doubt on the possibility of any sort of fidelity to

nature, as nature in and of itself was demonstrated by the *Critique*s to be beyond the reach of the human mind except through that very mind's mediation process—i.e., intuition and comprehension—which ultimately proved to be illuminative more of the perceiving mind that faced nature, than of nature itself. This amounted to a reorientation of sublimity from its heretofore mainly aesthetic prerogatives to something much more akin, initially, to the epistemological, something which could tell us just what, how, and how much we can be said to *know*; these noetic implications, however, also had deeper ontological implications in that, for Kant, knowing the limitations of our knowledge went a long way towards knowing just what it is that we are, as human beings.

Burke's *Inquiry* had somewhat earlier enacted a similar reorientation on native English soil, with perhaps the crucial difference in this respect lying in the fact that Burke's argument, unlike Kant's, did not radically deny the possibility of artistic fidelity to nature, but instead—which may ultimately only be a difference in emphasis—simply asserted implicitly the value of not being faithful, or rather, of being more faithful to the emotional effects, such as terror and delight, produced by nature on the poet. This is the aspect of Burke's analytic which appealed to Romantics such as Wordsworth, as is pointed out by Samuel H. Monk in *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (1935), where he highlights the influence of this aspect of Burke's argument on the burgeoning Romantic movement:

> Once it was seen that the sublime is a state of mind evoked by objects and ideas, the objective criteria of the rules [which the Romantics saw as guiding the poetry of Burke's era] were gradually invalidated and the perceptions of individuals, together with their personal emotions and their independent imaginative interpretation of experience could usurp the place of the older truth to nature. (236)

Yet however much Burke's analytic may have opened up the possibility of a more "independent imaginative interpretation of experience", it simultaneously implied and established a certain *space* between nature and man. By defining the feeling of sublimity as the removal of a natural threat through the realization of the actual inimmediacy of said threat, it enabled man to contemplate nature from afar, as it were, and thereby to recognize its essential powerlessness over man, however menacing its aspect might become.

Two elements of this implicit facet of Burke's thought particularly grated on the sensibilities of William Wordsworth, whose more philosophically oriented variety of Romanticism would eventually prevail, modified by more specifically American circumstances, in the thought of Emerson. Firstly, the notion of the feeling of sublimity as triggered solely by terror, dread, and kindred emotions was something Wordsworth could not wholly accept, however much he might use such aspects to lead into his own grander, and altogether more Kantian, conception:

> [The moon], from her sovereign elevation, gazed
> Upon the billowy ocean, as it lay
> All meek and silent, save that through a rift
> Not distant from the shore whereon we stood,
> A fixed, abysmal, gloomy breathing-place,
> Mounted the roar of waters—torrents—streams
> Innumerable, roaring with one voice!
> Heard over earth and sea, and in that hour,
> For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.
>
> (*The Prelude* 1850, XIV, 54-62)

This passage, describing a vision seen from Mount Snowdon in Wales, abounds in phrases—"sovereign elevation," "fixed, abysmal, gloomy breathing-place," "streams / Innumerable"—reminiscent of the poetry of the Sublime which had, particularly following Burke's treatise, come into vogue in the latter half of the 18th century. The

difference lies in the fact that, whereas poets of the Sublime would have rested content with such a description revelatory of the majesty of nature, Wordsworth goes on from this to posit something more:

> There I beheld the emblem of a Mind
> That feeds upon infinity, that broods
> Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
> Its voices issuing forth to silent light
> In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
> By recognitions of transcendent power
> In sense, conducting to ideal form;
> In soul, of more than mortal privilege.
> … The power which all
> Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
> To bodily sense exhibits, is the express
> Resemblance of that glorious faculty
> That higher minds bear with them as their own …
> They, from their native selves, can send abroad
> Kindred mutations; for themselves create
> A like existence; and whene'er it dawns
> Created for them, catch it …
>
> (*The Prelude* 1850, XIV, 70-77, 86-90, 93-96)

What these lines show is that, for Wordsworth, the imagination which—seemingly from outside—perceives the dreadful might of nature as seen at Mount Snowdon, actually proves to bear radical similarities to that might and, indeed, to issue from the same source. The imagination then and thus becomes transcendent precisely by means of its "recognitions of [its own] transcendent power," learning as it were to perceive itself both in and through its own nature-rooted power, and thereby realizing itself as something akin to a supererogatory force of nature. This realization shows Wordsworth moving one step away from the Burkean and towards the Kantian Sublime, as Burke's account of sublimity was based on an altogether different sort of realization, namely, the realization that a threat to the self had been removed. Burke, however, did not stop to ask *how* such a thing had happened, but simply assumed a serendipity of distance from the threat as explanation enough. Wordsworth's passage, on the other

hand, shows him seeking out a more satisfactory and indeed meaningful explanation, and finding his answer in an equation of self and imagination, in the process necessarily redefining the self by an extreme empowerment of the imagination. That is, this equation once discovered (or perhaps merely imagined), the imagination and the self are free ever after to assume nature's creative role. A poetic mind—though apparently no other—is in these lines from *The Prelude* given the power to induce that "that glorious faculty / That higher minds bear with them as their own" is in essence the same force that drives nature, thus opening up a great potential: the radical identity of this "glorious faculty" with nature actually enables poetic ("higher") minds to ape nature in "for themselves [creating] / A like existence;" i.e., an existence like unto that "which Nature thus / To bodily sense exhibits."

This conflation of natural and poetic creation, with the latter having its direct base only in the presentations of the former as revelatory of the unitary nature of the two, points to the other aspect of Burke's thought which rubbed Wordsworth's sensibilities the wrong way, namely, the notion—implicit in Burke's treatise—of a space or separation between man and the natural world. The idea that man and nature are at somewhat cross purposes can be glimpsed simply enough in the fact that for Burke, the experience of the Sublime rested specifically in nature's posing a threat to man's very existence, on a purely physical level. To Wordsworth such an idea was repugnant, and indeed he affirmed precisely the opposite:

> How exquisitely the individual Mind
> (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
> Of the whole species) to the external World
> Is fitted:—and how exquisitely, too—
> Theme this but little heard of among men—
> The external World is fitted to the Mind …
>
> (Prospectus to *The Recluse*, 63-68)

The congruities between nature ("the external World") and man ("the Mind") which are evident in this passage point not, as does Burke's argument, to any sort of terror, dread, or threat surmounted—which would only emphasize a separation existent between man and nature—but rather to the surmounting of the very space ostensibly dividing man from nature.

With this idea of the rapprochement of man and nature, Wordsworth enabled himself to extract something of the Sublime not only from the great and majestic in nature—elements focused upon by Burke as well as the subsequent poets of sublimity—but also from the small and the ordinary, as in this amplification of a simple, unassuming breeze:

> Ye motions of delight, that haunt the sides
> Of the green hills; ye breezes and soft airs,
> Whose subtile intercourse with breathing flowers,
> Feelingly watched, might teach Man's haughty race
> How without injury to take, to give
> Without offence; ye who, as if to shew
> The wondrous influence of power gently used,
> Bend the complying heads of lordly pines,
> And with a touch shift the stupendous clouds
> Through the whole compass of the sky …
> (*The Prelude* 1850, XII, 9-18)

Here, Wordsworth reveals clearly the moral ends lying behind his revision of Burke's ideas of the Sublime. Imagination, sharing the same radical space as nature yet invested with those supererogatory powers of understanding and insight—Kant's *comprehensio aesthetica*—transcends mere apprehension and becomes able to dress the breeze, nay any object, however it please. This is the moment of the Romantic Sublime, when, according to the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802), "a certain colouring of imagination" is thrown over the poetic object, "whereby ordinary things [become] presented to the

mind in an unusual way," so that "the primary laws of our nature" may thereby be revealed (*Norton English*, Vol. 2, 143).

This is also, however, the moment of metaphor, and it is perhaps for this reason that Wordsworth tightens the moral reins, for to allow metaphor—the imagination, the Sublime, the self—its ultimate freedom, where everything can represent or even *be* anything else, is, in Wordsworth's view, to give in to the deepest and most unprofitable meaninglessness or even anarchy, as can be read between the lines of the *Preface*:

> I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. If in this opinion I am mistaken, I can have little right to the name of a poet. … [O]ur continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts … and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length … such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments … that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves … must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.
>
> (*Norton English*, Vol. 2, 143-44)

Because the poet is possessor of that "higher" mind which, via the imagination, is able to penetrate into the mysteries of nature and realize its common base with the human mind, his task becomes to communicate this realization so that the poet's readers may "be in some degree enlightened, and [their] affections ameliorated." In other words, the poet must use the sublimity of his own realizations to attempt to bring the mass of men up to his own level, that they too may realize the sublime interconnectedness of man and nature and thereby improve themselves as men:

> Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
> A lasting inspiration, sanctified
> By reason, blest by faith: what we have loved
> Others will love, and we will teach them how,
> Instruct them how the mind of Man becomes

> A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
> On which he dwells, above this Frame of things …
> In beauty exalted, as it is itself
> Of quality and fabric more divine.
>
> (*The Prelude* 1850; XIV; 446-452, 455-456)

In this, the *Prelude*'s conclusion, the more or less logical outcome of the feeling of the Sublime—"beauty exalted"—is achieved, an outcome that had been gestating at least since Burke's *Inquiry*. A new and "more divine" vision of the self, a self "[a] thousand times more beautiful than the earth" is posited, and indeed the self—"the mind of Man"—is exalted more than mere beauty could ever be. In imagining he had somewhat effaced the arbitrary boundaries separating man and nature by revealing their radical identity, a sublime insight, Wordsworth had in fact only widened the gap, and had done so precisely by *imagining*, by attempting to unify man and nature through the imagination of man. The problematics of this stance would live on when the notion of the Sublime, most particularly the Romantic Sublime, crossed the Atlantic and lodged itself in the head of a young Massachusetts divine, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Chapter 1

"As the Eye—Such the Object"[2]: Ralph Waldo Emerson's American Sublime

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.[3]
—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.[4]
—Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances"

"SPACE," as the American poet Charles Olson has written, is "the central fact to man born in America" (11). The term "space", here as elsewhere, is a wide one, seeming to suggest everything from the vast expanse of the American continent to the even vaster blanks stretching between stars; from the gulf that exists between two individuals to that perceived, in moments of despair, within one's own self. All of these differing emphases of space figure greatly in the essays, orations, and journal entries of Ralph Waldo Emerson; indeed, the way he considers space, in all its aspects, proves instrumental in whatever definition of a particularly American sublime may be gleaned from his gloriously, and willfully, disjointed work.

One thing which that work seems to evince, from beginning to end, is the necessity of recognizing the existence and profound influence of space on the individual self. This can be seen from the very start of his first major essay, *Nature* (1836), wherein he gives a definition of nature predicated upon space, a definition which serves as the foundation on which, subsequently, he will construct his own definition: "Strictly speaking, … all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT

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[2] William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Erdman; 645
[3] *ibid*.; 39
[4] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Ruff; 46

ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (*Selections* 22). Space here is established not only between the individual and the landscape around, but also between the individual and his "own body", thus implicitly defining the self as a soul, cut off from the world, encased in a definite material enclosure.

Here, at the beginning of his career, Emerson is more than anything else serving as a diagnostician. What he essentially does in *Nature* is identify what he sees as the disease eating away at the American individual, a disease perhaps most succinctly summarized in the question posed at the very beginning of the essay: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (*Selections* 21). The "we" of this question refers to a number of subjects simultaneously: the men of Emerson's time, collectively; the Americans of the time, specifically; and generally, any individual of any time who feels bowed down by the weight of the accomplishments of others. It is, as a whole, a question addressed to that tendency of the individual to feel low before whatever is conceived of as "great" and thus powerful.

This idea of power in turn calls to mind the idea of the Sublime, particularly as propounded by Burke. It should be recalled that Burke had spoken of the intricate connections between power and the Sublime; indeed, he went so far as to proclaim, "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power" (115). There is, in fact, one aspect of Burke's consideration of the Sublime that could almost be seen as directly antagonizing the Emersonian project into existence. Burke, recall, accounted Deity as the apotheosis of power, and from this stance wrote the following:

> But whilst we contemplate so vast an object [as Deity], under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, *we shrink into the*

> *minuteness of our own nature*, and are, in a manner, annihilated before Him. (119, emphasis added)

There is, of course, a rather medieval and "God-fearing" religious aspect to this which Burke, even as a rough contemporary of the burgeoning ideas of the Enlightenment, was unable to wholly cast off and against which Emerson, as a Unitarian in the heady days following William Ellery Channing's ascension, was constrained to react violently. But even more, there was Emerson's own temperament, instructing him from the start as to the dangers of looking beyond the self for anything true, as can be seen in his journal entry for 29 July 1831, written soon after he had been ordained a Unitarian minister yet smack in the middle of his budding doubts about even that liberal church: "Suicidal is this distrust of reason; this fear to think; this doctrine that 'tis pious to believe on other's words, impious to trust entirely to yourself" (*Selections* 9).

The whole of Emerson's œuvre could, in fact, be considered a reaction against the complex of notions underlying Burke's phrase, "we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature". At several places throughout his work, he evidences a horror towards the potential smallness of man, normally coupling it with a reminder about man's inherent greatness, and even divinity. In the essay *Circles* (1840), for example, he concludes a discussion of man's shifting moods and "infirm faith" with the nigh schizophrenic assertion, "I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall" (*Selections* 171). The whole of *Circles* is, in fact, on one level an explication of this sense of a continuous shrinking, re-expanding, and subsequent reshrinking of the self before others who are, at least temporarily, more powerful than ourselves:

> There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us. The man finishes his story,—how good! how final! how it puts a new face on all things! He fills the sky. Lo! on the other side rises also a man and draws a circle around the circle we had just

> pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not man, but only a first speaker. His only redress is forthwith to draw a circle outside of his antagonist. (*Selections* 170)

Emerson, furthermore, makes no bones about what the aim of a man's "[drawing] a circle outside of his antagonist" ultimately is: "Step by step we scale this mysterious ladder; the steps are actions, *the new prospect is power*" (*Selections* 170, emphasis added). The driving aim, then, becomes to achieve the greatness that is power, and this proves to be radically identical to the process of constructing an individual self, as Emerson makes clear in saying that "already is our first speaker *not man, but only a first speaker*" (emphasis added). The moment someone greater—or, in the language of the essay, someone literally wider—comes along, one's selfhood is degenerated until one occupies the merely sequentially categorical description of "a first speaker". Emerson had made a similar point several years earlier, in *The American Scholar*:

> Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. (*Selections* 64-65)

Here, however, the diminishing agent that divides a man "into a thing, into many things" is not some other man imposing his greatness, but rather the whole society of which a man is a part:

> Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state these functions are parcelled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. (*Selections* 64)

The faceless mass of "the *divided* or social state" here effects the same end as another individual does in *Circles*, diminishing the individual to something virtually inanimate

and mechanical by means of the space it has created around that individual. What Emerson is then, in part, doing in *The American Scholar* and *Circles*, is demonstrating how space works to shrink the self to no more than "a weed by the wall", insidiously winnowing the individual off from his own innate greatness until he is barely capable of even perceiving that greatness, that power.

The root of this problem, as Emerson continually takes pains to emphasize, is perception. Speaking of the planter, he points out that he "*sees* his bushel and cart, *and nothing beyond*, and sinks into the farmer" (emphasis added), clearly highlighting the fact that it is a limited perception which causes this degradation. The question naturally arises as to what there is to see "beyond", and this is where Emerson's conception of nature comes into play.

As shown above, the Emersonian definition of nature is built upon division and separation: nature is "the NOT ME". However, this basic definition as given is decidedly not seen by Emerson as the be-all and end-all of the equation. Recall that, when giving some account of how man is being, or has been, diminished, he habitually couples that account with a simultaneous assertion of its opposite, or the greatness of man. Albeit Emerson was a Unitarian preacher by trade, and thus in the business of uplifting his flock, it is nonetheless very telling in terms of his own philosophy of nature when he writes, in the passage from *Circles* quoted above: "There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us. The man finishes his story … He fills the sky". Clearly, if a man is—even momentarily—capable of "[filling] the sky", and thereby encompassing all of nature, then the definition of nature as "the NOT ME" must be only a provisional one, which certain experiences or forays of the self can put the lie to.

A more accurate assessment of what Emerson actually imagines when he speaks of nature is set forth in *Circles*: "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile" (*Selections* 168). A more extended variation on this characterization of nature emerges later in the essay: "The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding" (*Selections* 174). Should we take these characterizations as definitive, it would shatter the definition of nature as "the NOT ME" given in the opening pages of *Nature*.

In fact, though, if we read this earlier definition *through* the definition(s) given in *Circles*, the former reads as something like the standard conception of nature held by all, the equivalent of the planter seeing "his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond". When the planter "sinks into the farmer", then, or perchance feels himself to be nothing more than "a weed by the wall", what he is doing is perceiving nature as a rigid "system of concentric circles", with himself anchored immovably at the center and merely looking out towards the circumference, as the very first sentence of *Circles* had already made clear: "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary feature is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world" (*Selections* 168). The tone of these lines, with its string of positively charged adjectives ("first"; "primary"; "highest"), seems to indicate here that this "system of concentric circles" is the correct way of perceiving the world. However, those later definitions of nature as "fluid and volatile" and "not fixed, but sliding" contradict this view. This is because, throughout *Circles*, Emerson works to undermine the very definition with which he began the essay.

First and foremost, the notion of the circle as defined in the opening sentence decidedly is not the pattern or form of nature, but rather a "primary feature" thereof. Accordingly, the world—that is, nature—remains a "cipher", within which the circle is but one "emblem" among many, as the adjective "highest" necessarily reveals. Furthermore, there is the very telling third sentence of the essay: "St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose center was everywhere and its circumference nowhere" (*Selections* 168). Coming where it does in the essay, this undoubtedly carefully chosen quote somewhat contravenes what has preceded it. For should the eye truly be "the first circle", then it must of necessity be the center; and yet, anyone who knows his Emerson is rightly apt to have the word "nature" ring in the back of his mind upon reading the word "God", and if nature be everything that is "the NOT ME, … [including] my own body" of which the eye is part, then it cannot have the eye *per se* as its sole center. And so the essay's first proposition is effectively rendered moot.

This is not, however, just sloppy thinking on Emerson's part. In fact, it serves to highlight the claim that our own perceptions of nature are at the root of the problem, as he points out in concluding the essay's first paragraph:

> Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. (*Selections* 168)

What this points to is, essentially, the necessity—in order to understand things aright—of a ceaseless cleansing of perception. A more celebrated passage from the earlier *Nature* makes much the same point:

> The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they

> appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. (*Selections* 55)

Perception is here revealed to be, quite literally, rotten at the core, with the disease afflicting the center spreading outwards to infect everything perceived. Of course, as indicated above, the supposed "center" may not be the center after all—which is, in fact, a part of the disease.

In the passage, the fundamental characteristic of the disease is how the eye—or perception—is a "ruin", something further emphasized in the description of the world lying "broken and in heaps". This clearly hints at the notion of a fall of some kind, though by no means *the* Fall, which was repugnant to the Unitarian sensibilities of Emerson. In fact, the one time that Emerson does specifically mention "the Fall of Man"—in the essay *Experience* (1844)—he has no truck with anything like original sin, but instead links it directly not only to a sort of diseased perception, but also to perception's fundamental role in shaping the individual:

> It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions, objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas. Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast. (*Selections* 269)

Unlike the above passage from *Nature*—which at least allows room for hope in its talk of "the redemption of the soul"—this passage flirts with an almost Humean skepticism, and in fact patently denies any possibility of such a redemption by its claim that the situation is "too late to be helped" and that, alas, "we have no means of correcting these

colored and distorting lenses which we are". This last phrase is of particular interest inasmuch as it explicitly reduces the individual to no more than perception, thus iterating that because our perception is flawed, because "we suspect our instruments", then we, too, are necessarily flawed and suspect, as a whole.

Even more interesting, perhaps, is the definition given by Emerson for "the Fall of Man", which is none other than "the discovery we have made that we exist". This is the point at which nature devolves into "the NOT ME", and indeed it is stated that at one time "we lived *in* what we saw" (emphasis added). The question arises, then, as to when this time was and, more importantly, when it came to an end. Emerson provides an answer of sorts in *Nature*, simultaneously revealing himself as a child of Romanticism:

> To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. (*Selections* 23)

Just as, in the passage from *Nature* quoted earlier, the flaw in human perception was put forth as a consequence of the fact that "man is disunited with himself", here it is revealed as resulting from man's "inward and outward senses" not being "truly adjusted to each other"; furthermore, the date of this maladjustment is presented implicitly as occurring upon entrance "into the era of manhood".

One of the guiding principles of Romanticism, it should be recalled, was that the child enters the world not so much as a tabula rasa as it does a bearer of some vague imprint of a paradisiacal birth, as expressed by Wordsworth in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood":

> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> (lines 62-66)

The lines that immediately follow these go on to reveal that the eventual fall from this state of grace comes about largely in terms of a progressively waning purity in perception:

> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy,
> But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The Youth, who daily farther from the east
> Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.
> (67-76)

Here, there is a clear contrast made between two different sorts of light: that which accompanies the child, providing him with "the vision splendid" by—as Wordsworth writes elsewhere in the "Ode"—causing everything to "seem / Apparelled in celestial light" (3-4); and conversely, "the light of common day" which, likened to "[s]hades of the prison-house", is effectively a blocking-out of that original vision, that primal clarity of seeing. An obvious affinity thus arises with Emerson's own delineation of two levels or degrees of light: the light of adulthood, which allows but "a very superficial seeing" insofar as it "illuminates *only* the eye" (emphasis added); and the light of childhood, which is fuller in that it "shines into the eye *and* the heart" (emphasis added).

Moreover, in a note on the "Ode" dictated to his friend Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth made a comment that seems to bear directly on Emerson's definition of man's fall as none other than "the discovery we have made that we exist". Speaking of the time when he was yet young, Wordsworth says:

> I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes. In later periods of life I have deplored, as we have all reason to do, a subjugation of an opposite character, and have rejoiced over the remembrances … (quoted in *Norton English*, Vol. 2, 187-188)

The nostalgic element in Wordsworth comes to the fore here, with what was felt in youth as a clearly frightening breakdown of individuality becoming to the adult a quite fond memory. The key phrase in the passage may indeed be "abyss of idealism", yet the marvelous ambiguity of what follows is surely as significant. Indeed, Emerson's comment, "that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors", could almost—in some hypothetical tome on the Romantic view of man's fall—be used as an explanatory footnote to Wordsworth's rather vague phrase "subjugation of an opposite character".

The choice of the word "subjugation", however, is entirely apt, and applicable as well to Emerson's view of the source of our flawed perception as to Wordsworth's. One of the most basic dichotomies in Emersonian thought is that between solitude and society, as he confirms at the beginning of *Nature*: "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" (*Selections* 23). The positive pole is solitude, with society the negative—in fact, society could almost be defined as that

which subjugates. To speak of "the discovery we have made that we exist" is, for Emerson, to speak of our fall into social existence:

> But the man is as it were clapped into jail by his own consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with *éclat* he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutrality! (*Selections* 149)

Here we find shades of Wordsworth's own "[s]hades of the prison-house". The "consciousness" mentioned here is precisely along the lines of what Emerson, several years later in the essay *Fate* (1851), would describe as "double consciousness":

> One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition [sic], one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists; the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of one and the other foot on the back of the other. (*Conduct* 49)

Some 50 years later, W.E.B. DuBois—in a quite different context but amounting to the same—would also refer to "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (5).

That equestrian balancing act, that judging of oneself as though one were both the circus freak and the patronizing circusgoer that makes one a freak, can hardly last long. Ultimately, such a consciousness, such a way of perceiving, is nothing if not destructive of the sort of individuality which it is solitude's ability to forge:

> Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. (*Selections* 149)

What such a view of society amounts to is something of a utilitarian dystopia of the spirit, erected heavy upon the individual in the interests of all. What Emerson is ultimately concerned with—unlike his ostensibly more radical disciple, Henry David Thoreau—is less demolishing this structure than, simply, allowing individuals *within* the structure to be empowered, and after to do what they will.

The value of nature in this project, for Emerson, is in how it serves as the bedrock of solitude, a space within which one can "pass again into his neutrality", which is essentially to pass wholly out of the sort of double-consciousness society engenders:

> But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! (*Selections* 23)

The experience described here, of course, in no way effaces "the discovery we have made that we exist": from that, there can necessarily be no return. What it does do, however, is provide new perspective, by removing what could be called the pomp and circumstance abounding in "the streets of cities"—here, an emblem of society—and showing in its place the radical greatness that is nature. In effect, it is a reversal of the process mentioned earlier whereby an individual is made to feel small; now however, by a sort of communion with "those heavenly worlds" that are the stars, it is society that is made small.

There remains, though, the problem that the individual himself is not accordingly made great by the simple fact that nature proves to dwarf society. This much is subtly indicated by the phrase, "the rays … separate *between* him and what he touches" (emphasis added), which—while not exactly cutting man off from nature entirely—

nonetheless creates a gap that must be bridged in order that the individual may achieve greatness. For, by isolating the individual on one side of this gap, these fickle stars manage to create less an individual *per se* than they do some isolate being still yearning for wholeness. Indeed, that such an isolating gap—and quite a wide one, at that—does exist, is only emphasized by the later statement that the stars, "though always present, … are inaccessible" (*Selections* 23). In the end, it is precisely this inaccessibility which makes the observer of the stars truly "alone", as under their auspices he has become separated from society and yet remains shut, as it were, out of their audience chamber. What the stars and their rays seem to be doing in this passage, then, is actually less concretely *giving* man "the perpetual presence of the sublime", than *reminding* him that it is there.

Nonetheless, even this reminder turns out to be of virtually inestimable value, as it and it alone is what can serve to tear aside the veil which society and its custom have thrown over a man's eyes. Emerson, it should be recalled, was an admiring student of the Hindu and Buddhist texts beginning to infiltrate America in his day, and cannot but have had some awareness of the concept—fundamental to both those philosophies—of *māyā*, which is Sanskrit for "deception, illusion, appearance" and refers to the notion that the world of common perception is no more than a veil on reality, a perspective or way of seeing that is skewed by consciousness. However Emerson may have come upon his views of perception on his own or however much or little his readings on Hindu and Buddhist thought may have influenced him, the similarities are quite palpable, though Emerson's own reading of such an idea adds a dash of the Romantic insofar as consciousness comes into being under the aegis of society.

Be that as it may, there is a passage elsewhere in the essay *Nature* which presents, by means of a rather oblique Emersonian fable or parable, not only how man's skewed perspective emerged, but also what it made of him and, more importantly, how it might begin to be corrected:

> Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents. Out from him sprang the sun and moon; from man the sun, from woman the moon. The laws of his mind, the periods of his actions externized themselves into day and night, into the year and the seasons. But, having made for himself this huge shell, his waters retired; he no longer fills the veins and veinlets; he is shrunk to a drop. He sees that the structure still fits him, but fits him colossally. Say, rather, it once fitted him, now it corresponds to him from far and on high … Yet sometimes he starts in his slumber, and wonders at himself and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it. (*Selections* 53-54)

Three main threads or ideas run through and animate this extraordinary passage, and once that they are understood a somewhat clearer picture of the nature of the sublime *à la* Emerson starts to emerge.

The first of these notions is primary and commonplace enough that it is taken here as fundamental, and accordingly given only implicitly; namely, the grandness or greatness of nature. It is a notion that in the passage, in fact, is stated only in terms of the passage's second motive idea, which is enshrined in the opening sentence: "Man is the dwarf of himself". The implication, of course, is that man is inherently giant—which in the rhetoric of the passage becomes a clear trope for greatness—and nature's own greatness is made apparent by association, since man is said to have once "filled nature with his overflowing currents". The spanner in the works, though, is that whereas nature *is* great, man merely *once was* great; where nature "once fitted" man, "now it [merely] corresponds to him *from far and on high*" (emphasis added). The stars, remember, are inaccessible.

But despite this diminishment of man with respect to nature, the fact remains that there is correspondence, and this is the third and central thread running through the passage, the all-important synthesis uniting the passage's other two fundamental concepts. It is presented in the powerful concluding sentence: "Yet sometimes he starts in his slumber, and wonders at himself and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it". There is something here that goes a step beyond the ultimates of solitude bestowed by those inaccessible stars, which also—inasmuch as they are a part of "the structure" that is nature—are a part of man's "house". By this analogy, they are rendered less remote than they may seem, are in fact drawn somewhat into the circle of man's influence.

This moment—wherein man realizes that the stars, that the things in nature, are not so distant and alien as the societally imposed double-consciousness would suggest—can only be called a moment of epiphany. The term "epiphany" (*επιφάνεια*) carries with it the sense of "manifestation, striking appearance", and what is manifested at the moment when man "starts in his slumber" is really nothing more grand than the realization that there *may be* some possible correspondence between himself and nature. Whatever the grand rhetoric of *Nature*, this is in and of itself a rather modest epiphany: one "wonders" and "muses strangely", and no more.

Again, though, even these somewhat perplexed reveries become, at least potentially, earth-shattering in their implications. For by means of such a modest epiphany, nature—once so remotely grand, even imposing—is brought low. Recall that, in *Circles*, Emerson speaks of those "*slight dislocations* which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding" (*Selections* 174, emphasis added). There are in fact passages of Emerson that strategically utilize such "slight

dislocations", such seemingly minor tears in the fabric of perception, in a quite explicit—if admittedly double-edged—devaluation of nature:

> That bread which we ask of Nature is that she should entrance us, but amidst her beautiful or her grandest pictures I cannot escape the *second thought*. I walked this P.M. in the woods, but there too the snowbanks were sprinkled with tobacco-juice. We have the wish to forget night and day, father and mother, food and ambition, but we never lose our dualism. Blessed, wonderful Nature, nevertheless! without depth, but with immeasurable lateral spaces. If we look before us, if we compute our path, it is very short. Nature has only the thickness of a shingle or a slate: we come straight to the extremes; but sidewise, and at unawares, the present moment opens into other moods and moments, rich, prolific, leading onward without end … (*Selections* 275)

There are, again, two natures being presented here: there is the surface, which is seen by "the eye of the man" and which "has only the thickness of a shingle or a slate"; and there is the substance, illuminated by "the eye and the heart of the child" and abounding in "immeasurable lateral spaces". To perceive these latter is to experience an epiphany of an altogether more striking sort than that which merely sets us to musing. Man is let to bypass the surface of nature—that which becomes so easily "sprinkled with tobacco-juice", with "the *second thought*" of double-consciousness—and is allowed instead to penetrate the substance. But still the question remains as to how such an experience is brought about, however "sidewise, and at unawares" it may be.

Ultimately, the answer to this question can be found to lie in the connections that exist between man and nature. In the passage from *Experience* dealing with the flaw in man's perception, Emerson raises what initially seems to be a fundamental doubt concerning the world around us: "Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects" (*Selections* 269). Though, as mentioned earlier, this statement dabbles somewhat in Humean skepticism, that is by no means the whole

import of what is said. In fact, soon afterwards, precisely the same information is presented from an altogether different perspective:

> Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself. The subject exists, the subject enlarges; all things sooner or later fall into place. As I am, so I see; use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are … (*Selections* 271)

At a glance, this seems a direct recollection of the rather menacing solipsism of the earlier phrase concerning "the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things" (*Selections* 269). There is, however, a clear difference in tone insofar as the menace appears to have gone, replaced by what seems a sort of promise or assurance. The earlier doom-laden pronouncement that "we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are" is transformed into "we can never say anything but what we are", which—though certainly not lacking in ambiguity—nonetheless errs more on the positive side of the equation as a consequence of the benign inevitability inspiriting the preceding claim that "all things sooner or later fall *into place*" (emphasis added).

There is another change actuated in this passage as well, one which may be of even more import than the passage's altered tone. Specifically, as compared with the earlier passage, there is an even greater degree of abstraction in the treatment: the phrase "the subject" crops up three times before it is refined down to an "I". This, though, is not some mere obfuscation of the matter at hand. Rather, the reasoning behind this abstract turn has already been provided, in a passage which—coming neatly between the two passages in question—also serves as the modulation from the minor key of the "Fall of Man" theme to the major key of its later variation:

> Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided nor doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos. The soul is not twin-born but the only begotten, and though revealing itself as child in time, child in appearance, is of a fatal and universal power, admitting no co-life. Every day, every act betrays the ill-concealed deity. (*Selections* 270)

What these lines do, structurally, is pick up and expand upon some of the sense of the "Fall of Man" passage's final phrase: "every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast" (*Selections* 269). That phrase has established a sort of illimitable sphere of influence for the self, as a somewhat logical corollary to the passage's extremes of subjectivity. The lines given here take that notion up and proceed to effectively turn it on its head in the process of providing an explanation as to how such a radical subjectivity is enabled to arise. The sphere of man's, or the subject's, influence is so boundlessly vast because man is fundamentally composed of soul, which "is not twin-born but the only begotten" and as such, literally constitutes the composition of everything.

Considered in this light, the epiphany recorded in Emerson's February 1844 journal entry, wherein man is essentially allowed access into the "immeasurable lateral spaces" that make up the substance of nature, becomes somewhat less an insight into nature as such, than a realization that man is, in fact, coterminous with nature's basic material; i.e. soul (*Selections* 275). It is for this reason that, in the journal entry, nature is characterized as being "without depth" and having "only the thickness of a shingle or a slate" (*ibid.*). Indeed, given such a lofty conception, all things *per se* necessarily become so much dross:

> The landscape, the figures, Boston, London, are facts as fugitive as any institution past, or any whiff of mist or smoke, and so is society, and so is the world. The soul looketh steadily forwards, creating a world before her, leaving worlds behind her. She has no dates, nor rites, nor persons, nor specialties nor men. The soul knows only the soul; the web of events is the flowing robe in which she is clothed. (*Essays* 257)

This not only chimes with the essay *Circle*'s characterization of nature as "fluid and volatile", but it also serves to establish that nature is really no more than one single manifestation of the all-encompassing soul—or rather the Over-Soul, as the essay from which this passage is taken was named. All things, both man and nature among them, amount essentially to a sort of ancillary effect of the Over-Soul's ceaseless unfolding, and once that an individual has comprehended this, the gap established between him and the "inaccessible" stars—between perceiver and perceived—has been bridged.

This realization, in turn, becomes a great means of empowerment for the individual, as is set forth in a passage from *The American Scholar*:

> The world,—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*,—lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion. (*Selections* 70)

This is what happens once that the stars are known to be less remote than they were thought, once that nature's supposed otherness is shown to be exactly the contrary. An individual of nearly incalculable power, able to "pierce [nature's] order" and "dissipate its fear", emerges from this realization that nature—whatever its vastness—is at bottom nothing less than the "shadow of the soul, or *other me*". It is a realization that immediately distends the self to its proper dimensions along the limitless contours of the Over-Soul, so that it once again "[fills] nature with [its] overflowing currents" (*Selections* 53). It is also, of course, a realization that strips nature of at least a portion of its power.

This passage's striking profusion of the first person emphasizes how it is a distinctly *individual* self that is being created: no longer is there talk, as seen earlier, of some abstract "subject" which "exists … [and] enlarges" (*Selections* 271). This is the moment at which the planter spoken of in *The American Scholar*, having now seen beyond "his bushel and his cart", rises from his degraded position and becomes able to entertain some "idea of the true dignity of his ministry" (*Selections* 64-65).

Immanuel Kant, recall, had in the book *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* proposed that, fundamentally, the feeling of the sublime could be boiled down to something like "the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*" (60). Emerson's opinion on the matter runs directly parallel. In *The American Scholar*, he provides some indication as to how this may be so:

> [Man] shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, "Know thyself", and the modern precept, "Study nature", become at last one maxim. (*Selections* 66)

The implication here—so long as one remains ignorant of the idea of the Over-Soul—is astonishing: more than simply being the mirror of man's soul, as the words say on the surface, nature is in actual fact *posterior* to man. Not posterior in terms of time, but instead on a rather different plane, as pointed out in the 1841 oration, *The Method of Nature*: "In the divine order, intellect is primary; nature, secondary; it is the memory of the mind" (*Representative Men* 462). The terms "intellect" and "mind" here are double-barreled in that on one level they refer to the Over-Soul and thus, by implication, to all things up to and including nature, and on another level—which is the one actually being stressed—they refer quite plainly to man alone.

It must be asked at this point why, if the Over-Soul does indeed comprise the entirety of the universe, man is so singled out as being of first importance, or—put another way—what is it that makes intellect "primary"? The briefest answer to be found to this question is a single word: power. Knowledge or intellect or mind, which is no less than consciousness, constitutes power, and power constitutes greatness. Speaking, in *Nature*, of the example of man's ability to comprehend the laws of physics, Emerson says:

> What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the councils of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast. *Man is greater that he can see this*, and the universe less, because Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known. (*Selections* 38, emphasis added)

Herein lies the blueprint for how to empower oneself: see, know, be. It turns out that those "inaccessible" stars, reminding us "from far and on high" of "the perpetual presence of the sublime", are actually reminding us of our own sublimity.

This privilege of man to "[enter] into the councils of creation" and understand—to *be able* to understand—even a part of what drives the stars, or indeed anything in nature including nature as whole, amounts to almost literally having the world at your fingertips:

> The exercise of the Will, or the lesson of power, is taught in every event. From the child's successive possession of his several senses up to the hour when he saith, "Thy will be done!" he is learning the secret that he can reduce under his will not only particular events but great classes, nay, the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character. Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mold into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. He forges the subtile and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and gives them wing as angels of persuasion and command. One after another his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will,—the double of the man. (*Selections* 38)

And so, if nature is indeed "the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part"—or, as it is phrased here, "the double of the man"—it is only so because man has made it so, by an "exercise of the Will" made possible by man's unique ability to peer into and comprehend the secret of nature. The word "comprehend", which has already been seen in terms of Kant's *comprehensio aesthetica*, bears an original meaning of "to seize completely"—precisely what is occurring in this passage. In thus seizing these inner workings of nature, man is empowered not exactly to create nature *per se*, but to effectively recreate it, to "mold [it] into what is useful", to "[work] it up" so as to "conform all facts to his character".

It is this last phrase that shows how this empowerment of man over nature is also, in essence, no different from the original creation of an individual self. For, whatever the immanence of the Over-Soul, Emerson nowhere claims that any man is wholly engulfed by the fact that he is of the same essential substance as all things else, but in fact strongly asserts the precise opposite:

> [T]hings are not huddled and lumped, but sundered and individual. A bell and a plough have each their use, and neither can do the office of the other. Water is good to drink, coal to burn, wool to wear; but wool cannot be drunk, nor water spun, nor coal eaten. The wise man shows his wisdom in separation, in gradation, and his scale of creatures and of merits is as wide as nature. The foolish have no range in their scale, but suppose every man is as every other man. (*Selections* 37-38)

Much as one must imagine his own "wise man" doing, Emerson is here generous enough to accord individuality even to that which is inanimate. The man of wisdom spoken of here, clearly, is none other than that same one whose "victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will" (*Selections* 38). The fundamental project of Emerson—recall his driving question, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"—is to convince each person that this

sort of power over all things is not merely his right, but his *raison d'être* and so his destiny:

> A man, a personal ascendency, is the only great phenomenon. When nature has work to be done, she creates a genius to do it. Follow the great man, and you shall see what the world has at heart in these ages. There is no omen like that.
>
> But what strikes us in the fine genius is that which belongs of right to every one. A man should know himself for a necessary actor. A link was wanting between two craving parts of nature, and he was hurled into being as the bridge over that yawning need, the mediator betwixt two else unmarriageable facts … He knows his materials; he applies himself to his work; he cannot read, or think, or look, but he unites the hitherto separated strands into a perfect cord. The thoughts he delights to utter are the reason of his incarnation. Is it for him to account himself cheap and superfluous, or to linger by the wayside for opportunities? Did he not come into being because something must be done which he and no other is and does? If only he *sees*, the world will be visible enough. (*Representative Men* 471-472)

In this, from *The Method of Nature*, there is a prescient augury of the assertion from the later essay *Experience* that "use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are" (*Selections* 271). Here, however—rather than being used simply as some affirmation of the inevitability of our being ourselves—it is given more as a strongly active and purposeful prod for a man to "[apply] himself to his work", an only slightly muted clarion call to action: "he cannot read, or think, or look, but he unites the hitherto separate strands into a perfect cord". A man's individuality, here, is blatantly set down as precisely that which holds the universe together, making it little wonder that the universe would capitulate to his "personal ascendency" and accept his authority "as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode".

At this point, it would be worthwhile to remember that the question from *Nature* that began Emerson's career—"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"—had more than just any individual as its interlocutor: it was a question addressed, in large part, to the *American* individual. Whatever the cosmic applications of Emerson's ideas, he was addressing a specific audience, not casting his words into the

sky, therefrom to be carried by the winds wheresoever they might will. Of course, no one addresses a vacuum—neither Longinus, nor Burke, nor Kant, nor Wordsworth; but then, none of these men had taken orders in a fairly radical young church in a fairly radical young nation. Emerson addressed the Phi Beta Kappa Society (31 August 1837; *The American Scholar*), the Harvard Divinity School Seniors (15 July 1838; *The Divinity School Address*), the Society of the Adelphi (11 August 1841; *The Method of Nature*), and countless others besides. This is not, by any means, an even remotely representative slice of American society, either then or now. Nonetheless, it was to Americans that Emerson's addresses, or orations, were pitched, and it was anyway them whom he wanted to reach, on one level at least, hoping they would become active participants in the formation of their own selves.

Despite this emphasis on achieving individuality, however, somehow the work of Emerson remains replete with limitations and even proscriptions on the possibility of actually doing so:

> Men, *such as they are*, very naturally seek money or power … ("The American Scholar", *Selections* 76, emphasis added)
>
> Now man is ashamed of himself; he skulks and sneaks through the world, to be tolerated, to be pitied, and scarcely in a thousand years does any man dare to be wise and good, and so draw after him the tears and blessings of his kind. ("The Divinity School Address", *Selections* 111)
>
> There is no man; there hath never been. The Intellect still asks that a man may be born. The flame of life flickers feebly in human breasts. We demand of men a richness and universality we do not find. Great men do not content us. It is their solitude, not their force, that makes them conspicuous. There is somewhat indigent and tedious about them. They are poorly tied to one thought. ("The Method of Nature", *Representative Men* 461)
>
> A man is a golden impossibility. The line he must walk is a hair's breadth. The wise through excess of wisdom is made a fool. ("Experience", *Selections* 264-265)

But all of this really speaks less to skepticism concerning the individual than it does to the rhetorical strategies of a man, bred to oratory in the Unitarian tradition, challenging his audience to find their own heights. And these heights, in spite of Emerson's constant assertion of solitude's necessity for the construction of individuality, were not ultimately to be solely those which could be gained by one man alone against the world[5]. In the passage from *The American Scholar* that speaks of nature's capacity to "make me acquainted with myself", he does not neglect to mention the following: "I grasp the hands of those next to me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech" (*Selections* 70)[6]. Looked at in terms of Emerson's stated mistrust and even condemnation of society, this seems to indicate that, once that a person manages to become an individual, there is at least relatively little for that individual to fear from society and, at most, much to be gained in terms of power.

Nonetheless, Emerson remains always ambivalent about society, and particularly about the democratic society of the United States:

> Shall we then judge a country by the majority, or by the minority? By the minority, surely. 'Tis pedantry to estimate nations by the census, or by square miles of land, or other than by their importance to the mind of the time.
>
> Leave this hypocritical prating about the masses. Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them. The worst of charity is, that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving. Masses! the calamity is the masses. (*Conduct* 236-237)

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[5]Emerson, whatever his shortcomings, at least lacks the solipsistic simplicity of one of his unwilling descendants, Ayn Rand.

[6] One wonders if Emerson had somehow seen, somewhere in his perusal of Buddhist texts yet years before their first appearance in the United States, the famous series of Oxherding Pictures used in Zen Buddhism as an explication of the enlightenment process, and in which—after having been enlightened—"the oxherd enters the town and the marketplace and bestows goodness to all about him" (quoted in Dumoulin, 279).

This—with its curious tone, the righteous anger of a thug couched in the language of a curmudgeon—comes from the late essay *Considerations By the Way* (1860), which is surely one of the most schizophrenic of his long career and could perhaps be taken as firm evidence of Emerson's approaching senility did it not sum up so concisely so many of the main themes that had animated that career. Yet in spite of this passage's hysterics, it at least lets its reader understand the value of an individual's "[grasping] the hands of those next to [them], and [taking their] place in the ring" (*Selections* 70): it can, perhaps, allow for more such individuals to come to be. The notion of applying such forceful drill sergeant tactics to allow this to happen, rather than letting solitude do the work, may indeed reflect Emerson's growing pessimism, but the fundamental idea underpinning the passage is no different from that which animates *Nature*, and in fact is neatly summarized later in the same essay: "In America, the geography is sublime, but the men are not" (*Conduct* 243). The sense here, of course, is that the men of America would and should be sublime. For, in the terms of Emerson's logic, it is only by becoming sublime themselves that they can hope to comprehend nature and thereby empower themselves to the point where they might become individuals and, as *Circles* puts it, again "[fill] the sky" (*Selections* 170).

Until such a large-scale transformation comes about, though, society remains and so must of necessity continue, must move forward, and in Emerson's time "forward" could fortunately be whittled down to one fairly precise direction—west:

> I do not think very respectfully of the designs or the doings of the people who went to California, in 1849. It was a rush and a scramble of needy adventurers, and, in the western country, a general jail-delivery of all the rowdies of the rivers. Some of them went with honest purposes, some with very bad ones, and all of them with the very commonplace wish to find a short way to wealth. But Nature watches over all, and turns this malfaisance to good. California gets peopled and subdued,—civilized in this immoral way,—and, on this fiction, a real prosperity is rooted and grown. 'Tis a decoy-

> duck; 'tis tubs thrown to amuse the whale: but real ducks, and whales that yield oil, are caught. And, out of Sabine rapes, and out of robbers' forays, real Romes and their heroisms come in fulness of time. (*Conduct* 242-243)

Emerson's logic here, as regards nature, is impeccable, however little it may appear so at a glance. It does indeed seem difficult to reconcile a phrase such as "Nature watches over all, and turns this malfaisance to good" with one, such as that from *Nature*, claiming that "Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve" (*Selections* 38); a subdued exaltation and an open diminishment are not always the best of bedfellows. Yet Emerson's logic, once its terms have been clarified, makes them so. There is, admittedly, the possibility that nature's service consists precisely of its "[watching] over all", and that this element is there cannot be irrevocably denied; but such an assertion would only, in the end, amount more to justification than clarification, and lead only to fuzzy rationalizations[7]. A perhaps more fruitful way to look at the seeming contradictions arising from Emerson's differing characterizations of nature is to simply look—again—at what he appears to be referring to with the word. In doing so, two basic sets of notions can be seen emerging from his apparently different uses of "nature" as a term.

First, there is that nature referenced in the journal entry of February 1844, which is a nature "without depth" and with only "the thickness of a shingle or a slate" (*Selections* 275). This is an admittedly physical nature, able to be "sprinkled with tobacco-juice". However, this is decidedly not the nature lived in by that planter of *The*

[7] It was and is on such points that the Transcendental movement comes under attack, most especially thanks to some of the works of Emerson's prodigal son, Amos Bronson Alcott, who was particularly fond of fuzziness: "Choice implies apostacy. The pure, unfallen soul is above choice. Her life is unbroken, synthetic; she is a law to herself, and finds no lusts in her members warring against the instincts of conscience. Sinners choose; saints act from instinct and intuition: there is no parley of alien forces in their being" (*The Dial*). From this—more than from Emerson himself—much of our modern-day New Age fluff can be said to descend.

American Scholar who "sees his bushel and cart, and nothing beyond" (*Selections* 65), nor is it even the nature of that man observing the stars and so gloriously reminded by them of "the perpetual presence of the sublime" (*Selections* 23). All that such a reminder by those stars ultimately does is to "open [the mind] to their influence" (*Selections* 23). No great insights into the workings of nature are thereby provided. In a similar mode, in *The Method of Nature*, it is said that if a man does no more than see, "the world will be visible *enough*" (*Representative Men* 472, emphasis added). The limiting word "enough" here implies, particularly in the context of perception, that a step forward has been made, but more yet remains: there is another level, another face of nature to be encountered. A larger breakthrough still awaits.

That breakthrough into the other level is registered in the February 1844 journal entry with the description of nature as containing "immeasurable lateral spaces" and "[opening] into other moods and moments, rich, prolific, leading onward without end" (*Selections* 275). Identifiable most likely with the Over-Soul, it is the nature which "watches over all" and provides purpose to the "rush and … scramble" of the 1849 gold rush in California, as well as to the very foundation of the United States:

> What brought the pilgrims here? One man says, civil liberty; another, the desire of founding a church; and a third, discovers that the motive force was plantation and trade. But if the Puritans could rise from the dust, they could not answer. It is to be seen in what they were, and not in what they designed; it was the growth and expansion of the human race, and resembled herein the sequent Revolution, which was not begun in Concord, or Lexington, or Virginia, but was the overflowing of the sense of natural right in every clear and active spirit of the period. (*Representative Men* 482-483)

It is nature under this aspect that, refulgent with power, becomes identified with the individual insofar as the *raison d'être* of the pilgrims—albeit they were unaware of it, and might even have taken strong issue with Emerson over his assessment—"is to be

seen in what they were, and not in what they designed". The suggestion, of course, is that the same is true of any individual, and indeed for the United States itself: any one individual's very being becomes a paean primarily to itself, and then, rippling outwards in concentric circles as it were, to the universe as a whole.

This deeper level of nature also becomes apparent in a journal entry from September 1857 which rather explicitly and favorably contrasts it with the more physical side of nature, to which it nevertheless gives some amount of proper due:

> *Naïveté*.—Uses of Nature, to be sure!—Why, this is foremost. What we value, all we value, is the *naturel*, or peculiar quality of each man; and, in a large, healthy individual, this is the antagonist of gravitation, vegetation, chemistry, nay, of matter itself, and as good at least as they. This is the saliency, the principle of levity, the *sal volatile*, which is the balance, or offset, to the mountains and masses. (*Selections* 374-375)

Something of a redefinition, or at least a reorientation, is being enacted here. Nature, in the word's common parlance, is constrained to "gravitation, vegetation, chemistry, … [and] matter". Although, in a technical sense, this does partake of everything in nature up to and including the physical laws that govern it, here the rather scientific terms are wielded reductively, almost like weapons against nature. More importantly, nature seems to be stripped of its most fundamental element, which can only be called the spiritual element. This missing spiritual element proves to be specifically bound up with man, and is indeed defined as "the *naturel*, or peculiar quality of each man". Thereby is it not only distinguished from material nature, or "matter itself", but also set in opposition to it. This opposition is, in the passage, quite schizophrenically characterized, with "the *naturel*" being put forth as both "the antagonist" and "the balance, or offset" to material nature. Nonetheless, as the passage's emphasis upon "value" makes clear, it is

the spiritual pole of this duality—recall Emerson's admission that "we never lose our dualism" (*Selections* 275)—that is given primacy.

This primacy of man, as a spiritual being, is a point clearly stressed in *The Method of Nature*:

> The termination of the world in a man, appears to be the last victory of intelligence. The universal does not attract us until housed in an individual. Who heeds the waste abyss of possibility? The ocean is everywhere the same, but it has no character until seen with the shore or the ship. Who would value any number of miles of Atlantic brine bounded by lines of latitude and longitude? Confine it by granite rocks, let it wash a shore where wise men dwell, and it is filled with expression; and the point of greatest interest is where the land and water meet. So must we admire in man, the form of the formless, the concentration of the vast, the house of reason, the cave of memory. (*Representative Men* 469-470)

Here we have, once again, the ocean. It has come a long way now from its original mention by Longinus; here, in Emerson's hands, it falls strongly on the Kantian side of the debate. Recall that, for Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*, the ocean itself "cannot be called sublime" (I, 2, ¶23), but rather reveals itself as more a vehicle, allowing its observer to be essentially carried up to the heights inherent "in our own ideas" (I, 2, ¶25). This occurs inasmuch as, in the act of observing the ocean, the observer's "mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality" (I, 2, ¶23).

The small yet vital Emersonian difference—which, to call a spade a spade, amounts to the American difference—is to essentially reify this "higher finality" as the observing individual himself, neither more nor less. What this twist amounts to is that the fundamental purpose of nature becomes to create the individual, or in Emerson's words, the "termination of the world in a man, appears to be the last victory of intelligence" (*Representative Men* 469). The sublime thus becomes, in essence, the

individual who is capable of perceiving sublimity, or rather the sublimity that is his own nature. So it is that even Kant's "broad ocean agitated by storms" (I, 2, ¶23) can be said to have "no character until seen with the shore or the ship"[8] (*Representative Men* 469). Emerson does not choose the word "character" lightly here, and the upshot of the phrase becomes that nature is only made dignified—or, if you will, sublime—by the presence of a dignified individual. The slight difference from Kant here lies in the fact that, for Kant, the matter is as it were first aesthetic and then spiritual insofar as perception leads onwards to comprehension; for Emerson, however, the matter is first spiritual—aesthetics is always given a rather short shrift by the Sage of Concord—but then percolates outwards to the physical or material. Even the physical presence of a real individual in a given land is enough to sublim(at)e nature, and the "[u]ses of nature" get whittled down to just the one: the creation of an individual.

In Emerson's work, whatever its universality, the land is definitely a given. Going all the way back to his first printed words, in the opening lines of *Nature*, it is clear that his thoughts are directed primarily to Americans:

> The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; *we*, through *their* eyes. Why should not *we* also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not *we* have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to *us*, and not the history of *theirs*? (*Selections* 21, emphases added)

An implicit distinction between the European tradition and the still unformed American one courses through this passage, with the constantly stressed dichotomy between "we" and "they" hammering the point home. The message is evident enough to anyone

[8] It is on an entirely different shore that Lucretius had concocted his own vaguely sadistic version of the Sublime: "What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is joy indeed" (*On the Nature of the Universe*, tr. Latham; 38).

reading: Americans must cast off their rather slavish adherence to tradition and create their own. Thus, when Emerson speaks, in *The Method of Nature*, of the ocean "[washing] a shore where wise men dwell" and only then becoming "filled with expression", it is an open secret that the shore he speaks of is his own. Nature is shown to matter only insofar as it houses great individual selves, and the whole project of Emerson is to somehow assist in the creation of such greatness within his own land.

Around the same time that Emerson was first putting this project into words in *Nature*, Alexis de Tocqueville was pointing out, in *Democracy of America*, that democratic "peoples may amuse themselves momentarily by looking at nature, but it is about themselves that they are really excited" (484). It is no easy task to find someone who better embodies this notion than Emerson, whose idea of "the *naturel*, or peculiar quality of each man" amounts to little more than a ratification of de Tocqueville's proposal. In effect, Emerson seeks to liberate the American individual into himself by radically transferring the primacy which American nature had held so threateningly poised above the young nation's head into the hands of the nation's people.

Emerson himself does not hesitate to conceal the threat American nature poses: "It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago" (*Selections* 75). Even more, though, this cryptically foreboding aphorism from 1837's *The American Scholar* is—four years later, in *The Method of Nature*—given its place, its name, and its purpose:

> Who shall dare think he has come late into nature, or has missed anything excellent in the past, who seeth the admirable stars of possibility, and *the yet untouched continent of hope glittering with all its mountains in the vast West*? I praise with wonder this great reality, which seems to drown all things in the deluge of its light. What man seeing this, can lose it from his thoughts, or entertain a meaner subject? The entrance of this into his mind seems to be the birth of man. (*Representative Men* 486, emphasis added)

It can hardly be coincidence that, exactly two years after *The American Scholar* and two years before the gloss upon it that is *The Method of Nature*, in 1839 newspaperman John O'Sullivan writ precisely the same notions just a mite larger in his incalculably influential article, "The Great Nation of Futurity":

> [O]ur national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.
>
> It is so destined, because the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal. It presides in all the operations of the physical world, and it is also the conscious law of the soul … (*Democratic Review*, 426)

The principle of equality, of course, is the selfsame principle driving Emerson's affirmation that "the fine genius is that which belongs of right to every one" (*Representative Men* 471). In principle at least, Emerson would surely agree with O'Sullivan's assertion that equality "presides in all the operations of the physical world, and it is also the conscious law of the soul". This is precisely the democratic principle of which de Tocqueville had spoken, only now—in the mouths of these two Americans—it is given an even stronger basis on the spiritual plane, and all of de Tocqueville's ambivalence gets winnowed away like so much chaff.

As a consequence of this winnowing, however, the creation of individual identity becomes fundamentally inseparable from the creation of national identity: both the physical and the spiritual body of the newborn individual hitch their wagons to the physical and spiritual body of America, and American nature ends up being no more than the clothing, as it were, of the American nation and the American individual. Something inherent in this process ultimately results in a curious phrase by Emerson: "I

am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West" (*Selections* 267).

It also results, in 1855, in a little self-printed book of poetry called *Leaves of Grass*.

Chapter 2

"A Verge of the Usual Mistake"[9]: Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself", and the Sublime American Self

Minute Discrimination is Not Accidental All Sublimity is founded on Minute Discrimination[10]
—William Blake, "Annotations to *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*"

Sacrifice the Parts. What becomes of the Whole[11]
—William Blake, *ibid*.

We are that bold and adventurous piece of nature which he that studies wisely learns in a compendium what others labour at in a divided piece and endless volume.[12]
—Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*

Reviewing, in 1866, painter Albert Bierstadt's monumental (83 x 142 1/4 inches) *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie*[13], critic Henry T. Tuckerman had these rather chastising words to say about the picture:

> The law of gravitation leagues itself with geological law against the artist. Away up, above the clouds, near the top of the picture, the observer will perceive two pyramidal shapes. By further consultation of the index-sheet [accompanying the exhibition], the observer will ascertain that these things are the two "spurs" of Mount Rosalie. Now, let him work out a problem in arithmetic: The hills over which he looks, as we are told, are 3000 feet high; right over the hills tower huge masses of cloud which certainly carry the eye up to 10 or 12,000 feet higher; above these … the two "spurs"; what is the height of Mt Rosalie? Answer: approximately, 10,000 miles or so. Impossible. (qtd. in Mitchell, 68)

One is rather at a loss what to make of a critic who critiques by means of roughly the same sin which he is railing against, calling upon the "law of gravitation" and "geological law" and, especially, "arithmetic" to browbeat the artist's supposedly exaggerated conception, and then comes up with a solution—"approximately, 10,000 miles or so"—which is itself an exaggeration. If it is meant as an ironic twist on

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[9] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 70.
[10] Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Erdman; 643.
[11] *ibid*.; 650.
[12] Browne, *Religio Medici, Hydrotaphia, and The Garden of Cyrus*, ed. Robbins; 16.
[13] See Appendix.

Bierstadt's own exaggerated style, it is not a particularly effective one. In fact, it seems more like a sort of tall tale contest, with Tuckerman attempting, in Emerson's words, "to draw a circle outside of his antagonist", Bierstadt (*Selections* 170).

A somewhat different judgment of the picture, however, is given by Lee Clark Mitchell, who—while admitting to the rather hyperbolic reality of Bierstadt's giant—chooses instead to train his perception on a different possibility inherent in the painting:

> [H]alf a dozen centers of interest vie for the viewer's attention in a kind of cinematic competition … for the plot: from the startled ptarmigans winging into flight, to a dead deer abandoned near the foreground pool, to Indians chasing a frightened horse, to the encampment of tepees near the river that flows through the left middle distance—a river in which mounted Indians ride three horses, on to deer quietly grazing beyond the chasing Indians, and so on, depending on how closely one looks. The point is that there is a surplus of stories, unrelated, unconflicting, randomly disposed, with figures afar as clear as the birds nearby. And while such a foreshortening of perspective is unrealistic, it has the effect of allowing potential narratives to emanate from many points—an effect reinforced by our slight confusion over the source of the picture's light fostered by the rococco [sic] shadows, the darkened pines, the distant thunderstorm. (67)

What these alternate perspectives on Bierstadt's *Mount Rosalie* perhaps reveal clearer than anything else is the greatly differing levels or categories of space which can justifiably be used as a framework from which to view the picture: Tuckerman, following one strand of the painting's logic, is led up towards "the two 'spurs' of Mount Rosalie"—one of which now goes by the name Mount Bierstadt—and on into outrage; Mitchell, taking the opposite path, finds his eyes darting rather "randomly" among the "surplus of stories" clustered towards the bottom of the canvas. It is perhaps not entirely insignificant that both men are Americans, and that the one who directs his gaze towards the more grandly natural space, rather than the more intimate individual spaces which are also present, is the one who ends up quite offended.

There is, of course, the caveat that Tuckerman's objections were ostensibly founded on Bierstadt's apparent trespass against the "truth to nature" supposed to guide

contemporary painterly ethics, as evidenced by Tuckerman's wounded cry that, against Bierstadt, the "whole science of geology cries out" (qtd. in Mitchell, 68). Yet there may be more lying behind Tuckerman's righteous indignation than simply some clash between Bierstadt's works and the aesthetics of the period. Recall the following statement by Emerson, from *Nature*:

> How calmly and genially the mind apprehends one after another the laws of physics! What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the councils of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast. Man is greater that he can see this, and the universe less, because Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known. (*Selections* 38)

If we for a moment assume that Tuckerman has read his Emerson—which, as one of the more prominent American critics of his time, he is sure to have done—then we see that he has understood what he read only up to a point; or at least, the ultimate aesthetic implications of this passage have passed him by. Observing Bierstadt's work through Tuckerman's eyes and in terms of Emerson's text would, essentially, lead one to conclude that Bierstadt was a boor and that his works were vulgarities insofar as his apparent misapprehension of "the laws of physics"—that is, Tuckerman's "law of gravitation" and "geological law"—would show that not only had his insight not refined him, but that he may not even have had that insight in the first place. Hence, his works would come off as vaguely savage in nature as in form, and this is what in fact became the gist of the critical backlash which struck Bierstadt beginning around the time of *Mount Rosalie*.

On the other hand, there is something in Emerson's contention that "Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known" that seems to have slipped out through the cracks of Tuckerman's criticism. Such a phrase hints towards an art that could, at least

potentially, develop in an almost expressionist direction, and the hints become yet stronger in the critical evaluation of critics which opens Emerson's 1843 essay, *The Poet*:

> Their knowledge of the fine arts is some study of rules and particulars, or some limited judgment of color or form, which is exercised for amusement or for show. It is a proof of the shallowness of the doctrine of beauty as it lies in the minds of our amateurs, that men seem to have lost the perception of the instant dependence of form upon soul. There is no doctrine of forms in our philosophy. We were put into our bodies, as fire is put into a pan to be carried about; but there is no accurate adjustment between the spirit and the organ, much less is the latter the germination of the former. So in regard to other forms, the intellectual men do not believe in any essential dependence of the material world on thought and volition. (*Selections* 222)

The sort of aesthetics outlined here would actually—so long as we know nothing of the shameless pandering to wealthy clientele that drove his career—go a long way towards redeeming Bierstadt's art, at least on a theoretical level: whatever else may be said about that art, it does seem to represent something of an individual vision. Bierstadt, in Emerson's terms, becomes as free as he may wish to alter, in his art, the supposed rules governing space in order to more fundamentally express the "dependence of form upon soul". Even if the end result be considered faulty—as several generations of criticism have declared it to be—then still, in line with Emerson's pronouncements (as well as Oscar Wilde's later adage that all bad art is sincere), it must nevertheless be accorded a modicum of respect as an attempt to present, in oils, something of a personal vision of American space.

In the London-based *Broadway Magazine* in October 1868—a bare two years after the unveiling of Bierstadt's monumental landscape—Walt Whitman published the first version of a poem seen by some as his own sense of what it was to try and create, tangibly, a personal vision of American space. In its final 1881 version:

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.
(*Leaves of Grass*, 564-565)

Not only does this poem provide a rather stark picture of the individual all but lost, baseless, "in measureless oceans of space" and casting about quite randomly—"musing, venturing, throwing"—in the hopes of holding firm in that midst; but it can also be used to clarify somewhat the dilemma resulting as per the two wildly different viewings of Bierstadt's *Mount Rosalie* shown above. In terms of such a reading, the question of the poem becomes how to form "the bridge" between Tuckerman's affronted image of the painting's natural space and Mitchell's focus upon its wealth of individual "potential narratives". What such a reading immediately invokes, however, is the sense that it is not limited just to this picture, or just to Bierstadt's works as a whole. Rather, the observer's confrontation with *Mount Rosalie* becomes nothing less than an emblem of the American individual's confrontation with American nature and American space, and this emblem is quickly seen to be pregnant with the question—addressed in Whitman's poem—of just how this confrontation is to take place, how the individual is to maintain amidst the "vacant vast surrounding".

This, of course, is fundamentally the same question as that which drove Emerson, and he too found himself somewhat affronted by the vastness of American space, at least in terms of how it seemed to so conspicuously and effectively dwarf the

budding American individual. As has been seen, for Emerson the way to amend this indignity was, essentially, by appropriating—or, in a more correct sense, reappropriating—American space, not merely in the geographical terms outlined in John O'Sullivan's doctrine of Manifest Destiny, but even more fundamentally in those spiritual terms which were actually Emerson's primary concern. Such an appropriation—insofar as it would involve a recognition of man's being the radical and highest embodiment of the spiritual, or higher, aspect of nature—would in essence transfer the felt primacy of American nature to the American individual.

But what of the method of getting this monumental action done? Emerson, without fail, pronounced that a solitary immersion of the self within nature—within that space—was what was called for. By means of such an immersion, perception and by extension the individual himself can again be made whole, cleansed as it were, and thus enabled to see things aright. The radical identity of man and nature would be recognized, and this recognition would in turn both uplift and empower the individual who had made it, in effect sublim(at)ing the self. However, just as the purely chemical process of sublimation actually involves two paired yet opposite processes—namely, the conversion of solid to vapor, and the condensation of vapor to solid—Emerson's "process" for empowering the self proves to be something less than a unity. In the world of chemistry, in that it is a natural change of state, sublimation presents no problem apart from the occasional extra amount of temperature or pressure required to effect it. In the rather more rarefied world of the spirit, though, the procedure becomes deeply involved in paradox (which, to be fair, Emerson never denied dabbling in):

> In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair.

> Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (*Selections* 24)

Should this passage from *Nature* be taken, as it must be, as a description of what occurs at the moment of sublimation, then the paradox lying at the heart of this process is exactly what comes to the fore. Firstly, emphasis is laid upon the fundamental importance of the eye, whose loss would present the only irreparable "calamity" inasmuch, one imagines, as it would forever muddy perception and prevent that achievement of perception cleansed that is the "transparent eyeball". The end result of this cleansing is stated to be the disappearance of "mean egotism" and the making "nothing" of the individual; which, however, is contradicted on the linguistic level—leaving aside the facile and, one hopes, unintentional homophone with "eye"—by the virtual litany of the first person pronoun which follows. However, a deeper contradiction emerges through the bare fact that this passage is quite explicitly presented as the emotional core of an essay which is, itself, explicitly concerned with inciting not just America, but Americans, to "enjoy an *original* relation to the universe" (*Selections* 21, emphasis added). It would seem that the fashioning of such an "original relation", such an independence and individuality, involves on at least one level an effacement of the self. Thus, further, it would seem that when Harold Bloom (255) spoke of the following passage from Emerson's journals as definitive of the American Sublime, he knew whereof he spoke: "There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each, but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts,—*I and the Abyss*" (*Selections* 405).

Whitman's poem "A Noiseless Patient Spider", quoted above, quite obviously grapples with some of the immense difficulties which these "two absorbing facts" give rise to. What the "soul" of the poem explicitly seeks is connection, but just *what* it seems to wish to connect is decidedly unclear. The object of the key phrase "to connect them" refers equally to the "measureless oceans of space" and to "the spheres", neither of which has any particular definite quality. This vagueness, however, is entirely in keeping with the poem's deliberate focus upon the subject, by means of which the object is rendered irrelevant: so long as the flung thread "catch *somewhere*" (emphasis added), then "the bridge you … need [will] be form'd"; the use of the word "need" only highlights the poem's emphasis upon the subject.

Reading the poem, though, in the light of Emerson's assertion that "the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, … because man is disunited with himself" leads on to the conclusion that the subject thus focused upon is itself deeply problematic (*Selections* 55). The threatening aspect of the "vacant vast surrounding" in which the subject finds itself proves an echo of that blighted Emersonian space, and from this space the "soul" of the poem sees itself—just as in Emerson—"detached".

This sense of detachment, however, proves to be a result of the fact that the subject is nothing *more than* "soul". For as well in the poem as in Emerson, soul can be considered simultaneously fundamental and incomplete: fundamental insofar as, in the form of the Over-Soul, it constitutes the substratum or even the noumenon of Emersonian nature, penetrating and informing all things up to and most assuredly including man; yet incomplete insofar as this "soul" has not yet condensed, as it were, into what Emerson terms "the *naturel*, or peculiar quality of each man", which alone is "all we value" (*Selections* 374). What the "soul" of Whitman's poem is seeking, then, is

that unity that would finally enable it to become a bona fide self: a spider whose flung silk catches nowhere is a travesty of a spider, and anyhow dies soon.

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" is a poem of universal import, in the sense that—however much can be read into the landscape of that "vacant vast surrounding"—it is not a poem directly concerned with America and American space; this fact is only emphasized by the poem's position as the centerpiece of the *Whispers of Heavenly Death* cluster, which in its openly universal themes and relative lack of any direct references ends up somewhat expressly addressed not to American readers specifically, but rather to any reader whatsoever. Additionally, even the terms of the poem's own argument are treated with a deliberate metaphoric vagueness: "the gossamer thread" spun and flung by the speaker is left as open and undefined in terms of tenor as the speaker himself. In order to get some sense, then, of in just what this thread might consist, doubtlessly the best place to turn is the poem that is possibly Whitman's masterpiece, "Song of Myself". This long poem can, furthermore, be seen as the main body of work to which the second verse of "A Noiseless Patient Spider" forms something of a belated preface, inasmuch as "Song of Myself" is essentially a poem that, on one level, depicts that as-yet-unformed soul blossoming into a self, and an explicitly American self at that.

In the original 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*—before "Song of Myself" had even a name—the ground for the poem's specifically American context was laid by the preface which immediately preceded it. This preface, broadly speaking, revolves around two basic ideas, which are scattered almost haphazardly throughout the text. The first idea involves the constitution of the nation:

> The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. (*Leaves of Grass* 5)

A number of seemingly separate conceptions course through this passage, but what manages to tie them all together is their common base in Whitman's democratic outlook. That outlook is realized here through the passage's central assertion that, as a place built by man, the "United States themselves" effectively amount to an incarnation of natural processes inasmuch as they "[correspond] with the broadcast doings of the day and night"[14]. More than just this, however, Whitman also allows the incarnation to be effected on a level below that of the entire nation. This is hinted at, here, in his use of the reflexive pronoun "themselves" to refer to the United States. Such a usage sounds somehow incorrect to the ears of a majority of modern Americans—who habitually prefer the singular—yet was likely not quite so uncommon in Whitman's own day, before the Civil War at least. No matter how common it may have been, however, the fact remains that he chose to emphasize the diverse aspect of the nation as a collection of individual states through using the plural, and indeed he refers directly to this aspect in the paragraph that follows: "the practical acknowledgement of the citizens of one state by the citizens of all other states" (*Leaves of Grass* 6). This sentence, moreover, bears a double duty in that it simultaneously narrows down the scope of the discussion from the United States to the individual states, and from the individual states to the individual citizens resident there; none, however, gets privileged over another, and thus all—that is,

[14] It is in terms of this basically all-encompassing aspect of the nation that Whitman is not entirely fallacious in speaking, at first sight quite paradoxically, of "Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth".

each state and each citizen—amount by implication to as much an incarnation of nature and its processes as the nation itself. That this is so soon becomes abundantly clear, together with something of the reason such an all-encompassing equalization must be achieved: "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen" (*Leaves of Grass* 6). Behind this thinly veiled call to a sort of spiritual action rather Emersonian[15] in its scope and intent lie those equally Emersonian bugbears, the stifling threats imposed both by the enormity of the still growing American nation—recall Emerson's outcry that "the calamity is the masses" (*Conduct* 237)—and by an American nature which, in its own "largeness", is potentially "monstrous".

This potential threat that is posed by nature and that constitutes the foundation of Whitman's preface is, in a sense, warded off with the preface's major argument, which concerns just how such an appropriate "largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen" might be brought about:

> The land and sea, the animals fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests mountains and rivers, are not small themes . . . but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. Men and women perceive the beauty well enough . . probably as well as he. (*Leaves of Grass* 10)

There is here an implicit contrast between the beautiful in nature, and that which lies beyond the beautiful. Nature's "dumb real objects" are accorded both "beauty and dignity", which ordinary people seem to "perceive … well enough". Yet they clearly

[15] Perhaps one of the major differences in the thought of Emerson and his disciple Whitman is how the latter rather explicitly thrusts the United States in between nature and the individual, making of it—at least at times—an almost pope-like intermediary, a preeminence the States shares only with poets (as the preface makes abundantly clear) and a select group of great and representative men, such as Abraham Lincoln.

remain situated outside those objects, and it is just this separation that allows nature to be imagined as "monstrous". To overcome this sense, they must learn to perceive "the path between reality and their souls", which it is the poet's task to reveal, thus allowing each individual citizen to, in effect, reimagine himself or herself as a microcosm in which nature is embodied.

Insofar as such a reimagining would afford a higher degree of grandeur or significance to the individual, it can be seen to coincide somewhat with Wordsworth's notion of man's own (potential) sublimity as a being "[i]n beauty exalted, … itself / Of quality and fabric more divine" (*The Prelude* 1850, XIV, 455-456). A further similarity with Wordsworth lies in the role of the poet in effecting this realization of the sublimity of man. Wordsworth's literally exalted characterization of the poet as he who "[i]nstructs them how the mind of Man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells", is not really so far off from Whitman's own characterization here (*ibid*., 452-454).

Where Whitman differs greatly from Wordsworth, however, is in the station he accords the poet in this whole process. On a purely verbal level, this difference is apparent: Wordsworth's poet *instructs* where Whitman's merely *indicates*. These differing actions signal different stances by the poet in regards to his audience, with Wordsworth effectively situating himself in a superior position while Whitman remains more or less on the same level. These different stances can also be seen in the words used by the two authors to refer to their respective audiences: Wordsworth consciously separates himself with the word "them", while Whitman speaks of "folks" and of "[m]en and women". This serves to include the poet among his audience, a point that is made abundantly clear later in the preface:

> The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another . . and that men can be good or grand only of the consciousness of their supremacy within them. (*Leaves of Grass* 14)

Having moved past Wordsworth here and on to a more democratic vision of the poet, this passage concludes with a cadence strongly suggestive of Kant's early characterization of the sublime, from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, as "the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*" (60). How different Whitman's American sublime actually is from the Kantian sublime is something that will be discussed in due course, but suffice it to say here that, on one level, Whitman can be seen clearly striving to divest his argument of the duality that Kant's had been based in. In terms of the preface's fundamental paradigm of nature incarnating itself in both the nation and the individual, the poet is seen in this passage as something of an intermediary, a representative of nature and of the nation who indicates "to each man and woman" that neither nature nor the nation are as "monstrous" as they may seem. When the poet, then, allows each person their recognition of "the consciousness of their supremacy within", he is in fact revealing to them "the path between reality and their [own] souls".

The importance of a sense of place in the terms of Whitman's argument, moreover, cannot be overestimated. As an intermediary, the poet comes to represent nature primarily through the specific nature of a specific nation, as Whitman has already made clear: "[The poet's] spirit responds to *his country's* spirit . . . . he incarnates *its* geography and natural life and rivers and lakes" (*Leaves of Grass* 7, emphases added).

The claim here that the poet "responds" arouses the question of what query or what need is being answered or met. In terms of what has already been discussed, it is evident enough that, by thus embodying his nation's "geography and natural life and rivers and lakes", the poet is exposing the sublime link connecting each person with the wider whole that is nature inasmuch as he places himself on the same level as each person, ideally allowing them exactly the same encompassing potential.

The ultimate value of such an action becomes apparent through the sentences that begin and end the paragraph wherein this call to action is found. Firstly, the paragraph opens with the following: "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people" (*Leaves of Grass* 6-7). Secondly, after a long catalog of the places and peoples of the United States, the paragraph ends with this pronouncement: "Here comes [the poet] among the wellbeloved stonecutters and plans with decision and science and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms" (*Leaves of Grass* 8). The opening sentences establish the poet as representative less of individual persons than of the people of a nation collectively, while the closing sentence establishes that, in such an all-encompassing capacity, he becomes effectively the bearer of a progressive future's standard. Taken together, these sentences turn out to equate a nation's people with their future, or rather—in the specific terms that the preface is stressing—it announces that the at present relatively formless ("there are now no solid forms") American nation and people will essentially, led by the example of the poet their representative, create those "solid and beautiful forms of the future" and, in the process, solidify their own identity.

The 1855 preface, which thus laid out the foundations of Whitman's project, was never again to be reprinted together with *Leaves of Grass*. Beginning with the 1860 edition, however, its basic prefatory duty would be taken up by the poems that would eventually be grouped together under the title *Inscriptions*. The first and most extensive of these poems, "Starting from Paumanok", more or less explicitly concerns itself with the formation of identity not only of the self but also of the nation, and more importantly with how these two identities are intertwined. The Paumanok of the title is an Algonquian word for Long Island, Whitman's birthplace, and indeed the poem does begin there: "Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born, / Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother" (*Leaves of Grass* 176). This grounding in place once established, however, the poem immediately goes on a sweep across roughly the whole of America:

> After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements,
> Dweller in Mannahatta my city, or on southern savannas,
> Or a soldier camp'd or carrying my knapsack and gun, or a miner in California,
> Or rude in my home in Dakota's woods, my diet meat, my drink from the spring,
> Or withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess,
> Far from the clank of crowds intervals passing rapt and happy,
> Aware of the fresh free giver the flowing Missouri, aware of the mighty Niagra,
> Aware of the buffalo herds grazing the plains, the hirsute and strong-breasted bull,
> Of earth, rocks, Fifth-month flowers experienced, stars, rain, snow, my amaze,
> Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the mountain-hawk,
> And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from the swamp-cedars,
> Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 176)

This is as clear a display as one might wish of the spectacular verbosity of Whitman's idiom, but if reduced to its main clause only, the gist is simple enough: "After roaming many lands … I strike up for a New World".

What is a bit more difficult, though, is finding what this "New World" actually refers to, since in the passage the traditional sense of that phrase, by the time it actually appears, has already been effectively exhausted by Whitman's concatenation of peoples, places, and beings. One clue about the answer emerges somewhat later in the poem, when, in a movement opposite to that of the opening lines, the poem's persona looks not inwards at America but rather outwards at other nations, assessing them in terms of their worth to himself:

> Nations once powerful, now reduced, withdrawn, or desolate,
> I dare not proceed till I respectfully credit what you have left wafted hither,
> I have perused it, own it is admirable, (moving awhile among it,)
> Think nothing can ever be greater, nothing can ever deserve more than it deserves,
> Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing it,
> I stand in my own place with my own day here.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 178)

This is a twist on the perennial theme of invoking the Muse (or Muses)—here under the guise of "Nations"—so as to aid the author in the expression of the work. Any such invocation involves a sort of double movement: on the surface, it is a humbling or even negation of the self, protesting the artist's helplessness to go it alone; but underneath this, and silently, runs a current of self-empowerment inasmuch as, by dint of the sheer fact that the artist is undeniably the actual creator of the work in question, he is to some extent placing himself on the same level as those divine creative beings. What Whitman does here in "Starting from Paumanok" is to essentially reverse the levels of this double movement, such that the implicit aspect of self-empowerment becomes explicit. He does this by skilful use of his own particular idiom. The bulk of the passage amounts to a qualified paean of the worth of all that has been "wafted hither [to America]" and than which "nothing can ever be greater". However—no matter the admiration and praise

granted it—this remnant of other lands is subsequently cast aside, and so briefly as to be a mere nonchalance: "[D]ismissing it, / I stand in my own place with my own day here"[16].

To so succinctly and summarily discard tradition not only puts emphasis on the great and new sort of power enshrined in America, but also provides a plausible focal point for that dimly perceived "New World" of the poem's first stanza. That this "New World" cannot precisely be meant in the usual sense of that term—i.e., the Americas—is clear enough; however, it also cannot be referring to the United States per se because, as has been pointed out, only *after* (poetically) traversing the physical space of the United States does the poem's persona *then* "strike out". In fact, it is the key line, "I stand in my own place with my own day here", that serves best as an emblem for what the "New World" might be: it is as if, having struck out and journeyed on, the persona has found at last an appropriate place to settle, to "stand". From this perspective, the "New World"—the persona's objective—becomes essentially that point ("here") at which the individual and the nation conjoin and become realized, each, as a self.

Aside from this notion's being implied in "Starting from Paumanok", it was in fact openly pronounced towards the end of Whitman's letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, which had served as a sort of consummation to the preceding 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

> Of course, we shall have a national character, an identity. As it ought to be, and as soon as it ought to be, it will be. That, with much else, takes care of itself, is a result, and the cause of greater results. With Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Oregon—with the states around the Mexican sea—with cheerfully welcomed immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa—

[16] Such a dismissal is in fact a sort of answer to a call Emerson had made, in *The American Scholar*: "The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, … in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all; it is for you to dare all. … We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" (*Selections* 79).

> with Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island—with all varied interests, facts, beliefs, parties, genesis—there is being fused a determined character, fit for the broadest use for the freewomen and freemen of The States, accomplished and to be accomplished, without any exception whatever—each indeed free, each idiomatic, as becomes live states and men, but each adhering to one enclosing general form of politics, manners, talk, personal style, as the plenteous varieties of the race adhere to one physical form. Such character is the brain and spine to all, including literature, including poems. Such character, strong, limber, just, open-mouthed, American-blooded, full of pride, full of ease, of passionate friendliness, is to stand compact upon that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality—that new moral American continent without which, I see, the physical continent remained incomplete, may-be a carcass, a bloat—that newer America, answering face to face with The States, with ever-satisfying and ever-unsurveyable seas and shores. (*Norton American*, 984-985)

This is the old idea of the American melting pot, only with the melting aspect de-emphasized so as to lay stress upon, instead, "that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality". What the letter adds to the "my own place with my own day" of "Starting from Paumanok" is a sense of how broadly that line's "my" must be conceived, as well as adding an explicitly "moral" dimension to the "American continent", a morality which partly consists in providing completion or fulfillment to the merely "physical continent" of old America.

In this process, again, the poet plays an important role in that, through embodying the nation—its people, its systems, its land—he comes necessarily to embody also the ideals and tendencies driving that nation; i.e., its "moral" aspect and promise of fulfillment. In his role as a guide, then, the poet makes of himself and his poetry an example that, if followed, would allow the nation to become truly itself and each individual to become truly a self, by living up to and in terms of the ideals on which the nation's identity was founded. It is owing to the poet's role as a guide that, throughout "Starting from Paumanok"—as well as, perhaps more famously, in the final line of "Song of Myself"—the persona of the poem is seen constantly on the move,

constantly ahead of both the individual and the nation, constantly having to stop on the way so that they may catch up:

> On my way a moment I pause,
> Here for you! and here for America!
> Still the present I raise aloft, still the future of the States I harbinge glad and sublime,
> And for the past I pronounce what the air holds of the red aborigines.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 186)

The implications of these lines could almost be said to function as a précis for Whitman's idea of the relation between national identity and the individual self. Serving through his poetry as a guide, the poet becomes a force fusing together not only each individual ("you") and the nation ("America") of which that individual is part, but also the past, present, and future of the nation. Further, insofar as the poet is "no better than" any other individual (*Leaves of Grass* 14), then of necessity any individual "you" is as capable as the poet or any other of embodying the nation with its own past, present, and future. Thereby, each individual's self becomes both the imprint of and—so long as the ideals involved are kept up with—the model for the nation's own. When Whitman speaks of democracy—as when, in "Song of Myself", he says, "I give the sign of democracy" (*Leaves of Grass* 211)—it is to this process that he refers. The nation maps itself onto each of its individual selves, and each individual maps his or her self onto the nation, and the poet's role in this reciprocal process is simply to function as the first cartographer.

There is, however, something of a problem enshrined in Whitman's notion of the self: however much he would like to make of the self an agent of unity—between the individual and the nation or, more widely yet, the nature in which that nation finds itself—the self that he actually proposes is divided in a basic way. Just how it is so is

perhaps most clearly and succinctly expressed in a rather frank entry from his notebook: "I cannot understand the mystery: but I am always conscious of myself as two (my soul and I)" (*Uncollected* 66). The dichotomy expressed here can—of course, given the vagueness of the terms—be read in a number of ways, but the simplest way ultimately proves the most enlightening: the "soul" here is essentially that wider and deeper aspect of "myself" that is basically uncondensed, undifferentiated, and identifiable with nature and that has already been seen at work in "A Noiseless Patient Spider"; the "I", meanwhile, has more to do with the quotidian and the physical Walt Whitman, born on Long Island, possessed of a sometimes trim and sometimes bushy beard, and prone late in life to stroke.

Throughout his work, Whitman now here and now there speaks of this or that aspect—of the "soul" or of the "I"—but constantly his emphasis is directed towards a union of the two. This much can be seen, for instance, in Whitman's letter to Emerson when he mentions "the freewomen and freemen of The States" as "each indeed free, each idiomatic … but each adhering to one enclosing general form of politics, manners, talk, personal style, as the plenteous varieties of the race adhere to one physical form". Indeed, even in that single sentence from the notebook where the dichotomy is set forth, the pain Whitman suffers at being "conscious" of such a separation within himself is virtually palpable, and this yearning for union also does not fail to make an appearance in "Starting from Paumanok":

> The soul,
> Forever and forever—longer than soil is brown and solid—longer than water ebbs and flows.
>
> I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems,

> And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,
> For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my soul and of immortality.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 178-179)

This is from the sixth section of "Starting from Paumanok", following hard upon the section wherein Whitman sets aside tradition so as to "stand in [his] own place with [his] own day". Just as the Emerson letter had indirectly insisted on the importance of "physical form", these lines emphasize "materials" and the "body". Here, however, the turn to the physical is, by proximity, made to connect with the rejection of tradition preceding it. This seems to indicate that Whitman's dissatisfaction with tradition is based less on its aims than on its means. The implication is that the poetic work of those "now reduced, withdrawn, or desolate" nations was somehow too weighted towards the spiritual *in form*—roughly speaking, it was too abstracted—and thus shunted aside an important aspect of existence, an imbalance that Whitman's "poems of materials" aim to redress. Given Whitman's explicit connection of the spirit of a nation and its poets—recall from the 1855 preface that "a bard is to be commensurate with a people" (*Leaves of Grass* 7)—the inevitable conclusion is that the "desolate" state of those nations referred to in "Starting from Paumanok" would seep into its poetry, and thence seep back out in a sort of continual degeneration process wholly unfit for the "new moral American continent". So as to avoid this process, Whitman seeks more than just a union between the "soul" and the "I", which in this context could be respectively read as either "The States" and each individual state, or as the nation and the individual person. In fact, what he seeks is a wholly *equal*, and thus a *balanced*, union.

This yearning for balance and equilibrium, a necessary concomitant for anyone who would be a democratic poet, finds rather direct expression in the poem "Me

Imperturbe", which eventually took its place among the prefatory work of the cluster to be called *Inscriptions*:

> Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,
> Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of irrational things,
> Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they,
> Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes, less important than I thought,
> Me toward the Mexican sea, or in the Mannahatta or the Tennessee, or far north or inland,
> A river man, or a man of the woods or of any farm-life of these States or of the coast, or the lakes or Kanada,
> Me wherever my life is lived, O to be self-balanced for contingencies,
> To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 173)

Much of the material that animates the first section of "Starting from Paumanok"—written around the same time—also finds expression here: the traversal of the American continent ("Me toward the Mexican sea", etc.); the persona's successive embodiment in different professions and places ("A river man, or a man of the woods", etc.); the "unrivall'd" strength and imperturbability of "the trees and animals". What is more present in "Me Imperturbe", however, that was much more concealed in the longer poem, is the foreboding sense of some sort of catastrophe lurking just beyond, in the form of "contingencies" that are both natural ("night, storms") and social ("hunger, ridicule") in form. What unites these otherwise disparate "contingencies" is that they are all situated outside or beyond the "I". The "soul", however, is in the poem capable of encompassing or embracing them all, thereby becoming their "[m]aster … or mistress". In the end, then, the divergent elements of the nation are effectively pulled together by the poem's persona.

In fact, one of the strengths of "Me Imperturbe" lies in its relatively succinct expression of the poet's central role in unifying the nation, or what the 1855 preface

refers to as his being "the arbiter of the diverse and … the key" (*Leaves of Grass* 9): the poem reads equally well, though slightly differently, whether it is seen as spoken by Whitman (or any other individual), or as pronounced by the nation itself. The difficulty inhabiting this fact, however—and it is effectively the same difficulty, or "mystery", that dismays Whitman in his notebook—surfaces from precisely those slight differences given rise to by those two alternate readings. For, although in both readings the sense of unease imparted by the apostrophic "O to be self-balanced for contingencies" retains its hint of disturbance, when the persona is seen as the nation, the poem reads in what amounts to a less frantic and more static manner: the United States, albeit "aplomb in the midst of irrational things", proves a clear match for those things and ultimately comes across as simply and grandly filling its space and comprising its people.

On the other hand, when the poem's persona is seen as an individual, a subtly different impression arises: just as in "Starting from Paumanok", there is a sense of the persona constantly on the move, *traversing* rather than filling the space of the nation and *becoming* rather than comprising its people. However "passive, receptive, silent" the persona may be, he seems to be only thus interiorly—that is, on the level of "soul"—while physically he is almost anything but: there is a hint that the persona's movement is a buffeting about, and the knowledge that he must "confront" something takes on an edgier note as he is perceived as traveling around rather nakedly. This ostinato of uncertainties animating "Me Imperturbe" seems to indicate that the self inhabiting the poem is not yet whole. It is rather as if that self is on the verge of the moment of epiphany described in Emerson's *Nature*, wherein one "starts in his slumber, and wonders at himself and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it" (*Selections* 54). The self in the poem has, for instance, already experienced

certain glimmers of understanding, such as recognition that things normally largely definitive of a self—his "occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes"—are in fact "less important than [he] thought".

Casting the two simultaneous perspectives of the poem side by side, it becomes clear that the greater sense of surety and calm and the more secure footing present in the reading of the persona as the nation is, more or less, precisely what the persona read as an individual is striving for. Fulfilled, this wish would add up to the unity and balance so sought after by Whitman. However, it is also clear that the sort of self that would thus be fashioned—effectively shorn of those things normally definitive of a self—is a quite different self than what is usually encompassed in that word, and veers dangerously close to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The difficulties thus inherent in this new, let us call it Whitmanian (or, if you will, American), self would go on to constitute the crux of the argument in "Song of Myself". This fact goes a long way to explaining the position of "Me Imperturbe"—as well as that of its cousin, "Starting from Paumanok"—as that poem's prefatory work.

"Song of Myself", particularly in its beginning sections, illustrates the way(s) in which a specifically American self comes to be formed, in relation with the other selves that are the American nation and American nature. The poem as a whole is roughly structured through a series of recurrent crises and breakthroughs that that self experiences in the course of its formation, and the following pages will focus in particular on those moments of climax that punctuate the poem. It is hoped that such a focus will prove better able to illuminate the contours of the American self as it emerges, through the notion of a specifically American sublime, into the nexus formed by

American nature and the American nation. Throughout, the text referred to will be the original 1855 version of the poem, which lacked the numbered sections of later versions.

Appropriately enough, "Song of Myself" commences—after a prelude that would eventually become sections 1 and 2—with something of a truncated, and highly ambiguous, creation myth that touches upon the "mystery" of the divided self mentioned in Whitman's notebook:

> Urge and urge and urge,
> Always the procreant urge of the world.
>
> Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . . Always substance and increase,
> Always a knit of identity . . . . always distinction . . . . always a breed of life.
>
> To elaborate is no avail . . . . Learned and unlearned feel that it is so.
>
> Sure as the most certain sure . . . . plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams,
> Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
> I and this mystery here we stand.
>
> Clear and sweet is my soul . . . . and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.
>
> Lack one lacks both . . . . and the unseen is proved by the seen,
> Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 28-29)

After presenting the nigh Schopenhauerian base of existence that is "the procreant urge of the world"—which could be equated with the primeval Chaos (*Χαος*) of Greek myth—this astonishing passage outlines a creation myth characterized in terms of "opposite equals" approaching one another. These equals then seem to concretize and grow ("substance and increase") until they form "a knit of identity" that is, nonetheless, composed of "distinction". The ambiguities of the passage are rife, as virtually nothing that would clarify the identity of the "equals" is given; it would not, however, perhaps be too far amiss—given the later terms of the passage—to read them roughly as more equivalents of the "soul" and the "I", seemingly converging to form a self.

Even with such a reading, however, ambiguity remains. Whitman's rhetoric leaves open the question of whether or not the "opposite equals [advancing]" actually ever meet, thus making it patently uncertain whether the "knit of identity" pertains to "equals" joined together, or to "equals" that remain perpetually approaching one another, in a sort of reversal of direction of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. That Whitman recognizes the potentially paradoxical nature of his creation myth is evident from his assertion that "[t]o elaborate is no avail". On the other hand, the repetition of the positively charged "always" simultaneously seems to hint that any paradox present is ultimately insignificant, so long as "distinction" and "a breed of life" is the result.

Another ambiguity is present here as well, cast into the creation myth's very narrative structure (inasmuch as we can call a two-line creation myth a "narrative"). This particular ambiguity resides in the phrase "Out of the dimness opposite equals advance", and has to do with what Gérard Genette, in his study *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), refers to as "*external focalization*" (Genette 190) and "*internal focalization*" (Genette 189). Taking these two terms in turn, external focalization amounts roughly to a narrator's viewing the narrated events wholly from without, adding up to a sort of impersonal (though by no means objective) narrator; this manner of narrating is the one that has just been applied to Whitman's creation myth. As external focalization, the word "opposite" reads as an adjective modifying "equals", thereby resulting in the sense of those equals approaching *one another* in their "advance". Adding an apropos comma to Whitman's phrase, this reading arrives at: "Out of the dimness, opposite equals advance".

Contrarily, internal focalization indicates a narrator who is involved in the events that he or she (or it) is narrating, and so narrates from a perspective that is essentially in on the game, thus causing the narrated events to be filtered through the narrator's own inner (and here, we may safely say, subjective) perception. If Whitman's creation myth be read in this way, the word "opposite" shifts its referent to "dimness", and—again adding an appropriate comma—we end up with: "Out of the dimness opposite, equals advance", where of course "the dimness opposite" is in fact "the dimness opposite" *the narrator*.

The value in this reading of the line lies in how it provides a stronger link to the perspectival shift that follows. First of all, it must be noted that, due to Whitman's use of hyperbaton, the highly ambiguous perspective of the quoted passage extends from "Urge and urge and urge" all the way until a definite subject appears with the words, "I and this mystery here we stand". By thus leaving the narrating persona out of the event, the creation myth read as external focalization somewhat paradoxically lends a rather more solipsistic cast to the passage as a whole. This is because, when the narrator does finally intrude into the uncertainties of the passage's perspective, it reads something like that narrator's attempt to subsume the entire passage within his own compass. When the creation myth is read as internal focalization, however, it better sets the stage for the line, "I and this mystery here we stand". If "this mystery"—which directly echoes the dualities of Whitman's notebook entry—is in fact read as the *same* mystery as that in the notebook, with its division of the self into the "soul" and the "I", then the possibility is raised that the "equals" in question are precisely "I" and "this mystery". This, in turn, leads to a reading of the creation myth as something akin to a confrontation of the persona with the "mystery" of his own dual self.

Such a reading is, in fact, entirely appropriate insofar as just such a confrontation is one of the major themes of "Song of Myself". The poem, at various points in the course of its development, now seeks a key to unlock "this mystery" and now seems relatively content to let the mystery remain as is. In the lines here under consideration, which is the first point in the poem where such abstraction is entered into, Whitman tacks more towards the latter of those two options.

The line following the persona's appearance exemplifies this willingness of Whitman to leave uncertainties open in the way that it simultaneously asserts both a proposition and its converse: "Clear and sweet is my soul . . . . and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul". Less a contradiction than an affirmation of the same positive emotive content present in the words "always distinction . . . . always a breed of life", this line in fact plays with the double Emersonian sense of the word "soul", as outlined above in connection with "A Noiseless Patient Spider".

On the one hand, there is what might be called the individual soul. Described by Emerson as "the *naturel*, or peculiar quality of each man" (*Selections* 374), it is indicated here by the words "my soul" in the first half of the line's grammatical parallel. The adjectives chosen to modify the noun, "clear" and "sweet", impute a strongly positive charge to the word, as if in keeping with Emerson's characterization of this "*naturel*" as something that "we value" (*ibid*.). On the other hand, there is also that wider sense of the word "soul" that is roughly akin to the Emersonian Over-Soul. This aspect seems to be hinted at in the second half of the line's grammatical parallel, whose negative structure embraces everything in the world "that is not my soul" and, by defining it with the exact same adjectives, places it on an equal footing. In so doing,

Whitman is actually being rather more indulgent than that Emerson who, in 1857, was declaring that "the *naturel*" was, in fact, "*all* we value" (*ibid*., emphasis added).

This balance between the parallel halves of the line on the formal level, mirrors the balance sought, on the level of content, between the self (subject) and the non-self (object). Rather than beginning as Emerson might, however, with the grand concept of an Over-Soul and localizing or coalescing down to the individual, Whitman makes the opposite movement: he induces the qualities of what is beyond his own individual soul *through* and *from the perspective of* that soul. Such a movement is significantly different from simple internal focalization, despite the similarities, in that it actually projects the persona's reading of his self out onto what is not his self. This is a classic Whitmanian move, and one that seems to see at least the beginnings of a fulfillment of the poet's prediction that, someday, "[t]he American bards … shall be kosmos" (*Leaves of Grass* 15).

In such a movement, of course, there is always the danger of a highly solipsistic conception emerging, and indeed this has been among the more common criticisms of Whitman since his inception as a poet: Henry James, for instance, once opined that Whitman's "plan [was] to adapt the scheme of the universe to [his] own limitations" (par. 4). If such an idea is difficult to see in the line claiming that "clear and sweet is all that is not my soul", it becomes rather more apparent in the next line. "Lacks one lacks both", in referring to what directly precedes it, could easily be seen as a mighty aggrandizement of the persona's soul in its implicit claim to the reader that, essentially, to lack me is to lack the world.

The context of the 1855 preface which has preceded "Song of Myself", however, appears to mitigate this rather dreadful possibility: "The messages of great poets to each

man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you may enclose" (*Leaves of Grass* 14). Disregarding the adjective "great"—which the succeeding phrases anyway undermine—this admonition allows for the phrase "[l]acks one lacks both" to be less an expression of solipsism than a call for anyone reading Whitman's lines to mimic his (poetic) actions in their own lives. It seems he would have them begin with an understanding of their own self, and from there move, or expand, outwards to a grander consciousness of the surrounding world.

It is not just any reader that is being addressed, however, and Whitman's 1855 preface makes it clear that his words are being pitched to a specifically American audience. Admittedly, in the passage under discussion, there is nothing apart from the poet's peculiar diction to make it any more likely that he is in Brooklyn, New York than in Birmingham, England. Soon enough in the course of the poem, though, a succession of hints starts to be dropped as to just which side of the Atlantic things are taking place on: "Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff" (*Leaves of Grass* 31); "I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far-west . . . . the bride was a red girl" (*Leaves of Grass* 35); "The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside" (*ibid.*); "The sharphoofed moose of the north" (*Leaves of Grass* 38).

Such dropped hints, piling up as the poem moves forward, come to a sort of climax in what was to become section 16 of "Song of Myself", where the persona of the poem openly declares himself as an American:

> I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
> Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
> Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
> Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine,

> One of the great nation, the nation of many nations—the smallest the same and the largest the same,
>
> A southerner soon as a northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable,
> A Yankee bound my own way […]
> (*Leaves of Grass* 42)

These words have been prefaced in the poem by a monumental catalog (section 15) of peoples and occupations summarized with the final couplet, "And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am" (*ibid.*). In none of this is there any whiff of the "mystery" expressed earlier. Instead, the persona is seen at balance, situated firmly amidst a series of polarities and easily embracing and, indeed, embodying them all.

What is more, a balance on an even wider scale—that of the nation as a whole—becomes enacted in this passage. "[T]he great nation" here has itself divided into rather distinct parts—"[a] southerner soon as a northerner"—that are set against one another, with the persona serving as a sort of fulcrum in the center. Through this means, an inherent equality among the nation's constituent parts is affirmed: "the smallest the same and the largest the same". But still, as the phrase "the nation of many nations" indicates, this balance and equality is not brought about solely through the social fact that is the individual self ("One of the great nation"), but also through the political fact joining such essentially disparate parts together on the equal plane that is the United States. The ground is thus prepared for the even fuller identification of the individual self and the broader "self" of the nation which immediately follows these lines.

The bulk of section 16 consists of the persona's successive embodiment of the peoples of far-flung regions of his nation. Not only does this serve to identify the persona with that nation by means of a sort of poetic occupation, but it also—through

the quite specific peoples thus occupied—highlights the importance of that same sense of place expressed in the preface's assertion that the poet "spans between [the Atlantic and Pacific coasts] … from east to west and reflects what is between them" (*Leaves of Grass* 7):

> A boatman over the lakes or bays or along coasts . . . . a Hoosier, a Badger, a Buckeye,
> A Louisianian or Georgian, a poke-easy from sandhills and pines,
> At home on Canadian snowshoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen off
> Newfoundland,
>
> At home in the fleet of iceboats, sailing with the rest and tacking,
> At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine or the Texan ranch […]
> (*Leaves of Grass* 42)

Eight states are encompassed here, and even Canada is not neglected[17]. More than simply a sense of place, however, it is the idea of being located or rooted in one's *proper* place that receives emphasis. Through the anaphoric "At home", Whitman stresses that these people truly *inhabit* their respective places, and thus that they belong there. In turn, this strengthens Whitman's claim that he, coming himself to successively inhabit them, belongs as much as they.

But no matter the balance seemingly achieved in all this between the nation and its component parts, or between Whitman and each other individual, there still remains some imbalance. It was seen in "Starting from Paumanok" and "Me Imperturbe" that the persona, so as to encompass the nation's people(s), had to traverse the length and breadth of the nation, in a rather tatterdemalion fashion and almost frantically. A similar

[17] Whitman's inclusion of Canada may have something to do with his assertion—given in the 1865 poem "From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird"—that his task is, "To sing first, … / The idea of all, *of the Western world one and inseparable*, / And then the song of each member of these States" (*Leaves of Grass* 420, emphasis added).

movement is occurring here, for the "I am" of the opening "I am of old and young" distributes out to each of the cataloged people in turn.

However, that "I am" proves to carry a double burden, as it is forced to mean, at one and the same time, both the individual self and the selfhood of the nation. In the end, it seems to break under the weight: in the highly Whitmanian self that emerges from the passage, it is difficult to see what is left of Whitman *himself*. It is as if the "I" of the notebook entry—that physical Whitman who appears on the frontispiece of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*—has been engulfed by the "soul". There is much in this that bears comparison with Emerson's phrase, "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all" (*Selections* 24). Whitman here, as much as Emerson there, has gone out seeking his self, and effectively dissipated in the process.

That this may well have happened is tacitly acknowledged in the lines that form the climax of section 16:

> I resist anything better than my own diversity,
> And breathe the air and leave plenty after me,
> And am not stuck up, and am in my place.
>
> The moth and the fisheggs are in their place,
> The suns I see and the suns I cannot see are in their place,
> The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 43)

The first of these lines is structured so as to give rise to two different readings that are, in effect, diametrically opposed.

The more basic and less troublesome reading is the one that, being fleshed out as "I resist anything [that is] better than my own diversity", would lead to a possible interpretation of the first of these two triplets as something akin to Whitman's vision of the apotheosis of democratic balance: strength through variety, and in a spirit of defiance

to what is outside of me and of the nation ("I resist anything [that is] better than my own diversity"); a sort of innocent and generous moderation in whatever one takes ("And breathe the air and leave plenty after me"); an acknowledgement, in a spirit of modesty, of one's natural right of belonging to where one is ("And am not stuck up, and am in my place").

The second reading of the first triplet's opening line, on the other hand, opens a veritable Pandora's box in its tacit acknowledgement of the dangers that the Whitmanian variety of self poses to its own integrity: "I resist anything better than [I resist] my own diversity". Essentially, as both readings are equally valid in their own way, there is nothing to choose between them except insofar as the first reading—being of a more positive cast—chimes somewhat better with the "And" that begins the following line[18]. This slightly stronger degree of concordance, however, by no means obviates the second reading or relegates it just to the level of careless composition. In fact, this second reading, showing the self as in danger of imminent dissolution, strengthens the passage as a whole, especially once the second triplet is brought into consideration. For it is the second triplet that brings the passage into the Kantian sublime, only to immediately reorient that sublime.

The course of the triplet runs from the more or less minute ("The moth and the fisheggs"), to the altogether grandiose ("The suns I see and the suns I cannot see"), to the highly abstract ("The palpable … and the impalpable"), the while asserting in no uncertain terms that all of these are "in their place". In so doing, what these three short

[18] This particular coordinating conjunction, though, would be jettisoned beginning with the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and by the time the so-called "deathbed edition" was published in 1891-1892, the lines in question had become: "I resist any thing better than my own diversity, / Breathe the air but leave plenty after me, / And am not stuck up, and am in my place" (*Leaves of Grass* 204).

lines are effectively doing is to show, in action, Kantian "comprehension" (*comprehensio aesthetica*). It will be recalled that comprehension involves the perceiving mind's aptitude for, basically, connecting the dots that are the apprehended objects of perception, combining them thus into an essentially meaningful whole. This process is the aesthetic moment, and it is precisely what is occurring in Whitman's second triplet: the perceiving mind of the persona—and, of course, by extension the perceptive reader—passes rapidly over a series of percepts and immediately notices an underlying unity among them, a unity signaled rhetorically by the repetition of the prepositional phrase, "in their place".

The Kantian sublime, it should be recalled, comes about at those moments of contradiction between the purely perceptive faculty, or "apprehension" (*apprehensio*), and the rational faculty that is comprehension: physical and sensory in nature, apprehension is, given the right conditions, capable of taking in more than comprehension, which thereby (temporarily) renders the latter inadequate. However, insofar as comprehension in due course lives up to its name by comprehending this inadequacy, it essentially re-empowers the mind of which it is composed, prompting the great leap into a sort of total comprehension that includes even the mind that perceives and, through its own unity, unifies the scene laid out before it.

However tersely expressed, it is precisely this process that is occurring here in Whitman's lines. The opening of the second triplet, "The moth and the fisheggs are in their place", places us firmly enough in the prerogative of apprehension: the line, whatever the wider cast of the words "are in their place", is predominantly physical description, with the persona describing just what is *seen*. This sense runs on into the beginning of the second line, with its "suns I see" continuing the purely physical

description. The remainder of the second line, however, enters new territory entirely: "the suns I cannot see". This phrase, especially when coupled with the complement "in their place", implicitly moves the line beyond the physical to show a mental and even imaginative faculty in action: it betrays the presence of *comprehensio aesthetica* yoking together the seen and the unseen into an aesthetic unity of its own devising. Similarly, the "palpable" and "impalpable" of the triplet's final line echoes the second line's juxtaposition of apprehension and comprehension.

It has been mentioned before, in connection with the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, that Whitman strove to overcome the Kantian duality existing between subject (the self) and object (nature). In that the repeated phrase "in their place" reflects the similar sentiment of the earlier repetition of "At home"—which applied directly to the persona's own self—this can certainly be said of the passage now in question: the self, here, is meant to be considered as itself "in [its] place"; namely, the America outlined in the lines leading up to these. The kind of unity that is thus thought to have been achieved is further expanded upon—and the understood context is literally expanded—in the lines immediately following:

> These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,
> If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,
> If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,
> If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
> If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.
>
> This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
> This is the common air that bathes the globe.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 43)

This passage would eventually become section 17 of "Song of Myself": a slice of pure abstraction succeeding the concrete realities of peoples and places that had largely filled

the previous section. In terms of the poem's argument, however, such a modal shift is absolutely necessary, as section 16 could all too easily be read—up until the concluding triplets, which pave the way for the coming abstraction—as nothing more than Whitman's *own* voyages across the length and breadth of America. The whole section, for instance, was developed within the matrix of the opening "I am", and indeed reminders of this first person coloring were worked into a part of the developing passage: "A Yankee bound *my* own way . . . . ready for trade . . . . *my* joints the limberest joints on earth and the sternest joints on earth, / A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in *my* deerskin leggings" (*Leaves of Grass* 42, emphasis added). Even if these reminders do involve the inhabitation of another individual, the fact remains that—as a result of that initial "I am"—it is Whitman doing the inhabiting.

But beginning with the closing lines of section 16 and continuing onwards to cover the whole of section 17, the poem's scope is widened, as if to be in accordance with the expansion of self that the persona of the poem is actually undergoing. The section's first such widening of scope comprises its first two lines: "These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing". Besides their initial movement of the poem beyond the American context—a fact which the remainder of the section expands upon—these lines invite the reader into the poem, in effect urging him or her to take on the mantle of the first person pronoun, along with Whitman, wherever it may occur.

In addition to thus sidestepping—again—the possibility of solipsism, this also allows Whitman to undercut the sort of exclusivation of the Kantian sublime engaged in

by Wordsworth and even, at times, by Emerson himself[19]. Against such exclusivity, Whitman sets instead the notion that "all men" may access that grand perception of unity that gives rise to the sublime. In fact, an assertion—cast, not coincidentally, in the present tense—such as "If [these thoughts] are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing", comes off as virtually the antithesis of Wordsworth's rather haughtily optimistic prediction that, in the future, poets like himself "shall describe objects, and utter sentiments … [such] that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves … must necessarily be in some degree enlightened" (*Norton English*, Vol. 2, 143-144). In contrast, Whitman's statement recognizes that to, as it were, stand atop the mountain and declare to those below that they might not yet be ready to comprehend such a grand vision, is to entirely miss that vision yourself.

Once that the reader is thus made (at least rhetorically) the equal of the poet, Whitman widens the poem's scope yet more, as the series of conditionals echoing that first conditional expands outwards to, quite literally, infinity: "If [these thoughts] do not enclose everything they are next to nothing". This and the two succeeding lines may be as close as Whitman comes to the Kantian dynamic of the sublime, whereby comprehension charges past its own inadequacy ("the riddle"; "they are distant") *vis-à-vis* apprehension and attains a greater depth of understanding ("the untying of the riddle"; "they are … close"). Now thus enriched by such grand considerations, the poem reels back in somewhat, grounding itself again in the fairly concrete realities of the natural world: grass, land, water, and air. This links back to the close of section 16, while nonetheless maintaining the poem's expansive thrust, now comprehending all of nature

[19] "Nature makes fifty poor melons for one that is good, and shakes down a tree full of gnarled, wormy, unripe crabs, before you can find a dozen dessert apples; and she scatters nations of naked Indians and nations of clothed Christians, with two or three good heads among them" (*Conduct* 238).

on scales both minute (“This is the grass that grows”; “The moth and the fisheggs”) and vast (“wherever the land is and the water is, / This is the common air that bathes the globe”; “The suns I see”). The ultimate effect of all these shifts of focus is to situate each individual being or self, in its own way, at the heart of the great round of natural processes in a way that suggests that such an infinitely dispersed and individual-centered nature is something akin to a natural law. To do the converse and limit the terms of his argument merely to individual human selves within an individual nation—as the bulk of section 16 initially suggests—would amount to little more than castles in Spain, as Whitman knew full well: “I am he attesting sympathy; / Shall I make my list of things in the house and skip the house that supports them?” (*Leaves of Grass* 48).

That natural aspect which, in sections 16 and 17, is effectively used to rein in Whitman’s more abstracted flights into sublimity has not, however, by any means gone unrepresented in the poem prior to those sections. “Song of Myself”, of course, begins with and is ultimately unified by Whitman’s musings on the same grass that is reintroduced in section 17. Apart from this, animal life—of a rather brazenly American variety—has already been given a catalog of its own:

> The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
> Ya-honk! he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation;
> The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listen closer,
> I find its purpose and place up there toward the November sky.
>
> The sharphoofed moose of the north, the cat on the housesill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog,
> The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
> The brood of the turkeyhen, and she with her halfspread wings,
> I see in them and myself the same old law.
>
> The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,
> They scorn the best I can do to relate them.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 38)

Here, again, is seen that same sense of rightness and propriety already remarked in section 16: this particular parade of fauna wild and domestic, too, is revealed to have "its purpose and place", which in the end serves to affirm the persona's sense that precisely "the same old law" runs through him and them both. Yet, where this catalog differs from the catalogs of peoples and occupations already referred to is that, here, Whitman does not come to inhabit or incarnate the beings in his list. This seemingly small difference will, in fact, turn out to be of nearly inestimable importance. Nowhere in "Song of Myself" does Whitman actually embody himself in the form of any life that is not human; instead, such life merely speaks to him, and in communications about which he is more or less left guessing and which he is largely powerless "to relate":

> Oxen that rattle the yoke or halt in the shade, what is that you express in your eyes?
> It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 37)

> And the mockingbird in the swamp never studied the gamut, yet trills pretty well to me,
> And the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 38)

A clear duality is established here between subject and object; namely, between the self of the persona and the animals being observed. The vocabulary chosen for these descriptions is a very limiting one, stressing now just the physical side of the animal in question and now the persona's own suppositions, thus intensifying the sense of duality by showing that the self is unable to comprehend whatever it is that is being communicated: the expression in the oxen's eyes "*seems to me* more than all the print"; the mockingbird "trills *pretty well to me*" (emphases added).

Precisely the same sort of dualistic relationship has already been set up—from quite early in the poem—between the self and another object in nature; namely, the grass:

> A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
> How could I answer the child? . . . . I do not know what it is any more than he.
>
> I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
>
> Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
> A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
> Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say
> Whose?
>
> Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . . the produced babe of the vegetation.
>
> Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
> And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
> Growing among black folks as among white,
> Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.
>
> And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 31)

The grass, of course, is among the primary images used throughout "Song of Myself" as a unifying device, and yet here—in spite of its being of such vital importance to the poem—Whitman is seen flailing about somewhat in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to pin it down. Just as the expression in the oxen's eyes "seems" rather than *is* something, so here the grass can only be arrived at by a series of metaphors whose force is sapped by being couched within the suppositional frame of the repeated "I guess".

But if the grass reveals nothing of itself here, it certainly does reveal something of the persona. These lines clearly evidence the persona's need to experience the grass as something more than the physical stuff that it so stubbornly is. As if weaving "the gossamer thread" of the spider in "A Noiseless Patient Spider" (*Leaves of Grass* 565),

the persona presses the grass to be expressive of his own grand conception of the self's intimate relation to the whole of nature.

The persona's need is here evidenced not only by how rapidly these brief and tentative metaphors succeed one another—as though the grass were Proteus always on the verge of eluding the persona's grasp—but also by the content of certain of the metaphors used. To speak, for instance, of the grass as "a uniform hieroglyphic" is to simultaneously highlight its otherness and perhaps even indecipherability ("a … hieroglyphic"), and its potential value as a common unifying force ("a *uniform* hieroglyphic, / … Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones" [emphasis added]). In this way, exactly the same burden is put on the grass as will animate the poem's later line, "If [these thoughts] are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing" (*Leaves of Grass* 43). Here, however, there is little or nothing of the confident equivocation of that line, in which the seeming incongruity between "the riddle" and its "untying" arises from a process like to that whereby the Kantian *comprehensio aesthetica* comes to realize, and then moves beyond, its own inadequacy.

Far from such a relatively tidy unraveling as that, the grass' ability to act as a unifying force in the hieroglyphic metaphor is dependent on its meaning being deciphered, a possibility which is essentially obviated—or at least left unsettled—by the whole metaphor's grammatical embedment in the frame of the initial "I guess". Similarly to the metaphor of the hieroglyphic, the characterization of the grass as "the handkerchief of the Lord" sees the persona struggling to, as it were, spread the grass' significance as widely as possible by connecting it to something ("the Lord") that has the reputation of infolding everything equally within its scope. However—even apart from the not entirely fortuitous appearance of the "I guess"—the sense of such a

meaningful connection, made to grow with no small degree of something like suspense throughout the course of the metaphor, finds itself cut short by the resounding and by no means simply rhetorical question, “Whose?”.

Whitman, then, ultimately remains outside the grass and unable to inhabit it, just as—soon enough in the course of the poem—he will prove unable to inhabit the oxen, the mockingbird, and the bay mare. Nonetheless, even with this inability, he does prove able to “see in [the animals] and [himself] the same old law” (*Leaves of Grass* 38). This is Kantian comprehension at work. Similarly, and by the same means, even the grass is eventually drawn into this sense of an overarching unity. This occurs in section 17, where the grass again appears, only now it is “the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is” (*Leaves of Grass* 43). Kantian comprehension here achieves a quiet breakthrough into understanding, recognizing now that the grass, the oxen, the mockingbird, and the bay mare are—just as much as “the moth and the fisheggs”—“in their place” (*ibid.*).

Of just as much significance as this breakthrough, however, is how it is arrived at. Throughout Whitman’s whole hemming and hawing response to the child’s question, “What is the grass?”, there is that evident need to make the grass expressive of more than itself: the child is “fetching it to [him] with full hands”, presenting him with the physical stuff itself, and so Whitman goes off in flights of fancy despite openly admitting his ignorance on the matter at hand. But it is those flights of fancy, those tentative and trembling metaphors, that show him working towards an answer, trying to push himself towards something that might be less tentative and trembling, just as that other question in the same passage—“Whose?”—was not simply some befuddled query but also a muffled goad prodding one towards the rightful owner of that “handkerchief”.

The weakness inherent in Whitman's response to the child's question can be, perhaps surprisingly well, explained by reference to Kant's most succinct description of the sublime, from the *Critique of Judgement*:

> [The sublime in nature] gives on the whole no indication of anything final in nature itself, but only in the possible employment of our intuitions of it in inducing a feeling in our own selves of a finality quite independent of nature. … [F]or the sublime [we must seek a ground] merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature. (I, 2, ¶23)

Kant's stance towards the sublime is based in a radical duality of subject (self) and object (nature), and this passage makes that abundantly clear in its almost antagonistic separation of the two elements in question. It has already been mentioned in the introduction that the severe rationalism of Kant so pristinely evidenced here leaves the object—nature, or the noumenon—locked beyond reach of the perceiving subject: there can be "no indication of anything final in nature itself" because, essentially, there is no getting past the wall of phenomena, by hook or by crook, to the noumenal world behind. It is just such an unequivocal duality that rankles Whitman, and indeed that whole chain of tentative metaphors trying to get at what the grass might actually *be* shows him calmly in the throes of indignation: the child presents him with a handful of the phenomenal stuff that is the grass, and Whitman reaches instead for the noumenal, essentially seeking through the grass something "final in nature itself".

This attempt at a definitive definition, however, is undermined not only by his blank confession of ignorance ("I do not know what it is any more than he"), but also by the very terms in which the subsequent makeshift definitions are couched, with the repeated "I guess" depriving each metaphor of its force even as the metaphor is asserted. From a Kantian view, the effect of that "I guess" is to situate each of those various

definitions firmly and finally within the mind of the subject (the persona of the poem), thereby making the failure of that subject's definitions—which would like to express the grass *an sich*—inevitable.

Nonetheless, despite all this fumbling about, one thing that is clear from Whitman's response to the child is that he is striving, not just for such a comprehension of the grass *qua* grass, but indeed for identity and even union therewith. This striving is especially highlighted by the meaning that is imputed to the "uniform hieroglyphic" of the passage's penultimate metaphor, with its claim that "I give them the same, I receive them the same" linking a number of different selves (subjects) together under the aegis of the grass. It is, in fact, this same all-receptive quality of the grass that tacitly qualifies the passage's final metaphor, "And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves", in that death—striking alike "young men", "old people and … women, and … offspring" (*Leaves of Grass* 31)—effectively carries all off equally to the care of the grass.

In turn, from the meditation upon death that ensues in the poem, arises something of the identity or union that is being sought. Firstly, launching into that meditation, the persona implicitly admits to the fallacy of his attempts at defining the grass through metaphor by striking off in a new direction with the line, "Tenderly will I *use* you curling grass … " (*Leaves of Grass* 31, emphasis added). With this statement shifting the action involved from one of *definition* to one of *use*, the inquisitive child is left by the wayside while the preceding string of metaphors is abandoned in a silent concession to the impossibility of neatly defining the grass as fundamentally equal to this or that other thing, which it is the job of metaphor to do. It is as if the various vehicles ("the handkerchief of the Lord"; "itself a child"; "a uniform hieroglyphic") employed to carry

off the tenor ("the grass") to some broader significance have broken down under the weight of the grass' *real* significance, which the persona intuits to be almost incomprehensibly vast.

As a result of this failure of metaphor, Whitman finds himself resorting instead, almost as if providentially, to a different variety of trope, one that better allows him to approach this deeper significance of the grass:

> [The dead] are alive and well somewhere;
> *The smallest sprout shows that there is really no death*,
> And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
> And ceased the moment life appeared.
>
> *All goes onward and outward . . . . and nothing collapses*,
> And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 32, emphases added)

Metaphor having proven insufficient, the rhetorical figure being used here—albeit indirectly—is synecdoche. According to Geoffrey N. Leech in *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1998), synecdoche is "of little literary interest", being encountered primarily "in proverbs … [and] conventional expressions" (150). However, a great deal of Whitman's argument in "Song of Myself"—and indeed in *Leaves of Grass* as a whole—is built around synecdoche, and not around the metaphor that Leech proclaims to be "so central to our notion of poetic creation" (*ibid*.).

Synecdoche (*συνεκδοχή*) involves one of two basic rhetorical processes: either a part of an object is used to represent the whole, or conversely, the whole of an object is used to represent a part. Etymologically, the sense of the word is "a receiving together or jointly", as though, along with one particular object's presentation to the senses, its concomitant object—either whole or part—were borne along and presented as well. In Whitman's work, synecdoche first surfaces in the 1855 preface where, following a long

catalog of praiseworthy actions and unmerited sufferings that ranges from the relative specificity of "all honest men baffled in strifes recorded or unrecorded" to the rather cosmic abstraction of "all that has at any time been well suggested out of the divine heart of man or by the divinity of his mouth or by the shaping of his great hands" (*Leaves of Grass* 22), the following pronouncement is made:

> [T]hese singly and wholly inured at their time and inure now and will inure always to the identities from which they sprung or shall spring. . . Did you guess any of them lived only its moment? The world does not so exist . . no parts palpable or impalpable so exist . . . no result exists now without being from its long antecedent result, and that from its antecedent, and so backward without the farthest mentionable spot coming a bit nearer the beginning than any other spot. (*Leaves of Grass* 23)

Bits of this passage bear clear echoes of sections 16 and 17 of "Song of Myself". For instance, where the poem has "The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place" (*Leaves of Grass* 43), the preface declares that "no parts palpable or impalpable" exist in isolation; and where the poem proposes that "If [such thoughts] are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing" (*ibid.*), the preface explains how "the farthest mentionable spot [does not come] a bit nearer the beginning than any other spot". Sections 16 and 17 from "Song of Myself" evidence a breakthrough into understanding on the part of the persona, who there—not coincidentally, through the medium of synecdoche—comes to realize the all-inclusiveness of his own thoughts, which in turn leads him on to a conception of the overarching unity of all things. Given this fact, it is entirely appropriate that the preface here echoes the words used to express that breakthrough, since the preface is in fact a presentation of the very vision that that breakthrough has made possible.

The synecdoche used in this passage is enacted primarily in grammatical terms, making it more of an analogy of synecdoche than synecdoche proper. The grammatical

subject of the opening sentence, “these singly and wholly”, uses two opposite yet complementary adverbs (“singly”; “wholly”) to provisionally split the referent of the relative pronoun (“these”) in such a way that each of the actions and sufferings in the preceding catalog are made to represent not only themselves, but also the entire catalog of which they form part. Following on from this, the sentence comes to a close with the object-position phrase, “the identities from which they sprung or shall spring”. Connecting this back to the grammatically split subject through the verb “inure”, the following valid reading results: “[T]hese … wholly … inure … to the identities from which they sprung or shall spring”. Equivalent to whole-for-part synecdoche, this reading causes the actions and sufferings outlined in the preceding catalog to adhere as a unity, making the catalog into a sort of précis of human experience and possibility. On the other hand, a quite different reading of the passage’s first sentence proves equally valid: “[T]hese … singly … inure … to the identities from which they sprung or shall spring”. Equivalent to part-for-whole synecdoche, this reading effectively accords full rights to each item in the catalog, allowing each the separate dignity it merits.

This is not simply grammatical gamesmanship, however, as the passage goes on to explain the wider significance of the dual reading of the first sentence: “Did you guess that any of them lived only its own moment? The world does not so exist”. Above all, what seems clear is that Whitman’s primary care in this passage is to subtract not a whit from either the individual identity of the actions and sufferings enumerated, or from their integrity as an expressive whole. This becomes evident enough from the assertion that, regardless of how well each may embody all or all may embody each, still, not even “the farthest mentionable spot” can approach “a bit nearer the beginning than any other spot”. With such a statement, Whitman is again displaying a yearning for balance among

elements that, just like the "soul" and the "I" of his notebook, are of different magnitudes.

The side of that balance that insists on the maintenance of *individual* integrity is what, ultimately, leads Whitman to discard metaphor in favor of synecdoche. For instance, returning to his answer to the child's question of what the grass is, and provisionally dropping Whitman's qualifying construction "I guess" so as to keep the metaphors plain, we end up with the following:

> [The grass is] the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
>
> […] [I]t is the handkerchief of the Lord […]
>
> […] [I]t is itself a child . . . . the produced babe of the vegetation.
>
> […] [I]t is a uniform hieroglyphic […]
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 31)

Stripped thus of Whitman's hesitancy down to their essential elements, it can be seen how these metaphors effectively deprive the grass of its pith, as each metaphor's vehicle in turn shifts the grass' identity away from itself. Of course, no such exercise severing lines from the frame in which they appear should be taken too far, as each of these metaphors does, after all, reveal one perspective from which the grass may be considered, while the suppositional frame only stresses that these are, in fact, just considerations. However, that the question prompting such musings was not how the grass may be considered, but rather what the grass *is*, should also not be lost sight of.

What is, ultimately, more important than whether or not these metaphors ultimately fail, is the fact that Whitman tacitly seems to feel that they do so. The whole sense of the poem, as indicated both by the 1855 preface and by the content of the metaphors used to define the grass, has been moving towards a notion of the importance

of an integral individuality. But then, the fact of metaphor itself—which is, in some sense, a subversion of individuality—comes into conflict with this notion, and as if recognizing this, Whitman changes tack: "The smallest sprout *shows* that there is really no death" (*Leaves of Grass* 32, emphasis added). From the standpoint of individuality, this has the advantage of allowing the grass, at least on a rhetorical level, to remain itself: the "smallest sprout" is presented as neither more nor less than what it is, yet is nonetheless allowed to intimate something beyond itself ("that there is no death"). Moreover, what the grass thus intimates—the essential impossibility of death—amounts to a fundamental insight into the workings of nature, which is plainly seen in a perpetually forward-moving, holistic manner: "All goes onward and outward . . . . and nothing collapses". The grass is itself one part of this whole complex of nature, and fully expresses nature's ceaseless, deathless character through its own sprouting "from the white heads of old mothers" (*Leaves of Grass* 32). This is pure synecdoche, radically equating the grass to the whole of nature.

For the holistic argument that Whitman is putting forth, the use of nature itself as a synecdochic whole is particularly beneficial in that it is a whole which, necessarily, encompasses everything. Thus, it is through synecdoche—on the figural level if not always the purely rhetorical level—that Whitman gets at the broad sense of unity at which he aims. Admittedly, the Kantian subject-object duality is not exactly done away with, for the subject in Whitman's figuration always remains defiantly itself. Instead, what Whitman's use of synecdoche does is render that Kantian duality, as a set notion, irrelevant. It is, in fact, in the very nature of synecdoche to perform such a displacement. Just as—to take an example of more "standard" synecdoche—in the phrase "all hands on deck", the hands of a working sailor are simultaneously separate hands capable of work,

and also parts emblematic of the whole functional sailor, so it is with the grass: it cannot, as Whitman hints through the very fact that he abandons metaphor, be denied that the grass is simply the grass and no more; yet at the same time, in its actions of growing and spreading and covering, the grass' very self is emblematic of the wider yet identical actions of nature as a whole. Thus, the grass amounts to a perfect expression of nature, in microcosm.

There is, however, one particular entity that, if it is not necessarily a more perfect expression of nature as such, can nevertheless be more perfectly *expressed*, in Whitman's view. However fully he may come to recognize the grass—or, for that matter, oxen and mockingbirds and bay mares—as an emblem embodying all of nature within itself, Whitman still does not and cannot fully enter into its being, as has been shown, but can really only "see in [it] and [himself] the same old law" (*Leaves of Grass* 38). But given that it is only, in fact, "the same old law" that is being realized, the inability to embody particular natural entities is ultimately neither here nor there. This is especially so given the further fact that there is, anyway, something so much closer:

> What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me,
> Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
> Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
> Not asking the sky to come down to my goodwill,
> Scattering it freely forever.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 38)

Here, soon after his rather humbling encounter with those animals that remain so resolutely outside of him, Whitman announces clearly that his own self will be the primary prism through which his poem, and thus his reflections on the connection between nature and individual selves, will be focused. Insofar as the poem's earlier turn, *vis-à-vis* the grass, from metaphor to synecdoche has effectively established nature as a

sort of matrix of which individual entities like the grass form part, it is evident that here Whitman is placing himself within that matrix, and thus by extension (and necessity) insinuating himself into the synecdochic process. He does so, however, in a seemingly humble spirit, as the profuse varieties of generosity in the passage's last three lines—"bestow myself"; "my goodwill"; "[s]cattering freely"—indicate.

What, though, are the deeper implications of Whitman's thus making himself an element in the process of vast synecdoche that his poem is developing? As already indicated, through synecdoche the part is allowed to remain itself while, at the same time, serving to express the whole. In so serving, however, the part in essence *becomes* the whole, even if it is but temporarily and rhetorically. In Whitman's fundamental example of the grass, for instance, the grass—by demonstrating that "there is really no death"—becomes radically identical with the supposition that nature as a whole "goes onward and outward . . . . and nothing collapses" (*Leaves of Grass* 32). An exactly similar identification occurs when, in place of the grass, we substitute the persona of "Song of Myself":

> I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits and grains and esculent roots,
> And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,
> And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,
> And call any thing close again when I desire it.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 57)

This presents the more physical side of synecdoche, wherein the persona realizes himself as the earth itself, including animal and vegetable and mineral. Humanity, the unmentioned biped, is curiously left out of the equation, for reasons that will become clear enough in due course. Despite this quatrain's insistence on sheer physicality, however, there is something more going on. The final two lines, concerning things being

now “distanced” and now summoned “close again”, could almost be taken as an emblem of Whitman’s use of synecdoche in “Song of Myself”: as the need arises (“when I desire it”) he makes use of different natural entities to express his ideas or perceptions of how nature is embodied—hence the carefully chosen word “incorporate”—and then moves on to some other entity, or to some more abstract consideration, as those ideas and perceptions develop organically.

More than this, however, the persona’s total physical appropriation of nature, when coupled with the phrase “for good reasons”, suggests some variety of motive lying behind or beneath that more physical aspect, a sense of some driving force prompting nature “onward and outward” (*Leaves of Grass* 32). A passage earlier in the poem has already supplied the same suggestion, directly christening it with the name “purpose”:

> This is the far-off depth and height reflecting my own face,
> This is the thoughtful merge of myself and the outlet again.
>
> Do you guess I have some intricate purpose?
> Well I have . . . . for the April rain has, and the mica on the side of a rock has.
>
> Do you take it I would astonish?
> Does the daylight astonish? or the early redstart twittering through the woods?
> Do I astonish more than they?
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 44-45)

These lines, in a sense, depict something of the process whereby Whitman gets to that point of being able to radically identify with the earth as a whole. The first line imagines the persona simply seeing himself reflected in “the far-off depth and height” that is nature broadly considered. The second line quickly moves a step further by rethinking this act of “reflecting” as a “thoughtful merge of myself and the outlet”, where “the outlet” might best be interpreted as nature coming to realization and expression in its various individual selves, in a process somewhat akin to Whitman’s use

of synecdoche. The couplet that follows is where, developing this idea of unity still more, the persona divines in himself an "intricate purpose". Judging from the subsequent identification with a series of natural phenomena—"the April rain"; "the mica on the side of a rock"; "the daylight"; "the early redstart"—it would seem that this is precisely the same mysterious "purpose" that drives nature itself.

There is an echo in this of that moment when the persona, observing the animals, perceives "in them and [himself] the same old law" (*Leaves of Grass* 38). When Whitman, there, uses that word "law", he is clearly referring to more than simply natural law of one kind of another, what Emerson had alluded to as "gravitation" and "chemistry" (*Selections* 374). In fact, Whitman directly connects this "law" to some sort of elemental motive force when he mentions finding the wild gander's call's "*purpose* and place up there toward the November sky" (*Leaves of Grass* 38, emphasis added).

Even if this "purpose" remains rather enigmatic, it soon enough receives some clarification:

> Do you not know how the buds beneath are folded?
> Waiting in gloom protected by frost,
> The dirt receding before my prophetical screams,
> I underlying causes to balance them at last,
> My knowledge my live parts . . . . it keeping tally with the meaning of things,
> Happiness . . . . which whoever hears me let him or her set out in search of this day.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 53)

"Happiness" is given here as "the meaning of things", linking Whitman's conception of nature up with a certain seminal American document's declaration that "all Men … are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, … among [them] Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (Jefferson, par. 5). That last line of the stanza has

a rather tacked-on feel, however, and in fact the "purpose" or "the meaning of things" could as well be elucidated by the lines preceding that final assertion.

The key line in the stanza is surely, "I underlying causes to balance them at last". Here, Whitman's oft-voiced idea of the fundamental importance of balance and equity finds expression from the more newly established perspective of him as the encompasser of the world. What the line shows, in fact, is that it is not merely the physical world thus encompassed, but also that force or purpose underlying the physical world. Such a force is indicated both through the word "causes" and through the idea, present in the use of the passive voice in the stanza's opening line, that there is something that causes "the buds beneath" to be "folded". This something is, of course, the persona—here at his most expansive—who issues forth "prophetical screams" that, besides serving as an emblem for Whitman's poetic project, also kickstart into action the annual processes of birth, death, and renewal that are here epitomized by those "buds beneath". By thus encompassing the physical world and the force or purpose that drives it, the persona is shown to have an immense, and indeed illimitable, power. Having expanded to "incorporate" into his body everything from "gneiss and coal", to "quadrupeds and birds", to "fruits" and "buds" (*Leaves of Grass* 57, 53), he only expands further again to envelop as well the "causes" that animate those entities (*Leaves of Grass* 53).

Given this extreme expanse, it should be little wonder when the persona finds himself sufficiently vast and powerful to make the claim, "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from" (*Leaves of Grass* 51). This line would certainly seem an explicit exaltation of the persona's self, particularly given the context in which it is found, wherein it is specifically the persona's physical body that is being so reverenced: "If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of

my body" (*ibid*.). However, the way for this "worship" has been prepared in terms making it clear that it is effectively the more expansive self of nature as a whole that is being adopted as a stance:

> Through me many long dumb voices,
> […] Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
> And of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and of the fatherstuff,
> And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
> Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
> Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 50)

Such phrases here as "[voices] of the rights of them the others are down upon, / Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised" evidence that the perspective is precisely the same as that of the "I underlying causes to balance them at last". Thus, coming before the persona's "worship … of [his] body", it colors that worship as far from mere solipsism. In this, the entire following catalog of the persona's body parts is granted a wider perspective and made to amount to precisely the same sort of synecdoche that makes the individual self a microcosm of nature, only now one level further down.

But if this claim of the self's thoroughgoing divinity does not necessarily amount to a claim of that self's superiority to nature, owing to its ability to thus comprehend nature in Kantian terms, this is by no means something that can be said for every such moment in "Song of Myself":

> Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask . . . . lie over,
> You light surfaces only . . . . I force the surfaces and the depths also.
>
> Earth! you seem to look for something at my hands,
> Say old topknot! what do you want?
> (*Leaves of Grass* 72)

As curious a phrase for the world as "old topknot" seems to indicate that the persona views it as almost a sort of unnecessarily flashy arabesque atop the head (perhaps even the persona's own head, given how expansive his body has become). Similarly, "the sunshine" is indirectly characterized as something of a fop, lambasted with the terms "[f]launt" and "bask". These lines make it clear that the self has become divorced from, and indeed reimagined as superior to, nature. This would certainly seem to be not only an instance of Whitman contradicting himself—which by his own admission[20], like his mentor Emerson, he is perfectly content to do—but also the very height of egotism.

Of course, Whitman admits as much to his egotism as he does to his self-contradiction, and in terms that are equally as telling: "I know perfectly well my own egotism, / And know my omniverous words, and cannot say any less, / *And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself*" (*Leaves of Grass* 76, emphasis added). This last line is an echo of the preface's admonition to the people to "Come to [the great poets] on equal terms" (*Leaves of Grass* 14). But more than that, what these lines from the preface and from section 42 of the poem are in essence doing, is attempting to anticipate and bypass the inevitable accusations of egotism by proclaiming the ability of all and sundry to achieve the same sublime insights detailed in Whitman's poem. Given the assertion in the preface that "[i]t is … not consistent with the reality of the soul to admit that there is anything in the known universe more divine than men and women" (*Leaves of Grass* 16), as well as the process of synecdoche that forms the basis of "Song of Myself", it is apparent that the sheer scope of the persona's self is an "unalienable" right of all, and furthermore that Whitman's essential task as a poet is to cry this fact out.

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[20] "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes" (*Leaves of Grass* 87)

There is thus in "Song of Myself" an explicit centering on the human that essentially makes it a song of everyman, or better, a song of how nature is enshrined in everyman:

> I am not an earth or an adjunct of an earth,
> I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself;
> They do not know how immortal, but I know.
>
> Every kind for itself and its own . . . . for me mine male and female,
> For me all that have been boys and that love women,
> For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted,
> For me the sweetheart and the old maid . . . . for me mothers and the mothers of mothers,
> For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
> For me children and the begetters of children.
>
> Who need be afraid of the merge?
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 33)

This extraordinary passage opens with what seems to be a denial of what much of "Song of Myself" is concerned with. For the persona of the poem to declare, for instance, that he is "not an earth" is essentially a flagrant violation of those later moments in the poem when he is, in fact, certainly nothing less than the earth on which he stands.

However, the accompanying assertion that he is also not "an adjunct of the earth" can perhaps modify this impression somewhat. The word "adjunct" means "inessential part of" or "addition to", and so this meaning locks in nicely with the process of synecdoche that animates the entire poem. Whitman's whole concept of nature, working in a manner akin to synecdoche, establishes that each part of nature—whatever it may be—is equivalent to the whole thereof. By this token, nothing can truly be "an *adjunct* of an earth" (emphasis added), insofar as its own individuality is in every way equivalent to and fully expressive of the totality. Thus, there is in fact little in this first line to shatter the holistic worldview that Whitman is piecing together.

There is, though, an undeniably clear emphasis on the human. Here, it is not openly coupled with any high-flown notions of the divinity or superiority of humanity; instead, it is a somewhat demure acknowledgement of limits. The persona literally disavows himself of the earth and of nature, situating himself instead within the prerogative of the human alone: "Every kind for itself and its own". This statement, fleshed out in the lines that follow, provides some explanation as to why the persona proves unable to embody and thus understand—from the inside out, as it were—animals or other forms of natural life, something which he does so abundantly does with people.

More than this, however, the persona's sense of animals as something other ultimately permits him to present himself—and by extension, the humanity with which he identifies—as a fuller realization of the inner workings of nature than the animals can be:

> I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals . . . . they are so placid and self-contained,
> I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.
>
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied . . . . not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
> Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
> Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.
>
> So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
> They bring me tokens of myself . . . . they evince them plainly in their possession.
>
> I do not know where they got those tokens,
> I must have passed that way untold times ago and negligently dropt them,
> Myself moving forward then and now and forever […]
> (*Leaves of Grass* 58)

This is certainly rather equivocal praise of "the animals". Life among them here is presented as an almost Edward Hicks-like vision of a peaceable kingdom, mitigated only slightly by the harsher tones of the second stanza. More importantly—as the phrase

"[n]ot one is dissatisfied" demonstrates explicitly, and the others from that stanza somewhat more implicitly—Whitman is more than capable of rhetorically imagining himself into other life forms, *when it suits his purposes*. How satisfied or not any animal, or indeed all animals, may be, is something impossible for him to judge, since the terms of his own poem have established them as an unbreachable other. Here, however—in one of his rarer moods of disenchantment with humankind—he insinuates himself into that other so as to make his point all the better. That point may indeed be made, but only at the cost of signaling how other "the animals" actually are.

This signal is only made stronger in the two stanzas following. There, Whitman sets up a clear anteriority of his own self—in this instance, doubtlessly the self that actually *is* imagined as encompassing "an earth"—by speaking of "the animals" as bearing "tokens of [himself]"[21] that he, as likely as not, "negligently dropt" an eon or two ago. In this anteriority, there are muffled hints of superiority. Whitman, for instance, *accepts* the "tokens", thus implying that some sort of offer has been made, which in turn connotes a small imbalance weighted towards the one—Whitman—with the power of acceptance and rejection. Likewise, just as is the case with anyone making an offer, the animals "bring" the "tokens" *to* Whitman, again hinting at a slight power imbalance. Above even these instances, however, there is the line, "Myself moving forward then and now and forever". What this line's strong positive emphasis on *myself* does, particularly when placed beside the characterization of the animals as "so placid and self-contained", is to indirectly condemn the animals as relatively backward creatures, less capable than Whitman himself of "moving forward". The effect is precisely the

[21] It is a line that resonates well with the earlier comparison of the grass to "the handkerchief of the Lord, / A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped" (*Leaves of Grass* 31). The resultant likening of the persona to "the Lord" may or may not be entirely coincidental.

same if we consider that "[m]yself" as representative of humanity or the American people[22].

The sum total of this highly ambiguous passage is that the animals, among whom Whitman might briefly condescend to dwell, are a variety of life that, however well they may fit into the synecdochic paradigm being constructed, are in fact less a full reflection of nature itself than is Whitman, a human. They—and just the same is true for the grass or any similar entity in nature—may show it forth and thus, in a sense, *embody* it, but they cannot *encompass* it. That is a privilege reserved for humankind, and in fact, for the American people (which, Whitman being generous, includes the poor bedeviled Canadians):

> The friendly and flowing savage . . . . Who is he?
> Is he waiting for civilization or past it and mastering it?
>
> Is he some southwesterner raised outdoors? Is he Canadian?
> Is he from the Mississippi country? or from Iowa, Oregon or California? or from the mountains? or prairie life or bush-life? or from the sea?
>
> Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,
> They desire he should like them and touch them and speak to them and stay with them.
>
> Behaviour lawless as snow-flakes . . . . words simple as grass . . . . uncombed head and laughter and naivete;
> Slowstepping feet and the common features, and the common modes and emanations,
> They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,
> They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath . . . . they fly out of the glance of his eyes.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 71-72)

The first two stanzas essentially establish the scene, making it clear even through the series of questions that the "he" subsequently referred to is an American. But the last two stanzas of this, the poem's eventual section 39—which, not by coincidence,

[22] Despite the indirect condemnation of humankind which precedes the line, it is not wrong to see Whitman's self even here being thus representative, since that condemnation was a temporary state of mind brought on by the egotistic crisis of section 27 ("To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" [*Leaves of Grass* 55]) and the subsequent rape of section 28.

immediately precedes the persona's dissevering from nature present in the line, "Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask" (*Leaves of Grass* 72)—present something of a vision of the sublime American self. It is a vision that resorts to simile ("lawless as snow-flakes"; "simple as grass") so as to, in defining that self, simultaneously set limits upon natural entities that previously would have been given the more comprehensive scope allowed by synecdoche: now, "snow-flakes" become confined to the adjective "lawless", and "grass" to the adjective "simple". Thanks to this suddenly (yet quite subtly) changed rhetorical strategy, the American self as depicted here proves to *contain* "snow-flakes" and "grass", as though they were mere parts or aspects of itself.

The strength of synecdoche in Whitman's use has been shown to lie in how it renders the Kantian duality of subject (self) and object (nature) effectively irrelevant. It does this by implicitly widening the scope of the subject so that it comes to embrace and include the object, in essence making subject and object one. Here in section 39, however, a fundamental change is made. Firstly, the subject (self) is made to inhere specifically to a given people, the Americans. Then, despite the fact that that self is given as embodying the object (nature) as a whole, it is allowed to occupy a position tacitly superior to other entities that, like it, are themselves only elements within nature. By the terms of Whitman's argument, those other entities should be allowed precisely the same privilege as Whitman himself, or indeed the American people, to embrace the whole of nature within themselves. Quite the contrary, however, they are here *subordinated into* that self through simile. The grass, "the early redstart twittering through the woods" (*Leaves of Grass* 45), the "[o]xen that rattle the yoke or halt in the shade" (*Leaves of Grass* 37), even the "[n]ations once powerful, now reduced, withdrawn, or desolate" (*Leaves of Grass* 178): all can be seen from this new

perspective as no more than facets of that always "moving forward" (*Leaves of Grass* 58) American self, "the nation of many nations" (*Leaves of Grass* 42) and indeed no less than "the race of races" (*Leaves of Grass* 7).

This ultimately amounts to an American self that is imagined in terms of sublimity. This sublime American self is a sort of mixture of the sublime of Kant and the Romantic sublime of Wordsworth, but filtered through an Emersonian sieve. Kant, of course, spoke of the sublime as "the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*" (*Observations* 60). Whitman—using means essentially similar to the Kantian *comprehensio aesthetica*—expands this sentiment into what amounts to the *divinity* of human nature. What is more, he takes the unique human ability of *comprehensio aesthetica* as a kind of proof of that divinity, inasmuch as such an ability is akin to nature's own comprehensiveness. In "Song of Myself", the Kantian duality of subject (self) and object (nature) does indeed get placed on the back burner along the way, but this is done only so that the duality may later be reestablished on terms even more favorable to the (human) subject, whose "*beauty and … dignity*" become raised to the n^{th} degree.

It is, of course, this element of divinity pervading human nature that provides the Wordsworthian touch to Whitman's conception of the sublime American self:

> […] the mind of Man becomes
> A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
> On which he dwells, above this Frame of things …
> In beauty exalted, as it is itself
> Of quality and fabric more divine.
>
> (*The Prelude* 1850; XIV; 450-452, 455-456)

As pointed out earlier, Whitman differs with Wordsworth concerning the precise role of the poet in effecting this realization of the divinity of the human. It turns out, however,

that this difference is ultimately neither here nor there, since the end achieved is fundamentally the same: the human becomes "exalted" above even "the earth / On which he dwells". Whitman's only minor objection to this might be to Wordsworth's stipulation that it is, specifically, "the *mind* of Man" (emphasis added) thus "exalted", for Whitman would add the human body as well: "The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer, / This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds. // If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my body … " (*Leaves of Grass* 51). The holistic terms of Whitman's argument, which have their root in synecdoche, make this sort of reverence inevitable. If it be accepted that what is human is divine, then it must of necessity be accepted that everything comprising the human is also divine, not merely the soul and the mind but also the "arm-pits" and the "head" (note how the physical term for this region of the human entity is studiously chosen).

Such exaltation of the body is commonly looked upon as one of Whitman's innovations, and certainly the explicitness with which he celebrated the body in his poetry *was* an innovation. However, Emerson—whose work surely provided one of the spurs to Whitman's imagination as per the divinity of the human soul—could well have also prompted him in the direction of the human body's relation with the divine:

> … I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; and the shop, the plough, and the ledger referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing;—and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench. (*Selections* 78)

However prior this may be to "Song of Myself"—it is from 1837's *The American Scholar*—it is strongly redolent of Whitman. It depicts "every trifle" as, in effect, sublime by virtue of its being expressive of "the highest spiritual cause", and does not neglect to include "the form and the gait of the body" among the things thus expressive.

The key to this whole passage, though, lies in its entire subordination to the first person: "*I* embrace the common, *I* explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give *me* insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds" (emphasis added). By virtue of such a framing, the American self which the passage's first person represents acquires the character of an avatar of the "eternal law" mentioned, which is essentially democratic in nature insofar as it extends equally everywhere to "embrace" all things. In the form of such an avatar, the American self effectively comes to realize sublimity in all that it surveys. At the same time, however, this very act of surveying, this first person frame, brings the passage into accord with Kant's assertion that there is nothing sublime *an sich* in nature, but only "a sublimity discoverable in the mind" (I, 2, ¶23).

This accord can be seen as well in a passage from *Nature*, again dealing with something that could be termed a "trifle":

> The instincts of the ant are very unimportant considered as the ant's; but the moment a ray of relation is seen to extend from it to man, and the little drudge is seen to be a monitor, a little body with a mighty heart, then all its habits, even that said to be recently observed, that it never sleeps, become sublime. (*Selections* 33)

The emphasis on seeing here—"a ray of relation *is seen to extend*"; "the little drudge *is seen to be*" (emphases added)—is clear, and even if the seeing is more visionary than

visual in nature, that does nothing to change the fact that the basic plan of Emerson's account of sublimity here fits well into the Kantian paradigm.

However, there seems to be something more going on. For Emerson, the "habits" of the ant—and, in effect, the ant itself—actually "*become* sublime" (emphasis added). This is a step that Kant would categorically refuse, insofar as he explicitly states that "the sublime … cannot be contained in any sensuous form" (I, 2, ¶23). But this containment, or embodiment, is exactly what Emerson effects here, and through the medium of the American self.

Emerson's account of the ant, in fact, bears comparison to a somewhat similar passage from section 27 of "Song of Myself":

> To be in any form, what is that?
> If nothing lay more developed the quahaug and its callous shell were enough.
>
> Mine is no callous shell,
> I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
> They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 55)

Where Emerson sees "a little body with a mighty heart", Whitman declares that "the quahaug and its callous shell [are] enough". In both, "the familiar, the low" are dignified by the human self perceiving them. There is a double bind involved in both of these similar actions, however, insofar as it seemingly *requires* that perceiving human self to enact this dignity. This fact is borne witness to in both passages. Emerson's ant is quite explicitly granted its sublime aspect only once "a ray of relation is seen to extend from it *to man*" (emphasis added). Whitman, on the other hand, more subtly devalues his quahaug by using it as the springboard for his perception of himself as something far less limited than it ("Mine is no callous shell").

The effect of all this is to strongly imply that what makes these objects in nature be (or seem to be) sublime, is a sublimity that, being inherent in the human, can only be passed on thereby: "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from" (*Leaves of Grass* 51). Here again, as with Emerson's statements concerning "the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause", everything is filtered through the subject (self) that, having come to embrace primordial nature, can then dispense grandeur as though it were broadsheets. Whitman, moreover, insists that all who read his poem will turn out to realize that this facility is their own as well:

> I dilate you with tremendous breath . . . . I buoy you up;
> Every room of the house do I fill with an armed force . . . . lovers of me, bafflers of graves:
> Sleep! I and they keep guard all night;
> Not doubt, not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you,
> I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to myself,
> And when you rise in the morning you will find what I tell you is so.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 73)

What is it, then, that Whitman tells? One of his primary points seems to be that neither he himself, nor anyone else, is alone. Less a devaluation of the individual self than a recognition that—above all in a democracy like the United States—the individual must balance that selfhood equally with the selfhood of all other individuals[23], this idea is explicitly given as the source of a great individual strength, as much for the individual as for the nation:

> I troop forth replenished with supreme power, one of an average unending procession,
> We walk the roads of Ohio and Massachusetts and Virginia and Wisconsin and New York and New Orleans and Texas and Montreal and San Francisco and Charleston and Savannah and Mexico,
> Inland and by the seacoast and boundary lines . . . . and we pass the boundary lines.

[23] Recall Emerson's markedly similar idea concerning double consciousness: "A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature … " (*Conduct* 49).

> Our swift ordinances are on their way over the whole earth,
> The blossoms we wear in our hats are the growth of two thousand years.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 71)

After the great crisis of individuality faced by Whitman at the beginning of section 38 of "Song of Myself"[24], Whitman here, in a great and eloquent stroke of recovery, aligns himself strongly with his fellow Americans. Moreover, their destiny as a whole proves to be as essentially grand as are each of their individual natures: this great "average" mass of the American self is marching forth "over the whole earth". It may not be laurels crowning them as they do so, but anyway those "blossoms" atop their heads prove significantly grander than laurels could ever be. Being "the growth of two thousand years"—hardly a randomly chosen lapse of time—the "blossoms" effectively make of the Americans "an average unending procession" of Messiahs crowned by nature itself. As such, America and the Americans, together constitutive of the American self, become nothing less than the apex of natural development.

In such a capacity, the American self becomes by proxy the lord over nature, as clearly outlined in the 1855 preface to "Song of Myself":

> Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another . . and that men can be good or grand only of the consciousness of their supremacy within them. What do you think is the grandeur of storms and dismemberments and the deadliest battles and wrecks and the wildest fury of the elements and the power of the sea and the motion of nature and of the throes of human desires and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain. (*Leaves of Grass* 14–15)

[24] "Somehow I have been stunned. Stand back! / Give me a little time beyond my cuffed head and slumbers and dreams and gaping, / I discover myself on a verge of the usual mistake" (*Leaves of Grass* 70).

Perhaps the key word here is that little preposition "on". Twice repeated—"Rage *on*, Whirl *on*" (emphases added)—it is given as a gauge for nature's propensity to always continue onwards, obstacles be damned. But, significantly, it is only nature's broad and violent strokes that Whitman is concerned with, which are in fact those that, since the emergence of the concept, have been habitually associated with the sublime inasmuch as they are felt to pose some threat to the self[25]: "storms", "dismemberments", "battles and wrecks", "the wildest fury of the elements", "the power of the sea", "the throes of human desires and dignity and hate and love".

However, what makes the American self sublime is that, faced with such objects "of all terror and all pain", it resists the threat. It can do this, in Whitman's paradigm, because of its ability to fully encompass nature, in all its aspects, thus essentially subsuming it *within* the self. This once done, the American self becomes no less than a fulfillment of nature's plan, an enactment as it were of nature's "intricate purpose" (*Leaves of Grass* 45). If such is the identity of the American self—so vast, so strong, and so telling—then that self can certainly afford to "step up to say" what Whitman says in "Song of Myself": "what we do is right and what we affirm is right … " (*Leaves of Grass* 48).

The pronouncement is simultaneously empowering and chilling. But however one may see it, it is hardly a statement that can traipse forward carefree and without the thought of consequences. Indeed, the statement—so definitive of how the American self

[25] In this, Whitman's argument can be seen to reach all the way back to Burke's explication of the sublime as something surfacing from the feelings associated with self-preservation: "The passions which concern self-preservation turn mostly on *pain* or *danger*. The ideas of *pain*, *sickness*, and *death* fill the mind with strong emotions of horror … Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger … is a source of the sublime" (90–91).

sees itself—has birthed hard consequences, not least for the American nature *against which* that self has so strenuously constructed its identity.

Conclusion

The Ends of the American Sublime

PÈRE UBU. – Cornegidouille! nous n'auront point tout démoli
si nous ne démolissons même les ruines! Or je n'y vois d'autre moyen
que d'en equilibrer de beaux edifices bien ordonnés.[26]
—Alfred Jarry, *Ubu enchaîné*

The word "nature" has been called "the most complex of all" words in the English language[27]. Surely this is the case. Whatever the word's semantic complexity, however, its most common everyday use—when relatively free of qualifiers at the grammatical or the contextual level—is roughly that given early on in Kate Soper's valuable study *What is Nature?* (1995), where she points out that

> when 'nature' is used of the non-human, it is … to refer to that part of the environment which we have had no hand in creating. It is used empirically to mark off that part of the material world that is given prior to any human activity, from that which is humanly shaped or contrived. (16)

This is surely a correct enough definition, and is likely more or less what most of us, if confronted with the word alone shorn of context, would picture to ourselves. Once we have established that denotation in our minds, however, the inevitable train of connotations follows in its wake.

In the first century or so of American history, perhaps the primary connotation of the word "nature" was the one that called up the picture of a large and rather intractable beast poised, usually to the west, and waiting. The resolve of Americans in those early years was, effectively, to tame that beast, and those various spots where the beast could be found waiting were the successive frontiers of the nation's history. A good deal of

[26] Jarry, "Ubu enchaîné", *Œuvres*, 289.
[27] Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 1.

this whole complex of notions can be seen in the words of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who in Chicago in 1893 delivered a paper to the American Historical Association entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History":

> The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely. And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, and at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history. (38)

It is not easy to miss the note of nostalgia for the frontier in this, written only three years after the Eleventh Census of the United States had officially declared the frontier closed. It is also not easy to miss something of why such nostalgia was able to rear its head so soon after the frontier's disappearance: the frontier provided the nation with "a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past"; in short, it provided Americans with the chance to actually *become* American, and in this it proved the sculptor of the American self. Inasmuch as the frontier is that imaginary line where wilderness and civilization meet, it is inevitable that the American self ends up defining itself *in opposition to* American nature, and this can be seen in Turner's characterization of that nature as a "stubborn" despot issuing "imperious summons" that force the Americans "to accept its conditions". George III being 73 years in his grave, American nature serves as a grand enough substitute.

Setting such a mindset to work on Kate Soper's basic definition of the word "nature", much can be found that would rankle the sensibilities of any properly

American self. In America, to speak—as Soper does—of something that "we have had no hand in creating" and of something "that is given prior to [our] activity", is tantamount to asserting that the foundations of the nation are, in essence, faulty. The United States being a nation built upon the idea of its grand space becoming a new world, it looks none too kindly on the brute fact that nature actually preceded it there. Instead, it seeks to find some means of accommodating that fact without doing irreparable damage to its own identity.

In America's literary history, the two great accommodators that accomplished this were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. In their works, they basically constructed a space within which the idea of the American self could grow and persevere. Their basic, shared method of establishing this space was to effectively de-emphasize the definition of nature given above—which, in Soper's words, amounts to seeing nature as something "'other' to ourselves" (16)—in favor of one that would admit nature *into* the definition of the American self. In essence, the culture of America was constructed as nothing separate from nature, so that the other of that wilderness lying on the far side of the frontier could more effectively be subdued, and in good conscience at that. The concept of "nature" was, that is, basically co-opted by the sort of American self that Emerson and Whitman envisioned, and with a more or less specific ends in view.

It is just such a redefinition that constitutes the basic structure and impetus of Emerson's very first essay, *Nature*. It begins with a definition of nature that, somewhat along the lines of Soper's initial definition, firmly establishes nature as something other: "Strictly speaking, … all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (*Selections* 22). The remainder of the essay, however,

amounts to a steady dismantling of this initial definition. The dismantling commences in the section immediately following, where Emerson appeals to those moments in which the seemingly clear boundary lines separating self from nature actually dissolve[28]: "In the woods", which are representative here of the supposed other that is nature, "all mean egotism vanishes" and the self arrives at a sense that "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (*Selections* 24). Through the power of God that is seen to underlie nature, the self reaches to an epiphany that, altogether pantheistic in character, unites it to nature at the source.

Ultimately, it is precisely this sense of radical unity with nature that allows Emerson, in 1841's *The Method of Nature*, to celebrate the cultural products—or rather, the "art"[29]—that the self constructs:

> I do not wish to look with sour aspect at the industrious manufacturing village, or the mart of commerce. I love the music of the water-wheel; I value the railway; I feel the pride which the sight of a ship inspires; I look on trade and every mechanical craft as education also. But let me discriminate what is precious herein. There is in each of these works an act of invention, an intellectual step, or short series of steps taken; that act or step is the spiritual act; all the rest is mere repetition of the same a thousand times. (*Representative Men* 458)

Even with the reserve Emerson shows here, one can still hardly imagine it being said by Wordsworth, he who—in "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway" (1844)—so painfully cried out, "Is then no nook of English ground secure / From rash assault?" (*Poetical Works* 224). The sentiments Emerson expresses, however, are hardly out of keeping with his contention that, fundamentally, man is not a being at odds with nature, but rather a "part or parcel" thereof.

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[28] It would not be wrong to recognize in such experiences a sort of analogy with the American frontier experience.

[29] "*Art* is [the term] applied to the mixture of [man's] will with [nature], as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture" (*Selections* 22).

This radical identity is not the end of Emerson's argument, however. Instead, as has already been seen, he goes on to posit that the human form and spirit in fact represent the convergence of all that is best and grandest in nature:

> The termination of the world in a man, appears to be the last victory of intelligence. The universal does not attract us until housed in an individual. Who heeds the waste abyss of possibility? The ocean is everywhere the same, but it has no character until seen with the shore or the ship. Who would value any number of miles of Atlantic brine bounded by lines of latitude and longitude? Confine it by granite rocks, let it wash a shore where wise men dwell, and it is filled with expression; and the point of greatest interest is where the land and water meet. So must we admire in man[30], the form of the formless, the concentration of the vast, the house of reason, the cave of memory. (*Representative Men* 469–470)

The use of the phrase "Atlantic brine" here is particularly telling, perhaps more so than Emerson may have wanted. Considering the audience addressed in conjunction with the reference to "a shore", there are really only two possible shores being evoked: the old eastern shore that is England (or, if you will, Britain); and the new western shore that is America. When the shore then gets qualified as "a shore where wise men dwell"—however much it could still refer to either of those two shores—it is in fact an open secret which one Emerson means. After all, the whole of Emerson's career was, on one level, an attempt to prod the American people to stop gazing back over those "miles of Atlantic brine" and, instead, look to where they actually were—a land of frontiers, of men and women creeping westwards across the wilderness—and establish themselves accordingly.

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[30] It is not entirely impossible that Emerson's movement in this passage from "*a* man" (emphasis added) to "man" embodies something of what Alexis de Tocqueville thought when—in the chapter "What causes Democratic Nations to Incline toward Pantheism"—he said: "As conditions become more equal, each individual becomes more like his fellows, weaker, and smaller, and the habit grows of ceasing to think about the citizens and considering only the people. Individuals are forgotten, and the species alone counts" (451).

Well aware as he is of the power of language to aid in effecting this, but at the same time wholly distrustful of the demagogues who have always so crowded the American scene, Emerson looks largely to poets for the creation of the intellectual and emotional foundations of the burgeoning American self, and indeed, the American nation. He does so because, for him,

> the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth. The young man reveres men of genius, because, to speak truly, they are more himself than he is. (*Selections* 223)

In fact, in this same essay—1843's *The Poet*—it is to the poet that Emerson ascribes the uniquely sublime power of overcoming the common view of nature as something other, and investing in the doings of man—that "last victory of intelligence"—the significance which is due them:

> For as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web. Nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own. (*Selections* 229–230)

The "deeper insight" of the poet that Emerson speaks of here essentially amounts to the poet's ability to redefine nature so that the word includes "the factory-village and the railway" on equal terms to "the beehive or the spider's geometrical web". It is a redefinition that attempts to sweep away the more common conception of nature enshrined in Kate Soper's definition, and thus to make nature quite literally all-encompassing. In the process, however, man is effectively made to be even more all-

encompassing than nature, inasmuch as his "deeper insight" allows him to imagine such a terribly broad conception.

Whitman, coming after Emerson, took as a personal injunction this idea of the poet as someone of "deeper insight"; he once even said, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil" (qtd. in Loving, 96). Indeed, in one sense the whole of *Leaves of Grass*—and most especially the first edition thereof—can be seen as an attempt to put into practice the ideas Emerson espoused in *The Poet*, where poets were referred to as "liberating gods" (*Selections* 236). What gives poets this supposed "liberating" power is precisely that "deeper insight" that they are able to attain and then, through their work, pass on. Such an insight—whereby all things from the porcupine to the post office are imagined as being perfectly, in Whitman's words, "in their place" (*Leaves of Grass* 43)—is really none other than a sublime insight, *à la* Kant's formulation. For to attain to an insight of such extent, one that involves conceiving of everything as existing "within the great Order", is to have one's power of comprehension (*comprehensio aesthetica*) outstrip one's power of apprehension (*apprehensio*), insofar as that "great Order" cannot be apprehended by the faculties of sense, but only by the faculty of reason. As Emerson says in *Nature*, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith".

It is just this sort of insight that leads Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement*, to proclaim: "Sublimity … does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind[31], in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within,

[31] Emerson, in *Nature*, betrays his close familiarity with Kant on this issue: "Yet it is certain that the power to produce … delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both" (*Selections* 24). It is only his argument towards the radical unity of man and nature that prompts him to add—as if it were an afterthought—the phrase, "a harmony of both".

and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us)" (I, 2, ¶28). The "exerting influence" of nature is what prompts us to "return to reason and faith", but the latter qualities remain stubbornly within *us*, and not out there "[i]n the woods". This is precisely the same complex of empowerment over and against nature that had already enabled Kant, in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1760), to declare that, in essence, the sublime "is *the feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*" (60).

This feeling and its underlying idea provide, to a very great extent, the motive force for the work of Emerson and Whitman. It can be seen to lie at the root of Emerson's statement that "we admire in man, the form of the formless, the concentration of the vast, the house of reason, the cave of memory" (*Representative Men* 470). In this formulation, these are qualities unique and plauditory of mankind, and mankind alone. As such, they prove to be in accord with Kant's proposal, in the *Critique of Judgement*, that the sublime is what "[enables] us to assert our independence as against the influences of nature, to degrade what is great in respect of the latter to the level of what is little, and thus to locate the great only in the proper estate of the subject" (I, 2, "General Remark upon the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgements"). Even Emerson's much-vaunted call, in *Nature*, that we should get ourselves "[e]mbosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us" does not annul this accord, for he immediately moves on to say that nature's "floods of life … invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature" (*Selections* 21). Once that we have been given such "powers" authorizing "action proportioned to nature", it is but a short step to our "re-attaching [of] even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight" (*Selections* 229). And once that "violation of

nature" has been attached back "to nature, by a deeper insight", then it can hardly be seen as anything but an instance of humanity "[asserting its] independence as against the influences of nature".

What underlies this perhaps initially bizarre idea that nature can be linked to its own "violation" is the concomitant idea that nature is a constant round of forward progress towards perfection; i.e., amelioration. It is an idea present to some degree in the last line of that same passage from *The Poet*: "Nature adopts [artificial things and violation of nature] very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves likes her own" (*Selections* 230). The "deeper insight" of the sublime seemingly informs of nature's illimitable power, allowing it to accept easily into its folds whatever "violation" mankind has to offer, for—according to Emerson's argument in *The Young American* (1844)—mankind's doings are equivalent to those of nature, and mankind is forever improving along with nature itself:

> Remark the unceasing effort throughout nature at somewhat better than the actual creatures: *amelioration in nature*, which alone permits and authorizes amelioration in mankind. The population of the world is a conditional population; these are not the best, but the best that could live in the existing state of soils, gases, animals, and morals: the best that could *yet* live; there shall be a better, please God. (*Representative Men* 626)

This idea of "*amelioration in nature*" seems to have been borrowed by Whitman, for—rare a word as it is—he uses it in a somewhat similar meaning in "A Song of the Rolling Earth", first published in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as "Poem of The Sayers of The Words of The Earth":

> Amelioration is one of the earth's words,
> The earth neither lags nor hastens,
> It has all attributes, growths, effects, latent in itself from the jump,
> It is not half beautiful only, defects and excrescences show just as much as perfections show.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 363)

Ultimately, there is little to choose between Emerson and Whitman's two characterizations of the term "amelioration". In both, the inherently positive aspects of the term are leavened with a reminder of the fact that the process of amelioration, being continual, is not complete: Emerson lets us know that "these are not the best", while Whitman takes care to point out that the earth has "defects and excrescences". If we would look for differences between the two, it is perhaps in the somewhat different audiences they were addressing that we should look, for both men go on to directly address their respective audiences and call for them to enact amelioration in their own lives and become, if nothing more, the best of their time.

Emerson, a scholar through and through, was addressing the Boston Mercantile Library Association:

> I call upon you, young men, to obey your heart, and be the nobility of this land. In every age of the world, there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity, at the risk of being called, by the men of the moment, chimerical and fantastic. Which should be that nation but these States? Which should lead that movement, if not New England? Who should lead the leaders, but the Young American? (*Representative Men* 639–640)

It is clear here that it is America and Americans who Emerson would like to see molded into "the best that could *yet* live" (*Representative Men* 626). The audience was an audience of literati, of the elite and "eminent citizens", and Emerson addresses them in solemn tones sure to warm any reactionary's heart. It should be recalled that, at around the same time, Emerson was afflicted with a growing fear that "the calamity is the masses" (*Conduct* 237).

Whitman's desired audience, by contrast, was precisely those calamitous masses, and this is how, to them, he goes on about the earth's principle of amelioration:

> The earth does not withhold, it is generous enough,
> The truths of the earth continually wait, they are not so conceal'd either,
> They are calm, subtle, untransmissible by print,
> They are imbued through all things conveying themselves willingly,
> Conveying a sentiment and invitation, I utter and utter,
> I speak not, yet if you hear me not of what avail am I to you?
> To bear, to better, lacking these of what avail am I?
>
> (Accouche! Accouchez!
> Will you rot your own fruit in yourself there?
> Will you squat and stifle there?)
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 363–364)

Here, from the words "I utter and utter" until the end, it is apparent that Whitman is speaking in the voice of the earth itself, a pose which is the useful prerogative afforded by the poet's sublime and "deeper insight". In this guise, he directly calls for his readers to birth ("Accouche! Accouchez!") something that would be expressive of "[t]he truths of the earth". Whitman's call here, then, would seem designed to have his readers respond to Emerson's own injunction and take some "action proportioned to nature" (*Selections* 21).

In the paradigm that Emerson's work sets forth, this notion of an "action proportioned to nature" comes to coincide with the terms of *The Young American*'s statement that "*amelioration in nature* … permits and authorizes amelioration in mankind" (*Representative Men* 626). That is, the progressive improvement by each person of the lot of mankind as a whole is, of necessity, a mirror of nature's own processes, which follows inevitably from the notion of the radical identity of man with nature so strenuously built up in Emerson's work. Furthermore, once the poet—who "stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but

of the common wealth" (*Selections* 223)—is slotted into this paradigm, it opens up the possibility that "even artificial things and violation of nature" (*Selections* 229) can be reimagined as nothing more than a part of the process of mankind's amelioration.

The whole of this complex of ideas was taken to heart by Whitman and embodied in his poems, sometimes even to the extent that certain lines in *Leaves of Grass* seem lifted almost verbatim from Emerson's works. It is thus perhaps little wonder that Whitman, too, tended to consider "artificial things and violation of nature" as, in essence, the inevitable work of nature itself, working through mankind. This sort of vision is scattered here and there in Whitman's book, but makes its first extended appearance in a poem first issued in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and there entitled "Broad-Axe Poem" but later reconstituted as "Song of the Broad-Axe":

> Weapon shapely, naked, wan,
> Head from the mother's bowels drawn,
> Wooded flesh and metal bone, limb only one and lip only one,
> Gray-blue leaf by red-heat grown, helve produced from a little seed sown,
> Resting the grass amid and upon,
> To be lean'd and to lean on.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 330)

Here in the poem's opening lines, Whitman puts the physical tool that is the broadax directly "within the great Order" of nature, just as Emerson has insisted the poet do (*Selections* 230). He does this by simply presenting the broadax as a child birthed from the earth and thus wholly composed of certain elements thereof. The broadax, that is—whose sole use is of a fundamentally violent nature—is redefined as a fully natural entity, a sort of primeval tool and example of nature eventuating through man something that is necessary to the improvement or amelioration of them both. In effect, Whitman appropriates the elements of nature that go into the construction of an ax—"Wooded

flesh and metal bone"—and thereby makes of that "[w]eapon shapely, naked, wan" a newborn child of the earth that the Americans of the frontier can afford "to lean on", confident in the knowledge that they are making nature still better than it was. The fact that the child in question is essentially matricidal is gingerly stepped around.

To be fair, Whitman does not, in the poem, entirely ignore the violent uses of the broadax. He does, however, make mention only of the violence done by the weapon *to man*. After all, if—following Emerson—the poet actually has attached "violation of nature" back again "to nature" by means of his "deeper insight" (*Selections* 229), then it can hardly any longer accurately be termed "violation", as such. Instead, it has effectively been made to reverse its identity, going from "violation of nature" to "amelioration" thereof. Thus, what is actually appropriation of nature is justified by christening it "*amelioration in nature*" (*Representative Men* 626).

The ultimate use of such a reimagining of the broadax's identity can perhaps best be seen from that point in the poem where Whitman discusses the violence that it produces. It is a violence that, rather revealingly, is restricted to the far shores of the Atlantic:

> I see the European headsman,
> He stands mask'd, clothed in red, with huge legs and strong naked arms,
> And leans on a ponderous axe.
>
> (Whom have you slaughter'd lately European headsman?
> Whose is that blood upon you so wet and sticky?)
> (*Leaves of Grass* 337)

Productive in Europe only of blood, the broadax proves to be productive of something wholly different across the ocean in America:

> … I see the mighty and friendly emblem of the power of my own race, the newest,

largest race.

(America! I do not vaunt my love for you,
I have what I have.)

The axe leaps!
The solid forest gives forth fluid utterances,
They tumble forth, they rise and form,
Hut, tent, landing, survey,
Flail, plough, pick, crowbar, spade,
Shingle, rail, prop, wainscot, jamb, lath, panel, gable,
Citadel, ceiling, saloon, academy, organ, exhibition-house, library,
Cornice, trellis, pilaster, balcony, window, turret, porch,
Hoe, rake, pitchfork, pencil, wagon, staff, saw, jack-plane, mallet, wedge, rounce,
Chair, tub, hoop, table, wicket, vane, sash, floor,
Work-box, chest, string'd instrument, boat, frame, and what not,
Capitols of States, and capitols of the nation of States,
Long stately rows in avenues, hospitals for orphans or for the poor or sick,
Manhattan steamboats and clippers taking the measure of all seas.

The shapes arise! …

(*Leaves of Grass* 338–339)

Here is a long tally of "artificial things" born through the work of the broadax. Whitman's comprehensive conception, however, has from the start of the poem imagined the broadax in natural terms, as a child of the earth. It has thus been defined so as to "fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web" (*Selections* 230), and by extension so have all the "artificial things" in which it results. America's culture and the products thereof are thus reimagined as nothing more nor less than the outgrowth of nature. By that token, this list is decidedly not composed of the earth's "defects and excrescences", but rather of extensions of nature that have been legitimated only by the terms within which they are couched.

The perennial relation between nature and culture is, naturally, an extremely complex one. In *What is Nature?*, Kate Soper—while admitting that she offers only "the sketchiest account"—summarizes the two most basic outlooks towards this relation of just how "nature has figured in human self-conceptions" (28):

> [O]ne of the main divisions … is that between those ethical, political and aesthetic arguments that are constructed upon a view of culture as offering an essential corrective to 'nature', or providing the milieu in which alone it acquires any definitively human form, and those that view nature as releasing us from the repressions or deformations of culture and as itself a source of wisdom and moral guidance. The former regard human 'nature' as appropriately and fully reflected only in those achievements of "civilization" that distance us from the sinfulness or naïvety or crudity of 'nature'; the latter would have us see the very process of authentic human fulfilment as jeopardized or distorted by the corrupting effects of cultural 'progress'. (28–29)

She goes on to identify the former conception with "the high Enlightenment" and the latter with "the Romantic reaction" (29).

These admittedly broad characterizations show that Emerson and Whitman conform quite well to the latter, and can thus, at least in Soper's terms, be seen as descendants of that "Romantic reaction". Neither man conforms fully to the outlined terms, however, and Whitman especially seems to add quite a new twist to Soper's characterization. In regards to those identified with "the high Enlightenment", she speaks of their considering "human 'nature' as appropriately and fully reflected only in those achievements of 'civilization' that distance us from … 'nature'". Whitman would no doubt vehemently disagree with this. However, if just a few terms and phrases of Soper's characterization were displaced, a reasonably accurate portrayal of the paradigm Whitman is constructing in "Song of the Broad-Axe" would result, for in that poem, Whitman can accurately be said to "regard … 'nature' as appropriately and fully reflected in the achievements of 'civilization', which are expressive of nature itself".

Even this redefinition is not quite enough, however, because Whitman's mention of "[c]apitols of States, and capitol of the nation of States" makes it quite clear that not just any "civilization" is being referred to. The same sort of hint is also provided in the

poem's final stanza, wherein—albeit indirectly—the United States, as constructed by the work of the broadax, is depicted as a sort of apotheosis of natural processes:

> The main shapes arise!
> Shapes of Democracy total, result of centuries,
> Shapes ever projecting other shapes,
> Shapes of turbulent manly cities,
> Shapes of the friends and home-givers of the whole earth,
> Shapes bracing the earth and braced with the whole earth.
> (*Leaves of Grass* 341)

"Democracy" here is, doubtlessly, more a euphemism for America than it is an evocation of the wider political phenomenon. Even given that thinly veiled reference, the fact that it is announced as the "result of centuries" could simply seem—and, in fact, might even be—an innocuous enough reference to those particular social and political processes attendant upon the slow rise of the nation since its seeds were first planted in 1492. However innocuous the phrase may or may not be, however, the last line of the poem strongly colors everything that has preceded: "Shapes bracing the earth and braced with the whole earth".

The line strongly echoes the depiction of the broadax, at the poem's beginning, as something "[t]o be lean'd and to lean on" (*Leaves of Grass* 330). As such, it serves to situate America and its products firmly within that built-up paradigm of nature as progress or amelioration, with America imagined as the de facto end product, or at the very least "the best that could *yet* live" (*Representative Men* 626). In effect, it amounts to synecdoche writ large upon the structure of Whitman's work: the broadax, together with all of the cultural "shapes" of America produced therefrom, are first reimagined as parts of nature—rather than simply being cultural products—and then are made to stand for the whole of nature.

It has been shown, in connection with Whitman's work in "Song of Myself", that the American self—the artificer of those cultural "shapes"—is effectively made sublime by means of a total identification with nature as defined in its very broadest sense, thus allowing that self a total comprehensiveness. The use of such a transformation is obvious, once it is realized that, in the first 150 years or so, American nature was seen as essentially a threat to the burgeoning nation; recall, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner's characterization of nature as present on the frontier: "The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions" (38). Given such a perspective, to *simply* define the American self as being in opposition to nature would be ineffective: not only would the threatening aspect of nature be maintained in such a scenario, but also the foundations of the nation in the idea of natural and foreordained development, as outlined at the very start of the nation in the Declaration of Independence, would be undermined.

By, instead, framing the American self as a wholly natural concomitant of the deep processes driving all of nature, the threat is transformed into a challenge or invitation to realize that sense of development as well within the nation as within each individual therein. Something of this complex regarding the American self as driven, as if by resistless natural force, to build a nation atop the country of America can be seen, already, in Francis J. Grund's 1837 treatise, *Americans in their Moral, Religious, and Social Relations*[32], which Turner cites in his study of the frontier:

> It appears … that the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion over inanimate nature, is the actual result of an expansive power which is inherent in them, and which by continually agitating all

[32] Francis Joseph Grund (1805–1863) was a sort of German—actually, Bohemian—immigrant Alexis de Tocqueville, and his book an outsider's look at the United States along the same lines as *Democracy in America*.

> classes of society is constantly throwing a large portion of the whole population on the extreme confines of the State, in order to gain space for its development. Hardly is a new State or Territory formed before the same principle manifests itself again and gives rise to a further emigration; and so is it destined to go on until a physical barrier must finally obstruct its progress. (qtd. in Turner, 7)

In this, a very real allowance is made for that frontier attitude that simply damned the consequences to the physical space of America. Such an allowance is opened up by the passage's rather curious mix of active and passive forces given as forging the American frontier. But so it seems to have been to the 19th-century mind. Emerson and, especially, Whitman were hardly immune. Such a conception of nature's relation to the self is, for instance, precisely what enabled Whitman to proclaim, in "A Song of the Rolling Earth", that "the substantial words are in the ground and sea, / They are in the air, they are in you" (*Leaves of Grass* 363), and *at the same time*, in the contemporaneously written "Song of the Broad-Axe", to declare that—as if of their own will—"The axe leaps! / The solid forest gives fluid utterances … " (*Leaves of Grass* 338).

The "words" here are essentially all that which, inherent in nature, lies waiting for expression: it is the ax of the young nation that provokes the expression's "fluid utterances". These "utterances"—that whole litany of cultural constructions evoked by Whitman—could as well be called signifiers, and something of what is finally signified through them can be seen in a later poem, 1874's "Song of the Redwood-Tree", wherein is transcribed the plaint "of a mighty dying tree in the redwood forest dense" (*Leaves of Grass* 351):

> *Nor yield we mournfully majestic brothers,*
> *We who have grandly fill'd our time;*
> *With Nature's calm content, with tacit huge delight,*
> *We welcome what we wrought for through the past,*

> *And leave the field for them.*
>
> *For them predicted long,*
> *For a superber race, they too to grandly fill their time,*
> *For them we abdicate, in them ourselves ye forest kings!*
> *In them these skies and airs, these mountain peaks, Shasta, Nevadas,*
> *These huge precipitous cliffs, this amplitude, these valleys, far Yosemite,*
> *To be in them absorb'd, assimilated.*
> (*Leaves of Grass* 352)

This is a far cry from "Song of Myself". There, however well he may come to understand what, for example, the grass or the animals are expressive of, Whitman never actually presumes to speak in their voice. But here, having grown to embrace even the "*occult deep volitions*" (*Leaves of Grass* 353) that purport to drive nature ever onwards, the self suddenly discovers the precise words with which the redwood tree is announcing that it will "*leave the field*". And in the place of the redwood, fulfilling Emerson's prophecy, comes "[t]he new society at last, proportionate to Nature, / In man of you, more than your mountain peaks or stalwart trees imperial, / In woman more, far more, than all your gold or vines, or even vital air" (*Leaves of Grass* 354–355).

This new American self, made sublime precisely in that it is made "proportionate to Nature", is perhaps the ultimate response to the threat that American nature's primacy posed to the burgeoning nation. It harbors neither disrespect nor open hostility for that nature, but rather "honors" it to the precise degree that it lauds itself as the fullest realization thereof:

> … that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that the man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. (*Selections* 50)

This passage from Emerson's *Nature*, especially when read in the context of Whitman's "Song of the Redwood-Tree", effectively constructs man's unique ability to "access … the entire mind of the Creator"—which, in Emerson's conception, is to understand the workings of nature—as exactly that which makes him superior, not precisely to nature as a whole, but rather to every other individual within it: man "is himself the creator in the finite", or rather, he is called so. It is from this that man's "inexhaustible power" is imagined as stemming.

It is also of just this power that Whitman's redwood sings. Of course, it is *made* to sing by the poet-representative of America and its peoples, which are then fashioned into the very object of the redwood's encomium: "*To the new culminating man, to you, the empire new, / You promis'd long, we pledge, we dedicate*" (*Leaves of Grass* 352). Not every American, however, is as aware as Whitman of what the redwood is revealing about the deep identity of the American self:

> … I heard the mighty tree its death-chant chanting.
>
> The choppers heard not, the camp shanties echoed not,
> The quick-ear'd teamsters and chain and jack-screw men heard not,
> As the wood-spirits came from their haunts of a thousand years to join the refrain,
> But in my soul I plainly heard.
>
> (*Leaves of Grass* 351)

Whitman's soul has deciphered the hieroglyphic of the redwood's language, and finds that it is only spurring the "choppers" and "camp shanties" and "quick-ear'd teamsters and chain and jack-screw men" on in their work. And since the redwood's song is made to transform their ostensibly destructive work into nothing less than the preparation of "a new world indeed" (*Leaves of Grass* 355), it ultimately matters little whether they hear or not, so long as someone like Whitman is around to give that work a sublime justification, rooted in nature.

APPENDIX

Albert Bierstadt, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains – Mount Rosalie*

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