

The American Voice

by

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We have been on the wrong path in America for a long time in appreciating the real nature of the American Voice, a misunderstanding abetted by the unfortunate connection of American poets and poetry with the American university where one false vision after another sweeps over the country with each critical craze. But we can sweep away this nonsense if we look at three iconic poets in their own time, Walt Whitman, Robinson Jeffers, and Robert Lowell. Ten unexpected traits emerge from their consideration which are the essence of the American Voice and explain Whitman, Jeffers, and Lowell 's stature at their apogees.

The first is the presence of a *quantum leap* in ability or direction which little foreshadows. There are the *rapture* of visionary insight, a subsequent assumption of a *common stance* with mankind, and a *move to clarity* in their poetic language. They adopt an *epic breadth*, and make the claim they know the way to *health*. Various they *turn to nature* and/or *confront the real form and pressure of America*. All go through a period of confusion and loss of direction as the consequence of an *inflation* growing out of their earlier work. All surprisingly regain their voice and power in a late *return*.

These features are not a schema, and are realized by each poet in strikingly different ways; whether this is an American and poetic pattern only is open to question, although Whitman spoke of Americans of all times and places... There are surprising overlaps in these poets' visions and diagnoses of *our* present condition despite their differences: the American Voice is coeval in them with the nature of the task they undertake, whether to celebrate, destroy, or renovate.

1. Quantum Leap

Whitman produced nothing noteworthy before the publication of the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855. The 1850s saw the appearance of Emerson's Representative

Men, Melville's Moby Dick, and Thoreau's Walden Pond: Emerson's first and second series of Essays had preceded these in the 1840s, and marked Emerson as the foremost man of letters in America, the proponent of the transcendentalism which profoundly influenced Thoreau and Whitman.

Before 1855 an undistinguished Whitman served an apprenticeship in printing, functioned as a schoolteacher, and went into journalism: at one time he edited the *Long Islander*, and in 1848 was discharged as editor of *The Brooklyn Eagle* because of his liberal free soil politics. An idiot brother often shared his bed. He traveled to New Orleans for two months in 1848 after being fired: no one is sure if the journey brought out his homosexuality, or whether that remained latent. But on his return Whitman gave up his previous dandyism, transformed his appearance into a rough's, became familiar with the New York bohemian element— and wrote almost all the poems for the first edition of Leaves of Grass. That starts with these lines from *Song of Myself* declaring universal brotherhood and identity,

I celebrate myself,
And what I am I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you.

Few took notice, but Emerson was among those and wrote a famous letter saluting Whitman as a prodigy:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "Leaves of Grass." I find it is the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. ... I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. ... I wish to see my benefactor, & have felt much like striking my tasks, & visiting New York to pay you my respects.

The letter created a sensation when, to Emerson's surprise, Whitman swiftly had it published. Leaves of Grass when now looked at, created a larger. Few agreed with

Emerson: Whitman spent his lifetime demanding the respect he thought due him from America.

Nonetheless the book altered perceptions about poetry and America. Whitman invented the persona of the proletarian, democratic bard whose song of himself stood for the song of every man. He sloughed off the poetic tradition and in cadenced, rhythmic free verse influenced by operatic aria celebrated himself and the world around him with an unprecedented frankness and boldness. When an American poet looks back over the American past for a founding voice, Whitman stands at the door.

The leap for Robinson Jeffers was as remarkable. Thirty-eight years of little achievement preceded Tamar in 1924, and Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems in 1925. The impact of those books, unlike Leaves of Grass, was immediate: in fact, Jeffers towered over the 1920s and 30s and, though declining, the 1940s. We have lost the sense of his size, but then he easily matched if not exceeded Pound and Eliot in the public eye, and while they left the country, he remained, casting his shadow over his contemporaries.

Before his break-through books were the self-published Flagons and Apples in 1912 and Californians in 1916. Even for an admirer these are hard to take: conventional in form, thought, and middling at best in execution. When his break-through came he abandoned the conventional tradition as decisively as Whitman and asserted a oneness with Nature, drawing his poetic strength from a universal source.

Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-beat's
ancient rhythm I never learned it of you.
Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our
tones flow from the older fountain.

from *Continent's End*

The grave tone and tidal line are decidedly Jeffers: the direct address, with its assumption of a unity between you and me and overt claim of man's unity with nature,

is as marked as in Whitman's "For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you." Again the quantum leap from the uninspired earlier work lands Jeffers in a shaped but clearly free verse rhythm of his own creation that subsumed traditional poetic elements like Whitman.

Unlike Whitman and Jeffers, Robert Lowell enters publication admired, rewarded, scion of a bloodline including James Russell Lowell, Amy Lowell, and Boston Brahmins, an approved follower of the ideas of the New Critics who spurned Robinson Jeffers. Both Lord Weary's Castle in 1946 (Pulitzer Prize) and The Mills of the Kavanaughs in 1951 preceded his quantum leap. It's worth taking a brief look at their prosody.

In Boston serpents whistle at the cold.
The victim climbs the altar steps and sings:
"Hosannah to the lion, lamb and beast
Who fans the furnace-face of IS with wings:
I breathe the ether of my marriage feast."
At the high altar, gold
And a fair cloth. I kneel and the wings beat
My cheek. What can the dove of Jesus give
You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,
The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.
from *Where the Rainbow Ends*, Lord Weary's Castle

or

Winter had come on horseback, and the snow,
Hostile and unattended, wrapped my feet
In sheepskins. Where I'd stumbled from the street,
A red cement St. Francis fed a row
Of toga'd boys with birds beneath a Child.
His candles flamed in tumblers, and he smiled.
"Romans! she whispered, "look, these overblown
And bootless Brothers tell us we must go
Barefooted through the snow where birds recite:
Come unto us, our burden's light— light, light,"
from *Thanksgiving's Over*, The Mills of the Kavanaughs

This is not bad, merely poetry of a specialist, traditional in usages, while Lowell's personal 'I' is almost lost in his effects.

In 1959 Lowell broke through this preciousness in Life Studies which had an immediate, galvanic impact on poetic practice and Lowell's reputation, uncorking 40 years of confessional poetry (deservedly or not), reaching past academic, specialist confines towards the man and woman beyond. Here is the start of *My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow*,

I.

"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!"
That's how I threw cold water
on my Mother and Father's
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.
...Fontainebleau, Mattapoisett, Puget Sound....
Nowhere was anywhere after a summer
at my Grandfather's farm.
Diamond-pointed, athirst and Norman,
its alley of poplars
paraded from Grandmother's rose garden
to a scary stand of virgin pine,
scrub, and paths forever pioneering.

Lowell's previous iambic pentameter, whether blank verse or heroic couplets or other rhyming variants, is set aside for the cadences of prose and speech, rhyme apparently accidental: in short tradition is subsumed within a Whitmanesque and Jeffersian speaking out to a man not assumed to be a fellow poet but a fellow American. It is *that American's* contemporary language turned into poetry, a profound divide from Lowell's earlier usage and another *quantum leap*. Lowell himself was proudest of the Part Four sequences concluding Life Studies: he knew he had broken out from strait-jacket modernism. In so doing he transcended also his merely Boston roots and spoke to the nation.

2. Rapture

Visionary experience or transcendence or mystical experience or as we would say in our bitterer age, *madness* or *mania* might do as well as *rapture* here. These defining

figures all were transformed in life and poetry by visionary experience whose end impact is rapture. The *rapture* is quite straightforward with Whitman. Malcolm Cowley writes,

His really distinguishing feature is that he has been granted a vision, as a result of which he has realized the potentialities latent in every American and indeed, he says, in every living person, even "the brutish koboo, called the ordure of humanity."

The connection to every living person stemming from his visionary insight with its effect of *rapture* is blatant in Whitman's own Preface to Leaves of Grass.

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions ... accepts the lesson with calmness ... that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches ... and that he shall be fittest for his days.

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.

He writes in '5', *Song of Myself*:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers...and the women my sisters and lovers.

Bucke, the sharpest of Whitman's disciples, had an actual date for Whitman's 'revelation'— one June morning in 1853 or 1854. Certainly Whitman's visionary insight overlaps Emerson's transcendental belief explored in *The Over-Soul* that the more profoundly one looks into oneself, the more surely one sees the commonalty of one's soul with the Soul shared by all. The resemblance of Whitman's vision to Asian forms of mysticism has been well remarked, although Whitman denied any knowledge of Asian thought to Thoreau, and there is little evidence of it in his early notebooks. We are faced with one of the most surprising facets of the iconic, defining American poet: *he* and *his*

poetry are shaped by a 'mystical' experience out of which not a renunciation but an engagement with the world flows, an experience in which all is seen to cohere.

I imagine many reacting negatively to the idea 'we are all Americans' implied in Whitman's idea the American is "fittest for his day" and in the phrase "Americans of all nations at any time". But what is meant here is an ideal of human brotherhood to be attained through a vision of a compassionate, moral, transported yet immediate identification of one with All.

Jeffers presents an equally clear case of the impact and *rapture* of vision transforming his plebian life and work. He wrote in 1935 of himself in 1916, at a time he was already living in Carmel, not far from the impressive Big Sur country,

I was doomed to go on imitating dead men, unless some impossible wind should blow me emotions or ideas, or a point of view, or even mere rhythms, that had not occurred to them. There was nothing to do about it...

Three more years passed, then after 1919 such a vision struck him. We are no more sure than we are with Whitman when exactly it struck, or if it was a series of insights that cumulatively transfigured Jeffers instead of one sudden blaze: these things are not susceptible to critical reduction and explanation— we see them through their impact.

The key elements of Jeffers' vision are the violence at the center of Nature and the sickness in our hearts, yet if only we look outward from our obsessive self-regard to the enormous beauty of being, the handiwork of God, we will see the wholeness of existence and find peace. In *Apology for Bad Dreams* he writes,

He brays humanity in the mortar to bring out the savor
From the bruised root: a man having bad dreams, who invents
victims, is only the ape of God.
He washes it out with tears and many waters, calcines it with
fire in the red crucible,
Deforms it, makes it horrible to itself: the spirit flies out and
stands naked, he sees the spirit,
He takes it in the naked ecstasy; it breaks in his hand, the atom

is broken, the power that massed it
Cries to the power that moves the stars, "I have come home to
myself, behold me.
I bruised myself in the flint mortar and burnt me
In the red shell, I tortured myself, I flew forth,
Stood naked of myself and broke me into fragments,
And here I am moving the stars that are me."

Whitman knew metaphorically and Jeffers factually three quarters of a century later that the atoms we are made of were forged in the stars. We are one with nature and its processes, for Jeffers: if we could hold to that perspective then even the most horrible of our inhumanities "...would be found / Clean as a child's' or like some girl's breathing who dances / alone / By the ocean-shore, dreaming of lovers" (from *Natural Music*). The most famous rapturous lines come from *Roan Stallion* in the sequence starting,

Humanity is
the start of the race; I say
Humanity is the mould to break away from, the crust to break
through, the coal to kindle into fire
The atom to split.

Again we are within the Emersonian sense of a transcendent reality under or overlying the delusions of immediate experience, and again a poet comes to that in his own way through visionary experience that leads to an outburst of genius. Jeffers wrote hundreds of lyric poems from 1919-1938, 18 long narratives, often epic in length, and four verse dramas.

Robert Lowell is no less part of this tradition of *rapture* though he typically inverts the large Whitmanesque or Jeffersian gesture, distancing and diminishing his experience with denial and irony, the latter always a diminuendo of greatness if the dominant tone, as in our own era. He also swiftly fled the astonishing arc of Life Studies, 1959, Imitations, 1961, and For The Union Dead, 1964.

Yet there is a double irony here, for Lowell can be seen somewhat mischievously as the quintessential *romantic* poet with his mixture of sanity and insanity. He was

bipolar, an extreme manic-depressive in our more knowledgeable and darker language: the aura of mystery and genius madness was once thought to offer is to us a worn and dangerous idea. We reach for a pill or end in an asylum if need be— as indeed Lowell did in 1949, 1954, and 1957-1958, to mention the main occasions. Lowell himself would have given the 'romantic' idea no credence: insanity was not a literary flourish for him, while the astringent, sterile prescriptions of the New Critics before he broke away with Life Studies took a dim view of emotional expressiveness, let alone poetic directness.

The kind of poet I am was largely determined by the fact I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism. From the beginning I was pre-occupied with technique, fascinated by the past, and tempted by other languages.

Lowell's madness made him fear *the excitement of poetry itself*: part of the treatment of his breakdowns in the later 1950s as Life Studies gestated was a requirement he write only *prose*.

There is an revealing story regarding Lowell's *rapture* told by Frank Bidart, Lowell's amanuensis, and editor of Lowell's Collected Poems. He quotes in his Introduction a letter from Lowell to Elizabeth Bishop.

In the hospital I spent a mad month or more rewriting *everything* in my three books [*Lord Weary's Castle*, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, *Life Studies*]. I arranged the poems chronologically, starting in Greek and Roman times and finally rose to air and the present with *Life Studies*. I felt that I had hit the skies, that all cohered. I[t] was mostly waste.

Bidart adds, "The thrill associated with madness, unreachable when sane, is the sensation all "coheres.'" The coherence of all identity and life at the heart of Whitman and Jeffers' transforming, visionary rapture is insanity for Lowell.

Not least ironic is Lowell's paradoxical appeal to coherence built into the break-through poems of Life Studies and For The Union Dead.

My whole eye was sunset red,

the old cut cornea throbbed,
I saw things darkly,
as through an unwashed goldfish globe.

...
Nothing! No oil
for the eye, nothing to pour
on those waters or flames.
I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil.
from *Eye and Tooth* in For The Union Dead

He assumes across the gulf separating ego from ego I will consider myself a brother in pain, that he and I have a community of interests, that our points of contact are so strong and so familiar he can speak to me in this seemingly unpoetic language. This is Whitman and Jeffers' assumption but Lowell is the spokesman for a time of diminished possibility, of withheld feeling or feeling bracketed in dismissal ("*Everyone's* (my italics) tired of my turmoil"). He is the poet of, worse than entropy, the inability of experience to cohere, of things flying apart— even as he makes the underlying assumption that that is our common lot and he can speak coherently to us about it. The rapture is dismissed as madness, the visionary insight discounted even as he implicitly expresses both in the poetry of his quantum leap.

Yet...

There is one direction where Lowell did make the large, *overtly* inclusive leap and claim of the defining poet. His Imitations seizes the representative figures in the poetic tradition stretching back to Homer and transforms them into *Americans*: "I have tried to write alive English and to do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America", he claims in his Introduction. "Most poetic translations come to grief and are less enjoyable than modest photographic prose translations," he adds. Therefore... His first two Sappho poems actually are "new" poems, Villon is "stripped", Hugo's *Gautier* is halved, and so on. He adds stanzas to poems by the perfectionist Rilke. "I have dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas,

changed images and altered meter and intent.” It is breath-taking as a conceit, and the most brilliant book of its kind we are likely to see— and it makes Whitman even more prophetic than apparent even on reflection when he wrote, “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature.” In Lowell the Americanization of the European tradition reaches a climax.

In the end, these defining, iconic poets cannot escape gestures of this sort. However compromised, however at moments they may feel “frizzled, stale and small” (*Home After Three Months Away*, see below), they are not small, no matter what damage they suffer from the vagaries of undisputed disease, despair, or debilitating irony.

But Lowell’s provincialism needs remarking. Like a good East Coast American poet, Lowell scion and Bostonian, one eye constantly looks back to Europe while the other stares inward examining sanity and motive with no less obsession than was true of John Adams two hundred years ago. There are no Asian poets in Imitations, no Spanish or Latin American, no African, not even poets working in the English tradition who require translation: Anglo Saxon, Middle English, Chaucer. The narrowness of view is a cultural debilitation, a rut so deep Lowell couldn’t see it. Worse, it is an urban debilitation, brilliant, shining, giving us a great book and a great creative moment, but one for other poets and academics, not one that reaches out to the common man on the street. It is a bright flash in a small room.

3. Common Stance 4. Move to Clarity

Both these elements are integral to the quantum leap as well as rapture of the visionary insight underlying these kinds of poets: for their rapture, insight, vision, metaphysical transport, what you will gives them a radical urge to put themselves forward and to be understood by all.

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less,

And the good and the bad I say of myself I say of them.
from *Song of Myself*

Great, humane men have made claims akin to this in the past: Terrence wrote words to the effect 'nothing human is alien to me', while Montaigne asserted he was his own best study for understanding mankind, but they spoke with restraint of themselves while the American defining poet makes the claim to universality overtly, at length, clearly and directly.

Jeffers equally strove for directness.

The old woman sits on a bench before the door and quarrels
With her meager pale demoralized daughter.

...

She is thrown up on the surface of things, a cell of dry skin
Soon to be shed from the earth's old eyebrows,
I see that once in her spring she lived in the streaming arteries,
The stir of the world, the music of the mountain.

from *Fawn's Foster Mother*, in Cawdor

He wants us to feel the old woman's decline, to understand what is now lost from the time of "her spring". It is because the old woman once lived "in the streaming arteries" that she quarrels with her daughter, whose failure stems from not living in "the music of the mountain", at one with nature: she is too limited, consequently, and her failure is one of vision as well as nerve, a moral "demoralized" fault. Jeffers is not concerned to be precious, experimental, surreal, traditionally rhyming or metered, minimal, maximal, or any other such thing—he, like Whitman, wants us to 'get it'. The more style matters, the less a poet has to say and the more, ultimately, the style will render him hermetic to future readers.

Vision and clarity of expression are fused everywhere in Whitman and Jeffers. Speaking in such a way is also a poetic stance: Whitman was not the proletarian rowdy he sometimes portrayed himself, or Jeffers the hard-headed, isolated man living in nature as it seems sometimes from his verse. Jeffers in fact went out to cultured dinner

parties in the Carmel art colony he and his wife Una wandered into in 1914, full of bright artists, writers, and professors, while his imagination turned its Big Sur environs into something 'Homeric'. But the casual reader hardly knows these things: what matters is how these poets find a stance that entails reaching for clarity in order to communicate the essence of their vision as if poetry reaches far beyond its specialist realm to working thinking living men and women.

The same urgency to be understood underlies Lowell's work in Life Studies: now he has something to say that's too important for his former word games or critical proprieties. He too was prepared to and did break with just those things in his quantum leap. The move to a common stance and move to clarity go hand in hand with an act of defiance to the received wisdom of common poetic practice and leads to the development of such a poet's own way of speaking the common language with fresh power. In fact Lowell's abandonment of poetry as he recovered from his hospitalization in the late 1950s for prose helped him move in the direction of his breakthrough poems.

FATHER'S BEDROOM

On my Father's bedroom:
blue threads as thin
as pen-writing on the bedspread,
blue dots on the curtains,
a blue kimono,
Chinese sandals with plush straps.
The broad-planked floor
had a sandpapered neatness.
The clear glass bed-lamp
with a white doily shade
was still raised a few
inches by resting on volume two
of Lafcadio Hearn's
Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan.
Its warped olive cover
was punished like a rhinoceros hide.
In the flyleaf:
"Robbie from Mother."
Years later in the same hand:

“This book has had hard usage
on the Yangtze River, China.
It was left under an open
porthole in a storm.”
from Life Studies

He could be talking to anyone anywhere America: the only obviously poetic usage is
“punished like a rhinoceros hide”, and that seems merely colorful in context, and
implies a degree of usage that is affecting. Jeffers writes of what would characterize the
true poet,

...I believe that our man would turn away from the self-conscious
and naïve learnedness, the undergraduate, unnatural metaphors,
hiatuses, labored obscurity, that are too prevalent in contemporary verse.
His poetry would be natural and direct. He would have something
new and important to say, and just for that reason he would wish to say
it clearly. He would be seeking to express the spirit of his time
(as well as all times)....
from Poetry, Gongorism, And A Thousand Years

A final word on prosody. Robert Hass proposes that Jeffers’ famous long line does
not come from his exposure to the natural rhythms of Big Sur or from Whitman, but
from late Victorian poets like Swinburne. He quotes part of a song-like lyric from 1917,
predating Jeffers’ quantum leap:

Was it lovely to lie among the violets ablossom in the valleys of love
on the breast of the south?
It was lovely but lovelier now
To behold the calm head of the dancer we dreaded, his curls
are as tendrils of the vineyard, O Death.

Hass has fun pointing out the near ludicrous lilt and affectation of the lines, and
compares them to lines from *Continents End*,

At the equinox when the earth was veiled in a late rain,
wreathed with wet poppies, waiting spring,
The ocean swelled for a far storm and beat its boundary, the
ground-swell shook the beds of granite.

There is a wider gulf between these two quotes however than just prosody: the quantum leap has intervened, as Hass is aware: the undistinguished early Jeffers to the visionary poet. It is that underlying vision that sparks the transformation of prosody, not accumulating practice. Lowell would not have reached Life Studies without his rapture, or Whitman written at all. Equally decisive is the poet's explanation of his stance and prosody: Jeffers we saw ascribed his lines to nature, the long beat of Pacific Surf, so unlike the nervous Atlantic's; and the way the Pacific's surf and tides echo the earlier cosmic tides of fire.

This is central, however the stances as self-explained by these poets are based on varying degrees of illusion, like Lowell writing about his family experience as if reportorial when in fact he altered and changed events. It is however precisely the illusion each poet entertains in self-explanation that facilitates his reaching out through the common stance and move to clarity to his fellow man in order to communicate his vision.

These poets' efforts to speak of by and for every man, to give our daily lives an aesthetic shape, may involve illusion and be a form of folly, but it is a noble folly, and necessary. To shape our consciousness into a creative self-awareness through their own, to give size and meaning to the common life of industrial, post-industrial, and technological man may involve illusion and be a form of folly, but it is a noble folly, and necessary. Illusion can be the road to madness: in the hand of the poetic personality of one of these defining poets it is also the road to meaning and, yes, redemption, however fleetingly bound to the experience of a particular poem.

It is in this sense the "American" effort may be the "human" effort to civilize, to humanize the unprecedented, continuous, revolutionary changes through which Western and American society are moving. It is good to lift our eyes beyond horizons

defined by daily coping and remind ourselves that the Romans worshipped Venus in the moon, but we walk on her face and now plot ways to walk on Mars'. Galileo faced the Inquisition for suggesting we orbit the Sun: we have sent a probe beyond our solar system hoping to reach other intelligence. As I write the Cassini probe has reached Saturn, once the god of the Golden Age. Once tradition provided order to experience and a shape and meaning to the universe: now change, welcome or not but beyond individual control leaves us naked of certainty in a way no prior generation has experienced. Perhaps that is why such poets have been appearing in America: there has been a fortunate collision of genius and need.

5. The Epic Stance

Song of Myself is an epic of a transported self doing his utmost to communicate his vision to the wider world. Whitman's ambition for Leaves of Grass is biblical in sweep. Epic is similarly inseparable from Jeffers, whether in the epics beginning with Tamar or in his stance of godlike clarity and perspective through which he communicates his vision of health. Lowell is the least epic of the three, although the crucial element is there, not in the longer poems preceding Life Studies but in his own extended, interrupted 'song of myself' starting with Part IV of Life Studies, continuing through its satellite volumes before 1964, through For The Union Dead, mislaid in the various "Notebooks" and the derivative works following, and resumed in Day by Day. Like Whitman his epic is himself, albeit expanded to recover the nuclear family from fiction and drama for poetry. In this respect Jeffers stands apart in the long poems, speaking through personae, yet he writes,

Thinking of the narrative poems I made, which always
Ended in blood and pain, though beautiful enough— my
pain, my blood....
from *But I am growing Old and Indolent* in The Beginning and the End

In the end there is only ourself to offer to another.

6. Health and the lyric 'I'

A critical claim of the break-through these poets make is that they have found the way to health for all, a claim made directly in Whitman and Jeffers, ironically as usual by Lowell. Join them spiritually, heed their admonitions, celebrate or rage or... as they do, and a man or woman can find his or her way out of the daily morass, pain and confusion into the sunshine of human fullness and well-being or at least sanity. Their claim of naturalness in prosody, language and self creates an expectation given voice by Blaise Pascal, "When we see a natural style we are quite amazed and delighted, because we expected to see an author and find a man," as Emersonian a statement by someone else than Emerson as it is possible to imagine.

Central to this assertion, and clear from the common stance and move to clarity is the reinvention of the lyric 'I'. I cannot stress this point too strongly: these poets make a claim for authenticity, that their 'I' speaks themselves and that our 'I' is included in their own. This claim is at the heart of their poetic 'stance'. Nothing is as easy to misunderstand as this lyric 'I'— such a misunderstanding underlies Confessional Poetry following Lowell, where the 'I' becomes revelatory in a solely personal way that reduces us to voyeurs. That is not the lyric 'I' at all, just someone's 'me.' The lyric 'I' is at once personal and impersonal or multipersonal, the 'I' that Whitman and Jeffers speak when they refer to the multitudes they contain in themselves, namely, of us. Nietzsche puts it very well in The Birth of Tragedy: the 'I' of the lyrical poet, "is not that of the actual waking man, but the "I" dwelling truly in the ground of being." That "ground of being" is Nietzsche's phrase for an Emersonian Over-Soul or a Whitmanesque celebration of the Universal Soul or Jeffersian celebration of all-inclusive natural process.

Lowell's claim is clear in the autobiographical poems of Life Studies: here I stand, here is my authentic experience of self and family. What is authentic is a quality of reality or truth in another that is abidingly real and true for us too: the inauthentic is a matter of coterie and clique, passing fad, social or personal dementia. Lowell's claim that universal coherence is madness leaves him as we saw only the immediate, individual and fragmented: Mother, Father, Grandfather, Grandmother, and his own incoherent, recurrently bi-polar experience. This is the way it is he says, this is reality, and because his description is so apt for the second half of the 20th Century it speaks for us, too. "We are being proven in a sort of secular purgatory: there is no earthly paradise on the horizon," he writes, far from Whitman's optimism and oddly close to Jeffers' intense criticism of contemporary life. Equally revealing is his use of "we": all of us, not just Lowell, are going through this purgatory. By focusing on and asserting the authenticity of these immediacies Lowell implies: let each of us only do the same and we too will live in reality and sanity, however we may be denied larger consolations. To share Lowell's lyric 'I' is to experience the only coherence available: that of personal integrity and fidelity to the unvarnished reality of an endlessly purgatorial world.

That is why these poets are all religions unto themselves. Lowell in the years following 1948 was not just in and out of hospitals and developing the poems for Life Studies, but in 1948 abandoned the Catholic Church. These poets lyric 'I' thus has a two-fold nature: the invitation into authentic, personal experience, wherein lies an experience of health simultaneous with the assertion of a common nature, direct or implied, and the invitation into their own vision of the world, the vision underlying the quantum leap, their rapture, however large, implicit or diminished it may seem. In this context Lowell's reduced sweep is only apparent: he is as sweeping in his claim to understand the world and its nature as Whitman or Jeffers.

He, like them, cannot have any other worldview to communicate his quantum leap and rapture than his own: he cannot be a figure like Eliot, slipping into the reassurances of a received faith. It is just those faiths which poets like these come to replace because traditional faiths have lost their ability to express our experience to offer the health and balance we crave. Equally, these poets cannot find a selfish salvation: they are on the cutting edge of the time each in his day thought “modern”, and what they bring back is for us all.

Jeffers asserts an authentic, healthy self communicated by the lyric ‘I’ without Lowell’s irony, although his lyric ‘I’ is not the man who, when his wife Una heard his pacing, which indicated he was at work, slacken, took a broomstick handle to the ceiling to start him up again. Just when the actual, younger Jeffers was “entire and balanced” (see below) is open to *autobiographical* question as he moodily shifted careers, pursued a married woman, wandered by accident into Carmel and then for years wrote ineffectually, bitter and frustrated. The *health* these poets claim is a state of mind as well as way of living created in the moment(s) of their *quantum leaps* and *raptures*: the lyric ‘I’ of *that* Jeffers or Whitman or Lowell is indeed, entirely well. *The American lyric ‘I’ is a visionary reinvention of the healthy self for the common man, or in our so much less interesting language, the general audience or reader or public...*

The Jeffersian road to health is to turn outward from our incestuous self absorption, as in “Humanity is/ the start of the race” from the sequence alluded to earlier from *Roan Stallion*. He wants to be remembered

Entire and balanced when I was younger,
And could lift stones, and comprehend in the praises the
cruelties of life.
from *Ante Mortem*, in *An American Miscellany*

because “The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to/ itself” (from *Credo*), and

our world is not
perfectly separate from nature’s, private and mad.

... It is true that the murdered
Cities leave marks in the earth for a certain time, like fossil
rain-prints in shale, equally beautiful.
from *Calm and Full the Ocean*, in The Double Axe

Turn to nature; live in nature; work stone, live within the seasons, within nature’s natural rhythms: see things *sub species aeternitas* and health awaits us to the extent possible in our fallen world, especially in the world of 1914-1945. Then we are “entire and balanced” understand the “praises and cruelties of life” in which all is “equally beautiful”.

Whitman has the great benefit of coming first and from a time we in a careless moment almost think innocent, publishing Leaves of Grass five years before the Civil War which transformed his time to one of still unparalleled national suffering. Assertions of health seem to leap off nearly every page of *Song of Myself*,

Who goes there! hankering, gross, mystical, nude?
...
What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?
All I mark as my own and you shall offset it with your own
...
And I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
...
And I know I am deathless
...
I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.
...
My foothold is tenoned and mortised in granite,
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And know the amplitude of time.
from lines 388-421

The last three lines are Jeffersian, the earlier an unabashed statement of multitude, size, and health that would be impossible to accept if not so obviously metaphorical an assertion of the wellness and fullness flowing from an acceptance of common, universal selfhood. *Come join me, loaf, observe, celebrate our common humanity our common selfhood flowing from the Universal Self* Whitman says in effect, and be “sound”, “entire and balanced” (Jeffers), or be the reader who “was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell” as Lowell said trying to explain the desired impact of his ‘autobiographical’ poems, meaning, of course, “getting” his reality and sanity.

Equally revelatory is the way the *common stance, move to clarity, quantum leap, and rapture* are really different facets of a unitary experience that can only be communicated through the *lyric ‘I’* as these poets assert the claim to *health*. Analysis breaks these elements apart; experience of them is one of constant unification for poet and reader. These poets are, ultimately, inescapable. Why? As Jeffers wrote of the true modern poet, “But let him not be distracted by the present; his business is with the future”, for he writes of permanent things within the upheaval of our experience and recalls us to ourselves.

7. Turn to Nature and/or 8. Confronting the Real form and Pressure of America

Part of the *quantum leap* and underlying vision behind these poets’ *rapture* is a confrontation with our industrial, post-industrial, and technological societies. They may criticize directly or through a turn to nature and its celebration in contrast to sick, contemporary society, or both.

In Jeffers *Woodrow Wilson* Wilson is tormented in the grave by a spirit who is unimpressed with his hopes and achievements.

It said “loyal to your highest, sensitive, brave,

Sanguine, some few ways wise, you and all men are drawn out
of this depth
Only to be these things you are, as flowers for color, falcons for
swiftness,
Mountains for mass and quiet. Each for its quality

Is drawn out of this depth. Your tragic quality
Required the huge delusion of some major purpose to produce
it.
What, that the God of the stars needed your help?" He [Wilson] said
"This is my last
Worst pain, the bitter enlightenment that buys peace."

In *The Purse Seine* Jeffers first evokes sardine fishermen working at night drawing
in their nets, the phosphorescent shoals of fish beating the water to a frenzied brilliance
as the nets tighten, sea lions watching, "sighing in the dark": then how brilliant a city at
night seems:

...how
could I help but recall the seine-net
Gathering the luminous fish? ...
I thought, We have geared the machines and locked all together
into interdependence; we have built the great cities; now
There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations
incapable of free survival, insulated
From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all
dependent. The circle is closed, and the net
Is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they
shine already. The inevitable mass disasters....

This is a chilling vision of history and our own technological change as special cases of
blind natural process inexorably working its way to a disastrous end while we shine
brightly within a net we hardly know is there...

Now we can understand the grandeur and tragedy of Robert Lowell. From a
Jeffersian point-of-view Lowell is down there in the city as the nets tighten. In *Home
After Three Months Away* he evokes his return from the hospital and mental illness, and
ends, "I keep no rank or station. / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (Life Studies).
This is not just open, not just brave, but heroic: *that we should care, with the nets closing—*

without a question mark or, for once, an ironic, defensive twist. This personal, unsparing bitterness continues appears in *"For The Union Dead"* as Lowell meditates on Colonel Shaw and his heroic, doomed Black regiment in the Civil War, sparked by considering urban redevelopment which has destroyed the old Aquarium of his childhood in another part of town. The last five stanzas go,

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

In this depraved scene even Hiroshima is commercialized. There is, too, a fusion of natural and urban as "giant finned cars nose forward like fish", a hint of the natural process in which we are caught that is so marked in Jeffers.

Whitman saw the poet as spanning the continent, one who "reflects what is inbetween them." He saw the future and asserted Leaves of Grass was written for the American far West, imagining "a free original life there", American civilization grasping the continent and finding on the West Coast "a newer, mightier world"

(*Pioneers! O Pioneers*). In lines anticipating Jeffers' *The Torchbearers' Race* he wrote in *Facing West From California's Shores*,

Look off over the shores of my Western sea— the circle almost circled;
For starting Westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere,
From Asia— from the north— from the God, the sage, and the hero;
From the south— from the flowery peninsulas, and the spice islands,
Now I face the old home again— very pleas'd and joyous....

But that "very pleas'd and joyous" sets him definitively apart from Jeffers and Lowell: he stands at the beginning, not in the midst of the effort. He never got farther West than the Mississippi, nor does Whitman have Jeffers' worship of Nature as an order of being beyond yet incorporating over-introspective man, nor are there evocations of pure natural beauty as occur so often in Jeffers. Whitman does see the disjunction between man and nature so accented in modern society with the need to heal that split, but is unaware of the Jeffersian nets then being let out.

Nonetheless Whitman is not blind to American failings. He imagines helping an auctioneer sell a slave more effectively in *I Sing The Body Electric*,

Gentlemen look on this curious creature,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for
him,
For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one
animal or plant,
For him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.

One can understand Whitman's affinity with Lincoln, who pondered the carnage of the Civil War in his 2nd Inaugural and could find no basis for it from a just God except as a punishment in proportion to the crime of slavery.

9. Inflation

All these poets get carried away by their out-sized ambition into megalomania, scolding egotism, and personal self-advertisement and obsession as they confuse their lyric 'I' with their autobiographical 'I' and for a time speak as if their underlying vision

and the poetic persona that lets them communicate that vision are identical with their private ego. From that moment the flood of Universal Soul, or the amoral God of Nature, or of (however diminished) Reality ceases, and instead we hear the dull repetition of 'me me me' or hysterical reproaches that seem personal and unbalanced.

This is an archetypal behavior, common enough in psychopathology where, say, a patient identifies with his hallucinations, and even more so in mythology. Joseph Campbell in The Hero With A Thousand Faces points out the hero is the figure who as the fruit of his adventure on whatever level of story sophistication brings to his society a gift/boon/elixir that permits the resumption of creativity by reestablishing the connection between cosmic and human. In accomplishing his task of renewal the hero typically meets what Campbell calls a "Holdfast" figure who resists him by trying to freeze time and maintain *as his own* the flow of being and creativity, which are inseparable and cannot be owned, only transmitted or resisted. The hero's success is a Holdfast's undoing. Campbell goes beyond this easy dichotomy with an insight of great brilliance by pointing out that Holdfast is a fallen hero, a giant of egotism who thinks the cosmic, creative power is his own. This giant egotism is the dark side of these poets' ambition.

Almost immediately Whitman after the first edition of Leaves of Grass proposes in his notes,

The Great Construction of the New Bible. Not to be diverted from the principal object— the main life work— the three hundred and sixty-five. It ought to be ready in 1859.

A "New Bible"... The number refers to three hundred and sixty-five poems to be regarded as chapters or psalms. He is no longer the *poetic* Whitman persona bringing the news of universal human brotherhood and deathlessness through the constant rebirth of the soul, so that in *Song of Myself* he could write of the lives of other men and

women in other ages, "I am the man....I suffered....I was there". Instead he is now the actual Walt Whitman demanding recognition as a giant among men.

The degeneration of the lyric 'I' in Jeffers too lies at the root of the ill-temper and excesses his critics in the 1930s and 1940s gleefully threw at him. We need to remind ourselves at times of the Emersonian insight, "Colleges hate genius, just as convents hate saints." Envy, the expression of our will to destroy, which is a deep part of human nature, flies out at any opportunity.

Jeffers' *inflation* isn't Whitman's megalomania but ill-disciplined runs to excess in his transports, first noted in the title poem of The Women At Point Sur in 1927, and a disenchantment with the world around him that steadily deepened into a bitter personal pessimism as he anticipated the coming of World War II long before most other public figures, Churchill being a singular exception. That so many around Jeffers were prepared to deny reality or follow some debased 'party line' drove him to an extremity of expression that repulsed many.

Some of this tone of the angry personal Jeffers replacing the Jeffersian lyric 'I' can be seen in the concluding lines of *The Purse Seine*.

These things are Progress;
Do you marvel our verse is troubled or frowning, while it keeps
its reason? Or lets go, lets the mood flow
In the manner of the recent young men into mere hysteria,
splintered gleams, crackled laughter? But they are quite
wrong.
There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that
cultures decay, and life's end is death.

"Our verse" here amounts to a claim of personal identification; we wonder from the topical language just who are the "recent young men" who are hysterics? For Jeffers to assume a lyric poet's right to speak out of an "our" when he means 'do you marvel *my* verse is troubled' gives an easy focus to the hounds of envy, and in fact the New Critics

began their assault around the time this was written in the 1930s so that his reputation has still hardly recovered— on the American East Coast.

He reflects on Hitler and vivid natural phenomena in *The Day Is A Poem*, likening the day to a poem, “Like one of Jeffer’s, crusted with blood and barbaric omens”, again stepping forward as himself. Or look at *Ink Sack*.

Ink Sack

The squid, frightened or angry, shoots darkness
Out of her ink-sack; the fighting destroyer throws out a
 smoke-screen;
And fighting governments produce lies.
But the squid and warship do it to confuse the enemy, governments
Mostly to stupefy their own people.
It might be better to let the roof burn and walls crash
Than save a nation with floods of excrement.

This was written during or immediately after World War II, the years of the Holocaust and its discovery.

In the heyday moment of the *quantum leap* and *rapture* these poets are able to poke fun at themselves, whether Whitman with sidelong glances at his posturing, or sounding his “barbaric yawp”, or Jeffers with his realization that seeps through the earlier great poems that the lives and visions he communicates are safely distanced from himself, even implying he is only an “ape of God” in one poem. Lowell writes of exhausting everyone with his turmoil. That distancing, that sense of measure, disappears in *inflation*.

Inflation for Lowell takes a turn both disastrous for himself and American poetry, for it is in the works after For The Union Dead that his lyric ‘I’ becomes merely a confessional ‘me’, and decades of self-indulgent confessions are unleashed parading as poems. Frank Bidart in his quixotic Introduction to Lowell’s Collected Poems brings home the public perception of the post For The Union Dead poet.

When he published in 1973 three sonnet books— *The Dolphin*, *History*, and *For Lizzie and Harriet*— many reviewers were bewildered: two of these volumes came out of his previous book called *Notebook* [which Bidart consciously leaves out of the ‘collected’ poems]. *The Times Literary Supplement*, in what we may characterize as an unsympathetic view of revision [!], with its review ran a drawing of a meat grinder chewing up books, turned by a man who stares out at us fixedly, demonically, with a half-smile. The man is, of course, Robert Lowell.

The vision of Lowell wandering about with the Notebooks manuscripts (Notebook 1967-68, published in 1969, and Notebook, published in 1970) with endless revisions is not reassuring, nor is Lowell’s own remark about different versions of a poem, “But they both exist”, nor Bidart’s defense of revising which needs no defense, nor his justification of leaving undecided preferences between different versions of poems, as if “*That we need not choose*” is an acceptable principle of artistry. After For The Union Dead the collapse of the lyric ‘I’ for Lowell brings with it a near-pathological inability to bring a poem to fruition, the ultimate instance of incoherence for an artist.

Now we have the man whose life is on parade as if of equal value to the life refracted through the poetic I/Thou of Life Studies, its tributary volumes, and For The Union Dead. Elizabeth Bishop could write of *those* poems, “A poem like ‘My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow’ or ‘Skunk Hour,’ can tell us as much about the state of society as a volume of Henry James at his best.” But in what comes now we see another megalomania, not sweeping as Whitman’s but literally “frizzled, stale and small”. *This* is the Lowell who declined a White House invitation from Lyndon Johnson, assuming *as his own* the stature of the poetic persona of his ground-breaking books. It was easy to disagree with Johnson, so Lowell’s act is coated with political virtuousness: but it is personal and confused in nature.

This point about *inflation* as it relates to the loss of the lyric ‘I’ is paradoxical. Isn’t the assertion of authenticity these poets make in their *quantum leap* and *rapture* what we

want? Don't we want an authentic self to confront real experience and in all non-ironic sincerity make a judgment and stand behind it? We hunger for such men. But true authenticity does not inevitably lie that way for a defining poet. He is a conduit of something larger than himself into his society that he hopes will lead to health and enlightenment, an eruption into mundane fact of the ideal meant by "human" however formulated by each poet. That communication is such a poet's authenticity, and can only be made within the lyric 'I'. *The insight of the defining poet does not belong to him: he is only its servant.* We can accept him as such, but not as a monster of egotism.

10. Return

This element of *return* most sets these defining voices apart from other poets. They recover their health when hope for that seems lost, and again are able to reach out to the common man through a rediscovered, perhaps redefined lyric 'I'.

Whitman was never again the poet of the 1855 Leaves of Grass: experience too often was something to be quarried for material for a new song, abstraction crept into his language, and various stylistic quirks became pronounced, whether his endless lists, or constant rewriting of the original Leaves of Grass, especially of *Song of Myself*. The revisions betray his need to rationalize what once was instinctive and sufficient unto itself. The tendency to mine experience for material is a particular disaster, for it is the modern disease par excellence to be alienated from one's experience, to treat it as an object to be used, like a shampoo from a drugstore, rather than the essence of experiencing oneself creatively alive and communicating that experience, as Whitman does so brilliantly in the 1855 *Song of Myself*.

Nonetheless the impact of nursing the wounded during the Civil War recalls his latent powers through his giving once more unquestioningly of himself, and lets him as the "Good Gray Poet" assert a lyric 'I' so that again he could speak as an 'I/Thou',

A worship new I sing,
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.
from *Passage to India*

Again Whitman is a conduit, there is the Universal Soul (now God), the soul, and the 'I' of the chanting poet trying to bring soul in touch with soul through a poem celebrating the civilizing of the entire globe, and the next onward phase of mankind, where "Nature and Man ... / ...shall absolutely fuse...." And should the voyage stop there?

O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!
Passage to you!
from *Passage to India*

Jeffers gives voice to the same theme of onward, upward ascending ascendance and 'passage' in *The Torch-Bearers' Race*, both literal continued passage and metaphysical passage to the indescribable cosmic, creative, nameless heart.

Having found out flight in the air to make wing to the
height, fierce eye-flames
Of the eaglets be strengthened, to drink of the fountain
of the beauty of the sun of the stars, and to gaze
in his face, not a father's,
And motherless and terrible here.

Whitman was to show this recovery of health and vision movingly in *Prayer of Columbus*, the last longer poem he would finish after his apoplectic seizure in 1873.

Is it the prophet's thought I speak, or am I raving?
What do I know of life? what of myself?
I do not even know my own work past or present,
Dim ever-shifting guess of it spreads before me,
Of newer better worlds, their mighty parturition,
Mocking, perplexing me.

It is very hard not to read these lines autobiographically, not to admire their doubt, their baring of the soul's quest as Whitman's own.

Eerily Lowell echoes the essence of these lines in *Grass Fires* from *Day by Day*,

The fire-engines deployed with stage bravado,
yet it was I who put out the fire,
who slapped it to death with my scarred leather jacket.
I snuffed out the inextinguishable root,
I—
really I can do little,
as little now as then,
about the infernal fires—
I cannot blow out a match.

He begins with “the illusion of “reality”” (confessional poetry) but realizes it is the use of memory that counts, and then tries to rewrite that as he recounts setting a fire trying to smoke out a rabbit. It blazes, and he snuffs it out himself, snuffing out the “inextinguishable root” now much more than a root of Grandfather’s endangered tree, or an oedipal root, but the “inextinguishable root” *itself* in either a Jeffersian or Whitmanesque sense. He fails: that isn’t how it happened, and the inextinguishable root is beyond his power— and implicitly, ours. That failure brings him up tellingly against his all-too-human limitations, extending equally to his failure to control his madness (“infernal fires”) or equally, implicitly, *his vision*. Again a lyric ‘I/Thou’ resonates here, well past anything autobiographical...

It is this recovery by Lowell in Day by Day which at once discomfited critics who after the preceding work were prepared to give him little credit despite the Pulitzer Prize he received for The Dolphin, yet drew grudging admiration, too. Constantly he rises from the confessional ‘me’ to the true lyric ‘I’, as in *Ten Minutes*, full of self-loathing but also self-mockery,

Though I work nightshift,
there’s no truth in this processing of words—
the dull instinctive glow inside me
refuels itself, and only blackens
such bits of paper brought to feed it...

Like, of course, *Ten Minutes*. The poem ends,

This is becoming a formula:

after the long dark passage,
I offer you my huddle of flesh and dismay.
"This time it was all night," I say.
You answer, "Poseur,
why, you haven't been awake ten minutes."
* * *

I grow too merry,
when I stand in my nakedness to dress.

The verse is freer to free once more in these poems, rhyme largely abandoned in any formulaic way, so we don't get the *ring-a-ling-a-ding* sort of nonsense he was capable of producing after abandoning all other traditional elements.

Jeffers makes the most encompassing recovery. He recovers his authentic voice even in The Double Axe with its bitter World War Two anti-war sentiments, even in the incredible disrobing moment in Part I as the returning son bares what should be his lethal wound but which his will has defied in order to come home to show the price of 'patriotism'.

...He tore off the soiled tunic
And dragged his shirt up from his belt, and bared
His chest's left side. It was black with wounds, and one
Like a wide grinning mouth, where a mortar shell fragment
Had crushed in through two ribs...

...
...She whispered, "I believe.
Have mercy on me." Damn you, put in your hand."
She came like a sleepwalker feeling her way,
Wide sightless eyes, and laid her hand on the purulent
Lips of the wound. He said, "Deeper," she slipped
Her hand into the hollow...

from Part 1, The Double Axe

This is not overkill as the New Critics would have it in their puerility, but a Dantesque ferocity over our failings, and pallid compared to the ovens at Auschwitz and the mentality that created them. Compare this misery with Dante's portrait of Ugolini and Ruggieri at the end of *Canto 32*, Inferno in Peter Dale's translation,

...I noticed, frozen hard,

Two in the same hole, so cramped, one head
Seemed, for the other one, a cap or guard.
But, as when hungry one would chew at bread,
So in that neck he sank his teeth to gnash
Just where the brain into the nape is led.
lines 124-129

and so on deeper into Hell with a good many more savageries. The difference between the two poets is that Dante watches with a guide: with Jeffers, as with Lowell in his family drama, we are in the midst of the action...

Part II develops Jeffers' philosophy of "inhumanism".

The old man ...
... more deeply gave himself
To contemplation of men's fouled lives and miserable deaths. "There is," he
said, "no remedy.— There are *two* remedies,
This man has got his remedy, and I have one. There is no third."
About midnight he slept, and arose refreshed
In the red dawn.

The first remedy is death; the second is to recognize that whatever we may do,

The mountains appear to be on their feet still. And down there the dark
ocean nosing his bays and tide-breaks
Like a bear in a pit. As for the human race, we could do without it; but it
won't die.
Oh: slightly scorched. It will slough its skin, and crawl forth
Like a serpent in spring.

We will die, but those of us who can live within the larger picture of the whole of creation just may have a chance for balance and health that will find our wars and other excesses hideous and not try to make excuses for them. This line of thought may not be pleasant, but it has the hard ring of truth to it.

Jeffers went on from The Double Axe in 1948 to the very successful adaptation of Medea in 1949, Hungerfield in 1953, and Beginnings and Ends in 1954. If on a smaller scale, it was nonetheless another explosion. The title poem *Hungerfield* is about a man who wrestles Death to a standstill to save his mother, then sees Death exact its toll on those around him until *Hungerfield* burns down his house in despair and abandons

his mother. The poem lodges in the depths of the brain, Jeffers' persona wrestling with Death and in accepting its inevitability speaking a powerful 'I/Thou'.

Finally in *Beginnings and Ends* we come almost directly to Whitman's vision in the original *Song of Myself*.

What is this thing called life? —But I believe
That the earth and the stars too, and the whole glittering
universe, and rocks on the mountain have life
...
...I think the rocks
And the earth and the other planets, and the stars and
galaxies
Have their various consciousness, all things are conscious;
But the nerves of an animal, the nerves and brain
Bring it to focus...
... they feel and feed and in-
fluence each other, each unto all,
Like the cells of a man's body making one being,
They make one being, one consciousness, one life, one
God.

Whitman, Jeffers, and Lowell speak in their ways to a brotherhood of man made conscious, all reflecting one another, all stemming from the same living source.

These reflections have been growing in me since September 12, 1977 when I heard over the radio Robert Lowell had died of a heart attack in New York. I was surprised by my sense of loss. Equally surprising was the way a poet's death was treated as a story of national importance. I felt the loss of a mentor on a cultural level: *he had taught us how to speak as poets*. That had altered both poetic practice and how we spoke of ourselves generally. He had altered reality. Twenty-eight years have passed: we are ready for and in need of a new defining voice, one that can again make our own language capable of communicating the wholeness of experience, its meaning, and our interrelatedness even to the very source of being where 'self' and 'other' are contained in one 'I/Thou'. None of this is magic: we are bound in a historical process that is also a

spiritual, and the spirit's needs demand satisfaction even more powerfully than the body's.

But indifference a poetry of such directness and ambition will have to break through a wall of indifference and challenge an entrenched critical unknowing. The poetry will seem anomalous, not of this time or another, although quintessentially of this time and speaking to us. In America this is a particularly difficult problem as so many and so much of American poets and poetry are associated with some University's English Department, understandable enough on a purely human level as a means to earn a living. But in this milieu one generation of young scholars supplants another as each in turn gets tenure and resists change in a 'Holdfast' pattern, their voices in turn frozen echoes of Levi-Straus, or Lacan, or Foucault, or Derrida and the rest, all suffering from the delusion their derivative criticism is somehow as important as an act of creation.

Lowell never broke with the American University's traditional Euro-centrism, nor consistently from traditional modernist prosody, although it is only his reinvention of *our* common language we retain. To the extent a poet belongs to an 'ism' or is an 'ist' he must sing in a minor key.

Worse, the University treats literature and contemporary like geological extracts to be classified, used, negated, or approved as they fit one of these pre-existing critical categories or usages, all overlaid with multiculturalism and especially with political correctness, epidemic in America, creeping elsewhere. It makes a mockery of Emerson's 170 year old remarks in *The American Scholar*.

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat.

Yet the scholar is the man "delegated" to concentrate on "intellect",

In the right state he is *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking.

Yet,

If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but knew what to do with it.

What so depresses about these lines is their *timeliness*, the contemporary failure of American literary critics to root themselves in our common experience of revolutionary transformation and to speak from this edge of native experience. The critical obsession with non-American models, the reduction of individual artists and their works to facets of classifiable experience, the cannibalization of art and experience, with an arcane style of writing as though preparing a legal brief carefully citing precedent to prove the writer is knowledgeable but not too innovative, wreathed in quotations, are, in the academic arena, a microcosm of the same incoherencies and insecurities characterizing modern post-industrial society where all is for sale and every self/fragment exploitable in isolation from every other.

The burden of one of these defining poets is to return us to the wholeness of experience, to remind us life is lived, not a raw material to be written about, and that language is to speak to one another of our needs; that man may be wonderful or awful, but is part of a larger order, and desperately needs both to know and to *feel* that to be healthy and overcome the violence which consumes self and society; that poetry works on the edge of the inexpressible to broaden and to redeem consciousness from both chaos and speechlessness and to reground our moral sense. It is a tall order, and no

wonder that the poets who find themselves going down this path find it such a large burden.

That fresh appearance of an American Voice will have to be Western, too, where the real creative, American edge exists today on the broad curve of the Pacific edge of the continent and its hinterland, whether indigenous or immigrant, permanent or passing: the real American Voice has the largesse of the West, and its wider, global, Pacific perspective. That voice, mind you, is as much a state of mind as place, although the two are related and the one cannot be had without some escape into the wider Western places of the American place and soul. Nor is that voice manifested only in poetry, as this concluding passage from Norman MacLean's A River Runs Through It shows as his persona of 'Norm' reflects as an old man on his dead father and tragic brother as he fly fishes,

...Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over the rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

The fusion of self with nature and of one with all, clearly stated and feelingly evoked are typical of that voice. Under the surface American celebration of individuality lies a deeper sense of brotherhood stretching across time and place, and union with nature. We recognize that voice when it breaks through, its urgency, its human reek, and its size that matches our hunger for even the briefest moment to be whole and at one and at peace with the Other in the wider universe that so tolerantly endures us.

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