

The American Poem

The United States ... the Greatest Poem

“The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”¹ The words are those of Walt Whitman, from the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was, in a sense, echoing something Ralph Waldo Emerson had said eleven years earlier, in 1844, in his essay “The Poet.” “America is a poem in our eyes,” he declared; “its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.”² Both remarks distill an idea that has captured the imagination of so many Americans, and especially American poets: the idea, or rather the compelling belief, that the New World (as Europeans saw it) could and should be turned into words. America could be written into existence, given not just a local habitation and a name but an identity by a poem. America seemed strange from the very first days of white colonization, to those who crossed the Atlantic to settle or simply exploit it. This was a “silent country,” observed one settler, conveniently ignoring those aboriginal inhabitants who had lived there for perhaps thirty thousand years; and it seemed to need language to fill the void. Some saw it as a wilderness. So the New England cleric Cotton Mather began his epic account of Puritan settlement, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (1702) by announcing:

I WRITE the *Wonders* of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of *Europe*, to the *American Strand*. And, assisted by the Holy Author of that *Religion*, I do ... Report the *Wonderful Displays* of His Infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath *Irradiated an Indian Wilderness*.³

Others saw America in more paradisiacal terms. “Each time I sailed from Spain to the Indies,” Christopher Columbus recalled towards the end of his life,

A History of American Poetry, First Edition. Richard Gray.

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

I reached the point when the heavens, the stars, the temperature of the air and the waters of the sea abruptly changed ... I do not find any Greek or Latin writings which definitely state the worldly situation of the earthly Paradise, and I believe that the earthly Paradise lies here.⁴

Either way, those who encountered this strange new world firmly believed that one, and possibly the only way to come to terms with and begin to understand it was to give it verbal shape. To name America was to know it.

After the founding of the republic, language was called on to perform another task as well, which was to help the infant American nation articulate its destiny. "We have yet had no genius in America," declared Emerson:

which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admired in Homer...⁵

That genius would come, Emerson and others believed, to turn the disparate facts of American historical experience into a coherent story, a heroic narrative with a beginning, middle, and a millennial end. In creating this epic of a new republic such a genius would, it was hoped, do something still further, perhaps more pressing and certainly more personal: he or she would tell Americans something about their individual selves. "The American is a new man," St. Jean de Crèvecoeur proclaimed in 1782, "who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions."⁶ The idea was simple and radical: in committing themselves to what they perceived as a promised land, each and every single person had been altered by the commitment; they might change the land, certainly, but the land would change them. An additional purpose of the new poetry followed from this: it would describe this change, this process of psychic transformation. It would show each reader how, why, and in what manner he or she had become "an American." "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature," Whitman insisted in 1855.

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.⁷

So the American explored, announced, and maybe even invented by the poem would be not only new but ample, a curious and compelling hybrid. Responding to and even mirroring the syncretic character of a "teeming nation of nations," he or she would occupy a liminal space, a proliferating chain of borders; they would fathom and perform a nature that was multiple as well as original; to borrow a phrase from Whitman's most famous poem, "Song of Myself," they would be large, containing multitudes.

So, according to this vision of things, the American landscape was a series of texts that could be read, and understood, with the aid of the American poem; American

history was a sequence of disparate facts waiting for the American poet to give them narrative shape; the American republic was a rich cultural mix, a tangled series of threads requiring both poet and poem to weave them into a meaningful pattern; and the American people, collectively and individually, were psychically and morally embryonic beings whose birth into full knowledge of themselves depended on their being (poetically) written and named. The vision was undoubtedly an apocalyptic one but it was widely shared; and it could be seen as an echo and extension of the utopian dreams that accompanied the early settlement, the millennial visions of the Puritans, and the idealism of the founding fathers of the republic. If America was a New Eden, or, alternatively, a new Canaan, then it surely required its own prophetic voices to announce it. If the United States of America was a new phenomenon, a nation deliberately founded by a few people at a particular moment in time and according to certain specific principles, then it positively demanded someone who could articulate those principles in a measured and memorable way. The American poet was to tell the tale of the tribe: not, perhaps, in the primitive sense of preserving myths of origin but to the extent that he or she was to offer to their readers some intimation of who they were and where they stood. The prophetic voice is not, of course, peculiar to American poetry, even in modern times, but it has sounded there more frequently, emphatically, and resonantly than elsewhere. From the early celebrations of Divine Providence in allowing the colonizers to come safe to land, through Walt Whitman's annunciation of a manifest destiny, to the visionary speech of Hart Crane and then, later, Allen Ginsberg: through all this and many metamorphoses, the millennial impulse has survived.

Two examples of that impulse, divided by two centuries, might help to illustrate this longevity. Here, first, is a passage from a poem called "The Rising Glory of America" by Philip Freneau, published at the end of the eighteenth century:

And when a train of rolling years are past
 ...
 A new Jerusalem, sent down from heaven,
 Shall grace our happy earth ...
 ... Paradise anew
 Shall flourish, by no second Adam lost,
 No dangerous tree with deadly fruit shall grow,
 No tempting serpent to allure the soul
 From native innocence. – A Canaan here,
 Another Canaan shall excel the old...

* * *

– Such days the world,
 And such America at last shall have
 When ages yet to come have run their round.
 And future years of bliss alone remain.⁸

Towards the end of the twentieth century, in turn, Tato Laviera from Puerto Rico ended a poem titled simply “AmeRícan” like this:

AmeRícan, defining the new america, humane america
 admired america, loved america, harmonious
 america, the world in peace, our energies
 collectively invested to find other civili-
 -zations, to touch god, further and further,
 to dwell in the spirit of divinity!

AmeRícan, yes, for now, for I love this, my second
 land, and I dream to take the accent from
 the altercation, and be proud to call
 myself american, in the u.s. sense of the
 word. AmeRícan, America!⁹

Both these poems will be discussed in a little more detail later. For the moment, the crucial point to make about them, and the pairing of them, is a matter of both change *and* continuity. Laviera resists the Anglocentrism implicit in the Freneau poem in favor of a new kind of ethnic identity, “AmeRícan” rather than “American,” the product of a convergence with other minority groups: with New York City as an exemplary space in which cultural mixing, or “*mestizaje*,” occurs. “We give birth to a new generation,” Laviera declares at the beginning of his poem; and he uses the accents of many cultures, a hybrid language that he and other American poets of Hispanic origin call “Spanglish,” the oral tradition and the language of the street, all to describe what it is that is about to be born. What the lines by Freneau and Laviera share, however, is just as significant as their differences. It is also what they share with so many other American poets: the belief in and, following on that, the announcement of a new dispensation in the New World.

From the beginnings of European settlement, however, the millenarian impulse in American poetry has had to do battle with something else that grows directly out of the national inheritance – or, to be more accurate, derives immediately from the freight of cultural assumptions that many of the colonists brought with them across the Atlantic. That something is a suspicion, a distrust of the fictive, the “made” or “made-up” quality of literature in general and poems in particular. “Be not so set upon poetry,” Cotton Mather warned, “as to be always poring on the passionate and measured pages.” Verse fed the sensuous appetites, no matter what its ultimate, higher aims might be, and besides it told tales; it depended, at least in the first instance, on human invention, on men’s and women’s lies rather than God’s truth. And to the Puritan injunction against fiction-making could subsequently be added a distrust of anything that was not immediately useful, functional, that did not help in the clearing of woods or the building of farms, shops, schoolhouses,

and churches. "To America," insisted one of the founding fathers of the republic, Benjamin Franklin,

... one schoolmaster is worth a dozen poets, and the invention of a machine or the improvement of an implement is of more importance than a masterpiece of Raphael ...
Nothing is good or beautiful but in the measure that it is useful...¹⁰

Certainly, Franklin looked forward to a more "refined state of society" when "poetry, painting, music (and the stage as their embodiment)" might be "necessary and proper gratifications." But his demotion of such activities to the level of the elegantly decorative hardly implied that they would even then be central, vital to the life of the culture; and many other commentators, lacking Franklin's intelligence and wit, have somehow contrived to suggest that to be a poet is not to be useful in any conceivable circumstances, and that not to be useful is not to be American. So to the roles of prophet and teller of tales are added those of misfit and trickster: much of what is fruitful and energetic in American poetry – as well as much of what is confusing and self-contradictory – grows out of the tensions generated by this discrete series of different roles.

There are, basically, two potential answers to this charge of uselessness: the accusation that poetry fails to pay homage to the cult of the fact. One is illustrated, in the early history of American poetry, by Edgar Allan Poe, who took the scarlet letter of shame and turned it into an emblem of pride. Poe not only accepted the charge of uselessness, he positively reveled in it. Poe played many roles in his life – the courtly charmer with the ladies, the fastidious dilettante in many of his reviews and essays, the bold verbal fencer in literary disputes – but all of them revolved around his resistance to the notions of use and profit. In answer to what he saw as the predominant emblems of national character, the enterprising Yankee, the energetic Westerner, the ruminative and moralistic New Englander, he embraced an aristocratic model, the idea of leisurely and learned gentility. "During a rainy afternoon," begins one of his essays, "being in a mood too listless for continuous study, I sought relief from *ennui* in dipping here and there, at random, among the volumes of my library – no very large one, certainly, but sufficiently miscellaneous; and, I flatter myself, not a little *recherché*." Playing the part of elegant dandy, living at ease but at odds with the bourgeois culture of the early American republic, Poe argued that it was the special merit of art in general, and poetry in particular, that it had no use value, no moral and – at least, in the commonly accepted sense – no meaning. The notion that poetry should provide instruction was something he dismissed as "the heresy of *The Didactic*." The idea that "every poem ... should inculcate a moral" he described as misguided, adding sardonically, "we Americans especially have patronized this happy idea." "Would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls," Poe insisted,

we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified – more supremely noble than the very poem – this poem *per se* – this poem which is a poem and nothing more – this poem written solely for the poem's sake.¹¹

This is about as far from the world of use, the realm of pulpits, schoolmasters, “barbarism and materialism,” as anyone could go. But as an aim to be pursued, or perhaps a temptation to be feared, the notion of “the poem written solely for the poem’s sake” has remained as seminal in American poetry as those other, more substantial and tangible urges described by Mather, Franklin, and Emerson.

Not many other American poets have played the *flâneur* quite so assiduously as Poe did, or been quite so insistent on seeing poems as, to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu’s account of what he calls “postaristocratic” society, a series of “refined games for refined players.”¹² But many have been drawn towards a similar resistance to meaning of any utilitarian kind or the whole principle of use. “What does it mean?????????????” John Ashbery asks of one of his poems, during the course of writing it; and the fourteen question marks slyly subvert the assumptions, the need for cause and explanation, that lie behind that question. Ed Dorn is more direct. Asked the meaning of the actions of Dorn’s hip poetic epic, *Slinger*, the eponymous hero of the poem laughs at his questioner. “You got some strange / obsessions,” he tells him; “you want to know / what something *means* after you’ve / seen it, after you’ve been there.”¹³ Which is, after all, a hipper way of saying what Poe said: that what matters is the experience – of the poem, a place, a person – not some nugget of supposed wisdom or significance that can somehow be elicited from it. Dorn’s friend and fellow Black Mountain poet, Robert Creeley, puts it another way: talking about life and poetry being “interesting” to the extent that they lack “intentional ‘control.’” The Language poet Charles Bernstein talks about using “opaque & nonabsorbable elements” in his work in order to make it resistant to interpretation. Another poet, a precursor of the Language school, Clark Coolidge, declares simply: “There’s no question of meaning, in the sense of explaining and understanding the poem. Hopefully, it’s a unique object, not just an object.” These are all, as we shall see, (relatively) contemporary echoes of Poe’s insistence that a poem must not mean but be. Not many poets after Poe have cared to imitate his pursuit of the (post-) aristocratic role – although some as otherwise different as John Peale Bishop and James Merrill surely have – but quite a few have embraced his notion of the poem as a free play of textuality. And the resistance to functionalism of form and content that lies at the core of Poe’s poetic principles and practice, that is one of the driving forces in the story of American poetry: as an act of defiance to a culture devoted to the notion of use.

There is, however, a polar opposite to this, another response to the accusation that poetry has no practical point or purpose. And, in the nineteenth century, the significant and symptomatic figure here is Whitman. Whitman’s position was to insist on the functional nature of poetry. To the charge that a poem was an object far less useful than an axe or a shovel, he responded again and again that it performed essentially the same function as those implements. It cleared the ground; it laid the foundations; it helped, crucially, in the making of a new nation. Others had more or less said this before Whitman, but never with such passion and conviction. There were many reasons for this, some of which will be explored in the next chapter, but one that should not be ignored has to do with the origins of Whitman’s own poetic practice. For Poe, the emergent cities of the new republic were a site of

danger, and a dangerous premonition of the direction in which the United States was heading. For Whitman, however, they were sites of possibility, paradigms of the booming, buzzing possibilities of the New World, not least because of their rich mix of peoples and voices. Whitman spent many of his early years as a newspaper journalist and editor. Having left school at the age of eleven, he learned his trade as a writer in the print shop. And, as he wandered around New York City, taking in its sights, observing the people on its streets, then writing essay after essay about his wanderings and observations, he was, without necessarily knowing it, serving an apprenticeship for his poetry. "City of orgies, walks and joys!" Whitman declares in one of his poems, "... as I pass, O Manhattan! Your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love, / Offering response to my own – these repay me."¹⁴ How Whitman was repaid for his wandering around the city is clear enough in the expansive rhetoric, his long, ambulating lines and delight in the spectacle of the people. It is also clear enough from his willingness to immerse himself in the life of the streets. As Whitman saw it, it was his destiny as a poet to build on his early years as a journalist: to attend to the way Americans were living and heading, to tell them what he has learned from attending to their lives and, if at all possible, to head them in the right direction.

"I will teach you my townspeople," a poem by William Carlos Williams begins. And the pedagogical note sounded here is one commonly heard in American poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following on from Whitman, many American poets have insisted, or suggested, that their work offers lively instruction, that their poems are things of use because they show their "townspeople," their fellow Americans and perhaps their fellow human beings as well, how to think, how to feel, how to behave or believe – in short, how to understand themselves and their world. Allen Ginsberg said as much when he argued that poetry offers us the discontinuities of "actual mind," a mind in process or rather a mind that *is* process, how we really are rather than how we "would like other people to think" we are.¹⁵ Poetry, according to this formulation, is useful because it peels away the false identity – of a person, a community, a nation – and exposes the raw actuality of the true. And in showing us who we are, it also offers a signpost as to how we might and maybe should act. The useful, to this extent, bleeds into the political. A poetry that is deeply personal, sometimes confessional or even downright embarrassing in its degree of self-exposure, can bleed into history, revealing with a kind of documentary accuracy the secret impulses and repressed myths of a larger community or even of a nation. In this delicate balancing act between revelation of self and society, exposing the sores of both, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell – two otherwise profoundly different poets – do have something, and something significant in common. The personal can bleed into the political, and the useful into the socially and historically instructive in the work of both. And not only in their work. "The problem is to control history," Kenneth Rexroth insists in one of his poems, "We already understand it."¹⁶ "We want poems that kill," Amiri Baraka has proclaimed, "Assassin poems. Poems that shoot / guns ... / Poems that wrestle cops into alleys / and take their weapons ... // Poem scream poison gas on beasts in green berets."¹⁷ While Adrienne Rich has

claimed that “the words” of her poetry “are purposes. / The word are maps,” enabling her to reveal “the thing itself and not the myth.” Not all poets who seek to offer useful maps of the thing itself, the world and its ways, have the particular investment in class war, racial conflict or gender troubles that, respectively, Rexroth, Baraka, and Rich do. Louis Simpson, for instance, sets himself the rather more modest task of trying to find out, for himself and his readers, how to “live peacefully in the suburbs / and not be bored to death.” But “how to live” remains the question, the consideration for all those poets, following on Whitman, who insist that poetry can make something happen, and should.

Poetry as pedagogical or political agency leads us back into poetry as prophecy: the belief that poems can, as Hart Crane believed, allow us to cross “new thresholds” and offer us “new anatomies” of the human condition. Crane has not been alone, among poets of the twentieth century and later, in calling on Whitman to assist in prophecy. “Walt, tell me Walt Whitman,” Crane implores in one poem, “if infinity / Be still the same as when you walked the beach / Near Paumanok.” “O Walt!” he cries out later, “Ascensions of thee hover in me now / ... / ... O, upward from the dead / Thou bringest tally, and a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood!”¹⁸ And Crane has been even less alone in seeing whatever prophecies his poetry can voice as having a specific address to America. “I am concerned with the future of America,” Crane once explained, “... because I feel persuaded that there are destined to be discovered certain as yet undefined spiritual qualities ... not to be developed so completely elsewhere.”¹⁹ This, as Crane well knew, echoes Whitman’s call to search out “the new times, the new peoples, the new vistas” of the New World and then transform them into “new words, new potentialities of speech.” But what were these new words? How was the New World to be named? Perhaps as succinct an answer as any to these questions was given by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, which was published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840. “In democracies,” Tocqueville declared, “men never stay still: a thousand random circumstances continually make them move from place to place, and there is almost always something unexpected, something ... provisional about their lives.” More to the point, he argued, “each man is for ever driven back upon himself alone.” Whereas “aristocracy brings everyone together, linking peasant to King in one long chain,” one thoroughly articulated, hierarchical framework, “democracy breaks the chain and separates each link.” As a result, people “become accustomed to thinking of themselves in isolation, and imagine that their entire fate is in their own hands.”²⁰ What the consequences of this were for Tocqueville lead us in another direction, and into another chapter of the story of the American poem.

The Poem is You

The theme, or notion, of every American being “driven back upon himself alone” was one to which Tocqueville returned more than once in his account of the infant republic. “Each citizen in a democracy,” he insisted at one point, “usually

spends his time considering the interests of a very insignificant person, namely himself." "There is a danger," he adds elsewhere, "that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart."²¹ Solitude or isolation, self-reliance or egotism, freedom or loneliness, self-sufficiency or pride, self-help or solipsism: the terms may vary – and certainly do so throughout American writing – but they can all be traced back to the structure of feeling that Tocqueville perceived, a structure that has as its keystone the idea of the individual, the single, separate self. It does not take a lot of ingenuity to see how this idea had assumed such importance, since it was and is the initial assumption in American ideology, the country's image of itself, that "the American" was someone who had opted out of society in all but its most elemental and inescapable forms. He or she had left an older world behind, and its relatively sophisticated social framework, to light out for a territory in which it was theoretically possible to determine one's own fate. He or she had, in a sense, repudiated the past. ("Practically," declared Thoreau, "the old have no very important advice to give the young.... Every child begins the world again."²²) Or, as later, more Freudian analysts would have it, he or she had denied the image and authority of the father. Either way, the American had, in the process, rejected those institutions, the products of history, which at once burdened those in older worlds and cultures and given them a reassuring sense of purpose and identity – and, at the same time, they had sought, discovered or devised a neutral ground, a border territory between cultures (and a conflux or mix of them) where the main task became the invention of the self. This older world or culture that the American had left, in fact (as a first-generation immigrant) or imagination (as a second- or later generation), might be Europe, as it is in, say, the fiction of Henry James or the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath, Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson and Susan Howe. It might be Latin America, Asia or Africa or some other part of the world, as it is in the work of poets such as Tato Laviera and Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song and Janice Mirikitani, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni. It might, as in the work of Native American poets like Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo or Roberta Hill Wideman, be an older America, hidden under an enormous accumulation, vast sedimentary layers of history. The fundamental binaries of thought between old and new, together with certain assumptions about what was old about the old and what is new about the new, remain, however; and they both complicate and fire into life the project of translating the new world into words – turning the cultural cross-roads that is America into sound, rhythm, and speech.

No series of cultural assumptions occurs in a vacuum; and it is worth pausing for a moment to consider how this particular series came about. There was, of course, in the first place the simple, historical fact that, when the first waves of white emigration to North America began, Europeans were looking for somewhere that might answer their need for a neutral space, somewhere where the burden of the actual past could be shrugged off and the lost innocence – or, rather, the lost possibilities – of some mythological past might be recovered. People usually find what they are

looking for, somehow, and what they found in their new home was precisely (in the words of one early promoter of colonization):²³

a Virgin Countrey so preserved by Nature out of a desire to show mankinde fallen into the Old Age of Creation, what a brow of fertility and beauty she was adorned with when the world was vigorous and youthfull.

Once things were perfect, the argument runs: before history started, before adulthood and the shades of the prison-house began to close in, before time and the past and other people imposed their burden. Things can be perfect again, this argument continues, the past and otherness can be obliterated, the lost perfection and possibility of times gone by can be recovered in times to come. Longing for an idealized yesterday and hope for an imagined tomorrow form the basic ingredients of what has become known as the American Dream. This strange but compelling mixture of the elegiac and the optimistic characterizes early European writing about America, and it has colored American writing ever since – as these famous closing lines from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald testify:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther ... And one fine morning – so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.²⁴

After the first waves of emigration, the frontier West with all its enthralling possibilities became the site of such nostalgic utopianism. “I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest,” declares Huckleberry Finn at the end of another great American novel, this time by Mark Twain, “because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt and civilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.” And when the frontier disappeared as a historical fact, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the *idea* of the frontier survived – as *The Great Gatsby* intimates – as an appropriate space or place, a field for individual activity limited only by the demands of the imagination.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate this, the formative influence of the West and the frontier: as an historical experience that many people lived through, learning lessons of self-reliance and enduring long periods of isolation, and, even more important, as an idea shaping aims and images of the self both before and after the actual frontier vanished. Equally, it is impossible to exaggerate the seminal impact of immigration in general on American culture, both experientially and mythically, and on the writing of America: immigration, eastwards into the United States as well as westwards, since so many of the new people in the new nation, in the distant and even more the recent past, have come from places other than Europe. Not everyone could light out for the Territory during the first few years of settlement, or even perhaps wished to; nobody can now. Nevertheless, Americans have habitually perceived themselves in pioneering terms – through the language of open spaces, new horizons,

personal mobility, and endless opportunity. They continue to do so, and not only themselves but the nation as a whole. As the pioneer rapidly advanced across the continent in the nineteenth century, for instance, poets like Whitman were only too eager to see the frontier gradually stretched out until it encompassed the globe:

I chant the world on the Western sea ...
I chant the new empire, grander than ever before – As in a
vision it comes to me;
I chant America, the Mistress – I chant a greater supremacy ...²⁵

At such moments, ideas of individual freedom and opportunity begin to shade, in a rather sinister fashion, into notions of personal power: without impugning Whitman's own motives, it is possible to trace a connection here between the American pioneering spirit and American exceptionalism – something that more recent poets like Robert Lowell, Ishmael Reed, and all those involved in resisting the invasion of Iraq on websites like *Poets Against the War* have not been at all reluctant to do. Which is not to say that these poets have not, in turn, been touched by that spirit, quite the contrary. The idea of the frontier may now be secreted in, say, an urban location, with the anonymity of the city supplying a convenient site, the moral vacuum in which the individual can choose or invent an identity. Or it may be dislodged into the notion of inner space, a purely mental, internal freedom that survives the proximity of others and, even, living within a closed system. It may find refuge in the aim of perpetual mobility, a journey without destination that becomes an outward and visible sign of an inward quest. Alternatively, it may be transformed into a matter of creative attitude: the writer, in other words, may take upon himself or herself the role of pioneer pursuing new frontiers of vocabulary and imagination – or, as William Carlos Williams put it, seeking out “a new line” to enable and articulate “a new mind.” Whatever its transmutations, though, the idea remains alive, in both American thought and American writing. The imagery of the frontier, the idea of a world elsewhere in which self-emancipation is attainable, still exert their pressure as sources of inspiration, difficult and sometimes troubling myths.

“American literature, especially in the twentieth century, and notably in the last twenty years,” wrote Toni Morrison in 1992, “has been shaped by its encounter with the immigrant.”²⁶ That is a useful reminder that the psychogeography of the frontier spreads out way beyond the European experience of America or even the imaginative gesture of stepping westwards. Any mental map of America and the writing of America has also to chart this: how the experiences and imaginative agencies of peoples from Asia, Africa, the Hispanic world, and, for that matter, the aboriginal inhabitants have thickened, enriched, and complicated things. The idea of the frontier territory, and the experience of cultural crossing that idea roughly – and, often inaccurately – transliterates, may involve, not a lighting out for the West, but a movement eastwards, northwards, southwards or, as in the case of Native Americans, African Americans, and some Hispanic peoples, a movement that is involuntary, forced. “My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be

in America," writes the Japanese American author Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club*. "I understood I was inventing myself," says the eponymous heroine of *Lucy*, by Jamaica Kincaid, who was born in Central America. The Chicano author José Antonio Villareal talks of his characters moving from Mexico to the American Southwest as part of "the ancient quest for El Dorado"; "and as they moved," he adds, "they planted their seed." *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, who emigrated from India to the United States, ends her story with the eponymous heroine setting out on the open road and traveling westward, "greedy with wants and reckless from hope." And *Reservation Blues* by the Native American writer Sherman Alexie ends in similar vein, with its characters setting out for a fresh start in the city – "Thomas drove in the dark," Alexie says of his central character, the leader of the group. "He drove";²⁷ and, as they set out in search of a new beginning, they are accompanied by the ghosts of wild horses, the emblems of their mythic past. These are all variations on the theme of a new life, the liberation and reinvention of the self in a new territory: a territory that is a rich compound of the actual and the apocryphal – and a territory that because of its interstitial status, its positioning between cultures, is neutral, a blank sheet or borderland, a place where maybe anything can happen. Thoreau talked of "self-emancipation" and insisted, "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour." Profoundly different in origins, and differently inflected as these various texts by Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, and Caribbean writers are – from each other as well as, collectively and individually, from the poems of Whitman or the prose of Thoreau – there is the same fierce belief at work here, a series of convictions fired into life by the (actual or imagined) experience of crossing over, entering into another world where, to quote Toni Morrison again, it might be possible "not only to be born again but to be born in new clothes" with "new elements of self."²⁸

The energies at work in American culture, American writing, and, in particular, American poetry cannot, however, simply be defined in terms of the idea or experience of crossing over. What was and is at work here involves other, often quite distinct and distinctive events and systems of belief – and, for that matter, the dialectical interplay between them. Among these shaping beliefs or ideologies is Puritanism, the religious system that dominated the early history of New England and that continued to exert a powerful influence on the hearts and minds of Americans long after the Puritan hegemony ceased to exist. For the Puritan, every material fact was an emblem, a symbol of some deeper spiritual truth: every human experience could be seen as part of a moral fable, an epic narrative devised by God. An event as trivial as a mouse gnawing away a Bible, left by accident in a barn, could be interpreted allegorically – and was, by the poet Edward Taylor. For by looking at what was left in the Bible, the good Puritan could read the message sent by the Divine Being through one of its messengers; he or she could study the events of history – even the most inconsequential and apparently absurd events – and then turn them into myth.²⁹ Few Americans after the early Puritans were willing to push the allegorizing tendency quite so far, or to interpret things in such straightforward, moralistic terms. But possibly one reason why American poets, among others, are so prone to symbolism, and so intent on endowing

those symbols with an ethical dimension, is that they are part of a culture still haunted by the Puritans. Not only that, the habit of introspection, a strange belief in the potentially educative nature of pain, the tendency to see death as the defining, determining moment in life: all these are part of a complex of feeling peculiar to Puritanism that is recognizably there in the work of poets as otherwise different as Emily Dickinson and Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Creeley. Like a ghost, a familiar spirit, the Puritan temper is still there in American poetry of the last two or more centuries, in however elusive or shadowy a form.

Dostoevsky once observed that what he called the American spirit is at once fantastical and “strangely ‘material.’” Which is a simple and succinct way of saying that there is a curious, even paradoxical combination of idealism and materialism in a great deal of American thought; and there is a tendency, noticeable in American writing especially, to de-materialize the material while rendering the spiritual dimension in all too solid a way. Think, for instance, of the robust hymns to America penned by Whitman, Carl Sandburg, and Allen Ginsberg that manage to be fleshily sensual and spiritually prophetic at one and the same time, or the way poets such as Robinson Jeffers, Muriel Rukeyser, and Susan Howe adopt a poetic tone and temper that is simultaneously rapt, vatic, and earthy. Part of this paradox must be attributed to Puritanism, with its willingness to see the physical world as a series of signs (which serves to de-materialize it) but easily interpretable, chiefly moral signs (which serves to bring matters back to the realm of action, to concrete experience). Part, however, has its source in another movement that exerted significant pressure on American intellectual and cultural life, the philosophy of the Enlightenment. For Enlightenment thinking – responsible for such cornerstones of the republic as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States – proclaims an allegiance to the concrete, tangible world while nevertheless building up all knowledge from self-awareness, the certainty of one’s own existence. As Bertrand Russell has observed, it is at once “objective” and “subjective”: “objective” in the sense that it directs attention to empirical experience and demonstrable proof, and “subjective” in that its criteria of judgment – clearness, distinctness, agreement or disagreement – have an internal, individualistic, subjectivist basis, so making life contingent upon mind.³⁰ Alert to this startling combination of idealism and materialism in the people they knew, Charles Eliot Norton declared that Whitman united “the characteristics of a Concord philosopher with those of a New York ... fireman”; while James Russell Lowell observed of Emerson that he had “A Greek head on right Yankee shoulders.”³¹ Emerson was a “Plotinus-Montaigne,” Lowell went on, in whom “the Egyptian’s gold mist / And the Gascon’s shrewd wit cheek-by-jowl coexist.” Similar remarks have been made about their American characters by (among many others) Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner: for example, Ahab in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Jay Gatsby, and Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) – all of them confuse power in the material world with the fulfillment of an intangible and very personal dream. The paradox at work here is summed up in a famous line of Robert Frost’s, “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.” – or, for that matter, in Hart Crane’s claim that he began to “touch the clearest

veins of eternity flowing through the crowds around us” – and so embark on a spiritual voyage that would lead to some of the most visionary poetry ever produced by an American – after a “thrilling experience this last winter in the dentist’s chair.”³² It would be wrong, of course, to put all this down to the impact of the Enlightenment, or even the combined consequences of the Enlightenment and Puritanism. Emerson and Whitman were far more than just the cultural descendants of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin; so, perhaps even more so, were Frost and Crane. But it would surely be right to suggest that why American thinking and writing, or at least much of it, brings together “gold dust” and “shrewd wit,” dream and fact, the veins of eternity, the crowd and the dentist’s chair, has to do with the mixed heritage of Descartes, John Locke, and the founding fathers of the republic.

The other, shaping ideas the Enlightenment offered to forms of American thought and writing were those of Use and Progress. Use, the utilitarian attitude, has been touched on already. But the notion of Progress is probably worth pausing over because it has had such an impact on the way many Americans, including American poets, think about themselves. Obviously, the Puritans, when they first arrived in the New World, believed in progress of a kind but it was primarily personal and spiritual progress that captivated their imaginations. They hardly believed in social progress, the – potentially unending – improvement of an entire society; and they claimed, at least, not to be interested in material progress as an end in itself – material rewards, so the doctrine went, were important only in so far as they could be seen as signs of God’s grace. There was a certain amount of casuistry or self-deception implicit in this claim, of course; it was here, perhaps, that the seeds of the confusion between the spiritual and the material, mentioned just now, were sown most profusely and dangerously. But the way in which a culture perceives itself is important; it has a profound effect on its life and development. So it is worth emphasizing the fact that the Puritans did see themselves in this way, and that, by contrast, the body of thought that the Enlightenment offered to the United States set the idea of Progress with a capital “P” upon a pedestal. A person like Franklin was sure that the good life could be realized here and now on the earth; he was sure that society could go on improving; and he was sure that all this could be done best of all in the new republic that he had helped to found. He, and others like him, gave to his fellow Americans the concepts of limitless growth, dynamic development, and almost inevitable self-improvement that have been responsible, equally, for the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, the visionary optimism of a Whitman or a Crane – or a Tato Laviera or an Amiri Baraka – and, on a less exalted level, for these rather creaking lines from an utterly typical nineteenth-century poem – written by a once popular but now largely forgotten poet who will be discussed briefly in the next chapter:

What strength! What strife! What rude alarms!
 What shocks! What half-shaped armies met!
 A mighty nation moving west,
 With all its steely sinews set
 Against the living forests³³

Lines like these show how the Enlightenment doctrine of Progress could fit neatly with the ideology of the westward movement; the two seem to draw force and energy from each other, as each thrusts into the light a vision of total possibility, an open road, a boundless future.

Just as definitive, as far as this vision is concerned, is another movement that has contributed to the way many Americans think and write – and, sometimes, act: Romanticism. Romanticism has a special significance for the poetry of the United States, because that poetry was and is written after the Romantic Revolution. There is an interesting paradox at work here. One reason why questions about the distinctiveness of American literature, about how to write an American poem or create an American epic, began to be asked in the early nineteenth century was precisely thanks to a debt to Europe, and in particular European Romanticism. Certainly, the political break with England acted as a catalyst for cultural self-discovery; it helped, in other words, to focus minds on such questions as, “What is an American?” and “What is an American poet?” But such questions seemed pressing, seminal for people like Emerson and Whitman because they had learned about the notions of national character and national culture from British and German writers: “the spirit of the nation,” “the folk,” the idea of a national narrative, songs and stories that could express and embody the culture of a nation – all these were part of the currency of European Romanticism, which Americans willingly adopted as their own. “Can we never be thought to have learning or grace / Unless it be brought from that damnable place?”³⁴ Philip Freneau was to inquire at the end of the eighteenth century. Freneau, as we shall see, was thinking about a very specific form of stylistic colonialism, the mind forged manacles in which, as he saw it, American writers were trapped thanks to their continuing debt to the “damnable” might of European aesthetic forms. The irony here, although Freneau was hardly aware of it, was that, even when he and other writers were talking about breaking away from all this and creating determinately American forms and measures, they were echoing the accents and sharing the assumptions of all those European poets and philosophers who believed in the reality of nationhood. Even the belief in the vital necessity, and the real possibility, of a national culture and a national poetics was, in the end, an importation from “that damnable place.”

The particular forms that nationhood assumed in the United States, the specific terms in which many Americans – and among them, crucially, American poets – perceived themselves, were, of course, separate and distinct. The imagined community that was the early United States was not simply an echo or repetition of the communities being imagined or invented back in, say, England or Germany. But even here, in the actual particulars and processes of national self-identification in the United States, there was a distinct debt owed to Romanticism. After all, along with the ideology of westward expansion and the progressive tendencies in Enlightenment thought, the visionary dimension in Romantic thinking and writing spurred many Americans on to conceive of their destiny as an open one, their horizons as limitless. And it helped to promote that nostalgic utopianism mentioned earlier. Shelley’s memorable lines from “To a Skylark,” “We look before and after, / And

pine for what is not,” could almost be taken as a signpost for American dreaming. Romanticism also encouraged Americans to find consolation in nature for their alleged lack of culture, or, to be more accurate, it prompted many of them to celebrate nature as the true embodiment of their culture – its openness, its air of possibility and its innocence. The space, the sheer size of the continent could encourage notions of mobility, the endless possibilities of a “future that year by year recedes before us.” The novelty of the flora and fauna, the abundance of life could promote visions of a vital and continually self-generating national community and culture. The landscape could become the American equivalent of the Pyramids, the Acropolis or the Colosseum. Combining the idea of America as the world’s newly recovered garden with a Romantic interest in preserving idyllic and primitive natural conditions, American poets could record their surroundings seen as if for the first time, a country untouched by European sensibility, let alone settlement. And they could declare, as Crèvecoeur did and then many writers after him, that the forms of American culture were at once far more ancient than those of Europe (what building, after all, was anywhere near as old as a river or a mountain?) and far newer (because rivers and mountains are alive, endlessly self-renewing and changing).

And then there was and is Romanticism’s most significant contribution to American poetry in particular: the idea of an American epic, some great work that would enshrine in verse the achievements and promise of the New World. Even in the colonial period, there was a sense that a work like this was needed; several attempts were made to present God’s way with His Chosen People in epic terms. The most widely read of these, although not a poem, is Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a learned and vastly documented history of New England which begins, as a passage quoted earlier intimates, by echoing Virgil’s *Aeneid*. But it was in the nineteenth century, really, that the appropriate forms for the American epic began to emerge; they began to do so partly under the pressure of republican feeling and partly responding to the inspiration of Romanticism. “I should hope,” wrote the statesman and second American President, John Adams, “to live to see our young America in Possession of an Heroick Poem equal to those the most esteemed in any Country.”³⁵ And although Adams was not to live to see it, one example of such an heroic poem did appear by the middle of the century, in 1855: “Song of Myself” in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. “Song of Myself” reveals the true shape of the American epic: a shape that was to be imitated by, among many others, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H(ilda) D(oolittle), Hart Crane – and then, after them, Charles Olson, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Diane Wakoski, and Susan Howe. It is, as we shall see later, essentially the shape of the Romantic epic, rooted in autobiography and a sense of spiritual possibility, resisting narrative and very often argument in favor of a more intuitive, associative approach. Fundamental to this kind of epic is the strategy of fragmentation and multiplication: the poem is conceived spatially, as a mosaic, made up of fragments, images – or, as William Carlos Williams was later to put it, things on a field, fragments and images that the reader is then invited, or even compelled, either to connect (as in the work of Eliot and Pound) or (as in the poetry of O’Hara and Ashbery) to take at face value as random, existential flow,

verbal and imaginative play. Equally fundamental are the ideas of openness, interaction, and collaboration. The process of self-discovery – or, as some writers would have it, self-reinvention – is theoretically endless and so the poem cannot come to any real terminus or conclusion. The act of readerly involvement – as each of us works or plays with the open text to create meanings, discover felicitous connections or simply go with the flow – also ensures that there is no convenient exit, no authentic way of writing “The End.” “Small erections may be finished by their first architects,” observes Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, “grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity.”³⁶ That is a sentiment shared, almost without exception, by those poets who have ventured to write a truly American epic; time and again, the architecture of the poem invites us, not so much to complete the building as to continue to build.

“It occurs to me I am America, / I am talking to myself again.”³⁷ That observation, made in one of Allen Ginsberg’s poems, betrays a tendency shared by many American poets, to be intimate and prophetic, quirky and serious, at one and the same time. It also suggests just how ingrained the idea of the self is in American thinking and writing: a self that is both solitary and yet somehow implicated – by example or imitation, origin or destination – in a larger, local, regional or even national culture. There are obvious dangers involved in talking about an American poetics. These are partly due to a point already alluded to, that the nation is itself a construct, a cultural artifact. “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness,” wrote Ernest Gellner, “it invents nations where they do not exist.” Tom Nairn has said something similar. “Nationalism,” he suggested, “is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as ‘neurosis’ in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity.” Another authority on this vexed subject, Hugh Seton-Watson, has admitted that he is “driven to the conclusion” that “no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised”; and yet, he adds, “the phenomenon has existed and still exists.” “All I can find to say,” Seton-Watson concludes, “is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one.”³⁸ A nation is, to this extent, what Benedict Anderson has christened an “imagined community.” No community larger than what Anderson terms a “primordial village” is “real” in the sense that everyone in it knows everyone else. No community is or should be one based on the denial of difference and conflict. To call a poet American, for instance, is not to say that he or she is either the same or has precisely the same origins, aims or interests as any other poet who is called American. The term allows for multiple significations; it is fluid, a distillation of a complex crossing of discrete historical forces. “Communities are to be distinguished,” Anderson has argued, “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”³⁹ “Style,” as Anderson uses the word, incorporates many things. The bedrock here is language, of course. Communities are constructed, defended, and resisted by words (spoken as much as, or perhaps even more than, written). But other human activities are necessarily at work; communities are also invented and then commemorated by monuments, by maps and museums – and, more recently, by a mass technology that enables difference up to a point to both

consumer and producer. Difference to the consumer comes from, for example, the media-making of America; Americans can see themselves, and others can see them, in terms of the many Americas imagined on film, television, and other electronic/mass media. Difference to the producer comes from the chance the new information technology gives for cultural diversity; it is, quite simply, easier, thanks to the multiple opportunities now for “publication” – that is, communication beyond the immediate, face-to-face community – for any group to make its voice heard. The mistake here would be to see these new forms as inventions in the sense of fabrication and falsity. And an even more fundamental mistake would be to infer that because nations are invented then nationalism is fake and irrelevant. It is not necessarily that; it simply supplies some of the terms in which human subjects, among them writers, habitually think of themselves. It offers a way of working at the interface between consciousness and history – and a way of making sense of the fragmented, discontinuous landscape – to borrow a word from Clifford Geertz, the “hodge-podge”⁴⁰ – that is any culture. It offers a way of translating a space we inhabit into a place we believe we know. And it is this translation, or what Anderson calls “style,” that is at stake here; it is, in short, what we are talking about when we talk about “the American poem.”

“The poem is concerned with language on a very plain level,” begins a piece by John Ashbery titled “Paradoxes and Oxymorons.”

Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it
You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other⁴¹

If there is a characteristic voice in American poetry, then this surely is it. The tone is intimate, immediate, collaborative to the point of being confrontational. As so often in American writing, the “you,” the direct address to the reader, appears even before the “I” does. “What’s a plain level?” the voice of the poem asks, and then answers:

It is that and other things,
Bringing a system of them into play. Play?
Well, actually, yes ...⁴²

The poem, evidently, requires playfulness, the sprightly mobility of words and rhythms announcing that life is motion; and it needs to be “open-ended,” so susceptible to change as to be protean, “lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.” Also, the poet intimates, it should generate a sense of unease, something that is a necessary consequence of a commitment to potential, the “dreamed role-pattern” of the future rather than the prescriptive structures of the past. As Ashbery draws to a conclusion in which very little is concluded, he seems to be speaking not only for his own perception of things but for generations of American poets who have made the direct encounter with process and particularity their shaping aim. The “I” is more shifting and shadowed here than it is in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily

Dickinson, or, for that matter, the work of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, let alone anything by Robert Frost or Marianne Moore. Still, there is a feeling as always of a specific consciousness, however contingent or metamorphic its nature, at work on the real and the reader. Ashbery's closing point here is, in fact, one that links the elusive character of his own identity to the equally elusive character of his audience. "It has been played once more," Ashbery says of the casual yet graceful sense of experience he has been celebrating, and the poetic instrument used to celebrate it. And he then adds this, almost as a challenge:

I think you exist only
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and you aren't there
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.⁴³

Those words express a conviction or intimation that, arguably, fires every American poem into life. The poem is the identity of the poet, realized in the act of writing; it also, Ashbery insists, enacts identity for the reader, as he or she participates in the re-creative process of reading it; in doing so, it achieves a brief moment of communion. Poet and audience are caught for an instant in a fragile web of words; together, they are compelled into a recognition that the liberation of being and the realization of communal meaning dreamed of by so many of those who have come to the United States – if they are to be found anywhere at all – are to be found there.

There, the poem, is in effect a site where the self of the poet and the self of reader are both invented and enacted. "Locate I," Robert Creeley declares in one of his poems, adding elsewhere, "position is where you / put it, where it is." The perceptual position of the speaker, the poet, is pivotal; it is this that determines identity; the "I" is located not just by the "eye" but by what the eye sees and the voice enunciates; the space of the poem is where space is transfigured into place and both meaning and being are constructed, given a local habitation and a name. Creeley expands on this in a poem called "The Pattern" that will be quoted and discussed in more detail later. "As soon as / I speak," Creeley confesses, "I / speaks." "It" may want to be "free," he goes on, but lies "impassive" "in the direction of its words."⁴⁴ Consciousness, the suggestion is, and self-consciousness are a function of language; the speaker, in this case the poet, sees and situates the self via words. So, to recall that bold claim made by Adrienne Rich, the words of a poem, any poem, are "maps": maps that trace and determine the geography of the self and direct us towards an understanding of just what it means to be – and to be in a particular place and time.

No American poet has perhaps understood this better than a poet of the same generation as Creeley and Rich, Elizabeth Bishop. As we shall see, her poems are full of maps because, for her, poem and map are interchangeable. The poem is a map because it is a symbolic journey; it represents an attempt to reclaim the world for the mind – and to reclaim, in particular, the self, the world of the mind. "You are an I," Bishop recalls herself thinking, when she was about to become seven years old, "you are an *Elizabeth*." For her then, at the time, Bishop tells us, "nothing stranger / had ever

happened”; and for her now, remembering and recreating that time, and rehearsing the years in between, “nothing / stranger could ever happen.”⁴⁵ The connection intimated here between Elizabeth the child recalled and Elizabeth the adult recollecting and poet rewriting a childhood moment is simple but seminal: the strangeness of “I” leads to the compulsion to particularize and perform that strangeness, to name the self (“you are an *Elizabeth*”). Words, poems, map – which is to say construct a figure for – the odd and otherwise unnameable and incomprehensible fact of being.

“I’m Nobody!” Emily Dickinson tells the reader,

Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – Too?
Then there’s a pair of us!⁴⁶

Poet and reader are complicit, paired in their anonymity; and so the poem voices identity for both of them, turning “Nobody,” at least temporarily, into “Somebody.” That complicity, a signature feature of American poetry, is memorably registered by Walt Whitman in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” when he approaches his imagined audience with even more intimacy than usual, telling each individual member of that audience, each of us readers, “closer yet I approach you.” “Who knows,” he adds, “for all the distance, but I am as good as looking / At you now, for all you cannot see me?”⁴⁷ This takes that relationship between the “I” and “you” of the poem, mentioned earlier, a stage further. There is reciprocity, collaboration as the poet shares with the reader in the project of knowing and naming the self. Poet and reader think each other into being, realize a figure for their own and each other’s identities in the shared space of the poem. Think, or as a more recent Native American poet, Joy Harjo, has put it, remember and reconstruct. “Remember that you are all people and that all people are you, /” she tells each imagined member of her audience. “Remember.” “Remember that you are this universe and that this / universe is you. / Remember that all is motion, is growing in you,” she concludes. “Remember the language comes from this.”⁴⁸ What she calls “the dance that language is” is, in fact, the key for Harjo, the way to unlock what people have been, are, and may become. And not just for Harjo. More formalist poets like Gjertrud Schnackenberg and Brad Leithauser similarly attend to the intimate connections between identity, language, and location; and more abstracted and visionary poets such as William Bronk dwell just as obsessively as Harjo does on the elusive, evasive connections between consciousness, our construction of ourselves and place.

In “Imaginary Prisons,” for instance, Schnackenberg dwells on the various, indelible ways in which the personal, the historical, and writing are intertwined, how we write ourselves into being as individuals and communities. “It isn’t history if it isn’t written – /,” she observes, “It’s written here, and written in memory.” So “here,” the space of the poem, becomes the place where identity is realized and mutuality is registered and recognized; just as “here,” the site of memory, is where we, poets and readers alike, begin to understand and define who we are and what connections we share. And in “The Mind’s Landscape in Winter,” Bronk conjures up a “winter mind”

that “is always lost and gropes its way ... even when the senses seize the world”;⁴⁹ the only refuge against the unhomelike nature of our world, Bronk intimates here and elsewhere in his work, is supplied by the stories and metaphors we come to inhabit, the narratives that give us shelter from the storm, the rhythms and chants that provide us with the saving illusion that life has measure and sense. Similarly, the signature poem from Leithauser’s first collection, “Hundreds of Fireflies,” attends to a recurring compulsion in his work: the shifting elusive series of connections that exist between our material environment and our psychic landscapes, between where we are and who we are. The piece begins as a formally elaborate but apparently simple portrait of fireflies on a summer evening. “The night belongs / to them,” we are told. “Darkness brightens them.” However, with the entrance into the poem of the poet and another human presence (a presence who is, quite probably, the poet’s wife), the perspective and tonal value subtly shift. “So it’s as wooers they come / bumbling the cottage screens,” the poet reflects, “to illuminate palely, eerily / our faces.” The illumination is both literal and metaphorical, since the fireflies seem to light up the relationship of the human presences that observe them and wonder at their graceful brilliance. With the prospect of “lengthening fall night” and “a year / of city living under skies grayly gathering snow,” the poet and his companion are, in a sense, harvesting a potential recollection, something to warm them and their relationship and protect them against the cold to come. They will be taking the memory of their firefly summer evening, and the promise of other, similar evenings in later summers, back with them to the slate gray skies and “the murk of shopping plazas.” The memory and the promise are like buried treasure, a shared emotional resource as well as a source of hope and inspiration. Once again, the poet initiates himself and the reader into the mysteries of verbal and existential reciprocity, the elaborate pattern of interaction and interdependence existing between the natural and the human, the experienced (the moment remembered) and the spoken (the act of remembering and articulating the memory). And, crucially, characteristically, “Hundreds of Fireflies” not only reflects on its subject, it also reflects it, by offering an elaborate verbal music, a mosaic of recurring words and figures that mirror the patterns it describes and celebrates, the way we make ourselves by making our place in the world.⁵⁰

The Breaking of the New Wood

One of the first commentators on the emerging American republic, Tocqueville, is helpful here again because he was also one of the first to suggest just how much the drama of the self was likely not only to inform but also to shape American writing. “On the whole,” Tocqueville argued:

... the literature of a democracy will never demonstrate the order, regularity, skill and art characteristic of aristocratic literature; formal qualities will be ignored or despised. The style will often be bizarre, incorrect, overburdened, loose, and almost always strong and bold.⁵¹

What Tocqueville was observing, with a characteristic mixture of alarm and admiration, was that writers in the United States, seeing themselves making themselves – subscribing, in effect, to the cult of the personal – were unlikely to depend on established forms and precedents, the aesthetic rules devised by other people in and for other situations. They would not, except with reluctance or qualification, put themselves, and their performance of themselves, in the strait-jacket of conventional verse and traditional structures – particularly given that many of those structures were meant to “communalize” experience, to render it less individualistic and idiosyncratic. They would have, somehow, to invent, to unravel a form that would adequately express a personal drama; they would have to find a way of saying what Whitman was to say, “*I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.*” And they would have to do this at the risk of possibly appearing eccentric or aberrant: a risk worth taking since, as Thoreau mischievously pointed out, the cardinal sin in a democracy is surely not eccentricity but conformity, failing to march to the beat of a different drum. “What demon possessed me,” Thoreau once asked, “that I behaved so well?”

So, what the reader encounters in American poetry is a tradition of the new, a tradition of radical experiment, the personal address and frequently surprising innovation. Even less obviously experimental poets like Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson, Elizabeth Bishop and Dana Gioia seem to speak out of the depths of their solitude; even the distanced, hieratic tone of John Crowe Ransom or, later, Louise Gluck, the elaborate patternings of Marianne Moore or Amy Clampitt cannot disguise the fact that these poets are engaged in a lonely confrontation with the real, less than usually (which is to say, less than usually by European standards) mediated by social or literary convention. Of course, this is not to deny the inescapable, ineluctable fact of intertextuality, the interdependence of poets and poetry. “The ugly fact is that books are made out of other books,” Cormac McCarthy once remarked. His fellow Southerner, the poet, novelist, and essayist Wendell Berry, has echoed this remark, although framing the same point in more positive terms. “The best writing even when printed,” Berry has claimed, “is full of intimations that it is the present version of earlier versions of itself.... It is a palimpsest.” And another poet, Joseph Brodsky, not born in the United States as McCarthy and Berry were but adopting it as his home, has agreed with Berry that textual interdependence is a mark and measure of value. “A good poet,” observes Brodsky,

does not avoid influence or continuity but frequently nurtures them, and emphasises them in every possible way ... Fear of influence, fear of dependence is the fear – the affliction – of a savage, but not of culture, which is all continuity, all echo.⁵²

Dialogue between poets is inevitable and even desirable. William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg were all in a way engaged in a conversation with Whitman, Robert Frost with Emerson and Thoreau, Sylvia Plath with Emily Dickinson, Robert Lowell with Allen Tate then later William Carlos Williams, John Ashbery is even now conversing with Wallace Stevens. And so on. What matters here is the quality of the dialogue, the active response to and reaccentuation

of other, earlier texts. Intertextuality is, in this sense, quite distinct from the acceptance of aesthetic convention or the pursuit of traditional structures. The American poet talks *with* and talks *back to* other poets, engages in something that is active, (re)creative; she, or he, does not, or at least tries not to, talk *like* them.

In his poem "A Pact," Ezra Pound makes the point in a way that, as it should, says as much about Pound as it does about Whitman. "I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman," the poem begins:

I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father.
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood.
Now it is time for carving.
We have one sap and one root –
Let there be commerce between us.⁵³

Announcing his intention of talking with and talking back to his illustrious poetic predecessor, Pound also insists on his right not to talk like him. This is a dialogue between generations but also a dialogue of equals; the "child" has "grown" into his own person and is ready to "make friends" now that the relationship is a balanced one, based, not on obedience or disobedience for its own sake, but on a recognition of interdependence and parity. The kind of connection with Whitman that Pound outlines and anticipates here is characteristic of a poet who was never short of self-confidence when it came to making claims for the truth of poetry and his own status and authority – both as a poet and a guide, philosopher and friend to other poets. But it is also characteristic, or rather symptomatic, of the American tradition of the new, finely poised between continuity and change: an acknowledgment of the inevitable links between poets of different generations and recognition of the equally inevitable need to (as Pound himself famously put it) make it new. In telling the tale of American poetry, there is a similar obligation on the narrator of that tale to trace connection and disruption: to catch the echoes and conversations, the intimacies of word and gesture that connect one poet with others and to measure how that same poet struggles nevertheless to forge what Williams called a new mind and a new line. American poetry is a web of words in which different poets work hard to make their own voices heard, to tell their stories precisely by attending and then responding to the voices and stories of others.

In the case of poets writing prior to the establishment of the American republic and just after, trying to make their voice heard meant talking with, talking back to, and even talking against poetic voices from other, older cultures. Philip Freneau, as some lines from a poem of his quoted earlier indicate, was acutely and testily aware how the "damnable place" from which the United States had liberated itself politically still exerted a profound aesthetic influence, in effect dictating the terms of "learning and grace." He was writing, as he sensed, in the wrong place and time.

There was that, the continuing cultural impact of the Old World. And there was also, as Freneau intimates elsewhere, the problem of writing poetry at a moment of conflict and in a society dedicated to common sense and use: during “an age employed in edging steel” and in a place “where rigid Reason” dictated the terms of the culture.⁵⁴ Over a century before Freneau made that bitter remark, two other writers, Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, as we shall see, found themselves facing related but slightly different challenges: the cultural impact not so much of the Old World as of beliefs and practices brought over from there – and the demands of an age employed not so much in edging steel as in settling a land, making it a suitable home for the faithful. With Bradstreet, there was a further challenge. In order to find her poetic voice and make it heard, she certainly had to cope with the conflicts she experienced between the spirit and the flesh, her devotion to inherited customs and beliefs and an equally passionate dedication to life and love. But she also had to deal with the problem of being a woman – and trying to be a poet – in a distinctly patriarchal culture: where the commands and demands of the Puritan fathers, as well as those of her Father in heaven, were meant to be taken as absolute, and the notion of female duty hardly stretched beyond the domestic roles of wife and mother. As a woman poet (itself an oxymoronic title in the eyes of many of her contemporaries) Bradstreet was to be echoed and talked back to by other, later poets who shared with her an interest in, or even an obsession with, what it means to be female and a writer: among them, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Sylvia Plath, Nikki Giovanni, Adrienne Rich, Diane Wakoski, Susan Howe, Marilyn Hacker, and Molly Peacock. Sometimes the way these later female poets engage and converse with what might be called their founding mother is there on the surface of the poem. It is there, for instance, in the intense self-consciousness, the need to exist in and by expression, to live via language, that Adrienne Rich gives voice to in much of her writing. “I must write for myself,” Rich declares in “Upper Broadway,” “I look at my face in the glass and see / a halfborn woman.” It is there in a rawer way, in Wakoski’s pursuit of what she calls “the completely personal expression.” “I, always slightly overweight according to Vogue standards /,” Wakoski writes, “and living in the richest country in the world, / would not be fairly using the material to hand / were I not to speak of my own experiences.”⁵⁵ For that matter, it is there in the broader cultural and political brushstrokes favored by Giovanni. “I wish I knew how it would feel / to be free,” Giovanni confesses in a poem that is about being African American and, equally, being a woman. “it’s a sex object if you’re pretty, /” she observes, “and no love / or love and no sex if you’re fat.” “get back fat black woman,” Giovanni adds, “be a mother / grandmother strong thing but not a woman.”⁵⁶ Structurally, and less openly, though, the poetry of Bradstreet receives a different kind of revoicing, a reaccentuation, in the way poets such as Hacker and Peacock take on the strict forms of a specifically male tradition in order, like Bradstreet, both to honor and disrupt them. Formal structures, in the work of both, are not rejected out of hand, since they are closely wedded to the intimacies and the loyalties of family life, mutuality and connection, love and friendship; they are, in short, products and paradigms of the ties that bind us all, one to another. But neither are those structures seen as simply authoritative,

taken on trust or used without question, revision, and where necessary, alteration, since no ties, however intimate, long lasting or passionate, should prevent us from the needs or truths of the personal, the demand of the immediate – or what Thoreau christened self-emancipation.

The confessional poet John Berryman, as we shall see, wrote a long poem called *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956). That, in itself, suggests how those American poets who have engaged in a creative dialogue with Anne Bradstreet are not exclusively female. Formally and thematically, in fact, Berryman's poem is rooted, just as the poems of Bradstreet, Hacker, and Peacock are, in a rhythm of resistance and surrender; an alternating rhythm of rise and fall, reaching out and drawing back, enacts the belief that Berryman clearly shared with his Puritan predecessor, that life is at best a series of little victories won in the face of ultimate defeat and death. The conversation here is with the first major American female poet; it could, however, given the issues Berryman explores, have been with Bradstreet's near contemporary Edward Taylor. Taylor was just as preoccupied as Bradstreet was, and Berryman was to be, with the possibilities of form, as a regulator of and a release for intimate feelings and the primal, existential rhythms of rebellion and surrender. And, like Bradstreet in particular, he was preoccupied by the struggle between soul and body: his acute awareness of death and his love of life, his devotion to God and his dedication to the things of the earth. Few of those later American poets who have engaged in a poetic dialogue with him have shared his religious convictions. What they have responded to, and echoed – adding their own nuances as they have done so – is his close attention to the intimacies of the solitary life together with the fierce belief that those intimacies matter, are worth paying attention to; or they have responded to his pained sense that knowledge of life's brevity only intensifies our recognition of its beauty. On a more formal level, and in addition, many of them have responded to his use of poetic structures as both a discipline and a source of emotional liberation. Confessional poets and New Formalists, for example, may have little enough in common. What they do have, however, is an emotional and vocal connection with Taylor, as they struggle with the same issues of meaning and form.

For Taylor, very often, God was the god of small things; his poems, many of them, are meditations on the possible spiritual significance of even the humblest domestic object (as in "Huswifery") or tiniest natural creature (as in "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly"). And Taylor's reverent attention to the commonplace, his cherishing of minute particulars in the belief that apocalyptic meanings may be discovered in the apparently ordinary and everyday, is echoed time and again in American poetry. The leaf of grass that provided Whitman with a title for his book as well as a source of wonder and inspiration, the red wheelbarrow that William Carlos Williams celebrated in one of his most well-known poems, the steeplejack's tools of trade that Marianne Moore observes and carefully records in her poem named after him, the "little granite pail" with a blue handle that Lorine Niedecker tells us contains "what's got away" in her life: these are just instances of an impulse so many American poets share with Taylor to attend carefully and even passionately to what at first glance might appear not worth attending to, the apparently but deceptively mundane.

Taylor's Calvinist beliefs may not be endorsed by many subsequent writers, but his belief in the divinity of the familiar certainly is. So, for that matter, is the fire and ice of his New England temperament, with other poets from that chilly, passionate part of the world like Frost, Robinson, and Lowell. "Here where the wind is always north-north-east," Robinson says in his poem on New England, "Wonder begets an envy of all those / Who boil elsewhere with such a lyric yeast."⁵⁷ Passion does not come easily "here," Robinson intimates, but it is all the more fiercely sweet or sorrowful for that. It is, as poetry from the region from Taylor through to Lowell and beyond testifies, all the more intense for being difficult to admit, address, and articulate. Another poet who spent most of his life in New England, Wallace Stevens, develops this theme by speaking of the sheer necessity of the "mind of winter," the stark, stripped-down vision required to see things as they are, "nothing that is not there" and "the nothing that is." But Stevens also reminds us of other elements in Taylor's poetry, by echoing and reaccentuating them. The recalcitrant strangeness and wonder of even the tiniest natural or man-made object like a blackbird or a jar is a continuing bass note in Stevens's poetry just as it is in Taylor's. So also is the unwavering belief that, as Stevens puts it, "Death is the mother of beauty." Announcing that, in "Sunday Morning," the poet sounds the keynote to that poem, and to much of his other work. He might just as easily have been voicing a half-hidden message in Taylor's work. For most of his life, Stevens never shared any religious convictions with Taylor. But what he did share was a belief that it is precisely the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death that endow even the most trivial events and experiences with meaning and magic. Between the different poetic generations, as Pound observed, there is commerce – and conversation.

The difficulties that Bradstreet and Taylor experienced in trying to forge an American poetry, however, were minimal by comparison with those of poets who came to America against their will and found themselves in a culture that was irrevocably alien. An African American poet like Phillis Wheatley had all the problems that her white poetic contemporaries encountered, but to these were added the problems of bondage and dispossession. Not only that, Wheatley, like other African American writers of her time and after, was dependent on her white patrons if she wanted to stand any chance of publication; and, if her work was to stand any chance of being attended to, let alone heard, she had to bear in mind, somehow, that her audience was almost entirely white. Everything she wrote was written under the threefold duress of living in an alien culture, inhabiting an alien language, and writing for an alien audience. How she dealt with all this will be a subject of the next chapter. But it is worth making the point here that what she struggled with, the paradox of writing in a language not her own and oppressed by definitions of self that denied her full humanity, her voice as a poet and her presence as a human subject were what later African American poets were to encounter. "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing, /" Countee Cullen was to write more than a century after Wheatley, "To make a poet black and bid him sing!" Long before W. E. B. Du Bois formulated the idea that the African American suffered from double consciousness, the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," with "two souls, two

thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body,” Wheatley dramatized that “two-ness” in her poetry, as she vacillated between deference to her white patrons and audience and self-assertion, gratitude at being snatched from her “native shore” of Africa (“land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom”) and idyllic memories of the lost Eden, the “pleasing Gambia” from which she was snatched. “Remember *Christians*,” Wheatley declares in one of her poems, “Negros, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d and join th’angelic train.” There is the humility expected of her in her work, perhaps (after all, Thomas Jefferson could scarcely credit the idea that anyone of her race could write poetry), but there is also a pride that is at once personal and racial. She may be conflicted, but that does not prevent her, like Whitman, from bragging for herself and for (black) humanity. And the resonances of her work find their echoes, not only in the attempts of writers like Cullen to deal with what they saw as the paradox of being black and a poet, but also in the prevailing rhythms of African American poetry generally: where the perceived challenge is to create and articulate an identity, to forge forms and definitions of being, with a language that is at least partially foreign and in a culture that is at least partially alien. “I, too, sing America,” Langston Hughes was to write. “I am the darker brother / They send me to eat in the kitchen.” “Tomorrow,” Hughes was to add, in a strange but wonderful reaccentuation of Wheatley’s poetic declaration of independence and equality, “I’ll be at the table / When company comes / ... / They’ll see how beautiful I am ... / I, too, am America.”⁵⁸ The dialogue Hughes has at such a moment with Whitman is obvious, as it is in “AmeRícan” by Tato Laviera. But structurally, subliminally, there is also a connection, commerce, with the woman usually described as the first published African American poet. Like all the African American poets who spoke back to her later, she was saying something apparently simple but, given the history of the United States, profoundly challenging and problematic: “Remember,” “I, too, am America.”

Forging the Uncreated Conscience of the Nation

The initial dialogue in the Hughes poem is, nevertheless, with Whitman – as its title, “I, too, sing America,” clearly intimates. And if there is one earlier American poet whose presence in American poetry of the twentieth century and after stands head and shoulders above the rest it is, incontrovertibly, the author of “Song of Myself.” For Whitman, as for Emerson and Thoreau, at the core of any plan or desire to sing America were the principles of openness, freedom, and, above all, individualism. The key to American poetry, as he saw it, was a series of paradoxes. The American poet embraced the idea of being a part of America by being apart from it; he, or she, identified themselves as a member of the poetic community by insisting on their uniqueness, their difference; they honored the aesthetic project they shared with other American poets in and through a declaration of independence. More than a hundred years after Whitman published his first book of poetry, a very different kind of American writer – female, author of novels and short stories, and Southerner – confronted the same series of paradoxes by rejecting the notion of influence in

favor of what she called confluence. "Each of us is moving," Eudora Welty wrote in her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*:

remembering, we discover and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge. Our living experience at those meeting points is one of the charged dramatic fields of fiction. I'm prepared now to use the wonderful word *confluence*, which itself exists as a reality and symbol in one. It is the only kind of symbol that for me as a writer has any weight, testifying to the pattern, one of the chief patterns, of human experience.⁵⁹

Elsewhere, in the same memoir, Welty further glossed her use of the term "confluence," explaining that by it she had in mind "a writer's discovery of affinity." "In writing, as in life, the connections of all sorts of relationships and kinds lie in wait of discovery," she suggested, "and give out their signals to the Geiger counter of the charged imagination, once it is drawn into the right field." Confluence only exists, the premise is, when a mind paradoxically finds echoes of its own uniqueness in the mind and voice of another and is, as a result, quickened into new creation and expression. "What counts," Welty wrote of herself as a writer, "is only what lies at the solitary core"; only through the mysterious experience of confluence can such a core be penetrated and impregnated while somehow remaining virginal, pristine, inviolably itself. Welty was almost certainly unaware of the echoes of Whitman resonating in her own, deeply memorable celebration of literary echo. Nevertheless, there is a remarkable confluence of opinion here. For Whitman equally insisted on both his inviolability as a person and a writer, his own selfhood, and the inevitability and necessity of contact, community, the interpenetration of his own life and work with the lives and works of others – other poets, other people whom he lived with, those he observed and addressed.

This belief in what Welty would call confluence is announced in the opening lines of "Song of Myself," where Whitman famously announces to the reader that, in celebrating and singing himself, "every part belonging to me as much belongs to you." It was from the belief expressed in this announcement, as we shall see in the next chapter, that Whitman drew his fundamental inspiration. And it was guided by this belief that he was to fashion a poetry that insisted on an intimate relationship between poet, each character inhabiting his poetry, and the reader – a relationship in which a recognition of the intimate bonds tying these three human subjects together coexisted with an acknowledgment of separateness, the distinction of being set individually apart. The self is performative in Whitman's poetry; it also discovers itself in the other. The poet is most himself or herself, most an individual, this poetry suggests, when he or she is addressing, announcing, and even reinventing the individuality of others; he or she is there in the poem as a result of a triangulation of human subjects – poet, character, reader – and at the core of his or her project is dialogue, an interaction, an interpenetration of identities and voices. "The poem is you": we are back with that, the poet inviting or even compelling the reader to participate. We are also back with the poem as an act of union or perhaps, to take a more

material figure of the kind that both Whitman and Hart Crane favored, a bridge. The poem is a bridge for so many American poets, between the “I” and the “you” and between the past, present, and future. It spans different generations, those that are gone, those that are there in the moment, those to come; and, in spanning those different generations it is also, and paradoxically, a bridge without clear parameters, a definite or conclusive configuration, beginning or end. It is open, provisional, not least because what it enshrines is a conception of poetics – and of experience – to which Charles Olson gave memorable expression in the opening line of one of his poems: “What does not change / is the will to change.”⁶⁰

The point is made over and over again, not just by Olson or Whitman, but by many American poets of otherwise different persuasions: that their aim is to honor and imitate the primary fact of change – and, in doing so, to restore and renew things for us because, in the act of resurrecting their own habits of perception, they resurrect ours as well. Each time the poem is read, the notion is, the world is freshly seen and fully discovered as it was once, presumably and continually, by the writer; things are lifted out of their greasy contexts and new, more personal and changeable, ways of seeing and naming are released. There is an element in all this of what the formalist critic Victor Shklovsky called “defamiliarization.” “As perception becomes blurred by habit,” Shklovsky suggested, “it becomes automatic,” and “we see the object as though it were hidden in a sack. We know what it is by configuration, but we see only its silhouette.” Gradually, the machinery of habituation devours everything: “objects, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war.” We begin to lose our sense of things, and it could be added (although Shklovsky does not say so), our sense of ourselves, our own separate identities, too. As Shklovsky perceives it, the aim of art is to oppose all this, to reverse the desensitizing process. Art, he concludes, “exists to help recover the sensation of life.” It is there “to enable us to feel things, to make the stone stony.” Its project, in short, “is to give a sensation of the object as something seen, not something recognized ... to make things unfamiliar.”⁶¹

And that, in many ways, is the project of American poetry. Both Emerson and Whitman said as much. “All around,” Emerson insisted in one of his essays, “what powers are wrapped up under coarse mattings of custom, and all wonder prevented ... the wise man wonders at the usual.” “Make the aged eye sun-clear,” he pleads elsewhere, in one of his poems – a theme on which Whitman expanded when he told his readers, “You shall no longer look at things second or third hand ... nor look through the eyes of the dead nor feed on the spectres in books.” “You shall not look through my eyes either,” Whitman added, “nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them for yourself.”⁶² Echoing Emerson, anticipating Shklovsky, Whitman saw his poetry as an agent of perceptual rebirth. “Now I wash the gum from your eyes, /” he tells the reader, “You must habit yourselves to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life.” According to this formula, American poets accomplish and perform their individuality in and through a passionate recognition of the individual phenomena around them; and they encourage their readers to realize their own personal identities, to wash their eyes and imaginations clean. “Poets are thus liberating gods,” Emerson declared, a point on which

Whitman and many subsequent American poets would agree. That is because they try, fiercely, “to turn upon things” (to quote Whitman again) “with wonder and love,” and to unlock their particularity; and they aim, with equal ferocity, to endow each member of their audience with an equal capacity for wonder – “the power,” to use Emerson’s phrase, “to fix the momentary eminency of an object.” As Whitman’s reference to “the spectres in books” intimates, however, there is a curious paradox at work here. The poem is seen as a potentially liberating force, certainly, but also, it may be, an imprisoning one. It is a stratagem for being, a medium for or prologue to knowing, not a body of ready-made knowledge; it requires the reader actively to engage with it, to use it. If the reader does not – if the poem is received passively, as a product rather than a process – then he or she becomes confined within its terms, its vocabulary and vision; instead of liberatory, reading becomes a form of enslavement, no more than looking “through the eyes of the dead.”

This idea of the poem as a beginning for the reader, a passionate call to attention, is pivotal in American poetry. Free verse, and in particular Whitman’s evolution of a line that registers the inflections of individual speech, the rhythms of a singular voice, and the uniqueness of a particular object and/or moment, is grounded in this notion. As deployed by Whitman, later by Pound, Williams, and Louis Zukofsky, then still later by Ginsberg, Olson, and Frank O’Hara, the free verse line turns the poem into an open field, an area of vital possibility where readers can allow their imaginations to play. It seems to be asking each member of the audience to resolve doubts about such things as pace, rhythm, and intonation, to participate in the process of making and remaking meanings, in short to rewrite the poem in their own terms. Pound may talk about the sequence of the musical phrase, Williams about a poem made of things on a field, Zukofsky about organic form; Ginsberg may insist on poetry rhythms that come from what he called actual talk rhythms, Olson that the line comes from the breath, O’Hara – borrowing his terms from abstract expressionist painting – may claim that he favors the volatility of “push” and “pull.” For all these poets and others, however, the project remains consistent in its sheer cherishing of inconsistency: to break the pentameter, in Pound’s famous phrase – to restore the unique breath and being of the poet to the poem and to compel each reader to catch that breath and share that being. “An invisible audience listens,” Wallace Stevens was to declare in “Of Modern Poetry,” “... to itself expressed / In an emotion as of two people, as of two / Emotions becoming one.”⁶³ And that sense of the poem as a stage on which writer and reader are in a reciprocal relationship, a strange state of mutuality that allows them equally to voice and perform their identities, is at stake, not just in American poetry that is openly and unequivocally written in free verse forms, but also in the work of those who apparently favor more traditional formal structures, such as Dickinson with her use of the basic hymn stanza or Robert Lowell with his compulsive resort to the sonnet. Even here, with Dickinson or Lowell, or, for that matter, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, there is a feeling of risk and adventure, surprise being generated out of a series of stimulating discords – discords from which readers must evolve their own harmonies. Traditional verse, in such hands, becomes as plastic and malleable as its free verse counterpart,

there is still a sense of unfinished and perhaps unfinishable business: a sense that Lowell himself memorably caught when he referred to the “open book” of his poetry as “my open coffin.”⁶⁴

Nor do the poetics of American individualism necessarily stop there, with the evolution of the free verse line and/or the disruption of conventional meters. Again, Whitman is useful and exemplary, to the extent that he illustrates a common, if not universal, tendency towards a looser, more open-ended syntactical structure. Lines and sentences are left lying side by side just as things are, undisturbed and separate. There are few compound sentences to draw objects and experiences into a net of theory, an elaborate scheme or hierarchy; the reader is offered a sequence in which each thing, each experience, each person observed is valued in and for itself. There is this, we are told, and this, and this. Or, as Gertrude Stein once put it: “the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go on counting by one and one ... One and one and one and one and one and one.” “Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series,” Stein explained. She might have added – and she certainly intimated elsewhere – it is also naturally American: so much so that, as she put it in *The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans*, “it is something strictly American to conceive a space that is filled with moving, a space of time that is filled always filled with moving.”⁶⁵ The poet’s eye establishes a democracy of objects; and the poetic syntax arranges a democracy of words and statements, linked only by a minimal “and,” perhaps, a dash, a semi-colon, or a series of dots. To do more than that, to absorb things into a complex intellectual or grammatical structure, would – the suggestion is – be an act of blindness and betrayal; it would be to interject the meddlings of the mind between the eye and the pressure of reality. A language as varied and polyglot as the cultural and verbal mosaic of the United States allows, images and figures that draw attention to minute particulars, an active grammar and open syntax: all these help to transform the poem into a space filled with moving, a verbal equivalent of life as process, a continuously changing and developing present – and, as such, a paradigm of America.

On a number of occasions during his life, when he was celebrating the poem as cultural paradigm, Whitman, as we have seen, claimed that he was the poet best equipped to realize this ambition. There was a characteristic touch of arrogance to this claim, but it was based on the fierce conviction that, by creating a space filled with moving both he and his readers could occupy, he was not simply reflecting but rather making a community: building a comfortable, comforting, and fundamentally humanized place to share. Not everyone has agreed with this, however – when it was said by Whitman, by Stein, or then later by Olson – and, to the extent that they have not, have helped to mark out the further boundaries of the American poem. The poet creating a community might be one possibility. But others were initially located by two significant figures in nineteenth-century American poetry with whom Whitman had only certain things in common: Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson. Take Poe. The entire thrust of his work – as those remarks of his about the “poem *per se*,” quoted earlier, clearly indicate – away from ordinary, phenomenal experience, in and down towards the deepest levels of consciousness. Poe’s metaphysics and his aesthetic are

inextricably woven together here. The self, he claimed, creates its own world, inviolable and intangible; and the poem, ideally, makes a supreme version of that world – it is self-contained, fixed, and perfect. Each word, as he saw it (or, for that matter, each note in a musical composition, or each brushstroke in a painting), could and should become a talismanic sign, a locus of feeling, association, and suggestion; and each work of art could and should become a “pure” or “closed” field, as autonomous and impalpable as the reality it imitates. This is poetry as incantation: and an eloquent rejection of everything that violates selfhood. It is as if Poe had read Tocqueville’s warnings about the isolating possibilities of American democracy and then turned them on their head. In his work, after all, solipsism becomes the aim: the poet seeks, not community, but absolute aloneness, the sanctuary of the disengaged self.

Poe is a poet apart, of course, as he himself never tired of suggesting. But even in his apartness, and his cherishing of that state, he defines himself as a seminal figure in American poetry. His conservatism, tinged with his professed allegiance to his adoptive Southern homeland, anticipates, among others, such Fugitive poets as John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate – writers just as obsessed as Poe was with the pressure of the past and an imagined world of aristocratic ease and leisure. His commitment to the poem as a pure play of textuality is later echoed in the work of Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery; his obsession with dream states and the strange mythologies dreams inspire is revisited and rehearsed in the poetry of Sylvia Plath; while his notion of the word as an almost magical nexus of suggestion and association, a cumulus of possibilities, is repeated in Hart Crane’s insistence that, as a poet, he was “more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness (and their combination and interplay in metaphors on this basis) than ... on the preservation of their logically rigid signification.”⁶⁶ All these, and many other American poets, have been in creative dialogue with Poe. Which is not to deny that they have also been in dialogue with others: Tate with Eliot, for instance, Stevens with Keats and the Symbolistes, Ashbery with Stevens, Plath with Emily Dickinson and Lowell, Crane with Whitman and Melville. The dialogues are multiple, part of the intricate web, the network of interchange, that constitutes American poetry. As the mere mention of Keats and the French Symbolistes suggests, those dialogues also stretch beyond the inevitably porous boundaries of American aesthetics and culture: Baudelaire, after all, was haunted by the ghostly presence of Poe, seeing him both as a poetic twin and a god. But Poe’s contribution to the web of words that constitutes American poetry, its multicultural spaces and its transnational contexts, is vital. “He is so close to me,” Allen Tate observed of Poe, “that I am sometimes tempted to enter the mists of pre-American genealogy to find out whether he may not actually be my cousin.”⁶⁷ Many other poets, from or beyond the United States, could say exactly the same.

“The world is myself,” Wallace Stevens once suggested. “Life is myself.” That remark could have been made by Poe. It could just as plausibly have been made by Emily Dickinson: but with a different intonation and in a very different key. Solitude is there for her too; it is not, however, something that she necessarily wants. It is not, as it is with Poe, a key to knowledge, an access to the truth, but quite the contrary:

which is why her poems, as we shall see, tend to be centrifugal in their aim and direction, moving hesitantly, uncertainly, and with the suspicion of eventual failure towards the limits of knowledge – constantly, if sometimes only implicitly, alerting us to the narrowly circumscribed nature of our individual fields of vision. Vladimir Nabokov once famously suggested that all art does, and can do, is draw us a picture of the prison bars that surround and contain the individual consciousness. As she experiments with language and transforms each of her poems into a kind of exploratory measuring of just how far she can see, and just how much or little she can know, Dickinson sometimes seems to be saying something very similar. That is why, perhaps, one of her most famous poems ends “And finished knowing – then –.” Thanks to the syntactical instability of such a line, Dickinson may here be announcing an end to even the possibility of knowledge (“then, at this moment, I finished knowing”) or she may be alerting us to the possibility of what comes after this (“I finished knowing ... and then”). There is a haunting verbal slippage here that is echoed, in many ways, in the last line of Plath’s most famous poem, “Daddy”: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through,” where it remains unclear whether the narrator has achieved a breakthrough or suffered a breakdown – whether she has come “through” the trauma she describes or that trauma has left her “through,” over and done with. Indeterminacy is key here. There is not even the intimation, as there is in the work of Whitman or Plath’s fellow confessional poet Lowell, that the act of seeing and saying has been therapeutic, even cathartic, that release of a kind has been found in the discipline of writing. There is only the terrible suspicion that the experience being described, or rather conjured up and confronted, lies just beyond the reach of knowledge, redress – and perhaps even appropriate language. Other poets have shared this suspicion with Dickinson and Plath; and, perhaps significantly, many of them are also women. “Pain is impossible to describe /” confesses Laura Riding Jackson, “Pain is the impossibility of describing / Describing what is impossible to describe / Which must be a thing beyond description.”⁶⁸ “I have nothing to say,” writes Toni Morrison in a poem written just after 9/11 and addressed to what she calls here “the dead of September,” “no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become.” Of course, the suspicion that writing may be a quest for failure is not confined to one gender or ethnic group. “Nothing to say,” after all, is precisely the phrase the composer and poet John Cage uses to describe that peculiar cross between speech and silence that is his aesthetic aim. “I have nothing to say /” Cage says in one of his poems, “and I am saying it / and that is poetry / as I needed it.” And the perilous, quite possibly unbridgeable gap between the word and the world has become a preoccupation of writers, American and European, since at least the Romantic revolution. But, quite possibly, as the work of Dickinson, Plath, Riding Jackson, and Morrison suggests, there may be an extra edge to all this, an exceptionally acute fear that, as Riding Jackson once put it, “truth begins where poetry ends,” in the work of those who sense they are not in a commanding social and cultural position – who, for reasons of gender, ethnicity or both, feel marginalized and so forced into the position of stealing the language.

Emily Dickinson marking out the limits of her prison, peering through (or perhaps just at) the bars and considering the possibility of escape; Edgar Allan Poe turning inward to a deeply personal dreamland, a world where his desires could somehow receive entire satisfaction; Walt Whitman venturing the idea of a dialectic between the individual consciousness and the world and turning that idea into action, into the making of an exemplary audience for his poetry: together, these three nineteenth-century figures helped map out an area of possibility that subsequent American poetry was to explore. Together with poetic predecessors like Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Phillis Wheatley, they set up signposts that others, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, were to use and follow in their own charting of the country's ample geography, their own attempts to translate the landscape of the United States into verse. The routes these earlier poets traced were not restrictive, of course. What writers such as Bradstreet, Taylor, and Wheatley, or Dickinson, Poe, and Whitman offered and continue to offer is not a prescriptive grammar but a transformational one: a range of options on which each writer can build, structures that are generative, susceptible to change, a series of opportunities or guidelines rather than rules. "Poets to come!" wrote Whitman:

Not today is to justify me and answer what I am for
 But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
 greater than before known,
 Arouse! For you must justify me!
 I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
 I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.
 I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a
 casual look upon you and then averts his face,
 Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
 Expecting the main things from you.⁶⁹

If, as he sometimes imagined, Whitman could return now and look over the shoulders of American poets and their readers, he would certainly find his expectations fulfilled, his hope satisfied. He would see a body of work that, in the past century and more, has discovered its challenge in the ideas and experiences of America: a challenge that includes both the problematic status of the United States as a multinational nation-state (the "first universal nation," to use Ishmael Reed's phrase), the sole remaining superpower, and an aggressive promoter of its own brand of democracy *and* the residual belief in the promise of rebirth and redemption, a new life in a place commensurate (as Fitzgerald put it) with the human capacity for wonder that has haunted every American generation and each new wave of immigration. And he would quite probably feel that his "one or two indicative words" have borne fruit, that his own poetry, along with that of his American predecessors and contemporaries, has been justified, proved, and defined by a great and continuing tradition that has, as at least one of its unacknowledged aims, the forging of the uncreated conscience of the nation. The American poetic voice is always apart but also part of a community, a chorus – singular and, at the same time, heavy with echoes.

Notes

- 1 Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition).
- 2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1844). See also William Byrd of Westover, letter to Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery, July 5, 1726, cited in William Byrd, *The London Diary (1717–1721) and Other Writings*, edited by Marion Tinling and Louis Booker Wright (New York, 1958), p. 77.
- 3 Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (1702).
- 4 Christopher Columbus, *Narrative of the Third Voyage, 1498–1500*, in *The Four Voyages of Columbus*, translated and edited by J. M. Cohen (New York, 1969).
- 5 Emerson, "The Poet."
- 6 St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, "What is an American," letter 3 in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).
- 7 Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.
- 8 Philip Freneau, "The Rising Glory of America," lines 434–6, 441–6, 467–70.
- 9 Tato Laviera, "AmeRícan," lines 50–60.
- 10 Cited in Constance Rourke, *The Roots of American Culture* (New York, 1942), p. 3. See also Cotton Mather, *Manuductio ad Ministerium* (1726), in Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson (eds.), *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* (1938; New York, 1963 edition), p. 686.
- 11 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle," para. 9. See also "Marginalia," *Democratic Review*, November 1844, in James A. Harrison (ed.), *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1902; New York, 1979 edition), XVI, 3.
- 12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982), pp. 18, 40.
- 13 Edward Dorn, *Slinger*, Book 1 (Bollinas, Cal., 1975). See also Robert Creeley, "Brendan O'Regan and Tony Allan: An Interview with Robert Creeley," in *Robert Creeley, Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961–1971*, edited by Donald Allen (Bollinas, California, 1973), p. 131; Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 2012), pp. 720, 725.
- 14 Walt Whitman, "City of Orgies," lines 1, 7–8.
- 15 Allen Ginsberg, "Poetry or Fiction?" *Margin 2* (Spring 1987), pp. 22–3. See also William Carlos Williams, "Tract," line 1.
- 16 Kenneth Rexroth, "New Objectives, New Cadres," lines 60–1.
- 17 Amiri Baraka, "Black Art," lines 19–21, 41. See also Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," lines 52–3; Louis Simpson, "Sacred Objects," lines 2–3.
- 18 Hart Crane, "Cape Hatteras," section 4 of *The Bridge* (New York, 1930).
- 19 Hart Crane, "General Aims and Themes," in Brom Weber (ed.), *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane* (New York, 1966), p. 219.
- 20 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democratie en Amérique* (1835–40), II, chapter 15 (my translation). See also *ibid.*, II, chapter 2.
- 21 *Ibid.*, II, chapter 17.
- 22 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), chapter 1.
- 23 Edward Williams, "Virginia, more especially the South Part thereof Richly and Truly valued" (1650), p. 19, in Peter Force (ed.), *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement and Progress of the Colonies in North America* (1836–46; New York, 1947 edition), III.

- 24 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), chapter 9. See also Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), "Chapter the Last."
- 25 Walt Whitman, "A Broadway Pageant," section II. See also William Carlos Williams, *Paterson, Book Two* (London, 1963).
- 26 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), p. 92.
- 27 Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York, 1995), p. 306. See also Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York, 1989), p. 104; Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York, 1990), p. 134; José Antonio Villareal, *Pocho* (1959; Garden City, 1970 edition), pp. 15–16; Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York, 1989), p. 239.
- 28 Thoreau, *Walden*, chapter 1; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 34.
- 29 For a fuller discussion of the Puritan tendency to locate the visible by reference to the invisible, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind from Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953).
- 30 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946), p. 513. See also Miller, *New England Mind*.
- 31 James Russell Lowell, "A Fable for Critics," lines 552–3. See also lines 548–9. See also Charles Eliot Norton, letter to James Russell Lowell, September 23, 1855, in Milton Hindus (ed.), *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1971), p. 30.
- 32 Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose*, pp. 91–2. See also Robert Frost, "Mowing," line 13.
- 33 Joaquin Miller, "Westward Ho!," lines 1–5.
- 34 Philip Freneau, "Literary Importation," lines 22–3.
- 35 John Adams, cited in B. T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality* (Syracuse, New York, 1953), p. 61.
- 36 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851), chapter 32.
- 37 Allen Ginsberg, "America," lines 45–6.
- 38 Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder, Colorado, 1977), p. 5. See also Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London, 1964), p. 165; Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London, 1977), p. 359.
- 39 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London, 1991 revised edition), p. 6.
- 40 Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, California, 1988), p. 82.
- 41 John Ashbery, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," lines 1–4.
- 42 Ibid., lines 6–8.
- 43 Ibid., lines 13–16.
- 44 Robert Creeley, "The Pattern," lines 1–9. See also "The Language," line 1; "The Writer's Situation," in *Interviews*, p. 180.
- 45 Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," lines 54–5, 60–1, 72–4.
- 46 Emily Dickinson, poem 288, lines 1–3.
- 47 Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," section 7.
- 48 Joy Harjo, "Remember," lines 20, 25–6, 56.
- 49 William Bronk, "The Mind's Landscape in Winter," lines 1–2. See also Gjertrud Schnackenberg, "Imaginary Prisons," lines 5–6; Brad Leithauser, "Hundreds of Fireflies," lines 1–2, 7–9, 24–6.

- 50 Gray, *History of American Literature*, pp. 628–9. See also pp. 625–6.
- 51 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, chapter 13. See also Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” section 33; Thoreau, *Walden*, chapter 4.
- 52 Joseph Brodsky, “A Footnote to a Commentary,” translated by Jeremy Gambrell and Alexander Sumerkin, in Stephanie Sandler (ed.), *Rereading Russian Poets* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1999), p. 184. See also Cormac McCarthy, Interview with Robert W. Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Enormous Vision,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 19, 1992, p. 3; Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York, 1990), p. 192.
- 53 Ezra Pound, “A Pact.”
- 54 Philip Freneau, “To an Author,” lines 29–30, 34. See also Gray, *History of American Literature*, p. 39.
- 55 Diane Wakoski, “Greed, Part 3,” lines 4–7. See also Adrienne Rich, “Upper Broadway,” lines 19–20.
- 56 Nikki Giovanni, “Woman Poem,” lines 18–22. See also Gray, *History of American Literature*, pp. 624–5.
- 57 Edwin Arlington Robinson, “New England,” lines 1, 3–4. See also Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man,” lines 1, 15; “Sunday Morning,” poems 5, 6.
- 58 Langston Hughes, “I, Too,” lines 1–3, 8–10, 16–18. See also Countee Cullen, “Yet Do I Marvel,” lines 13–14; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York, 1963 edition), p. 45.
- 59 Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984), p. 93. See also pp. 103–4.
- 60 Charles Olson, “The Kingfishers,” line 1.
- 61 Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” in *On the Theory of Prose* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1928), p. 12. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Leon Burnett, for providing me with a literal translation and advice.
- 62 Whitman, “Song of Myself,” section 2. See also Emerson, “The Poet”; Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 17, 30–1.
- 63 Wallace Stevens, “Of Modern Poetry,” lines 15–18.
- 64 Robert Lowell, “Reading Myself,” in *Notebook 1967–1968* (London, 1969), line 14.
- 65 Gertrude Stein, *Writings and Lectures 1911–1945* (London, 1968), p. 97. See also pp. 23, 99.
- 66 Hart Crane, “A Letter to Harriet Monroe,” in *Letters*, p. 234. See also John Ward Ostrom (ed.), *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1946), I, 170. Poe to Frederick W. Thomas, June–July, 1841.
- 67 Allen Tate, “Our Cousin, Mr. Poe,” in *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (London, 1968), p. 145.
- 68 Laura Riding Jackson, “Beyond,” lines 1–4. See also Wallace Stevens, “Adagia,” *Opus Posthumous*, edited by Samuel French Morse (London, 1957), p. 165; Emily Dickinson, poem 280, line 20; Toni Morrison, “The Dead of September,” in Judith Greenberg (ed.), *Trauma at Home: After 9/11* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 2003), p. 1; John Cage, “I Have Nothing to Say and I Am Saying It”; Laura Riding Jackson, excerpts from the Preface to *Selected Poems* (1970), in *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Manchester, 1980), p. 416. The remark by Nabokov alluded to here is as follows: “As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration [for his novel *Lolita*] was somehow prompted

by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage." As numerous commentators have pointed out, the remark is a perfect gloss on and summary of Nabokov's aesthetic.

69 Walt Whitman, "Poets to Come," lines 1, 2–9.