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DAVID CURTIS

American Romanticism: Beyond the Walls a Star

In the volume of poetry called *Steeple Bush* (1947), Robert Frost included two poems, "One Step Backward Taken" and "Directive," which taken together suggest a thematic tension basic to literary romanticism in America, especially as that movement was given shape and voice by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville.[1] The first poem pictures a person standing upon the banks of a rushing stream or river, swelled perhaps by melting mountain snows. The torrent sets sands and gravel flowing, tips huge "boulders off their balance," and, in short, unbalances the whole environment. The viewer perceives this chaos as a "universal crisis" and notes his own "standpoint shaken" by the collapsing earth. Yet amid this dissolution of his comfortable world, the viewer saves himself through the simple expedient of stepping back from the gully's edge, back onto solid ground again. Finally nature itself repairs partially the damage it had caused — "the sun came out to dry me"; but the repair is necessarily partial, since a "world" has been "torn loose." Yet the viewer's timely retreat has saved his skin at least for a time.

The process of disengagement has served the troubled and discontented of America well. From the Puritans who fled Archbishop Laud and came to Massachusetts Bay in the seventeenth century to the beatniks and hippies who "dropped out" in the twentieth, Americans have explored the pattern of exile and discovery thoroughly. Even the unromantic pragmatists we call the founding fathers stepped back from English aristocratic government and discovered American republicanism, while the hero of what Hemingway called the first modern novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ended his flight with a vow "to light out for the territory," to step back perpetually. But the step backward taken by Frost's persona is different from these in that he recoils from nature itself, and not from the institutions of society. Similarly the disengagement of the great American Romantics had little to do with society. The America of 1836 which received Emerson's *Nature* was neither oppressed by tyrannical government nor blighted with urban slums.

Industrialization was decades away. Agrarianism and traditions of tolerance had yielded a modest prosperity and social order. Franklin and Crèvecoeur saw the American success story as a compound of industry, self-reliance, and compromise. Factions and radicals — whether in the political or religious spheres — were nuisances to be suppressed or ignored. If reason and reasonable desires prevailed no backward steps need ever be taken. Thus, Crèvecoeur's rational insistence on materialism. He envisions a neighborhood of farmers, Lutherans, Catholics, seceders — "the most enthusiastic of all sectaries"[2] — all living in harmony, uninterested in cabals or proselytizing, their zeal controlled by the benefits of order and plenty: "He raises good crops, his house is handsomely painted, his orchard is one of the fairest in the neighborhood. How does it concern the welfare of the country . . . what this man's religious sentiments are or really whether he has any at all? He is a good farmer, he is a sober, peacable, good citizen. . . . This is the visible character, the invisible one is only guessed at, and is nobody's business." Thus, Franklin relates the story of the elderly woman whose devotion to Christ was such that she lived a recluse in a garret, with a stool and crucifix for furniture, who ate only gruel, who subsisted on prayer. The practical Ben sees none of this as devotion, however, remarking that he tells this tale "as another Instance on how small an Income Life and Health may be supported."[3]

The point is that eighteenth-century rationalism concerned itself only with actions and effects. Caught in a storm at sea, Franklin is neither awed nor impressed by the elemental forces, but instead considers the utility of lighthouses. Faced with Frost's flash flood, Ben would have been calculating the cost of a dam. The ground never gave way beneath his feet; his world was never turned loose. The backward step that American Romanticism implores us to take is from this indifference to the inner self, that part of us which Crèvecoeur says is nobody's business. For this reason Henry Thoreau stepped back to Walden Pond in 1845 and into literary history. "Most men," he writes, "even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them."[4] In short, it is to save his life

(capital L would be apt) as well that Thoreau, like Frost's persona, took that one backward step.

To discover what the "finer fruits" of life might be, we should now turn to the other poems in *Steeple Bush*. As "Directive" follows "One Step Backward Taken" immediately, we are not terribly surprised that it begins with the word "back." "Back out of all this now too much for us" consciously mimics Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us," except that Wordsworth's sonnet is a lament, mournful but suggesting no action, while Frost's poem is, well, a directive. "Back out" not only locates us in space and time, but points to a solution for our problem through action. It is as if the persona of "One Step Backward Taken" — sun-dried and ready — is to be followed in his second and third steps, followed in fact all the way in "Directive" to his discovery of a new world, complete with finer fruits, designed to replace the one turned loose in the universal crisis of the preceding poem.

And the journey back leads through the constructs of social man first:

> There is a house that is no more a house
> Upon a farm that is no more a farm
> And in a town that is no more a town.

The repetitive phrasing echoes the incantation chanted by Thoreau a century before — "Simplify, simplify." Frost, too, proposes the search for a time "made simple by the loss / Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off." Back we go through the glacier-carved valley, through woods excited by our presence, through a country "where two village cultures faded / Into each other." Does this imply that our back-tending journey must take us through the synthesis which emerged from the dialectic of Puritan and federal America, the synthesis we call Romanticism? For we find ourselves shortly among the "playthings in the playhouse of the children," amid the talismans of innocence and simplicity; and the poet adjures us to "Weep for what little things could make them glad." One of these little things, a "broken drinking goblet like the Grail," has been secreted for our salvation within "an old cedar at the waterside." These are the waters of a brook, "the water of the house," like spring water, "so near its source, / Too lofty and original to rage." To drink these waters so

near their source, from the holy cup preserved from childhood, hidden from the eyes of the unsaved within nature — this is our salvation and Frost's directive: "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion."

We can see that the "finer fruits" of life are inextricably tied to the notion of wholeness and that the achievement of wholeness is in *turn inextricably bound to the journey back through society, time,* and culture to human childhood, to the spiritual mythography concealed in nature, to the healing waters near the source. Such anyway is the burden of Frost's vision and the vision of the transcendental Romantics of nineteenth-century America. It is important to note, however, that wholeness is accomplished "beyond" the confusion or chaos of life. It does not eradicate the confusion; it cannot ignore it. Nor did three of the primary writers of the Romantic Age in America.

Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville bear witness in their fiction to the psychic fragmentation of confusion, of a world torn loose from wholeness. The confidence of Crèvecoeur's materialism and Franklin's utilitarian rationalism gives way in their prose to the doubts and fears of conflicts internalized, to the "visitations of insecurity," as Harry Levin puts it, to the ambiguities inherent in the pattern of exile and discovery.[5] These writers knew that retreat entailed guilt as well as release and that discovery could be as terrifying as it was wonderful. Guilt and terror abound in their pages as their characters attempt to deal with the anxiety of experience (Hawthorne), the fear of death (Poe), the mystery of evil (Melville). As they feel the ground beneath their feet crumbling amid "the universal crisis" of life, these already fragmented heroes try through further fragmentation to shore up their ruins. They build walls around their fears, only to realize (usually too late) that they have not diminished their guilts and terrors but rather increased them. And they must keep the walls around their fears in good repair, even as their energy drains away and their humanity vanishes.

The fragmented self depends completely upon reason or aesthetics or faith or cynicism. It lacks perspective and eschews the risks of exposure. All of its confidence adheres to a single over-developed facet of personality, and when that strong-suit fails it, the self collapses totally, having no other resource to rely upon. Finally it

is dominated by the very fear or anxiety it sought to wall out of its environment in the first place.

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" provides an excellent example of the dangers of the fragmented self. Subtitled "A Story of Wall Street," Melville's poignant tale depicts the failure of rationalism in a world of mysterious evil. Bartleby appears one day in the office of a prominent lawyer and is hired to do copying work. Strangely, there are some tasks he will not perform, not out of any reasonable objection, but simply due to will. "I would prefer not to" becomes a familiar refrain in the office, upsetting the routine of the other copiers and the composure of Bartleby's employer. Is Bartleby's refusal to proofread or run errands whimsy? Is his eyesight failing, or is his trauma emotional? From the beginning of their curious relationship, the lawyer senses Bartleby's pathetic existence: "I can see that figure now — pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!"[6] Here is a victim of life, beaten down, passive, whose entire existence will be encompassed within the four walls of the lawyer's office. He is a burden and when he begins to express his negative preferences, a nuisance as well.

Instinctively, the lawyer, whose story this really is, builds a wall around this new problem. He is a self-proclaimed "safe" man (p. 4), *insulated from the agonies of the lonely and poor, and he has no* intention of allowing loneliness or poverty — be it material or spiritual poverty — to invade his safe world:

> I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done. I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall. . . . Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding-screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight. . . .
>
> (pp. 11-12)

With Bartleby comfortably walled in, the office can resume its safe routine, the scrivener now one of the caricatures which comprise the lawyer's business world. But the mystery of Bartleby lingers, especially when the lawyer discovers that his new employee is living in his office, that he has no life beyond his dead-wall cell. He is out of sight but not out of mind. If only a reason could be found to explain his strange behavior. The lawyer is not cruel; he is no Dickensian villain. But he simply cannot abide the mystery of Bartleby. The lawyer yearns to know the reason behind Bartleby's misery, for if a reason can be found, a solution can too. This is the way of Ben Franklin:

> "Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?"
> "I would prefer not to."
> "Will you tell me *anything* about yourself?"
> "I would prefer not to."
> "But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me?"
>
> (pp. 25-26)

But again Bartleby has no answer, and reason has no appeal to him:

> "Bartleby, never mind, then, about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now, you will help to examine papers to-morrow or next day: in short, say now, that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable: —say so, Bartleby."
>
> "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," was his mildly cadaverous reply.
>
> (p. 26)

When appeals to reason and utility (eighteenth-century ideals) fail, the lawyer in desperation falls back upon an even older American ideal: "Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestined from eternity" (p. 35) and he resolves to let Bartleby remain entombed within his office. But then Bartleby's presence begins to hurt business — the

unpardonable sin for utilitarianism — so he is packed off to prison, the Tombs. This enforced exile, however, relieves neither Bartleby's misery nor the lawyer's guilt. And a final confrontation in the Tombs solaces neither. Even nature, though it reaches deep into the Tombs, cannot reach either man:

> The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung. (p. 45)

But Bartleby is already dead, and so the "strange magic" is denied the lawyer. Within the thick walls part of him dies too. He had placed his reliance, his safeness, upon his ability to maneuver life to meet his needs. He had surrounded himself with puppets, confident that his reasonableness and usefulness made him master of the strings. But just as the grass seed penetrated the thick-walled Tombs, evil got through the cracks of his walls, and he discovers himself at last unable to hinder its growth.

"Benito Cereno" returns Melville to the more familiar milieu of the sea and the great sailing ships, but is like "Bartleby" (they are included in *The Piazza Tales* [1856] and both were written after Melville's career as a novelist had, with the failures of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, gone up in smoke) about the insufficiency of human reason to counter or, in this case, even recognize evil. Yankee Captain Amasa Delano goes to the aid of a stricken Spanish ship, a slaver as it happens. Disease has riddled the crew, and her master, Benito Cereno, seems completely enervated. It appears to Delano that the African captives have played a decisive role in bringing the *San Dominick* to safety. With him, Delano has brought fresh water, food, and an American confidence in his abilities as a mariner and a judge of people. Unfortunately, his investigation into the conditions aboard the *San Dominick* is hampered by preconceptions. Negroes are by nature docile, Delano thinks, Spaniards haughty and cruel.

Again walls go up around misery and evil, walls of Delano's making, and he doubts the evidence of his own eyes that something is wrong. When he sees a slave strike a Spanish sailor, when he notes Benito's evident terror, Delano concocts reasons for these phenomena based upon what he thinks should be the case. When Benito nearly faints with fear, Delano thinks, "How unlike we are made!" (p. 276). And of the murderous Babo, Benito's black attendant, who is holding a razor to Cereno's throat in the guise of shaving him, Delano concludes:

> There is something in the negro which, in a particular way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castinets, and flourishing them apparently with equal satisfaction. . . . And above all is the great gift of good-humor. Not a mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture as though God has set the whole negro to some pleasant tune.
>
> (p. 306)

What these particular Negroes had been set to is the murdering of the Spanish crew, hostage-taking, and the destruction of Delano and his men. Delano, though, can see nothing, except what he expects to see. Safe behind the walls of stereotype, he is in greater danger than he knows. Ultimately this extremely tense story ends with Babo trying to kill Delano and failing, yet even then the American innocent cannot grasp the extent of the horror. Benito adminishes him:

> "you were with me all day; stood with me, sat with me, talked with me, looked at me, ate with me, drank with me; and yet, your last act was to clutch for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men. To such degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may even the best men err, in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose condition he is not acquainted."
>
> (p. 351)

Whether there is any way to become acquainted with human "recesses" is a good question, but Melville's point is that such knowledge can never be gained where walls of expectation or naivete intervene.

Lastly, as in "Bartleby," the healing powers of nature are invoked too late. Delano urges Cereno to put the slave revolt behind him and enjoy life:

> "But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves."
> "Because they have no memory," he dejectedly replied; "beause they are not human."
> (pp. 351-52)

Benito has realized the unhappy fate of humanity to remember and regret. The power of blackness — the ambiguity of slavery within a Christian world, aboard a civilized ship — brings Benito wisdom and death. Delano, however, is touched by neither.

Although Melville's *Piazza Tales* were the last written of the great American Romantic stories, the challenge they pose to the assumptions of eighteenth-century optimism make them an appropriate starting point for discussing American Romanticism. Rationality overwhelmed by the irrational, well-intentioned humanity swamped by evil, the ineffectiveness of walling out the discordant — of these themes are "Bartleby" and "Benito" built. And it is precisely these problems that smashed Franklinian confidence and mandated the Emersonian program.

Before examining that program, however, two other masters of darkness must be discussed. In story after story Edgar Allan Poe and Nathanial Hawthorne assault the comforting assumptions of their readers. In Poe's fiction all conflicts are internalized, and psychic terror reigns. What results is a veritable comic insanity, mocking the deistic order of the eighteenth century. In stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Premature Burial," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado," Poe delineates our desperate attempts to bury or immure our fears, anxieties, and enemies. These attempts always fail, and fail, moreover, in two senses. The fear or anxiety is not put to rest, and the guilt resulting from the attempt

accelerates the approach of madness. Madeline Usher is buried alive by her brother, but claws her way out of the crypt to embrace him in death. Roderick is described as suffering "much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of a certain texture; the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds . . . which did not inspire him with horror."[7] So much for the five senses; add to that Roderick's terror of death, and one has a combination approaching Beckettian totality: Roderick Usher feared only two things, life and death.

Exactly how entombing his sister is supposed to alleviate Roderick's dreadful condition is unclear, but this is Poe, not Melville, and the failure of reason is not in question in this story. Rather Poe is writing about the hegemony of fear over man, how fear leads to unspeakable actions, those actions to terrifying guilt, and that guilt to madness.

Maddest of all his narrators — if such a measurement can be made — is the protagonist of "The Tell-Tale Heart." So insane is he that Poe through him is able to make us shudder and laugh at the same time. His descriptions of the too-meticulous care that he takes before killing "the old man" are disquieting:

> And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it — oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly — very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening. . . . Ha! — would a madman have been so wise as this?
>
> (p. 445)

The repetition, the slow-motion is truly maddening, especially when we learn that the real object of hate is not the old man but the Evil Eye. It is the self that is to be slaughtered, hacked to pieces, and buried beneath the floor boards. But again this "wall" is penetrable;

the killer hears the still-beating heart of his victim. The tale ends in a scene that Ionesco might have composed, with the police sitting calmly, chatting, while the killer rants and raves in their presence —"I foamed — I raved — I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards. . . ." (p. 448). The heart beneath the floor pounds, yet the officers seem not to hear it or to notice the rather inappropriate behavior of the narrator, as if chair-swinging is quite normal:

> Almighty God! — no no! They heard! — they suspected! — they *knew*! — they were making a mockery of my horror!
>
> (p. 448)

Noting that "anything was more tolerable than this derision!" (p. 448) the murderer confesses his crime, and the farce is over. We are left to wonder whether anyone remarked his "shrieked" confession of guilt, but we recognize at least that the fragmentation of self in Poe's stories is so thorough that the narrative itself begins to split asunder in conscious irony. This is surely the case in "The Premature Burial," where after describing for pages and pages in gruesome detail states of catalepsy so profound that their victims are buried while still alive, after detailing his own precautions against being interred while in this death-in-life situation, after retelling his own horrific experience of premature burial, the narrator recounts his return to psychic health: "I thought upon other subjects than Death. . . . I read no *Night Thoughts* — no fustian about church-yards — no bugaboo tales — *such as this*" (p. 542).

Poe saw all the terror of exile and discovery, all the agony of the personality responding to fear. Hawthorne, on the other hand, saw opportunity for growth. His characters have to choose between retreats from life or journeys into the complexity of adulthood. Those like Hester Prynne, who fear emotion, run the risk of dehumanizing themselves as they cease to feel, while those like Arthur Dimmesdale live cataleptically as they flee from responsibility. Others like Goodman Brown or Reverend Hooper become unbalanced in the face of experience. Yet still others like Robin, the hero of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," pass through the ambiguities of adolescence towards the possibilities of maturity.

Robin's exile is self-imposed. He has ventured to town to make his fortune, leaving the simple pleasures of country life, the securities of home and family behind. He is eighteen, vigorous, and eager to get ahead. Gifted by nature with strength and beauty and supposing himself shrewd, Robin thinks he has all the attributes necessary for success. And he has an ace-in-the-hole, his relation, Major Molineux, a magistrate of the town. In fact, Robin's reliance on the Major signals his uneasiness with complete independence and perhaps reflects a doubt or two about the usefulness of his other merits.

Like Captain Delano, Robin finds himself in the middle of an unforeseen circumstance. Unbeknownst to him rebellion is loose in the town, and thus his inquiries after the Major meet with angry rejoinders, suspicious glances, whispers, or derision. And Robin must ask after Molineux, since he is no sooner deposited on the ferry-landing than he is lost. He wanders through the crooked streets of the town as if in a maze. His virtue and good nature are tested and meet the tests, but his frustration and anxiety increase as the townspeople rebuff his inquiries about his kinsman. Hawthorne shows us that the wall separating innocence from experience is but a membrane, quickly pierced by our initial foray into the world. Robin's expectations of triumph vanish upon the wind that wafts to his ears "the antipodes of music," the discordant notes of his kinsman's processional.[8] There will be no help from Molineux, who has been tarred and feathered, and cannot help himself. The psychodynamics of Hawthorne's fairy tale are apparent: the trusted father-figure, invested by the child's needs with unlimited power, is in reality impotent. Moments before witnessing Molineux's disgrace, Robin contemplates giving up his quest and returning home, fantasizing how much he is missed. Yet his imaginings include as well the picture of his exclusion from familial safety. The path back to innocence is effectively blocked by Robin's night in town, and so accepting experience's lesson, Molineux's disgrace, Robin turns on the impotent father by joining in the town's mirth at the Major's plight:

> . . . Robin seemed to hear the voices of the barbers, of the guests of the inn, and of all who had made sport of him that night. The contagion was

> spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street, — every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there.
>
> (p. 230)

With that one shout of laughter, Robin enters the town in earnest. Independent, now, of all help except that which his own resources can provide, Robin scales the wall of childhood and finds himself irrevocably on the other side an adult. Yet Hawthorne knows that the climb over that wall exacts a heavy, albeit a necessary, price:

> When there was a momentary calm in that tempestuous sea of sound, the leader gave the sign, the procession resumed its march. On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery around some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony. On they went, in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man's heart.
>
> (p. 230)

So the confusion literally melts away from Robin, the new man. But whether he is whole is another question. Hawthorne suggests that a certain toughness is needed to join life's procession and that once having joined, the adult wins his freedom, yet must accept, too, the frenzy of the procession as part of the bargain.

Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville are romantic writers and great writers because they face the "universal crisis" squarely. They identify for us the anxieties of existence, the baffling complexity of the fallen world for fallen man. They assay fear and guilt and explore the walls we erect to keep them at bay. Those walls, they note, succeed only in keeping us from wholeness and happiness. Neither rationalism nor materialism brings contentment, and maturity, the offspring of experience and innocence (which dies giving birth), is the twin of sorrow. It remained for the transcendental Romantics to offer a solution to the psychic dilemma of fallen man, and their answer lies in Frost's preposition, "beyond."

Ralph Waldo Emerson published the transcendentalist manifesto, *Nature*, in 1836. In this long, hortatory essay, Emerson posits a basic duality in the universe — Nature and Soul. Nature is the Not Me, bound to time and space, of seeming substance; Soul is infinite and eternal, invisible, the essential Me. Nature is the Soul made manifest, the divine spirit hardened into measurable entities, the human body, horses, trees, and ponds. For his part man, too, is dualistic. He responds to the world around him with Understanding or Reason. Understanding is the rational faculty in man. Through its use we can approach nature as a commodity, manipulate it, adjust it, conquer it. Reason, however, is an intuitive faculty. Employing it, we approach nature as an apparition, an appearance. Reason makes our spiritual kinship with nature clear; we learn that our being is one with its being. We learn that the Eternal is immanent throughout creation:

> Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.[9]

Nature without the observer is insufficient, and Reason without something to see through is fruitless. Ideation must have something to act upon; nature is its tutor, its healer, its minister. Nature is, writes Emerson, "the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it" (p. 37) To hear that spirit, Thoreau camped at Walden Pond for two years and Whitman loafed among the leaves of grass. A backward step may be forward depending upon one's point of view.

The problem as Emerson describes it is that man has lost his ability to use Reason — those "untaught sallies of the spirit" (p. 39). For this lost ability, the "mean egotism" of social man is to blame. In "The American Scholar," Emerson details man's social fragmentation:

> The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

> Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. . . . He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm.
>
> (p. 53)

But because we have become alienated from nature and because that alienation is apparent to us, we have, Emerson believes, settled for life on the circumference of the invisible or eternal world. At the center of this universal circle is the Ineffable Spirit from which divinity radiates to the circumference and which becomes divine in nature and in us. But fragmented and alienated man, unable to become a transparent eyeball, lacking the perfect harmony with nature needed to see the radical unity of the creation, neither sees nor feels anything:

> To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child.
>
> (p. 9)

Unspoiled and free, the child is perfectly adjusted to nature, but the adult has surrendered this harmony to "mean egotism":

> The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself.
>
> (p. 43)

Yet nature never fails us; it is always prepared to exhibit to us the unity and divinity of creation, if we will only look:

> If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are

Sacred Heart University Review, Vol. 8, Iss. 1 [1987], Art. 3

> no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.
>
> (p. 30)

And, happily, it is nature itself which stimulates that more earnest vision. No matter how much we harry ourselves with society or how much life torments us, our comfort is as close as Walden Pond, as certain as the lights of the stars. "The tradesman, the attorney," says Emerson, "comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. . . . We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough" (p. 13).

Our Reason stimulated by nature, then, nature itself — "the solid seeming block of matter" — is "pervaded and dissolved by a thought," the creative, originating Thought (p. 34). Emerson believes this dissolving Idea is divine and is within us and is us and can issue from us. Then we are indeed great souls, liberated from those "visitations of insecurity" that beset the fictive heroes of Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne: "No man fears age or misfortune or death," Emerson writes, while he is in the "serene company" of these divine *natures, or great souls, "for he is transported out of the district of* change" (p. 35). Nor is personal serenity alone affected, but morality and ethics also, for as Emerson remarks in "The American Scholar," "A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think" (p. 61).

Emerson's disciples, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, were two great souls strong to live. Thoreau tells us he went to Walden Pond to corner life, to discover its meanness and its sublimity, to get at its marrow. For his part, Whitman plunged with equal vigor into the gaiety of Manhatten beer cellars and the agony of Civil War hospitals. And yet because both writers adhered to the dissolving Idea, both surmount the walls of meanness and death.

Walden is not only a splendid satire on "busyness," it is an exemplum of the dissolving Idea in action. Time becomes a stream to fish in; pickerel are seen as "Walden all over and all through" (p. 195). Ethics are comparable to the pond, and the earth itself appears to be fluid. The "earth's eye" is liquid, and looking into it "the beholder measures the depth of his own nature" (p. 128). Walden itself seems bottomless or "unfathomable," but Thoreau, playing with Emerson's

"Reason," assures his readers "that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth" (p. 195). Finally the motives of resurrection and cycle, so central to the book, climax in a watery miracle: "Walden was dead and is alive again" (p. 212).

Surely the most wonderful moment of "Spring," the climactic chapter of *Walden*, though, is not the completed resurrection, but the initial thaw. The great melting of the ice on the pond is less dramatic than "the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing" (p. 208). Inert matter is in motion, and in the first stirrings of the dissolving Idea acting upon matter, Thoreau sees the pattern and unity of all creation: "As it flows . . . you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, or brains or lungs or bowels" (p. 208) Finally as it reaches the water below the bank, the sand gives up whatever form it had assumed, and pure matter has become pure soul. The thawing sand-bank suggests to Thoreau the oneness of creation. The sand wants to assume the ideal form of the leaf, in fact, anticipates in its flowing the vegetable leaf. Thoreau remarks the bridge between anticipation and realization, between spirit and matter, between the idea and the appearance: "No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the ideas inwardly" (p. 209). For Thoreau the human hand is a leaf, as are trees, rivers, feathers, and wings. All creation is a flowing into ideal form. Fluids act upon solids to form "lobes," and even phonics cooperate to point the moral: "The radicals of lobe are 'lb,' the soft mass of 'b' . . . with a liquid 'l' behind it pressing it forward" (p. 209). Thoreau imagines blood vessesls, bones, flesh, and tissue formed in this way; the human face is pictured as congealed drops. "What is man," asks Thoreau, "but a mass of thawing clay?" (p. 210). Thus, the "universal crisis" reported by Robert Frost, as sand and rock collapsed into the torrent, is no crisis at all to Henry Thoreau, but simply a reshaping of matter by spirit. The issue may augment the infinite variety of nature, but beneath (or "beyond") that variety is the common and eternal Idea.

In Walt Whitman's poetry the themes of eternity, oneness, and fluidity are paramount. Yet Whitman also manages to unite more successfully than any other Romantic writer the dualities of matter and soul, of appearances and essence. Thoreau, of course, was an expert naturalist; nature was real and beautiful to him, even as an end

in itself. Nor does Emerson disparage the undissolved world: "I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love to it. . . . Let us speak her fair. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother" (pp. 35-36). Despite such disclaimers, though, the Concord transcendentalists impress us as chiefly interested in what is occurring beyond or through nature. Whitman's love of the sensual marks his poetry, then, as a special kind of transcendent art.

In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," for example, Whitman learns to sing of the agony and ecstasy of life through the combination of the bird's song of grief, his memory of childhood feeling, and the sea's whispered key. None of the three elements can exist significantly without the others:

> The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair
> the atmosphere dallying,
> The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last
> tumultuously bursting,
> The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,
> The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
> The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
> The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,
> To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd
> secret hissing,
> To the outsetting bard.[10]

The loneliness of boy and bird and man is real, the death of the she-bird is real, the fluctuations of hope and despair real, the "sterile sands" real. Real too is the bliss of earthly love:

> Shine! shine! shine!
> Pour down your warmth, great sun!
> While we bask, we two together.
>
> Two together!
> Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
> Day come white, or night come black,
> Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
> Singing all time, minding no time,
> While we two keep together.
>
> (ll. 32-40)

Thus sing the happy birds, but permanence cannot exist in the finite. One bird dies or disappears. The remaining bird can only mourn; the translating child has greater scope. Gifted with Emersonian Reason, he is permitted to experience the flow of the dissolving Idea. From the salt tears running down the child's cheeks he learns to feel; from the salt waves flooding the shore he learns that death is the key to life eternal. The sea and the tears are part of the same dissolving process. So too is the he-bird's threnody, floating on air and memory back to the man who had forgotten how to sing. His lesson well-learned, Whitman proclaims himself the "chanter of pains and joys" and the "uniter of here and hereafter" (l. 20). Possessing the key to eternity — death — the poet will sing of earthly pains and joy, while "swiftly leaping beyond them" (l. 21). The endlessly rocking cradle is the flow of being and the rhythmic motion comforts us in its very endlessness. The only real death is life and the only real life flows through death, beyond pain, beyond confusion, towards the wholeness of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

As the first word of the title — "Crossing" — suggests, this very great poem is about motion, too. Its final section begins with the celebratory "Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!" (l. 101). The river connects Brooklyn to Manhattan, *connects Walt to his fellow passengers, connects the ferry to the great* ships in the harbor and the tugs plying their trade. The barriers of time and space disappear in the prophetic vision of the "eternal float of solution" (l. 107). Past, present, and future are one, "distance avails not, and place avails not" (l. 56), and nothing comes between the poet and us:

> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever
> so many generations hence,
> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of the living crowd, I was one of the
> crowd
> Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
> bright flow, I was refresh'd. . . .
>
> (ll. 21-24)

Great soul that he is, Whitman, responding to the Idea that dissolves, is (in Emerson's words) "transported out of the district of change." We have already seen that death is the key to this

permanence, and yet all is not settled, for "curious abrupt questionings stir within me" (l. 59). Whitman sums up those questionings in the lines which present the crisis of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

> I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
> I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
> That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I
> knew I should be of my body.
>
> (ll. 62-64)

In short, how to maintain the dissolving Idea and the identifying substance concurrently? Whitman insists on the perfect synthesis. That the realities of time and space and mortality are insubstantial he knows, but of what use have these identifying realities been to him, of what use to us? And why do we love them so? May we continue to love them so and still maintain our place in the "eternal float of solution"? Whitman says yes, for he sees that the eternal must be approached through the finite, that in the material alone the spiritual can be visualized and visited. Appearances are a "necessary film . . . / . . . dumb, beautiful ministers" (ll. 121, 126). Though bound in time, space, and mortality, the Not Me is a welcome and beloved part of our morphology:

> We use you, and do not cast you aside — we plant you
> permanently within us,
> We fathom you not — we love you — there is perfection in
> you also,
>
> (ll. 129-30)

and once we accept and cherish the Not Me, it speeds our "crossing" into the "eternal float of solution":

> You furnish your parts toward eternity,
> Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.
>
> (ll. 131-32)

The wholeness of personality described in Whitman's poetry marks the completed journey of Frost's "Directive." In "Take Something Like a Star," Frost counsels us to fix our minds upon the

ideal and thereby wrest permanence and serenity from a chaotic world. The Romantics exhort us to seek a star beyond the walls built by fear and guilt out of the stones of rationalism, materialism, and immaturity. Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne caution us that these stones won't hold, that they merely fragment the self, and increase the fear and guilt they were meant to contain. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman point us towards the star of Ideality. Only by fixing upon it can we remain whole beyond confusion.

In *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis describes the new man American Romanticism sought to create:

> a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.[11]

It is with this new American in mind that Emerson urges each individual to "Build, therefore, your own world" (p. 45). And he might have added that if one wants it to be a divine world, then one had best take something like a star to build it with.

Notes

[1]Frost's poems are quoted from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1969).

[2]J. Hector St. John, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London, 1782), p. 60.

[3]*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, *et al* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 103.

[4]Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Sherman Paul (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 3. All quotations from Thoreau refer to this edition and will be indicated by page number only in the text of my essay.

[5]Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (New York: Knopf, 1958), p. 6.

[6]*The Complete Short Stories of Herman Melville*, ed. Jay Leyda (New

York: Random House, 1949), p. 11. All quotations from Melville refer to this edition and will be indicated by page number only in the text of my essay.

[7]*The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1946), I, 266. All quotations from Poe refer to this volume and will be indicated by page number only in the text of my essay.

[8]*The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales*, Vol. XI of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat, *et al* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974), p. 227. All quotations from Hawthorne refer to this edition and will be indicated by page number only in the text of my essay.

[9]*Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, Vol. I of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), p. 10. All quotations from Emerson refer to this edition and will be indicated by page number only in the text of my essay.

[10]Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), ll. 136-43. All quotations from Whitman refer to this edition and will be indicated by line number only in the text of my essay.

[11]R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 5.