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Walt Whitman’s Therapeutic Vistas

on the poet's discovery of literature's redemptive and self-renovating potential

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WALT WHITMAN'S THERAPEUTIC VISTAS:

ON THE POET'S DISCOVERY OF LITERATURE'S REDEMPTIVE AND SELFRENOVATING POTENTIAL

BY
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AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

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Biography

Kasper Rueskov Guldberg, born 1984, is a Danish Whitman scholar interested in the psychological significance and potentials of aesthetic activity, particularly reading and writing. He did his undergraduate work in English Literature at Copenhagen University between 2006 and 2011. Kasper has taught at Roskilde University and Aalborg University and currently serves as editorial secretary for Nordic Association for Romantic Studies (NARS). With NARS and his assistant PhD supervisor Robert Rix, he has co-organized the conferences *Disseminating Romanticism* in 2014 (at Aalborg University) and *Rethinking Cultural Memory 1700–1850* in 2015 (at Copenhagen University). Kasper's scholarly orientation owes much to the feedback he has received for talks given at three PsyArt conferences (in 2013, 2014 and 2015).

ENGLISH SUMMARY

This dissertation considers the life and works of Walt Whitman within the context of literature as therapy. It offers several new ways of evaluating the therapeutic, autobiographical and self-transcending aspects of Whitman's poetry while seeking to clarify both (1) Whitman's personal experiences as a beleaguered self reacting to life's challenges through his poetry and (2) the general potentials of the written word for everybody who puts pen to paper. Poems and to a lesser degree other writings from across Whitman's career are considered in the light of different theoretical contexts. These include existentialism, phenomenology, Franklean logotherapy and psychoanalysis (including trauma theory, analytical psychology, as well as insights from Freud, Kohut and Lacan). References are also made to the philosophy of religion.

Motivated to uncover fresh psychological insights about aesthetics and creativity while also presenting new arguments about Whitman, the dissertation rests on the foundational premise that text, self and world often mutually affect each other in ways that are best addressed from a psychological theoretical framework.

Carefully considering and learning from each of the theoretical and practical realms of knowledge, as well as from a wide range of poets, authors, essayists, literary scholars and biographers whose insights and life orientations complement Whitman's, the dissertation achieves to extract ideas of practical value from Whitman's experience which shed light on the fundamental problems of the human condition. That achievement is to some degree inevitable given the theoretical underpinnings, but it is also intentional insofar as it is my opinion that the majority of Whitman critics – excellent Whitman readers though they are – nevertheless fail to make their writing about Whitman begin where their reading of him stopped. In other words, it is my opinion that scholarly arguments, in order to not misrepresent Whitman's works, need to reflect and take seriously the fact that they were read by and had an effect on a human being who necessarily has things in common with the poet. These commonalities, which I consider *archetypal* (as they are timeless and transcend nationality, race, gender, historical environment etc.) include the precarious predicament of being a vulnerable and mortal self in a world inherently (though not incessantly) indifferent or hostile to the safety and well-being of human beings. More specifically, the commonalities also include the fact that we all inhabit biological, social and psychological realms which continuously delight and afflict us as we cycle through epochs of youth, aging,

companionship, loneliness, robustness, frailty, sexuality, disease, triumph, shame, courage, fear, wonder and death – to name but a few archetypal experiences. The dissertation goes some way towards redressing the identified dearth in the indicated kind of scholarly approach.

It is a classic psychoanalytic insight that we may not consciously know or feel precisely "where we are" in the aforementioned biological, social and psychological realms at any one moment, but that our journey nevertheless affects us *unconsciously* (hence the psychoanalytic practices of dream analysis and automatic association, for instance). I explain how Whitman's poetry – and literature in general – can aid readers psychologically and sensitize them towards a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the truth of their existence. And I present the general argument that aesthetic engagement may ground us existentially and lead us to realise the therapeutic and redemptive rewards of aesthetic and literary engagement.

I also delineate how – with reference not exclusively to Whitman but to any individual who utters a sincere thought reflecting their present mental and existential situation – how our experience of the exterior world is not a constant to which we must submit but is dependent on our thoughts and feelings about our situation and about ourselves. From an investigation and explanation of this psychological dynamic I turn to Whitman and explain that his *Leaves of Grass* can be thought of as the ongoing inauguration of carefully crafted symbolic selves uniquely possessing the wisdom, personal resources, courage or perspective on which actual survival in the world seems to be predicated. It is arguable that Whitman experimented with and managed to transform his *actual* character – and thus his life – by creating poetic instantiations of character (symbolic selves) and having them pervade and inhabit *Leaves of Grass.*

Although Whitman's letters reveal that he was too complex a man to exclusively be the majestic "father-healer" he liked to see himself as – offering "prescription[s] of health and Eros" and "antidote[s] to disease and Thanatos", as David Aberbach writes – he does appear to have managed, amid quite unpalatable circumstances, to nourish, construct, repair and raise his self to such degrees of existential serenity, confidence and courage that he felt not only "self-balanced", as he put it, for virtually any contingency but was also occasionally seen as a religious leader of men. Because I consider it unwise idolatry to explain this wonderful gradual transformation by insisting that the historical Whitman was in some mysterious, unknowable way categorically different from almost all other people, I necessarily come to the conclusion that we ought to reflect deeply on the implications of his example for *all of us*. And I suggest that we should not be too quick to assume that we necessarily perceive the upper limits and capabilities of the human psyche.

The road to serenity for Whitman was, despite his genius, long and troubled. His many worldly trials, including the countless tragedies he witnessed during the Civil War and his never fulfilled romantic life, would lend poignancy and interest to the story of his life even if he had not also spent his life creating a literary masterpiece which often hints autobiographically at the disappointment, heartache, regret and indifference he endured. Although there is ample scholarship, including monographs, offering analyses of Whitman by comparing him to Herman Melville, Friedrich Nietzsche and others (or by considering his debt to certain philosophers, the Bible or Swedenborg), few scholars have considered Whitman's life and works in a Jungian light. I offer a much-needed analysis informed by one of Jung's most compelling psychoanalytic concepts, namely the shadow aspects of the psyche. Such an analysis, which sees Whitman intuitively guided by his writing in the direction of a complete integration of his shadow, is indispensable insofar as it explains much of what could be called the "Whitman myth", i.e. the curious fact that one humble man was able to span such vast emotional ranges that he could be said to be simultaneously America's "prime celebrant" and "greatest elegist for the self", as Harold Bloom puts it.

In brief, the dissertation argues that the central challenge in Whitman's life was to locate a way of being a sustainable self in the world while also – privately – enduring his own psyche and despite countless crises desire his own continuation. As for the challenge to tolerate oneself, a considerable amount of evidence suggests that for most of his life Whitman was painfully troubled by his sexual longings, which is particularly evident from a handful of poems. Particularly interesting in the context of Jungian shadow analysis are a few moving and deeply agonized poetic passages in which shameful confession of secret deeds and thougths are worded by the poet as if something quasi-diabolic and criminal needed exorcizing. And yet, despite this, Whitman appears to have had enough empathy (a Kohutean concept) for the "multitudes" inhabiting and constituting his self to access vast reservoirs of redemption and fortitude and emerge "self-contained", which – from the perspective of analytical psychology – suggests that his integration of the shadow was successful. I demonstrate in this context that, interestingly, Anne Gilchrist became aware that something resembling shadow integration was taking place in Whitman long before Jung presented his theory.

The dissertation stresses that we can and should try to learn from any lives that have confronted being in a profound way – and triumphed against heavy odds. Related to that is the force which the dissertation lends to the fact – largely forgotten or unrealized – that the human psyche is not merely a passive entity at the receiving end of a torrent of blunt worldly qualia and interior

psychic static. Rather, it is an actively cooperating and co-authoring aspect of our experience – whether the particular experience strikes us as momentous or trivial. It seems to me that generally that realization is only afforded those very few individuals who are shoved dangerously close to utter destruction but are then – by some miracle – saved: a death-and-rebirth archetype, I argue in here. At the end of the dissertation, I explore the implications of all these issues for the (unfortunately always pressing) challenge of treating what is currently called post-traumatic stress disorder. Whitman may not have been a starved prisoner of war or the survivor of a near-death-experience (as that word is generally used), but in spite of that I maintain that his life does exhibit the kind of steady, tolerant, brave patience which seems to be the only attitude worth adopting in the face of particularly dismaying existential crises; and, rather uniquely, he spoke and wrote like no one else about his cycles through various psychic "micro-deaths and renewals", as Jordan Peterson puts it. I therefore argue in this dissertation that there is good reasons to study Whitman's life *as well as* his works – not because they are categorically the same "thing", but because one grew out of and had an evident, discussable, remarkable and positive effect on the other. I therefore also argue that it is appropriate to heed – if possible – Whitman's request that his verse be viewed not "as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or æstheticism." We may think we do justice to an aesthetic work by subjecting it to impeccably rational and clinically precise scrutiny, but the problem is that it is hard to remain alive to and resonate with the full humanity of the spirit in which the poem is composed if we do not meet that spirit halfway between it and our analytical principles. That is the spirit in which I here attempt to read and discuss Whitman's life and works.

DANSK RESUMÉ

Nærværende afhandling undersøger Walt Whitmans liv og værker inden for en kunstterapeutisk ramme og præsenterer adskillige nye måder, hvorpå Whitmans digtes terapeutiske, selvbiografiske og selvtranscenderende aspekter kan anskues. Afhandlingen søger at belyse (1) Whitmans personlige oplevelser som et lidelsesfuldt selv i poetisk kollision med livets udfordringer og (2) det skrevne ords generelle potentiale for den, der gør brug af det. Digte og i mindre grad andre tekster fra hele Whitmans karriere betragtes i lyset af forskellige teoretiske kontekster. Disse tæller: eksistentialisme, fænomenologi, logoterapi efter Viktor Frankl og psykoanalyse (herunder traumeteori og indsigter hentet hos Jung, Freud, Lacan og Kohut). Der refereres i øvrigt til teologisk filosofi.

Med afsæt i ønsket om at afdække psykologisk viden om æstetik og kreativitet samt præsentere nye argumenter til Whitman-forskningen hviler afhandlingen på den grundlæggende præmis, at tekst, selv og verden ofte gensidigt påvirker hinanden på måder, der bedst kan begribes fra en psykologisk forankret position.

Under omhyggelig inddragelse af og stillingtagen til de forskellige teoretiske og praktiske vidensdomæner herovenfor nævnt samt til en lang række digtere, forfattere, litterære forskere og biografører formår afhandlingen ud af Whitmans oplevelser at kondensere indsigt af praktisk værdi, der kaster lys på den menneskelige konditions fundamentale problemer. Et sådant resultat er til en vis grad uundgåeligt givet det teoretiske fundament, men det er også intenderet, eftersom det er mit synspunkt, at majoriteten af Whitman-forskere (om end de afgjort er kompetente Whitman-læsere) ikke i tilstrækkelig høj grad formår at lade deres skriftlige reception begynde, hvor deres læsning stoppede. Med andre ord mener jeg, at forskningsargumenter – for at yde Whitman retfærdighed – er nødt til at reflektere over og tage det faktum seriøst, at de nødvendigvis blev læst af og afstedkom en reaktion i et menneske, der har noget til fælles med digteren. Disse fælles livsbetingelser, som jeg betegner som *arketypiske* (eftersom de er tidløse og transcenderer nationalitet, race, køn, historisk miljø m.m.), involverer den prekære prøvelse, det er at være et sårbart selv i en verden, hvis indifference og fjendtlighed over for menneskelig tryghed og velvære, er immanente faktorer (om end ikke uafbrudte). Mere specifikt tæller fællestrækkene det faktum, at vores liv har rødder i biologiske, sociale og psykologiske domæner, der uafladeligt er til skiftevis behag og pinsel under vores eksistens' uforudsigelige rute gennem epoker af ungdom, aldring, fællesskab, ensomhed, robusthed, skrøbelighed, seksualitet, sygdom, triumf, skam, mod, frygt,

undren og død – for nu blot at nævne nogle få arketypiske fænomener. Afhandlingen søger så vidt muligt at udligne den beskrevne forskningsmæssige forsømmelse.

Det er klassisk psykoanalytisk viden, at skønt mennesker måske ikke bevidst forstår eller erkender deres situation i de førnævnte biologiske, sociale og psykologiske domæner, så perciperes vores oplevelser alligevel på ubevidst plan (dette forhold er f.eks. centralt for freudiansk drømmetydning og fri association). Jeg forklarer, hvordan Whitmans poesi – samt litteratur generelt – kan assistere læsere psykisk og facilitere en rigere forståelse af deres eksistens betydning. Og jeg præsenterer det generelle argument, at æstetisk engagement kan forankre os i eksistentiel forstand og lede os mod en erkendelse af de litterære genrers terapeutiske og forløsende kompensation.

Med reference til (ikke blot Whitman, men til) enhver, der formulerer en inderlig reaktion og tanke i sin refleksion over herskende mentale og eksistentielle forhold skildrer jeg også, hvordan vores oplevelser af den eksteriøre verden ikke er en konstant mur, mod hvilken individet må kollidere og bøje sig, men derimod er fænomenologisk afhængig af vores tanker og følelser omkring vores situation – vores selv og væren. Jeg bevæger mig fra en undersøgelse af og forklaring på denne psykologiske dynamik til Whitman og forsvarer mit udsagn, at *Leaves of Grass* kan anskues som den kontinuerte indstiftelse af omhyggeligt komponerede symbolske selver ladet med den kvalitet, at de besidder netop den visdom, de personlige ressourcer, det mod og perspektiv, som konkret overlevelse i verden synes at afhænge af. Det kan anføres, at Whitman eksperimenterede med og formåede at forvandle sin faktiske person gennem skabelsen af poetiske destillater – symbolske selver – af eftertragtede karakteristika, som han lod tale og vokse i livsværket *Leaves of Grass*.

Skønt Whitmans breve afslører, at hans personlige kompleksitet forhindrede ham i udelukkende at optræde som den alfaderlige frelser, han yndede at betragte sig selv som – fuld af opskrifter på helse og eros og modgifte mod sygdom og død, som David Aberbach skriver [min egen oversættelse] – så må det indrømmes, at han synes at have formået (om end martret af svære eksteriøre omstændigheder) at nære, opbygge, reparere og rejse sit selv til en ro, selvsikkerhed og glæde, der ikke blot gjorde ham harmonisk afstemt ("self-balanced") over for stort set enhver prøvelse, men som også til tider lod ham fremstå som en religiøs leder. Eftersom jeg betragter det som uforsvarlig idoldyrkelse at prøve forklare denne forunderlige gradvise forvandling ved at insistere på, at Whitman på mystisk vis var en kategorisk exceptionel anomalitet, kommer jeg til den konklusion, at vi bør reflektere dybt over implikationerne af Whitmans eksempel *for os alle*. Og jeg indikerer, at vi ikke for hurtigt må antage, at vi nødvendigvis besidder endegyldig information

om de øvre grænser for den menneskelige psykes kapacitet.

Vejen til ro, selvsikkerhed og glæde var for Whitman – hans geni til trods – lang og besværlig. Hans livs mange prøvelser, ikke mindst de tragedier han bevidnede under Den Amerikanske Borgerkrig og hans altid uforløste romantiske liv, ville lade hans livshistorie med en sjælden grad af patos – og ville også være af generel interesse, såfremt han *ikke* under sine prøvelser havde kreeret et mesterværk, der i høj grad selvbiografisk afspejler den skuffelse, smerte, fortrydelse og ligegyldighed, han led og overlevede. Skønt der foreligger betragtelig forskning (herunder monografier), der analyserer Whitman gennem sammenligning med Herman Melville, Friedrich Nietzsche og andre (eller evaluerer hans gæld til forskellige filosoffer, bibelen eller Swedenborg), har kun få forskere overvejet Whitmans liv og værker i jungiansk perspektiv. Jeg præsenterer en tiltrængt analyse med afsæt i et af Jungs mest tankevækkende koncepter, nemlig den menneskelige psykes skyggeafspekt. En sådan analyse, inden for hvilken Whitman fremstår intuitivt ledt via sin poetiske produktion mod fortløbende integration af sin skygge, er uvurderlig grundet dens samtidige forklaring på hvad man kunne kalde Whitman-myten, nemlig det bemærkelsesværdige faktum, at en og samme mand var i stand til emotionelt at spænde så vidt, at han kunne forfatte både den dybeste elegi og lystigste hyldest til det menneskelige selv – for at citere Harold Blooms vurdering.

Kort sagt argumenterer afhandlingen, at den centrale udfordring i Whitmans liv var tilvejebringelsen af en måde, hvorpå det blev muligt at være et bæredygtigt selv i verden samt udholde sin egen psyke og ville sin egen fortsættelse trods utallige kriser. Hvad sidstnævnte udfordring angår, så antydes det uimodsigeligt af en lang række kilder, at Whitman til tider var smerteligt plaget af seksuel længsel, hvilket er særligt tydeligt i en håndfuld digte. Særligt interessant i relation til jungiansk skygge-analyse er en lille serie dybt emotionelt plagede poetiske passager, hvori digteren i skamfuld bekendelse af hemmelige tanker giver indtryk af, at noget kvasidiabolsk og kriminelt bør eksponeres og uddrives. Men til trods for dette synes Whitman at have besiddet nok empati (et centralt teoribegreb hos Kohut) over for sin psykes underelementer ("I contain multitudes") til at etablere indre kontakt til enorme reservoirer af psykisk lindring og styrke, hvilket vidner om, at hans skyggeintegration lykkedes. Jeg påviser i denne kontekst, at Anne Gilchrist, længe før Jung præsenterede sin teori, blev opmærksom på, at en proces *ikke ulig skyggeintegration* foregik i Whitman.

Afhandlingen understreger, at vi kan og bør prøve at lære fra ethvert liv, der har konfronteret væren på åndfuld, frygtløs, fornyende vis – og triumferet trods knusede vilkår. I den

sammenhæng støtter afhandlingen op om det (stort set overalt ignorerede og forsømte) faktum, at den menneskelige psyke ikke blot er en passiv enhed under bombardement af en strøm af hårde verdslige indtryk og psykisk baggrundsstøj. Derimod er psyken et dynamisk interagerende og "sam-virksomt" aspekt af vores oplevelser – hvad end den specifikke oplevelse slår os som monumental eller triviel. Det forekommer mig, at denne indsigt generelt kun åbenbares for de ganske få individer, hvis fysiske og psykiske ruin kortvarigt er en overhængende risiko, men som så på mirakuløs vis undslipper katastrofen med livet i behold. Jeg betragter denne oplevelse arketypisk som "død og genfødsel" og belyser implikationerne af alle de ovennævnte overvejelser for det (altid aktuelle) problem, som post-traumatisk stress udgør for talløse overlevende og kriseofre. Ganske vist var Whitman hverken krigsfange eller overlevende af en eller anden nærdødsoplevelse i ordets typiske betydning, men på trods af dette fastholder jeg, at hans liv er eksempel på den omtalte art modigt accepterende tålmodighed, som synes at være den eneste attitude, det er værd at manifestere i mødet med særligt alvorlige eksistentielle kriser; dertil kommer det temmelig unikke, at han talte og skrev som ingen anden om sine ture gennem "mikro-død og fornyelse", som Jordan Peterson kalder det. Jeg argumenterer derfor i afhandlingen, at der er gode grunde til at studere både Whitmans liv og hans værker – ikke fordi de er kategorisk sammenlignelige, men fordi sidstnævnte – værkerne – er vokset ud af førstnævnte og havde en evident, analyserbar, bemærkelsesværdig og positiv effekt på førstnævnte – digterens liv. Jeg tilføjer derfor også, at det er korrekt at udvise et minimum af respekt for Whitmans ytrede ønske, at vi ikke betragter hans vers som et litterært kunststykke eller som noget, der sigter mod kunst eller æstetik. Det er en moderne antagelse blandt forskere, at et æstetisk værk ydes størst retfærdighed ved at blive underkastet strengt rationel og klinisk præcis undersøgelse, men problemet med dette er, at det er svært at blive animeret af og forblive resonant med den ånd, der herskede under digtets skabelse, hvis den ånd ikke kommes i møde og træffes på halvvejen i vores analytiske udgangspunkt. Det er i denne ånd, jeg heri forsøger at læse og diskutere Whitmans liv og værker.

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I wish to dedicate this dissertation to Vanessa Galeano Duque.

I would like to thank a number of people. Robert Rix deserves a tremendous amount of thanks for educating me expertly on the Romantic era during my undergraduate years in 2006 and onwards, for pointing out the splendid Romantic hallmarks with passion and intelligence, for understanding my desire to understand Whitman better, for his belief in and co-supervision of my project, for his dedicated and excellent stewardship of the Nordic Association for Romantic Studies and for being a great friend for more than ten years.

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I would also like to thank a host of wonderful people I have gotten to know since enrolling in the humanities in 2006. These are friends, teachers and colleagues and I will always be grateful for their countless instructive and exhilarating conversations with me and for their immeasurably positive influence on my work in ways evident and sometimes not-so-evident. These include, in no particular order, Jesper Præst Nielsen, Jesper Klarskov, Jeppe Klitgaard Stricker, Martyn Bone, Brian Graham, Marlene Edenstein, Gregory Stephenson, Wesley Spyke, Elsa Rosais, Cian Duffy, Joseph Dodds, Adrian Chapman, Anna Sandberg, Lis Møller and Karina Lykke Grand. You have all helped me more than you probably think.

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E P I G R A P H I C P E R S P E C T I V E S

1.

– All works of culture should be *How X Can Change Your Life* . . .
– More importantly that's why they wrote it.
—Alain de Botton and Chris Hedges (respectively), 2015 interview

2.

The true question to ask respecting a book is, has it helped any human soul?
—Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas" (cf. Botton and Hedges above)

3.

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
. . .
I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time while I wait for a boat,
(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you,
Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd.)
—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

4.

When I read as I ought . . . [that is] with the total commitment required of any reader . . .
mental objects rise up from the depths of consciousness into the light of recognition.
[Reading] implied something resembling the apperception I have of myself, the action by which I grasp straightway what I think as being thought by a subject (who, in this case, is not I). . . . I am thinking the thoughts of another. . . . By I think [them] as my very own. . . .
My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another.
—Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading" (cf. Whitman above)

5.

We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depths of the abyss.
—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

6.

I write poems because they solve a conflict, because I am ill at ease spiritually and want to

clarify my thoughts and feelings. I write poems because from some inner chaos, I am driven to create order. I write poems because I am flooded, overpowered by feelings which have been provoked by some aspect of life or nature. This great bulk of feeling can only be subdued or brought under control if I allow some intellectual craftsmanship to work on it, to produce a manageable thought which I can control in the place of the all-pervading emotions which control me . . . Much of my poetry springs from the inner need to set thoughts and feelings in order and to emerge triumphant from the difficulties . . . One of the functions of poetry is to restore an inner balance which has temporarily been lost.
—Molly Harrower, *The Therapy of Poetry* (cf. Pascal above)

7.

The universal and ever-present urge to self-transcendence is not to be abolished by slamming the currently popular Doors in the Wall. The only reasonable policy it to open other, better doors . . . [some of which] will be social and technological in nature, others religious or psychological . . .
—Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (cf. Pascal above)

8.

[M]an's unease with the material world promotes a tendency towards abstraction and spiritual concerns.
—Susan Rowland (on a theoretical premise from Wilhelm Worringer), *Psyche and the Arts: Jungian Approaches to Music, Architecture, Literature, Painting and Film* (cf. Huxley above)

9.

[To] express for all mankind what all mankind feel without the power of expressing; to live the comprehensive life of the Philosopher, of the Poet, broad and vigorous, all lives in one,—reaching up into heaven, reaching down into hell, stretching backward over all the Past to gather up its results, throbbing with all the vital activity of the Present, making the Future glorious with more than hope,—this is the aim and the mission of Walt Whitman, this the felicity of his life as expressed in his poems.
—Walt Whitman, from an anonymous review of his own *Leaves of Grass* (May 19, 1860)

10.

Write books only if you are going to say in them the things you would never dare confide to anyone.
—Emil Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born* (cf. Whitman above)

11.

That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.
—F. Scott Fitzgerald (to Sheilah Graham), *Beloved Infidel*

12.

[J]ust as all neurotic symptoms and, for that matter, dreams are capable of being 'over-interpreted', and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation.

—Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

13.

Once we have the idea of alternative selves, we will have questions about the limits of being, about what or who we can take ourselves to be.

—Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures* (cf. Freud above)

14.

Individual existence means limited existence—limited in space and time. The existence of the limits makes experience possible; the fact of them makes experience unbearable. We have been granted the capacity for constant transcendence, as an antidote, but frequently reject that capacity, because using it means voluntarily exposing ourselves to the unknown.

—Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*

15.

We always have a choice about the contents and character of our inner lives.

—Sharon Lebell (after Epictetus's *The Enchiridion*), *The Art of Living*

16.

The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n[.]

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (cf. Lebell [Epictetus] above)

17.

[O]ne of the profoundest philosophical mysteries[is] the power of the individual mind to create its own world, not in complete independence of what is called "the objective world," but in a steadily growing independence of the attitudes of the minds toward this world. For what people call the objective world is really a most fluid, flexible, malleable thing. . . . To analyse this "objective" world is all very well, as long as you don't forget that the power to rebuild it by emphasis and rejection is synonymous with your being alive. . . . What we do is important; but it is less important than what we feel; for it is our feeling alone that is under the control of our will. In action we may be weak and clumsy blunderers, or on the other hand sometimes incompetent and sometimes competent. All this is largely beyond our control. What is not beyond our control is our feeling about it.

—John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (cf. Milton above)

18.

[According to Freud,] anxiety is a signal of danger, related to the infant's terror at its own

helplessness.
A potentially strong poet is hardly helpless, and she may never receive a signal of anxiety in regard to the literary past; but her poems will tally them.
—Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*

19.

Because we are nothing special . . . it is the work of culture to make us feel special. . . . We make our lives pleasurable, and therefore bearable, by picturing them as they might be.
—Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*

20.

[Reason] may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced; and [Imagination] as mind, acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry"

21.

Paul Valéry was fascinated by the influence of his own mind upon Valéry, which we can read through his major poems. We are neither Shakespeare nor Valéry, but all of us suffer the mind's force and violence upon ourselves.
—Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (cf. Shelley above)

22.

[T]he dividing line between fantasy and reality is not so easily drawn. It is certainly possible to disappear voluntarily into the mists of delusion; to withdraw into the comforts of denial from a world terrible beyond what can be borne. Imagination is not always insanity, however; its use does not always imply regression. Imagination and fantasy allow each of us to deal with the unknown. . .
—Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (cf. Shelley above)

23.

"And what is true for the reader is *a fortiori* true of the poet, who learns very quickly that there is no singing school for his soul except the study of the monuments of its own magnificence."
—Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (cf. Shelley and Bloom above)

24.

"[T]here is no true expertise in the humanities without knowing all of the humanities. Art is a vast, ancient interconnected web-work, a fabricated tradition. Overconcentration on any one point is a distortion."
—Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays*

25.

The old Delphic injunction “know thyself” now guides a great deal of scientific activity, as well as work in the traditional humanities. This is surely admirable, for there are no trade union barriers in the pursuit of knowledge.

—Simon Blackburn, “The Seat of Knowledge: Smart and Comfortable” (cf. Paglia above)

26.

What can be said is that some terrible pain lurks behind his verse. He is, of course, the definitive poet of joy. But there are signs of personal trauma even in his most exuberant poems.

—David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*

27.

The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (cf. Reynolds above)

28.

Either there [are] aesthetic values, or there are only the overdetermination of race, class, and gender. You must choose, for if you believe that all value ascribed to poems or plays or novels and stories is only a mystification in the service of the ruling class, then why should you read at all rather than go forth to serve the desperate needs of the exploited classes? The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the oddest illusions ever promoted . . .

—Harold Bloom, *On The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*

29.

Sweet are the uses of adversity;
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head:
And this our life, exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.

—William Shakespeare

30.

Works of literature are places where some of our deepest sorrows find themselves reflected, codified, chrystallised, in a way which gives up hope and dignity and makes us feel less alone.

—Alain de Botton, public talk 2016 (cf. Fitzgerald above)

31.

If human life is as I have just described it then the human is tragic. This is the point of view I offer in this book.

—Christopher Hamilton, *A Philosophy of Tragedy*

32.

Empirically, therefore, the self appears as a play of light and shadow, although conceived as a totality and unity in which the opposites are united.

—Carl Jung, *Psychological Types*

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2. “Democratic Vistas”, in Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect* (Glasgow: Wilson and McCormick, 1882–1883), 252.

3. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”.

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5. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. by A. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995), 63.

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17. John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (Suffolk: Picador, 1982), 62 and 626.

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19. Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), xvi.

20. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”, in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (New York: Penguins Books, 2017).

21. Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

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Preface

I received a personal introduction to the writings of Walt Whitman by a professor of American Literature, whose fondness for the poet was conveyed to me in terms I found both poignant and unusual, profound and strange. My teacher said that, after many years of reading and rereading the poet, he considered Whitman "a great companion to have", one that he returned to "for comfort and companionship". As I myself started getting an impression of the poet, I started to feel that my teacher's words, in addition to being interesting and sincere, correctly identified a quality in Whitman that I instinctively assumed both unusual and admirable in literature.

Once the unique character of Whitman's free verse began to yield to my curiosity and revealed the poet's fresh thoughts and brave affirmation of the profound and difficult things in life, I had – to my great surprise and pleasure – a similar experience to that of my teacher.

John Cowper Powys called attention to the power in Whitman "of restoring us to courage and joy even under circumstances of aggravated gloom" and calls him "the poet of passionate friendship and the poet of all those exquisite evasive emotions which arise when our loves and our regrets are blended with the presence of Nature."[1] It is not irrelevant to this dissertation that my own opinion of Whitman is largely in agreement with Powys's. Like the poet himself would have wanted it, I was hearing Whitman's "chant of dilation or pride."[2] Compatible with Powys, the Geneva School critic Georges Poulet might have said of me that I was "a self who [had been] granted the experience of thinking thoughts foreign to him", and that I was undergoing reading's "remarkable transformation" which can "cause the physical objects around [a reader] to disappear" and enable a "rapport" with "thoughts which are . . . the cogitations of another." Summing up this exciting idea, it was Poulet's contention that when "I read as I ought . . . I am thinking the thoughts of another", which "would be no cause for astonishment if I were thinking it *as* the thought of another. But I think it as my very own."[3]

Whitman insisted that his verse be viewed not "as a literary performance, or attempt at

[1] From John Cowper Powys, *One Hundred Best Books, with Commentary and an Essay on Books and Reading*, 27.
[2] From "Song of Myself".
[3] Emphasis mine. Georges Poulet is cited in Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, 44.

such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or æstheticism".[4] He also insisted that there was a practical distinction between generically, commonly defined poetry and "true" poetry:

> The words of the true poems give you more than poems,
> They give you to form for yourself, poems, religions, politics, war, peace, behavior, histories, essays, romances, and everything else,
> They balance ranks, colors, races, creeds, and the sexes,
> They do not seek beauty – they are sought.[5]

And a little further on in the poem: "Whom they take, they take into space, to behold the birth of stars, to learn one of the meanings, / To launch off with absolute faith." Addressing the reader directly (as "you"), Whitman wished that he could "spring from the pages into your arms" and entertained the idea of the reader's "seeking [him]".[6] He also envisioned, wished for everyone to achieve, and labored at bringing about in himself a state of personal being – and a style of living conducive to and harmonious with it – that was "self-balanced for contingencies", as unshakable under the influence of "ridicule, accidents, rebuffs" as a tree and charged with "the feeling to-day or any day I am sufficient as I am."[7] He told his friend and biographer R. M. Bucke, "I have imagined a life which should be that of the average man in average circumstances, and still grand, heroic," and insisted that the "true question to ask respecting a book" is, "Has it helped any human soul?"[8]

For better or worse, most Whitman critics have preferred not to address and direct their scholarship along these themes and values, although when reading certain scholars it is possible to infer a measure of personal excitement engendered by Whitman's art. If most have erred on the impassive side, there *are* worthy exceptions; Roger Asselineau's pioneering study *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* is one. Still, most Whitman studies do not highlight the connection between their *personal* enthusiasm and *scholarly* motivation for studying the poet. Although I personally find such prefacing both instructive and important, it is obvious that personal statements like that do not appear learned and sophisticated in the common technical sense. I nevertheless think there can be no harm in admitting to being guided by one's involuntary responses, and I shall

[4] From the 1889 essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads".
[5] From "Song of the Answerer".
[6] The quoted phrases in this sentence are from, respectively, "So Long!" and "Full of Life now".
[7] From "Me Imperturbe" (twice) and "One Hour to Madness and Joy" (once).
[8] See Richard Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, 181. The last two quotes in the line are from "Democratic Vistas", which is contained in Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, 252.

suggest that Harold Bloom may be on to something profound when he calls "the individual self . . . the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value."[9] He goes on to say that "the only pragmatic test for the canonical" is whether you think a work "worthy of rereading." While I happen to consider Whitman not just "worthy of" but very nearly commanding or necessitating rereading, I shall keep the focus on Whitman – not me – and not mingle my arguments with personal introspection.[10] Having said this, I must add that it is central to my underlying premises that there should be no stigma associated with literary scholars taking an interest in the relationship between literature and the health of readers' souls, so to speak, in addition of course to several other issues that are properly found to warrant attention. And certainly I believe that as long as we strive to lead sane and moral lives, we should endorse and respect the kind of art *and* criticism that appears to be on the side of health and morality (hard though it may be to separate the wheat from the chaff). If there is a choice, we should care unapologetically for art which, in John Gardner's words,

> seeks to hold off . . . the twilight of the gods and us, . . . that beats back the monsters . . . [and] builds walls against life's leveling force [and] the ruin of . . . consciousness, . . . [that] asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution, [that would] keep the mind intact . . . [including] what is necessary to humanness."[11]

I am sympathetic, then, to art which proposes to "transcend the human without forsaking humanism", to borrow Bloom's thumbnail definition of "the American Sublime".[12] And as a scholar I pledge my allegiance to Gardner's brand of values in calm conviction that all human flourishing is finally predicated upon it. Similarly. I do not think it takes many verbal flourishes to argue persuasively that the healthy artist – who wills his or her own survival – had better make a decisive endeavor to be on the side that is "against chaos and death, against entropy."[13]

When Ralph Waldo Emerson first read Whitman in 1855, he famously "rubbed [his] eyes a little" – as a man would pinch himself – before concluding, evidently a bit dazed, that "the solid sense of the book" was indeed "a sober reality".[14] This is the first of several personal accounts

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[9] Harold Bloom, *On the Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, 22

[10] It is apropos that Bloom, in his most reason work, defends his "firm conviction that true criticism recognizes itself as a mode of memoir." See Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 49.

[11] From John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 5–6.

[12] From Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*, 3.

[13] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 6.

[14] All quotations from Emerson in the current preface are from his famous 1855 letter to Whitman which is reproduced in full in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. by Michael Moon, 637.

that *Leaves of Grass* is capable of wielding over its readers a strange power best characterized as visceral – in the sense that there is potentially something super- or extra-literary about the text – which, as I have noted, seems to be what Whitman was consciously trying to achieve. The reaction of Robert Louis Stevenson is strikingly similar.[15] Jan Christian Smuts, author of *Walt Whiman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (1895), also found that "Whitman did a great service to me in making me appreciate the Natural Man and freeing me from much theological or conventional preconceptions [*sic*] due to my very early pious upbringing. It was a sort of liberation . . . Sin ceased to dominate my view of life, and this was a great relief as I was inclined to be severely puritanical in all things."[16] And although public reception of his work was not unanimously enthusiastic, occasionally Whitman learned by mail of readers who (like a woman in Australian writing in 1888) found his books to be "moral tonics in their joyous healthiness and [providing] just the antidote that is needed to all the morbid self-analysis and sickly sentimentality of the present age. I never read them without feeling more strongly than ever what a beautiful sane thing human life is."[17] John Addington Symonds, who also corresponded with Whitman and went on to write a significant study on the poet, could think of only one book who had affected him more deeply than *Leaves of Grass*: the Bible.[18] Mark van Doren remarks Whitman's "Messianic nature" and adds that there is "still something legendary about Walt Whitman—about the man himself, and about . . . *Leaves of Grass* . . . It remains amazing, and so we look for wonders in the man. Nor is there any lack of them at hand."[19]

This dissertation is first and foremost my attempt to discover and discuss the full significance of these powerful and life-altering responses. Emerson's response exhibits the two genres of evaluation I have indicated above: detached and critical versus involuntary personal. The New England sage saw with *intellectual* clarity that the contents of the book as well as the artistry of its execution defied casual description: "I find [in it]", he wrote, "incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be."[20] This is a crucial observation, but equally so – to me – is his

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[15] See Glenda Norquay, ed., *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction: An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays*, 112.
[16] Smuts's work on Whitman remained unpublished until 1973. The quoted words appear in W. K. Hancock, *Smuts: The Sanguine Years, 1870–1919*, 48.
[17] This particular fan letter (from one Jessie Taylor) is quoted in Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 178.
[18] See John Addington Symonds, *Walt Whitman: A Study*, 11.
[19] From the Introduction to *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. by Mark van Doren, ix.
[20] Lawrence Buell has pointed out that Emerson, by praising the work as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed", seems deliberately to avoid calling it poetry. From Lawrence Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, 416.

personal and emotional response. It is valid and important *in general* to the complicated issue of our relationship with literature, with reading and writing. In thus lingering on the fact that Emerson found it incumbent on him to inform the author of *Leaves of Grass* that he was "very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy," I am foreshadowing that these – and related aesthetic merits and psychological benefits – will be among the leitmotifs of this dissertation.[21]

PART 1 • THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theoretical Perspectives on Crisis, Writing, Self and Transcendence

Chapter 1. *"The true questions to ask respecting a book is, has it helped any human soul?":* On the Reasonableness of Expecting Literature to Be Therapeutic

Chapter summary: This dissertation seeks to uncover and discuss the potentials for literature – extending to and not excluding a normal person's private experiments with the written word – to serve as an aid to discovering and understanding our subjective experiences. But more than that, the dissertation reflects my interest in literature's usefulness as a tool with which to address and bring healing to psychic pain and reduce existential suffering. It thus deals, essentially and throughout, with the themes of human "survival" as well as "flourishing", which I consider (in the tradition of the twentieth-century existentialists) to be two *not* categorically distinct states of being; it is my view then that survival differs from flourishing in degree, *not* in kind.[22] I should add that my use of the

[21] The phrase is Emerson's. From Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. by Michael Moon, 637.

[22] In other words, a flourishing person is technically speaking a person particularly apt at surviving.

Despite my affinity for certain twentieth-century existentialists, I have found Blaise Pascal's account of human perception from the seventeenth century very useful as well. Compatible with what I have argued above, Pascal sums it up thus: "Qualities carried to excess are bad for us", then offers this elaboration: "Our senses can perceive [and tolerate, let me add] nothing extreme; too much noise deafens us, too much light dazzles; when we are too far or too close we cannot see properly . . . too much pleasure causes discomfort; too much harmony in music is

word “survival” just now acknowledges the word’s broadest sense; therefore, were I to elaborate on how I am going to conceptualize it in discourse, I should emphasize psychic coping, the soothing of anxiety and the procurement and maintenance of sustainable non-traumatic states. (Informally, survival is thus imagined to be the result of a robust aptitude for what one might call “psychic homeostasis”; I shall not be engaged with other – more physical and visually evident – modes of eluding fatality and enabling thriving.). Literature, then, is approached as a potential countervailing force – or activity, or method, if you like – to the individual whose situation is unbearable because of pain, anxiety or trauma, and for whom no external mitigation is forthcoming or foreseeable. In much of life – perhaps necessarily so – our psychological pangs are ignored or go unnoticed (often, Freud thought, due to repression of consciousness about the real roots of the discomfort); frequently, too, our attention is simply diverted away from it as a consequence of common distractions and life’s inherent flux and transience. We may later look back on such occurrences and utter the platitude “Time heals all wounds”. But that strikes me as the attitude of a person who has not yet learned quite as much about his or her psychic nature and emotional life as it is in general afforded human beings to learn. It is true that we often survive without having to consciously learn anything profound about ourselves. In relatively innocuous cases of suffering (when some threat, illness or enemy alters its, or his, destructive course before we are spoken for), it will often be sufficiently consoling to our aching psyche to be graciously sheltered in the sympathy of a loved one, parent or friend. Human consolation and solace might truly be the swiftest mood stabilizer commonly available. Sadly, however, human sympathy, let alone love, cannot be counted on to be extended automatically or in desired form every time we collide bruisingly with reality. Insofar as literature really has a positive (potential) role to play in making our psychological

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displeasing; too much kindness annoys us. . .” Conversely, as will be seen, I am here saying: Human flourishing may occur insofar as there is an ability to withstand, negotiate, countervail or neutralize – in short, *survive* – threats, adversity and all “qualities carried to excess”.

Very appropriately, Pascal’s precis of human perception is offered in the context of his summary of the human condition with its inherent sources of good and ill. It is featured among my epigraphic perspectives (no. 5), and I shall silently take it for granted as a fundamental starting point in the following chapters.

Another reason why the theme of “flourishing”, for which *survival* is (obviously) a crucial precondition, will be secondary in rank to survival is that this thesis is concerned with crises, danger and “life gone wrong”, and although flourishing represents a fine ideal towards which the desperate individual – *any* individual – may well decide to strive, his first concern is naturally mere survival. (It might be remarked *en passant* that *eudaimonia* as a theoretical concept, which signifies “flourishing” in Greek, entered the Western canon – with Plato and Aristotle – very nearly at the same time that literary criticism as an intellectual discipline did – with Aristotle’s *Poetics*.) This note features words from Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 63.

vicissitudes easier to endure and less frustratingly mystifying, a dissertation devoted to systematically conceptualizing the process in principle and exploring it in practice is, in Simon Blackburn's words, "unlikely to do us any harm".[23]

* * *

> One's life is not always the thing it is supposed to be—has its periods and periods—dark, light, dark again—spots, errors, damned foolishnesses.
> —Walt Whitman, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 6

i. The Existential Hum and the Dream of Analgesics

Beneath the surface of Horatio Dresser's observation that "Life is a problem which has for each an individual solution" lies the recognition that it is no straightforward matter to master and excel at life or recommend a certain methodology or existential attitude to a human being who has resolved to learn to live well.[24] The Delphic injunction "Know thyself" (identifying a prerequisite bit of psychoemotional, existential "homework" which, if shirked, a person would have little hope of excelling at life) also implicitly suggests that no one *Weltanschauung* can profitably be taught to everyone with equally great results. With such axiomatic caveats – with the recognition, for instance, of the dizzying multiplicity of unknowns and variables determining any individual's life – begins the history of Western philosophy – in a manner of speaking. Aristotle usefully put it thus:

> For to some people happiness [the technical term is *eudaimonia*: "living well and doing well"] seems to be virtue; to others prudence; to others some sort of wisdom; to others again it seems to be these, or one of these, involving pleasure or requiring it to be added; others add in external prosperity as well. . . . It is reasonable for each group not to be completely wrong, but to be correct on one point at least, or even on most points.[25]

More than two millennia later, the West is still hotly debating from whom the "answers" to the problems that life so stubbornly represents are to come (the natural sciences are frequently pitted against the humanities in that kind of debate – or against the theologians and mystics).[26] Evidently, the burden of existence (the "existential hum", in Kurt Vonnegut's phrase) still drives human beings

[23] Blackburn's words are from Simon Blackburn, *Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love*, 190.
[24] Horatio W. Dresser, *The Power of Silence: An Interpretation of Life in its Relation to Health and Happiness*, 10.
[25] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.
[26] This is Blackburn's point in Simon Blackburn, "The Seat of Knowledge: Smart and Comfortable".

to belief or nihilism, substance abuse or self-help, quietism or company, contemplation or action or distraction.[27]

Although it has in the twentieth century become quaintly unfashionable for scholars in the humanities to busy themselves with defining and examining "philosophies of life" or speculating about such possibly ill-defined and nonintellectual concerns as "the meaning of life", it has in fact not even been 150 years since Matthew Arnold declared that great poetry (which is still being studied) was inseparable from the issue of "How to live".[28] It has been even less time since D. H. Lawrence argued that art, "always ahead of the "times"," can "reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment." But of course, Arnold and Lawrence were not exactly academics. Leonard Cohen has remarked that the world is generally "hostile to the writer, the world is hostile to the poet, the world is hostile to any man who will hold up a mirror to the particular kind of mindless chaos in which we endure" – and surely an accurate and honest engagement with the chaotic aspect of reality is unavoidable and essential to the issue of how to live.[29] So why the disconnect?

Although I just a moment ago declared this a trend or situation obtaining predominantly in the twentieth and twenty-first century, let me note that the diagnosis predates the current era considerably. Montaigne was to my knowledge the first to put academics' biases on behalf of technicality and sterile detail under critical scrutiny – and call them out for neglecting "virtue" in an effort to appear "learned". Whateer the situation in 16th-century France, his useful diagnosis is worth quoting as this dissertation is predicated on my personal sense that it is quite pertinent and timely still:

> I gladly come back to the theme of the absurdity of our education: its end has not been to make us good and wise but learned. And it has succeeded. It has not taught us to seek virtue and to embrace wisdom: it has impressed upon us their derivation and their etymology. We know how to decline the Latin word for virtue: we do not know how to love virtue. Though we do not know what wisdom is in practice or from experience we do know the jargon off my heart. . . . A good education changes a boy's judgement and morals . . .[30]

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[27] Vonnegut uses the phrase "existential hum" in *Palm Sunday*, in Kurt Vonnegut, *Welcome To The Monkey House and Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, 497. Also, see the epigraphic words by Aldous Huxley (no. 7).

[28] To be fair, some academic scholars take on the issue – but very occasionally. Examples include Peter Singer (*Practical Ethics*, chapter 12), Shelly Kagan (*Death*, chapter 14) and Simon Blackburn (*Being Good*, chapter 17).

[29] The Cohen quote is from Leonard Cohen, "Leonard Cohen in 1964 – On being a Jewish writer, a Canadian and a seeker of G-d" [4:55].

[30] Michel de Montaigne, "On Presumption", *The Complete Essays*, ed. by M. A. Screech, 749–750.

H. D. Thoreau shared the concern that the aim, emphases and tendencies of academic scholarship were not infallible, adding (rather mysteriously) that "It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know". In

Whitman, about whom this dissertation is after all about, wrote a poem intriguingly entitled "Long I thought that knowledge alone would suffice me"; and I feel sure he would agree with Montaigne and Thoreau (in footnote 30). He copied the following sentiment from Thomas Henry Huxley into the "common-place book" whose quotations he "absorb'd over and over again" – and later reproduced in *Specimen Days and Collect*:

> I myself agree with the sentiment of Thomas Hobbes . . . that "the scope of all speculation is the performance of some action or thing to be done." I have not any great respect for, or interest in, mere "knowing," as such.[31]

On the same issue – that is, on the issue of *which* questions are more essential and critical and *which* theories for talking about them more appropriate – the psychologist Jordan Peterson appears loyal to a (in this context perhaps similarly unusual) intellectual position, namely that which takes seriously and follows to its logical conclusion the fact that because conscious "being" on this planet is a phenomenon that spans millions of years, it greatly antedates our modern allegiance to post-Enlightenment "rationality" and conceptions of "truth". In his elucidation of the mode of survival characterizing these vast stretches of time (evolutionary history), Peterson offers – usefully for me – what doubles as a thumbnail precis of the nature and usefulness of the arguments central to this thesis. His claim is that embodied biological being is generally sustainable over time when it is rooted in conscious, centralized being and responds dynamically to the constant need to "understand itself in the world [and] to figure out how to act in the world." He continues:

> And I would say: That's our fundamental problem. Our fundamental problem is not: *What are things made of?* (although I'm not saying that's not *a* problem: it's a problem ["discussable", in Rick's terminology, see footnote 30], but it's not the fundamental problem.) The fundamental problem is: *What to do about what things are made of? Where to*

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the best romantic form, he lamented too that "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. . . . To be a philosopher is . . . to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically." The parallelism with Montaigne's distinction between knowing how, for instance, to decline the Latin word for virtue without knowing how to love virtue should be obvious. The first quote is from *The Quotable Thoreau*, ed. by Jeffery S. Cramer, 77; for the second, see H. D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 19.

Similarly, Christopher Ricks has overtly implied that the things critics tend to write about are not the most important ones: "[T]he critic must resist . . . the temptation to write as if the discussable things were the most important ones." See Christopher Ricks, *Poems and Critics: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism from Shakespeare to Hardy*, 12.

[31] Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, 185. Being personally acquainted and united in Emersonian orientations, I am also confident that he shared with Thoreau a desire "to explore the fundamental facts of existence in order to be able to recognize the real, the eternal truth and substance underlying all existence, as distinct from the actual, the distracting and sometimes misdirecting commontion that prevents our paying attention. The task he set himself was to find the reality that transcended his day-to-day experiences." From Jeffrey S. Cramer's annotations to Henry David Thoreau, *I to Myself: An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, xviii.

> *go?* [These are existential questions and of the same nature as] *What's the meaning of your life? What's the purpose of your life?* We shouldn't be using materialist theories to address such questions – but we do, and it has cost us a lot.[32]

To what degree the indicated ebb or decay in academic enthusiasm for these timeless and largely unanswerable (we might say *sublime*) problems of being – as well as the apparently attendant ebb in public support for *thought* to the detriment of support for *scientific research* – is due to obvious economic reasons I cannot settle; but it obviously stands to reason that it is easier to monetize and commercialize something that either makes or fixes a visible dent in the world's physical surfaces than something that redresses the world's more subtle problems – its moral, intellectual or psychic crises (in part because the latter are by far more difficult to measure).

In the wake of general indifference among academicians for assisting the public in their attempts to look after the well-being of their soul, it seems that a broad swathe of more or less doubtful coaches, gurus, media personalities and self-help authors have found ways to cater to the kind of appetite I have described – for evidently the interest among the public has not really waned, whether it is in vogue to avow it or not. Of course, so-called "self-help literature" predates the printing press and the Enlightenment, which is a kind of testimony to the observation of the alleged timelessness of the indicated issues: Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* is a classic example and has never been out of print. A much more recent example – though it predates D. H. Lawrence – is William Edward Hartpole Lecky's interesting *The Map of Life: Conduct and Character* in which three "great guiding landmarks of a wise life" are straightforwardly identified: "to do our duty—to avoid useless sorrow—to acquiesce in the inevitable."[33] Whether such rather dogmatic injunctions

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[32] From Jordan Peterson, "2015 Maps of Meaning Lecture 02: Object and Meaning (Part 1)" [45:00].

Jordan Peterson has said that one of the problems with approaching something purely academically is that (a) "thinking is a tool and "being" is something that supersedes any tool", adding elsewhere that (b) "Wisdom [is] what the humanities is supposed to teach us, [and] wisdom is what enables you to deal honorably with the tragedy of life." From (a) Jordan Peterson, "The Necessity of Virtue – Jordan B. Peterson" and (b) Jordan Peterson, "Biblical Series II: Genesis 1: Chaos & Order" [1:21:05].

This might be an appropriate point to remark that although each person is necessarily very intimately familiar with seeing the world from the viewpoint of a body and viewing themselves as a "self", I am going to consider the phenomenal fact of the self *sublime*. By that I essentially mean that (like sublime events in general) it eludes absolute rigorous description and poses its own distinct challenges to human flourishing. (The fact that there has been no decline in the torrent of arguments – from philosophers, theologians and mystics – supposedly establishing exactly *when* a self comes into being, *when* it goes out of being and *what it is* in the meantime should at the very least bear out my claim that the self is no trivially comprehended entity (or concept, event, phenomenon). Merely indicating the breadth of the literature on being, eschatology, philosophy of mind, and other centrally relevant associated disciplines of thought would be beyond what the scope of this dissertation permits.)

[33] W. E. H. Lecky, *The Map of Life: Conduct and Character*, 353.

can heal the ineluctable anguish associated with the human condition – or whether subtler, profounder works are indicated – I shall be considering in these chapters.

ii. Grim Reality and Higher Consciousness

Let me revisit my determination to address the age-old embarrassment and secrecy surrounding existential suffering in scholarly form and fashion. Taking a leaf out of Harold Bloom's *On The Western Canon*, then (see epigraphic perspective 28), this dissertation declines to add to recent attempts to harness culture for politicized and sociological concerns (however apparently admirable), and is compelled to side instead with the psychoanalysts as well as certain contemporary thinkers (e.g. the philosophers Christopher Hamilton, Simon May and Shelley Kagan and the psychologist Jordan Peterson). It submits that the earth's current population is to all intents and purposes, on average, every bit as desperate, agonized and traumatized as previous generations. Peterson says: "People suffer more than they have to because [they] profoundly misunderstand what is real. We're blinded to what is truly fundamental by the things that present themselves most easily to our perception."[34] As a consequence of ineluctable suffering across the human race, then, it seems plausible that one is actually doing people a favor by constructing and defending the argument that there is more than one way of conceptualizing reality. In other words, it might be that most people have adopted and internalized an unnecessarily punishing view of how things are interrelated, and of what they amount to as individual persons. It might be, for starters, that we would all take heart from and find reassurance in the news that it is possible to think of art and culture as domains and artefacts of psychological and personal *utility* (i.e. characterized by the potential for personal transformation), quite beyond and separate from our culture's wonted appropriation of the aesthetic for political, decorous and mildly hedonistic functions. I would commend such a position for the simple reason that I consider it the healthiest one.

And conversely, it is my view that to assume art particularly well-adapted to addressing and redressing issues of political and social injustice – rather than a realm or conduit via which one may grapple honestly with psychological, existential, philosophical, even essentially religious mysteries – is to manifest a prosaic and diminished attitude to the frequent profundity and inevitability of great works of art. Steeping our hearts and intellects in great works of art (as opposed to privileging more mechanical, gross, appetitive and unthinking forms of human activity)

[34] From Jordan Peterson, "TEDxToronto – Dr. Jordan B. Peterson—Redefining Reality" [2:15].

is to me as obviously valuable as it is intuitively preferable and high-minded to "gaze at the stars" when one is plunged in some miserable gutter (to reference Oscar Wilde's famous quote). We have had a century of nihilism, genocide, catastrophe and disillusion; yet here we are in the West, comfortable, warm, educated, safe and free. The fact that we do not suffer inordinately is an unspeakable miracle from a historical perspective, and we ignore the significance thereof at our peril. In William James's words, "Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony"; therefore, recognizing that we have the opportunity to nourish sides of ourselves that transcend the worldly domain, we really have no choice but to seize that opportunity with gratitude.

As a pacifistic human enterprise, art is in a different existential category from conventional modes of intervention on behalf of those who suffer. R. L. Stevenson wished to thank Whitman – and other poets have inspired equal and similarly articulated gratitude in their readers – for shattering the "cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion", shaking the "tabernacle of lies" and in practical terms defining a "strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues". That is clearly no small service. The arts should be valued and listened to for what they invite us to do with them and thereby with ourselves; to decline to take them seriously for extending that opportunity is, in my opinion, to manifest an inappropriate level of ingratitude and a lack of engagement with the mystery of being, and it is therefore no way to recognize and repay the strange and complex causes that have placed us here to speak and think freely. It seems to me that only by confronting the mystery of being squarely and with all the intuition, courage and principle of our intellects (and by extension our *speech*), can we hope to transcend a cattlelike mode of being to one that finds us worthy of our ineluctable suffering.[35] These words of mine are, I suppose, one way of restating and acknowledging my agreement with the, I think, eternally valid Delphic injunction (see epigraphic perspective 25). Whether they knew it or not, certain artists have been guided by its directive, as have certain mystics although to my thinking there is not anything intangible or mysterious about what I am describing.

If the attitude to being that I have traced above may be emblematized as the discovery of the Wells-ean "green door in the wall" (cf. epigraphic perspective 7), then Whitman has struck many readers as a poet who drew and offered maps to that door, so to speak.[36] Let me entertain that

[35] Fyodor Dostoevsky said, "There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings." From Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 66.

[36] To stay with the metaphor, Whitman wrote: "I often think the *Leaves* themselves are much the same sort of thing [as his *American Primer*]: a *passage way to something* rather than a thing in itself concluded: not the best that might be done but the best it is necessary to do for the present, to break the ground" (emphasis mine). Horace Traubel cites

metaphor throughout this paragraph. The analogy with a bona fide religious awakening has of course frequently been made.[37] However, although William James has identified "expression[s] of . . . mystical experience" in Whitman's poetry we do not need to proceed by ineffable terms and mysterious premises in order to present a provisional answer to this question: What can we comprehensively pronounce about the nature of the attitudes and values that lie beyond the "door" (the discovery of and access to which were arguably essential to Whitman's survival and happiness – and could be to ours)?[38] Unfashionable though it may make me appear (but heartened by Harold Bloom's view that "there is no critical method except yourself"), I maintain that careful consideration of the insights on ordinary life and higher consciousness below – and careful reflection on how badly they have been comprehended in our frantic, official Western world – should convince most people that the surest way of limiting existential unhappiness might be psychological in nature. Properly understood – which is to say, understood beyond an average willingness to pay mechanical lip-service to the idea – it is unfortunately a culturally unorthodox view that we are the playthings (the reapers of the consequences) of our own mental health and mental powers *to a greater degree* than of external, measurable and manipulatable factors. Henry Miller was not surprised that the view I describe is so skeptically received: In his view people are by nature, inexorably, "busybodies [who] do not know how to swim on the river of life [but] prefer a sort of senseless insect activity" to the deeper meaning that is the often the hard-won reward of contemplation and art.[39] If works of art – in this case Whitman's poems – have so much as the faintest potential for putting us on the road to what is being outlined below (for "sensitizing" us to its insights; see footnote 101), then we need a good argument for choosing *not* to think about art's potential in that way. Here – almost in full though not quite – are the insights that need to be carefully considered:

> Ordinary life rewards practical, unintrospective, self-justifying outlooks that are the hallmarks of what we could call 'lower' consciousness. Neuroscientists speak of a 'lower' part of the brain they term the reptilian mind and tell us that under its sway, we strike back when we're hit, blame others, quell any stray questions that lack immediate relevance, fail to free-associate and stick closely to a flattering image of who we are and where we are heading.

Whitman thus in his foreword to Walt Whitman, *An American Primer by Walt Whitman: With Facsimiles of the Original Manuscript*, ed. by Horace Traubel, vii.

[37] Edwin Haviland Miller records that a fanatic "slogan" about Whitman was in circulation in the 1860s: "There are three great men in history, Jesus, Buddha, and Walt Whitman, and the greatest of these is—Walt Whitman." From Walt Whitman, *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman*, ed. by Edwin Haviland Miller, 119.

[38] For James's thoughts on Whitman and mysticism, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 342.

[39] From Henry Miller, *My Life and Times*, 37.

However, at rare moments, when there are no threats or demands upon us, perhaps late at night or early in the morning, when our bodies and passions are comfortable and quiescent, we have the privilege of being able to access the higher mind – what neuroscientists call our neocortex, the seat of imagination, empathy and impartial judgement. We loosen our hold on our own egos and ascend to a less biased and more universal perspective, casting off a little of the customary anxious self-justification and brittle pride.

In such states, the mind moves beyond its particular self-interests and cravings. We start to think of other people in a more imaginative way. Rather than criticise and attack, we are free to imagine that their behaviour is driven by pressures derived from their own more primitive minds, which they are generally in no position to tell us about. Their temper or viciousness are, we now see, symptoms of hurt rather than of 'evil'.

It's an astonishing gradual evolution to develop the ability to explain others' actions by their distress, rather than simply in terms of how it affects us. We perceive that the appropriate response to humanity is not fear, cynicism or aggression, but always – when we can manage it – love.

At such moments, the world reveals itself as quite different: a place of suffering and misguided effort, full of people striving to be heard and lashing out against others, but also a place of tenderness and longing, beauty and touching vulnerability. The fitting response is universal sympathy and kindness.

One's own life feels less precious; one can contemplate being no longer present with tranquility. One's interests are put aside and one may imaginatively fuse with transient or natural things: trees, the wind, a moth, clouds or waves breaking on the shore. From this point of view, status is nothing, possessions don't matter, grievances lose their urgency. If certain people could encounter us at this point, they might be amazed at our transformation and at our newfound generosity and empathy.[40]

iii. Of What Exactly May Whitman Remind Us?

[41] In Whitman's best poems the poet seems to bask in an existential attitude much like the one laid out above. He seems to have achieved it more or less by his own will and determination, and since news of an achievement of that nature first reached me I have been impressed and heartened by the promise – on behalf of the entire human race – and existential profundity indicated by its possibility. I have brought in a quote by Susan Rowland (see epigraphic perspective 8), but shall throughout use the word "spiritual" hesitantly, not casually, for it is notoriously hard to be scholarly about whatever it denotes. Fortunately, what I am trying to parse out has been considered by other Whitman scholars, including his biographer Justin Kaplan who, when asked if *Leaves of Grass*

[40] This essay (from which I have omitted a few paragraphs) is entitled "On Higher Consciousness". From Alain de Botton, "On Higher Consciousness", in *The Book of Life* (online essay collection).

[41] Whitman wrote this to Emerson in 1856: "In poems or in speeches I say the word or two that has got to be said, adhere to the body, step with the countless common footsteps, and *remind every man and woman of something*" (emphasis added). From Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Michael Moon, 638.

"primarily contain[s] a spiritual message", replied: "Yes. Very definitely. Not in any doctrinal way. But a spirit. And you can't pin spirit down."[42] I return to these themes under the rubric of saintliness in chapter 3.

As evidenced by my Preface, I have been very intrigued by other readers' responses to Whitman. Some of them anticipate what de Botton more carefully develops in his piece on "higher consciousness". The positive implications for survival (due to enhanced psychic endurance and personal immovability) as a direct consequence of attaining such a state – and despite the facts of life's crises and traumas – seem to me obvious. As a minimum, then, a dissertation dedicated to art's role as handmaiden of psychic renovation, renewal, healing and construction of self must at least register (if not explicate) the potential for occasionally bringing about such psychic states, such modes of existence. Curiously, de Botton's psycho-attitudinal description of "higher consciousness" corresponds closely with a portrait of Whitman penned by his friend and biographer Richard Maurice Bucke. The portrait appeared in Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901):

> His favorite occupation . . . seemed to be strolling or sauntering about outdoors by himself, looking at the grass, the trees, the flowers, the vistas or light, the varying aspects of the sky, and listening to the birds, the crickets, the tree frogs, and all the hundreds of natural sounds. It was evident that these things gave him a pleasure far beyond what they give to ordinary people. Until I knew the man . . . it had not occurred to me that any one could derive so much absolute happiness from these things as he did. He was very fond of flowers, either wild or cultivated; liked all sorts. I think he admired lilacs and sunflowers just as much as roses. Perhaps, indeed, no man who ever lived liked to many things and disliked so few as Walt Whitman. All natural objects seemed to have a charm for him. All sights and sounds seemed to please him. He appeared to like (and I believe he did like) all the men, women, and children he saw (though I never knew him to say that he liked any one), but each who knew him felt that he liked him or her, and that he liked others also. I never knew him to argue or dispute, and he never spoke about money. He always justified, sometimes playfully, sometimes quite seriously, those who spoke harshly of himself or his writings, and I often thought he even took pleasure in the opposition of enemies. When I first knew [him], I used to think that he watched himself, and would not allow his tongue to give expression to fretfulness, antipathy, complaint, and remonstrance. It did not occur to me as possible that these mental states could be absent in him. After long observation, however, I satisfied myself that such absence or unconsciousness was entirely real. He never spoke deprecatingly of any nationality or class of men, or time in the world's history, or against any trades or occupations—not even against any animals, insects, or inanimate things, nor any of the laws of nature, nor any of the results of those laws, such as illness, deformity, and death. He never complained or grumbled either at the weather, pain, illness, or anything else.

[42] From Justin Kaplan and Rob Couteau, " 'The Mystery of the Man': Justin Kaplan Talks About America's Greatest Poet". See footnote 558 where Horace Traubel mentions a "movement of the spirit."

> He never swore. He could not very well, since he never spoke in anger and apparently never was angry. He never exhibited fear, and I do not believe he ever felt it.[43]

If even a fraction of this portrait is to be trusted (and who can say that it is? – but it might be) that at least raises the possibility (whether we are Whitman readers or not) that what we take for granted in general about the possibilities of the human psyche falls pitifully short of the *actual* psychic potentiality.

iv. Self-balanced for Contingencies

Although I shall return later to this point, it seems appropriate here to add that what Whitman (in *Democratic Vistas*) deemed his country sorely needed was works enabling each person to "confront Nature, and confront time and space, both with science, and *con amore*, and take his right place, prepared for life, master of fortune and misfortune."

This mode of confrontation, I argue, is what he so nicely sums up in the phrase "self-balanced for contingencies" (from the poem "Me Imperturbe"). If we are inclined to take at face value the poet's own statement about his work (again from *Democratic Vistas*), then *Leaves of Grass* contains "a basic model or portrait of personality for general use" and aims to be the literary distillation of "a new breath of life" that will serve to accomplish "what neither the schools nor the churches and their clergy have hitherto accomplish'd, and without which this nation will no more stand, permanently, soundly, than a house will stand without a substratum", namely the nurture and raising of "a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States" (footnote 44).

At the end of his life, Whitman told Horace Traubel that he had tried in his words "to leave men healthy, to fill them with a new atmosphere." Although I am going to try to avoid the word "religious", which can introduce unnecessary confusion, Whitman himself, we notice, does not shun it, although I doubt he wishes to imply numinous overtones in a formally metaphysical sense). In a context related to the secular appropriation of terms with a prominent religious history, I find it fascinating that the words "health", "heal", "hale", "whole" and "holy" are all related etymologically.[44]

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[43] I cite from James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which includes Bucke's portrait. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 83.

[44] The "leave men healthy" quote is from *With Walt Whitman in Camden* and is spoken on October 9, 1890. See Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 82. All the other quotes above (in section iv) derive from *Democratic Vistas*. I have verified the etymology at

It is interesting too to find that Whitman was aware of the above-mentioned etymological relations. In William Swinton's *Rambles Among Words* from 1859, to which several biographers believe Whitman contributed at least two chapters, we find this passage:

> The word 'HEALTH' wraps up within it—for, indeed, it is hardly a metaphor—a whole world of suggestion. It is that which healeth or causeth to be whole—what the Scotch call hale: that is, perfect 'health' is that state of the man when there is no discord or division in the system, but when all the functions conspire to make a perfect one or whole."[45]

v. The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose

I have offered these views in defense of poetry and on behalf of art and aesthetic engagement because it is my sense that it has been tacitly established that art and aesthetic creations could not possibly offer nourishing correctives for our souls, could not possibly delight, comfort, ground or stimulate us in ways or to degrees worth taking seriously. The very word "soul" – or, more precisely, the act of defending its metaphoric utility rather than speaking of "psychological health" or refer learnedly to areas of the brain (see Adam Phillips in footnote 199) – seems these days enough to set levelheaded thinkers' teeth on edge. The idea that there is something immature and childish – something hopelessly "romantic" – about that kind of language seems to pervade discourse and culture in the West, perhaps beyond the West as well. When it comes to psychic health, the majority of people seem to find it conducive and appropriate to affirm what appears to be the culture's tacit consensus about the best way to health and happiness. Unfortunately that seems to involve an occasionally desensitizing sybaritic combination of fun, bliss, notoriety, recognition, socioeconomic status, correctives for aging, hedonistic distractions and palliative comforts, in short, a diet of luxury and convenience bordering on the decadent and summed up rather well by the old phrase "bread and circuses".[46] Seldom does one hear advertised the value of wisdom, reflection, self-mastery, perseverance, discipline or accurate Delphic self-knowledge. So, in a way, I feel moved to argue (with Angus Fletcher) that if we wish to elude the "the slavery of pleasure" (and it goes without question that we should), then we must cultivate an unillusioned (not naïve and

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www.etymonline.com.

[45] From Zachary Turpin's Introduction to Walt Whitman's "Manly Health and Training"," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (2016), 166.

[46] "Bread" conveniently doubles as a slang synonym for money. The following titles are recent texts that diagnose and explore the implications of the tendencies I have sketched: *Affluenza* (John de Graaf), *Stuffocation* (James Wallman), *Status Anxiety* (Alain de Botton), *The Antidote* (Oliver Burkeman) and *Against Happiness* (Eric G. Wilson).

"precious") interest in the sublime.[47]

While "bread and circuses" are ineffective defenses against the real threats collectively faced by the human race, works of culture seem excellently suited for presenting the truth we dread most – including the fact of our mortality and vulnerability – without leaving us terrified. In a paper addressing the works of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Stendhal, Rudolf Bernet has argued that by virtue of "chang[ing] the common use of language", "writing and reading . . . operate a transformation of human existence." They may do this by "teach[ing] us more about the meaning of our real life than can be gotten from familiarity with its factual events". Bernet adds that potentially "literature not only sublimates our lives, but also transforms our understanding of *truth*– insofar as it is related to human existence. The true meaning of our lives involves possibilities as much as facts, imagination as much as actual experiences." Taking Stendhal as his example, he suggests that the author (*any* author, but in this instance Stendhal) "transforms and sublimates his own life by means of his writing", which in Merleau-Pontyean terms means that "writing allows for a more authentic mode of existence, characterized by self-transcendence and openness to new possibilities."[48]

Perhaps an insistence on the need to face up – in some fashion – to the dark undeniable facts determining human life is likely to strike an emotional chord primarily with pessimistically-inclined realists. One can imagine that the naïve and presently comfortable might find such views alarming and reject them out of hand as morbid or "defeatist". Yet I maintain that all friends of wisdom should be sympathetic to confronting the basic existential facts with *seriousness* (not untampered melancholy). In the case of poetry, I return to this noble function via Mary Kinzie's *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling* (see footnote 128). This is important because when I look at the roster of blisses and comforts above – recommended for the nourishment of the modern soul – the feeling that we are playing a gigantic trick on ourselves, in fact collectively immersing ourselves in an existential delusion, is inescapable

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[47] The quote from Angus Fletcher's *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* is given in Ralph Cohen, *Studies in Eighteenth-century British Art and Aesthetics*, 198.

The cultural portrait I offer in this paragraph would have worried Nietzsche too; he worried about and raged against "the religions of comfortableness", which he thought had a claim on people who "experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence." Cf. Whitman in footnote 502: "I am a great contender for the world as it is—the ill along with the good." Nietzsche maintained that "happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that . . . grow up together." From Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, 192.

[48] Rudolf Bernet's words are in reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage*: *Cours au Collège de France* (1953). His paper – entitled "Philosophy and Literature – Literature and Philosophy" and given at the University of Copenhagen on 17 August 2017 – is slated for publication shortly in *Chiasmi International*, vol. 19. It is used here with the author's permission.

to me. But so too is the intuition that we are in general *unduly* terrified of things. Take social rejection and exclusion: arguably one of the most common contemporary anxieties in the developed world (Orhan Pamuk seems to agree; see footnote 128). In his work *Pensées*, Pascal offered an archetypal image that elegantly captures the tragicomic scenario: It is as if every human being is all the time passing through a strange "town" feeling deeply worried about how he or she will be received by its citizenry (this, as I say, is an archetypal image distilling into narrative the problem of locating one's place in a culture, or scene, or situation, and having to survive there for a time). However, Pascal reminds us that we do not in general

> . . . care about our reputation in towns *where we are only passing through*. But when we have to stay some time we do care. How much time does it take? A time proportionate to our vain and paltry existence.[49]

The "punchline", as far as I am concerned, is that this is always true – and true about life in general. We *are* only passing through, but we tend to forget it (or as Freud thought, *repress* it) because the fact of our mortality has been erased from the list of socially accepted subjects. Inescapably, we are mortal, and by that token all of this is temporary. This argument, of course, puts it bluntly; it is just an example. If what I say is not true about death – if "trigger warnings" about that concept are not yet required in public places – it is true about *something* that *somebody* is right now at their wits' end about. Modern man really is and always will be – for it is an archetypal situation, in my estimation – in search of a soul, as Jung put it, i.e. in search of a mode of being, an existential attitude, a set of resources that preserve him in an emergency and when his character is found lacking in some way. At each moment of existence, John Cowper Powys claimed, each person more or less habitually manifests a more or less coherent "philosophy", a kind of invariable pattern of "thought by which the self gathers itself together, cleanses itself, governs itself, steers itself; and copes as well as it may with all the pleasant or unpleasant impacts of the vast impinging Not-self."[50] I merely venture to propose here that there is much to be gained by nourishing a real and true

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[49] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 7.

[50] John Cowper Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, 67.

It is Traubel's opinion (stated in 1919) that Whitman personal "philosophy" manifested a healthy confidence vis-à-vis the archetypal trials confronting every individual who must take his or her place in the culture: "Schools, customs, rejected him. Scholarship, fashion, professionalism and professorialism, church and state, in the dubious measures of their silences and laughters, treated him as a negligible claimant. But he stayed round till they melted. He wasn't scared off by bad weather. He wore out the patience of thousands of hells. They gave in. He didn't. Of course he had only the usual steering chart to go by. Every man, derelict or divine, has this and no more. He took his medicine as they take theirs. With mingled emotions of gladness and sorrow." From Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 294–295.

interest in the constitution, features, workings (that is, proclivities and capabilities) of the personal "philosophy" (in the Powysean sense) of one's self. It seems plausible that integration of and familiarity with our personal nature is a significant step in the process to psychic health and discovery or recovery of the "soul" in Jung's terminology; in chapter 4 I return to this under the rubric of Junging integration of the shadow aspects of the soul.

vi. Archetypal Suffering, Archetypal Surviving

My overall view is that there is life yet – and truth – in the romantic notion that there are invaluable riches to be gained by undertaking this integrative process, cultivation or exploration. Goethe thought so too; he said in conversation (specifically about Friedrich Schiller, whom – like Whitman – he admired, but the point can be made in general) that "Nothing constrains him, nothing narrows him, nothing draws downward the flight of his thoughts" who – "a true man, such as one ought to be" – is "in perfect possession of his sublime nature" and can freely express "the great views which lie within him". Goethe goes on to correctly describe the situation of most of us: we "always feel ourselves subject to conditions. The persons, the objects that surround us have their influence upon us . . . [so that], paralyzed by a thousand considerations, we do not succeed in expressing freely whatever may be great in our nature. We are the slaves of objects round us, and appear little or important according as these contract or give us room to expand."[51] What I mean by citing Goethe to this effect is that, although so many objects surround us, these things, including "what lies behind us and what lies ahead of us[,] are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."[52] In this dissertation, as we shall see, the burdens beleaguering modern man are endured and redeemed through integrative and cooperative contact with "what lies within us" which is tapped into via existentially and psychologically charged aesthetic (i.e. poetic) expression.[53] Jordan Peterson regards the process of evolving into what Goethe called "a true man [or woman], such as one ought to be" in purely existential terms and notes that finding a "pathway forward" tends to begin with an identification of the "reasons why [human beings] suffer":

> Look at you and the way you're built – it's inevitable: there's not very much of you and

[51] From Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Words of Goethe: Being the Conversations of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, ed. by Johann Peter Eckermann, 265. See footnote 559.

[52] These words – often misattributed to Henry David Thoreau and sometimes to Ralph Waldo Emerson – are in fact from Henry Stanley Haskins's *Meditations in Wall Street*. See *The Quotable Thoreau*, ed. by Jeffery S. Cramer, 469.

[53] "Only what is really oneself has the power to heal", said Jung. From Carl Jung, *The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious*, paragraph 258.

> there's a lot of everything else [this was Goethe's view too]. And so, you just don't last that long, and you're fragile across multiple domains. And you're harshly treated by society; there's no doubt about that. And then there's responsibility that can be laid at your own feet.

In light of all this, Peterson points to a position developed by such thinkers as Viktor Frankl, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Søren Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, which stipulates that despite systemic, random and frequently unwarranted suffering on the personal level

> *there's a pathway forward* [in the voluntary adoption of] a mode of being that has some nobility so that you can tolerate yourself and perhaps even have some respect for yourself as someone who is capable of standing up in the face of that terrible vulnerability and suffering.[54] [The] pathway forward as far as the existentialists are concerned is – certainly – by the avoidance of deceit, particularly in language, but also by the adoption of responsibility for the conditions of existence and some attempt on your part to actually rectify them.[55]

I shall later investigate this attitude by making reference to the Cain and Abel story. But for now, having tried to sketch a relationship between coping with the most basic threats to the well-being of humans and the process of working towards psychic integration, let me add that this dissertation makes the case that to the degree I or you – or anybody – become, like Whitman, "a man [or woman] who is pre-occupied of his [or her] own soul" (not in the solipsistic or narcissistic senses but with a clear-headed, moral, steady dedication and allegiance), we will be less terrified by and less vulnerable to our collisions with the external world's inherently (though not incessantly) unkind environment.[56] Our anticipatory preemptive defense should be a robust inner constitution (more on that in chapter 2), and achieving that is, I claim, an option available to everybody.[57] Being

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[54] Nietzsche said: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

[55] From Jordan Peterson, "Jordan Peterson: Why We Suffer" [0:15]. David Aberbach records that Jean-Paul Sartre considered Nietzsche a "forerunner of Existentialism". From David Aberbach, *Surviving Trauma*, 120.

[56] As for achieving the right degree of "pre-occupation" with one's soul, Whitman later explained the point to his friend Traubel: "I do not lack in egotism, as you know─the sort of egotism that is willing to know itself as honestly as it is willing to know third or fourth parties." See also footnote 300. From Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 59.

[57] Although I do not particularly wish to endorse the Stoic philosophers in this dissertation, I am forced to admit that the attitudes I have just recommended are strikingly close to those laid out in the *Enchiridion of Epictetus*: "[The] basic Stoic truth of subjective consciousness[is:] to distinguish what is in our power from what is not in our power. Not in our power are all the elements which constitute our environment, such as wealth, health, reputation, social prestige, power, the lives of those we love, and death. In our power are our thinking, our intentions, our desires, our decisions. These make it possible for us to control ourselves and to make of ourselves elements and parts of the universe of nature. This knowledge of ourselves makes us free in a world of dependencies. This superiority of our powers enables us to live in conformity with nature." Having noted the similarity, I shall say no more of the *Enchiridion*. From Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, 6.

The "robust inner constitution" I have alluded to, including the hazards of neglecting its development,

necessarily "strangers in a strange land", as the Bible has it, and forced to sustain skepticism towards our persons in every town we are obliged to "pass[] through", we are, I claim, helped and fortified to the degree we can assess that situation from the self's sane, wise and unillusioned point of view.

Speaking of illusions, I deem that one of the malaises of our era and present culture in the West is that it is not sufficiently honest about the unavoidable traumas – large as well as small – that any individual is bound to face throughout his life, obviously despite the great variability across different people's individual fates. Although intuitively ill-advised and short-sighted, the suppression of accurate information about the essential facts of human life, including death and loss, is perhaps not that surprising; as Cormac McCarthy suggests in one of his novels, a case can be made that it is indeed "good that God [or culture] [keeps] the truths of life from the young as they [are] starting out *or else they'd have no heart to start at all*."[58] However, Freud sagely insists that "Men cannot remain children for ever. They must in the end go out into 'hostile life'. We may call this 'education to reality'. Need I confess to you that the sole purpose of my book is to point out the necessity for this forward step?"[59] A wide-reaching problem inherent to modernity, as I see it, is that we are squeamish about and act immaturely around the most fundamental truth: That we are going to die and suffer. Cf. Peterson, cited above: "We're blinded to what is truly fundamental by the things that present themselves most easily to our perception" (see footnote 34). If we could but really realize it and not flee from this allegedly dismal – but in fact bracing, necessary and significant – truth we might be able to embrace life more heartily and emphatically. And, recognizing accurately that "we are only passing through", we might learn to lessen our worries

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was on Tolstoy's mind as well. His words are refreshing and compatible with my point above: "For God's sake or if not for God, for your own sakes, come to your senses. Understand the senselessness of your lives. Tear yourself away even for a moment from all the trivia that occupies your daily life and that you think so important! All your chasing after money, . . . your parliaments, your sciences, your churches. Tear yourself away from all that for a moment and examine your life; look at yourself, at your soul which lives such an unpredictably short time in your body. Come to your senses. Look at life around you and understand all its craziness and be horrified by it. . . . [S]eek salvation from it. But you do not even have to seek it. Each one of you has it in your soul. Just come to your senses and understand who you are and ask yourself what you really need. The answer, which is the same for everyone, will come to you. . . . Come to your senses even for a minute and you will clearly see that the only important thing in life is not what is external but what is internal. Just realize that you need only one thing and nothing else. You need only to save your soul and only by doing that can we save the world. . . . [P]eople waste their souls' energy on "arranging" their lives . . . rather than on improving themselves." From Lev Tolstoy, *Death and the Meaning of Life*, 91.

[58] Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, vol. 1, 284. It seems that McCarthy is drawing on Joseph Conrad: "For every age is fed on illusions, lest men should renounce life early and the human race come to an end." Conrad is featured as an epigraph to Christopher Hamilton, *A Philosophy of Tragedy*.

[59] Sigmund Freud, *On Freud's* "*The Future of an Illusions"*, 49. (The present version of the book features redundant pagination; page 49 is simultaneously page 55.)

about our reputation in various cultural contexts. In other words, we lack the kind of wisdom and understanding, which, according to Jung, is an analgesic for psychic suffering:

> Tears, sorrow, and disappointment are bitter, but wisdom is the comforter in all psychic suffering. Indeed, bitterness and wisdom form a pair of alternatives: Where there is bitterness, wisdom is lacking, and where wisdom is there can be no bitterness.[60]

The mature engagement with good art can inform and deepen our education away from politically motivated half-truths towards an unillusioned integration of ourselves with reality – without which there can be no wisdom. We should grow existentially supple and dynamically wise rather than demand with childish stubbornness that the cosmos overturn the irredeemable fact of our mortality.

vii. Intuition and the Wisdom of Poets

I offer my thesis partly in the manner of one defending a moral position, knowing full well that though the argument is sincere it is not in any technical sense inevitable. Like Whitman, I say, "I'm not here to prove things but to say things."[61] And yet, my position remains that I see very little to be gained and much to be lost by negligently permitting "our thoughts [to be] unworthy of the great theme," in W. MacNeile Dixon's words.[62]

On that basis, I shall suggest in the following that *if* we were to consider taking an answer from any group or person to the sublime and outrageous question *How to best get through life?*, the nearest good poet might – in the role of an "Answerer" (which in Whitman's coinage codes for a "maker of poems") – turn out to be superior to more conventional specialists and experts.[63] That significant, valuable, unique insights were forthcoming from artists, including poets,

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[60] Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, section 330.

[61] Isaiah Berlin is cited in Donna Bassin, *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements*, 442.
Whitman is cited in Horace Traubel, ed., *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1, 229.
The William James quote is from that writer's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 149.

[62] From W. MacNeile Dixon, *The Human Situation*, chapter 1 (no pagination in online version).

[63] Although it is intellectually wayward and precarious to posit the existence of "perfect" minds (for how could we ever define "perfect", and who would adjudicate?), I venture that it is not unreasonable to assume that the (by me alleged) relative utility of a poet in the present context would be due to such a person's unillusioned attitude to human beings, psychological openness in general (accompanied by a lack of dogma and ideology), aloofness to restrictive teleological notions of the arts, healthy indifference to fame or castigation, nuanced linguistic skill and lack of lexical biases regardless of the degree to which such a lack might seem unfashionable or outlandish by current standards. Among these qualities (which I base on nothing but my own careful consideration), I should stress and privilege especially the first-mentioned quality: a Terence-esque tolerance and sympathy in the face of the bizarre, the crazy and the exceptional. (The Roman playwright Terence, or Publius Terentius Afer, wrote "Homo

was the view (as I have indicated) of Matthew Arnold who found that "the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, – to the question: How to live." And similarly, Virgil Nemoianu has said (of *romantic* poetry specifically) that it possesses "the kind of variety and indeterminacy, richness, and flexibility that could make it privileged ground for experimenting with human potentialities and responses, redeeming the past, assimilating the present, and projecting the future" – which, on the face of it, appears to usefully cover or complement certain skills that must be integral to surviving and fundamental to achieving that balance and command over life without which living is intolerable.[64] Whitman himself was inclined to believe that when it came to understanding humanity,

> poets . . . present the most mark'd indications. Comprehending artists in a mass, musicians, painters, actors, and so on, and considering each and all of them as radiations or flanges of that furious whirling wheel, poetry, the centre and axis of the whole, where else indeed may we so well investigate the causes, growths, tally-marks of the time—the age's matter and malady?[65]

If we accept Dresser's assertion that "Life is a problem which has for each an individual solution", we nevertheless arrive at the following problem. What if narrowing the issue down until we operate at the level of the individual does not bring us within reach of the desired existential "solution". Each person will have to endure slightly different sorrows (some of which will be "useless", in Lecky's terminology, while others, tragically enough, will be worth our every mourning sob); similarly, the problems that fall under "the inevitable" rubric will present themselves differently to different persons, each of whom will have to discover and attend to the particulars and try to prove themselves "equal" to them. To continue my philosophical investigation of what "an answer" might ultimately be like and whether or not the desired kind of answer (fixed, unequivocal, applicable, expedient) is in fact a *logical* possibility, I suppose that we run into the practical concern that an answer might not be comprehensible to the human mind at all, not amenable to intellectual appreciation. This idea – i.e., that the answer or answers we correctly hanker for elude intellectual

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sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto", which is commonly rendered in English as "I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me".) I think *that* is what Freud took aim at when he wrote that "psycho-analytic observation must concede priority to imaginative writers. It can only repeat what they said long ago." From Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 213.

[64] Nemoiany is quoted in Nicholas Mazza, *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice*, chapter 1 (no pagination in online version). Matthew Arnold's words from *The Study of Poetry* are cited in Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell, eds., *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*, 118.

[65] From Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*, 156.

presentation – is taken seriously within Zen Buddhism.[66] And if intellectually knowable and reasonable, the looked-for truth or cluster of truths might still not exhibit a fixed nature *across time*, across the changing scenes and vicissitudes that flit across any given life. We might find, rather, that what life asks of us is nearly endless humility, methodological flexibility and general openness to shifting conditions. An analogy from Platonic metaphysics comes to mind: As with all Platonic forms, the "form" that we can only imagine Life to be (life at its highest and best, across time, for any given person) seems not to exist in any positivistic, handy and convenient sense in the concrete, chaotic world where we must life. Ideal Life may, it seems, float free from mental capture to remain something to be envisioned, a kind of mirage which only the existentially reflective will be inclined to pursue.

viii. Existential Flexibility

I think a kind of intellectual modesty is called for: Let us acknowledge that the factors and contingencies in life are too many, too varied, too complex, too hidden and frequently interacting in a fashion too chaotic for any human being to contrive an unfailing set of precepts synthesizing the wished-for ideal: unblemished, painless existence across reasonable stretches of time. For not only is the world around us constituted by a tightly woven fabric of countless chaotic and complex systems interacting with and within each other, the human being itself is also in psychological terms an unknowable and largely ungovernable cluster of systems. To think and argue seriously and methodically about living well under conditions as unstable and capricious as these invites immediate intellectual modesty, the kind of modesty one finds articulated so reasonably by John

[66] Zen Buddhist stories operate on the principle that whatever must be imparted is not intellectual and therefore aloof to direct verbal articulation. A separate issue is the fact that sometimes the amount of information vying for our attention is greater than our capacity to process it – an answer or a piece of information can apparently dwarf the human mind attempting to grasp or hold it mentally (cf. Richard Feynman's related claim, "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics."). Speaking about the problem of artificially engineering machines capable of rivaling human perception and information processing, Jordan Peterson has said that at any moment in life our senses are inundated with vastly more information *that could potentially be apprehended* than humans are actually able to register; indiscriminately taking everything in would overwhelm (and perhaps even damage) our brains: "[Humans] ignore almost everything . . . You know already how complicated a chess game is, how incomputable that is. Yet [humans] are interacting with an environment whose complexity leaves a chess game in the dust. [That] environment is composed of an infinite number of hierarchically stacked chess games, and yet [we] wander through it without a second's thought – unless something goes wrong." From Jordan Peterson, "Music and the Patterns of Mind and World" [14:45]. The point is that humans do not approach being with what we tend to call "rational" parts of the brain; after all, by far main part of human existence has arguably been endured in so-called prerational times.

Gray: “There are many things the good life is not. But no one thing it is bound to be.”[67] However much we might desire a gospel of timeless precepts, Dixon correctly recognizes that “reason, for all the flourishing of her trumpets,” does not itself offer a method for “illuminating the grand problems” of human life, and that though hard and fast answers are sometimes what we need and should look for we need – in the majority of instances, let me inject – to bear in mind “the utter folly of all dogmatism”. This agrees with George Santayana’s observation that a “complete mastery of existence achieved at one moment unfortunately gives no warrant that it will be sustained or achieved at the next.”[68] It also agrees with Jaron Lanier’s formulation that “Being a person is not a pat formula, but a quest, a mystery, a leap of faith” and with Carl Rogers’s insistence that “The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination.” All these attitudes agree well with Henry Miller’s inclination to see the “joy of life” as a “not static but dynamic” state.[69]

Epistemologically speaking, the “dynamic” aspect that I am developing here is obviously more compatible with humanism, psychology and existentialist philosophy than with scientifically-rooted dogmatism and ideology. It is therefore fitting that it was a poet – a poet *and* thinker, who happened also to be a significant inspiration on Whitman – who said: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.”[70]

ix. Living Well

In a style owing something to Montaigne’s unpretentious and colloquial essays, this chapter approaches the universal challenge or invitation to *live well*, the injunction to try as human beings to carve out as meaningful a life as possible and exist in a fashion that is as far from endless near-death emergency uninterrupted survival as possible and not attended by too much physical or psychic discomfort. “We must learn to endure”, said Montaigne, “what we cannot avoid”, suggesting that we have a personal obligation to meet discomfort with at least a measure of dignity,

[67] John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 95.
[68] George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Art*, quoted in Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 300. In Robert Frost’s phrase, we have to “go into battle on limited knowledge, insufficient knowledge.” From James Nelson, ed., *Wisdom: Conversations with the Elder Wise Men of Our Day*, 13.
[69] From Jaron Lanier, *You Are not a Gadget*, 5; Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, 186; and Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*, 69.
[70] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”.

courage and resilience – in short, meet discomfort from a position of tenacious acceptance towards the fact that, necessarily, "[o]ur life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of contrary things, also of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only one kind, what would he have to say?"[71] When the psychologist Steven Pinker offered his view that human beings were happiest when they were "healthy, well-fed, comfortable, safe, prosperous, knowledgeable, respected, non-celibate, and loved," we might smile – as a result, perhaps, of the reassuring notion that happiness is nothing other than a multi-variable balancing act suggested by this catalogue of splendid states; however, we might weep the next second at recognizing the inherent contingency of each variable, each catalogued item.[72] Even if by something like a miracle one managed to achieve some or all of these things, one would never escape from the realization that they are at best a kind of (temporary) loan. Also, one could argue that a life spent busily trying to accrue love and prosperity, food, shelter and so on, might not necessarily be worth the struggle if one were *too* – that is, obsessively – invested in it. If our obsessive scramble for "the usual rewards", as Whitman calls them, is not attended by a strong sense of meaning we might be unhappy for all that we are, strictly speaking, successful. If the motivation that spurs us on turns maniacal or the grief that attends our intermittent failures crushes us then Pinker's bouquet of blisses will not satisfy us in the desirable manner.

For as is often the case, when a proposed answer or solution to a problem is both simple and attractive, there is generally upon closer inspection a fly in the ointment. There is, as Adam Phillips remarks, "no peace" for those who see the human predicament through Freudian lenses.[73] We are, as Robert Ardrey said, risen apes, not fallen angels, and reality reminds us of this in the sense that nothing in our life-sustaining environment is immune to decay, death or change. (Presumably an angelic world, of which one can only dream, would be invulnerable to these and all the other imperfections that characterize the world in which we are doomed to live.) The philosopher Christopher Hamilton has presented a wistful, indeed tragic, but ontologically undeniable summary of the manifold conditions that characterize and circumscribe human existence:

> Human being are born to suffer. All human lives are marked by pain and guilt, by loss and failure, by disappointment and compromise. All of us go through life confused, and need in the end to acknowledge that life itself damages us, often profoundly and always irreparably. Human endeavour is fragile and human beings have only limited control of their own lives.

[71] Michel de Montaigne, "Of Experience", in Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays,* 1237.
[72] Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 387.
[73] Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 7.

> Here and there, there may be progress in one or more senses - moral, political, technological and so on – for some periods, but there is no inevitability about the continuation of such progress. Human nature is not perfectible and happiness is not to be dreamed of - or, rather, is only to be dream of – even if there are moments in which we feel happy or content. Our desires are often in conflict with each other, and our reason is a fragile instrument that is largely driven by blind urges and needs. There is no moral world order; the wicked often flourish while the good are crushed and perish. Most of the time we do not really understand what we are doing, and there is no goal or purpose to history and no redemption for our pain and suffering. Human beings think they long for contentment, but when they get it they often destroy it because they are creatures who are deeply divided against themselves. And however excellent or morally good a life one has led, it ends in death, which is final, and from which there is no release or redemption.
>
> If human life is as I have just described it then the human is tragic. This is the point of view I offer . . .[74]

This bracing view may sound unremittingly harsh and gratuitous in its horribleness, but it is not exactly uncommon in the literature beyond "Positive Thinking" and similar intellectually doubtful psycho-philosophical maps to the territory. The moral philosopher Shelly Kagan presents a similar picture that rings both beautiful and melancholy.[75] Upon calmly accepting the full implications of our basic existential and ontological predicament, Kagan is led, as many have been before him (Viktor Frankl, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and more recently Jordan Peterson, for instance), to a distinctly moral conclusion. It seems to Kagan that the only constructive response of the individual to the surrounding chaos must take the form of a personal resolution which will manifest itself as an attempt patiently and persistently to try to "to replace ignorance with knowledge, intolerance with tolerance, subjugation with justice".

It is, I think, worth considering for a moment that the line of reasoning here, roughly speaking, goes from *descriptive* to *moral* – from encompassing everything to centering on the individual and the individual's response. (Solzhenitsyn offered a metaphor that sustains that model: However paradoxically, the individual (each individual) is the "center of the Universe" which consequently has "as many different centers as there are living beings in it" – we are all of us Atlas, then, in a way.) Let us not neglect to remark that for the individual to begin to carry out these

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[74] Christopher Hamilton, *A Philosophy of Tragedy*, 9–10.

[75] At a 2014 debate hosted by The Veritas Forum at Yale University, Kagan said: "[Leaving aside the "breath-taking beauty and awe-inspiring complexity" of the world] it also seems to me, sadly enough, that the universe is utterly, utterly indifferent to us, to not just humans but to other sentient creatures as well. It just doesn't care about how it crushes us, it doesn't care about the suffering, misery, that it causes us, it doesn't care about the fact that it cuts us down and tramples on our dreams. More horrifyingly still, it is not just nature that often has this attitude, we have this attitude to one another. Other humans are indifferent to the suffering of their fellow humans or, even worse, contribute in a malicious, vindictive, sadistic fashion to compounding their misery." From Shelly Kagan and N. T. Wright, "Living Well in the Light of Death – NT Wright and Shelly Kagan at Yale" [2:30].

worthy "replacements" (along with others that they depend on and will facilitate), the individual must be in a position to carry out the work, which is another way of saying that the individual must have somehow achieved a certain existential balance him- or herself – a critical level of physical health and psychic and emotional well-being (not to mention a knack for self-management and a few skills). Montaigne knew this too: "Not being able to govern events, I govern myself", he wrote – whereby he suggests that success at "governing" oneself may partly compensate for the difficulty of governing events in the external world.[76] It is indeed true that governing events is very often nearly impossible, but sometimes it is not totally impossible. Kagan (in the Veritas debate I have mentioned) acknowledges that although immense "the blackness is not immutable"; or, as Henry Miller puts it

> The one great power we have is our ability to transmute things. When a thing goes wrong you have to turn the wrong into the right. This is . . . the greatest thing about the universe—that it can be altered. . . . Man has a bit of this power in him: to take what is lost and failed and convert it into a new and wonderful things.[77]

"Man has a bit of this power in him", writes Miller. The redemptive transformation of something associated with the disagreeable, the terrifying, the lamentable, the chaotically disorganized and elusive, into something one can accept, even bless and wish to protect, is one of the fundamental themes of this dissertation at the level of the embodied self. I shall appropriate the theme takes in psychological terms, but in its basic narrative conceptualization the process lies at the heart of one of the oldest stories our culture has preserved, the Bible.

> There is something about the very nature of human being that makes us feel as if something needs to be *said right*. When that's been discussed historically, it's been associated with the term redemption – people are in need of redemption. . . . Human beings in the West have been meditating on the nature of *human being* for thousands of years, perhaps ever since we became self-conscious, which[, among other things, is a property that] drives our search for meaning. One of the consequences of this meditation has been the production of a series of books that people know as the Bible [the first book of which, Genesis,] starts out with the word of God [Logos] creating being from chaos. . . .[78]

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[76] In his surest moments (he knew doubts too), Whitman also was capable of "governing" his self: "When shows break up what but One's-Self is sure?" he asked in "Quicksand Years."

[77] From Henry Miller, *My Life and Times*, 122. On page 190 of that work, he returns to the subject from a purely metaphysical angle: "It is possible to transmute the bad into the good, the wrong into the right. There is always this possibility. It would be an utterly uninteresting world if everything remained what it seems to be."

[78] Jordan Peterson, "Psychology of Redemption in Christianity" [0:45].
The Hebrew phrase "tohu wa-bohu" describes the chaotic state out of which, according to the Book of Genesis

Logos, Peterson explains, is "something like consciousness and something like speech" and

> has the power to pull order out of an underlying chaos. Now, we [human beings] do this all the time . . . That's, I suppose, in some sense why we are hypothetically made in the image of God.[79] We use our consciousness to constantly construct being out of chaos. And according to the initial opening of Genesis, there's something about this that is akin to the construction of the world. . . . Consciousness itself plays a world-constructing role. It's got a central place. And human beings in some [minor] sense participate in that.[80]

Peterson's point is that in carrying out this work humans are akin to the deity as represented by the biblical texts. The idea of using our "consciousness to . . . construct being out of chaos" has a striking echo in Gregory Orr's work where "poetry of survival [is delineated as] a restabilizing of self through poetic ordering".[81] Henry Miller made the same connection and was completely open about it (notice how closely the fifth sentence is synonymous with the words from Edison):

> No man is as full of chaos as I am. People think I am an orderly man. My house is orderly and my work table is orderly. But inside I'm a raging chaos. *I don't think I could be creative*

(1:2), the world was made; the phase has been translated, variously, as "waste and void," "formless and empty," or "chaos and desolation." The latter variant sustains the implied analogy to psychological chaos (suffering, dislocation, confusion) particularly well. Indicating the antiquity of the relationship between "the word" and ameliorating influence and potential, one finds the theme a leitmotif of the texts of the Bible. In Psalms, for instance, Logos, as spoken by God, is presented as both the creative principle and an agent of healing: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (Psalms 33:6); "He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave" (Psalms 107:20).

A secular formulation of the idea and process of Genesis 1:2 is at the heart of Edison's aphorism, "To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk". The analogy to alchemy, which throughout this thesis I shall occasionally indicate, should be obvious. From Mark A. Runco and Steven R. Pritzker, *Encyclopedia of Creativity, Two-Volume Set*, 270.

[79] Peterson does not mean this literally. He is in this passage engaged in construing the myths in Genesis archetypically.

[80] From Jordan Peterson, "Psychology of Redemption in Christianity" [5:50].

By way of introducing one of the central thinkers of my thesis, I should perhaps mention that Jordan Peterson accurately sums up his own scholarly premises with the following words, some of which I have referred to previously: "People suffer more than they have to because we profoundly misunderstand what is real. We're blinded to what is truly fundamental by the things that present themselves most easily to our perception. Thus we fail to realize what is most genuine and important. We believe that the world is made out of objects. I would like to propose instead that the world is made out of chaos and order and that the quality of our being is dependent on how we manage the balance between the two. Chaos – that's what manifests itself when we don't know what we're looking at[: it comprises "the unknown, the unexpected, the anomalous" but also the "fruitfulness of nature" and "an ocean of possibility surrounding the territory of human culture", "the water of life" as well as "the flood unleashed by an angry god", archetypally speaking.] . . . Order, by contrast, is where you are when everything is running properly[: it is a mode of being characterized by sufficient time, security, happiness, stability – making it a reliable "dwelling place" for men and women] . . . When men and women cry out to heaven in the face of their suffering, what is it that they can call forth? Meaning." From Jordan Peterson, "TEDxToronto – Dr. Jordan B. Peterson—Redefining Reality" [2:15]. The word "meaning" anticipates Viktor Frankl's "logotherapy" to which I shall turn later in this chapter.

[81] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 180. Judith Harris finds that literature "involves the underwriting of the whole person in all his or her emotional complexity", which seems an equivalent perspective. Both Orr and Harris speak of poetry in terms of a useful ally and countervailing force when the self is threatened from without.

> *if I weren't so chaotic*. Just lately some scholars dug up an ancient manuscript relating to pre-Biblical times. It had to do with the first words in Genesis about the creation of the world. In this manuscript God was said to have brought order out of chaos. This is quite different from creation. What God did was to bring about order. In other words He did *not* create.
>
> That's the definition in my mind of an artist, that he is only a man who rearranges things. Arthur Rimbaud said, "No man ever created anything." Man is not a creator. All man does is turn things about, rearrange things, that's all. That's creation as far as man goes.[82]

Whitman appears to have been intimately familiar with personal transformation, and it informs much of *Leaves of Grass*.[83] Given the fundamental ontological – rather forbidding – facts upon which human existence is predicated – and given the evident impossibility of synthesizing and disseminating "good" and eliminating the causes of suffering in order to usher in the utopia reliably and once and for all – it seems that the best one can do is aim to live in a manner that is "not unworthy of the great theme". It is, of course, very hard to say what that means qualitatively, technically. Again, as John Gray says, "Though we can be in error about how we want to live, there need be no one truth about the best life. There are many things the good life is not, but no one thing it is bound to be."[84]

One problem with Dixon's lofty and lyrical phrase is its implied quasy-religious connotation. It does not evacuate us from a deeply speculative realm, so everything I say in the following is said with this caveat: "You may accept or reject it to the extent that it agrees with your

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[82] Henry Miller, *My Life and Times*, 137. My emphasis.

[83] Incidentally, as Thomas Becknell establishes, Whitman's work betrays his deep familiarity with the language of the Bible. But the central story in the Bible also resonates with *Leaves of Grass* because both texts deal with the difficult struggle for (human) perfection. (Interesting in that regard is Jordan Peterson's indication of the commonality between the Bible and traditional hero mythologies.) See Becknell's entry "The Bible" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 55.

> The central story I have in mind can be paraphrased thus: The Old Testament dramatizes the problems associated with creating a perfect state. A cyclical pattern arises insofar that, as soon as a state is established, people (subjects as well as rulers) begin to get corrupt. As a consequence of their tendency to grow corrupt, the state collapses into a state of chaos, which is accompanied by a prophetic revelation in the form of a warning against the chaos. Then comes a terrible period of chaotic disruption, which is followed by renewal and regeneration of the state. Then the process repeats itself. The New Testament can be regarded as a text trying to solve that problem. Jordan Peterson has said that it emphasizes the necessity of "endless micro-deaths and renewal" on the personal level (one finds this theme in Whitman, as I have said) and of "aiming at the highest value, sacrificing what is no longer useful and valid in yourself and telling the truth." From Jordan Peterson, "Psychology of Redemption in Christianity" [46:00].

[84] John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 63. A similar dissymmetry was noticed by C. S. Lewis ("How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints") and by Jordan Peterson. On formulating a "transnational and transethnic morality", the latter said: "We don't know what it is, but we know what it isn't. It isn't pointless torture and genocide. At minimum to be virtuous is to live your life in such a way that the probability that you would engage in such actions, given the opportunity, is minimized." From Jordan Peterson, "The Necessity of Virtue". For Lewis's quote, see C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 226.

own observation and introspection."[85] Even supposing for a moment that there were no semantic ambiguity about its meaning semantically, there still might be different (and mutually contradictory) existential stances across a group of different individuals. That there are no quick and straightforward solutions seems one of only two things we can conclude with any semblance of certainty at this moment. The other is that human beings will inescapably, time and again, find themselves in desperate need of ways to confront and survive intermittent hopelessness, ruin, disappointment and dejection. I shall be arguing that one such ways leads through literature and through what literature can help us achieve.

x. Suffering and Being Human

I said before that there was a sting in the tail of the constituents of Steven Pinker's happy state, namely the fact of the inconstant, contingent, brittle nature of our happy conditions and untroubled moods. The insufferable thing about existential suffering, so to speak, is that it rarely emerges predictably, the product of neatly definable external conditions and factors for which prevention or a cure can be synthesized with precision and ingenuity. Plausibly, at first blush anyhow, preventing psychic worry, static, regret and so on would depend on perfect knowledge of the human psyche and nature; but unsurprisingly perhaps we seem to be denied access such knowledge. Our conscious minds (so Alain de Botton distills the fundamental Freudian principle) are condemned to all the time "ride like tiny boats on the swells of unconscious psychoanalytic and biological seas"; interestingly, that we suffer is (at least partly) a consequence of our being conscious. So when we suffer *we know that we suffer*, which is a fate, say, a blade of seaweed or an amoeba is spared for all that it is alive and that its life or being *can* go more or less well. The reality without us and within us is not engineered, so to speak, for our secure and easy tranquility:

> We often experience the world as confusing and chaotic, especially during crises. This confusion can be outside us, in the objective conditions of our social and political lives, or it can be inside us, in the shifting world of emotions, thoughts, and memories. [Aware of] the power of disorder in our experience, we are likely to become aware of a strong need [for] some order in the world that helps us feel safe and secure.[86]

[85] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 292.
[86] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 3.

I shall return, in the latter part of this chapter, to these words from Gregory Orr's *Poetry as Survival*, a trenchant and useful contribution to the argument that literature might indicate and assist us in beating a path to a sense of order, safety and security (among other things – such as wisdom) – or to what Aldous Huxley calls "Doors in the Wall" (with a reference to H. G. Wells's fine short story about searching for a lost, half-forgotten paradise).[87] Huxley considers humankind's need for "vacations from intolerable selfhood" and "urge to self-transcendence" (which I will at present take in the broadest sense) to be "undoubtedly [ineradicable]", "universal and ever-present".

Regardless of the nature of the steps taken, regardless of the process, it is surely a significant feat and a profound spiritual achievement to manifest, and sustain over time, a state of peaceful being in a world "whose very nature is momentariness and fluidity", in which change is the only constant.[88] We all emerge from evolution unclothed and vulnerable (and are each of us "a stranger and afraid / in a world [we] never made", in Housman's words), a strange network or "contexture" (as Marcus Aurelius puts it) of "blood and bones and . . . nerves, veins, and arteries" with no choice but to meet the unpredictable odds of our survival and make do with our own individual combination of arbitrary and fixed limitations and our own frequency of psychic static.[89] "Man is the animal for whom to be or not to be is the question: its resolution therefore must have the form of an answer", writes Stanely Cavell in *Must We Mean What We Say* (before asserting that pain and meaninglessness have the upper hand over pleasure and sense).[90] To that precarious mental ambivalence and existentially trying predicament Jordan Peterson adds the insight that we are all forced to bear certain unnegotiable "arbitrary facts of being" that are blindly imposed on everyone through no fault of their own:

> . . . [Y]ou're a certain amount of attractive, a certain amount of intelligent, you're a certain amount of athletic, you're a certain amount of mentally ill, [and] you're a certain amount of pre-disposition to cancer.[91]

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[87] "The true paradises are the paradises we have lost", writes Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 3, 903.
[88] Alan Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, 77.
[89] "A stranger and alone" is A. E. Housman's famous phrase from "XII" in *Last Poems*. The Aurelius quote is from chapter 2 of the *Meditations.*
[90] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, 132.
[91] From Jordan Peterson, "The Necessity of Virtue – Jordan B. Peterson". Or, as he puts it in *Maps of Meaning*: "The fact of mortal vulnerability—that defining characteristic of the individual . . .—may be rendered even more "unjust" and "intolerable" by the specific manifestations of such vulnerability. Some are poorer than others, some weaker, some unsightlier—all less able, in some regard . . . Recognition of the seemingly arbitrary distribution of skill and advantage adds additional rationally "justifiable" grounds for [resentment and disillusionment]." Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 322. (The Phillips quote below is from Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 19.)

Though an inconvenient truth perhaps, the fact is that a life wholly untouched by crises – bodily *and* mental – is patently unlikely. Sometimes a normal and unsuspecting human being is suddenly ambushed by what Adam Phillips calls an "attack of [his or her] own nature" – a potentially psychologically crippling and traumatic event – which from that moment radically rewrites the conditions governing the person's existence: " 'trauma' [can become] another word for living a life." Despite the acuteness of the suffering involved there is frequently nothing especially grand or spectacular about the particular unfortunate eventuality – we may sit stunned from some catastrophic bolt from the blue and wonder why no deep moral was written on the calamity. (The best we may be able to say about it is that if we survive we might subsequently hold uneventful, painless living in higher regard.) But we might learn or should perhaps always bear in mind that we are vulnerable creatures – especially in psychological terms; thus Phillips in *Side Effects* credits Freud with summarizing our universal human predicament to the effect that we are all of us always "in shock, but wishing our way through. It is as though there is a design flaw in the human animal; our childhood is more than our development can cope with. We are all in recovery of having been children." Further compounding this situation, Phillips has in other work (*Unforbidden Pleasures*, particularly pp. 84–121) argued that parts of our psychological make-up, the part which Freud called the superego, behaves in a way that is quite revealing about our entire history as persons, from our infantile beginnings till now. Let me end this section, then, with what according to Phillips is revealed about us by our superego: "Were we to meet [the embodied superego] socially, as it were, this accusatory character, this internal critic, we would think there was something wrong with him. He would just be boring and cruel. We might think that something terrible had happened to him. That he was living in the aftermath, in the fallout of some catastrophe." Phillips adds: "And we would be right."

xi. The Human Condition and Literature

There is nothing new or controversial about the bracingly dark view of human existence presented above. Indeed, for most of recorded history it has been dominant, central to many cultures, as the earliest written texts suggest. One example is The Buddha, proclaiming that "life is suffering". Or one might think of The Book of Job which contains the lines, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. Man comes forth like a flower as is cut down." And in a recent work, Gabriele Schwab insists that "There is no history without trauma. Some lives will forever be overshadowed by violent histories . . . Collective trauma is passed down to individuals in

multifarious and refracted ways. . . [When] trauma becomes a chronic condition [it] violently halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language." Although these irremediable facts are likely to sit uneasily with most people they need stating honestly and candidly, I think, because it is to the detriment of *precisely those who suffer* that our cheery secular modernity remains so averse to acknowledging and embracing the inherent friction and always-impending disintegration of our being.[92] In an age when technology, entertainment and social media are well on the way to effectively eliminate pain, boredom and social isolation from the human experience, and it is widely believed that rational thought, dialogue and knowledge are the only keys to resolving human problems, it has – I think – come to be seen as demoralizing and almost controversial to suggest

> that the world is not only benevolent, it is also malevolent, [and that] because we're equipped with certain emotional possibilities and certain motivational possibilities, the probability that we will encounter despair and frustration and disappointment and anxiety is just as real as the possibility that we will encounter elation and hope and satisfaction. [For human beings then] the world is bivalent; it takes with one hand and gives with the other. And that is true for the natural world which produces us and destroys us, as it is for the social world which fosters our development and crushes our individuality . . . [93]

The best poets have responded fruitfully and been very alive to all the timeless, universal, ineradicable aspects of (what used to be called) "evil" that can mar a human life. Contriving in this context a useful phrase and applying it to the lives of John Keats and Walt Whitman, the critic Harold Bloom speaks of the inevitable "pain and suffering of being a natural man or woman living and dying in a natural world".[94] Thus phrased, it does not sound quite so terrible; Bloom subtly

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[92] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn argues that a precarious mental brittleness accompanies an unreasonably sunny view of the world: "[It would be more] correct to say that no [labour] camp can corrupt those . . . who do not accept the pitiful ideology which holds that "human beings are created for happiness," an ideology which is done in by the first blow of the work assigner's cudgel." From Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, *An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 626. Also cited above: Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, 42.

Similarly, Carl Jung found the idea of existence without an element of inner torment simply unnatural: "The apparently unendurable conflict is proof of the rightness of your life. A life without inner contradiction is either only half a life or else a life in the Beyond, which is destined only for angels. But God loves human beings more than the angels." (William Blake conveys the same idea in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without contraries is no progression"). Jung also took it as uncontroversial that "even the most hard-boiled rationalist is not immune from shattering nightmares and haunting fears." The first Jung quote is from C. G. Jung, *Letters*, 375. The latter one is from C. G. Jung, *Jung on Christianity*, ed. by Murray Stein, 207.

[93] Jordan Peterson, "Maps of Meaning: 4 Games People Must Play (TVO)" [15:50].

The presuppositions unique to the current *zeitgeist* (touching on modern-era technology, entertainment and social media) are a paraphrase of the presentation in Jonathan Lear, *Freud*, 2.

[94] From Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 362.

leads us to recognize the normality, the naturalness, of the ordeal. After all, who can deny that the best of lives involve living, aging and dying, and that having a body necessarily means vulnerability and risk? If Whitman was subject to the "pain and suffering of being a natural man", then he can (to adapt a phrase from Ward Churchill), to the degree he was afflicted by that predicament, be said to have been "wounded" by life (a wound being a contingent crisis afflicting us liminally), not "sick" (sickness being a systemically pervasive crisis); Churchill writes "[being wounded] requires healing, [being sick requires] a cure."[95]

I am here embarked on arguing that writing can be potentially healing (i.e. therapeutic), not curative. It would be terribly naïve to make the claim that every truly life-threatening crisis can be tackled aesthetically. Yet, it would also be an unfortunate oversight to suggest that the accumulative implications of sustained liminal wounding could not present a situation every bit as grave as Churchill's "sickness". Hence, it is appropriate that Whitman deemed it noble to write in order to "leave men healthy" (see the etymological observation in footnote 47).[96]

If I can be excused for speculating semi-idly about something which perhaps lies beyond the realm of the knowable, one of the unique things about literature is the very reason why it has proven so timelessly popular with reading audiences (or in illiterate eras, *listening* audiences): from myths and fairy-tales, handed down orally through prehistoric eons, to the handy volumes that have made the bestseller lists over the centuries and peppered our language with names and archetypes like Hamlet, Emma Bovary, Uriah Heep, Raskolnikov and Mildred Ratched.[97] It seems plausible that literature works because it can, in happy instances, "catch [our] conscience" (or, less fancifully, almost mysteriously compel us to take an interest), and it is a poignant fact that our conscience can, as Hamlet well knew, be caught *against our will*. "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king", the Danish prince says. Sheherazade exploited a similar human susceptibility in order, night after night, to keep death at bay for another twenty-four hours – to put stories between her would-be executioner and her own execution. It seems that something in our psychological construction is sensitive, hospitable and willing – sometimes eager – to temporarily give ourselves over to what Freud calls "castles in the air", to something as non-immediate and intangible as the airy constructions of an imagined tale.[98] The Canadian writer

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[95] Ward Churschill, *Wielding Words Like Weapons: Selected Essays in Indigenism, 1995–2005*, chapter 13.

[96] The "leave men healthy" quote is from *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 9, and is spoken on October 9, 1890. See Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 82.

[97] The creations of William Shakespeare, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Ken Kesey, respectively.

[98] Sigmund Freud, "The Poet and Day-Dreaming", in Sigmund Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious: The*

Sheila Heti has suggested that "[l]iterature would not work if we were all more different that we are alike", so possibly it is the universal existential condition and the reassuring discovery that one is not alone in the world which sparks our interest in reports from the lives of other people – which accounts for much of the best literature (Alain de Botton has said that English literature is essentially about human relationships; see also epigraphic perspective 11).[99]

Adam Smith too noticed that we possess a fairly ready and somewhat mysterious ability to interest ourselves in narrative and narrated events, even when we know the involved names do not designate people who can need our help or become our friends. Thinking philosophically about the nature of human empathy – or "fellow-feeling" – Smith finds that something similar must charge our enjoyment of stories; we somehow live vicariously through others' episodes, whether real or imagined:

> Whatever is the passion which arises . . . in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator. Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than that with their happiness. We enter into their gratitude towards those faithful friends who did not desert them in their difficulties; and we heartily go along with their resentment against those perfidious traitors who injured, abandoned, or deceived them.[100]

Smith is of the opinion that romances and tragedies animate the same vicarious emotions as scenes and episodes in real life. (In modern terminology, one might say that while we do not *believe* that someone's courage is rewarded or punished we do, as reading bystanders, *alieve* it.) "In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the bystander always corresponds to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the sufferer", adds Smith.

Another way in which the psychological distance between the literary domain and the

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Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, and Religion, 46.

[99] Sheila Heti, introduction to Alain de Botton, *Essays in Love*, ix. Heti's interesting statement is not new in literary history: Horace indicated it with his famous line "Why do you laugh? Change only the name, and the case is your own." From Horace, *Satires*, in *The Works of Horace: Translated into English Prose*, book 1, 8, ll. 69–70. Henry Miller tapped into the same idea as the one expressed by Poulet (epigraphic perspective 4) when he wrote: "The good reader, like the good author, knows that everything stems from the same source. He knows that he could not participate in the author's private experience were he not composed of the same substance through and through." From Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life*, 29.

The observations from Alain de Botton ("English literature is not a subject, the real subject is relationships") are given in this 2015 interview: Alain de Botton, "Talent will not be wasted for much longer".

[100] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 4. In the following I shall explain how archetypal theory sheds light on Smith's observation.

attentive reading "spectator" is reduced or bridged is present in the idea that we as enthusiastic readers identify not so much with a tragic or romantic character but with the glimpses of the author we may catch from bringing ourselves into intimate contact with the author's work. This idea is persuasively presented by Alain de Botton:

> The way to look at literature is as an instrument that sensitizes us to different things. We all know that if five different people are asked to describe one scene, they will all describe it differently. Some will describe the light, others will focus on what people's feet were doing, others will look at the material shape of the room, or whatever. A great writer picks up on those things that matter. It's almost as if their radar is attuned to the most significant moments. . . . [F]or me, that radar is not something we should simply passively accept while we read the book. It's something we should learn from; we should shut the book and then say, "Okay, I've read Jane Austen or Proust or Shakespeare, and now I'm going to see my mother, or I'm going to have a chat with my aunt or I'm going to go and talk to some friends in a coffeeshop, and, rather than just doing it the normal way, I'm going to look at them and I'm going to ask myself that basic question, How would Jane Austen see them? How would Proust see them? How would Shakespeare see them?" In other words, I'm not just going to look at the world of Shakespeare or Jane Austen through *my* eyes. I'm going to look at *my* world through *their* eyes. That is the benefit – that is the intelligence-giving power of great literature. We are sensitized by the books we read, and the more books we read and the deeper their lessons sink into us, the more pairs of glasses we have, and those glasses will enable us to see things that we would otherwise have missed.[101]

xii. Sad Soliloquies in the Happy Valley

Let me return to the suffering and desperation that even an relatively comfortable and by all standards enviable life can throw at us, no matter how many "existential trouble-shooters" we might be able to enlist to prevent and dispel any crisis imaginable. Dr Johnson's *Rasselas* contains an archetypal and culturally familiar picture of a human being plunged into existential crisis, a human being about whom a companion might say (as was said of Captain Ahab): He is "sort of sick, and yet he don't look so. In fact, he ain't sick; but no, he isn't well either".[102] I have already mentioned Ward Churchill's fruitful distinction between sick and wounded, which might apply here and lead us to define this state as of the latter category. See Churchill's distinction between being sick and

[101] Alain de Botton, "How Proust Can Change Your Life" (video interview), accessed November 3, 2016.

[102] These words are spoken by Captain Peleg in Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (chapter 16). *Moby Dick* is sometimes compared to *Leaves of Grass*; Van Wick Brooks calls them "planetary" books in *The Times of Melville and Whitman*, adding: "One gave the dark side of the planet, the other the bright." Indicating the archetypal nature of the predicament in question, many other classic stories explore and dramatize comparable existential or spiritual malaise, e.g. *The Pilgrim's Progress* whose eponymous hero, like Rasselas, finds himself anxious and directionless before formulating *his* original answer: to pursue "an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away."

wounded above.[103] Usefully enough, the kind of wound that interests me (and Churchill) has been dealt the soul. Rasselas is a character and person for whom practically all Steven Pinker's parametres have been satisfied (his home is the so-called Happy Valley where the prince's every wish is attended to by servants and entertainers), yet who nonetheless miserably comes to realize that for the existentially dislocated (and "soul-wounded") even a life of privilege and pleasure becomes a problem demanding that its central character contrive an individual solution, locate a source of healing. A bewildering *Weltschmerz*, a splenetic ennui, an agonizing restlessness, has at the beginning of the book begun to vex the young prince who has ample opportunity to reflect on his woeful situation. Involuntarily he takes to running philosophical and rhetorically charged inventories of the suffering to which human flesh is heir:

> "What," said he, "makes the difference between man and all the rest of the animal creation? Every beast that strays beside me has the same corporal necessities with myself: he is hungry, and crops the grass; he is thirsty, and drinks the stream; his thirst and hunger are appeased; he is satisfied, and sleeps; he rises again, and is hungry; he is again fed, and is at rest. I am hungry and thirsty, like him, but when thirst and hunger cease, I am not at rest. I am, like him, pained with want, but am not, like him, satisfied with fulness. . . . I can discover in me no power of perception which is not glutted with its proper pleasure, yet I do not feel myself delighted. Man surely has some latent sense for which this place affords no gratification; or he has some desire distinct from sense, which must be satisfied before he can be happy. . . . I have many distresses from which you [the animals of the fields] are free; I fear pain when I do not feel it; I sometimes shrink at evils recollected, and sometimes start at evils anticipated: surely the equity of Providence has balanced peculiar sufferings with peculiar enjoyments."[104]

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[103] Churchill adds: "To describe and assert the distinction [between being sick and being wounded can be] an act of empowerment . . ." A person's rejection of a diagnosis of his or her predicament summed up in "the patient is sick" is a theme also addressed by Thomaz Szasz (overtly, in the following) and Adam Phillips. Szasz writes that in order to "ameliorate" the problems of those who suffer and seek help, the "psychiatrist . . . offers not treatment or cure but psychological counseling." Phillips would rather reappropriate and seek to reintegrate whatever it is inherent to a person that is resistant and aloof to the phenomenon of a cure: "We are [always] already confounded by our fate. Psychoanalysis – and this is another paradox at the heart of Freud's work – is always after the event. It doesn't cure people so much as show them what it is about themselves that is incurable. Or, rather, it shows them the areas of their lives in which 'cure' would be the wrong word; in which we have to come up with something else to do other than get better. And one thing we can do, Freud . . . suggests, is track the unconsciousness of our lives." This is what W. H. Auden called Freud's attempt to "have us remember most of all / to be enthusiastic over the night."

See Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 80; Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 13–14.

And why are our problems normal and natural? Because "all the information that you've ever gathered in your entire life to build yourself out of, and to make your life stable, has come as a consequence of your ability to explore what you don't understand", which if we are unable to confront it will remain bewildering and paralyzing. From Jordan Peterson, "Maps of Meaning: 13 The Force Within (TVO)" [14:18].

[104] Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, in Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 263.

Herein lies, in part, the prince's important observation that, in the words of the contemporary psychologist Jordan Peterson, "the fundamental constituent elements of reality" are not material *to the individual* (that is, the person forced to exist in the material landscape and whose well-being is what interests us); rather, the fundamental constituent elements of each individual's "*own* reality" are

> emotional, they're motivational, they're dreams, they're visions, they're relationships with other people. They're conscious: they're dependent on consciousness [and] self-consciousness.[105]

In fact, it is a somewhat humbling facts about modern neurological science that specialists have, to quote Peterson speaking, "absolutely no materialist explanation whatsoever either for consciousness or self-consciousness". But I would add that literary qualia – literary experiences, literary engagement and literary pleasure – retain some of their fascination precisely because the neurological facts about how they affect, challenge and delight the human psyche stubbornly elude the most subtle among those who make it their business to know. Now, back to Rasselas who thus locates his problem, first and foremost, in his soul or psyche: Besides learning that his happiness is not the neat and inevitable result of exposure to all the happy influences known to man, it appears that the prince discovers shortly afterwards the relief that attends verbal articulation of inner suffering.[106] Rasselas discovers, in the words of Thomas Mann, that "knowledge of the soul would unfailingly make us melancholy if the pleasures of expression did not keep us alert and of good cheer."[107]

The notion of reaping cathartic or therapeutic rewards from literary self-representation is not new and has to me a particularly important precursor in the Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's account of his experiences in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, written shortly after his release at the end of the war. Embodying a therapeutic system based partly on what he saw and realized while a prisoner in the camps, his work *Man's Search for Meaning* (originally and

[105] From Jordan Peterson, "The Necessity of Virtue".

[106] Regarding the words "soul" and "psyche": Sam Parnia (interviewed here by Robert Lawrence Kuhn for the PBS series *Closer to Truth*), has said that conflating the terms "mind", "consciousness", "psyche", "soul" and "self" is permissible in certain contexts. From this interview: Sam Parnia and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, *Closer to Truth* [2:50], accessed October 2016.

[107] Thomas Mann, *Tonio Kröger*, in *Death in Venice: and Seven Other Stories*, 92. Compare Leonard Cohen's line from *The Favourite Game* (footnote 185).

accurately entitled *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*) includes the following account which sees the author, in his state of unimaginable unmitigated misery and debasement, forcing his

> thoughts to turn to another subject. . . . I [imagined that I] was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! All that oppressed me at that moment became objective, seen and described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past. Both I and my troubles became the object of an interesting psychoscientific study undertaken by myself. What does Spinoza say in his *Ethics*? – *"Affectus, qui passio est, desinit esse passio simulatque eius claram et distinctam formamus ideam."* Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it.

I shall later return to Frankl and have more to say on what exactly he discovered about suffering while imprisoned during World War II, particularly about human survival.

On the related note of transitioning from suffering to articulation based in suffering, a famous essay by Freud contains the interesting view that "unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies", which leads Freud to conclude that "happy people never make phantisies". Freud goes on to consider "[men] of literary talent" and explains that "many emotions which are essentially painful may become a source of enjoyment to the spectators and hearers of a poet's work." An author will – or at any rate, can – elicit "great pleasure", including sometimes a "feeling of repulsion [being] overcome", or instigate a "release of tensions in [the] minds" of his or her audience by skillfully "relat[ing] what we take to be his personal day-dreams". For this, a sustained theme in the present thesis, incidentally, Freud does not offer a complete and unimprovable reason or explanation, but after acknowledging that the "technique" with which the writer accomplishes this is "his innermost secret" (suggesting that the enjoyment-enhancing qualities may differ among authors), he does recognise that it has to do with the individual's essential *loneliness* (which, in turn, is an issue related with the enjoyment of "repulsion . . . overcome"). It is his view that "the essential *ars poetica*" of a writer is sympathetic, respectful and generous to our existential solitude, to the fact of "those barriers [which, once we grow up and leave our babyhood behind, we find] erected between every individual being and all others." It seems plausible, I think (and shall argue), that the writer can him- or herself partake of and share some of the "aesthetic . . . pleasure" that is made available to an audience (see Hermann Hesse's words in footnote 191: "[the poem] speaks first of all to the poet himself, it is his cry, his scream, his dream, his smile, his whirling fists"). This is apparently the case with Rasselas. While I cannot settle whether having him form beautiful soliloquys on the hollowness of existence afforded *his author*, Dr Johnson, personal pleasure, I can

coherently infer that Johnson certainly felt it correct as an author to arrange for his character to discover some respite from suffering by engaging in a kind of creative process of sublimation in which frustrated day-dreams were enabled to reemerge in the shape of dignified, melancholy and aesthetically robust soliloquies; for he writes (emphasis added):

> With observations like these the Prince amused himself as he returned, uttering them with a plaintive voice, yet with a look that discovered him to feel some complacence in his own perspicacity, and *to receive some solace of the miseries of life from consciousness of the delicacy with which he felt and the eloquence with which he bewailed them*. . . . [H]is heart was lightened.

Matthew Arnold considered poetry a "criticism of life", and the gist of that observation seems indicated in this context.[108] Interestingly, Freud seems to share Heti's point that "[l]iterature would not work if we were all more different that we are alike" as well as agree with Smith's point that we quite spontaneously enter into highly intimate psychological communion with the characters appearing before us via a literary medium. Writes Freud:

> Perhaps much that brings about this [aesthetically pleasant result in the audience] consists in the writer's putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame.[109]

For, significantly, day-dreams need not be a source of pain *in and of themselves* (unlike the perhaps more straightforward agonies of sorrows and anxiety), but can become so by virtue of being impossible to mention to anybody in our present circle of acquaintances (homosexual desire in the Victorian era may represent a case in point).[110] After all, not every private wish is equally well-suited for the kinds of conversation we are brave and articulate enough to have with our friends and family. And even if, by laying the cards of our psychic frailty or discomfort on the table, we manage to elicit the sympathy of friends or family, we might in truth have benefited more from the sense that our experience was not ours alone, from feeling deeply the dismantling of "those barriers"

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[108] In Arnold's poem "Wordsworth" (1879), he states that "poetry is at bottom a criticism of life." Dietmar Schloss, *Culture and Criticism in Henry James*, 20.

[109] Sigmund Freud, "The Poet and Day-Dreaming", in *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, 54.

[110] I have found Gregory Orr's essay on Whitman (in *Poetry as Survival*, 159–179) both cogent and useful, but am simultaneously sympathetic to Harold Bloom's injunction to "clear[] your mind of the nonsense that our nation's greatest writer can be understood merely in terms of his homoerotic orientation." Unconsciously echoing Freud's phrase "reproach or shame", Orr writes: "What I want to claim about Whitman is simply this: that to be gay in an intolerant, heterosexual world is to be an outsider, to be someone . . . who personally feels the destructive forces of guilt and shame." For Bloom's words, see his introduction to Frank D. Casale, *Bloom's How to Write about Walt Whitman*, vi.

separating our predicament from that of a fellow sufferer somewhere in the world. ("Misery loves company", an old proverb states; on the dissolution of barriers, see Cohen in footnote 467.) Extended sympathy might reinforce our sense of being uniquely cursed, whereas the imagined company of a fellow sufferer will make our predicament seem a much less personal affront. Peter Abelard captures some of the philosophy behind this kind of dynamic precisely:

> Often the hearts of men and women are stirred, as likewise they are soothed in their sorrows, more by example than by words. And therefore, because I too have known some consolation from speech had with one who was a witness thereof, am I now minded to write of the sufferings which have sprung out of my misfortunes, for the eyes of one who, though absent, is of himself ever a consoler. This I do so that, in comparing your sorrows with mine, you may discover that yours are in truth nought, or at the most but of small account, and so you shall come to bear them more easily.[111]

Freud's words that much that brings about a pleasant release of tension in our minds as consumers of the relevant literature "consists in the writer's putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame" are finally also in agreement with Alain de Botton's claim that certain good books can offer "descriptions of who we genuinely are . . . with an honesty quite different from what ordinary conversation allows for". This is quite obviously a great relief when we feel ourselves misunderstood, strange and are unable to "say what is really on our minds"; he goes on:

> In the best books it's as if the writer knows us better than we know ourselves [and finds] the words to describe the fragile, weird, special experiences of our inner lives. . . . Writers open our hearts and minds – and give us maps to our own selves so that we can travel in them more reliably and with less of a feeling of paranoia and persecution. As the writer Emerson remarked: 'In the works of great writers, we find our own neglected thoughts.'[112]

An undercurrent in Alain de Botton's works is captured in his next – concluding – words, which can be allowed to double as an ethos central and meaningful to this dissertation also:

> [I]f literature can really do all these things, we might need to treat it a bit differently to the way we do now. We tend to treat it as a distraction, an entertainment (something for the beach). But it's far more than that. It's really therapy, in the broad sense. . . . Literature deserves its prestige for one reason above all others: because it's a tool to help us live and die with a little more wisdom, goodness and sanity.

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[111] Peter Abelard, foreword to *Historia Calamitatum*. Cited as prologue to Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn.*
[112] Alain de Botton, "What Is Literature for?" (video essay).

xiii. Love and Sorrow

There is of course no guarantee that we can apply literature "tool"-like and instrumentally to our lives in a useful, rewarding manner. But when things look grim and no other analgesic is forthcoming, a *merely contingent* source of redemption is, I venture, preferable to none at all. De Botton, who with the philosopher John Armstrong has cowritten a book entitled *Art as Therapy*, writes (although not in that book) that "art [whether literary, visual or otherwise] is there to help us make us feel less lonely, to make us understand our pains and to help us precisely when love has failed us."[113] I am ready to defend the view, for which I think there are good arguments, that our psychological health is to a high degree a correlate of the amount of love in our life. It is one of those things that every child knows – although august adults may find it a bit awkward to estimate and express the degree to which the presence of a caring, loving sympathizer alleviates suffering. The awkwardness is lessened somewhat if we substitute "empathy" for "love", and (reassuringly) it turns out that the fact of the human capacity for empathy is nothing less than a prerequisite for moral philosophy. A poet, as I stated earlier, should be someone who can confront the quirks, needs and vulnerabilities of humanity with a calm and clear eye, and this is exactly what W. H. Auden did when he stated, in "September 1, 1939", that "we must love one another or die." Philosophers and psychoanalysts, too, can hardly afford to ignore the basic relationship between love or empathy (on which social integration and acceptance rest) and human well-being. The emphases in the following are mine:

> We are not iron men. We are buffeted by misfortunes, frequently *dependent on other people*, far from immune to fears, hopes, griefs, and desires. . . . [Y]ou are the creation of luck, not immune to time and chance, and any day infirmity or accident can find you, depending entirely on the *good offices of others*.[114]

> Faced with the stresses and strains of everyday life, it's easy now for people to feel that they're failing. And what they are failing at, one way or another, is managing the ordinary excesses that we are all beset by. Too much frustration, too much bad feeling, *too little love*, too little success, and so on.[115]

[113] From Alain de Botton's afterword to Alain de Botton, *Essays in Love*, 215.
[114] From Simon Blackburn, *Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love*, 7 and 190.
[115] Adam Phillips, "Adam Phillips – 'On Being Too Much for Ourselves' – BBC Radio4 – The Essay – Part 4" [0:37]. The essay is featured in Phillips's book *On Balance*.

These perspectives are interesting and useful for subtly reminding us of something profound as well as important to my argument. Art is old; so is love – both are human constants, practically speaking, which have presumably accompanied humans in some shape or form for a long, long time – they reach deep into prehistory to be coincidental with the rapid development of the prefrontol cortex and our most human traits. All that time, love has surely been failing us periodically, powerfully defeated us, trampled on our dreams, subjected us to agonising psychic travails that were no doubt variously surprising, terrifying or humbling. But notice, before I proceed, that I am not talking chiefly of the pain that is caused by a sense of unrequited romantic love (incidentally, a historically recent mass phenomenon). I mean, rather, that love (familial, confraternal, communal, what you like) fails us when – for whatever reason – it is absent during crises of the heart, during moment of psychic pain *for which it is, I shall assume, the most expedient kind of cure*.

It is to me a deeply poignant fact that our options, defenses, remedies and tactics when faced with this category of crisis are currently as few and useless as they always have been. Redeeming that poignancy somewhat, Alain de Botton argues, as I have already said, that "art is there to help us . . . when love has failed us," to which Gregory Orr adds: "Human culture "invented" or evolved the personal lyric as a means of helping individuals survive the existential crises represented by the extremes of subjectivity and also by such outer circumstances as poverty, suffering, pain, illness, violence, of loss of a loved one."[116]

When love "fails us – when we are made, for example, to suffer our "reproach or shame [etc.]" in psychoexistential exile from sympathizers or fellow-sufferers – we are in trouble precisely because we are suffering in an area of life where quick, convenient and recognizably instrumental solutions are not and cannot enter. We are in the grips of a type of suffering that bypasses all we have physically built and invented to fortify our lives over eons of human history. In an age when philosophy is less and less at the front of average Western citizens' mind, such problems – problems without technological, science-based solutions – are something of an unwelcome anomaly, at least from the position of thinking systematically and theoretically about resolving them. The dominant ethos of our times is optimistic in the sense that most things are automatically taken to be in principle physically perfectible; even pathology of the human mind is studied in principle no differently than a physicist studies the combustion engine. Verifiability and replication of results are the criterion under which potential ideas must be evaluated. But the different problems that (absent) "love", in the broadest sense, can wreak across our lives (including

[116] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 4.

crises of self-worth, anxiety, loneliness, guilt, jealousy, disappointment in self or other, nervous break-downs, shame and sexual woes) are of an essentially timeless quality, which renders them decidedly cure-proof (in the instrumental definition of cure). A broken heart, shattered hopes, blasted self-esteem, existential fear and so on, do not represent problems amenable to practical solutions for the obvious reason that by virtue of being psychological problems they cannot be brought in proper contact with a cure.

In the poem "Harlem", Langston Hughes asked "What happens to a dream deferred?" and found himself unable to move past his amusing and hopeless string of questions:

> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?*

A dream deferred is, as everyone knows, a common phenomenon (with a real presence) in the world. But it is admittedly *real* and *present* in the world – and matters darkly to whomever it matters – *in ways categorically different* from that of rotting meat, sagging loads or raisins drying up in the sun. It is real in a way very similar to the way H. W. Auden found love to be real and present in the world. In the poem "Tell Me the Truth about Love", W. H. Auden too looked for answers, answers about the quality of love. He did so in a manner very similar to that of Hughes and was similarly unable to provide an anatomy of the mystery under observation:

> Does [love] look like a pair of pyjamas,
> Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
> Does its odour remind one of llamas,
> Or has it a comforting smell?
> Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
> Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
> Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
> O tell me the truth about love.

Evidently, the matter is too deep for logical, lexical, or intellectual explanations. (The singer and writer Leonard Cohen once made the useful comment that certain things that resist being "explained . . . must be embraced."[117]) And yet, despite the absurdist litany of questions, something meaningful, important and concrete (but empirically elusive) is known by Auden's speaker *about* love. The speaker knows that the respectable, official and learned generally find love awkward to acknowledge openly and seriously ("Our history books refer to it / In cryptic little notes"); that it is powerful enough to motivate many to migrate to another continent ("It's quite a common topic on / The Transatlantic boats;"); that its accidents can in some cases sap the sufferer of his or her will to live ("I've found the subject mentioned in / Accounts of suicides,"); and that its inspiring episodes can overwhelm lovers and turn them temporarily into poets while waiting for a train ("And even seen it scribbled on / The backs of railway guides"). When a pain gathers momentum in the human psyche, the world seems to change before the eyes of the sufferer – so much so that Goethe's Werther is far from being the only person on the long list of suicides, literary and otherwise. It is a kind of premise of this thesis that all contenders for a swift and instrumental physical cure, even those affecting the psyche more than anything else (such as alcohol or psychoactive drugs), fall short of meriting the word "cure". That term should be reserved for more elegant and less aggressive means. After all, because the initial causes of psychic pain are almost always literally irreversible (so, for instance, traumatic childhood episodes, accidents and many other crises which are the result of either mechanical or genetic misfortune or "evil"), a physical cure is powerless to rectify the problem *per se*. As far as I am concerned, the difference between an instrumental cure and therapeutic engagement (which may offer healing) is that the former is valuable to the extent it can eliminate the problem swiftly and completely whereas the latter is valuable to the extent it can accommodate, befriend and often painlessly produce a helpful redescription of the problem – not annihilate it (see Phillips in footnote 277). If the problem is, say, a raging fire that threatens to obliterate one's crop, the cure will soak the field, put out the fire and drown the plants, whereas a therapeutic confrontation with the problem is committed to finding a use for the fire, perhaps contain and prevent its spread, and accept that crops must from now on be grown elsewhere. Therapy's power is to enable the acquisition of a new attitude to one's pain, one that makes coexisting with the pain a livable scenario; the similar argument for a cure is that it transforms the sufferer into a kind of master over mental pains, vested with the power, in theory, to decide which can linger and which should go. The reason why I find being pacifistically accommodating toward

[117] Leonard Cohen, *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, 186

psychic pain whenever possible an appealing position ultimately comes down to a matter of "faith" (although not the religious kind). If one can seriously consider the possibility that one's psychic pain is importantly symptomatic of one's failed attempts to interact smoothly with the surrounding landscape, one is compelled to welcome and scrutinize the symptoms provided one wishes to comprehend one's bruising collisions with the landscape. But if psychic pain is not assumed to have symptomatic newsworthiness, then perhaps a swift execution of the offending part of the mind is preferable.

What, then, is an appropriate way to behave when help is needed in this most basic and human way – when our psyches are in that primordial state of pain that shoots to the core of our being (presumably because it has dogged us consistently through our Pleistocene evolution)? While in this thesis I shall not be concerned with any kind of solution to psychic suffering invented and manufactured in a laboratory, it is important to appreciate some of the reasons why so-called "art-as-therapy" is these days so widely disregarded in favor of alternatives that probably strike most modern world-views as more radical, more comfortingly "one-size-fits-all" (than an art therapeutic program, presumably), something that does not commit the patient to spending too much time and effort, something conveying a powerful aura of the "cutting-edge" and technological sophistication (enough so to warrant patent protection), something quite observably effective (even if the effectiveness is chiefly felt as more or less expected side-effects). The at least equally sophisticated osmotic transfusion, so to speak, of the most moving or interesting details of a given artwork into the scientifically baffling neural complexity that underlies a person's mind is, it would seem, largely deemed a different kind of "sophisticated" or "radical" from that of psychopharmaca or a change in diet or exercise (which, like practically everything, also affects our minds in a number of ways). There was a time when it could be seriously opined that whereas science was appropriately the domain of those "desir[ing] to see things as they are", culture was worthy of respect because it had essentially risen out of *humanity itself*, including

> all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for stopping human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing the sum of human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it—motives eminently such as are called social . . . [Culture] moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good.[118]

[118] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 33–34.

But in a human emergency – when confusion is most paralysing, say, and we are increasingly guilty of leaving the world worse off and unhappier than we found it – it is no longer very fashionable to look inward, to dwell on timeless questions, to take an interest in the ineluctable error and culpability of humans or recall the wisdom of geniuses. Because would-be scientific panaceas (none truly worthy of the name exists, of course, despite the many very impressive break-throughs achieved by great scientists) have always appeared in a flash of insight or as a sudden epiphany, their merits are gazetted across the culture in louder, prouder tones than are the merits and charms of art, culture, philosophy and wisdom, which have come about painstakingly and organically – not spontaneously – and, in Oscar Wilde's satirical words, are "quite useless". So in this hypothetical scenario, the troubled modern individual would find Matthew Arnold's words quaintly charming and laughably naive.

Although from a cosmic perspective, the same laws must necessarily apply to all domains of human activity, a few undeniable *intellectual* differences persist between the natural science, on the one hand, and the arts, philosophy, existentialism and (scientifically untestable) theories, on the other. But interestingly, both, I venture, can arguably be expected to perform what are taken to be desirable services – I use the word loosely – that are useful for those able to receive them. The respective methodologies are obviously radically different, but there is some commonality in their fundamental *raisons d'être*. In a shrewdly introspective statement, Alfred Einstein once succinctly implied what is, in my opinion, the principal difference between the natural sciences and the arts: "I sold myself body and soul to science", he said, "—a flight from the I and we to the it."[119] These words bear out the premise (central to this thesis) that the world can, at least in principle, be approached from the subjective, anthropocentric perspective of the affected individual and, alternatively, from the objective, scientifically unassailable "perspective" of a psyche-less omnipresent "ideal observer" – from what the philosopher Henry Sidgwick called "the perspective of the universe". The latter is totally undistracted by personal values or what Kurt Vonnegut calls the "existential hum", so there is something Platonic and perfect about this description of the world – it can by definition never be *experienced*.[120] Both views have their usefulness, but it is important to know from which one one is regarding reality. As for the widespread, involuntary privileging of the latter in the West these days, the privileging is hardly surprising. That science and technology have impressively transformed the world and continue to

[119] Cited in John Stachel, *Einstein from 'B' to 'Z'*, 88.
[120] Vonnegut's words are from *Palm Sunday*, in Kurt Vonnegut, *Welcome To The Monkey House and Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, 497.

do so is wholly beyond dispute. The first man-made structure visible from space (The Wall of China) was the result of then-sophisticated technological ingenuity (as well as brute force), and the same applies for the rockets and satellites that were crucial in finally establishing its visibility from space. The modern world is one in which the accelerating rise of new physical possibilities is only rivaled by the impressive grinding into the dust of age-old problems, problems that most of our ancestors found so unconquerable and impenetrable that they were explained by appeal to the supernatural realm; thus, diseases were once explained by appeal to demons, and weather by appeal to gods. Given that most thoroughgoing transformation of our world in recent history – enabled by the fortuitous discoveries and scrupulous labours of Copernicus, Galilei, Kepler, Newton, Lenoir, Watt, Morse, Bell, Edison, Darwin, Pasteur, Mendel, Röntgen, Tesla, Curie, the Wright Brothers, Einstein, Turing and their colleageus – it is not surprising that we tend by default to look in the direction of experts in "it" rather than experts in "I" and "we" when our lives throw up discomfort and ambiguity.

xiv. Technological Panaceas

But there is a problem with this automatic disposition or bias, and Henry David Thoreau summed it up nicely: "[T]he improvement of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence."[121] Around a hundred years later, the essayist, thinker and exponent of Buddhist thought to Western audiences Alan Watts took what he called a long and wide view of things only to register that "the entire project of 'conquering nature' ", which in his view was the métier of all the aforementioned scientists, "appears more and more of a mirage – an increase in the pace of living without fundamental change of position".[122] Alain de Botton willingly grants that the "trajectories of mankind have been pointed in a firmly upward direction for several centuries" and that

> [m]aterial improvements since the mid-eighteenth century have . . . have so exponentially increased our comfort, safety, wealth and power . . . as to deal and almost fatal blow to our capacity to remain pessimistic. . . . [W]e have witnessed the cracking of the genetic code, the

[121] H. D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 16.

[122] Alan Watts, *The Book. On the taboo against knowing who you are*, 50. Henry Miller, similarly, found that "The men who believe that work and brains will accomplish everything must ever be deceived by the quixotic and unforeseen turn of events. They are the ones who are perpetually disappointed." These words from *Sexus* are quoted in Henry Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, 33.

> invention of the mobile phone, the opening of Western-style supermarkets in remote corners of China and the launch of Hubble telescope.[123]

One is almost, he writes, forgiven for sometimes expecting that "the combined powers of the IMF, the medical research establishment, Silicon Valley and democratic politics could together cure the ills of mankind". Unfortunately, he too cannot resist the feeling that "the essential laws of man's existence" float obliviously free of all triumphant victories among the scientific community. Indeed, it must be admitted that although mankind as a whole has benefited in countless instances

> *we* do not comprise mankind: none of us individuals can dwell exclusively amidst the ground-breaking developments in genetics or telecommunications that lend out age its distinctive and buoyant prejudices. We may derive some benefit from the availability of hot baths and computer chips, but our lives are no less subject to accidents, frustrated ambition, jealousy, anxiety or death than were those of our medieval forebears. . . . [Happiness is unable to] ever make a permanent home for itself on this earth.[124]

It is an "ontological truth" – and a "fundamental statement about the nature of being" in Jordan Peterson's words – that "suffering is an integral part of being", an inevitable corollary of the fact that human beings are sentient creatures with no choice but to live within the certain parameters, certain quite specific limitation.[125] This truth obtains so universally as to be an almost forgotten or invisible condition and will to many be so familiar as to seem a cliché. Given the fairly upbeat and optimistic cultural spirits in the West, such an apparently off-putting and grim insight may not be widely and frequently mentioned, yet (informally speaking) there would be no undertakers, insurance agencies, doctors or therapists if it were not true. And yet, as I have said, panic and despair are premature and unwarranted reactions. A passage from Alice Munro's story "The Children Stay" comes to mind: While this universal human condition may be, so to speak, chronic, "chronic means that it will be permanent but perhaps not constant. . . . And you'll learn some tricks to dull it or banish it, trying not to end up destroying what you incurred this pain to get." There is, in other words, a price to pay for embodied and psychological life. The mature response will accept

[123] Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, 182.
[124] Ibid., 182–183.
[125] According to Peterson human being is centrally and variously vexed by the burden of limitation (see footnote 91). On these "arbitrary facts of being", Peterson remarks: "[These are simply] conditions of existence. Human being is predicated on a kind of fundamental limitation in that we are what we are and we're not other things. And so that means inevitably that the awareness of human being comes along with suffering. And life poses the question: 'How to conduct yourself in the face of suffering?'." From Jordan Peterson's "The Necessity of Virtue – Jordan B. Peterson".

our fundamental vulnerability to suffering which frees up mental power to focus on living with and in spite of it rather than trying to dismantle and remove it as an "ontological truth."

xv. Approaching Poetry as Therapy or Healing for Woundedness

I have been suggesting that because the ablest and most likely trouble-shooters servicing our culture – from their posts at the frontier of what is technologically possible – can, in Judith Harris's phrase, offer no "protective cuirass" for our fundamental existential and psychic vulnerability, the individual is compelled to seek solutions or coping mechanisms elsewhere.[126] Religious faith and community are the answer for some and I have no doubt the therapeutic payoff from that approach can in some cases be real and valuable. In fact, by analogy many of the arguments concerning "literature as therapy" developed in this thesis could probably be adapted – with no appeal whatsoever to the numinous and esoteric – to fit the type of healing and therapy that is the preserve of churches and faiths all over the world. But this is a thesis on the therapeutic engagement with literature, and as such it has much in common with Mary Kinzie's constructive ambitions in that context and on behalf specifically of poetry. In her book *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling*, she explains that poetry must exhibit both "technical concentration and moral truth" (on "truth", see Bernet in footnote 48), the latter half of which statement arguably reveals her to be a critic celebrating and emphasizing the ability of poems (and indeed any writing) to be sensitive and generous – not blind or indifferent – to human suffering.[127] Her

> definition reflects the demand that a novel, poem, play, or artful meditation reply to the need for coherence in a human life while reflecting the facts of experiential complexity, and that literary work must speak memorably about our great anxieties—affliction, injustice, death.[128]

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[126] Judith Harris writes: "Writing can be a means of going beyond the limits of the suffering body; indeed it can provide a protective cuirass for the wounded." From Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*, 5.

[127] This is predicated on the, I believe, largely uncontroversial premise that morality is in its fundamental orientation opposed to the unnecessary suffering of the innocent.

[128] Mary Kinzie, *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling*, ix. Charles Simic wrote that "Poetry is a place where all the fundamental questions are asked about the human condition." The same point was made by Orhan Pamuk who, in his 2006 Nobel lecture, entitled "My Father's Suitcase", noted that "What literature needs most to tell and investigate today are humanity's basic fears: the fear of being left outside, and the fear of counting for nothing, and the feelings of worthlessness that come with such fears; the collective humiliations, vulnerabilities, slights, grievances, sensitivities, and imagined insults, and the nationalist boasts and inflations that

Citing Rilke – "You must change your life" – Kinzie discusses this existential possibility with the practicality and energy of a non-fatalist, non-defeatist person. In other words, it is Kinzie's point that Rilke's words succinctly express the real (because true) possibility that we might discover and recover, if we tried, a modicum of self-agency against external forces vying with us to govern our lives. Few thinkers articulate this point better than Viktor Frankl, as I shall show at the end of this chapter. Poetry can offer a "stay against confusion," Robert Frost wrote, and when it does it is a shining human triumph, one which those plunged in suffering would be foolish not to harness art in order to try to mimic and follow. "If you are doing it right, rather than you watching it, art sees and changes *you* . . . . [W]hat if one imagined the work itself to be announcing its demeanor, and soliciting and modifying our scrutiny by its own?" Kinzie writes. Characteristic of Kinzie's hopefully confident claims on behalf of the potential effectiveness of art and poetry as vehicles for self-renovation is a certain wise and reasonable modesty. I identify the same modest hopefulness in Adam Phillips's attitude to psychoanalytic therapy: Psychoanalysis, he says, and I share his view, "is an experiment. It's not as though it *promises* a better life, but it might do."[129] (Cathy Caruth, as I shall show shortly hereafter, offers an explanation for the kinship between literature and psychoanalysis.) I have already argued that in an emergency – when the need for relief is urgent – it is irrational to be excessively exacting, pedantic and dismissive of any source of relief on account purely of its contingent or only partial effectiveness. In the introduction to her book (page x), Kinzie seems to see things the same way, as is evidenced by the caution with which she chooses her verbs:

> I have frequently experienced the sensation that to study a work, a painting or poem, was to be studied in return, until studying, listening, or reading became also a process of being

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are their next of kin." Simic is cited in Neil Astley, ed., *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*, 29. Also, Orhan Pamuk, "My Father's Suitcase" (Nobel lecture).

Cf. Judith Harris's words (in footnote 472) that "A poet must bring sadness or lament into the reader's heart." Whitman, as will become clear, is strongly an exemplar of the moral "demands" expressed by Kinzie – as were Federico Garcia Lorca and others. Leonard Cohen found them in Lorca whom he took to stress that "if one is to express the great inevitable defeat that awaits us all, it must be done within the strict confines of dignity and beauty" (which ensures, arguably, that the expression turns out "memorable"). From Sylvie Simmons, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*, 491.

Jordan Peterson, finally, contributes the distinction that, "Any *good* work of art . . . speaks to you of things that you almost know but don't yet know. That's what makes it profound." When art achieves that, I would claim, it meets our need for (i.e. instils) "coherence" (Kinzie's term) in our lives. From a public talk: Jordan Peterson, "2017/03/12: Strengthen the Individual: A Counterpoint to Post Modern Political Correctness" [18:45].

[129] From Adam Phillips, "Adam Phillips: 'Against Self-Criticism' (with Q&A)" [47:25]. Thomas S. Szasz writes: "What psychoanalysis (and some other therapies) can offer [the suffering individual] is a better knowledge of himself, which may enable him to make new and better choices in the conduct of his life." From Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 80.

> studied, of being read. . . . It may be that if we could restrain our chronic urge to reduce art to something else, we might perceive truths we could not have predicted.

The hope is, of course, that such "truths" afford us the opportunity to arrive at less paralyzing conclusions about whatever we are currently feeling victimized by.

Among the quotes serving as a prologue to this thesis, I have cited from a conversation between the authors Alain de Botton and Chris Hedges. Speaking in that order here, the writers discover that they are in agreement about the idea that

> – All works of culture should be *How X Can Change Your Life . . .*
> – More importantly that's why they wrote it.[130]

While I am skeptical of adopting the quoted viewpoint as anything amounting to a supreme criterion against which to judge literature, I do welcome and am excited by the idea of literature as powerful enough to improve our thinking and enhance our experience – with all the attendant payoffs from the perspective of our psychic health. I have a strong interest in works that are even intermittently capable, as Arnold puts it in *Culture and Anarchy*, of clearing human confusion, diminishing the sum of human misery and leaving the world better and happier than we found it (a tall order though this may seem). In a manner similar to that of Montaigne who, as already mentioned, criticized "education" for aiming "to make us not good or wise, but learned", and for "not [teaching] us to follow and embrace virtue but [rather] imprint[ing] in us their derivation and etymology", Kinzie declares herself

> curious to see how the intellectual environment might grow less obscuring, where art is concerned, if a number of readers were to entertain a posture of readiness and even need for guidance from the words of artists. In this way we might reacquaint ourselves with the human and curative powers of creation. To experience art would mean to be scrutinized by the creative intelligence that worked through it in its growth. [As a consequence one might hope to] achieve possession over one's own past, one's own pulse, and one's own untoward and surprising predilections. Rather than cancelling the individual person and obviating self-knowledge, the disciplines required by art return to us perfected command over what is most fruitfully idiosyncratic.[131]

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[130] Alain de Botton and Chris Hedges, respectively. The quoted words are from the interview Alain de Botton and Chris Hedges, "Chris Hedges: What Can Atheists Learn from Religion? Interview with Alain de Botton (2012)" [39:50].

[131] Cf. Nemoianu (cited in footnote 64) who found poetic language to have "the kind of variety and indeterminacy, richness, and flexibility that could make it privileged ground for experimenting with human potentialities and responses, redeeming the past, assimilating the present, and projecting the future."

Let me bracket our often bruising collisions with the unpredictable external landscape for now and instead observe the following: The fact that there are parts of ourselves – such as our "past" experiences and "untoward" present selves – that partake simultaneously of the *fruitful* and the *idiosyncratic* is a familiar, if paradoxical, thought that segues usefully into an insight from Viktor Frankl that I shall adopt as a premise for the rest of my thesis; I shall close this chapter on that insight.[132]

Freudian psychoanalysis is predicated on the notion that although we – in a deep sense – *ourselves* constitute the problem, we also contain in us the potential for moving past or rectifying the problem, that is for transcending our problematic selves or reconfiguring our problematic selves. Judith Harris prefers the word "self-renovation" (see page *Signifying Pain*, xi) for the kind of therapy that literature can provide, and I have already cited Phillips who reminds us that "It is as though there is a design flaw in the human animal; our childhood is more than our development can cope with. We are all in recovery of having been children." But we also contain, as I say, in some unrealized but potential and not *un*realizable shape the means of transcending our crisis. I shall return, by another route, to the profound implications located by Jordan Peterson in "the idea [dominant in Judeo-Christian scripture] that continual death and rebirth is a necessary precondition to proper human adaptation" (see footnotes 171 and 313). "Survival" is a better word than "adaptation", but the idea is the same: Peterson's point is that surmounting crisis is predicated on the individual's ability "to identify with the part of [the]self that transcends . . . current personality [and] can constantly die and be reborn." I locate a similar argument in Lev Tolstoy's *My*

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[132] Incidentally, the fact that in matters of the psyche the beneficial and the difficult are often inseparably conjoined was also observed by Robert Bly who for his psychoanalytic work on the male psyche started from that very premise: Being conversant with the useful examples of Freud, Jung and Wilhelm Reich, Bly encouraged male readers (for whom his book *Iron John* is specifically written), against their better judgement perhaps, to consider carefully the contents of their psyche and to "accept what's dark down there, including the *nourishing* dark" – arguably an allusion to the Jungian shadow, about which I shall have more to say in chapter 4, or to the "in sterquiliniis invenitur" principle (see the following footnote). From Robert Bly, *Iron John*, 6.

And again, sizing up the legacy of Freud whose ideas inform and underpin those of this dissertation throughout, Adam Phillips writes – much to the same effect – that "Freud's genius was to describe to us just how and why it is a good and necessary thing – a good thing because a necessary thing – for us to live in conflict with ourselves and others." From Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 7.

There is, incidentally, something quasi-Stoical about the courage demonstrated in a person's insistence on a link between the "necessary" and the "good", insofar as it bears a certain resemblance with Boethius's words: "All fortune is good fortune; for it either rewards, disciplines, amends, or punishes, and so is either useful or just." From Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius*, 72. Similarly, Whitman writes in the 1855 Preface: "What has ever happened . . . . what happens and whatever may or shall happen, the vital laws enclose all . . . . they are sufficient for any case and for all cases . . . none to be hurried or retarded." Also, consider the comparison with Marcus Aurelius in footnote 136.

Confessions (chapter 6) where he considers the steps by which he himself avoided destruction (suicide) at the height of a religious crisis:

> [T]he passage to annihilation is opposed by our own nature, by our will to live, which causes our own existence and that of the universe. That we so fear annihilation, or, what is the same, that we so wish to live, only shows that we ourselves are nothing but that wish, and know nothing beyond it. Consequently, what remains to us after the annihilation of will, except will again, is assuredly nothing; on the other hand, for those in whom will has destroyed itself, the whole of this material universe of ours, with all its suns and its milky-ways is nothing.

Let me make the link I insist on a little clearer. When Tolstoy writes "we ourselves are nothing but that wish [to live]", then that corresponds to Peterson's argument which sees adaptation as a result of "identify[ing] with the part of [the]self that transcends . . . current personality [and] can constantly die and be reborn" (note that only a part perishes). (In these thoughts I also detect reverberations of Harold Bloom's thumbnail definition of the American Sublime (footnote 12): "transcend[ing] the human without forsaking humanity".) My argument then – informed by the old alchemical notion of "In sterquiliniis invenitur"[133] – is essentially this: Within a person's voluntary recognition that suffering is essentially inevitable and therefore "natural", a countervailing, alleviating "influence" or resource may be located and accessed. Something promising – or, as I have described it, potentially nourishing or "fruitful" – is latent in the very darkest predicament. In its bracing way the "dark" holds something that "nourishes" and can be discovered firsthand provided we resist the perfectly natural human temptation to curse the darkness out of fear. Perhaps the idea was given an even more effective articulation by Edward Carpenter, a friend and correspondent of Whitman, although his discussion from *The Drama of Love and Death* is couched in broader considerations concerning numinous verities and cosmic reality. The words on "hindrance" halfway into the citation are especially apposite:

> What then, it will be asked, is the object or purpose or use of our incarnation in this grosser body? Limitation and hindrance are part and parcel of the great scheme of the soul's deliverance. . . . These subserve the evolution of self-consciousness and of the sense of identity. It is obvious that diffused faculties and perceptions, however swift and powerful, could never have brought these gifts with them. It was only by pinning sensitivity down to a point in space and time by means of a body, and limiting its perceptions by means of bodily end-organs, that these new values could be added to creation – the local self and the sense of Identity. All the variety of human and animal nature, all the endless differences of points of

[133] The phrase means "it is found in cesspools". See Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, 35.

> view, all diversity and charm of form and character and temperament must be credited to this principle. . . . And not only limitation but also hindrance. These things give an intensity and passion to life, and a power and decisiveness to individuality, the absence of which would indeed be sad. As a water-conduit by limiting the spread of the stream and confining it in a close channel gives it velocity and force to drive the mill, so limitation and hindrance in human life stimulate the individualised energy from which for good or evil, all our world-activities spring. . . . The vast and pervasive soul-stuff of the universe (in its hidden way omniscient and omnipresent), suffers an obscuration and a limitation, and is condensed into a bodily prison in a point of space and time – but with a consequent explosive energy incalculable.[134]

It is the nourishing quality of Carpenter's incalculable "explosive energy" which should be celebrated despite the necessarily attendant discomfort. We are necessarily conflicted and ambivalent about suffering discomfort, but because it is "necessary" (in Phillips's word) a mature mind will tolerate and find it "good". To reference the Hostile Brothers again (see footnote 134), an Abel will do that while a Cain will not. William James also identifies the essentially religious aspect of the attitudinal divide; speaking here of what I see as Abel's attitude, James writes, "There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God."[135] Because it is futile and counterproductive to protest the fundamental, unalterable, ineluctable and often grim facts of existence in the hope of avoiding them, only the foolish and immature are given to doing it – from the misguided perspective that there is something to be gained from indulging in idle fantasies, which generally amounts to nothing more than some form of denial (see Peterson in epigraphic perspective 22).[136] As for Whitman, part of his program was his resolve "to show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to beautiful results" and to "search carefully for [what he "was for" in] defeat and dismay."[137]

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[134] Edward Carpenter, *The Drama of Love and Death*, 243–245. Subtly suggesting the metaphor of alchemy, Harry Emerson Fosdick sums up Carpenter's word when we writes: "No steam of gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. No life ever grows until it is focused, dedicated, disciplined." The link between discipline and the flourishing of human life is of course the theme of one of the oldest stories in our culture: the story of Cain and Abel. The relationship between accepting suffering humbly, cooperatively and without resentment (which Cain cannot), on the one hand, and respectable living, on the other, arguably has archetypal status. It is therefore unsurprising that it resonates productively with the present discussion. The words from Fosdick are from Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Answers to Real Problems: Harry Emerson Fosdick Speaks to Our Time: Selected Sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 160.

[135] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 52.

[136] Consider too Marcus Aurelius's words (from *Meditations*): "[If] anyone is afraid of an operation of nature, he is a child"; and consider, finally, C. D. C. Reeve's words (from *Love's Confusions*) on regrettable but common human personality traits: They "would be a flaw, I suppose, *if there were a better alternative*" (emphasis mine). From C. D. C. Reeve, *Love's Confusions*, 139.

[137] The first quote is from "Starting from Paumanok". In full, the second quotation reads: "I do not know what you are for, (I do not what I am for myself, nor what any thing is for,) / But *I will search carefully for it in being foiled*, / *In*

To argue affirmatively, as I am currently doing, for the potential recognition of something positive or nourishing inherent to situations of keen distress and perplexity might on the face of it seem a radical, unpitying and unkind position, but I maintain that an enlightened reconceptualization of the terms of suffering, with which we are ineluctably saddled anyway, will turn out to be in fact an uncontroversial way to proceed. One can perhaps see this by noticing that locating a positive possibility in one's predicament need not involve anything other than coming to realize that moving beyond the suffering ("getting better") may have to depend on a process of *personal* evolution, or growth and change. And *this* one would certainly be ill-advised to dismiss as an obvious evil out of hand: There is no getting around the problem that denouncing personal evolution looks suspiciously like voluntarily embracing stagnation and personal fossilization.[138] Once again, because one is oneself part and parcel of the problem of one's suffering, one is also – insofar as one is capable of changing at all, which I shall assume – part of the solution; that is, one is an integral part of the modest but crucial amelioration of one's own crisis. And this is uncontroversial because although it might not be the most obvious fact due to its systemic metaphysical ubiquity (it is hiding in plain sight all the time), all we *ever do in life is change*.[139] Whether we are inclined to agree, there is no question that we are continually, imperceptibly readjusting ourselves as a consequence of our surroundings; we never cease to renovate ourselves in order to go on living. Predominantly, as I have suggested, we do so unconsciously and so subtly that we do not notice it. (My suspicion is that an unconscious and automatic, culturally instilled tendency to pay lip-service to the good of positive personal change while cursing all manifestations of suffering is widespread in our culture; the problem with that is that we fail to notice the inherent contradiction of such a position: We cannot have it both ways. Growth is for extremely good reasons inextricably linked with suffering; for if nothing is "broken", why would we ever "fix" it – or improve, amend and change?)[140] The fact that self-improving evolution is even an "psycho-ontological" possibility is that kind of "fruitful" element of which we might have remained

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defeat, poverty, imprisonment—for they too are great. / / Did we think victory great? / So it is—But now it seems to me, when it cannot be helped, that defeat is great, / And that death and dismay are great." These verses are from "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" (emphases mine).

[138] Of course, in fairness, there are cases of such crushing despair and suffering that even this thought might be too conceptually ambitious and demanding; at the very least, the process of getting better might be a life-long process.

[139] See my note on "endless micro-deaths and renewal" in footnote 83. Change, I posit, is essentially "micro-death and renewal".

[140] In discussing a passage in Proust *In Search of Lost Time*, Alain de Botton writes, "It is perhaps only normal if we remain ignorant when things are blissful. While a car is working well, what incentive is there to learn of its complex internal functioning? . . . Only when plunged into grief do we have the Proustian incentive to confront difficult truths." See Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, 75.

oblivious were it not for our suffering, which may serve as a kind of awakening.[141] Henry Miller nicely articulated the attitude by noting, "Like every man I am my own worst enemy, but unlike most men I know too that I am my own saviour."[142] *That* in a nutshell is the principle and attitude upon which I suspect effective therapy is predicated (whether the suffering person is conscious of it or not).

To repeat, all will to life must, I think, involve the recognition and realization that of course we cannot expect to persist in an unchanged state, and that change will be demanded of us by external events. Sometimes we must grow or change in unpredicted manners and directions in order to stand – meaning *tolerate* – our lives at their more difficult junctures. And it is typically at the more difficult junctures that we undergo the most radical transformation; they should not be shunned or childishly cursed merely because they seem perilous; life is necessarily perilous – or we would grow blasé and apathetic in the face of it, and disinclined to take it seriously. Although we necessarily change and evolve continuously over the course of our lives, it is during critical psychic suffering and distress that our personal evolution tends to be (because it must be) more specific in mode and more noticeable in degree – if personal evolution is an impossibility the individual is in grave danger. In Eric G. Wilson's words: "alienation [and] anxiety are calls for us to take responsibility for our own unique beings, for us to become, for once, authentic. We conclude that crisis is the crucible that burns away the inessential and reveals to us our vital core."[143]

xvi. Everyone Suffers Alone – Selfhood and Suffering

Of course, as with most worthwhile things, there is a significant probability that we will fail. But this dissertation is not a statistical evaluation but a sincere discussion of the psychological experience of suffering, one that emphasizes the real arguments for taking heart amidst defeat, distress and crisis. While still embarked on my preamble leading up to Viktor Frankl's insight, let

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[141] Indeed, a profound connection between existential threats and the heightened form of consciousness that characterizes human beings has been established as central to human evolution. For more on this, see *Maps of Meaning*, 300–302. Cf. Viktor Frankl: "[M]an's search for meaning may arouse inner tension rather than inner equilibrium. However, precisely such tension is an indispensable prerequisite of mental health." (Cf. Jung's words on "unendurable conflict" in footnote 92.) Thomas S. Szasz writes: "The dialectical interplay of the opposing tendencies or themes of freedom and slavery, liberation and oppression, competence and incompetence, responsibility and license, order and chaos[is] essential to the growth, life and death of the individual." From Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 2.

[142] That sentiment was shared by Whitman who wished to signal and usher in a new order – and new era – in which "every man shall be his own priest." Cf. his 1855 Preface. Miller's words are from Henry Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, 119. Recall also Miller's description of the "joy of life" as "not static but dynamic" (cited earlier).

[143] From Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, 42.

me make an auxiliary argument about the relationship between the phenomenological sense of self and heightened crises of suffering.[144] (The centrality of "meaning" to the phenomenological approach of reality is useful and significant to me – in short because I agree with Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Frankl, Primo Levi and others that the most reliable antidote to suffering is meaning.) It has been argued that "phenomenology" represents a "stronger source of appeal for discovering the nature of mind and individuating elements than either ordinary language or ordinary language and science", which is a realization I consider analogous to Eric G. Wilson's claim that there is a strong, intimate and potentially enlightening relationship between a person's suffering and his or her sense of self.[145] In their own ways, others have corroborated the gist of such observations; Jordan Peterson, for instance, remarks simply that the experience of suffering (or "pain") seems to partake of a higher or more primary order of reality than other sensual experiences: "For most people there is nothing more real than their own pain", a fact which also interested William James, R. W. Emerson, Nietzsche and several other thinkers.[146] (Purely speculatively, I could say that *this* should not surprise us at all; in other words, suffering (which in its more widespread manifestations historically speaking must be imagined to translate trivially to the threat of incapacitation and annihilation) *should* "wake us up" about the true state of our situation more than pleasure, because not responding to threats with a heightened level of self-awareness would in evolutionary terms *not* have been conducive to survival.) The fact remains that suffering is deeply personal and frequently accompanied by a sense of isolation, of having been socially singled out. The poet and Trappist monk Thomas Merton, writing a few decades before Peterson, asks, "What, after all, is more personal than suffering? The awful futility of our attempts to convey the reality of our suffering to other people, and the tragic inadequacy of human sympathy, both prove how incommunicable a thing suffering really is. When a man suffers, he is most alone. Therefore, it is in suffering that we are most tested as persons."[147] Echoing Merton's claim is Joyce Carol Oates's description of "despair" as "a state of intense inwardness". (Later I shall present an argument that resonates

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[144] In referring to phenomenology going forward, I shall seldom stray from this brief definition: "Literally, phenomenology is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view. This field of philosophy is then to be distinguished from, and related to, the other main fields of philosophy: ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), ethics (the study of right and wrong action), etc." From "Phenomenology" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[145] From Timb Hoswell, *Phenomenology and The Ghost in The Machine: An Investigation into Wilfrid Sellars, Jean--Paul Sartre, Gilbert Ryle and The Concept of Mind*, 296.

[146] From Jordan Peterson's "The Necessity of Virtue – Jordan B. Peterson". This is part and parcel's of Peterson's phenomenological conception of being.

[147] See Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 84.

strongly with Oates's observation that "this state of keenly heightened inwardness has always fascinated the writer, whose subject is after all the imaginative reconstruction of language. The ostensible subject *out there* is but the vehicle, or the pretext, for the ravishing discoveries to be made *in here* in the activity of creating.")[148] The relation between self and suffering is established even further by Eric G. Wilson who offers an explanation of why moments of limitation and suffering may occasionally entail or potentially prepare for something like an existential epiphany within the self, an event that then typically facilitates our survival (notice how we are again told that the apparently forbidding and unsafe dark might harbor nourishing experiences):

> To sit long with our various alienations and our sumptuous paralyses and our nervous fears is to come indeed to a startling realization[: that m]elancholy connects us to our fundamental being.[149] . . . If I am anxiously sad, I don't enjoy a comfortable relationship to the objects of people around me. . . . Unmoored from these familiar things, I am forced to look within myself, into my most mysterious interiors. . . . [S]tripped of the familiar, I get in touch with what is most intimate: I am *this* person and no one else [and in order to remain this person] I must find my unique potentialities.[150]

In the moment when we lose the customary implicit, innocent, quasi-childlike trust we once had in the world, we may gain or access *ourselves* in a new and richer sense.

This, I grant, may sound awfully like hopeful, pseudointellectual cant; however, we rarely exclaim so upon meeting people who have survived a real trauma or illness and have avoided being completely warped by the experience. In such situations we generally vicariously enjoy their sense of grateful relief and wonder at the unknowable (because to all intents and purposes invisible) operations of the world's chaotic forces and serendipitous events. I further claim, effectively backed up by Adam Smith (footnote 100), that we tend to listen to such people with rapt attention – an observation borne out by the fact that suffering, survival and premature death form deeply embedded archetypal narrative motifs which have a natural claim on human interest for all that they

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[148] These Oates quotes are from Joyce Carol Oates, " "Zero at the Bone": Despair as Sin and Enlightenment", in *Where I've Been, and where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose*, 63.

[149] Cf. Jordan Peterson whose statement (cited previously) corroborates Wilson's above: "Human being is predicated on a kind of fundamental limitation in that we are what we are and we're not other things." This harkens back to the classical Jewish commentary on the nature of God which includes the question: What does something characterized by omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience (omnibenevolence is sometimes included also) lack? The answer: limitation. It is of course essentially part and parcel of the so-called Frame Problem (which I introduce on page 103) – and also integral to the principles of semantics and speech– that without limitation (in the form of arbitrarily defined category boundaries) there is no being (there is just undifferentiated "omnibeing"). For more on the classical commentary on the nature of God, see Jordan Peterson's "The Necessity of Virtue – Jordan B. Peterson".

[150] Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness*, 43. As I shall show at the end of this chapter, Jung too subscribes to the ultimate instructiveness of assuming that we are completely alone in our crises. If we did not assume so, "[we] would remain merely a child." From Carl Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934,* vol. 1, 385.

do not constitute very "discussable" things. Whitman offers the view that these things especially appeal to the sensibilities of poets:

> And yet there is another shape of personality dearer far to the artist-sense [than the theme of perfect, unalloyed happiness], (which likes the play of strongest lights and shades,) where the perfect character, the good, the heroic, although never attain'd, is never lost sight of, but *through failures, sorrows, temporary downfalls, is return'd to again and again, and while often violated, is passionately adhered to as long as mind, muscles, voice, obey the power we call volition.*[151]

In discussing the corresponding archetype in Jungian terms (under the rubric of "rebirth", which connotes psychic transformation), Maud Bodkin discerns three elements: *frustration*, which is followed by *creative evolution*, which leads to *transcendence*.[152] The middle element can be alternatively conceptualized as a kind of growth during which "the constituent factors are transformed".[153] As for gaining or accessing ourselves in a new and richer sense while plunged in a socially isolating crisis, a contributor to *True Tales of American Lives* (edited by Paul Auster), perfectly encapsulates such a story:

> I have been unable to write for weeks now, my mind riddled instead by imminent departures, imminent change.
>
> Then it strikes me: this moment is the friendly hand of solitude. . .
>
> Sometimes it is good fortune to be abandoned. While we are looking after our losses, our selves may slip back inside.[154]

xvii. Literature, Trauma and Psychoanalysis

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[151] From Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, 156–157. Emphasis mine. Whitman later told Traubel: "I think things are as good as they can be—all right as they are . . . including the agitation, including the agitation! especially the agitation! Indeed, I might think agitation the most important factor of all—the most deeply important: to stir, to question, to suspect, to examine, to denounce!" From Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 59.

[152] Charles Hamilton Morgan argues that the Jungian archetype in question informs many of the poems dealing with crisis in *Leaves of Grass* – I shall return to this idea. See Charles Hamilton Morgan, "A New Look at Whitman's "Crisis"," 41.

[153] Cf. Ricks's words in footnote 30.

> The very fact that an observed phenomenon does not yield hard empirical data and is therefore not verifiable or falsifiable in a Popperean sense should of course not make us pretend the phenomenon is not important – that would be materialism at its most stingy and dogmatic. Important – indeed, perhaps the most important – things do not always manifest themselves in empirical form. On this, Adam Phillips has said that "If you live in a culture that regards scientific criteria as the privileged ones, then psychoanalysis is going to fail. [But] nobody wants to measure friendship, say, or love." From Adam Phillips, "RSA Replay: One Way and Another".

[154] The writer of this account ("An Average Sadness") is Ameni Rozsa. From Paul Auster, ed., *True Tales of American Life*, 473.

It is, as I have said, a premise derived from psychoanalysis that although we must all sometimes endure suffering that is somehow inseparable from "ourselves" – a product of parts of our psyche – we nevertheless simultaneously possess the potential for untangling our confusion, for transcending ourselves in helpful ways and for arriving at newfound ways to live in the face of psychic struggle or pain. This dissertation is about our discovery, awareness, attitudes toward and eventual celebration of that potentiality as approached via, and activated and harnessed by means of, literature.

As regards psychoanalysis (and Freud's writings on trauma in particular), Cathy Caruth identifies a link or kinship between literature and psychoanalysis that goes some way towards validating the parallelism I indicated earlier. Caruth writes

> If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet."[155]

(My own suspicion, which I cannot go into too much at the moment, is that "the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" is an issue essential to phenomenology too.)[156] Volney P. Gay writes that psychoanalysis

> has much to say about the production and enjoyment of art. This seems true of the narrative arts, like the novel, which are often similar to dreams and other psychological acts that

[155] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 3. The psychologist James W. Pennebaker who has done research on expressive emotions therapy (EET), i.e. the beneficial health potentials of writing creatively, also indicates the affinities between the "talking cure" (psychoanalysis) and creative writing: "Writing about emotional upheavals in our lives can improve physical and mental health. Although the scientific research surrounding the value of expressive writing is still in the early phases, there are some approaches to writing that have been found to be helpful. . . . You can write longhand or you can type on a computer. *If you are unable to write, you can also talk into a tape recorder.*" From James Pennebaker, "Writing & Health" (emphasis mine).

It might be remarked that Christopher Isherwood also affirmed the kinship between literature and the realm of psychology and therapy. He once remarked that his writing was a kind of self-discovery, "not unlike, really, the self-discovery of free association in psychiatry".

[156] My thinking here (that is, my inclination to think of literature, psychoanalysis and phenomenology as mutually compatible domains of thinking) is encouraged rather specifically (meaning *precisely*) by Jordan Peterson's observation that "The automatic attribution of meaning to things—or the failure to distinguish between them initially [cf. knowing v. not knowing]—is a characteristic of narrative, of myth, not of scientific thought. Narrative accurately captures the nature of raw experience [note that dreams – spontaneous products of the psyche – tend to have narrative structure]. Things *are* scary, people *are* irritating, events *are* promising, food *is* satisfying—at least in terms of our basic experience [much of our experiential life is only communicable in phenomenological terms]." From Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 2.

> Freud investigated. I believe psychoanalysis is a valid science and relevant to the narrative and nonnarrative arts.[157]

It deserves to be mentioned that in his essay "The Poet and Day-Dreaming", Freud argues that the human desire to alter the existing and often unsatisfactory or unpleasant world of reality can results in such diverse mental activities as childhood play, fantasies, dreams and – for my purposes most interestingly – works of art. The mental activity, then, Freud says, is undertaken for the sake of inventing a situation in which wishes, hitherto unsatisfied, are fulfilled. The parallel to psychoanalysis is clear.

On the face of it it might seem an undesirable quality of suffering that it serves, as I have argued, to amplify and intensify the sufferer's sense of self (or selfhood). The upside of this, however, is what is thereby offered us obliquely (the "toad" of suffering may be ugly and venomous but there is a "precious jewel in his head"; see epigraphic perspective 29). The intensified sense of self enables the suffering person to potentially become something other than a purely passive victimized object upon whom suffering is inflicted. Although there are no guarantees of triumph here, there is enough evidence in the literature I have consulted for me to posit that one can *attempt* to suffer with a degree of involvement, agency and deliberation. That is to say, one can attempt to suffer attentively, fully aware and awake (some might say "Stoically" but I shall not carry that word forward), rather than stumblingly, haphazardly, chaotically, numbly or desperately. Take Nietzsche's famous dictum, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*": these oft-quoted words remind us that although a person may be greatly burdened by external hardship, the person *participates* in the suffering like no merely material object could participate in its destruction by actively recalling and rehearsing a personal *why*. From a certain personal standpoint, the *how* – a reality inflicted by external forces – is secondary precisely because it is external, whereas the *why* is primary and closer to the individual by virtue of being internal and personal. In Nietzsche's words reappear – with a shifted emphasis – what I have tried to make clear about suffering's amplification of the sufferer's sense of self.[158]

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[157] From Volney P. Gay, *Freud on Sublimation: Reconsiderations*, 11. Also, Adam Phillips finds undergoing psychoanalytic treatment (entering into what Lacan called "the psychoanalytic opportunity") very similar to "reading a powerful work of literature, [which can amount to a] leap into the relative dark." From Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, xii.

[158] Viktor Frankl said of Nietzsche's aphorism, "There is much wisdom in [it]. I can see in these words a motto which holds true for any psychotherapy. In the Nazy concentration camps, one could have witnessed that those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive. The same conclusion has since been reached by other authors of books on concentration camps . . . As for myself, when I was taken to the concentration camp of Auschwitz, a manuscript of mine ready for publication was confiscated. Certainly, my deep desire to write this manuscript anew helped me to survive the rigors of the camps I was in. For instance, when in a camp in Bavaria

Only by rescuing, encircling and defending a measure of mandated selfhood that might otherwise "go under" and be lost, will our personal *attitude* to the trying situation be able to emerge. Upon merely emerging, our attitude gains a theoretical chance of affecting in a (perhaps modest but) decisive and positive (i.e. redemptive) way the experiential quality of the crisis. (Henry Miller knew that in general it was hopeless to dream of altering the world: "I certainly do not hope to alter the world. Perhaps I can put it best by saying that I hope to alter my own vision of the world. I want to be more and more myself . . ." (a statement which rehearses the elements of the Tolstoy aphorism cited just before footnote 211).[159] The idea of responding to external reality with deliberation and "indirectly" (and via the only available option given the dauntingly immoveable quality of external reality, i.e. by calibrating and attending to the *psychological* aspect of the interaction) is an idea which also interested a man whom Henry Miller admired and learned from: E. Graham Howe. In Howe's book *War Dance: A Study of the Psychology of War*, the author presents the following meditation relevant to this dissertation's present as well as upcoming theme:

> Certainly it is true that our attitude towards this 'real' external world is determined by our attitude towards these forces which exist within ourselves. It is as if in that outer world we are seeing ourselves as within a mirror. It is not so objective as it seems: it is as if we change the map of life itself by changing our attitudes to it.[160]

Cf. Powys in epigraphic perspective 17.[161] These words indicate the most central theme of my dissertation – and possibly the most profound theme of human life: the degree to and manner in which are lives are affected by the state of (and what we do with) our psyches, our souls. And now

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I fell ill with typhus fever, I jotted down on little scraps of paper many notes intended to enable me to rewrite the manuscript, should I live to the day of liberation. I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a Bavarian concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of cardiovascular collapse.

"Thus it can be seen that mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-being." From Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 104–105.

[159] From Henry Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, 141.

[160] E. Graham Howe, *War Dance: A Study of the Psychology of War*, 190–191.

[161] Joyce Carol Oates suggests that we may have to be "adolescent: restless, vulnerable, passionate, hungry to learn, skeptical and naive by turns" if we are to "believ[e] in the power of the imagination to change, if not the life itself, one's comprehension of life." Such a person, she adds, suggests the traits of an "ideal reader." From Joyce Carol Oates, " "Zero at the Bone": Despair as Sin and Enlightenment", in *Where I've Been, and where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose*, 65.

I am also reminded of John Cowper Powys's words that "Not the wretchedest man or woman but has a deep secretive mythology with which to wrestle his material world and to overcome it and pass beyond it. Not the wretchedest human being but has his share in the creative energy that builds the world. We are all creators. We all create a mythological world of our own out of certain shapeless materials." From John Cowper Powys, *The Meaning of Culture*, 189.

finally I have arrived at the point where I can introduce the premise and insight which essentially defines and informs my whole thesis. Viktor Frankl's powerful idea – one bound up profoundly with the theme of survival – will serve as a kind of underlying premise for all I have said thus far and all I shall argue in the chapters to come. It is related to the thought that we can come to discover that suffering successfully enables us to evolve meaningfully and change in a coordinated and valuable fashion.

Consider a person at the very height of physical and psychological distress; imagine, for instance, a person submitted to torture from which no escape is possible and no rescue in sight. As a concentration camp inmate during the Holocaust, Frankl saw and endured several crises that fit this description. However, his observation – a mental stroke of genius – articulated in *Man's Search for Meaning* (originally released as *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*) has found a nearly universal welcome, certainly far beyond the walls restraining the insulted and humiliated. Plunged in unspeakable depths of suffering, Frankl nevertheless found that "the last of the human freedoms" remained available to him in the form of his ability "to choose [his own] attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose [his] own way". The epiphany, which to an extent partakes of what I have said earlier about suffering with "involvement, agency and deliberation", deserves quoting more or less in full:

> [In the camp] there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form or the typical inmate.
>
> Seen from this point of view, the mental reactions of the inmates of a concentration camp must seem more to us than the mere expression of certain physical and sociological conditions. Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp [and prove himself "worthy of his suffering" and a living proof] that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. . . It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.[162]

[162] Fom Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 65–67.

I am struck by the equivalence of the insight put forward in Tolstoy's *My Confession*, chapter 6. The passage is cited above. Like Frankl, he conceived, at the height of his religious crisis in 1879–1880, of the

It is thought-provoking that in the case of Frankl it took a sustained and nearly lethal series of assaults on his person and personal dignity and integrity to bring about the realization that "any man can, even under such circumstances [which for all intents and purposes means *any circumstances whatsoever*], decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually." Frankl witnessed inmates "walk[ing] through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread" and distilled the extraordinary principle that the freedom "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances" will always be potentially free from destructive incursion.[163] That such a kernel of wisdom was enfolded in such a barrage of evil and misery recalls, if you will, Jung's "In sterquiliniis invenitur"; I have featured Milton's familiar words among the epigraphs for a similar reason (epigraph no. 16). It might be interesting to note for a second that a similar violent dynamic was described by another suffering inmate a few decades later: Solzhenitsyn also discerned insights of existential philosophy reflected in acts of torturous humiliation:

> So wouldn't it be more correct to say that no camp can corrupt those who have a stable nucleus, who do not accept that pitiful ideology which holds that "human beings are created for happiness," an ideology which is done in by the first blow of the work assigner's cudgel?[164]

But Frankl only provides the outline of what is so crucial to my dissertation. He tells us that no man is ever fatally robbed of the mental and spiritual freedom to choose his attitude to whatever scenario surrounds him. (Cf. Powys in the latter half of epigraphic perspective 17.) I am going to do two things: First, because I find it suggestive, I am going to take that part for granted – to treat it as a given or a fixed assumption – without subjecting it to dismantling criticism. (Doing the latter would not benefit the overall argument.)[165] Second, I am going to argue that the attitudes taken by those

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individual's survival as part and parcel of (if not identical with) his or her steady determination to retain a residual will in a situation when agency was under attack or threat of being stripped away. Note too the close parallelism between Tolstoy's line "we ourselves are nothing but that wish [to live]" and Frankl's observation that the choice of personal attitude to life is decidedly "the *last* of the human freedoms" in a life-threatening crisis.

[163] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 65.

[164] From Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, 626. Dostoevsky is another figure who at the height of despair and terror (I allude to his mock-execution in 1849) fell abruptly into radically different beliefs and attitudes about human life and human potential. See Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, 141.

[165] What I *can* do is remark that other thinkers validate Frankl in their different ways. Thus, for instance, William James: "Even a sick man, unable to be militant outwardly, can carry on the moral warfare. He can willfully turn his attention away from his own future, whether in this future or the next. He can train himself to indifference to his present drawbacks and immerse himself in whatever objective interests still remain accessible. He can follow public news and sympathize with other people's affairs. He can cultivate cheerful manners, and be silent about his miseries. He can contemplate whatever ideal aspects of existence his philosophy is able to present to him, and practice whatever duties, such as patience, resignation, trust, his ethical system requires. Such a man lives on his loftiest, largest plane. He is a high-hearted freeman and no pining slave." From William James, *The Varieties of Religious*

fortunate enough to survive have at least one profound thing in common. Such "surviving attitudes", I argue, must arguably be imbued by an Abel-like humility, patience and cooperation with the terrible ordeal (at least such aspects as cannot be countered and deflected). I think one can suggest an analogy to psychic suffering more generally: I would construe the Abel-like attitude I have outlined as similar to the "will to health" (as opposed to "will to illness") that Otto Rank and (later) Carl Rogers – and, independently, Thomas S. Szasz – have written of.[166] In being cooperative and patient I do not mean, of course, that the person fundamentally agrees with or even blesses the ordeal – far from it; however, and this will sound strange in the context of all-out murderous torture, the ordeal must be *suffered to occur* (permitted to happen), much though it is detested, for if there really is no alternative to it, if it really be overpowering and unavoidable, it will not do to deny reality in either deed or name.

> [W]isdom begins only when one takes things as they are; otherwise we get nowhere, we simply become inflated balloons with no feet on the earth. So it is a healing attitude when one can agree with the facts as they are; only then can we live in our body on this earth, only then can we thrive.[167]

Experience, 51.

Also, cf. Epictetus's words in epigraphic perspective 14, and Emmanuel Kant's suggestion that we are endowed with a measure of agency in precisely how we experience reality: The "pragmatic" human being can, Kant writes, choose to engage in a willed "investigation of what he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself." Kant's words (from *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*) are cited in Simon Blackburn, *Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love*, 1. Blackburn explains that Kant is echoing an older theological tradition that "human beings are free to make of themselves what they will."

[166] Szasz declares that successful therapy depends on "a consenting, co-operative client. There is no way to "help" an individual who does not want to be a psychiatric patient." From Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 81.

Otto Rank thought that "people were inevitably caught in a battle between their "will to health" and their "will to illness," [and that thought] would greatly influence Rogers. From "The Gale Group" [no individual author is identified], *A Study Guide for Psychologists and Their Theories for Students: Carl Ransom Rogers*, no pagination in online version. Compare "will to health" with Frankl's concept "will to meaning".

Equally relevant is Rogers's "state of congruence"; see Carl Rogers, "The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change", 95.

[167] These words are from Carl Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934,* vol. 1, 545.

Earlier I quoted W. E. H. Lecky's words of advice "Acquiesce in the inevitable", which speak to the same theme. Shakespeare gleaned the same principle and put it thus: "Let me embrace thee, sour adversity, for wise men say it is the wisest course." From *Henry VI*, Part III. Cf. epigrammatic statement no. 28. Gregory Orr speaks of a necessary "passive receptivity", which he finds articulated in D. H. Lawrence's aptly-entitled poem "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through". From Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 5.

Also consider Whitman's words "I do not lack in . . . the sort of egotism that is willing to know itself as honestly as it is willing to know third or fourth parties" (cited in footnote 56).

Another sentiment from Carl Rogers seems pertinent (if not in its particulars then at least in overall spirit): "*I find I am more effective when I can listen acceptably to myself, and can be myself.* . . . I feel I have become more adequate in letting myself *be* what I *am*. It becomes easier to accept myself as a decidedly imperfect person [one, in our case, who is powerless against the agony of a terrible trial]. . . This must seem to some like a very strange direction in which to move. It seems to me to have value because the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change. . . . [We] cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are. Then

A Cain's "wroth" insistence (incidentally representing a very human and understandable position, of course) that the world is at genuine fault for being such an aggravating, impossible and unfair series of trials is simply too optimistically brittle an attitude to withstand the first blow of reality's "cudgel" (to allude to Solzhenitsyn). I base these remarks in references to Cain and Abel because the biblical Hostile Brothers represent archetypal psychological attitudes to reality, particularly its trying and painful aspects, and though we may not like to admit it these aspects are a constant in human lives – whether of the sort that scar us to the point where we barely survive or the much more commonly occurring ones which merely make it difficult to flourish like we could wish to flourish (to reference my discussion of *eudaimonia* in chapter 1). Jung too considered what I am tempted to call "Frankl's scenario" and gave a useful description of what may happen if one assumes Abel's attitude and suffers the unavoidable bad to occur:

> [When] you get into a disagreeable situation where you see no opening, no direct path, you assume that you are quite alone with yourself. In a way it is a very good thing that you think so; otherwise you would never make up your mind, you would remain merely a child. You must believe that you are practically alone. But you may find yourself in a really tight place where you can't get out, where you are helpless. Then you recognize that you are not alone, because such an absolute impasse is an archetypal situation, and an archetypal figure becomes constellated, a fact in your psychology, a potential, and so you are up to the situation. This has repeated itself innumerable times in history, man has again and again passed through such situations and has a psychological method of adapting, the thing to do in such a case.[168] For by his consciousness alone, particularly the dim consciousness of early ages, man was quite unable to invent such a thing; to primitive man everything was revealed, he invented absolutely nothing, he could not think, *it* thought. So it is the totality of the psyche that functions in that way; the psyche produces a double, it brings up another figure; that is a psychological fact. The *psychopompos* is this second figure; you can call it the daimon [divine manifestation], or the shadow, or a god or an ancestor spirit;[169] it does not matter what name you give it, it is simply a figure; it might even be an animal. For in such a predicament we are dépossèdés [dispossessed], we lose the power of our ego, we lose our self-confidence. Until that moment, we were willful or arbitrary, we had made our own choice, we had found out a way, we had proceeded as far as this particular place. Then suddenly we are in an impasse, we lose faith in ourselves, and it is just as if all of our energy

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change seems to come about almost unnoticed." From Carl Rogers, *The Carl Rogers Reader*, 19.

[168] John Cowper Powys records a similar insight in *A Philosophy of Solitude*: "The mind that can shake itself free from its human preoccupations is not a mind that has betrayed its human engendering; it is a mind that has gathered up the historic continuity of the generations; it is a mind that is aware of what Job endured, of what Homer enjoyed, of what Sophocles experienced, of what Goethe felt." From John Cowper Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, 83–84.

[169] In terms of whether the phenomenon of the sublime is indicated here, note that Jung's use of the world "god" agrees with Bloom's words, especially the latter half, here: "Whitman, our national poet, calls out for an answering greatness. . . . What is the American Sublime and how does it differ from British and Continental instances? Simplistically, *the sublime in literature has been associated with peak experiences that render a secular version of theophany: a sense of something interfused that transforms a natural moment, landscape, action, or countenance*" (emphasis added). From Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 3.

> became regressive. And then our psyche reacts by constellating that double, which has the effect of leading us out of the situation.[170]

Previously in the context of Jung I have mentioned alchemy and, elsewhere, the notion of the biblical Logos as a process by which order is produced out of chaos. In light of those previous remarks and the Jung quote immediately above, consider Eric G. Wilson remarks "that [in Jung's mind] melancholia and insight are intimately connected, that profound gloom generates rapid light, that dissolution is the key to transformation. . . . [and] that the life of Jesus [is] ultimately a parable for the alchemical process by which one moves from necessary melancholy to a grasp of the essential self." Thus the main motifs and strands of my argument are collectively addressed and mutually related. Another observation central to this dissertation is due to Peterson who sees death and rebirth as "a necessary precondition to proper human adaptation", as I have said, and adds that in order to survive "you have to identify with the part of yourself that transcends your current personality [and] can constantly die and be reborn."[171] It would seem then that "dissolution" (in Jung and Wilson) and "[self-]transcendence" (in Peterson) are means to the same end: "transformation" or "proper human adaptation", both of which are forms of survival and therefore crucial. An important clue – supporting the existential instructiveness of what I have painted as the Abel-like approach to trying and painful aspects of existence – emerges from this: It turns out to be true (as I hinted earlier) that there are extremely good reasons why positive growth is linked with suffering: We have to nearly break (break down) in order to enable our own fixing (by which process we learn something about ourselves and about survival) or in order to improve – or change and grow – as persons: "[The writer] has to establish, or re-establish, a unity which has been broken and which is felt just as keenly by the reader, who is a potential artist, as by the writer, who believes himself to be an artist," writes Henry Miller.[172] From a different angle, Peterson comes at the same issue:

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[170] From Carl Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934,* vol. 1, 385. One can of course doubt Jung's confident assertions (to pretend otherwise would turn my argument into a combination of dogma and wishful thinking). The kind of dynamic that Jung takes aim at seems to resonate with religious descriptions of the world; this does not trouble me, however, in part because the entire theory of the literary sublime itself has religious overtones (Harold Bloom sees R. W. Emerson and Whitman as exemplars of "the American Religion", for instance), and in part because I use Jung's and Frankl's assertions as a premise or conditional on which the ensuing argument hinges. The religiously charged nature of Jung's words is even more evident in this approximately synonymous observation from Tolstoy: "There is something in the human spirit that will survive and prevail, there is a tiny and brilliant light burning in the heart of man that will not go out no matter how dark the world becomes." Tolstoy's words are featured as the epigraph to Frank Chadwick, *How Dark the World Becomes*.

[171] From Jordan Peterson, "Biblical Series III: God and the Hierarchy of Authority" [2:15:45].

[172] Henry Miller, *The Henry Miller Reader*, 361.

> Creative exploration of the unknown, and consequent generation of knowledge [in my phraseology, confronting the predicament with an Abel-ish attitude and acknowledging that something about *us* may need to change], is construction or update of patterns of behavior and representation ["the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change", Rogers said], such that the unknown is transformed from something terrifying and compelling into something beneficial (or, at least, something irrelevant) [in my words, what appeared to be an absolutely hellish experience – Frankl's suffering in various concentration camps are a strong example – is not so hellish that it must "rob you of your very self, your inner freedom", as Frankl found]. The presence of capacity for such creative exploration and knowledge generation may be regarded as the third, and final, permanent constituent element of human experience (in addition to the domain of the "known" [order] and "unknown" [chaos]) [again, it is my contention that this redemptive, transformative attitude is the central feature that survivor mindsets share in the hour of their keenest suffering].
>
> Mythological representations of the world – which are representations of reality as a forum for action – portray the dynamic interrelationship between all three constituent elements of human experience. The eternal unknown – nature, metaphorically speaking, creative and destructive, source and destination of all determinant things – is generally ascribed an affectively ambivalent feminine character (as the "mother" and eventual "devourer" of everyone and everything). The eternal knower, finally – the process that mediates between the known and the unknown – is the knight who slays the dragon of chaos, the hero who replaces disorder and confusion with clarity and certainty [I am herein arguing that that process can be undertaken aesthetically, linguistically, through the written word], the sun-god who eternally slays the forces of darkness, and the "word" that engenders creation of the cosmos.[173]

The appropriate moment for returning to Gregory Orr has finally come. Like Peterson, Orr also considers our experiences in the world defined by the balance of order and disorder (Peterson says "chaos").[174] Orr writes:

> Our day to day consciousness can be characterized as an endlessly shifting, back-and-forth awareness of the power and presence of disorder in our lives and our desire or need for a sense of order [cf. Harrower in epigraphic perspective 6]. Most of us live most of our lives more or less comfortably with the daily interplay of these two awarenesses, but in certain existential crises, disorder threatens to overwhelm us entirely. In those cases, the very integrity of the self is threatened, and its desire or ability to persist is challenged. . . . [Our] instability is present to us almost daily in our unpredictable moods and the way memories haunt us and fantasies play themselves out at will on our inner mental screen. We are creatures whose volatile inner lives are both mysterious to us and beyond our control. How to respond to the strangeness and unpredictability of our own emotional being? One important answer to this question is the personal lyric, the "I" poem dramatizing inner and outer experience.[175]

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[173] Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 20.
[174] Note the highly appropriate two-fold meaning of the word "disorder": lack of order versus ill health.
[175] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 4. See also Harrower's words in epigraphic perspective 6.

It is interesting to read Whitman's work as the repeated recognition that the personal lyric has this property: that it can help us respond to the mental pangs that scar our lives. I have quoted Phillips as saying that psychoanalysis can show people "the areas of their lives in which 'cure' would be the wrong word; in which we have to come up with something else to do other than get better", and I have suggested that therapeutic writing can accomplish the same. The psychologist Jay Martin shares that view (as does, of course, Orr): "One of the processes we see in creativity is that the creative person solves a problem. That is, he's depressed, he's anxious, he's uncertain, he's mourning, he's grieving. He writes, and in the process of writing, he doesn't necessarily cure himself, but he gets some perspective by writing. By putting one sentence down after another, you get a perspective on your own disorder."[176] The limited but crucial and redemptive influence we may have and exert on our suffering can be concentrated – like a meditative breath – in the resolve to "put[] one sentence down after another", or as Orr puts it: "Maybe I should look inside myself for something stable", for "each of us needs a sense of order, a sense that some patterns or enduring principles are at work in our lives. . . . Each of us needs to believe that patterns and structures exist and can be made to exist." The hopeful possibility inherent in the word "can" sums up the central parts of these concluding remarks. But Orr goes on in what seems unconscious corroboration of Frankl's and Jung's important ideas – with a coincidental approving glance at Shelley as well (epigraphic perspective 20):

> *The awareness of disorder generates in the human mind a spontaneous ordering response.* This ordering response is innate, a natural power—all human minds possess it. Why not call it "imagination" and recognize it as a fundamentally human cognitive capacity?[177]

I believe that when Harold Bloom speaks of "the mind's influence upon itself" (see epigraphical perspective 21), it is in an intimately related sense. Speaking of Bloom, it is to him (via Jung, as it happens) that I owe the concept of the literary "daemon" (although Jung spells it "daimon", as we have seen, and does not speak specifically of writers); Bloom calls it the "poet-in-a-poet", whereas Jung considers it a psychically generated "double" (and calls it "*psychopompos*" as well as a few other things). Here is Bloom:

> Most of the American writers studied in this book [*The Deamon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*] start with a recognition of the god or daemon within themselves and compose through moving outward: Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Dickinson,

[176] Jay Martin is cited by the authors of this work: David Shields and Shane Salerno, *Salinger*, 263.
[177] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 16–17. See epigraphic perspectives 6 and 20–22.

> Melville, Henry James, Stevens, Frost, Hart Crane. . . . The territory all of them light out for is ultimately themselves.

Again, something in the psyche – activated by suffering and discomfort or disorder, awakened by the terrible threats towards aspects of the self – has the capacity to discover, establish and manifest *self*, a process that may take the form of – or inform, guide and accompany – literary creation: "All artistic production and enjoyment," writes Wilhelm Worringer, "is accompanied by that state of inner psychic exaltation ["excitation", "turbulence" or "crisis" are permissible stand-ins for "exaltation", I think; Worringer is no trauma scholar] in which for us to-day artistic experience is localized".[178] The finished writing may then be regarded as a record of the self (or soul) and its struggle toward wholeness (etymologically related to "healing" and "wholesomeness", as I have said).[179] It is equally a record of the transformation of the person under the yoke of crisis.[180] Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience*, seems to agree with the main character of that description and provides a poignant and useful image by conceptualizing traumatic experience in terms of "a human voice that cries out from the wound [symbolizing the beginning of suffering], a voice that witnesses a truth that [the traumatized person] cannot fully know."[181]

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[178] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 132. The Harold Bloom quote preceding Worringer is from Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 406.

[179] Consider this passage, very relevant to my overall theme: "For the awakened individual, however, life begins *now*, at any and every moment; it begins at the moment when he realizes that he is part of a great whole, and in the realization becomes himself whole. In the knowledge of limits and relationships he discovers the eternal self, thenceforth to move with obedience and discipline in full freedom. *Balance*, *discipline*, *illumination*—these are the key words in [E. Graham] Howe's doctrine of wholeness, or holiness, for the words mean the same thing. It is not essentially new, but it needs to be rediscovered by each and every one individually. As I said before, one meets it in such poets and thinkers as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, to take a few recent examples." From Henry Miller, *The Wisdom of the Heart*, in *The Henry Miller Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Durrell, 259.

[180] Arthur Koestler wrote, "Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human condition." Cited in Jeffrey Berman, *Death in the Classroom: Writing about Love and Loss*, 252. Whitman's art has been called therapeutic several times; see, for instance, Donald. D. Kummings's entry "Asselineau, Roger (1915–)" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 36. See also Carl Martin Lindner's words on "personal wholeness" in footnote 291.

[181] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 3. Despite the brevity of my citation, the whole chapter rewards close study. Caruth's Freud-derived metaphor resonates with this image from Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me."

xviii. Clearing the Wilderness

To recap and conclude the chapter, I have tried to argue a number of things: (1) That suffering in one form or another is an integral, ineluctable and therefore effectively archetypal and central condition or fact of life (this goes for suffering that is the direct consequence of brutal collisions with external reality as well as more predominantly psychic varieties of suffering which seem to have no discernible cause in the world beyond our selves);[182] and (2) that we are naturally disposed to respond to suffering by sometimes doing nothing (being unwilling or not daring or experienced enough to acknowledge that we are suffering), sometimes losing ourselves in escapist distractions that efficiently but only temporarily alleviate our distress (an unwise response, amounting to a kind of denial, which might only exacerbate our crisis); but I have also said that in the absence of a swift and reliable elimination of the source of our anguish we do have another option, which is a result of the freedom and agency of self that Frankl asserts is always ours;[183] and (3) that exercising this option takes us in the direction of potential transcendence of our current suffering even though the cost very likely is that we undergo some changes that we would not have welcomed prior to the crisis.[184] I have argued too that language can be the instrument or method through which we try to get a handle of the elusive and overwhelming nature of our suffering. Plunged in meditation on – or feeling victimized by – "the great inevitable defeat that awaits us all" as well as of all other more manageable manifestations of defeat, we should aim to write – to the degree it is an option – with what Nietzsche calls "greatness" and Cohen calls "beauty and dignity". (And should the suffering person feel that the therapy of art be beyond their reach on account of a lack of skill or excellence, we might well take a word of encouragement from Whitman: "There is that indescribable freshness and unconsciousness about an illiterate person that humbles and mocks the power of the noblest expressive genius.") What matters is the resolve to take charge over a sinister situation (the "will to health", in Otto Rank's words), rather than allowing it to ride roughshod over the individual. If the

[182] "Tragic encounter with the forces of the unknown is inevitable, in the course of normal development, given continued expansion of conscious awareness." From Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 324. Paul Auster penned an elegant articulation of this universally dreaded contingency: "You didn't deserve it, but neither did you not deserve it." Jordan Peterson's equally pithy articulation of the same is "If something terrible is happening to you, you're going to wonder *why you*? That's for sure. *Why not you?* might be a better question because it's inevitable." From Jordan Peterson, "The Necessity of Virtue". For the Auster quote, see Paul Auster, *Winter Journal*, 198.

[183] Cf. "The intrinsic nature of human experience ensures that potent motivation for deceitful adaptations is always present. It is the encounter with what is *truly horrible and terrifying*, after all, that inspires fear and engenders avoidance. The human tendency to flee into false heavens of security can therefore be viewed with sympathy and understanding." From Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 324.

[184] "Maturation is a frightening process." From Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 324.

result of such an effort be a literary text, no matter how insignificant or aesthetically unremarkable it appears to even the kindliest assessor (who in lieu of other readers might be the suffering person him- or herself), then we have nevertheless taken part in a creative act, which means we *have already* by definition transcended brute suffering and transformed a "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" state of being (to quote Shakespeare's Hamlet) into a fertile one. (Once again, it is "fertile" technically, *by definition*, in that it is capable of partaking of the genesis of *something* – i.e. our writing, our report, our testimony, our poem – which exhibits a higher degree of inherent order and meaning than the chaos and anguish afflicting the person.) "The news is sad but it's in a song so it's not so bad" would be an appropriate summary of why the genesis I am identifying is one to be celebrated; or as Whitman put it in a poem about death: "These carols sung to cheer my passage through the world I see."[185] The thought is familiar to many writers; Emily Dickinson informs a correspondent: "I had a terror—since September—I could tell to none; and so I sing . . . because I am afraid."[186] Thoreau appears to consider the "imagination" characterized by similar capabilities as those expressed by Shelley in epigraphic perspective 20. Whereas Shelley spoke of imaginative mind acting upon certain other thoughts and in so doing was able to "colour them with its own light, and composing from them as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity", Thoreau emphasized the lasting pleasure of imaginative creation:

> If you have ever done any work with these finest tools, the imagination and fancy and reason, it is a new creation, independent of the world, and a possession forever. You have laid up something against a rainy day. You have to that extent cleared the wilderness.[187]

Other writers have presented views compatible with this idea: Gardner, as I have said, sees "moral" art, which he endorses exclusively, as art that pushes back against "chaos and death, [and] against entropy"; André Malraux suggests that "all art and the love of art allow us to negate our nothingness", and Frankl (who, like Gardner, is cited previously) urges us to transcend "apathy

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[185] The first quote is from Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game*, 94. Whitman's words are from the 1871 poem "These Carols".

Kenneth Burke, who had a "real love/hate relationship with Whitman" in William H. Rueckert's estimation, has made the deflationary statement that Whitman in his poems is merely "whistling in the dark"; but William H. Rueckert writes, "To reduce Whitman's poems to whistling in the dark is to reduce them to a kind of absurdity, to a purely verbal symbolic action with no basis in reality. [Whitman] was not, as Burke suggests, just peddling nature as American real estate." From Kenneth Burke, *On Human Nature: A Gathering While Everything Flows, 1967–1984*, ed. by William H. Rueckert and Angelo Bonadonna, 66.

[186] The last quote is reprinted in George Mamunes, *"So has a Daisy vanished": Emily Dickinson and Tuberculosis*, 128.

[187] Cited in Christopher Edgar and Gary Lenhart, ed., *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Classic American Literature*, 58. See also Peterson's words in epigraphic perspective 22.

[and] irritability" by a mental effort to discover life "meaningful and purposeful").[188] Adam Phillips writes that "suffering can sometimes be transformed by applying words to wounds, by being seen as meaningful," which faithfully echoes my words and constitutes a straightforward way in which one might be able to resolve the Nietzschean problem overtly indicated by Nietzsche's words, "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering."[189] By writing from the midst of our catastrophe or crisis (and thereby being "worthy of our suffering" in Frankl's words – or proving ourselves "equal to" it), it is as if we are salvaging something valuable from a wreck, the wreck being the simultaneous death and transformation of our habitual life "philosophy" in Powys's sense.[190] Our writing is necessarily distinguished by being a cry that is uttered in an emergency, which is to say *through a wound*, figuratively speaking, and literally *through woundedness* (if you will forgive the contradictions between Caruth's and Phillips's incompatible wound metaphors), and its message is similar in spirit and import to that carried by Job's messenger carrying news of calamity: "I only am escaped alone to tell thee."[191] In short, our survival or recovery is predicated on our honest cooperation with the difficult facts of our predicament and our implicit recognition of the possibility that we may need to change in order to survive (not because it is not tragic that

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[188] Malraux is cited by Brombert in Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi*, 4.

[189] Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 19. The phrases from Frankl are referenced earlier in this dissertation.

Michael Moon, editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, associates with Whitman a "compassionate involvement in the episodes of human fortitude and faith." From Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Michael Moon, 546n6.

On the subject of Nietzsche's oft-cited aphorism, which is at the heart of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (defined in terms of "Will to Meaning"), the philosopher Simon May has said this about Heidegger and Camus: "[Heidegger, like Camus,] had this vision of the human being as "thrown" (he used the word "geworfen") . . . into a world, which in a sense is not ready for him, and he is not ready (or she is not ready) for it. And the idea is not that this is actually tragic. . . . It's not actually tragic. It's part of accepting and understanding life that you accept the fact that we are thrown into this world that can be profoundly hostile to our intentions, that has no concern for us whatsoever. And that the challenge of living a well-lived life . . . for Heidegger is to find an authentic relationship to this world in which you in a sense make it your own and in which you in some way dispense with the whole question of cost-benefit calculations. . . [One way to make the world one's own would be,] firstly, by a profound act of acceptance, which also involves getting rid of . . . a sort of "means-end" instrumental approach to the world [and] of seeing the world as a sort of object for the subject to manipulate, in fact [of] the whole subject-object distinction." Many of the themes I have developed were, in Simon May's portrait of Heidegger, central to that man's life and existential perspectives as well. For more on "Will to Meaning", see Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 97–101.

[190] Differing gently with Archibald MacLeish who wrote that "A poem should be equal to: / not true" (see footnote 228), Seamus Heaney said in his Nobel Lecture that "poetry can be equal to and true at the same time". He added: "there are times when a deeper need enters, when we want the poem to be not only pleasurably right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a re-tuning of the world itself. We want the surprise to be transitive like the impatient thump which unexpectedly restores the picture to the television set, or the electric shock which sets the fibrillating heart back to its proper rhythm."

[191] Hermann Hesse bears this out by saying, memorably, that "In its origin a poem is something completely unequivocal. It is a discharge, a call, a cry, a sigh, a gesture, a reaction by which the living soul seeks to defend itself from or to become aware of an emotion, an experience. In this first spontaneous most important function no poem can be judged. It speaks first of all to the poet himself, it is his cry, his scream, his dream, his smile, his whirling fists." Cited in John Fox, *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*, 2.

external forces are causing us suffering, but because among the two – person and predicament – only the former can, so it appears, be moderated here and now). In Carl Rogers's words, we "cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed." Frankl's insistence that we may partake mentally, dynamically and with real agency in the painful process of enduring existential distress will be a premise in what I shall have to say in the following. By "premise" I mean to say that I consider it the fundamental psychological principle on which our sublime intention to suffer successfully or deliberately hinges, and which in turn presents us with the opportunity to discover meaning in suffering and on that rise and evolve in a meaningful valuable direction.

I shall in chapter 3 particularly return to and consider some relevant instances from Whitman's work that reflect what I have said above. For now, let me present one passage by way of closing the chapter in which Whitman investigates a phenomenon that seems strikingly closely related to the psychic dynamics outlined by Frankl and Jung:

> What do you think is the grandeur of storms and dismemberments and the deadliest battles and wrecks and the wildest fury of the elements and the power of the sea and the motion of nature and of the throes of human desires and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain.[192]

[192] From Whitman's 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Roger Asselineau notes that the "superb arrogance" with which this Preface is charged "perhaps arose from an obscure feeling of inferiority." From that perspective, the text becomes a manifestation in deed of what it conveys and urges in name (very "*meta*", as we have learned to say); consider in this context my words on Coleridge's line "From the soul must issue forth . . . A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth" (cited in footnote 374). From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 181.

It should also be noted, given the textual resonance with the cited passage, that Whitman would later consider *Leaves of Grass* not "an intellectual or scholastic effort of Poem mainly, but more as a radical utterance out of the abyms of the Soul, the Emotions and the Physique." From the Preface to the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*; cited in Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, 12.

It is interesting to consider the quoted passage in the light of these lines: "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am, / Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary, / Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest, / Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it." From "Song of Myself". The word "grandeur" also makes it pertinent to what Whitman said in a *Specimen Day* passage I have cited earlier ("there is another shape of personality dearer far to the artist-sense"); see footnote 151.

As a note of interest, Rudyard Kipling posits the existence of the very same kind of voice when in the poem "If—" he writes "[If you can] hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to [your heart and nerve and sinew]: 'Hold on!' / . . . [then] you'll be a Man, my son!"

Chapter 2. *"[I]t is not my material eyes which finally see, / Nor my material body which finally loves"*: *Leaves of Grass* as Redemptive Inauguration of Symbolic Self

Chapter summary: The failure on the part of scholars, primarily philosophers, to satisfactorily and consensually define the nature of the personal self is part and parcel of a kind of positive consequence, namely that it generates the potential for individuals to symbolically (and phenomenologically) represent, explore and reconfigure aspects and features of their individual self via art or language. These aspects and features represent dimensions which float free and to some degree remain aloof to the empirical realities surrounding personal identity which are harder, sometimes impossible, to influence and alter. E.g. one cannot with the word take a *very* interesting look at the fact that one has two arms and two legs; but one *can* write interestingly about the qualities felt to be attributable to one's self, which manifests itself in ways both empirically undeniable and empirically elusive. The linguistic handling of qualities inherent to the self is, as I have already suggested, fundamentally a phenomenological issue. The fact that it is possible via language to gain access to and potentially influence the composition and internal situation of a self is the fundamental axiom and premise on which psychoanalysis is predicated: We are thus amenable to psychic change and have as speaking, writing selves a role ourselves in facilitating it. Part of the definitional ambiguity afflicting the practice of defining self has to do with the fuzziness and instability of the categories involved in the intuitively tempting binary model *self versus other*. As one looks into these issues it becomes clear that the familiar poetic self-portrait from Housman – "I, a stranger and afraid / In a world I never made" – is overwhelmingly a *subjective* and phenomenological summary of the existential situation. That it is intuitive can hardly be denied, and from an evolutionary perspective taking it for granted has no doubt been incomparably effective. A more defensible account, however, would argue that we are not neatly and hermetically divorced and in separation from the so-called "external" world with its empirically available experiences, but rather integral to and in our small way co-constitutive of it. While *some* threats to human well-being are clearly best tackled by construing human life for the

individual as an atomized and lonely I-against-the-world battle (predatory animals and natural disasters, for instance), others are not. Some threats and problems arise *on* or *inside* the liminal border (a categorical boundary) which we have learned not to question as a result of early-childhood socialization and are culturally obliged to reiterate daily in the act of clothing ourselves. Psychic problems are among these threats and problems – running the gamut from the commonest personality frailties to regrets, anguish, traumas and clinical malaise. The specific psychological attitudes that one harbors to specific crisis and threats turn out to significantly impact and influence the specific nature of the experience of feeling persecuted or threatened, which means that it is useful to direct focus away from the somewhat fruitless attempt to discover and chart with scientific veracity the nature of our existential situation and instead recognize the psychologically consoling or healing rewards that might be gained from the activity of creative self-examination and self-expression. The goal for the person is "individual liberation" (in Thomas S. Szasz's phrase): i.e. to facilitate that "self-control and self-direction supplant internal anarchy and external constraint".[193] (Goethe, on this issue, spoke of "Antique natures"; cf. footnote 335.) This thesis is in part a reminder of the fact that each person always has the choice – related to or dependent on the freedom Frankl identified (end of chapter 1) – to mentally question, adjust, care about, restructure and redeem the initial mental reactions of the pandemoniacal self (a phrase which seems to cover the earlier oft-cited conceptualizations "rhapsody of perceptions" and "blooming buzzing confusion") when confronted with the forces that assail it.[194] The self is not a static given entity doomed to life-long engulfment in a sea of hostile surroundings, it turns out, but an organically evolving multiplicity or conglomerate that via the oxygen of self-examination, self-expression and symbolic self-repair and self-maintenance can be taught to "roll with the punches" and thus be assisted in its mandatory pursuit of enough peace, stability and confidence to stay sane. This choice – available to each person – may even be said to

[193] Szasz stresses the significance of self-discipline, which he sees as a prerequisite of individual liberty. From Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 2. I am sympathetic to that position although I would prefer "self-agency" to "self-discipline" whereby (to adopt Viktor Frankl's vision) I mean the person's genius for making a certain "inner decision" and thus "decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually." In dire crisis, Frankl thought, a person's human dignity depends on that crucial "inner decision".

[194] The quoted phrases in parenthesis are, respectively, Emmanuel Kant's and William James's. They are quoted in the chapter on "The Self" in Simon Blackburn, *Think*, 138. The metaphor of pandemonium in relationship to the self is due to the contemporary philosopher Daniel Dennett, as will become clear.

Reminiscent of Orr's phrase, Viktor Frankl, as I shall show at the end of chapter 1, spoke of guarding against "powers which threatened to rob you of your very self".

offer what Aldous Huxley called psychological "self-transcendence" (see epigraphic perspective 7).

* * *

We sail a dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents,
vortices—all so dark, untried—and whither shall we turn?
—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

i. That Art Thou: Reflections on Being and "Me and Not-Me"

[195] At the end of this second chapter, I propose that *Leaves of Grass* can usefully be thought of as the poet's discovery and iterative honing over many years of a poetic voice capable of articulating the unique characteristics – more precisely, the existential attitudes – of a mode of being which he hoped would (and then found could) redeem or reduce his suffering thus assisting his survival in bad times and enriching his experience of living in better times. This is the kind of function of poetry that Seamus Heaney was identifying when he pointed out that poetry deserves credit "for making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's center and its circumference" and for instilling an order that is simultaneously "true to the impact of external reality" and "sensitive to the inner laws of a poet's being".[196] It also provides an apt example of what Arthur Koestler was getting at when he claimed that "self-repair and self-realization" could be achieved through "creative activity", through the artistical attempt to "express the inexpressible" and "escape from the distortions and constraints imposed by the conventional styles and techniques". (See also Goethe's perspectives on "Antique natures"; footnote 335.) It is of some

[195] This phrase ("Me and Not-Me" along with "I and Not-I") are used by Ralph Waldo Emerson who used them in an argument on the philosopher Fichte's "Ich and Nicht-Ich". See Patrick J. Keane*, Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All Our Day"*, 277.

[196] In his 1995 Nobel Lecture, Heaney employs an instructive metaphor. Speaking of his childhood days, he remarks that his inexperienced mind was as "susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence." When considering – as an adult poet – the mental service and order that poetry is to be credited for rendering, he writes: "I credit it ultimately because poetry can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago. An order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew. An order which satisfies all that is appetitive in the intelligence and prehensile in the affections." Another writer managed to nourish a "restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference": Thus Henry Miller's greatness, in Norman Mailer's estimation, was that he managed to "maintain some relation between his mind and that theatre which presumes to call itself reality." Henry Miller, *Genius and Lust: a Journey through the Major Writings of Henry Miller*, ed. by Norman Mailer, 84.

interest also that Koestler covertly makes the point that self-repair and self-realization are part and parcel of *the same* process and are apparently happening simultaneously; that there is a *generative* quality to *fixing* oneself when "in bad shape" is at the heart of the idea I shall lay out. In Koestler, again, repair and realization are the two aspects integral to the "do-it-yourself therapy" (his phrase) that artists are (rather enviably perhaps) capable of potentially manifesting through their creative and aesthetic "attempt[s] to come to terms with traumatizing challenges."[197]

I shall consider how one might appropriately conceptualize a person's *self* in terms of the pressures and challenges of "external reality", whatever that phrase precisely means – i.e. wherever precisely that domain begins and ends – which turns out to be part of the problem. Interestingly, however, it is also part of a solution – in other relevant terms. And I shall show how *Leaves of Grass* embodies and represents Whitman's response to these and related problems and challenges.

Six years before his death, Leonard Cohen reflected on what Federico Garcia Lorca's poetry had taught him as a young man about the manner in which a poet must speak of death: "[If] one is to express the great inevitable defeat that awaits us all, it must be done within the strict confines of dignity and beauty," he said (see footnote 128). Unwittingly, this insight might have a distant precursor in Nietzsche's words, "Of what is great one must either be silent or speak with greatness." This chapter quietly accepts the premise (derived trivially from these sentiments and from the necessary interconnectedness of life and death) that life (including being, bodies, selfhood, personal identity, consciousness, the self) are properly to be spoken of within certain strict confines of a kind of "greatness", by which I mean confines indicated by a respect for the mystery of the various themes and issues (specifically, in this thesis, those that are *difficult* for us). It seems reasonable to assume that the philosophical and theological literature on death, human being, personal identity and related issues is already so vast – and still growing – precisely because these are virtually inexhaustible domains. This confers a kind of impossibility and humbling hardness to

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[197] From Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, 177. That view echoes Graham Greene's view (cited earlier). Green is cited in Jeffrey Berman, *Death in the Classroom: Writing about Love and Loss*, 252.

As a note of interest, let me mention that Koestler seems to agreement with Alan Watts, whom I shall mention in the following, that "the task and delight of poetry is to say what cannot be said" and "to eff the ineffable, and to unscrew the inscrutable". From Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915–1965*, xiii.

Not surprisingly, the phrase "representing the unrepresentable" is often used by scholars in connection with coming to terms with and working through trauma; Cf. Walter Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism: American Poetry and the Traumatic Past*, 41.

Also, note how Koestler's duality "self-repair and self-realization" finds a synonymous counterpart in the latter half of the title of Judith Harris's book *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* (underlining added).

them – a "greatness" in Nietzsche's terminology.

A different way of expressing the same observation is the following: I suppose the scholars and thinkers in these domains of exploration are trying (in Alan Watts's phraseology) to make the ear hear itself, the teeth bite themselves or the hand catch hold of itself.[198] They are engaged, in other words, in something akin to a tautological impossibility which ushers in the kind of respectful (and humble and open-minded) stance I insist we need to embrace and argue from. We are grappling with something that both dwarfs and subsumes ourselves at every level of analysis which is why extreme epistemological humility and caution is advised. In the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau put it nicely: "The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling." When in this chapter I use the word "sublime" and cite Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley and Jordan Peterson (scholars of psychology *as well as religion*), a robust card-carrying materialist of the New Atheist variety might suppose that I have lost my scholarly bearings and seduced myself with pretty superstition. Let me therefore at this point openly state that I respectfully doubt that a strictly materialist delineation of selfhood will lead to a very useful picture; I fear it will not amount to more than a mechanical and hopelessly sterile portrait of human being – which we would be forced to dismiss insofar as we were against "explaining away" what is "great" rather than "explaining it".[199] I would add that I am perfectly willing to say that it might be useful to say that there is something sublime or transcendent about being (Peterson's work, especially *Maps of Meaning*, presents a carefully calibrated and persuasive argument for this claim), and that it seems no coincidence or slip of the pen that Harold Bloom boldly establishes synonymousness between "American literary *selfhood*" and the "American *Religion*" (my

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[198] Alan Watts, *What Is Tao?*, 31.

[199] Allan Hobson mentions the oft-cited criticism of Daniel Dennett's book *Consciousness Explained*, which some critics felt should have been entitled "Consciousness Explained Away", in Allan Hobson, *Psychodynamic Neurology: Dreams, Consciousness, and Virtual Reality*, 32. My wariness of an overly materialist handling of this issue owes something to both Thomas S. Szasz, Roger Scruton, Jordan Peterson and Adam Phillips. Szasz writes, "I do not deny or minimize the empirical or scientific basis of various systems of classification. However, my concern here is different: it is to clarify the strategic intent and import of systems of classification regardless of their content." From Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 197. (More on Szasz later.) Relevant to the same, Scruton, much more recently, has written: "I am fairly confident that the picture painted by the evolutionary psychologists is true. But I am also confident that it is not the whole truth, and that it leaves out of account precisely the most important thing, which is the human subject." From Roger Scruton, "If We Are Not Just Animals, What Are We?", in *The Stone*, March 6, 2017.

Adam Phillips agrees with Scruton: "I am unmoved by [evolutionary and neuroscientific explanations of psychological traits]. It's not that I think it's wrong or false. Lots of it sounds true to me. . . . But I am just unmoved by the sentences. So I am not fascinated by the brain – this is not to my credit, you understand – but people have different interests. And when neuroscientists write about the brain I find it incredibly boring. . . . But I find the brain the least alluring body part. I prefer faces much more. . . . Neuroscience is for the people who love it." From Adam Phillips, "RSA Replay: One Way or Another" [24:00].

emphasis) both of which partake, in his thinking, of the "American Sublime."[200] I have found that these words by Huxley adequately sum up the situation and dispose of it very well:

> No account of the scientific picture of the world and its history would be complete unless it contained a reminder of the fact, frequently forgotten by scientists themselves, that this picture does not even claim to be comprehensive. From the world we actually live in, the world that is given by our senses, our intuitions of beauty and goodness, our emotions and impulses, our moods and sentiments, the man of science abstracts a simplified private universe of things possessing only those qualities which used to be called "primary." Arbitrarily, because it happens to be convenient, because his methods do not allow him to deal with the immense complexity of reality, he selects from the whole of experience only those elements which can be weighed, measured, numbered, or which lend themselves in any other way to mathematical treatment.[201] By using this technique of simplification and abstraction, the scientist has succeeded to an astonishing degree in understanding and dominating the physical environment. The success was intoxicating and, with an illogicality which, in the circumstances, was doubtless pardonable, many scientists and philosophers came to imagine that this useful abstraction from reality was reality itself. Reality as actually experienced contains intuitions of value and significance, contains love, beauty, mystical ecstasy, intimations of godhead. Science did not and still does not possess intellectual instruments with which to deal with these aspects of reality. Consequently it ignored them and concentrated its attention upon such aspects of the world as it could deal with by means of arithmetic, geometry and the various branches of higher mathematics. Our conviction that the world is meaningless is due in part to the fact (discussed in a later paragraph) that the philosophy of meaninglessness lends itself very effectively to furthering the ends of erotic or political passion; in part to a genuine intellectual error—the error of identifying the world of science, a world from which all meaning and value has been deliberately excluded, with ultimate reality. . . . In [the present moment] we are able to see that the contents of literature, art, music—even in some measure of divinity and school metaphysics—are not sophistry and illusion, but simply those elements of experience which scientists chose to leave out of account, for the good reason that they had no intellectual methods for dealing with them. In the arts, in philosophy, in religion men are trying—doubtless, without complete success—to describe and explain the non-measurable, purely qualitative aspects of reality.[202]

Before embarking on this chapter properly, let me inject that I have already indicated above that the arguments I am developing in this dissertation are charged or facilitated by positing an imagined liminal contact surface or "membrane" between, in Orr's words, "the self and the forces that assail it" – or, in Emerson's, "the me and the not-me". While this dualism is a methodological

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[200] Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 23.

[201] On the current intellectual and epistemological climate, Alan Watts has usefully remarked that "[M]odern Protestantism . . ., in its liberal and progressive forms, is the religion most strongly influenced by the mythology of the world of objects, and of man as the separate ego.") From Robert L. Johnson, *Counter Culture and the Vision of God*, 87.

[202] Aldous Huxley, "Beliefs". Printed as an appendix in Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Phillosophy*, separate pagination.

convenience sanctioned on essentially phenomenological grounds, as I shall show, it has the added merit of being natural and intuitive – it is compatible with how we tend to think about our lives:

> [Thingking] in terms of an 'I' now looks like a formal or structural requirement on interpreting experience in the way we do—as experience of a three-dimensional world of continuing objects, amongst which we move. The 'I' is the point of view from which interpretation starts. It is not something else given in experience, because nothing given in experience could solve the formal problem for which an 'I' is needed. But a point of view is always needed: to represent a scene to yourself is to represent yourself as experiencing it one way or another.[203]

I used the word "membrane" earlier; Judith Harris, to whose work (*Signifying Pain*) I am sympathetic and to some degree indebted, uses the very apt word "cuirass" (see footnote 126). Whether, however, it presents a *true* picture in some philosophically sound, empirical and hallowed-by-science sense is a debate I shall not try to settle in these pages (my suspicion is that humankind will never settle it and that it shall remain a philosophical problem and outlast the subtlest thinkers to come); suffice it to say that a vast slew of common considerations about human being in the world are certainly predicated on it. In chapter 1, I excerpted a few words from Jordan Peterson's lecture "The Necessity of Virtue". The relevant passage makes the persuasive argument that we very often have no choice but to be phenomenological about things; that is, we are often forced to privilege what things feel like in the absence of that presumably empirical data which – if it could be produced and rationally evaluated, which is arguably itself something of a problem – might corroborate and legitimize the feeling and thus cement its validity beyond the power of subjectivity. In "The Necessity of Virtue" Peterson says:

> Modern people are fundamentally materialistic. And there's some utility in that: We're masters of material transformation, and the fact that we are materialist in our scientific philosophy has made us extremely powerful . . . from a technological perspective, but it's blinded us to certain things. And I think one of the things it's really blinded us to is the nature of our own being, because we make the assumption that the fundamental constituent elements of reality are material. We fail to notice that the fundamental constituent elements of *our own* reality are not material – they're emotional, they're motivational, they're dreams, they're visions, they're relationships with other people. They're conscious: they're dependent on consciousness [and] self-consciousness. . . . We don't deal well from a materialistic perspective with the qualities of being.

[203] Simon Blackburn, *Think*, 140.

I consider that to be accurate. But I shall also suggest that that is simply an unalterable aspect of the curious nature of being in this universe – and that we must act accordingly. I think Jung bears out that stance when he very usefully observes

> The psyche deserves to be taken as a phenomenon in its own right; there are no grounds at all for regarding it as a mere epiphenomenon, dependent though it may be on the functioning of the brain. One would be as little justified in regarding life as an epiphenomenon of the chemistry of carbon compounds.[204]

Central to Tolstoy's quote "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself" is the implied observation that the self – any given person's self – is an element of the world.[205] This state of self subsumption means that change necessarily occurs in both when occurring (originating, or occurring *first*) in one. That insight agrees too with Jung's assertion that "any internal state of contradiction, unrecognized, will be played out in the world as fate."[206] And Henry Miller wrote of Whitman that "He knows that if there's anything wrong with [the world], no tinkering on his part will mend it. He knows that the only way to put it to rights, if we must use the expression, is for every living individual to first put himself to rights."[207] Despite the mutual integration or overlap between self and world, we tend also to be keenly aware and somewhat troubled to concede that selves can be eliminated (as in death) without necessarily causing substantial change in the world, which as an observation lends credence to the conceptual distinction between self and world that I have just mentioned. There is obviously a paradox here, and much philosophy and religious thought have unfolded from these first foundational steps towards an accurate picture of the world and a believable existentialist philosophy. We are in philosophical territory that (in Shelly Kagan's terminology) remains riddled with "mysteries".[208]

Having proved intellectually indissoluble – which is to say *timeless*, practically speaking, and for that reason integral to the human condition or, alternatively, archetypal – the mysteries and paradoxes that persist in and around existentialism, personal identity and the notion of the self furthermore happen to be of a multiplicity and variety that make attempts at summarizing

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[204] Carl Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 7–8.
[205] Tolstoy is quoted by Alfred Armand Montapert, ed., *Words of Wisdom to Live by: An Encyclopedia of Wisdom in Condensed Form*, 40. An observation containing the same idea in different guise arguable motivated Montaigne's "Not being able to govern events, I govern myself" (quoted in the previous chapter).
[206] Cited in Jordan B. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 342. Jung said elsewhere "It is often tragic to see how blatantly a man bungles his own life and the lives of others yet remains totally incapable of seeing how much the whole tragedy originates in himself, and how he continually feeds it and keeps it going." From Carl Jung, *Aion*, paragraph 18.
[207] Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life*, 222.
[208] See, for instance, Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 121 and 177.

them not only time-consuming but ultimately not very useful and meaningful. The rich, high-resolution picture is distorted by attempts to shrink it. Ongoing intellectual divisiveness is an aspect of the complexity. For instance, as for the problem of specifying "the nature of an individual" a standard reference guide agrees with me that while these

> questions [are] of great interest and importance [they] defy summary treatment: it must suffice to say that they are the subject of lively contemporary debate, most of the contributors to which, recognizing that Locke's commitments cannot both be held together, argue for abandoning one or the other."[209]

I shall therefore refer the interested reader to the relevant philosophical treaties and only present a few salient aspects necessary for coming to grips with the issue as it appears in the context of my arguments on therapeutically handling and responding to the forces that assail the self (dysphoria, trauma, mental anguish, etc.).

The briefest and, among historians of philosophy, most legendary verbal articulation of what centrally defines selfhood is doubtless Descartes's "cogito ergo sum": I think, therefore I am. In the context of Descartes's significant contributions to philosophy, the insight is justly famous, and Freud is by no means the first – nor the last – to argue for the reasonableness of assuming that what it offers, albeit quietly and indirectly, in the way of a definition of a self ("someone who thinks") is axiomatic and valuable:

> Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of ourselves, of our own ego. This ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else[,] . . . seems to maintain clear sharp lines of demarcation.[210]

Thus Freud on the familiar appearance of a perfect one-to-one identity between a person's ego and his or her quality of existing as *an individual entity* (meaning, literally, that which cannot be divided). My remarks, in the previous chapter, to the effect that "When a man suffers, he is most alone", as Merton puts it, also sustain the idea that I or you indeed are bounded-off entities existing in a world of objects and events – what Alan Watts calls "separate ego[s] enclosed in a bag of skin."

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[209] See A. C. Grayling, ed., *Philosophy: A Guide through the Subject,* 506. Of course, various worthwhile précis exist in book form, for instance, John Perry's *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*. Derek Parfit's *Reason and Persons* offers a seminal contemporary discussion of the topic.

[210] Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, 12–13. Freud proceeds by saying that "such an appearance is deceptive" due to the claim defended by psychoanalytic research that "the ego is continued inwards without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious mental entity which we designate as the id and for which it serves as a kind of façade".

But it is worth thinking hard, as Pierre Gassendi (a contemporary of Descartes) did, before accepting "cogito ergo sum" as a sound starting point for developing a good understanding of selfhood. Gassendi pointed out that Descartes was guilty of a central unwitting assumption, and that the fact that thinking is going on does not lead smoothly to the conclusion that thinking is being done by *a* thinker, by one particular and unitary agent."[211]

What I want to get at is competently stated in Oliver Burkeman *The Antidote*:

> What if we are mistaken, not only about how to change ourselves but also about the nature of the selves we're trying to change? Calling into question our assumptions about what it means to talk about the self might prompt an entirely different approach to the psychology of happiness.
>
> The notion that our commonplace assumptions about selfhood might need re-examining . . . is an ancient thought, central to Buddhism and to numerous other philosophical traditions – a theme recurring so frequently in the history of religion and spirituality, in fact, that it is a part of what Aldous Huxley and others labelled 'the perennial philosophy.'

The fact that it is possible to coherently argue that "our commonplace assumptions about selfhood might need re-examing" is suggestive and revelatory to me. Beyond the certainly thought-provoking fact that apparently all manner of spiritual, religious and no doubt culture-generating practices and traditions have sprung from the fertile grounds of an intellectually elusive phenomenon, it reveals something profound about human being. It is this: In the final analysis, the phenomenon and very fact of (human) being appears finally open to (human) interpretation. The natural scientists have not offered the last word or closed the book on what it finally means to be a self in the world. In the universal absence of that kind of truth – i.e. of the relevant indubitable and authoritative account – the account that you contrive for yourself is potentially as valuable as any.[212]

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[211] The German scientist Georg Lichtenberg later declared that Descartes was entitled only to claim that "thinking is occurring", not "I think, therefore I am". Also, see Oliver Burkeman, *The Antidote*, 107 (quoted on this page).

To return to alchemy, Terence McKenna has said that for the alchemists, "the firm ontological division between mind and matter that is built into western thinking now, did not exist. *That* comes with René Descartes with what is called the "res extensa" (the extended world) and the "res [cogitans]" (the interior world), which has no spatial extension." From Terence McKenna, "Terence McKenna – Carl Jung & Psychic Archetypes (Lecture)" [8:10].

[212] Thus it is that without believing in or wanting to defend the Cartesian notion of souls, the psychologist Paul Bloom can write a book-length treatise, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*, the whole "premise of [which] is that we are [Cartesian] dualists" by instinct. Whether or not that could be proved or we can argue ourselves out of it, it is crucial and interesting to Paul Bloom (and me) that we "do not feel as if we *are* bodies; we feel as if we *occupy* them." (His emphasis is on what being "*feels*" like, which is where it should be.) I shall shortly hereafter credit Rousseau with the apt observation that "One does not begin by reasoning but by feeling," which also is an insight that this dissertation appreciates. In general, it is my belief that no

ii. The Frame Problem

Jordan Peterson has taken an interest in the wider epistemological implications of the so-called Frame Problem: "the problem of how to bind your perceptions – to limit them." Here, he flags and questions the apparent object-like spatial discreteness of a human being that is generally inferable from visually encountering the human form:

> When you look in the mirror you see yourself as an object. You see your eyes, you see your nose, you see your face, you see your body. And that's pretty much what you see when you look at other people. But that isn't all there is to you. In fact, that's hardly any of what there is to you. . . . [F]or example, you exist at the level of the quantum particle. You can't perceive that, in fact people didn't know that until seventy-five years ago. Above that level you exist at an atomic level, and then a molecular level, and then you exist at the level of complex organs and the interactions between those organs. And then you, and then your family, and then the groups that your family belongs to. And then the ecosystems that the groups belong to, and so on and so forth until what it is that you are can expand to encompass virtually anything.
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> Now, when you look at yourself you don't see that. You see yourself at a certain level of resolution . . . but all those other levels are equally real and equally relevant. And we in fact have very little idea how it is that you're only able to see what you see. Almost nothing has obvious boundaries and this has real world consequences, it's not something that's merely abstract.[213]

I mentioned in passing the spiritual dimension of the intellectual elusiveness of the matter. One person who considered seriously the argument that "all those other levels are equally real and equally relevant" was Alan Watts. Watts emphasized the spiritually liberating rewards of recognizing, wholly in conformity with the just-cited argument (though he predates Peterson), that

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dissertation could speak seriously about lyrical poetry – in which the "I" speaks "strongly and directly [from] personal experience" in Robert Frost's words – without attending at least as loyally to subjective experiences as to what is given the distinction of being "empirical" by contemporary science.

[213] Jordan Peterson, from the lecture "Jordan Peterson: Reality and the Sacred" [5:20]. D. H. Lawrence was conscious of the same problem: "Now I absolutely flatly deny that I am a soul, or a body, or a mind, or an intelligence, or a brain, or a nervous system, or a bunch of glands, or any of the rest of these bits of me. The whole is greater than the part. And therefore, I, who am man alive, am greater than my soul, or spirit, or body, or mind, or consciousness, or anything else that is merely a part of me." D. H. Lawrence, "Why the Novel Matters", in Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 402–403.

Paul Bloom offers this useful precis of the Frame Problem: "[O]ne might argue that bodies and souls do not exist because the only proper description of the world is given in the language of physics. Because of this, there are not chairs, clocks, forks, fish, or people. All that really exists is elementary forces, quarks, leptons, and whever else that physicists discover. But this is far too minimalist a perspective. The natural sciences . . . explain lawful generalizations at levels above that of physics, some of them involving real-world objects. The philosopher Hilary Putnam makes the point that nothing at the level of physics can explain why a square peg cannot fit in a roung hole. If you want to explain this you need to be able to talk about pegs and holes." From Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*, 223.

> You would immediately feel at one with all nature, and with the universe itself, if you could understand that there is no "you" as the hard-core thinker of thoughts, feeler of feelings, and senser of sensations, and that because your body is something in the physical world, that world is not "external" to you.[214]

I do not think that this part of Watts's program, in and of itself, merits the word "religious" (along with William James, I would reserve that designation to other sentiments and mindsets), but obviously it resonates with, updates and repeats thoughts and attitudes whose religious credentials, so to speak, are unquestionable.[215] (Incidentally, the view delineated by Watts owes much to Vedanta, Taoist thought and Buddhism.) I quote Watts because he is relevant to the dissertation theme by virtue of exemplifying, in his own "spiritual" way, the potential for the individual to playfully inaugurate and nourish an existential attitude that lends consolation in a frequently bewildering world:

> We do not need a new religion or a new bible. We need a new experience—a new feeling of what it is to be "I." The lowdown (which is, of course, the secret and profound view) on life is that our normal sensation of self is a hoax, or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing—with our own tacit consent, just as every hypnotized person is basically willing to be hypnotized. The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego. . . .
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> . . . The sensation of "I" as a lonely and isolated center of being is so powerful and commonsensical, and so fundamental to our modes of speech and thought, that we cannot experience selfhood except as something superficial in the scheme of the universe.[216]

Watts's book is conveniently characterized as the attempt to dismantle or at least challenge the widespread and dominant – although in post-Frame Problem philosophical terms arguably problematic – view that " "I myself" is a separate center of feeling and action, living inside and

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[214] More speficially, where the Frame Problem angle that Peterson adopts is concerned, Watts wrote: "The first result of th[e illusion that human beings only exist on one level of being] is that our attitude to the world "outside" us is largely hostile. . . . The hostile attitude of conquering nature ignores the basic interdependence of all things and events—that the world beyond the skin is actually an extension of our own bodies—and will end in destroying the very environment from which we emerge and upon which our whole life depends." The ominous tone and note of warning here echoes Peterson's "Almost nothing has obvious boundaries and this has real world consequences". E. Graham Howe, whom I shall quote later, wrote, "What then is the true nature of this external world in which we live? To find the truth, we are again engaged in metaphysical abstractions. Has it a reality of its own, objective, independent—or is it to be regarded only as the image of ourselves? Are we to say 'I am that', or 'I am Not that', or perhaps both?" From E. Graham Howe, *War Dance: A Study of the Psychology of War*, 190.

[215] William James elects to construe "religion" as the "[generally "helpless and sacrificial"] personal attitude which the individual finds himself impelled to take up towards what he apprehends to be the divine." From William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 149.

[216] Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo against Knowing Who You Are*, 12.

bounded by the physical body". His thesis has the secondary value, useful to me, of associating *this* understanding of selfhood with the sense of being vulnerable and ultimately defenseless (that is, if one *is really there* in concentrated, discrete, palpable form, then one can be hurt). Once adopted, this perspective puts the world squarely in front of us and sees it as something that must be confronted, understood, negotiated and appeased – if for no other reason than that there is so much more of "it" than there is of "me".[217] From such common sentences and phrases as "I came into this world," "you must face reality", "the conquest of nature", we unthinkingly side with the poet who found himself to be

> . . . a stranger and afraid
> In a world I never made,[218]

rather than recognize that we

> do not "come into" this world; we come *out* of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean "waves," the universe "peoples." Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. . . . [But, as we have seen] even those who know it to be true in theory do not sense or feel it . . .[219]

For the purposes of illustration and because this has implications for the self too, here is Watts's treatment (akin to a "deconstruction") of *discrete physical events*. As with the self, under minimal philosophical examination these too betray themselves as hypostasized conventions:

> Let's take something called an event. How do we demark it from other events? At what point, shall we say, were you born? Were you born at parturition, or when the doctor slapped you on the bottom, or cut the umbilical cord, or when you were conceived, or when your father and mother were first attracted to each other? When was it? When did you begin? There is no way of deciding except arbitrarily. . . . There isn't a real beginning. . . . When are you dead? That's another big argument. . . . So just as there are no point instance in the curve [a metaphor from mathematical calculus], there are no events in nature.[220]

Or rather, there are only events in nature when a human spectator has arbitrarily defined the criteria for the kind of event concerned as well as satisfied him- or herself that the criteria obtain in the

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[217] "[B]ecause you're finite and you're surrounded by [the sum total of everything [including] all those multiple levels of being that are beyond your perceptual capacity], in a sense you're in a battle that you can never win. [This is] because there is always more of what it is that you're trying to contend with than there is of you. And worse than that . . . is that the thing that you're contending with isn't even static. It keeps changing, so that what worked for you yesterday won't necessarily work for you tomorrow." From Jordan Peterson's lecture "Reality and the Sacred" (22:50)

[218] A. E. Housman: "The Laws of God, the Laws of Man".

[219] Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo against Knowing Who You Are*, 8-9.

[220] From Alan Watts, "Alan Watts[:] How To Enjoy Yourself Successfully" [5:00].

given situation. This is no trivial matter; think, for example, of how difficult it can be (in a court of law) to determine whether the willful telling of a lie has taken place or not.

Having shown above how the innovative and thoughtful mind may turn the arguably contradictory ontological facts about the reality of human selfhood into a source of relief via discourse, let me put Watts aside and proceed.

iii. Going into Battle on Limited Knowledge

Between the two World Wars, E. M. Forster faced an analogous and similar intellectual dislocation – and also (like Watts and the hypothetical writers I am imagining) proposed to "formulate a creed of [his] own". Observing the persistent failure of the intelligentsia to provide an irrefutable and unchallengeable descriptive definition of the self and of personal identity, I think we can learn from Forster's constructive pragmatism and resolution to be undeterred in his similar circumstances of limited knowledge. In his 1938 essay "What I Believe", he admits discomfort and displeasure with the fact that

> Psychology has split and shattered the idea of a "Person" [notice that he could thus far as easily have leveled the critique at philosophy], and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us, which may at any moment rise to the surface and destroy our normal balance. We don't know what we are like.

But his response to this picture of unpredictability and unknowability – and therefore *danger* (which, in a very real political sense is the theme of the essay) – is instructive and heartening:

> We can't know what other people are like. How, then, can we put any trust in personal relationships, or cling to them in the gathering political storm? *In theory we cannot. But in practice we can and do*. . . . For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid, and the "self" is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence. . . . Starting from [personal relationships], I get a little order into the contemporary chaos.[221]

It does not so much matter that – obviously – Forster's picture of selfhood, which hypostatizes the self as an entity, diverges in terms of content from Watts's program, which is informed by his skepticism and dismissive stance with regards to ontological category boundaries.[222] Forster's

[221] From E. M. Forster, "What I Believe" (emphasis mine).

[222] Unlike Forster, Watts held that to think of "ego" as "real, as an effective entity," would inevitably induce "confusion and psychic self-contradiction." From Alan Watts, "The "ego" as an Abstraction," in *Alan Watts – In the Academy: Essays and Lectures*, 306.

attitude is relevant because it too shows us a mind deciding to proceed, without violating what it perceives to be true, nourished by and allied to its subjective understanding of itself as a positive presence in the world. Or, in other terms, given the ontological "leeway" that in some areas is an attribute of the world as we perceive it, we effectively become – along with unbending reality – the co-authors of the statutes conditioning our being in the world. It is true, of course, that Forster's *main* point concerns personal relationships and the obligations people have toward each other – not the metaphysical or ontological truth concerning selfhood and embodied being; but his subsidiary point, on which the main one is predicated, coincides with my present theme: For better or worse (and I shall argue the former), the self and being elude indubitable description, yet accepting this benignly and then acting accordingly certainly seems – no matter how one parses it – advisable. What is not advisable is intellectually tying oneself into knots in vehement but ultimately futile attempts *to know*.

Fully appreciating the difficulty of specifying the nature of an individual, John Locke suggested we distinguish between "real" and "nominal" essence. The former is "the real internal, but generally in Substances, unknown Constitution of Things, whereon their discoverable Qualities depend" (which, let us say, represents what we wish to know). Nominal essences are apparent properties and inform our opinions and decisions. We can, it transpires from Locke's argument, be misled about the real essence of something yet have to form opinions about it based on its nominal essence. Tellingly, Locke avoids what a minute ago I called "tying himself into knots"; he recognizes with tranquility that it seems to be humans' lot to live the greater part of their lives in familiarity only with things' nominal essences. "If [nominal differences] be not real enough to make [some] thing of one kind and not of another, I do not see how *animal rationale* can be enough really to distinguish a man from a horse [or a "stag from . . . a buck"]. . . I suppose everyone thinks [nominal differences] real enough to make a real difference between that and other kinds." In other words, Locke refuses to be defeated into depressed inaction by having to infer and intuit knowledge as opposed to knowing something absolutely.[223] Wittgenstein would agree; his stance with regards to skepticism is not dissimilar to that of Hume and Kant, and can be summarized thus: There are some things we have to accept in order to get on with our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking.[224]

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[223] The Locke quotes are from John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book III, chapter iii, 300–301. The debate concerning the essential identity of things continues to this day; my precis explores only a small minority of the possible aspects one could address.

[224] Cf. A. C. Grayling, ed., *Philosophy: a Guide through the Subject*, 57.

I hope it is made apparent by these examples that something constructive, creative and imaginative can be introduced to fill a void where something unshakably factual would otherwise be. We cannot know ourselves in some absolute sense (this is true psychologically as well as philosophically), and yet we have to act as entities (which is not precisely what we are) from a position of agency (which we do not precisely command). One seems to be a less warped and troubled agent if one has made one's peace with the haunting implications of this domain, particularly the things in it which cannot be known in an absolute sense. Indeed, this is one of the themes of this dissertation: Out of a forbidding, lamentable, chaotic, indecipherable, unnamable tangle or mess, the mind can weave – or distill, literally produce, bring about – something of value, comparative order and meaning – and therefore consolation.

That process, especially as laid out by Forster, seems to have something to do with an idea I first encountered in Nietzsche, then rediscovered in a few other thinkers. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche offers a phrase that seems in favor of privileging description (subjective in nature) over truth (objective in nature):

> This has caused me the greatest trouble and still does always cause me the greatest trouble: to realize that *what things are called* is unspeakably more important than what they are.[225]

Nietzsche admits, one notices, that the sentiment he presents can be difficult to accept, which I second (if taken at face value).[226] When it comes to negotiating the world, I would generally put my trust in a maxim privileging "what [things] are" over "what [they] are called" – assuming the distinction is evident and represents an actual and unambiguous choice. I would suggest that what "things are called" is more important than "what they are" only when the latter is sufficiently unknowable and mysterious – and perhaps (as an added proviso) is of consequence primarily to oneself. Indeed, so as to not seem to be promoting linguistic anarchy and self-indulgence, which is also, of course, the last thing Nietzsche would do, I am inclined to accept his proposition only in two kinds of situations: The first falls epistemologically under the rubric of phenomenology (here we are more or less *forced* to sort and negotiate reality linguistically as we best can and see fit –

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[225] Italics in original. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude of German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, section 58, 69.

[226] I am wary of the sentiment for precisely the same reason that I am skeptical of the Nietzschean statement that "facts are precisely what there is not, [there are] only interpretations": I would caution us not to wade too far into the soggy sands of epistemological relativism. Note that Simon Blackburn has remarked of Nietzsche that "some of his sayings may have the status of aphorisms – tossed off to stimulate thought rather than as representations of how things are". Blackburn does acknowledge, however, that "clearly in many cases Nietzsche advances these assertions as true".

although the subject matter in question defeats and mocks our best attempts at true comprehension); in the second situation we are working towards aesthetic ends.[227] Consider Oscar Wilde's famous aphorism: "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."[228] John Sutherland suggests that "[i]t is through the forms of art . . . that we shape and understand the formlessness of the world around us."[229]

In the same spirit, consider what Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes about Whitman and his transition from journalist into poet: "the roots of this transition will undoubtedly remain as opaque as they are complex; the origins of poetic inspiration simply *are* that way. But while we may never know what went on in Whitman, we do know what went on in his work. The brilliance of Whitman's greatest poems stems from the ways in which the poet transformed *fact into art*."[230] I also suggested that there frequently arise situations in life when we are, as I put it, "forced" to err on the phenomenological side where verbal expression is concerned, and I mentioned Emerson's argument about language from *Nature* (see footnote 256). Apparently, all prehistoric civilizations invented complex, rich and meaningful – but scientifically provisional, "primitive" and updateable – explanations for such things as weather, fate, death, fortune, health, the night sky – including many other aspects of the observable or phenomenal world. Essentially, they did this by representing these things and their supposed causes and meanings *as they could be perceived* – otherwise how could conversation about them viably proceed (or be initiated)? These provisional representations were arguably not "true" in a modern-scientific, empirical, post-Enlightenment sense (although, as I have hinted, modern scientific results are also not *absolutely* true either; they

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[227] As I say, it goes without saying that Nietzsche never advocated deliberate verbal deception. He seems to merely deem it a lost cause for humans ever *truly* to know the suchness of reality, the "thing-in-itself" (in Kant's terminology) or what Locke called the "real" essence of things, as opposed to "nominal". Because of this ontological handicap, talking *as if one knew* and could legitimately recruit and benefit from the authority of language is really the only option. And *that* seems to have its own distinct advantage, as Montaigne very likely thought (and argued in "On Books"): "I freely say what I think about all things – even about those which doubtless exceed my competence and which I in no wise claim to be within my jurisdiction. When I express my opinions it is so as to reveal the measure of my sight not the measure of the thing".

It was Nietzsche's understanding that the natural state of "men" is one of deep immersion in "illusions and dream images; their eye[, he writes,] glides only over the surface of things and sees 'forms'; their feeling nowhere lead into truth, but contents itself with the reception of stimuli, playing, as it were, a game of blindman's buff on the backs of things. Moreover, man permits himself to be lied to at night, his life long, when he dreams, and his moral sense never even tries to prevent this . . . What, indeed, does man know of himself! Can he even once perceive himself completely[?]" From Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873).

Elsewhere, Nietzsche has said that only "He who *suffers* from [actuality]" has "reason to *lie himself out* of [it]", which seems pertinent to my thoughts on art and mental health (note my emphasis). From *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Cited by the author of this work: Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 324.

[228] From Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying", in *Oscar Wilde – The Major Works*, 239 Famously, the American poet Archibald MacLeish wrote "A poem should be equal to: / not true."

[229] From John Sutherland, *A Little History of Literature*, 136.

[230] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism & Imaginative Writing in America*, 33 (italics mine).

too potentially can always be overturned should scientific research make further headway) – but the "primitive" explanations of our forebears were *true enough*. Consider this example from John Berger:

> Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky.

It seems to me abundantly and self-evidently useful for humans to agree on and exercise certain arbitrary ways of seeing and talking about phenomena that would otherwise elude identification due to their essentially random (e.g. the night sky), chaotic, ephemeral or elusive nature. As Alan Watts has pointed out, the self (Watts says "ego", but that does not spoil the point) arguably represents one such elusive phenomenon: "It exists in the same way as the Equator, or a line of longitude, or an inch. It is a social institution, or a convention, but it is not an effective agent."[231] Like with the stars, however, we "trac[e] imaginary lines between" points in our pandemoniac internal experiences (to use the word Daniel Dennett borrowed from John Milton) and emerge equipped with a way of elucidating what would otherwise be insurmountably mysterious – e.g. consciousness, selfhood, being. When it comes to ancient civilizations' anthropomorphized or "magical" explanations, needless to say, modern-day observers have tended to coolly dismissive of them – in compliance with the dicta of their discipline, it would seem. (However, it is worth asking this: When we use language to convey and explicate scientific findings today, *are we really doing something essentially different from so-called primitive civilizations?* I am not so sure.)[232] At the end of the day, language remains our best tool or method with which to arrive at approximately correct

[231] From Alan Watts, "Unity in Contemplation," in *Alan Watts – In the Academy: Essays and Lectures*, 254. The quotation from Berger above is cited in Ralf Hertel and David Malcolm, *On John Berger: Telling Stories*, 139.

[232] Carl Jung said that "The primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them." The kind of expressive (or "inspired", or mythological) language use that characterizes such myths and that we are sometimes thrown back on by virtue of being inadequately informed factually, does not offer up and convey *untruths*. It serves us truth *which at a later point is doomed to seem expressed, linguistically speaking, in low resolution*. The very lowest-resolution truth claims may, it may turn out, finally not escape the epithet "factually wrong" as our comparatively sophisticated (but never infinitely sophisticated) understanding distances itself from the earlier one; but to call them useless, naive or misleading betrays a certain arrogance with respect to the ontological excellence of the present moment – and, by that token, betrays confusion too about the ongoing scientific evolution in the direction of more sophisticated descriptions of the world.

conclusions about the nature and details of reality (whether only *we* hold it or they become the more or less consensual view).

iv. Co-authoring Experience

Quite usefully in the context of these questions, Rousseau has remarked that "One does not begin by reasoning but by feeling."[233] Sometimes one stays closer to feeling (subjective experience) than one moves towards fact (objective representation) – even though, as Thoreau equally usefully said, we tend to forget "that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking", that is, objective representation might never or only extremely rarely be completely purged of a subjective element.[234] Pertinent to this, Thomas Samuel Kuhn has written:

> Scientists can agree that a Newton, Lavoisier, Maxwell or Einstein has produced an apparently permanent solution to a group of outstanding problems and still disagree, sometimes without being aware of it, about the particular abstract characteristics that make those solutions permanent.[235]

What I wish to argue is that it is reasonable to say that there may be moments in life where the content of a person's *feelings* concerning the experiential side of life may more usefully be emphasized – may, with Nietzsche's words above, be more "important" to the person – than some true and well-reasoned argument which could be impersonally affirmed by uninvolved parties across the board. For an example, take any person's life at some moment – take mine specifically: Arguably there is *some objectively true* sense (and much might depend on "some") in which I am as engaged in *living* as I am *in aging* and as engaged in *aging* as I am in *dying* (this recalls what I said

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[233] Quoted in Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 40. Harking back to the Miltonic distinction between intuitive and discursive reason, T. S. Eliot indicated practically the same thing with his observation that "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." Similarly, Alan Watts notes that the "root of the matter is the way in which we *feel* and conceive ourselves as human beings, our sensation of being alive, of individual existence and identity." (My emphasis) Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo of Knowing who You Are*, 8.

[234] Albert Einstein was aware too that, although they may be very hard to separate, objective representation and subjective experience tend to get in each other's way; see his words (in footnote 119) on devoting his energy to the world of objective reality at the cost of all subjective perspective.

The Henry David Thoreau quote, prefacing a highly personal book-length essay, is from the *Walden* (chapter 1): "In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference."

[235] From Thomas Samuel Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), 44. Kuhn adds, in a footnote: "Michael Polyani [in *Permanent Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* from 1958] has brilliantly developed a very similar theme, arguing that much of the scientist's success depends upon "tacit knowledge," i.e., upon knowledge that is acquired through practice and that cannot be articulated explicitly." See also Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 236–238.

about arbitrarily defining what constitutes events above). Equally there may be some objectively true sense in which I am *guilty* as I am *innocent*, as *isolated* as a *member* of one or more social groups, as *faced with an unfamiliar scenario* as *faced with a familiar one*, and so on. Again, if there are no events in the universe, if everything is one gigantic event, then the Big Bang is still crashing on today – with us all right in the middle of it; and if it takes an arbitrary human effort to conceptually, linguistically carve subordinate events out of the Grand Event everything partakes of, then that amounts to a rather frank admission that a *subjective* conceptualization must be brought to bear on the undifferentiated cosmos, chaos, totality before we can make sense of anything.[236] Kafka once reminded himself in his diary: "It is never possible to take note of and evaluate all the circumstances that influence the mood of the moment, are even at work within it, and finally are at work in the evaluation, hence it is false to say that I felt resolute yesterday, that I am in despair today."[237] What I wish to argue is that a certain permutation or distribution of emphases across the in principle countless parameters and dimensions that are relevant to my current situation might correctly be said to represent – and *be* – my subjective experience at any given moment. (If this seems a stretch, then recall that the freedom Frankl identified and posited as a universally present feature of the human psyche is upheld in this discussion as an overarching premise.) The central and interesting point is that no standard for accuracy could be introduced to validate or invalidate a given representation of a given person's situation at a given moment in time (hence the difficulty of demonstrating such things as deceit as well as many other deeds that are psychological in nature).

The attempt to produce and provide a true "report from the interior" in any given moment (one accurately true to whatever I feel myself to be going through) amounts to a desire to *simultaneously* discover and record an honest, earnest and therefore probably useful *inventory of a subjective situation*, i.e. a kind of abstract of my whole psychological situation. Analogous to the attempt to state the objective truth, the self-representational activity I am describing is an activity with obvious similarities to giving testimony. (Observe that giving testimony is commonly a *survivor*'s job or duty; so a writing person is also usefully thought of as someone who, like Phillips's superego, is "living in the aftermath, in the fallout of some catastrophe", cf. chapter 1, section x of this dissertation.) Once again, by carefully and truthfully tracing the details of my experience and negotiating and investigating the degree of badness visited upon me, it seems possible that I might be able to represent myself in a way that in general terms is existentially

[236] See Alan Watts, *Tao: The Water-Course Way*, 54.
[237] Franz Kafka, *Diaries*, 245.

fortifying as well as a first step towards getting to know myself more accurately and intimately, thus locating a measure of self-respect and bringing my self-estimation and current external conditions into mutual alignment:

> On this view, there might be something that for a given individual is his or her truth, his or her way of truthfully living a life, but there is no such thing as *the* truth, no such thing as the uniquely *right* or *correct* way of looking at life. You can look at life as tragic or comic; as an adventure or as a trial; as an arena in which we are carried by, but also tested by, God's love; as a struggle between fundamentally egotistical individuals; as a scene of amusement and joy; as a kind of pantomime or as more of a farce; and so on. . . . [P. F.] Strawson says that there are truths, but no truth. I would make the same point by saying that each of these ways could be a way for some individuals to live a life truthfully, and people can have good reasons for what they think and feel, for living in *that* way.[238]

v. Logos and the Influencing of One's Self

[239] In the diary excerpt from which I have just quoted, Kafka agreed that "tak[ing] note of and evaluat[ing] all the circumstances that influence the mood of the moment" could constitute an exercise in altering and influencing one's personal outlook – but because he considered it on a par with deluding oneself he was deeply ambivalent about the final value of the enterprise. Still, it is worth citing his angry outburst in full as it does provide a thought-provoking thumbnail picture of the enterprise:

> Such differentiations [e.g. "I felt resolute yesterday" and "I am in despair today"] only prove that one desires to influence oneself, and, as far removed from oneself as possible, hidden

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[238] From Christopher Hamilton, *A Philosophy of Tragedy*, 27–28.

[239] I have said that there is some objectively true sense in which it is a true that I am dying as that I am living (or as true that I am "drowning" as that I am "waving", to reference the famous poem "Now Waving but Drowning" by Stevie Smith); recall and consider my axiomatic premise above to the effect that there is a difference in degree, *not category*, between "surviving" and "flourishing" (the difference is analogous to the difference between, literally, any two colors in the visible spectrum). Interestingly both observations – the upbeat and morose – can be used to generate a therapeutically beneficial line (depending on the person, presumably). A pessimist might latch on to the former and permit it to be a channel for the subjectively welcome news that calamities would, in light of the present situation, henceforth need to assume seriously dismal (and therefore unlikely) dimensions in order to vitiate the quality of life significantly (hypothetically this would constitute an uplifting perspective to a pessimist); an optimist, on the other hand, might by merely "chanting" *I am (still) living*, thereby permit his or her self to be a channel for the reassuring news that that utterance is generally found to incorporate (by being a kind of "count-your-blessings" summing-up at the center of a perhaps precarious life).

In a related context, Adam Phillips has said: "People should try the therapies they're intrigued by . . . [And besides, if] anything worked, we'd all be doing it. There's no mystery to this. In this culture there's an array of possible things you might do. [Whereas, if] you have a broken leg, there is probably more or less universal consensus about what you should do, if you have a broken heart, there isn't. So we are left with what's available in the culture. . . . [*Any form of therapy is*] *as good as it is for those people for whom it's good*." (My emphasis.) Adam Phillips, "RSA Replay: One Way and Another" [1:00:45].

> behind prejudices and fantasies, temporarily to create an artificial life, as sometimes someone in the corner of a tavern, sufficiently concealed behind a small glass of whiskey, entirely alone with himself, entertains himself with nothing but false, unprovable imaginings and dreams.[240]

I, however, would humbly counter Kafka's diatribe by asking: What is so objectionable about cultivating in the mind an atmosphere of self-honesty and truthful representation of external and internal reality? Surely, where the attempt of "influenc[ing] oneself" is concerned, it can be done for good as well as for ill.[241]

Crucially, what we *feel* is less fixed and more fluid than what we *believe*; we may run through more consecutive feelings over the course of one day than we run through consecutive beliefs – about fundamental issues, certainly – over the course of a year or more. I think Rousseau is right that in most cases *feeling* a certain way about something precedes the *reasoning* we might subsequently engage in vis-à-vis what caused the feeling. When it comes to using poetry therapeutically – and expressively (in hopes to bring about a "clarification of life [and summon] a momentary stay against confusion", as Frost put it) – I should think it a bad approach to sacrifice honest and careful attention to feeling for the sake of objectively sound reasoning. Of equal importance is the fact, already presented, that in matters concerning the individual's sense of self the account *you* may contrive for yourself, based in your subjective experience of being alive, is potentially every bit as valuable as (1) the account *I* may contrive for myself (so we need not try to influence or convert each other in this domain), and (2) the objective account *I* may form about *you* through empirical study.

Heraclitus once argues that human beings must necessarily adhere to the "common" (*xynos*) and "follow what is common"; in other words they must conform somewhat and come together around a shared, collectively established understanding of things. Because "the *Logos* is common" we establish and discover "all things" via *Logos*, via this (in the words of C. J. Vamvacas) "supreme principle that combines and sustains everything – the directive power, which pervades, governs, and arranges 'the single and common world' ".[242] These days – i.e. in the post-Enlightenment era – I consider the aforementioned domain of objective reality versus subjective

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[240] Franz Kafka, *Diaries*, 245.

[241] A critic of my line of reasoning might say here that this argument makes me an ally of the Positive Psychology group. I say merely, that I see no argument that would conclusively prevent the premise (and promise) of the Talking Cure from applying (and manifesting), at least to some degree, in instances where dialogue is replaced by written self-representation.

[242] Constantine J. Vamvacas, *The Founders of Western Thought – The Presocratics: A diachronic parallelism between Presocratic Thought and Philosophy and the Natural Sciences*, 112–113.

experience (or "Not-Me" versus "Me" to reference Emerson's appropriation of Fichte) akin to Heraclitus's *Logos* versus what he elucidates thus: "[While from a place of rationality and logic, *Logos*] speaks with intelligence and trust what is common to all . . . men prove as unable to understand it once they have heard it as before they heard it. For, though all things come to pass in accordance with *Logos*, men seem as if ignorant. [The reason is that] although the *Logos* is common, most men live as if they had a private understanding of their own", i.e. their own arbitrary private *Logos* (private reason, language). Vamvaca's argues that the vast majority of mankind set their own 'private understanding' against the 'common' *Logos*. To that I would add and argue that they do so out of a need to bolster and retain selfhood, a need to preserve identity and mental integrity against the constant onslaught of external reality. They do so – or can at least attempt to do so – in order (as Whitman puts it) to "no longer take things at second or third hand". The poet wanted the common man to "not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself."[243]

vi. The Elusive Self

I want now to look from a new angle at the difficulty of discursively establishing a fundamental account of the self, an angle that allows us to discover what this difficulty offers in terms of working out for ourselves what is true – and could be true – about ourselves.

First, let me present one case where Whitman seems to anticipate Freud fairly strikingly. Here below is Whitman (immediately followed by Freud):

> Whitman: "What a history is *folded, folded inward and inward again, in the single word I*."
>
> Freud: "[While the] ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else[,] that such an appearance is deceptive, and that on the contrary the ego is *continued inwards without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious mental entity* which we designate as the id and for which it serves as a kind of façade – this is a discovery first made by psychoanalytic research, which should still have much more to tell us about the relation of the ego to the id."[244]

[243] From "Song of Myself".

[244] Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, 12–13 (emphases added). Whitman's words will be seen more clearly to antedate Freud's conceptualization of the psyche when it is borne in mind, in the present context, that Freud was fond of employing the metaphor of *archeology* when speaking of the psyche.

Whitman's most famous line from "Song of Myself"– "I am large, I contain multitudes" – also finds a counterpart in Freud's assertion that the appearance of the ego as "unitary" is "deceptive"; nor, he writes, is the ego "autonomous".[245] Michael Frayn, whose brilliant allegory I have quoted in the preceding footnote, asserted: "I discover that I am not an absolute ruler after all. I am a mere constitutional fiction."[246] The idea of something fictional at the heart of what we are has also exercised the contemporary philosopher Christopher Hamilton who lays out his argument that we are up against a "fundamental mystery of the self [which means that it] can't be very well articulated in the discursive terms of philosophy".[247] His view is, by his own admission, "not a view very widely accepted" but parts of it are familiar to the psychoanalytically inclined, for instance that "we are [as human beings] fundamentally . . . mysterious to ourselves":

> [Humans] are unable to get clear on the meaning of their actions. What is really going on [in any situation]? What . . . do I really want from [any endeavor]? . . . Is it not, after all, rather pointless? These are exactly the kinds of questions that we can and do ask ourselves as we seek to understand what it is that we are doing with our lives. It is as if we live on two levels: One, at the surface, where we know what we are doing and can explain it, and another, deeper level where we cannot make sense of ourselves. It is no doubt true that we live most of the time on the surface, but there are moments, particularly those of crisis, where we are struck by how little we understand things. Moreover, it also seems to be that a growing sense of our living on the deeper level comes with ageing, as we start to be able to look back across periods of our lives and wonder what they meant – and, therefore, what the present means.[248]

In basic agreement with the case I have been trying to make with regards to the ontological "leeway" that is a result of the difficulty of defining human selfhood, and the interesting philosophical possibilities that go along with it, Hamilton also posits that letters and language have a role to play as a consequence of the "fundamental opacity [which] attends who one is". As he puts

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[245] This speaks to Forster's lament above (see footnote 221) that psychologists have "split and shattered the idea of a "Person", and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us, which may at any moment rise to the surface and destroy our normal balance." In his book *The Human Touch: Our Part in the Creation of a Universe*, Michael Frayn gives a both amusing and memorable allegorical account of the doubtful case for establishing autonomy on the part of the human psyche. See Michael Frayn, *The Human Touch: Our Part in the Creation of the Universe*, 394.

Edward Carpenter, a friend of Whitman's, would agree with Frayn's picture: "We can none of us boast, at any point, of a rounded, definite and stationary self." From Edward Carpenter, *The Drama of Love and Death*, 274.

[246] From Michael Frayn, *The Human Touch: Our Part in the Creation of the Universe*, 394.

In a book review on Nietzsche and the Nietzschean conception of the human self, Roger Caldwell remarks that "even a 'fictional' self is still a choosing self, and not a merely passive receptor of experience." From Roger Caldwell, "Nietzsche and Morality".

[247] Christopher Hamilton lays out his view in detail in his book *A Philosophy of Tragedy*.

[248] Christopher Hamilton in Grant Bartley, et al., *Philosophy Now*, "The Tragedy of Life".

it in *Philosophy Now*, "the fundamental mystery of the self . . . comes through much more in literature".

His point is subtle and difficult to summarize, but I think that one implication of it is that we are able to know Madame Bovary, Uriah Heep or Tonio Kröger more deeply and with a greater clarity than we will be able to know an actual living person; I suppose that another way of saying this is that it is a different kind of knowledge by virtue of the known being more authoritatively established, certain, final and immutable. Consider the mysterious property accorded to language, or more precisely *words*, by W. H. Auden in the sonnet "Words":

> A sentence uttered makes a world appear
> Where all things happen as it says to do;
> We doubt the speaker, not the tongue we hear:
> Words have no words for words that are not true.[249]

Actual human selves, manifest as flesh and bounded by time and space, are ontologically or descriptively elusive and ephemeral in other ways which make them impossible to pin down accurately – in short: aloof to true description. By highlighting, ordering, defining and limiting authoritatively, literature can permit the self of a character to be revealed in ways our fellow human beings (including ourselves) are never revealed.[250] Let me investigate that thought a bit further.

First, I shall suggest that Isak Dinesen's (i.e. Karen Blixen's) claim that "Any sorrow can be borne if it can be made into a story, or if a story can be told about it" is a potentially profound insight.[251] I take it Blixen is thinking that by transplanting one's elusive, unknowable personal self into a harrowing, exciting or competently narrated story where (as a symbolic self) it survives despite odds, say, then one has demonstrated that the symbolic self – despite its inevitable vulnerabilities and limited knowability – can be represented as something real, as an coordinated entity heroically resistant to the hostile forces (including sorrow) opposing it. The common and straightforward idea – borne out by and central to James W. Pennebaker's research, I think (see footnote 155) – is essentially this:

> If you tell a simple story like a parable . . ., what do you extract out from the story? A moral. And what's the moral? It's the implication of the story for behavior. So you tell a little story about someone who acts out a given moral code, and that person does

[249] Of the sonnet's fourteen lines, these – the first four – are most frequently cited. From W. H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957*, 320

[250] "After finishing [John Williams's novel *Stoner*]", Stephen Elliot wrote in a review, "I felt I knew Stoner better than I know some of my friends." From Stephen Elliott, "Stephen Elliott on John Williams' Stoner".

[251] Blixen is cited in Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 21.

> better or worse, and the moral of the story is: If you act in this manner, you will do better or worse.[252]

It is, I think, in this sense and along these theoretical principles that "Writing . . . can provide a protective cuirass for the wounded", as Judith Harris writes.[253]

The following thoughts on a much-debated argument from Daniel Dennett seem crucial to unpacking what Blixen and Christopher Hamilton suggest and imply; I cite the passage because it invaluably establishes that language is (1) a functional ability and (2) without equal when it comes to (phenomenologically) negotiating the conditions of being under which the individual must persist:

> Language is not used just for communication with others: it leads to reflection—to communication with ourselves, as it were. Reflection requires language. Language may initially be needed in order to tell others the reasons for our actions, but once it exists, it supplies the concepts that allow us to become aware of our own mental processes.[254] A dog may bark in anger but cannot reflect on the fact that it is angry.[255]

Let me at this point permit the interjection of Thomas S. Szasz's point that

> Classification is not reserved for science of the scientists. It is a fundamental human act.[256] To name something is to classify it. But why do men name things? The answer often is: To gain control over the thing named, and, more generally, over one's power to act in the world. . . . It is another way of saying that man's superiority over the other animals lies in his ability to use language.[257]

David L. Thompsen continues his precis of Dennett's position:

> Once humans learned the term "anger" in the process of explaining their behavior to others, they may ask themselves the reason for an incipient behavior and use the concept to reflect

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[252] From Jordan Peterson, "Maps of Meaning: 1 Monsters of Our Own Making (TVO)" [21:00]

A related, profound and slightly different exegesis of Blixen's claim may learn from Simon May who, in the context of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, concludes that "A free self – a self that is not merely an effective hierarchy of drives but is also not structured by metaphysical notions . . . – must, therefore, be a self that affirms itself as a product of its history, a history that is a brute given and that can never be undone or be otherwise. As Zarathustra again puts it: Redemption is 'to re-create all "it was" into a "thus I willed it". . . . All "it was" is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to is, "But thus I willed it . . . . thus shall I will it" ' . . ." Source: Simon May, "Nihilism and the Free Self", in Ken Gemes and Simon May, eds., *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, online version is unpaginated. Also, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 3.

[253] From Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*, 5.

[254] "Concepts" is correct. The distinction between "thing" and "concept" (both invoked by a word) was already fully developed in John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and has (according to Paul H. Frye) "been more or less commonly accepted since then". From Paul H. Frye, *Theory of Literature*, 99. See my comments on the Lockean distinction between "nominal" and "real" in footnote 223.

[255] David L. Thompson, *Daniel Dennett*, 83.

[256] As to just how fundamental it is, it was R. W. Emerson who in chapter 4 of *Nature* (entitled "Language") noted: "Words are signs of natural facts. . . . Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance." From Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 22.

[257] Thomas S. Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity: Essays on the Psychiatric Dehumanization of Man*, 196.

on their own internal state—even if such reflection actually results in inhibiting the behavior itself. Self-consciousness, the consciousness of oneself, appears as a secondary result of our linguistic interaction with others.

Language not only results in self-awareness. It also enables us to issue commands—not just to others but to ourselves. We can set ourselves tasks—going to class, for instance—that would be impossible without the linguistic concepts involved. Language enables us to become chameleonic transformers: when we use language to take on new projects and adopt new rules and policies, we transform our mind from one virtual machine into another. Such self-commands allow the linguistic level of mind to control other processes, and this is the basis for voluntary action. An action is free in so far as it is the result of something I have asked myself to do. . . .

For Dennett, language does even more than enable communication, self-awareness, and voluntary action. Language generates stories or narratives and these in turn create the self. Inverting common sense, Dennett holds that it is not the self that tells tales; initially at least, it is the narrative that generates the self. The distinctively human self is a narrative self and is a construct of language: "Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source". . .

The idea that language precedes consciousness—"pandemonium"—[leads us now to] the implications for the nature of the self. A science-fiction scenario may help us. Imagine a computer that has been programmed to write novels. (Artificial intelligence have created poetry and music, so a novel is not too much of a stretch.) Suppose that one story our computer produces appears to be an autobiography: "Call me Gilbert . . .," it starts. We have stipulated that the computer is just a machine: it is not conscious and cannot thing. And Gilbert is, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, we can interpret the text as a series of adventures that center on Gilbert, our fictional character. Let us elaborate this thought-experiement by embedding this computer in a robot with videocams, a speaker system and perhaps wheels. Careful programming allows the ongoing autobiography to be modified by the real circumstances and events in the world around the robot. If you knock it with a baseball bat, for instance, the subsequent section of the story will involve an individual, whose description matches you, hitting Gilbert with a bat. It now appears as if the text, as we interpret it, is a heterophenomenological report, the report of someone's experience. But whose?

In our earlier reference to the novels of Conan Doyle . . ., we distinguished Sherlock Holmes, as a character in the content of the novels, from the author and the process of writing. In our current scenario, there is no author: the novel-writing computer/robot is simply a machine. Here there is even less temptation to say that the writer is the subject of the experience. It is to "Gilbert" that we must attribute the experience recounted. Gilbert is neither the name of the machine nor the name of the program that generates the novel. Gilbert is the protagonist within the heterophenomenological report created by the computer. . . . It is not just conscious experience that is generated by the mechanisms of language generation in the brain: the very existence of the self has the same status.

We are to understand from Dennett's thinking that "every self is a construct created by an impersonal—that is, unselflike—process of *language* production in the brain" (emphasis added – "*for reasons*", as Whitman would say). It should be obvious that because each of us is to some extent capable of observing ourselves in the world (i.e. imagining how we must appear to others) *as*

well as monitoring closely what we are withholding *from* the world (by not avowing it in speech), we are exclusively highly privileged to witness our own self-narratives and the emergent picture of our own "self". If for the sake of the argument (though not altogether unreasonably) I may define "identity" as a socially negotiated self, then these words by Lawrence A. Joseph (on Catherine Pozzi) describe the scenario well:

> [Feeling "her very essence undermined", w]riting represented her attempt to fill this existential void: language and the imagination enabled her to construct a self and give an identity to a fragmented consciousness. As patently autobiographical enterprises, the letter and the intimate journal were naturally her privileged mode of expression. But identity requires not only the construction, in words, of a self but also its recognition in the eyes of others. However voluminous these autobiographical writings, their value to her as self-construction was restricted by the discontinuous nature of their form as well as by their limited circulation.[258]

Somerset Maugham is a good example of a writer for whom it was specifically the act of *publishing* a text of self-narrative (his autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage*) that was redemptive.[259] The same is true of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn with respect to the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*, part novel and part personal testimony: "When [he] heard the announcement about the novel's publication on the BBC, he felt as though "an enormous burden had been lifted" from his shoulders."[260]

Historically, Maugham precedes the argument proposed by Dennett that our selves are

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[258] From Lawrence A. Joseph, "Catherine Pozzi's "Agnes": Writing as Self-Construction", *Biography*, vol. 11 (Winter 1988): 49–50.

[259] In the memoir *The Summing Up*, Maugham recalls: "I was but just firmly established as a popular playwright when I began to be obsessed by the teeming memories of my past life. The loss of my mother and then the break-up of my home, the wretchedness of my first year at school for which my French childhood had so ill-prepared me and which my stammering made so difficult, the delight of those easy, monotonous and exciting days in Heidelberg, when I first entered upon the intellectual life, the irksomeness of my few years at the [St Thomas's] hospital and the thrill of London; it all came back to me so pressingly, in my sleep, on my walks, when I was rehearsing plays, when I was at a party, it became such a burden to me that I made up my mind that I could only regain my peace by writing it all down in the form of a novel. . . .

"I had written a novel on the same themes when, after taking my medical degrees, I went to Seville. Luckily for me Fisher Unwin refused to give me the hundred pounds I wanted for it and no other publisher would have it at any price; or I should have lost a subject which I was then too young to make proper use of. . . . It seems to me that if the writing of the first novel did not finally repress into my subconscious the unhappy memories with which it was concerned it is because the writer is not finally disembarrassed of his subject till his work is published. When it is delivered to the public, however heedless the public be, it is his no longer and he is free from the burden that oppressed him. I called my book . . . *Of Human Bondage*. It is not an autobiography, but an autobiographical novel; fact and fiction are inextricably mingled; the emotions are my own, but not all the incidents are related as they happened and some of them are transferred to my hero not from my own life but from that of persons with whom I was intimate. The book did for me what I wanted, and when it was issued to the world . . . I found myself free forever from those pains and unhappy recollections. I put into it everything I then knew and having at last finished it prepared to make a fresh start." From W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, 119–120.

[260] From Alexandra Popoff, *The Wives: The Women Behind Russia's Literary Giants*, no pagination in online version.

so naturally and conveniently inaugurated *linguistically*; he had this to say about writers (and artists in general):

> It may well be that we are all of us a bundle of mutually contradictive selves, but the writer, the artist, is deeply conscious of it. With other men, the life they lead makes one side of them predominant [cf. Hamilton's "two levels" in footnote 248], so that, except perhaps in the depths of the subconscious [*sic*], it ends by being the whole man. But the painter, the writer, the saint is always looking inside himself for new facets; he is bored at repeating himself and seeks, though it may be without actually knowing it, to prevent himself from becoming one-sided.[261]

This corresponds well to Roberto González Echevarría's claim about "literature's foremost appeal: to become another, to leave a typically embattled self for another closer to one's desires and aspirations."[262] And in the case of John Cowper Powys, Charles Lock writes:

> Constantly in the *Autobiography* Powys . . . wonders how much of life can be put into a narrative. Life as we experience it consists of "so many completely meaningless, insignificant, irrelevant episodes. . .unconnected with any general 'stream of tendency' " [I omit here a reference to a footnote in Lock's dissertation]; and out of these episodes we "have to *invent* our own destiny." . . . [The following are Powys's words from page 46 of his *Autobiography*:]
>
> > What excites our more intelligent interest *is a story*, that is to say the struggle of a soul. . .with the obstacles that hinder its living growth, that obstruct the lilt of its pulse and joggle to left or right its integral continuity . . .[263]

I have said that stories about life enabled, hopes dashed, triumph prevented, traumas endured by the unknowable and treacherous forces of the world have a "natural claim" on the interest of humans. The interesting question is, approximately, this: How are our experiences altered by what we can do at the level of our self? Let me investigate that notion a little closer.

vii. Fragmentary Repositories of Alternative Selves

Freud observes at one point that each individual "has built up his ego-ideal on the most various models", whereby he seems to hint at the possibility on the part of a person to – in some measure – influence, shape or select the constituent "content" (the word is not ideal, but may be adequate as a metaphor) of his or her own self.[264] And it is my contention that it is not hard to imagine a close

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[261] W. Somerset Maugham*, The Summing Up*, chapter 61.
[262] Roberto González Echevarría, *Cervantes' "Don Quixote"*, 2.
[263] Charles J. S. Lock, "Development of Style in the Writings of John Cowper Powys, 1915–29" (DPhil diss.; University of Oxford, 1981).
[264] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, chapter 11.

constructive relationship between *that* process and a process of healing or coping in a situation of suffering. Touching on the same principle, Adam Phillips learns from Hamlet who (according to Brian Cummings)

> 'far from speaking his mind, confronts us with a fragmentary repository of alternative selves, and searches within for the limits of being.' [Phillips continues:] Once we have the idea of alternative selves, we will have questions about the limits of being, about what or who we can take ourselves to be. If conscience can be caught – like a fish, like a criminal – it might become part of that fragmentary repository of alternative selves that resemble a troupe of actors. If the play is the thing, then we can say that it was useful to have a cultural form in which the conscience of a king – or indeed of anyone; conscience itself being like a king – could be caught, exposed, seen to be like a character.[265]

William James had this to say on the same issue: "Mankind is susceptible and suggestible in opposite directions, and the rivalry of influences is unsleeping. The saintly and the worldly ideal pursue their feud in literature as must as in real life."[266]

Kurt Vonnegut, too, felt that he knew something about the potential for transformation (and, less innocuously, malleability and distortion) of self, and he expressed it in the famous warning that accompanied his novel on lending cooperation with the Nazi movement: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."[267] The point is, I suppose, that the kinds of selves that exist surround us and that we ourselves typify are impossible to pin down with accuracy, are constantly evolving, are highly impressionable to external and internal stimuli and, given their fundamental impressionability, are at no point invulnerable to sadness or precluded from delight.

At the beginning of this chapter I called it an uncontroversial (if also in some ways problematic) convenience to conceptually distinguish between "self" and "world". On the convenience side of the argument, clearly we cannot claim that "thoughts and feelings do not exists

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[265] On the issue of "alternative selves" and the fragmented ego, Freud wrote that "Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of ourselves, of our own ego. This ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else. That such an appearance is deceptive, and that on the contrary the ego is continued inwards without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious mental entity which we designate as the id and for which it serves as a kind of façade – this is a discovery first made by psychoanalytic research . . . But towards the outside, at any rate, the ego seems to maintain clear sharp lines of demarcation." From Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, 12–13.

[266] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 323.

[267] Vonnegut's aphorism is the epigraph to his novel *Mother Night* about the ideological possession of Nazis during World War II. Thomas Weiskel echoes the sentiment by saying that we are generally as ignorant about what lies *within* the parameters of human possibility as what lies *beyond*. Harold Bloom cites Weiskel in Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 3.

(as some radical behaviorists assert)."[268] As for the problematic side of the case, I should also flag Alan Watts's highly logical (semantic) argument that

> You cannot have an experience called "self" without an experience called "other." This is why the two are really one, which is both self and other and yet neither . . .

The gist of these words will probably sit awkwardly with some; after all, they seem to conclusively reveal that what is commonly taken to be a true dichotomy ("self" versus "other") is actually *one thing*, and, further, that that one thing is cleaved into opposites merely by the element of human "experience". But it is helpful – indeed, absolutely crucial – to recognize that selfhood is experiential, i.e. literally something inferred from the phenomenon of experience. There is empirically and phenomenally no *thing* there (for all that there is a useful word, which can be used in a fashion that is approximately phenomenological).[269] Why is this helpful and crucial? Because it means that our accounts of what we perceive ourselves (our so-called "selves") to go through, including who we take ourselves to be and what we hope to be in the future or to go through (or avoid going through again) are not *wrong* – they are unburdened by the obligation to be objectively *right*, empirically *correct*, because their whole validity rests entirely on their being subjectively meaningful, adequate and useful to the experiencing self. ("Right" or "wrong" in the empirical sense is not the appropriate standard with which to evaluate the validity of the word; "useful" would be better; I am reminded of the Yale psychologist Paul Bloom who in detailing "one of the main critiques of Freud" rephrases the well-known critique leveled by the physicist Wolfgang Pauli at a colleague in the 1920s: "That's not right; it's not even wrong.")[270]

On that note, pay special attention to my added emphases within this quotation from Alan Watts:

> [W]hen the Emperor Wu asked Bodhi-dharma, "Who are you?" he answered, "I don't know." Neither do I, for it is impossible to bring vision into clear and objective focus upon itself. Just try—and somewhere along the way you will discover that *the only real "you" is the shifting and momentary totality of everything you see and feel, within and without*.[271] I do not, then, bother with the vicious circle of discovering my

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[268] From Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human*, 191. The Watts quote that follows is from Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography*, 188.

[269] To clarify the semantic distinction presented by that sentence: "The phenomenal level concerns the things we encounter in ordinary experience—books and trees—while the phenomenological level concerns facts about sensory experience considered strictly from the viewpoint of the experiencer's apprehension of sensible qualities." A. C. Grayling, ed., *Philosophy: A Guide through the Subject*, 515.

[270] From this lecture: Paul Bloom, "3. Foundations: Freud" [34:30]. The precise wording of this widely-cited quote varies somewhat.

[271] Cf. David Hume: "We are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement." Hume also said: "For my part, when I enter

> "real personality" or make any special attempt to act naturally. I just put on whatever personal style seems appropriate to the circumstances, or entertaining to myself or others. *Others may see a consistent personality underlying all these "acts," but this must be their projection on my Rorschach blot . . . All interesting descriptions of human character are poetic, imaginative, dramatic, and fantastic, whereas all attempts at valid description are myopic, interminable, and dull.* This is why the writing of history and biography is an art, not a science.[272]

With Vonnegut, whom I have just alluded to, we might now say that we really do seem to be and become "what we pretend to be".[273] And with Hamilton (and Watts) we might well agree that "the fundamental mystery of the self . . . comes through much more in literature" (cf. Caruth's comparison of literature and psychoanalysis in chapter 1).[274]

viii. Experimenting with Human Potentialities

The self is conscious then, and to a certain degree free (phenomenologically, it takes itself to be so, and in that sense the observation is sufficiently true). When an embodied self applies that experiential freedom to the activity of artistic representation, the result is liberating to the degree that the person discovers that the created artwork (let us assume it is a literary work) allows and endows the writing person with a certain agency that is absent from the rest of life. Bluntly put, the page affords one the opportunity and perfect freedom to name, mold, temper, deepen, order, highlight and soften things, as well as the opportunity to adjudicate, crop and "omit" details (for instance, through focalization) as one sees fit. The idea is that a valuable opportunity is thus provided for working with and attending only to a manageable selected part of the countless constituent elements of experiential reality; a trail can be blazed and access gained to what Nemoianu terms a "privileged ground for experimenting with human potentialities and responses, redeeming the past, assimilating the present, and projecting the future."[275] Harold Bloom suggests

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most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat of cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception." From David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6. (Book, Part, Section).

[272] Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915–1965*, 209. My emphasis.

[273] Again, spiritual leaders have found the malleability of self intriguing and something to be celebrated as well as regarded warily. "You are as holy as you wish to be," is John Ruysbroeck's formulation emphasizing the promising and celebratory aspect of this. I have long thought that Emerson's idea of the "the infinitude of the private man" represented a similar idea.

[274] See footnote 261.

[275] See footnote 131.

Many very different examples from literature could be given, and much more said, on this. An excellent example related to what I have described is given by Steven Marcus under the rubric of "transference" and concerns Charles Dickens's central character in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: "He suggests that through Nell's death Dickens may have been mourning his own spiritual death in childhood, during the blacking factory humiliations that he described in his autobiography. [In this way,] Dickens was both remembering his own experience and identifying with another's."

that we ask of any poem or play: "What precisely does this leave out to make it the beautifully expensive torso it is?"[276] When we write "strongly and directly [from] personal experience", as Frost urged us to do, we can take what the world looks like when it (for instance) most frightens us, address the vast and chaotically conjoined mess and with our own limited but nevertheless literally creative truthful "Logos" effect a change that is analogous to the creation of the world out of chaos in Genesis: We can aim for the feeling of *order* rising triumphantly above underlying *chaos* (see my reference to Genesis in chapter 1). Thus a story can be told and, in Blixen's words, with its telling the relevant "sorrow can [hypothetically, at least] be borne"; in Phillips's words, "a redescription" can emerge of what we are or what has happened to us.[277]

I am here reminded of Molly Harrower's words in epigraphic perspective 6 on the potential for poetry to help the individual to "create order and understanding out of a mental muddle."[278] On the drive to write poems distilling order out of some unbearable "inner chaos", I am reminded too that one of Whitman's significant biographies, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman by* Roger Asselineau, features the argument that "the composition of *Leaves of Grass* . . . rapidly permitted Whitman to put the confused world of his perceptions in order and clearly to distinguish between the Me and the Not-Me." It also goes some way towards bearing out Seamus Heaney's words that poetry provides "an order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew."[279] And I fully concur with this analysis:

> Although any definition of literature will be inconclusive, it doesn't mean that literature as a category doesn't exist. At some point in our history, language in the form of poems and stories was harnessed to explain the world to the self and the self to the world. After that, literature could not in good conscience be seen as arbitrary but rather as something that

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See Meredith Anne Skura, *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*, 192–193.

[276] Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 52. It also seems apposite here to mention that when Whitman turned to poetry seriously in 1855 he did so partly from his desire to "bestow[] on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less. He [wished to prove himself] the arbiter of the diverse" and external realm and to hand over the relevant "key" (i.e. the mental skill with which to negotiate the imposing features of the world) to "common folks".

[277] Adam Phillips has frequently emphasised that "psychoanalysis [and I am suggesting that writing may partake of the same therapeutic function] offers a person, at best, an essentially unpredictable redescription [of the self and its crisis]." Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 17. Jordan Peterson has said that an archetypal motif emerges "when human beings encounter the unknown [and] encapsulate it in an explanatory network [by applying names to unidentified elements]. It's a way of binding up the anomaly or unknown and giving it a substantive form." From Jordan Peterson, "Maps of Meaning: 2 Contending with Chaos (TVO)" [22:00].

[278] Molly Harrower, *The Therapy of Poetry*, 53.

W. H. Auden subtly employs a number of paradisal metaphors when he describes the successful poetic labor like this: "With the farming of a verse / Make a vineyard of the curse, / Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress; // In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise." From Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats".

[279] From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 2, 35, and Floyd Collins, *Seamus Heaney: The Crisis of Identity*, 217. See also footnote 196.

> answers a basic human need: It's part of the civilizing process, it helps us to thrive. Literature may not exactly be indispensable, but, in retrospect, it does seem inevitable.[280]

In certain circumstances, then, we are able to aesthetically bring about something imbued with the potential to nourish our self. When this happens, we are, classically speaking, *artists*, to honor Gardner's conceptualization (quoted more fully in chapter 1) of art as that which "asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution [while offering] what is necessary to humanness."[281] Similarly, Harold Bloom associates Whitman's "grand voice" with "hold[ing] off the permanent darkness" and finds that it typifies the property specific to the so-called American Sublime; it "transcend[s] the human without forsaking humanism."[282] When the world challenges us with its chaotically conjoined clusters – with "cows *and* wars *and* chewing gum *and* mountains", as Gardner amusingly writes – we might with Franklean resolve (see footnote 162) attempt aesthetically to celebrate order and meaning – by creating miniature simulacra and instantiations of order and meaning; alternatively, when "the world is too much with us" (in Wordsworth's words), we have the potential to bring about something that is imbued – perhaps – with harmony, cheer, wisdom, magnanimity and orderly subordination (the latter of which items alludes to Gardner again and codes for orderly and rational causality as in "guilt *because* of sin *because* of pain").[283]

Molly Harrower (cf. epigraphic perspective 6) identifies one of the highly valuable functions of poetry thus: the potential of restoring "an inner balance which has temporarily been lost". This function is what my former teacher's words identify (see the Preface above) in characterizing Whitman as a writer who through his poems reliably offers "comfort and companionship". I like the metaphor of "inner balance", to which I shall return, and am inclined to value inner balance (plausibly the result of trying successfully to carry out the Delphic injunction) over many other things worth having. Poetry – or the poetic word – is such a useful thing ("for those people for whom it's good [and useful]", to quote Adam Phillips from footnote 239) because it can potentially assist a dislocated person in restoring a state of inner balance.

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[280] From Arthur Krystal, *This Thing We Call Literature*, 82.

[281] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 5–6. Henry Miller writes that Nietzsche once coined the phrase "the healing quality of art." From Henry Miller, *The Henry Miller Reader*, 290.
Also, cf. Kinzie's insistence that literary art should "reply to the need for coherence in a human life while reflecting the facts of experiential complexity, and . . . speak memorably about our great anxieties—affliction, injustice, death." Kinzie is cited in the previous chapter.

[282] Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 49 and 32.

[283] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 6.

ix. "All interesting descriptions of human character are poetic, imaginative, dramatic, and fantastic"

[284] It is important in this context to not lose sight of the "I", or speaking self, and its functions for these are a central aspect of the poetry that interests me. As I segue into talking increasingly about this poetry in the case of Whitman, I am going to adopt Sedikides and Skowronski's phrase "symbolic self", which according to the authors represents the "symbolic construction of the self".[285] Because this dissertation fundamentally deals with survival and argues that the symbolic self-represention that animates lyrical poetry may be of therapeutic value to the self, I would be remiss if I omitted the following surprising and interesting fact: Sedikides and Skowronski offer the argument that the capacities for "self-awareness and self-representation" may be much more valuable than one might be inclined to assume; this is because arguably a "well-developed symbolic capability is highly likely to increase reproductive fitness."[286] Cf. Peterson's words on what makes "embodied biological being . . . sustainable over time" just before footnote 32. (I am not in a position to elaborate on Sedikides and Skowronski's claim but consider the bioevolutionary argument, at the very least, intriguing.)

Emily Dickinson may be of help if we are to try to understand how poetry may serve a personally generative function and align the act of "locat[ing] a voice" with "locat[ing] a self" (in Leonard Cohen's words). At a 2007 plenary seminar entitled *What Happens in a Poem* at The Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of Imagination, the poet Timothy Donnelly draws

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[284] Cited above, the words in the section title are Alan Watts's.

[285] Yoshihisa Kashima, Margaret Foddy and Michael Platow, eds., *Self and Identity: Personal, Social, and Symbolic*, 18. Cf. Alan Watts: "Thus we come back to the question of what we mean by "I." First of all, obviously we mean our symbol of ourselves." Characteristically, Watts adds, "Ourselves, in this case, is the whole psychophysical organism, conscious and unconscious, plus its environment. That is your real self." From Alan Watts, *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks: 1960–1969*, 216.

When an "I" appears in a Whitman poem, Whitman scholars typically call it "the poetic 'I' " by which they mean exclusively the poetic speaker *when signified by and appearing under the one-letter pronoun*. But I find the air-quotes and pronoun-cum-noun coinage awkward and shall instead use "symbolic self" to designate the self-referring speaker speaking the word "I".

[286] This argument from Darwinian survival is also presented by V. S. Ramachandran (*The Tell-Tale Brain: Unlocking the Mystery of Human Nature*) and by Jordan Peterson who suggests that we have evolved an ability to "view the world through a narrative lens because the fundamental problem we have to solve as living creatures is how we should act in the world", not what the world is materially made of. Human flourishing, Peterson argues with reference to phenomenology and existentialism, is predicated on finding out what *matters*, less so what *matter is*. Cf. Peterson's lecture "2017 Maps of Meaning 2: Marionettes & Individuals (Part 1)" [1:48].

Also, consider again Arthur Krystal's words from *This Thing We Call Literature* (in footnote 286 above). The passage quoted there continues thus: "Like music, drawing, or sculpture, *literature makes life more manageable*; but unlike the other arts, it speaks to us in the way we speak to one another; it's the self-conscious repository of consciousness." (Emphases added) Arthur Krystal, *This Thing We Call Literature*, 82. See also my reference elsewhere to Thomas S. Szasz.

attention to this line from one of Dickinson's letters: "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a *supposed person.*"[287] Donnelly then presents the notion that the practice and medium of poetry afford the poet a chance to dramatize, investigate and examine "a potential self, a potential psychology":

> [T]here are poets who want to be able to investigate possible psychologies . . . rather than dramatizing their own. I think that that's something that some poets are after. And of course that raises the question: *How* we choose [via poetry] to . . . investigate a potential psychology may actually reflect a great deal on our own psychology, and probably does. But I do feel that as a poet I need the liberty of knowing that people aren't necessary going to read my own poems as biographical or even necessarily as something like dreamwork.[288]

In other words, to touch on the salient aspects of this statement, "potential" personalities or selves may rise and fall as a consequence of our poetic voice which we necessarily construct out of the raw material of "our own psychology". Also (to address Donnelly's last sentence), it might be true that the degree to which these aesthetically inaugurated – or contrived and dramatized – "possible psychologies" are externally noticeable is minimal (to a biographer, say, or a critic); after all, it is not easy after all to infer and record accurately and instantly what informs another person's self-consciousness at any given moment; this is what Watts is getting at in remarking "the only real "you" is the shifting and momentary totality of everything you see and feel, within and without."[289]

Hence, I consider Donnelly's view practically compatible with my own thesis which posits that poetry might present a site or space where a person's attitudes, experiences and emotions, specifically those implicating or pertaining to the person's sense of self, can be negotiated, represented and considered, which as a strategy would appear particularly useful in a moment of crisis given, as I have argued above, that what hurts us does so by virtue of our *strong sensation of being ourselves*, i.e. of being involuntarily targeted by adverse forces.[290]

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[287] From a letter to Mr. T. W. Higginson. See Emily Dickinson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd, 257. My emphasis.
[288] Timothy Donnelly in "What Happens in a Poem" [1:55:43].
[289] See footnote 272. From Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915–1965*, 209.
[290] My description of poetry here is in accord with that put forward by Virgil Nemoianu, mentioned previously. See footnote 64.

x. Sublime Self-realization, Authentic Masks, the Voice of Faith

As for seeing poetry as a mode of introspection, Harold Bloom has credited Ralph Waldo Emerson with pointing out that "voice, not text, is America's mode of self-knowing" – and has himself said:

> The revelation making possible the breakthrough that is *Leaves of Grass* 1855 was neither mystical nor psychosexual. It was the invention of the mask "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," who could not reconcile his soul and his true self and so took up the middle ground between them.[291]

It seems relevant that Whitman himself has written that he was inclined to consider *Leaves of Grass* "an attempt to give the spirit, the body, *the man*, new words, new *potentialities of speech*—an American, a cosmopolitan . . . range of self-expression" (emphases added).[292] Cf. these lines from "Song of Myself": "My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach, / With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds. // Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself, / It provokes me forever." Given Whitman's acknowledgement in a letter to John Addington Symonds that "the writing and rounding of L[eaves] of G[rass] has been to me the reason-for-being, & life comfort" (and, in "Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", that it "has been the comfort of my life since it was originally commenced"), I am inclined to think that Whitman would willingly conflate his own "[providing] new potentialities of speech" with "[providing] new potentialities *via* speech".[293]

Bloom's seemingly deflationary assessment that Whitman merely "invent[ed] a mask" and behind it proceeded to compose an important work of literature becomes less deflationary in light of Bloom's frequently stated enthusiasm for Oscar Wilde, with whom he playfully agrees that "Art is perfectly useless" – and possibly would agree too that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."[294] More interestingly, perhaps, is Whitman's own concurring view

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[291] Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 57. Bloom is insistent on the word "mask"; in *On the Western Canon* he writes "The Whitmanian soul is unknown nature, a kind of blank, while the rough self is a persona or mask, an endlessly shifting series of identifications." R. W. French who contributes the entry on "Persona" in the *Walt Whitman Encyclopedia* observes that to "a certain extent, particularly in his later years, [Whitman] *became* what he imagined himself to be, and the evidence is in the poetry as well as in his public pronouncements. Whitman seems to have had a remarkable ability to will himself into being." As for Whitman's attempt to take up the middle ground between his soul and his true self (a dichotomy which I will not adopt exclusively), Carl Martin Lindner points out that Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* laboured towards psychological or personal wholeness and integrity. Cf. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 513 and 239, respectively.

[292] From Walt Whitman, *An American Primer*, viii–ix.

[293] The letter to Addington is cited in Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, 47.

[294] Along with his phlegmatic acceptance that "reading the very best writers . . . is not going to make us better citizens" and that "literary criticism, as an art, always was and always will be an elitist phenomenon", Bloom expresses his sympathy for Wilde in Harold Bloom, *On the Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, 15–16.

(in 1867) that the symbolic self of 1855 ("Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos") was indeed a mask.[295] His wording is doubly interesting because in the attempt to distance himself from a characterization he had himself done much to deserve he simultaneously uses language to suggest a new and different persona:

> [P]ersonally the author of *Leaves of Grass* is in no sense or sort whatever the "rough," the "eccentric," "vagabond," or queer person that the commentators (always bound for the intensest possible statement,) persist in making him. He has moved, & moves still, along the path of his life's happenings & fortunes, as they befall or have befallen him, with entire serenity & decorum, never defiant even to the conventions, always bodily sweet & fresh, dressed plainly & cleanly, a gait & demeanor of antique simplicity, cheerful & smiling, performing carefully all his domestic, social, & municipal obligations, his demonstrative nature toned very low, but eloquent enough of eye, posture, & expression, though using only moderate words; and offering to the world, in himself, an American Personality, & real Democratic Presence, that not only the best old Hindu, Greek, and Roman worthies would at once have responded to, but which the most cultured European, from court or academy, would likewise, on meeting to-day, see & own without demur.[296]

Potentiality of self-expression (as Whitman approximately puts it in his *American Primer*) is, from a slightly different angle, what Dickinson is getting at too with her "supposed person". Elsewhere in Harold Bloom's *The Daemon Knows*, the author argues to equivalent effect that Whitman "creates a fiction of the self that becomes a poem in our eyes" – that to Whitman "the self was a necessary fiction, an illusion so desired that leaves of grass would sprout from the barren rock of being."[297] While thus amassing textual support for my argument, let me add that Kenneth Burke (cited by Bloom in *The Daemon Knows*) has suggested that "Whitmanian vistas are future possibilities"

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[295] Asselineau uses the word "pose", not "mask", and settles that to accuse Whitman of "imposture" is to "misconceive the complexity of the problem." I return to this later; see footnote 291.

[296] From a letter to his friend William D. O'Connor (10 November 1867). See Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, 347–349.

[297] Far from intending a pejorative remark, Harold Bloom also writes that Whitman "had no poetic method except his self." Whatever the exact meaning of that line, a strong relation between poetic creation and the inauguration and consolidation of voice-dependent self is clearly suggested. To ask, at a given moment, whether self is generated via poetry or vice versa seems a little bit like asking: *Which came first – the soup or the recipe?* (cf. Donnelly in footnote 288: "*How* we choose [via poetry] to . . . investigate a potential psychology may actually reflect a great deal on our own psychology, and probably does.") There is a circular element to this process, which these lines from T. S. Eliot memorably capture if we choose to "hear" them in the context of the discovery or creation of a self: "[T]he end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." The clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson considers Eliot's words "the most remarkable elaboration of the nature of the relationship between the individual human consciousness and reality itself that has ever been penned – and the culmination of a system of thought that's been developing over thousands and thousand of years." The Bloom quote is from *The Daemon Knows*, 54. Jordan Peterson's quote is from the TED talk "Potential: Jordan Peterson at TEDxUofT" [19:50].

which (beyond echoing my dissertation title suggestively) corresponds well with Ed Folsom's assertion that

> The key for Whitman was always to enlarge the self, to work toward a democratic conception of selfhood as absorptive, nondiscriminating, receptive, and loving. For Whitman, a democratic self was one that came to recognize vast multitude of possibility within its own identity [cf. Whitman in epigraphic perspective 9], one that could imagine how one's own identity, given altered circumstances, might incorporate the identity of anyone in the culture, from the most marginalized and despised to the most exalted and powerful.

The notion that poetry may serve its therapeutic role via generative, expansive, adjusting ministrations with regards to self or personality is central to my thesis, and as a claim it seems amply borne out by observations such as these.[298] I especially like the metaphor in Bloom's wording that a new self, which had to be fairly deeply desired in order to be manifested, was born through the obstetrical intervention of a "necessary fiction" (notice the clear parallel here between "fiction" and Vonnegut's "pretend to be").

We have, it would seem, before us a man who discovered himself able to use the creative and poetic word to sift and amplify, sculpt and generate that germ in him which was nourishing for the whole, knowable and worth enlarging from what was unknowable, destructive and negative.[299] These lines, gathered from across the body of work, seem to reflect this principle pithily, and taken together they indicate a thoroughgoing concern with self and identity (all emphases are mine):

- (a) I too have felt the resistless call of *myself*
- (b) I celebrate *myself*, and sing *myself*,
  . . .
  And of these one and all I weave the song of *myself*.
  . . .

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[298] Recalling an early crucial moment that foreshadowed his poetic output, the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen has said the following: "to find a voice – to locate a voice – that is, to locate *a self* – a self that is not fixed, a self that struggles for its own existence". These words run parallel with the theory I am charting for the relationship between voice and self.

The Ed Folsom quote above ("The key for Whitman . . .") is from his entry "Democracy" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 173.

[299] According to several acquaintances, Whitman was able to carry out – at least intermittently – what T. S. Eliot later captured in the alliterative resolution, "Let's not be narrow, nasty and negative." The achievement was marked enough to deeply impress or intrigue many who knew the poet: "Until I knew the man," writes Dr R. M. Bucke, "it had not occurred to me that anyone could derive so much absolute happiness from [admiring flowers, animals and the sky while "sauntering about outdoors by himself"] as he did. . . . Perhaps, indeed, no man who ever lived liked so many things and disliked so few as Walt Whitman." Bucke's description of Whitman is cited – in the context of healthy-mindedness – in William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 84.

In all people I see *myself*, none more and not one a barley-corn less,
And the good or bad I say of *myself* I say of them,
. . .
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than *one's-self* is,
. . .
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
. . .
I stop somewhere waiting for you

- (c) I will effuse *egotism* and show it underlying all, and I will be the *bard of personality*[300]

- (d) "One's *self* I sing, a simple separate person"

- (e) "Only the theme I sing, the great and strong-possess'd *soul*, eludes not,
One's-self must never give way—that is the final substance—that out of all is sure,
Out of politics, triumphs, battles, life, what at last finally remains?
When shows break up *what but One's-Self is sure*?"

- (f) O the joy of my *soul* leaning pois'd on itself, receiving identity through materials and loving them, observing characters and absorbing them,
My soul vibrated back to me from them, from sight, hearing, touch, reason, articulation, comparison, memory, and the like,
The *real life of my senses and flesh transcending my senses and flesh*,
My body done with materials, my sight done with my material eyes,
Proved to me this day beyond cavil that *it is not my material eyes which finally see*,
Nor my material body which finally loves, walks, laughs, shouts, embraces, procreates.

- (g) *Me*, wherever my life is lived, O to be *self*-balanced for contingencies!

- (h) Defiant of . . . conventions, I avowedly chant "the great pride of *man in himself*," and permit it to be more or less a motif of nearly all my verse.

- (i) Through angers, losses, ambition, ignorance, ennui, what you are picks its way.

- (j) You broken resolutions, you racking angers, you smother'd ennuis;
Ah, think not you finally triumph—*My real self* has yet to come forth.[301]

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[300] In a conversation with Traubel several years later, Whitman thought it necessary to define his precise meaning in using this word: "I do not lack in egotism, as you know─the sort of egotism that is willing to know itself as honestly as it is willing to know third or fourth parties." On another day he had this to say: "A certain amount of egotism is necessary─but for having it, we never could have endured the strain─passed unharmed through the fire─especially in the years when Leaves of Grass stood alone, unfriended but by me." Cf. Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 59 and 60.

[301] These lines are from, respectively, (a) "Song at Sunset", (b) "Song of Myself", (c) "Starting from Paumanok", (d) "One's Self I Sing", (e) "Quicksand Years", (f) "Song of Joys", (g) "Me Imperturbe", (h) "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", (i) "To You", (j) "Ah Poverties, Winkings, and Sulky Retreats". The emphases are mine.

The last line cited above has a certain affinity with a line Whitman wrote in one of the "self-reviews",

Crucially Whitman seems to have discovered that he had a *say* about the direction in which he intended to grow psychologically – a *say* generally uttered *in direct response* to life's trying events and "forces that [would] assail" him and often taking the form of poetic lines and stanzas awaiting publication in the next edition of *Leaves of Grass*. On the dispiriting critical responses he garnered, he remarked: "[The critics] sail into me in great style—but that is the great test: if I cannot stand their attack I might as well go out of the *Leaves* business", which affirms seeing *Leaves of Grass* as a work of stalwart and undaunted persistence in the face of opposition and disappointment. His biographer David S. Reynolds has also settled the degree of volition as the handmaiden or catalyst for Whitman's "optimism", which according to Reynolds "was very much a *willed* optimism, one achieved in the face of harsh social conditions and great personal challenges."[302]

xi. Some Ground for Hope and Renewal

Observe the significant word "volition" in the quote from *Specimen Days* (footnote 151). And, also, in the words of another scholar, "particularly in his later years, he *became* what he imagined himself to be" (footnote 291), the evidence of which "is in the poetry as in his public pronouncements". As for the conflation of what has been called "personae" versus the actual poet, Edwin Haviland Miller notes that "Whitman himself does not always differentiate [between the poetic figment and the real Whitman]" – which in the light of these themes I hope the reader will recognize the significance of.[303] As I say, Whitman seems to have recognized that he indeed had a *say* in the matter of what he represented and who he was; particularly, he recognized that it might pay off to hopefully intend by volition to steer toward what Gary Schmidgall calls "light-hearted[ness]" (consider the significant word "want"): "I don't want to figure anywhere as misanthropic, sour, doubtful: as a discourager—as a putter-out of lights."[304] Toward the end of his life, Whitman seems to have succeeded in nourishing such a "restorative relationship between [his] mind's centre and its circumference" (to

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i.e. in his own review of *Leaves of Grass*: "The style of the bard that is waited for is to be transcendent and new."

[302] David S. Reynolds, "Walt Whitman's World: America Still Needs His Poetry". Cf. the words by R. W. French cited above ("To a certain extent . . . he *became* what he imagined himself to be, and the evidence is in his poetry as well as in his public pronouncements. Whitman seems to have had a remarkable ability to will himself into being").

[303] For the quote preceding E. H. Miller's, see "Personae" (by R. W. French) in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 514. For Miller's quote, see Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: a Psychological Journey*, 136.

[304] Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 60. The word "Light-hearted" is the editor's designation of what Whitman establishes in the quoted line.

Approximately thirty years earlier, Whitman had written these lines: "I remember I said to myself at the winter-close, before / my leaves sprang at all, that I would become a / candid and unloosed summer-poet" – the intention and volition with regards to self and being is clear. From "So Long!" (1860 edition).

reference Heaney's formulation of the dynamic) that he was able to claim, "Whether it is constitutional or what not with me, I stand for the sunny point of view—stand for the joyful conclusions. This is . . . because my *faith seems to belong to the nature of things*—is imposed, cannot be escaped: can better account for life and what goes with life than the opposite theory."[305]

In the passage from E. H. Miller that I have just cited, the scholar adds that Whitman's "idolators, understandably, do not make" a distinction "between the poetic figment and the real Whitman", and the word "understandably" is worth thinking about. As a young man, Roger Asselineau was one "idolator" who out of his own suffering probably approached Whitman from the assumption that the potential psychological attitudes that made *Leaves of Grass* such an attractive work might "actually reflect a great deal on [Whitman's] own psychology" (to cite Timothy Donnelly). During the German occupation of France during the Second World War, Asselineau, who later wrote a great Whitman biography, found that merely exposing himself to the fruit of Whitman's poetic efforts exerted a spiritually instructive, consoling and on the whole ameliorative effect on Asselineau. It prevented "moral suffocation" and "offered some ground for hope and for a renewal of faith in mankind"[306]:

> Invaluable lessons of tenacious energy could be drawn from his *Leaves of Grass*, in which with patient strength he overcame his anxieties and doubts and repelled their repeated attacks over the years. The presence of evil within him and around him never broke his spirit. His faith and enthusiasm always brought him through. But this invincible optimism was the result of a continual struggle, and thus the serenity of his old age was a victory over anguish.[307]

As concerns the menacing scenes and imposing things around him, I have already noted, first, that sometimes *the only thing* a person – a self – can do is try to regulate his or her own liminal *attitude* to the surroundings, and, second, that poetry might offer one way to do this; for in Heaney's words we have seen that poetry might simultaneously be "true to the impact of external reality" and "sensitive to the inner laws of a poet's being".[308]

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[305] Ibid.

[306] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, 1. Appropriately, Whitman described himself (in an 1855 self-review of *Leaves of Grass*) as someone whose voice brought "hope and prophecy to the generous races of young and old". The poet meant for his work to teach that "Happiness is no dream, and perfection is no dream. Amelioration is my lesson, he says with calm voice, and progress is my lesson and the lesson of all things." www.whitmanarchive.org/.

[307] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, 1. I shall return in chapter 4 to the theme of "the presence of evil within him".

[308] In an essay ("Beauty, a Hint of Happiness"), Santayana once defined "the sense of beauty" as arising from "the harmony between our nature and our experience": "When our senses and imagination find what they crave, when the world so shapes itself and so moulds the mind that the correspondence between them is perfect, then perception

Why poetry enables (and, to some, extends) this potential is, I suspect, as difficult to clear up as the related question, *How does psychoanalysis make some (but not all) people better?* I have sketched and presented part of a possible explanation in the context of Karen Blixen's insight that "Any sorrow can be borne if it can be made into a story, or if a story can be told about it", but let me add to those words the following, which hints at what is going on when we express ourselves and exercise our capacity for "self-awareness and self-representation", particularly in a story (poetry can have a narrative structure too). Suppose we told ourselves a few stories about who we are, where we would like to be, and how we are going to get there. It now happens that as a consequence of our narrativization exercise the

> *stories regulate our emotions, by determining the significance of all the things we encounter and all the events we experience. We regard things that get us on our way as positive, things that impede our progress as negative, and things that do neither as irrelevant. . . .*
> . . .
> Our initial attention [to those things that occur contrary to our predictions and in spite of our desires] constitutes the first step in the process by which we come to adjust our behavior and our interpretive schemas to the world of experience . . .[309]

If only for the potential benefit of having "things we encounter" cast reliably into relief, Peterson here present a pretty strong argument for story-telling (which, as I am suggesting, is compatible with poetry's domain) as a form of therapy, the operating principle of which would then presumably be that our stories may serve as lenses through which an instructive view of life may be glimpsed (cf. Bernet's words in footnote 48). This corresponds to what Peterson has said elsewhere. Beyond offering a few useful phrases, the block quotation above is valuable and central to my overall thesis because:

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is pleasure, and existence needs no apology. . . . Beauty is a pledge of the possible conformity between the soul and nature, and consequently a ground of faith in the prevalence of the good." From George Santayana, "Beauty, a Hint of Happiness", in Logan Pearsall Smith and George Santayana, *Little Essay Drawn from the Writings of George Santayana*, 286. Anticipating (or at least predating) the essential principle of such formulations, Whitman wrote in 1855 that not only should the poet comprehend beauty and dignity, he should "indicate the path between reality and [folks'] souls." There appears to be some affinity between Santayana and Whitman. In any event, the former's view that "Beauty is a pledge of the possible conformity between the soul and nature, and consequently a ground of faith in the supremacy of the good" finds several corresponding utterances in Whitman. Here is one: "I match my spirit against yours, you orbs, growths, mountains, brutes, / Copious as you are, I absorb you all in myself, and become the master Myself." The theme of "matching" outward reality and inner fortitude and "amplitude" – a kind of "rapprochement" – is pronounced in Whitman. See Whitman's "A Song of the Rolling Earth", section 3.

[309] Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 20. Italics original and not added. Cf. again, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 3 (cited in chapter 1).

- it suggests that stories (or, broadly speaking, written representations of our lives) – through the regulation of our "emotions" – profoundly inform our well-being,
- it hints at the kind of order our words might help create (principally our *story*, but poetry might serve the same function),
- it asserts that the change may have to take place in *us* (which I have arguing and which I have already begun to claim pertained to Whitman),
- and it asserts that the change will be gradual and proceed by "steps".[310]

Now back to Whitman, the notion of a mask and the inauguration of a certain way of being. Speaking in the first person in the essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", Whitman aimed to

> articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and æsthetic Personality . . . in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.[311]

The quote does not make it sufficiently clear that the "Personality" in question was not fully formed, that it "had yet to arrive" (to overtly allude to a poem I shall indicate shortly). Harold Bloom, Michael Sowder and others remind us that rather than "faithfully express" what was already a fully-fledged "Personality", Whitman's verse and incessant editorial revisions reflected a kind of continual becoming and was more accurately seen as the inauguration and adjustment of a symbolic self. In Harold Bloom's blunt words, *Leaves of Grass* was the "invention of [a] mask", i.e. a recipe for new and (until actually inaugurated) merely *potential* modes of being, centrally featuring a poetically constellated symbolic self defined by its genius for expressing the exact attitudes and psychoemotional nature that would ensure survival and enable satisfaction under such grim conditions as confronted "the real Whitman". Mark van Doren has said that between 1848 and 1855 Whitman "changed into a person who understood how to talk as if he were Adam reborn."[312]

Indeed, so mesmerizing and affective appears the genius for living of this symbolic

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[310] The first of these bullet points seems borne out by the considerable evidence that stories are linked to psychophysical responses. Here is Somerset Maugham to that effect: "It would be difficult to persuade an author that there was not a close interaction between the body and the mind. . . . Most writers have chills and fevers, aches and pains, nausea at times, when they are engaged in composition; and contrariwise they are aware to what morbid states of their body they owe many of their happiest inventions." From Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, 172–173. The long history of the word *catharsis*, which Aristotle uses it in his *Poetics*, is a reminder that a psychophysical regulation has long been associated with storytelling.

[311] From "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads".

[312] See Michael Sowder, *Whitman's Ecstatic Union: Conversion and Ideology in* Leaves of Grass, 57–59. See also Introduction to *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. by Mark van Doren, xiv.

self that Henry Miller, in his essay on Whitman, regarded its creation as "truly an awakening and not a mere development of creative talent" (note that Henry Miller heeds Whitman's request not to be viewed in terms of a literary performance). I have already mentioned that Whitman's symbolic self was frequently assumed by his "disciples" to be an accurate portrait of the poet, and I think Henry Miller is tempted to assume as much when he writes: "Between the early Whitman and the "awakened" Whitman there is no resemblance whatever. . . . Whitman remade himself from head to foot."[313] More to the point, Miller affirms my argument that the symbolic Whitmanean self enabled Whitman to, as Miller puts it, "march[] on, calm, steady, sure of himself, certain of ultimate victory".[314] This claim is amply corroborated by the work of several Whitman specialists (although it is of course not true that Whitman was permanently "sure of himself"; there is evidence of his personal doubts in several letters).

It is of course finally impossible *exactly* to *measure* the extent to which the historical "real" Whitman – the poet and citizen – was transformed by vocally creating a symbolic self, but as I have said we can only conclude that he benefited considerably from it.[315] This was the view of Horace Traubel – his companion and amanuensis – as well as the majority of later biographers; his biographer Justin Kaplan, for instance, calls his works a "gospel of the self redeemed through art", and the later biographer David S. Reynolds locates "a recipe for healing" in Whitman's poetry. (Acting as his own critic, Whitman himself wrote in one of his highly interesting and anonymous "self-reviews" from 1855 that *Leaves of Grass* contained a "voice bringing hope".)[316]

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[313] The Miller quotes are from his essay "Walt Whitman". See Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom and Dan Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, 206.

Asked to reflect on the *psychological* significance of the central miracle in the story of Christ's resurrection, Jordan Peterson has reflected that there are profound implications in "the idea that continual death and rebirth is a necessary precondition to proper human adaptation. Every time you learn something new: *that* is important. Part of the "stupid old you" has to die, and sometimes it can be an awful lot of you. In fact, it can be so much of you sometimes that you just die; you just can't handle it. So there is a real idea [in the proposition] that you have to identify with the part of yourself that transcends your current personality [and] can constantly die and be reborn." Jordan Peterson, from the lecture "Biblical Series III: God and the Hierarchy of Authority" [2:15:45].

[314] From Henry Miller's essay "Walt Whitman". See Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom and Dan Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, 206.

[315] The Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds has stated, as I have already mentioned, that "We may never know the complex relationship between the 'I' of his poetry . . . and the private Whitman." Cf. David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 199. Whitman always insisted that *Leaves of Grass* had been "the comfort of [his] life".

[316] Reynolds speaks of Whitman's poetry as "a recipe for healing" in his afterword to Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by David S. Reynolds, 86. Kaplan's words are from this interview with Rob Couteau: Justin Kaplan and Rob Couteau, " 'The Mystery of the Man': Justin Kaplan Talks About America's Greatest Poet". The 1855 "self-review" in question (famous for the opening last "An American bard at last!") is available in Walt Whitman, *Selected Poems 1855–1892*, 114.

xii. Giving Voice to What One Has on One's Mind

Alan Watts was cited earlier for stating that the self is in no true sense to be located like a conceptually coherent thing hiding "behind the mask of [a person's] apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego". I suspect the word "mask" carries negative connotations to many, but there is an important, etymologically rooted sense in which it is synonymous with "person" and in which "person" by the same token is approximately synonymous with "giving voice to what one has on one's mind" – and these points neatly sum up what I have been arguing in this chapter. So let me close this chapter with a few remarks on these issues. Here is Watts unpacking the etymological point:

> When you say, "I am a person," the word *person* is from the [artform of] drama. When you open a play script and see the list of the actors, this is the dramatis personae, the persons of the drama. The word *person* in Latin is *persona*, meaning "through sound," or something through which sound comes; the persona in Greek or Roman drama was the mask worn by the actors. And because they acted on an open-air stage, the mask's mouth was shaped like a small megaphone that would project the sound. So the person is the mask. Isn't it funny how we have forgotten that? Harry Emerson Fosdick could write a book called *On Being a Real Person*, which translated literally is, "How to be a genuine fake," because in the old sense the person is the role, the part played by the actor. But if you forget that you are the actor, and think you are the person, you have been taken in by your own role.

A leitmotif of *Leaves of Grass* is a kind of rapprochement, which is the result of the poet's juxtaposition of reality's forbidding and terrifying aspects (death, sickness, injury, loneliness, scorn, denouncement, armed conflict) and the verbally constellated, "magnificent and haughty" attitude of the individual confronting these things. The attitudes are those of "an individual who *creates a self* in the context of the fullest possible understanding of the external world", as Scholnick puts it.[317] *Leaves of Grass*, then, frequently juxtaposes variations of scenes where a (frequently triumphant) self is faced with (frequently terrible) reality:

> *I* match my spirit against *yours*, *you* orbs, growths, mountains, brutes,
> Copious as *you* are, *I* absorb you all in myself, and become the master myself.[318]

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[317] Emphasis mine. From the entry "Science" by Robert J. Scholnick in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 239. "[M]agnificent and haughty" is from the same entry. The quote starting "When you say . . ." is from Alan Watts, *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks: 1960–1969*, 57.

[318] These lines are from "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (emphasis mine).

As I side-note, let me ask: Does this kind of scenario tap into essential "beauty"? George Santayana seems to think so: see the quote from "Beauty, a Hint of Happiness" in footnote 308 and the commonality with

In light of Watts' words of the paradoxical, inherently thespian element of "being a real person", it ought to not upset even the most puritanical adherents of personal "authenticity" that Whitman in a manner of speaking has adopted a mask in order to give voice to his "magnificent and haughty" alter ego. Purists need to realize that "the authentic self" is too grand a phrase, that it falls apart under scrutiny, that capital A "Authenticity" is hence nowhere to be found, that in a manner of speaking Watts is right that "the person is the mask" and that by that token Whitman has in a certain sense become – and *is* – what he pretended to be (to borrow Vonnegut's words).

This may sound strange, but is not really, as Octavio Paz shows us. He introduces his chapter on Whitman with these words:

> Walt Whitman is the only great modern poet who does not seem to experience inconformity vis-à-vis his world. Or even loneliness; his monologue is a vast chorus. Doubtless there are, at least, two persons in him: the public poet and the private person, who conceals his real erotic inclinations. But his mask—the poet of democracy—is something more than a mask: it is his true face. Despite certain recent interpretations, the poetic dream and the historic one coincide in him completely. There is no break between his beliefs and the social reality.[319]

If we let Paz guide us to the assumption that Whitman's mask (the symbolic self he carefully contrived and continually honed and adjusted over the latter half of his life as a defense against his "anxieties and doubts and [the] presence of evil within him and around him") legitimately *was* his true face, his "willed optimis[tic]" face, (as opposed to something we really ought to dismiss as inauthentic), then it becomes easier to make sense of Whitman's words from "So Long!"

> This is no book,
> Who touches this, touches a man . . .

Leaves of Grass was the book in which via art he rendered his symbolic self "imperturbe", i.e. exemplifying and partaking of an existential attitude that made it "balanced for contingencies" (note

Whitman's 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Note too that D. H. Lawrence corroborates Whitman's words (about the poet being a master of the path between reality and the soul) by writing: "The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment. As mankind is always struggling in the toils of old relationships, art is always ahead of the "times," which themselves are always far in the rear of the living moment. . . . A new relation, a new relatedness hurts somewhat in the attaining; and will always hurt. So life will always hurt." D. H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel", 402–403.

[319] Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre: The Poem, The Poetic Revelation, Poetry and History*, 271.

that Harrower above also uses the metaphor of balance; see epigraphical perspective 6). *Leaves of Grass* was the work in which he directly confronted and addressed

> . . . poverties, wincings, and sulky retreats,
> . . . foes that in conflict have overcome me,
> . . .
> . . . degradations, . . . tussle[s] with passions and appetites,
> . . . smarts from dissatisfied friendships . . .,
> . . . toil of painful and choked articulations [etc.],[320]

and told these "hells" (as Horace Traubel might say)[321]

> Ah think not you finally triumph, *my real self has yet to come forth*,
> It shall yet march forth o'ermastering, till all lies beneath me,
> It shall yet stand up the soldier of ultimate victory.[322]

Here is an example of the poet revealing that he was consciously in the process of self-realization (awaiting his "real self"). He shows himself to be at once curing and constructing his self (to allude to the title of Judith Harris's book). With Donnelly I believe that while investigating, exploring, yearning for a precisely "*potential* psychology" Whitman in the moment of writing in fact "reflect[s] a great deal on [his] own [current] psychology", which obviously evolves – yet perhaps not quite as fast as his poetry would invite it to. When Anne Gilchrist, the author of "An Englishwoman's estimate of Walt Whitman", was powerfully taken in (indeed hopelessly seduced and romantically attracted) by Whitman's mesmerizing and affective lines of self-realization-stroke-self-repair, Whitman had to bust the myth and spell out the categorical difference between self-portrait and self-projection:

> Dear friend, [he wrote to her,] let me warn you somewhat about myself—& yourself also. You must not construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W. W. and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W. W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy such devotion.

Crucially, the *Leaves of Grass* "Figure" that Gilchrist told Whitman that she had fallen in love with, really *was* "ideal" – a godlike being – so on that point Gilchrist was far from imaging things (as Whitman would later admit). What she saw – and took the risk of directly telling her beloved that

[320] From "Ah Poverties Wincings, and Sulky Retreats".
[321] Cf. the words, spoken by Horace Traubel at the centenary of Whitman's birth in 1919 (footnote 50 and 557).
[322] Emphasis mine. From "Ah Poverties, Wincings and Sulky Retreats".

she saw – was plainly there to see, only it was not to be taken literally for it was no self-portrait. In his meditation on those events several years later, Whitman said, "She was not a blind dreamer—a chaser of fancies: she was concrete—*spiritually* concrete." (My emphasis; these words were recorded by Traubel and featured in *Intimate with Walt* under the heading "Oxygenated Men and Women: Walt's Pantheon".)

xiii. Towards Psychic Healing

The self that emerges from *Leaves of Grass* is "ideal", to be sure – or sublime. I have presented Harold Bloom's conception of the "American Sublime" (of which Harold Bloom considers Whitman an exemplar) as that which "transcend[s] the human without forsaking humanism". But I would argue – uncontroversially I hope – that nothing in the world (no problem or sorrow, or anxiety or loneliness) is transcended via a sublime text unless the individual "is basically willing" to cooperate; writes Alan Watts (immediately followed by Aldous Huxley):

> We do not need a new religion or a new bible. We need a new experience – a new feeling of what it is to be "I." The lowdown (which is of course the secret and profound view) on life is that our normal sensation of self is a hoax, or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing – with our own tacit consent, just as every hypnotized person is basically willing to be hypnotized.[323]

> The universal and ever-present urge to self-transcendence is not to be abolished by slamming the currently popular Doors in the Wall. The only reasonable policy it to open other, better doors . . . [some of which] will be social and technological in nature, others religious or psychological . . .[324]

The reason I cite this is that I believe that for a work of self-transcending or sublime potential to help in a psychological fashion the suffering person must in some way mentally allow, permit or will that his or her world-view and attitudes undergo change or enhancement of some sort. Shoshana Felman has noted that "the capacity to witness and the act of bearing witness in themselves embody some remedial quality and belong . . ., in obscure ways, to the healing process."[325] (See also the Jung quote in footnote 60.) Interestingly, this amounts to a *faith* in the

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[323] Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, 12. The quotation above ("Dear friend") is cited in Marion Walker Alcaro, *Walt Whitman's Mrs. G: A Biography of Anne Gilchrist*, 145.
[324] Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 64. As for "religious", cf. Whitman's words on the "religious and moral character" (footnote 44).
[325] Felman is cited in Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 16.

work, more specifically a faith in what psychological conversion or healing the work could potentially facilitate. Michael Frayn, who has briefly been mentioned above, offers a useful description of the kind of faith I intend, the kind of faith on which self-transcendence must, I think, be predicated. I think it can be argued that *Leaves of Grass* amounts to a declaration of faith on the poet's part, which is a claim compatible with Harold Bloom's observation that "American literary selfhood" as represented by Whitman exemplifies "the American Religion".[326] I shall return to this – and the function of prayer – in chapter 3 where I argue that Whitman is continually at work constructing (or expressing his dependence on) a "sublime" poetic program capable of supporting him by suggesting with which attitudes he might be equal to his suffering and survive in a frequently hostile world.

Citing Arthur Krystal, I have said above that literature at once "makes life more manageable" and is "the self-conscious repository of consciousness" (footnote 286). These remarks should be kept carefully in mind in the context of the following two observations:

> "Writers write for themselves and not for their readers, and that art has nothing to do with communication between person and person, only with communication between different parts of a person's mind."[327]
> —Rebecca West

> "Self is not an idea—it is simply the perception of intercommunications of internal experience, which accompanies that experience itself."[328]
> —Wilhelm Wundt)

(I have underlined the emergent "resonances" between West and Wundt.) Taking West and Wundt at their word for the moment, if "art [amounts to] communication between different parts of a person's mind" and "self [amounts to] the perception of intercommunications of internal experience", then the two insights seem to be, if not synonymous, certainly conceptually and thematically related. They seem teleologically geared toward the same end, namely that of preserving (or serving as repository, in Krystal's word, for) something like self, or consciousness, or self-consciousness.

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[326] Indeed, as I have mentioned, Asselineau found that it was Whitman's "faith and enthusiasm [which] always brought him through." See footnote 307.
[327] Quoted in Lisa M. Schwerdt, *Isherwood's Fiction: The Self and Technique*, 110.
[328] Quoted in Edward Carpenter, *The Art of Creation: Essays on the Self and Its Powers*, 70.

xiv. Writing and Healing the Self

In order to be able to appropriately close this chapter, I would like to approach the above sentiment (derived from West, Wundt and Krystal) via a different route: The philosophical reasons are admittedly complicated, so I shall select and emphasize only the necessary ones in this summing-up.

In part because we are animated beings whose existential meaning, import and precise manifestation in the world as well as in our own eyes is in the constant process of being determined and "recalculated" as the scenes and trials around us shift (and have us struggling to keep up and act accordingly), it is impossible to arrive at something like a final, fixed and definitive statement about who and what we truly are at the level of the self. There are several possible levels of analysis, each of which has validity, but ultimately our being is too strange a phenomenon – and too difficult to explain – for us to get an adequate intellectual handle on being once and for all. In the attempt to triangulate the phenomenon a combination of narrative and phenomenological description seems the most sensible way forward. Such approaches appear to get the balance more or less right between the need for intellectual humility (given the philosophical difficulty of the problem) and the need for an answer (given humans' innate desire to comprehend their situation). (No doubt the Biblical stories, which I have touched on here and there, owe their longevity as cultural artefacts in part to the fact that stories engage the human psyche in ways disembodied facts cannot.) When Judith Harris shrewdly uses the word "renovation" (see *Signifying Pain*, xi) for the kind of maintenance work without which the human self would fossilize or decay, she thereby, sensibly and indirectly, inaugurates a kind of image of what a human self is like. (She also invites us to move from her term – "renovation" – to the inference (correct in my opinion) that our own hand is needed; for we can neither renovate nor partake of the in principle open-ended construction, reconstruction, healing and redemption of our selves if we do not take deliberate action and exercise the kind of free agency whose conceptualization I have found so well expressed by Viktor Frankl; see the end of chapter 1.)

Harris's metaphors associated with care, repair, renovation etc. bring to mind a philosophical thought experiment – familiar to philosophers of identity – known as the Ship of Theseus or Neurath's Boat. In order to present it here, I will have to stress that, as with our selves, we are both the ship and the crew (both "body and soul"). Our condition is very similar to Neurath's sailors about whom Otto Neurath says:

> [On] the open sea [they] must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.[329]

In the thought experiment's sister incarnation – when it is presented as the "Ship of Theseus" – the emphasis is put on the thought-provoking fact that it is not clear whether the ship is the very same one once sails, spars, rigging and planks have all been tossed overboard and replaced with substitutive material. (About preservation of human identity across time, George Orwell said in the essay "England, Your England": "What have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person.") Again, in my appropriation of these naval images and metaphors, which is done merely for purposes of illustration and is not to be taken as a stab at formal philosophy, we are at once Theseus and his ship: Our self needs renovating, and *something* in us – I have introduced the Jungian concept of a "double", or "Daimon" (in Bloom, "Daemon") – is capable, if we are fortunate, of carrying out the required self-renovation.

The metaphor is fairly common across thinkers of self, life, world and meaning. Nietzsche engaged the image as laid out by Schopenhauer (in *The World as Will and Idea*) who had observed, appropriately enough, that a boat

> provides stability, solace, and a way of rescuing the self from its surrounding tumult. In others words, the creation of an object – which is to say, the creation of some thing with limits – is the common denominator that unites the objectification of the self (the *principium individuationis*) with the objective world, a world of objects that are always (as Protagoras had already argued) true.[330]

Much could be said about this sentence but beyond its immediately obvious relevance to my thoughts on constructing and continually renovating the self, I will only mention that it very significantly indicates that a well-functioning self unites us well with the world of objects, and that the "rapprochement" is achieved through a creative effort ("the creation of some thing").[331] So, too, for the life of selves: Indeed, I consider this the highest, or most central and significant, of the self's potentials and functions. It appears that the theme was intriguing to Nietzsche, who having just read

[329] From M. Neurath and Robert S. Cohen, ed., *Empiricism and Sociology*,199.
[330] Cited in Paul Gordon, *Tragedy After Nietzsche: Rapturous Superabundance*, 63.
[331] Recall Seamus Heaney's "scullery bucket" metaphor in footnote 196.

Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* wrote:

> one might say of Apollo what Schopenhauer says, in the first part of *The World as Will and Idea*, of man caught in the veil of Maya: "Even as on an immense, raging sea, assailed by huge wave crests, a man sits in a little rowboat trusting his frail craft, so, amidst the furious torments of this, the individual sits tranquilly, supported by the *principium individuationis* and relying on it."[332]

Nietzsche goes on to posit that "the shattering of the *principium individuationis*" is generally accompanied by a "a glorious transport . . . aris[ing] in man, even from the very depths of nature", which takes him into considerations of "Dionysian rapture" (where I shall not pursue him). Let me return instead to the concept of bringing the self into a condition from which it can bear the trials of its immersion in the world of objects.

xv. Rapprochement – World and Self

Henry Miller frequently said that he did not intend to change the world but was rather interested in changing himself.[333] He admired, as I have mentioned, E. Graham Howe's *War Dance: A Study of the Psychology of War* for this passage:

> Certainly it is true that our attitude towards this 'real' external world is determined by our attitude towards these forces which exist within ourselves. It is as if in that outer world we are seeing ourselves as within a mirror. It is not so objective as it seems: it is as if we change the map of life itself by changing our attitudes to it.[334]

Goethe is another writer who became aware that if we are to survive on the storm-tossed ocean of life then we need a self – a soul, a psychic constitution – that can sustain repeated collisions with

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[332] Cited in Paul Gordon, *Tragedy After Nietzsche: Rapturous Superabundance*, 63.

[333] See the quote – referenced in footnote 159 – from Henry Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, 141. Elsewhere Miller wrote "The world has not to be put in order: the world is order incarnate. the world is order incarnate. It is for us to put ourselves in unison with this order, to know what is the world order in contradistinction to the wishful-thinking orders which we seek to impose on one another." From Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life*, 363. (Cf. Carl Rogers's words, cited earlier, "[when] we thoroughly accept what we are[, then] change seems to come about almost unnoticed.") Similar to something Proust wrote (see footnote 374), Miller also wrote "One's destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things." From Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 25.

[334] E. Graham Howe, *War Dance*, 190–191.

what Freud called "hostile life". A "nature" that had mastered that challenge was, in Goethe's terminology, of an "Antique" variety, aside from which quality it was to be understood as

> an unfragmented nature which operates as a whole, knows itself one with the world and therefore does not experience the objective external world as something alien, which comes to meet the inner world of man, but recognises in it the answering counterparts to his own sensations.[335]

When previously I stated that human beings are on the whole badly served by not being told – or keeping from themselves – the fundamental truth or truths about human existence, I was alluding to what Goethe is expressing here: we cannot be well-adapted to reality if reality is inadequately or misleadingly represented to us; we grow strong in proportion as we know the truth. Regardless of what Santayana actually meant by the word "beauty" in the following, he too was a thinker concerned with the possibility for uniting the human self and the real world in a bearable manner: "Beauty is a pledge of the possible conformity between the soul and nature, and consequently a ground of faith in the supremacy of the good." As to how that might be done, Santayana offers a view on "masks", which, incidentally, Erving Goffman found very instructive. The quote recalls remarks surrounding that metaphor presented earlier in this dissertation. Observe that in our common understanding of the word, a mask denotes a consistent, carefully-achieved "pre-emptive" attitude of the face inserted in the liminal space between the self and the world. In Santayana's words:

> Masks are arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feeling, at once faithful, discreet, and superlative. Living things in contact with the air must acquire a cuticle, and it is not urged against cuticles that they are not hearts; yet some philosophers seem to be angry with images for not being things, and with words for not being feelings. Words and images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than the substances they cover but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation. I would not say that substance exists for the sake of appearance, or faces for the sake of masks, or the passions for the sake of poetry and virtue. Nothing arises in nature for the sake of anything else; all these phases and products are involved equally in the round of existence . . .[336]

Mask, as the reader will begin to see, is thus my metaphor for the inner constitution, a template for wholesome attitudes of the self without which being in the world would be immeasurably harder. Masks are crafted, yet they signify to those confronting them a specific psychoemotional

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[335] Goethe is cited in Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, 138n14. For "answering counterpart", cf. Bloom's phrase "answering greatness" in footnote 169.

[336] George Santayana, cited and featured as an epigraph in Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

disposition. Poems, too, are crafted – and in the process of crafting them we might manage to slip into doing some psychotherapeutic work of the sort that leaves us better and stronger, the sort that has a psychologically ameliorative effect. Harold Bloom, as I have said, introduces the intriguing concept of "the influence of a mind upon itself" (it is a recurring phrase in *The Daemon Knows*).

To grossly oversimplify what I am suggesting (and have been suggesting for several pages): Due to the continually restless, everchanging nature of the human psyche, it is a possibility to move in two directions under one's own psychic lights. One can either follow imagination in the pathological direction toward "insanity . . . and regression" (as Peterson puts it in epigraphic perspective 22), or one can aspire with Shelley (see epigraphic perspective 20) to have

> [Imagination act] upon [Reason's] thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.

Thus the poet and the reader may both learn "that there is no singing school for his soul except the study of the monuments of its own magnificence" (see epigraphic statement 23). Word for word, poem for poem, the chaos that would engulf him can be beaten back with – and interspersed by – the effort and will to countervail "death [and] entropy" (in Gardner's phrase), which is a will I have characterized as something functionally similar to the divine Logos. Roger Scruton said:

> By speaking in the first person we can make statements about ourselves, answer questions, and engage in reasoning and advice in ways that bypass all the normal methods of discovery. [We can arrive at] the assurance that, when you and I both speak sincerely, what we say is trustworthy[.] . . . [W]e inhabit a life-world that is not reducible to the world of nature, any more than the life in a painting is reducible to the lines and pigments from which it is composed".[337]

Whitman never doubted that decided "will" to countervail the adverse constitutive elements of our environment is critical to the success of the intervention – we must proceed from a first initiative arising in decided volition:

> The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. . . . He learns the lesson . . . . he places himself where the future becomes present.

Hypothetically speaking, when the self has learned to tell the two directions apart and begun to express loyal dedication to the right one, the self will be on the road to the situation so eloquently sketched by Goethe: an integrated (or "whole") self which no longer finds the objective external world alien but "recognises in it the answering counterparts to his own sensations" (see footnote

[337] From Roger Scruton, "If We Are Not Just Animals, What Are We?", in *The Stone*, March 6, 2017.

353). That psychic condition or state – from which living must feel very much like gently streaming with and gliding through the contours of the surface of being and "agreeing" in the deepest sense with reality[338] – was on Jung's mind as well:

> "All that is outside, also is inside," we could say with Goethe. But this "inside," which modern rationalism is so eager to derive from "outside," has an *a priori* structure of its own that antedates all conscious experience. It is quite impossible to conceive how "experience" in the widest sense, or, for that matter, anything psychic, could originate exclusively in the outside world. The psyche is part of the inmost mystery of life, and it has its own peculiar structure and its elements, the archetypes, ever "originated" at all it a metaphysical question and therefore unanswerable. The structure is something given, the precondition that is found to be present in every case. And this is the *mother*, the matrix—the form into which all experience is poured.[339]

Whether Jung read Emerson or not I do not know, but I have found a passage to the same effect (even down to the metaphor of "pouring") in Emerson's essay "The Transcendentalist", which also deals with the issue of being a self immersed in the world of phenomena:

> All that you call the world is the shadow of that substance which you are, the perpetual creation of the powers of thought, of those that are dependent and of those that are independent of your will. Do not cumber yourself with fruitless pains to mend and remedy remote effects; let the soul be erect, and all things will go well. You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance. Let any thought or motive of mine be different from that they are, the difference will transform my condition and economy. I—this thought which is called I,—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould. You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the power of me. Am I in harmony with myself? [then] my position will seem to you just and commanding. Am I vicious and insane? [then] my fortunes will seem to you obscure and descending.[340]

This is naturally an exciting prospect and one that seems to touch on the vocation of mystics, ascetics and hermits. Indirectly, it harks back the Frame Problem as well, yet introduces the fact (addressed by Kant) that in examining the external world I am necessarily barred from extracting the real suchness of its elements. How they appear to me is a partial consequence of my own "suchness", if you will. I said – several pages back – that I would consider the human self a "sublime" phenomenon, and I have granted that there are religious overtones to the word "sublime";

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[338] Trying to resolve the problem "what is a saint?", Leonard Cohen in one of his novels describes such a state as well as anybody else, in my opinion. I return to his words on an attitude which can be considered "saintly" in chapter 3 (footnote 382).

[339] Carl Jung, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype", in *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, paragraph 187.

[340] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist", in Lawrence Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*, 110.

hopefully these remarks on the simultaneous participation of and attitudinal distancing from the "hostile world" are sufficient substantiation for those stances. (The mysteries of consciousness and being lend themselves willingly to the ideas of theologians.)[341]

xvi. Natural Self-Attitudes

Like Goethe and others, Whitman knew that living well depended on achieving a condition of self in which the objects of the world did not traumatize him into immobility. I am arguing that writing can be crucially useful as a methodology in the process of achieving such a thing – whether we prefer the word balance, harmony, wholeness or psychic health. Distancing himself from the themes of delirium which he associated with Edgar Allen Poe, he once wrote:

> I wanted, and still want for poetry, the clear sun shining, and fresh air blowing—the strength and power of health, not of delirium, even amid the stormiest passions—with always the background of the eternal moralities.[342]

Similarly, in the 1855 Preface he wrote that "to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals, and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside, is the flawless triumph of art."[343] The goal was to become "self-balanced for contingencies", not the least of which were those of "night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs". He longed to be (and thought it possible to become) "enough for myself" in the same way "the fishes and birds are . . . enough for themselves", and to approach the realization of that desire he found it, at least in principle, a promising strategy to emulate such attitudes as "the trees and animals" manifested. Indeed, he wrote poems celebrating the being manifested by plants ("I Saw in Louisiana a Live-oak Growing", "This Compost!") and animals

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[341] Although not a theologian, consider these pertinent words from Peterson: "The notion that it's necessary to have an individual relationship with the Absolute – with God, for example – is a statement of the fact that we are in fact adapted to the nature of reality, and if we draw on everything that is within ourselves without fear then we can develop the sorts of personalities that are powerful enough to confront the horrible absolute and to consider that justifiable and worthwhile." From Jordan Peterson, "Say No to Happiness: CBS Ideas" [33:10].

Michael Moon, editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, writes that Whitman is poet through his life displays a "compassionate involvement in the episodes of human fortitude and *faith*" (my emphasis). From

[342] Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, 157. On the last page (page 200) of the text of *Specimen Days*, Whitman cites Marcus Aurelius on virtue: "[W]hat is it, only a living and enthusiastic sympathy with Nature?" – to which he adds, significantly, "Perhaps indeed the efforts of the true poets, founders, religions, literatures, all ages, have been, and ever will be, our time and times to come, essentially the same—to bring people back from their persistent strayings and sickly abstractions, to the costless average, divine, original concrete." Those lines hint – albeit subtly – at the death-and-rebirth archetype I have indicated pervades Whitman's work.

[343] From "Preface, 1855", in Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, 268.

("Song of Myself", section 32) as if longing to comprehend their secrets and adopt their existential methodology:

> I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
> I stand and look at them long and long.
>
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
> Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
> Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.
>
> So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
> They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.
> I wonder where they get those tokens,
> Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?[344]

I shall return to this issue in chapter 5 in a discussion of Jacques Lacan's Mirror Phase.

In *Whitman's America*, his biographer David S. Reynolds argues that Whitman helped calm his private turbulence by regulating his poetic persona, a claim he expands thus elsewhere: "Whitman's poetic persona was constructed as an absorptive device that could imaginatively defuse rancorous sectional quarrels, just as in his private life Whitman cultivated a "superb calm character" to ameliorate personal upheavals."[345] (For "poetic persona" I prefer "symbolic self", on behalf of whose ability to instruct and support the actual self I am arguing.) In the just quoted verses, a partial constitution for a potential self is reflected: the principles of a symbolic self are set down in writing as a shield – "cuirass", "mask", "pose" – against the kinds of ill that would put the self in existential jeopardy (specifically, in this case, sin, the confusing demands of religion, general unhappiness). To return to the naval metaphors for a second, Henry Miller wrote that "Whoever has studied Whitman's life must be amazed at the skill with which he steered his bark through troubled waters. He never relinquishes his grasp of the oar, never flinches, never wavers, never compromises"; and Whitman himself at times of crisis found similarities between his life and

[344] From "Song of Myself". In "A Song of the Rolling Earth", he wrote: "No politics, song, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account, unless it compare with the amplitude of the earth, / Unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude of the earth."
[345] From David S. Reynolds's introduction to David S. Reynolds, ed., *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, 9.

> some lengthen'd ship-voyage, wherein more than once the last hour had apparently arrived, and we seem'd certainly going down—yet reaching port in a sufficient way through all discomfitures at last.[346]

He did this, Asselineau records, because despite being "tormented, unstable, storm-tossed[,] his work allowed him to recover his equilibrium and achieve serenity. His poetry saved him. By its means he gradually escaped the dark and stormy chaos where he had been floundering and emerged in an orderly, peaceful universe where light overcame dark."[347]

xvii. The Poem as Constitutional Blueprint

On the ways in which "[h]is poetry saved him" and might save others, I have suggested that the poetic creation can be conducive (principally via such pursuits as the crafting of a symbolic self) to the development of an *actual* self fully capable of thriving in the world despite the hostility and chaos inherent to the latter – and despite the ineradicable possibility of being swallowed by troubled waters. Adopting the attitudes of the symbolic self I have likened to the donning of a mask. The not unreasonable accusation that that move has a whiff of inauthenticity about it was one that Asselineau pondered:

> In order to resemble the mythical personage of the book, the one Whitman wanted to be but was not, he was often obliged to distort the facts somewhat. In particular, in his first edition, he completely suppressed his past as a journalist and a man of letters and passed himself off as an uneducated but inspired carpenter, as a "rough." Is it then necessary to accuse him of duplicity and imposture, to reproach him for his "pose" as Esther Shephard has done? This would be to misconceive the complexity of the problem. When Whitman made such affirmations, he was perfectly sincere. He really identified himself in imagination with the man he wanted to be. To a certain extent he became the ideal being of whom he dreamed and thus lived the part he had written for himself. He was so firmly persuaded of his own absolute sincerity that he made complete frankness one of the criteria for the recognition of great poets: "The great poets are . . . to be known by the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor."
>
> There is no justification for speaking of a "pose" in the case of Whitman, for that would be to take up again the whole problem of sincerity

[346] From Whitman's "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads". For his preference for this metaphor, cf. his words from *Democratic Vistas*: "We sail a dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents, vortices—all so dark, untried, and whither shall we turn?" In old age, Whitman once exclaimed despairingly to Traubel, "I have spent a hard day. Oh! I am tempest-tossed—bound to go down—bound to yield, to give up the struggle, at last!" Also, see the very last citation in chapter 1.

[347] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 16.

> and to affirm with J. P. Sartre that "a man is never anything but an imposture," or with Valéry that "every work of art is a fake." Let us say, then, quite simply that Whitman wanted to create a book and that in so doing he has created himself.[348]

The last line above resonates with what I imagine were the feelings of Lazarus Aaronson when he wrote these well-known lines of prayer and poetry:

> All that I am is staked on words.
> Bless their meaning, Lord, or I become
> Slave to the heavy, hollow, mindless drum.
>
> Make me the maker of my words.
> Let me renew myself in my own speech,
> Till I become at last the thing I teach.
>
> And let a taste be in my words,
> That men may savour what is man in me,
> And know how much I fail, how little see.[349]

By way of closing this chapter, I want to take a closer look at Asselineau's claim that by creating *Leaves of Grass* "Whitman . . . created himself".

A useful way of emblematizing what I have said about the potential for writing to instruct and inform the generation of self is available in another – and rather famous – observation from Sartre. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre explores the origins of a human being with the invention and production of certain mundane articles (e.g. tools such as pen-knives). In the case of the former, the "essence [of any tool] – that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible – precedes its existence" because it was "made by an artisan who had a conception of it". Sartre's atheistic existentialism (which forbids him to assume the existence of some "supernal artisan" in the heavens) then leads him to the conclusion that "there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it[and that that] being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality." In keeping with that, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards . . . and then he will be what he makes of himself." (I am not going to enlarge here on the Lockean *tabula rasa* nor on the role of a biologically determined human nature.) Instead I will at this point return to the main issue: I am going to posit that the beleaguered self, despite its understandable fear and trembling, nevertheless confronts the

[348] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 15–16.
[349] This poem, entitled "The Stake", goes on for three more stanzas. Published in *The Homeward Journey and Other Poems* in 1946.

redemptive option of using the word to construct something akin to the Sartrean "essence" which hypothetically would have preceded human existence had human beings been the handiwork of God. Readers of Sartre sometimes call this "something" I am talking about a "blueprint for human beings."[350] In case the argumentative maneuver I have just performed seems to err on the eccentric side of academic discourse, let me simply present a textual example which I consider to be Whitman's very overt admission that his poems truly *were* thought of as something like blueprints (or maps) for his self – but let me first suggest that the idea is not as new and exotic as it might seem. After all, John Milton proposed in *Areopagitica* that "Books . . . preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extractions of that living intellect that bred them", which seems to establish the same intimate link between text and self.[351] And Whitman, before setting out to write *Leaves of Grass*, gave himself the injunction, scribbled in a notebook and reiterating what I described as his admiration for the qualities of the natural world, to

> Outline sketch of a superb calm character, [one whose] emotions &c are complete in himself, irrespective of whether his love, friendship, &c are returned, or not[, who] grows, blooms, like some perfect tree or flower, in Nature, whether viewed by admiring eyes, or in some wild or wood, entirely unknown [and is] analog[ous with] the earth, complete in itself, enfolding in itself all processes of growth effusing life & power, for hidden purposes.[352]

At the very least this is evidence that his continuous construction of self had a strong *written* dimension (a fact of which he was conscious) – *and* that the writing was *Leaves of Grass*.[353]

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[350] Cf. David R. Law, *Briefly: Sartre's Existentialism and Humanism*, 6.

[351] Consider my words on the line "Who touches this [book], touches a man" (above footnote 320). Henry Miller indicates a similar relation by pointing out – somewhat cryptically – that a writer's death "often enables us to see . . . that his life and work were one." From Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life*, 37.

However, Daniel Dennett, whose metaphor for the self ("pandemonium") has already been mentioned and should be borne in mind at this point, makes the more formal argument that "We . . . are almost constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves, and hence *representing* ourselves, in language and gesture, external and internal . . . Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate, but words, words, words. . . . Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is . . . telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are. . . . These strings or streams of narrative issue forth *as if* from a single source – not just in the obvious physical sense of flowing from just one mouth, or one pencil or pen, but in a more subtle sense: their effect on any audience is to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a *center of narrative gravity*." From Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 13.

[352] Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, vol. 2, *Washington*, 889. In 1876, he felt he had done so, as he said in an interview in the New York paper *World*. See Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 8.

[353] I feel confident stating the latter because it has been well documented that Whitman often mused on upcoming changes and additions to *Leaves of Grass* in his notebooks. Michael Moon writes that "During the crisis years of the early 1860s, the poet, deeply perturbed but invincibly hopeful, entered into his notebooks just such adjuration to himself [as would later evolve into the poem "Ah Poverties, Wincings, and Sulky Retreats"]". From an editorial note in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Michael Moon, 401n7.

Ezra Greenspan writes: "Privately, . . . he was pouring his personal thoughts, ideas, opinions, ideals,

Now for what I deem to be Whitman's unmistakable admission that his poems were seen by the poet as forming a kind of personal "constitution", a series of blueprints for his self; significantly, his hand-written signature was affixed to the following poem which was granted the unique status of serving as title-page epigraph in three late editions of *Leaves of Grass*:

> Come, said my Soul,
> Such verses for my Body let us write, (for we are one,)
> That should I [the Soul] after death invisibly return,
> Or, long, long hence, in other spheres,
> There to some group of mates the chants resuming,
> (Tallying Earth's soil, trees, winds, tumultuous waves,)
> Ever with pleas'd smile I may keep on,
> Ever and ever yet the verses owning—as, first, I here and now,
> Signing for Soul and Body, set to them my name,
>
> Walt Whitman

Chapter 3. *"His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things"*: Whitman as Eulogist for the Self

Chapter summary: Starting from the premise that psychic suffering – whether the source thereof is a physical, exterior threat to well-being or some essentially psychological crisis (e.g. shame or anxiety) – is a contingent existential possibility from which there is no attractive immunity, the question is: Where does that leave the individual self? I have already begun to argue that words can be used therapeutically in a number of ways, and in the remaining parts of the dissertation I turn to Whitman and show how he exemplifies

hopes, and beliefs into homemade notebooks and into marginal comments he wrote onto the many and varied clippings he was collecting from his periodical and book readings. In these various notebooks and marginalia, one can see the clearest reflection of Whitman's self-transformation." From Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader*, 73.

Roger Asselineau also discusses the role and use of the poet's notebooks; see his biography *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 69, 186 and 188.

Consider again the meaning of this line, deep within *Leaves of Grass*: "My real self has yet to come forth."

some of them, predominantly in his poetry. In chapter 3, I explore a central issue best described as the way in which words – poetry – offer the writing self an opportunity to constitutionally compose and inaugurate a symbolic self or persona (or poetic "protagonist" in Gregory Orr's nomenclature) that uniquely possesses the wisdom, personal resources, courage and perspective that surviving some particular crisis of being are felt to require and which the actual self cannot yet – but may with effort potentially learn to – embody. To borrow Timothy Donnelly's words (see footnote 288), I argue that Walt Whitman's poetry can profitably be thought of as his attempt to investigate possible psychologies rather than dramatize his own as presently manifested. I argue too that creating and continually recreating a symbolic self in lines represent a convenient way of capturing, honing, augmenting and studying present and latent psychic possibilities and potentials. According to Asselineau, Whitman's life is a proof that "creat[ing] a book" and "creat[ing one]self" are sometimes mutually sympathetic (or symbiotic) projects and endeavors (see footnote 348). Perpetuating the dissertation's interest in the theme of existential well-being and survival, the chapter establishes that survival finally hinges on the self's ability to, in Montaigne's words, "endure what [it] cannot avoid", and *that* includes its own company (which will be the theme of chapter 4) and the trials and tribulations of the concrete external world (which will concern me in this chapter). For that reason, I look exclusively at those aspects of Whitman's symbolic selves which seem to be of relevance in contexts associated with being and living, thriving and surviving. It is a central argument in the chapter that an existential disposition or attitude pervaded by "saintly" largeness and affection is a strong position from which to confront the reality of being and anticipate and finally welcome future threats to being. Such an attitude is defined. Although the sincere promotion of such an attitude is clearly theodicial in nature (as Gerald Heard, William James, Jordan Peterson and many others have intimated), in using the word "saintly" I intend no implications having to do with any deity or institutionalized religion. The argumentation learns from Friedrich Nietzsche in a number of ways, which turns out to be interesting given both men's considerable "debt" to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (although not to each other). It seems, in the words of Terry Mulcaire, that Whitman found that the problems of the human condition "were not finally obstacles to overcome, but potential sources of beauty to be incorporated into an aesthetic view of the word, in which suffering,

sorrow, and pain will always be essential moments in an endless and ultimately positive dialectical progress."

* * *

You are not thrown to the winds, you gather certainly and safely around yourself,
Yourself! yourself! yourself, for ever and ever!
. . .
It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your mother and father, it is to identify you,
It is not that you should be undecided, but that you should be decided,
Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form'd in you,
You are henceforth secure, whatever comes or goes.
—Walt Whitman, "To Think of Time"

In the previous chapters I have considered many different aspects of existential crisis and countered that with the essentially hopeful argument – adopted from Nietzsche and others – that one antidote to the difficulty of life is reliably to be located in finding "some meaning in the suffering" (see footnote 189). I have also explored one important category of such redemptive meaning and suggested that there is absolute (inarguable and non-relative) meaning to be derived from becoming conscious of the ways in which one's crisis and suffering can confer, in Edward Carpenter's words, "power and decisiveness to individuality" (see footnote 134), which is another way of stating the potential upside of what at first glance seems unmitigated catastrophe: namely, the emergence of a new expression of self. In "Song of Myself", Whitman reflects on the tangible world "quivering [him] to a new identity"; in "Passage to India" he writes, "How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how speak, if, out of myself, / I could not launch . . . superior universes?" The emergence of the new "superior" self (superior to what confronts and surrounds it in the present moment) is the simultaneous transcendence of other inadequate instantiations of self – hence the death-and-rebirth metaphor. (The analogy to a Darwinian process of evolution is worth indicating but not worth getting caught up in or pursuing.) Whitman indicated his familiarity with the process when he spoke of

> . . . that something in the soul which says [to the sources of suffering], Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain.[354]

I have cited several thinkers as well as poets to the effect that such an outcome is the only way through life's inevitable catastrophes. And I have said that writing can be of instrumental help in the process:

> [T]rauma is, by definition, among the fiercest and most destructive forms disorder can take. Trauma, either on an intimate or a collective scale, has the power to annihilate the self and shred the web of meanings that support its existence. [Cf. Whitman's phrase "receiving identity through materials" in footnotes 395 and 397.] And yet, the evidence of lyric poetry is equally clear—deep in the recesses of the human spirit, there is some instinct to rebuild the web of meanings with the same quiet determination we witness in the garden spider as it repairs the threads winds and weather have torn.[355]

Fortunately most of life is not crisis, despair and traumatic catastrophe. My reason for jumping straight to and then dwelling on moments where life is acutely imperiled and self severely threatened is simply my intuition that the essential things come into focus when the situation assumes the characteristics of a life-or-death scenario. I suppose that – at least by analogy – that idea is what Hegel aimed at when he wrote "The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering" on which he provided the elaboration that "only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real."[356] A related reason is captured in these considerations: Speaking of the Enûma Eliš (the Balylonian creation myth), Jordan Peterson deems it an archetypal motif that "the hero is always born *at the time of maximal crisis*" (emphasis mine). The reason is simple, he adds: "If your culture is dealing well with the forces of the unknown so that everything is static but productive [and] so that problems don't arise, there's no reason for the hero . . . It's only when crisis beckons that the birth of the hero is necessary."[357] In plainer language, I am motivated to look at traumatic situations because, straightforwardly enough, if the considerable problem of surviving under unreasonable circumstances can be solved then it seems likely that we

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[354] From Whitman's Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

[355] Robert Bly, *Poetry as Survival*, 132.

[356] From G. W. F. Hegel, Preface to *Philosophy of Right* (1820).

When Blake stated that "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom", he may have been trying to articulate the same truth (provided we construe "excess" in Pascal's sense: "Qualities carried to excess are bad for us . . .; too much noise deafens us, too much light dazzles"). From Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 63.

[357] Jordan Peterson, "Maps of Meaning: 2 Contending with Chaos (TVO)" [17:30].

shall also know how to solve the incomparably smaller problem of surviving under manageable and normal circumstances. On top of that perspective, one does not have to be a decadent or romantic poet to notice that the truly *valuable* lessons in life tend to be accompanied by disagreeable moments; Proust writes that

> A woman whom we need and who makes us suffer elicits from us a whole gamut of feelings far more profound and vital than does a man of genius who interests us.[358]

Once we have recognized that this is simply the nature of things and the unalterable conditions of human existence, there is no actual problem here to solve. However, we *can* learn something about the personal attitude associated with survival. Barring a well-timed (but actuarially highly unlikely) miracle, the preferable psychic attitude in the midst of an agonizing trial seems to be the one I have sketched with reference to Abel in Genesis: the person imbued with an attitude of self that cooperatively recognizes that it is necessary to willingly undergo certain adjustments – internal "construction" and "reconstruction" work, so to speak – in order to not shatter under the hostile forces of the ordeal. This is arguably identical with – or amounts to – a kind of transcendence: self-transcendence.

Whitman, as I have said, even as early as his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, was cognizant of the fact that no self could bridge the span of life without undergoing continual and frequent adjustment. He also knew, I think, that to the degree he manifested disinterest in his inner life and self, adapting to the ever-changing situations that existence threw at him was going to be impossible. Perhaps because he was already a writer (he had been a printer's apprentice in early youth and subsequently done much editing, freelance journalism and even fiction writing), quasi-autobiographical poetry may have seemed the most obvious way of actively taking an interest in the state of his self. (Incidentally, not much is known about Whitman's sudden and apparently unforeshadowed transformation from editor and carpenter into poet.)[359] At any rate, where the

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[358] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, 268.

[359] An alternative theory to the one I have sketched above suggests that the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on Whitman transformed the young reporter and brought forth the introspective "bard of personality" (Whitman's phrase about himself in "Starting from Paumanok"). His friend Trowbridge recalls the following from a conversation with Whitman: "He freely admitted he could never have written his poems if he had not first 'come to himself,' and that Emerson helped him to 'find himself'." From John Townsend Trowbridge, "Reminiscences of Walt Whitman", *Atlantic Monthly*, 89 (1902): 166.

Asselineau writes, "No doubt there is a relation between Whitman's mystical sense and his poetic activity, but this parallelism or coincidence in itself explains nothing. . . . To say that Whitman's genius was born of his mysticism does not solve the problem of its sudden appearance." From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 50.

perilous career of the self is concerned, Charles Hamilton Morgan has noticed that "the archetypal pattern of spiritual death and rebirth" is a fairly frequent "structural device" in *Leaves of Grass*, especially after 1860. One finds it in the 1855 and 1856 editions as well, however. Morgan records that in "Song of Myself," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd",

> the speaker, in his attempt to assimilate all experience, is overwhelmed by the magnitude of the burden he is taking upon himself. In this gathering process there is a rising emotional pitch. There follows a period of doubt, despair, self-violation, frustration, and then indifference. Rebirth comes when the poet discovers his "mistake," makes a recovery, and moves forward again with his new knowledge and self-awareness.[360]

Taking a broader look at literary history, another scholar (Richard P. Adams) has claimed that the death-and-rebirth archetype is the "structural pattern of some of the most significant works of nineteenth-century English and American literature"[361] – evidence, arguably, validating my decision to regard it as archetypal in previous chapters. Adams finds *Leaves of Grass* to be the combination of two principles of organization: (1) "unification of individual facts and bits of experience into progressively larger and more complex integrations" and (2) "organic growth seen as a pattern of death and rebirth."[362] The latter point resonates with Peterson's inclination to consider "continual death and rebirth [a] necessary precondition to proper human adaptation [as well as survival]" (footnotes 171 and 313). Morgan agrees with Adams that the two principles work together in *Leaves of Grass*; these are Adams's words: "The assimilation of the fact of death, the transcendence of the feelings of fear and sorrow at the loss it involves, is one of the greatest changes the growing organism can undergo."[363]

Knowing he *could* write and perhaps sensing he *had* to write, Whitman started out as a poet, as I have said, completely unillusioned about the fact that

> . . . alienation, and more generally the problems of the human condition, were not finally obstacles to overcome, but potential sources of beauty to be incorporated into an aesthetic

[360] Charles Hamilton Morgan, "A New Look at Whitman's "Crisis," 41.
[361] I cite here Morgan's paraphrase of Adams as that man presents his argument in Richard P. Adams, "Romanticism and the American Renaissance," American Literature, XXIII (January, 1952): 419–432.
[362] Ibid. (Again, the words are Morgan's paraphrase.)
[363] Richard P. Adams, "Whitman: A Brief Revaluation," *Tulane Studies in English*, V (1955): 111–149. See also Daryl Sharp's words in footnote 383.

> view of the world, in which suffering, sorrow, and pain will always be essential moments in an endless and ultimately positive dialectical progress.[364]

I have hinted earlier that it occurs to me that Whitman wished more than anything to grow or transform himself into a person who could look at the least immediately loveable things in the world and nevertheless celebrate them. I have also said that to some degree he succeeded (recall, as a minimum, Bucke's description of his habits and personality (footnote 43) and reflect on the young "disciple" (footnote 37) convinced of the legitimacy of comparing Whitman with Jesus Christ). I think it was Whitman's view that the self's best anticipatory "defense" against a rough world was a well-developed resolve – a decisive and voluntary predisposition – to bear, allow, permit (and ultimately, when possible, bless) its very roughness and offensiveness. Bearing out that claim, Asselineau has said (quite generally really, but with reference to the impact *Leaves of Grass* had on him) that "To avoid moral suffocation it [is] necessary to find . . . some ground for hope and for a renewal of faith in mankind" (footnote 306). In other words, I think a pronounced loneliness and melancholia is at the heart of what reads like the most involuntarily joyous poetry. Among the epigraphic perspectives, I have cited David S. Reynolds to this effect:

> What can be said is that some terrible pain lurks behind his verse. He is, of course, the definitive poet of joy. But there are signs of personal trauma even in his most exuberant poems.[365]

And Whitman had himself said as much in "Song of Myself":

> The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
> The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

It is important to reiterate and recognize that the kind of attitude exemplified by such lines is precisely and exhaustively accounted for in Frankl's and Jung's analyses of what happens to and in the self during acute suffering: A personal freedom and autonomy gets generated, ironically, *as a result of* the very factors that are so overwhelmingly antipathetic to freedom and autonomy:

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[364] From the entry "Dialectic", written by Terry Mulcaire, in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 239.

[365] David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 52. Note that Henry Alonzo Myers ranks Whitman with Sophocles and Shakespeare as the preeminent tragic poets of world literature. Myers's words (from *Tragedy: A View of Life*) are cited in "Optimism" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 487.

"Through angers, losses, ambition, ignorance, ennui, what you are picks its way."[366] Metaphorically speaking, the wound carries its own healing (cf. "in sterquiliniis invenitur") – but it dwells there in *latent* form; the healing must be unlocked with willed effort undertaken on behalf of the self. The emphasis on personal agency as a factor in actual life outcomes is unmistakable:

> After to-day I inure myself to run, leap, swim, wrestle, fight,
> . . .
> And to hold my own in terrible positions, on land and sea.[367]

Here is another example:

> (O Mother—O Sisters dear!
> If we are lost, no victor else has destroy'd us,
> It is *by ourselves* we go down to eternal night.)[368]

While on the subject, Reynolds is right to say, "The optimism of Whitman's poetry, then, was very much a willed optimism, one achieved in the face of harsh social conditions and great personal challenges."[369] There is good historical evidence supporting the argument that Whitman's life was beset by a wide range of sorrows.[370] But even if he were only, in Harold Bloom's phrase, subject to the "pain and suffering of being a natural man or woman living and dying in a natural world", he was nevertheless *continually* forced to redeem those unbudgeable elements of existential discomfort.[371] That Whitman suffered seems to me completely undoubtable; but so does the fact

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[366] From "To You."

[367] From "Myself and Mine."

[368] From "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (emphasis mine).

[369] From David S. Reynolds, "Walt Whitman's world: America still Needs His Poetry", July 3, 2005.

[370] Reynolds's writes: "Whitman's private life . . . too was stormy. He faced severe family difficulties: the pathetic condition of his younger brother Eddy, retarded since birth; the decline of his possibly alcoholic father, who died shortly before "Leaves of Grass" came out; the marriage of his unstable sister Hannah to a neurotic Vermont artist, whom Walt later called "'a skunk – a bug . . . the bed-buggiest man on earth"; early signs of mental illness in his older brother Jesse, whom Walt eventually committed to a lunatic asylum; and, perhaps worst of all, the indifference of the whole family (including the "normal" siblings, Jeff, George, and Mary) to his poetry. "Not [one] of my people," as he put it, appreciated his volume." From David S. Reynolds, "Walt Whitman's world: America still Needs His Poetry", July 3, 2005. Other biographers have emphasized sexual woes particularly.

A good example of Whitman's suffering from one of the poet's notebooks is cited by Asselineau and dates from 1848 or 1849: "I am not glad to-night. Gloom has gathered round me like a mantle, tightly folded. / The oppression of my heart is not fitful and has no pangs; but a torpor like that of some stagnant pool. / . . . / Every precious gift to man is linked with a curse—and each pollution has some sparkle from heaven. / The mind, raised upward, then holds communion with angels and its reach overtops heaven; yet then it stays in the meshes of the world too and is stung by a hundred serpents every day. / . . . / Thus it comes that I am not glad to night.— / I feel cramped here in these coarse walls of flesh. / The soul disdains its [incomplete] / O Mystery of Death, I pant for the time when I shall solve you!" From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 69.

[371] From Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 362.

On the face of it, Bloom's words do not seem to identify anything very profound or unique given that

that *on the whole* (although not wholly consistently) he suffered without appearing very alarmed or desperate; rather, he bore his cross with determination and courage.[372]

Whitman's great triumph (artistic *and* psychological), then, is to have nourished in himself such qualities and attitudes – and in part via his writing to have brought about such a constitution of self – as would render him capable of withstanding the pressures of the human condition: capable of remaining "aplomb amid irrational things."[373]

A few pages back I cited Terry Mulcaire's words on seeing "the problems of the human condition" as providing "potential sources of beauty" and, by that token, regarding it valid material for poetry. Here, then, is a clear articulation of how we may say – with reference to Howe, Henry Miller, Proust and Coleridge – that the world is transformed as a consequence of the individual's personal transformation ("new eyes", as Proust puts it).[374] Like Mulcaire, Santayana too associated the word "beauty" with achieving "harmony between our nature and our experience". So did Blaise Pascal who found that "There is a certain standard of grace and beauty which consists in a certain relation between our nature, such as it is, weak or strong, and the thing which pleases us."[375] Whitman simply thought that the "greatest poet", by which he meant a creature animated by "beautiful blood and a beautiful brain", could reliably "indicate the path between reality and [a people's] souls."[376]

Very simply put, that "path" is shorthand for a self that survives, that reconciles inner

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everybody is subject to those same burdens. However, people are undeniably different and are thus disturbed by the fundamental conditions of being to varying degrees. A case in point is Somerset Maugham who confessed: "It is one of the faults of my nature that I have suffered more from the pains, than I have enjoyed the pleasures of my life." Needless to say that he too became a writer. From W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, 282.

[372] Cf. Roger Asselineau in footnote 307.

[373] From "Me Imperturbe". These words from Edmund Burke come to mind: "It is wise indeed, considering the many positive vexations and the innumerable bitter disappointments of pleasure in the world, to have as many resources of satisfaction as possible within one's power." Cited in W. E. H. Lecky, *The Map of Life: Conduct and Character*, 35.

[374] The first two writers have been cited sufficiently copiously already. Proust wrote "The real voyage of discovery . . . / consists not is seeking new landscapes, / but in having new eyes." The line is cited by – and in – David Michalski, "Cities Memories Voices Collage", in Richard Cándida Smith, ed., *Text and Image: Art and the Performance of Memory*, 117.

As for Samuel Coleridge, his masterly "Dejection: An Ode" contains these lines (fourth stanza): "O Lady! we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live: / Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud! / And would we aught behold, of higher worth, / Than that inanimate cold world allowed / To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd, / Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth / A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud / Enveloping the Earth— / And from the soul itself must there be sent / A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth, / Of all sweet sounds the life and element!" See Harold Bloom's remarks on "convert[ing] opinion into knowledge" in footnote 395.

[375] From Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. The words in question are cited in Mortimer Jerome Adler and Charles Lincoln Van Doren, eds., *Great Treasury of Western Thought: A Compendium of Important Statements on Man and His Institutions by the Great Thinkers in Western History*, 1078.

[376] From Whitman's 1855 Preface.

reality with outer and is ever prepared and ready, in Whitman's words, "to learn from crises of anguish, advancing, grappling with direst fate and recoiling not" (in "Long, too Long America"). In moments of deepest doubt – when forced to admit "I do not know what you are for, (I do not know what I am for myself, nor what any thing is for,)" – such a self is nevertheless immediately capable of adding, "But I will search carefully for it even in being foil'd, / In defeat, poverty, misconception, imprisonment—for they too are great / . . . defeat is great, / And . . . death and dismay are great" (from "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire").

The following is a simplified view, but it is nonetheless a useful way of thinking about Whitman's early verses: Having understood the worthwhile and absolutely important objective of attempting to meet the challenge of adjusting the self to a degree where it would be "self-balanced for contingencies", Whitman must have begun to see *Leaves of Grass* take shape conceptually and thematically in his head. It is my contention that he felt called upon to try to resolve nothing less than the most essential problem: How can the human condition be embraced when suffering is so probable and integral to life? "The true question to ask respecting any book," he argued in "Democratic Vistas," is "has it helped any human soul?" and does it possess the power to "free, arouse, dilate" readers?[377]

The already-presented notion that poetry could be regarded as the result of giving voice to something in the self (the writer's "Daemon") that is capable of responding coherently, decisively, perhaps even boldly and triumphantly, to trauma does not mean that the voice cannot praise and eulogize as well; Kaplan speaks of Whitman's "dithyrambic" style. The two modes – the two extremes of being – are related, as I have tried to show. I have explained that we may have to consider that the moment when the self gets conscious of the terrible contingency of existence may bring a person, a self, to start "preemptively" nourishing sides of him- or herself capable of discovering sufficient compensation among the world's glorious features for the terrifying fact of its awful ones. Freud famously defined anxiety as "being *Angst vor etwas*, or anxious expectations," Harold Bloom writes, and that observation speaks exactly to my point – the dreaded is always around the corner and something to prepare for while there is still time.[378] Pascal writes, "Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace," which too serves as a valid commentary on my insistence that Whitman's work must be considered

[377] From Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *Specimen Days and Collect*, 252.
[378] Harold Bloom, *On the Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, 18.

compensatory in nature, in the sense here identified.[379] It is as if Whitman sensed – to adapt yet another quote – that the only way to avoid living as if *nothing was a miracle* was to cultivate an existential attitude and approach to living based in the thought that *everything was a miracle*.[380]

It is probably fair to point to the clear religious overtones of such an attitude. I do not have the credentials or inclination, as I have said, to consider the matter in theological terms, but it would be silly to deny the powerful spiritual dimension to selfhood that I attribute to Whitman's perspective. (Again, consider the numinous connotations – "theophany", "transcendence" – inherent in the phrase "the American Sublime", of which, according to Bloom, Whitman is an exemplar.) There is another reason why it is appropriate to think about the attitude of Whitman's symbolic self in terms of a religious or saintly attitude, and the reason is that both (the concept of self and the domain of religion) partake of the ideal, by which I mean something glorious and transcendent, something which by definition is bound to defeat human aspiration but which should nevertheless inform and inspire the human aim.[381] The fact that the self is doomed to aspire and devoutly honor an ideal – yet never be granted its full and final conquest – is, as far as I can tell, at the heart of the psychological function of prayer. Again, without intending any metaphysically religious implication, let me in the following then merely nominally portray this interesting ideal or aim as "saintly".

In speaking of achieving a psychic condition or state from which one "agrees" with reality (and "acquiesce[s] in the inevitable"; cf. footnote 33) in a deep sense and consequently seems to stream gently through the psychophenomenal realm of being, I said (in footnote 338) that I would return to a passage from a Leonard Cohen novel in which the question "What is a saint?" is raised. I feature this passage in full below because of my opinion that it very accurately and eloquently doubles as a miniature portrait of the kind of self that Whitman was trying to manifest; I have no doubt that Whitman would have praised this picture of sainthood profusely:

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[379] F. O. Matthiessen notes that Pascal's exposition of the contradictions existing in human nature and "the paradox of its being both vile and sublime" were of interest to Emerson. From F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, 181. The Pascal quote above is from his *Pensées*, 12.

[380] The speaker here is Alfred Einstein, and his words are: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." From Albert Einstein, *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein*, 483.

[381] Whitman greatly admired Emerson's statement that "Poetry is the only verity—the expression of a sound mind speaking after the ideal—and not after the apparent." In fact, this line from "Poetry and Imagination" had such a claim on Whitman that, although he would in later life often try to downplay the influence Emerson had had on him, he freely admitted in *Specimen Days* that he had long ago deemed the line worthy of inclusion in his "old, well-thumb'd common-place book, [which was] filled with favorite excerpts [to be] absorbed over and over again when the mood invited." From Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, 183.

> What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love.[382]

In an interview on Canadian television, Cohen sensibly conceptualized the obtainment of this "remote human possibility" as achieving a "state of grace". When asked by a sarcastic interviewer to more carefully define such a state, another poet (Cohen's friend Irving Layton) interrupted the conversation with the words:

> What Cohen is trying to do right now is to preserve the self; that's his real concern. And I think that is the concern of every poet – to preserve the self in a world that is rapidly steamrollering the selves out of existence and establishing a uniform world.[383]

Resonating perfectly with this example, I want to argue that Whitman's poems, specifically those partaking of the celebratory existential mode, can be accurately described as having the function of prayers, prayers which articulate the poet's earnest desire to, first of all, "preserve [his] self" and survive, but more importantly to preserve it in order to approach and, if lucky and destined to, intermittently achieve the "remote human possibilit[ies]" of "love" and "balance" outlined in *Leaves of Grass*. The goal is not to "dissolve the chaos" – or, in Henry Miller's words, "alter the world" – but to begin the process of healing, integrating and redeeming the self – and so "be [one's own] saviour" (Miller) and "[one's own] priest" (Whitman) – in order that the world may become

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[382] From Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, 112.

[383] The interview featuring Cohen and Layton is found in the documentary *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen* [8:00]. Layton's words are highly pertinent to my argument and commentary on the citations from West and Wundt (see footnotes 327 and 328).

On the relationship between "preserving the self" and achieving a "state of grace", Daryl Sharp has written: "Psychologically, uniting the opposites [Jung's constitutive self elements "light" and "shadow"] involves first recognizing them in whatever conflict we are engaged in, and then holding the tension between them. The extent to which we are successful in this difficult and often lengthy endeavor—the degree of wholeness we experience—can be called *a manifestation of the Self, or, if one prefers, the grace of God*." From Daryl Sharp, *Digesting Jung: Food for the Journey*, 56. Emphasis mine. Sharp's words are a commentary on a passage from Jung from which my epigraphic perspective 33 is excerpted.

like a "home" (Cohen) rather than a chaotic pit in which one can only suffer and die. Cohen's portrait of the saintly attitude rewards close comparison with Bucke's portrait of Whitman (see footnote 43).[384]

As further evidence and indication of the at least quasi-religious psychological make-up of such a "monster of love", it is surely no coincidence that the following description of spiritual detachment, which echoes it closely, is due to the theologically erudite Alan Watts:

> Detachment means to have neither regrets for the past nor fears for the future; to let life take its course without attempting to interfere with its movements and change, neither trying to prolong the stay of things pleasant nor to hasten the departure of things unpleasant. To do this is to move in time with life, to be in perfect accord with its changing music, and this is called Enlightenment.[385]

Is there any basis for comparing the act of writing (about what embodied living *could* potentially be like, say) to that of praying (for improvements to embodied living)? Henry Miller certainly thought so and found the two easily relatable to each other:

> The act of writing puts a stop to one kind of activity in order to release another. When a monk, prayerfully meditating, walks silently down the hall of a temple, and thus walking sets in motion one prayerwheel after another, he gives a living illustration of the act of sitting down to write. The mind of the writer, no longer preoccupied with observing and knowing, wanders meditatively amidst a world of forms which are set spinning by a mere brush of his wings. No tyrant, this, wreaking his will upon the subjugated minions of his ill-gotten kingdom. An explorer, rather, calling to life the slumbering entities of his dream. The act of dreaming, like a draft of fresh air in an abandoned house, situates the furniture of the mind in a new ambiance. The chairs and tables collaborate; an effluvia is given off, a game is begun.[386]

In chapter 1, I made reference to Alain de Botton's de-esotericized and secular definition of "higher consciousness" because I saw evidence for believing and stressing that certain pursuits available to humans – the properly conducted study of certain works of literature not the least exemplary of them – are potentially conducive to the person's gradually rising awareness of and psychological

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[384] Borrowing a line from *Mircea Eliade's classic, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Justin Kaplan argues that, for Whitman, "the poet was the shaman of modern society, a master of 'the techniques of ecstasy'." From Justin Kaplan and Rob Couteau, " 'The Mystery of the Man': Justin Kaplan Talks About America's Greatest Poet".

[385] Alan Watts, *Become What You Are*, 10.

[386] Henry Miller, *The Henry Miller Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Durrell, 363.

resonance with such a state. I stand by that tangential observation which Miller too (a kind of Whitman for the twentieth century, thought Lawrence Durrell) found provocative:[387]

> The great joy of the artist is to become aware of a higher order of things, to recognize by the compulsive and spontaneous manipulation of his own impulses the resemblances between human creation and what is called "divine" creation. . . . The endless interpretations [of "works of fantasy"] which are offered up contribute nothing, except to heighten the significance of what is seemingly unintelligible.[388]

I bring this cryptic and elusive view because it resonates with my impression that what frequently characterizes sublime poetry is its simultaneous emphasis of the world as both unintelligible and deeply significant in human eyes. To further underscore my tangential remarks on "higher consciousness", I would add at this point that the opposite stance to the one sketched by Miller above (i.e. the feeling that the world is *not* fundamentally unintelligible and also *not* significant) might cause a person to careen dangerously close to dogmatism and nihilism, respectively, both of which seem anathema to sublime poetry.

As for the element in poems partaking of the function of prayer, Michael Frayn provides a useful account, which I think serves to explain why Whitman's persistent attempt to define an ideal symbolic self on the page – to, as he put it, "Outline [a] sketch of a superb calm character"[389] – proved effective and positive at the level of his actual being:

> Declarations of faith, like declarations of anything else, are uttered with some purpose in mind. This is not usually to catalogue articles of belief out of academic interest, as you might list different species of beetle. The intention is to secure an effect, upon others or upon oneself. At their lowest and most depressing they have something in common with the chants and taunts that supporters utter at football matches, where the intention is not to express any particular states of affairs, or hopes for their alteration, but to induce feelings of solidarity and right-mindedness among the supporters themselves, and to incense their opponents.
>
> At their highest, though, I suppose you might understand declarations of faith as being like a performance of one of the great heroic parts in the theatre, which offers the possibility of expressing human truth by a dramatic fiction. Some of the same difficulties and opportunities arise. The believer, like the actor, may impress by the sheer force of difficulty overcome. On the other hand he may force his performance, and become unconvincing. The

[387] Durrell's comparison is made in his Introduction to *The Henry Miller Reader*: "[Like] Whitman or Blake[, Miller has] left us, not simply works of art, but a corpus of ideas which motivate and influence a whole cultural pattern." See *The Henry Miller Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Durrell, ix.

[388] From *The Henry Miller Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Durrell, 362. Cf. Miller's words (cited on page 37) that "the greatest thing about the universe[is that]that it can be altered. . . . Man has a bit of this power in him [this "ability to transmute things"]: to take what is lost and failed and convert it into a new and wonderful things."

[389] See footnote 352. The Michael Frayn quote below is from Michael Frayn, *The Human Touch*, 263–264

> performance may vary from the crude and obvious, with much weeping and tearing of the hair, to the subtly understated and inward, with nothing to show on the surface but the occasional shadow of emotion passing across the features, a certain way of going about things, a style.
>
> Whether done well or ill, the believer is exploiting the possibilities offered by this thing that he has taken upon himself. Roles and beliefs have lives of their own, implications which lead us on to destinations we never dreamt of when we signed the contract for the show. (Hence, perhaps, the tendency of actors' performances to get coarser during a long run, and for believers to go off at tangents from one another . . .)

Almost every element of Frayn's analysis of the phenomenon of sincere declarations of faith has an application in the present exploration of the therapeutic potential of Whitman's works – initially for himself.

Whitman was conscious that he contained within him a "latent mine" full of "unlaunch'd voices—passionate powers" among which were "Wrath, argument, or praise, or comic leer, or prayer devout" (from "A Font of Type"). There is clearly a pronounced tone of prayer to the poem "Come, said my soul" (see text following footnote 352), which served as the title-page epigraph to several of the post-1876 editions of *Leaves of Grass*. (It was also the only poem in the book which reproduced in ink what – certainly from a graphological perspective – offered something of higher personal fidelity than typeset words could achieve, namely a facsimile of Whitman's signature.)[390] In this epigraphic poem, the poet's "Soul" (or Daemon, in Bloom's system) expresses the keen wish that "should [it] after death invisibly return . . . long, long hence" it may "Ever with pleas'd smile . . . keep on" "Tallying Earth's soil, trees, winds, tumultuous waves" and also "yet [own] the verses". It is interesting to unpack what these few lines might reveal about the poet.

Based on Eric Wilson's work, I made some remarks on states of intensified sense of self earlier. Specifically, I suggested that the alienated and paralyzed person – "Unmoored from" and unable to "enjoy a comfortable relationship" to external reality – is "forced to look within [and] get in touch with what is most intimate", which in fortunate cases leads to the discovery: "I am *this* person and no one else." But there is clearly something stagnant, static or "arrested" about this kind of state; it hints at nothing about the next moment and apparently finds the self in a kind of suspended animation. (Whitman described that state in a poem apparently representing the plunge from a contented state to one of defeat: "Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself, /

[390] "I was chilled with the cold types, cylinder, wet paper between us. / Male and Female! / I pass so poorly with paper and types, I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls." From the 1855 version of a pome which would in 1881 receive the title "A Song of Occupations."

Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled? / And sullen hymns of defeat?) If I may borrow a metaphor from the world of modern-day electronics, then, there are times when the self has to "reboot" before it can interact normally with the world again; "there are times in one's life when one has to shut down just to regroup."[391] In the epigraphic poem, Whitman's "Soul" is praying that should it be fortunate enough to return after death it will return to a state or condition directly opposite that of paralyzed alienation; it prays for a resurrected state associated with high spirits ("pleas'd smile") and engagement with and appetite for the world of phenomena (it desires to "tally" a long series of natural phenomenal manifestations. *That* state – dynamic, animated, interactive, wholesome, joyful – was what Henry Miller designated when he pictured the "joy of life" as "not static but dynamic."[392] Note that a self characterized by a smiling mien is naturally disposed and inclined to confront, accept and celebrate things (in that a smile is psychologically a facial gesture signaling welcome, invitation, appeasement) – not pass through the world manifesting a "fault-finder's or rejecter's gait".[393] In conclusion, Whitman's brief poem works much like a prayer expressing the wish that his Soul can – after death – continue or return to its current state.[394]

Whitman owes some of his literary legend to the fact that he is so consistently memorable on that desired state, which William James called "healthy-mindedness" and which has much in common with Alain de Botton's conceptualization of "higher consciousness". These lines find the soul smiling and tallying the object surrounding it without forgetting its own integral part in the happy scene:

> O the joy of my soul leaning pois'd on itself, receiving identity through materials[395] and loving them, observing characters and absorbing them,
> My soul vibrated back to me from them, from sight, hearing, touch, reason, articulation, comparison, memory, and the like
> The real life of my senses and flesh transcending my senses and flesh,
> My body done with materials, my sight done with my material eyes,

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[391] From Leonard Cohen, *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, ed. by Jeff Burger, 555.

[392] See footnote 69.

[393] From "Song of Myself".

[394] Alternatively, the death-and-rebirth archetype allows for a reading in which "death" is not to be taken literally but is to be construed merely as a temporary traumatic interruption or break with the preferred state. Sickness, depression, loss and thwarted ambitions are occurrences capable of ushering in this painful state, of sending the Soul to the archetypal "underworld" for a while.

[395] Elsewhere (in "Song of Myself") Whitman described this process thus: "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul. // Lack one lacks both, and the unseen [soul] is proved by the seen [world], / Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn."

Harold Bloom sees Whitman as an "American variant of [Samuel] Johnson's quest to convert opinion into knowledge. Knowledge of what? If, as Epicurus insisted, the what is unknowable Walt's knowledge is a personal gnosis, in which the knower himself is known by whatever can be known." From Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 53.

> Proved to me this day beyond cavil that it is not my material eyes which finally see,
> Nor my material body which finally loves, walks, laughs, shouts, embraces, procreates.[396]

The melancholy self in Wilson's description is unmoored from reality to such a degree of "lockdown" and immobility of the senses that "receiving identity through materials" is simply impossible.[397] It has no choice except to attempt to revivify and transform itself internally in the hope of becoming again capable of connecting with the world. Whitman dedicated a whole poem ("A Noiseless Patient Spider") to the first shy attempts of the formerly "isolated" "soul" (this time he does not capitalize the word) to form a "bridge" or launch an "anchor" in order to become moored once more to the world. That poem is heavily characterized by the very human and realistic concern that, as Peterson put it, "there's not very much of you and there's a lot of everything else" (source identified in footnote 55) – the "isolated" spider (or soul) is sustained only by "a little promontory" surrounded by the "vacant vast surrounding" – yet at the same time, the poem makes clear that there is a universe of things ("measureless oceans of space") to "catch" and gain hold of in the event of the spider's embodiment of a balanced, wholesome, self-contained mode of being. Gregory Orr considers this motif central to Whitman's works: "Whitman's transformative genius[is] to be one of the ultimate outsiders in his actual life and yet to create a persona in his poetic life, a "Walt Whitman"[,] who is the ultimate insider."[398] A famous line indicating the same schism is the very last line in the 1855 Preface: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

Many of those poems by Whitman that are not reminiscent of prayer in any trivial sense nevertheless appropriate language associated with the sacred; they offer something like the confident prophetic pronouncements of a sage or oracle. This mode is compatible with the mode of a poet who "absorbs" his country "affectionately" because the voice is disposed to celebrate and eulogize the ordinary workaday world rather than pay respect to remote ideals and fantasies. I think there is a fairly straightforward way to understand how Whitman came to launch from his "latent mine" of voices such "passionate . . . praise."

The pronouncements I have described frequently exhibit a certain incantatory effect,

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[396] From "A Song of Joys".

[397] For purely philosophical reasons, it is worth considering this Whitman line in the context of Hume's words "I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception." See footnote 271.

[398] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 168.

which bears out John Burroughs's claim that Whitman was inspired by the prophetic books of the Bible. Countless scholars, following Burroughs, have emphasized the debt owed by Whitman's prosody to the English Bible.[399] As to the incantatory element, Philip H. Round claims that the poems' "syntactic parallelism, repetition, and cataloguing" make for lines that are of an "expansive, oracular, and often incantatory" order ("expansive" was a term that William James too preferred, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, when it came to visions voiced by Whitman).[400] Frank D. Casale adds that the "visionary mode" in the poems is inseparable from a style that is "celebratory, elevated, verbally ornate."[401] The evidence is very considerable that Whitman intended *Leaves of Grass* to be a sacred work; Thomas Becknell writes that Whitman "in his vision of a nation of divine persons, . . . assumes a prophetic voice reminiscent of Old Testament prophets."[402]

Before I proceed, I would like to reiterate, with Timothy Donnelly, that "How we choose [in works of poetry] to . . . investigate a potential psychology may actually reflect a great deal on our own psychology" (footnote 288). However, assuming *that*, it also stands to reason that in the case of Whitman we are unlikely ever to "know the complex relationship between the 'I' of his poetry . . . and the private Whitman." (see footnote 315). Underscoring the general theme of *volition*, Nietzsche suggested a link between the autobiographical and the aesthetic and creative, when he wrote "When one has not had a good father, one must create one."[403]

Most Whitman biographies establish how rarely Whitman mentions his father in his letters and cautiously conclude that Whitman was dissatisfied with his father. His biographers are also fairly unanimous in emphasizing how attracted Whitman was to the role of parental comforter. David S. Reynolds details how he "showed a distinct parental strain in his own life" and how in his poetry he frequently returned to affirmations of procreation and parenthood:

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[399] See John Burroughs, "His Ruling Ideals and Aims", in *Walt Whitman*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 174. Bloom himself makes the claim in several different places, for instance in his introduction to Frank D. Casale, *Bloom's How to Write about Walt Whitman*, vi. Incidentally, Kirsten Silva Gruesz sees "the incantatory phrase" as a hallmark of *Leaves of Grass*. From Kirsten Silva Gruesz's entry " "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (1856)" in in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 91.

[400] From Philip H. Round's entry "Style and Technique(s)" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 694.

[401] Frank D. Casale, *Bloom's How to Write about Walt Whitman*, 85.

[402] From the entry "The Bible" by Thomas Becknell in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 56. The same source (page 55) notes that Whitman, in one of his notebooks, once called *Leaves of Grass* "the New Bible". Roger Asselineau adds to that assessment that "[Whitman's] ambition was not to rival the prophets of the Old Testament, but to create a new kind of poetry meant for the eyes of his readers rather than for their ears." From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 2, 240.

[403] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, 381. As is apparent, such a compensatory psychological dynamic pervades this dissertation's central arguments.

> His siblings became like surrogate children to him, as indicated especially in his autobiographical story "My Boys and Girls." He would assume a parental role with his young male friends, many of whom called him Father or Uncle or Old Man. He even had what seemed a motherly side. Burroughs noted in him a gentle, tender quality, "something indescribable in his look, in his eye, as in that of the mother of many children." . . . If he often played the role of surrogate parent, he also sought to establish links with imagined parental figures. The terms "mother" and "father" are scattered liberally throughout his poems, applied variously to the earth, the sea, the night, the flag, the Union. . . . Recoiling from the restlessness of his childhood, the idiosyncrasies of his parents, and the problems of his siblings, he would continue throughout his life to fabricate comforting parental figures, including himself.[404]

Reynolds is probably right in saying that Whitman's father, Walter Whitman Sr., has "been treated too harshly by biographers."[405] However, by all accounts he was "a moody, taciturn man" who was for much of his life dogged by professional ruin.[406] Asselineau depicts him as "enigmatic", a "mediocre and dissatisfied farmer" (although he also worked as a carpenter and builder) endowed with a "hard, self-contained, independent character." It has been generally assumed that Whitman represents his own father in these famous lines from the autobiographical poem "There Was a Child Went Forth":

> The father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger'd, unjust,
> The blow, the quick load word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure.[407]

Whatever the precise truth of the relationship between son and father, the former evidently preferred the women in his family, notes Asselineau.[408]

My argumentation here is not based on so much as *accidentally* coincidental with David Aberbach writes that

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[404] David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 55.
In *Specimen Days*, he recalls his Civil War experiences among the soldiers in the military hospitals of Washington and avows his "fatherly or brotherly interest in them". From *Specimen Days and Collect*, 57.

[405] Whitman brother, George Whitman, said that his brother's "relations with his father were always friendly, always good." See David S. Reynolds, ed., *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, 16. Also, Whitman would recall in old age: "my dear daddy was remarkable everywhere he went for his kindness to the dumb beasts." From Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 196.

[406] David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 23. Reynolds also records that Whitman, Jr., once told his friend John Burroughs that his father had had periods of heavy drinking.

[407] From "There Was a Child Went Forth". The suggestion that Walter Whitman, Sr., is the father here depicted is very widespread in the literature. However, Gay Wilson Allen has argued on behalf of Whitman's compulsive interest in cruel fathers although its roots are not fully identified. See Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*, 56.

[408] From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 18.

> Whitman's fame rests almost entirely on . . . *Leaves of Grass*, which he wrote in his Brooklyn home as his father lay dying in another room. (The father died a few days after the publication of the first edition . . . in 1855.) It is estimated that a full two-thirds of Whitman's output was written in the year before and the year after this loss. His poetry evidently serves as a catharsis, a means of working through the grief process and of recreating himself. . . . Did the father's death [in 1855] create Whitman's gift or free it? Whitman's poetry was bound up with the evolution of his new identity during and after the death. In his poetry, as in life, he saw himself as a father-healer, and even before the father died he seems to have organized his life around a fantasy of being father to his younger brothers and partner to his mother.[409]

In a spirit similar to the construction of my earlier arguments in this chapter (and bearing out Reynolds in epigraphic perspective 26), I have sketched these biographical facts and inferences because I want to argue that Whitman's oracular, incantatory assertions are best comprehended in light of their scarcity and essentiality in his actual – his social – life. Constitutionally and personally attracted to the idea of "brighten[ing] up those who suffer", Whitman must have been attracted to the idea of imbuing his symbolic self with the capacity to speak comforting words – like an ideal parent – to (what he considered) the noble but troubled children of America. This may be true, and yet we should not forget Hesse's claim that "[the poem always] speaks first of all to the poet himself, it is his cry, his scream, his dream, his smile, his whirling fists" (cf. footnote 191). Roger Asselineau cites Jean Catel to the effect that Whitman's early short stories contain "confessions and thoughts which foretell Whitman's masterpiece", although they are admittedly as "the dawn, not the sunrise".[410] The following excerpt from Whitman's autobiographical (see Reynolds above) 1844 short story "My Boys and Girls", in which the loss of innocence is keenly lamented, seems to provide a missing piece to an understanding of why Whitman felt himself called upon to be a voice of satisfaction and encouragement – one declaring the "unintelligible" cosmos and blindly unfolding events good and "significant", to allude back to Henry Miller – notwithstanding undeniable evidence to the contrary. The very evident filial love of this excerpt seems compatible with a parental instinct to soothe:

> Blessings on the young! And for those whom I have mentioned in the past lines, oh, may the developement [*sic*] of their existence be spared any sharp stings of grief or pangs of remorse! Had I any magic or superhuman power, one of the first means of its use would be

[409] David Aberbach *Surviving Trauma*, 23–24. Aberbach is indebted to C. M. Parkes's *Bereavement: Studies in Grief in Adult Life* (1986), wherein it is argued that to gain a new identity after a loss is an integral part of the grief process; Aberbach concludes that "there is no doubt that Whitman's poetry illustrates and, indeed, enacts such a transformation."

[410] From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 46.

> to insure the brightness and beauty of their lives. Alas! that there should be sin, and pain, and agony so abundantly in the world!—that these young creatures—wild, frolocksome [*sic*], and fair—so dear to me all of them, those connected by blood, and those whom I like for themselves alone—alas, that they should merge in manhood and womanhood the fragrance and purity of their youth![411]

I shall shortly provide a few examples illustrating more precisely what form his lines of encouragement – his attempts to "insure the brightness and beauty of . . . lives" – took. But first – inspired by the idea that a writer is necessarily and always, in a profound sense, aiming his writing *at himself*, let me speak briefly of the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer. In a treatise on the aesthetics of sculpture and design as well as on the themes of empathy, enjoyment and psychic needs, Worringer sketches an intriguing answer to why people have different artistic preferences and aesthetic weaknesses. He initially posits that art is, in a sense, an "exchange": "Every sensuous object [work of art], in so far as it exists for me, is always the product of two components, of that which is sensuously given and of my apperceptive activity." He then goes on to explain:

> The value of a work of art, what we call its beauty, lies, generally speaking, in its power to bestow happiness. The values of this power naturally stand in a causal relation to the psychic needs which they satisfy. Thus the 'absolute artistic volition' is the gauge for the quality of these psychic needs. . . . No psychology of the need for art—in the terms of our modern standpoint: of the need for style—has yet been written. It would be a history of the feeling about the world and, as such, would stand alongside the history of religion as its equal. By the feeling about the world I mean the psychic state in which, at any given time, mankind found itself in relation to the cosmos, in relation to the phenomena of the external world. This psychic state is disclosed in the quality of psychic needs, i.e. in the constitution of the absolute artistic volition, and bears outward fruit in the work of art, to be exact in the style of the latter, the specific nature of which is simply the specific nature of the psychic needs.[412]

The idea that the value, utility or profundity of an aesthetic work varies according to and is dependent on the psychic state of the person evaluating it *whether its creator or not* is indirectly captured in Whitman's words from "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" about *Leaves of Grass*: "My book . . . has been the comfort of my life since it was originally commenced". In other words, as a finished book it elicits the creator's own satisfaction and is found satisfactory by him due to its function vis-à-vis a psychic situation obtaining beyond and separate from the book – in the poet himself and (by virtue of a literary conceit) in those he imagined himself talking to. David

[411] The story is available at the online *Walt Whitman Archive* and has Whitman Archive ID "per.00333".
[412] From Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 13.

S. Reynolds is justified in locating "a recipe for healing" in the poems (footnote 316), and Whitman himself may claim that their speaker is often "bringing hope", because the spirit in which they are uttered is squarely "against" (as Gardner would say) psychic pain and hopelessness.[413] The poet's Daemon is so painfully conscious of such woes – from first-hand personal experience but also simply as forces endemic to human existence – that it feels called upon to counter them in a spirit analogous to the one suggested by the familiar prayer:

> Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
> Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is discord, unity.
> Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is error, truth.
> Where there is despair, hope. Where there is sadness, joy. Where there is darkness, light.
> O divine master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console.
> To be understood, as to understand. To be loved, as to love.
> For it is in giving, that we receive. It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned.
> It is in dying, that we are born to eternal life.[414]

The principle I am distilling here agrees with Worringer's theory and pays homage to John Gardner's ideas about morality in art. It also seems to speak to Asselineau's words that in Whitman "an obscure feeling of inferiority" may have been what gave rise to something "superb"; or, as Whitman put it, "I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems, / And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality, / For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my soul and of immortality." The "argument from inferiority", so to speak, corresponds too with Robert Bly's observation, derived from his analysis of the Brothers Grimm's fairy-tale "Iron John", that "where a man's wound is that is where his genius will be."[415] That duality is noted too by Harold Bloom who considers Whitman equally "[o]ur prime celebrant" and "our greatest elegist for the self, for the daemon errant in time's wastages."[416] "In his poetry, as

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[413] Henry Miller's understanding is compatible with such an interpretation of the psychic dynamics behind Whitman's verse, for he asserts that it was as a consequence of the poems' expansiveness that Whitman was able to "march[] on, calm, steady, sure of himself, certain of ultimate victory." See footnote 314.

[414] The prayer is associated with St. Francis of Assissi. See Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, 20.

[415] From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 181; and Robert Bly, *Iron John*, 42. The reader should bear the idea that "where a man's wound is that is where his genius will be" in mind when reading my chapter on shadow integration in chapter 4. The analogy between "wound" and "shadow" is profound and deserves to be recognized.

It seems of relevance to note that Stendhal wrote in his journal that "A man must heal himself of enthusiasm for the happiness that he lacks", which distills and presents the same dichotomy of opposites while indicating that will to heal is required in order to cope with "lack" and enable endurable being. Cited in Matthew Josephson, *Stendhal; or, The Pursuit of Happiness*, 123. See my words on "will to health" in footnote 166. On "will to meaning" (central to Franklean logotherapy), see footnote 189.

[416] From Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 28.

in his life," writes David Aberbach, "[Whitman] saw himself as a father-healer [whose] poetry is a prescription of health and Eros and an antidote to disease and Thanatos."[417] It seems uncontroversial to state that a father – or any parent, male or female – is a person that a child may depend upon for nurture, comfort, teaching, protection (the list goes on); in other words, the parental duty is to be, when possible, a positive and "orderly" force against the corresponding "chaotic" negatives suggested by hunger, despair, ignorance, danger and so on. Tragically, perhaps, there are moments in life when a person has little choice but to try to carry out some of those offices *for him- or herself*. A strong articulation of such a situation was described by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, although I shall do no more than merely indicate her argument.[418]

Some of Whitman's best lines have the feel and structure of responses to the needs of someone in direst despair and danger. Many of these emphasize the solidity, nobility, integrity, beauty and endless resources and of the individual self (cf. the Emersonian "infinitude of the private man" in footnote 273). The first few lines in the first poem in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* –

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

– recommend that we consider (1) that all selves are entities worth celebrating (this teaching is conveyed by example), (2) that the "good news" known by the symbolic self justifying his self-celebration might apply to the reader too so that (3) celebration of selves can occur communally and openly, not in the dark. Those readers who contemplated the 1855 Preface before turning to the first poem (then entitled "Leaves of Grass" but eventually entitled "Song of Myself") may have already picked up such a sentiment. In a passage in the Preface detailing the poet's aesthetic ambitions, Whitman writes

> What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or sooth I

[417] From David Aberdach, *Surviving Trauma*, 24,

[418] Bearing out my overall argument on behalf of the property inherent in each person's self to creatively synthesize order out of chaos as well as my claim (derived from Frankl) that a person is free to choose his or her response to suffering when subject to it, I am obliged to at least mention Melanie Klein's claim that a self-parenting ability might be something like an innate skill: "The baby's impulses and feelings are accompanied by a kind of mental activity which I take to be the most primitive one: that is phantasy-building, or more colloquially, imaginative thinking. For instance, the baby who feels a craving for his mother's breast when it is not there may imagine it to be there, i.e. he may imagine the satisfaction which he derives from it. Such primitive phantasying is the earliest form of the capacity which later develops into the more elaborate workings of the imagination." From the title essay in Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921–1945*, 308. See Harold Bloom in epigraphic perspective 18.

> will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as regardless of observation. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me.

The notion that the self is inherently worthy of attention and enthusiasm – and that, rather than advocate secrecy about that, the self may appropriately be validated and celebrated *in the presence of others* – is conveyed here too ("by my side"). A little earlier in the Preface, the detailed description of the genius of "the greatest poet" or "artist" (which we are led to infer informs and pervades the ensuing verses) contains mention of qualities of a Messianic quality:

> The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer . . . . he is individual . . . he is complete in himself . . . . the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not.

As for "seer", Harold Bloom calls Whitman a "poet-prophet".[419] Equality between this "seer" and everybody else (the Preface refers frequently to "people" and, less frequently, to "folks") is emphasized in other ways elsewhere in the Preface: "The poet sees for a certainty how one not a great artist may be just as sacred and perfect as the greatest artist." So what sets this "equalizer of . . . age and land" apart and makes him deserving of words like "sacred and perfect"? We learn that he has broken away and liberated himself from things and status, bread, circuses, to be no longer a "slave[] of pleasure" (see footnote 47), which is interesting insofar as it suggests that the array of unique qualities are the product of decisive resolve and initiative, not providence or anything resembling numinous decree: "He is not one of the chorus . . . . he does not stop for any regulation . . . he is the president of regulation." This position does indeed sounds reassuringly optional. If he has a precursor in literature, it would be Emerson's self-reliant nonconformist.[420] Alternatively, it would be Thomas Carlyle's "hero."[421]

The central character of the Preface is one overflowing with individual possibility, autonomy, freedom, exuberance and exhilaration. Yet despite that character's arguably Messianic proportions, the attainment of these things depends on efforts that are apparently *within everybody*

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[419] Harold Bloom calls Whitman "poet-prophet" in "Trust the Tale, not the Teller: Hans Christian Andersen", in J. C. Hallman, ed., *The Story About the Story: Great Writers Explore Great Literature*, vol. 2, 298.

[420] See footnote 340 and 442.

[421] In "Whitman's Poet-Prophet and Carlyle's Hero", Fred Manning Smith argues that Carlyle is key to understanding and tracing the sentiments in Whitman's Preface. The Carlyle text in question is *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, which contains a chapter entitled "The Hero as Man of Letters". Asselineau concludes that both Carlyle and Emerson are certainly influences on Whitman but that there are others too. See Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 55.

reach. This is made clear when – apparently in a moment of uncontained joy and existential exuberance – the voice of the Preface betrays its confidence that readers will be eager to emulate it themselves and therefore curious about the necessary character-forming program ("recipe for healing" in Reynolds's phrase). Equivalent to my own words following footnote 138 – where I posit that *because one is oneself part and parcel of the problem of one's suffering, one is also part of the solution* (see text coming up to footnote 457) – the program is offered on the heels of the premise or principle that "If the greatnesses are in conjunction in a man or woman it is enough . . . the gaggery and gilt of a million years will not prevail." (Notice that the *presence* of "greatnesses" is silently assumed and taken for granted; it is the *configuration* of this potential that is the issue; the bit about "gaggery and gilt", incidentally, is analogous to how I conceptualized "cure", exterior and instrumentally applied as distinct from organically occurring "healing" – see text anticipating footnote 96.) With no further ado, and without a shred of doubt or uncertainty, Whitman lays out "what you shall do:"

> Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

To stress that "greatness" is a latent possibility which the human self can accrue by volition might seem a philosophically tangled way of convincing those tormented by existential misgiving that their despair is finally unfounded; but it is arguably the only way available to someone intent on avoiding specious cant and happiness by decree, which seems chimerical. A gesture of that sort (i.e. the insistence that dedicated effort is the only difference between the unrealized and realized individual) seems inseparable in nature from a parent's fully owned and overt trust that a child will be able to bear the burden of existence and make the necessary choices in a satisfactory – perhaps even praiseworthy – fashion. It is a profoundly "democratic" and anti-elitist stance – as Thoreau recognized: He said of *Leaves of Grass* that "it puts me into a liberal frame of mind prepared to see

wonders. . . . He is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen."[422]

Again, it is the fact that achieving Whitman's "remote possibility" (to use Cohen's phrase) is in principle an achievement *open and available to all* that makes the sentiment redemptive and revelatory, even Messianic or saintly – and finds Whitman most unrestrainedly celebrating selfhood. Of course, it is possible to quibble about the practicality and utility of specific details in Whitman's program, but it would be hard to deny that the passage does lay out the possibility for existential renewal and a "rebooting" of the self in clear and unmistakable terms. Similarly, it would of course be possible to accuse the program of arbitrary dogmatism; but I venture that this is beside the point for the following reason: The value of the piece is significantly *not intended* to inhere in its technical utility as proved by practical application (note that "your very flesh shall be a great poem" is hardly meant to be taken literally) but rather in what issuing such straightforward dicta *suggests* about the potentials of the human self and about human being. And the human self's potential upper limits and capabilities – particularly the psychological ones – are not easily defined or "capped".[423]

In the phrase "dismiss whatever insults your own soul", which immediately precedes a description of the saintly state, reappear the freedom on behalf of the individual that I have tried to sketch in preceding chapters. The very ability to "dismiss" is similar in nature to the biblical Logos that Peterson and Henry Miller attributes to the human self. Reality can be "edited": As John Cowper Powys puts it, "To analyse this "objective" world is all very well, as long as you don't forget that the power to rebuild it by emphasis and rejection is synonymous with your being alive."[424] Whitman's point is that although reality seem forbidding and alienating at first glance, we must not accord first appearances *eternal* significance. The previously-cited insights from Nietzsche ("To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering") and Jung ("A life without inner contradiction is either only half a life") lead us to conclude that a world in which we are asked to do nothing about our suffering – about our sense of "inner contradiction", about our "insult[ed]soul" – would indeed be an impoverished world (even though we might *think* we should like it more than one demanding our constant and patient "editing" or "co-authoring" offices). (Thus, *both*

[422] Milton Meltzer, *Henry David Thoreau: A Biography*, 119.

[423] As I write in the abstract and have hopefully demonstrated several times already, I am determined to approach the texts in a spirit that does not preemptively deconstruct or negate the spirit in which they seem to have been written. Although there are doubtless times when stern neutrality and skepticism is of the essence, I am not convinced that the best way to approach literature is by adopting the role of deconstructing diagnostician intent on exposing contradictions, biases and weak points. See epigraphic perspective 28.

[424] John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography*, 626. See also epigraphic perspective 17.

self and world are celebrated, or redeemed, in the Preface.) Whitman promises – metaphorically, it would seem – that we can each of us become "a great poem and have the richest fluency [in our words and] in the silent lines"; that metaphor is hospitable to what I here call our ability to "edit" life, and it retraces the point from Blixen that we can choose to have a part of our being incorporate aesthetic dimensions (we achieve that by telling stories, writing poems or thinking imaginatively about our trials). To the degree we do that, we may derive or tap into a freedom generally absent from life. All these textual instances of and references to latent human autonomy or "will" (and many more that I have mentioned previously) indicate each other in my reading of Whitman. Singly and jointly I find that they cohere to make possible the interpretation I am presenting which – whether made overt (as here by me) or not – is the active and central element in Whitman's "recipe for healing."

There is a passage in Nietzsche – on "will" (I have alluded to it in footnote 252) – which is relevant to the present discussion:

> 'And how could I bear to be human if the human being were not also a composer-poet and riddle-guesser and the redeemer of coincidence!
> 'To redeem that which has passed away and to re-create all "It was" into a "Thus I willed it!"—that alone should I call redemption!
> 'Will—that is the liberator and joy-bringer: that is what I taught you, my friends! . . .'[425]

Simon May sheds light on the passage by commenting that "what is painful about the past . . . becomes redeemed when we will, which means when we affirm, that past."[426] The symbolic self in many of Whitman's poems (including those written after 1855) seems engaged in similar determined attempts to "will the past" – to take past events and redeem them by turning them *from* their status of "It was" *into* their new status of "Thus I willed [them]!". This is similar to "dismiss[ing] whatever insults [one's] own soul" in that it is a mental operation undertaken for purposes of healing (through the amelioration of one's whole existential situation) and to which a person's aesthetic and linguistic faculties can usefully be harnessed.[427] (Cf. Jung in footnote 53: "Only what is really oneself has the power to heal".) There is also a quasi-religious attitude at play here, for seeking to "will the past" is arguably analogous to attempting a Kierkegaardian leap of

[425] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, 121.
[426] From Simon May, *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, 99
[427] Incidentally, I am not the first to notice a certain affinity between *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and Whitman. Nils Åke Nilsson has located a number of things in the former which "seem to develop some ideas in Whitman's work (although there is no evidence of any direct influence of Whitman on Nietzsche . . .)". Nilsson is a contributor to Jan van der Eng and Willem G. Weststeijn, ed., *Avant Garde: Interdisciplinary and International Review*, 52.

faith; the leap consists in the individual's willingness to accede that his or her evaluation of the fairness of events is necessarily limited and therefore perhaps ultimately not worth defending.

Exemplifying "will[ing] the past", Whitman writes, for instance:

> I assert that all past days were what they must have been,
> And that they could no-how have been better than they were,
> And that to-day is what it must be, and that America is,
> And that to-day and America could no-how be better than they are.[428]

And in a passage from "Song of Myself" that rewards cross-comparison, he writes

> This minute that comes to me over the past decillions,
> There is no better than it and now.
>
> What behaved well in the past or behaves well today is not such a wonder,
> The wonder is always and always how there can be a mean man or an infidel.[429]

In these examples, the self appears determined to accede (on no very *obvious* authority, hence *leap of faith*) that no current state of affairs should be met with the self's condemnation or grief but must rather be patiently accepted in spite of the difficulty or discomfort plausibly associated with acceptance. The emerging attitude has much in common with the one expressed by Boethius: "All fortune is good fortune; for it either rewards, disciplines, amends, or punishes, and so is either useful or just" (see footnote 132). The crux is that while there might be many different responses to life (depending on scenario-specific details), there are only two directions in which to slide: towards unconditional acceptance or towards unconditional rejection. Alternatively, these might be conceptualized as, respectively, *flight to* or *flight from* the saintly perspective. Einstein is establishing or invoking the same linear spectrum when he delineates the only "two ways to live your life" (see footnote 380).[430] In another poem, where Whitman envisages the concept of a "true poem of riches", the way he talks about it suggests that he knows that determination and decisiveness – i.e. "will" – are key to the work of bringing it about:

> I will make the true poem of riches,
> To earn for the body and the mind whatever adheres and goes forward and is not dropt by

[428] From "With Antecedents."
[429] From "Song of Myself," section 22.
[430] Apropos Einstein's words, in the poem I turn to next ("Starting from Paumanok") Whitman expresses his intention to show that "all the things of the universe are perfect miracles, each as profound as any."

death;
I will effuse egotism and show it underlying all, and I will be the bard of personality,
And I will show of male and female that either is but the equal of the other,
And sexual organs and acts! do you concentrate in me, for I am determin'd to tell you with courageous clear voice to prove you illustrious,
And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present, and can be none in the future,
And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to beautiful results
. . .[431]

I have argued that *Leaves of Grass* is a book in which Whitman via art pursues, hones and to some degree starts self-adopting an existential attitude that renders him capable of withstanding the pressures of the human condition – makes him "balanced for contingencies". Predominantly, it is a transformative attitude: Under its force, "imperfection", "sexual organs and acts", "male and female" and everything else reappear in a new and better light. As a result of the archetypally heroic, psycholinguistic retrieval and rescue (*from* undifferentiated chaos *into* orderly, structured conceptualization) of the idea of self-redemption as a *practical* possibility, ideas that are of a piece with "whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to beautiful results" gain credence and plausibility. Ideational coherence has at least thus been demonstrated linguistically, which brings them that much closer to mental recognition. In other words: Although I keep suggesting there is much we do not understand about human being and potential, it seems we are justified in holding that in order for something to be practically achievable, it should also be available or hospitable to straightforward theoretical presentation.[432] It is as if, because the vision that self-redemption is a practical possibility is so obviously beautiful (I assume that news of redemption is always inherently welcome), by merely showing ourselves able to partake of that vision on behalf of the self, we inch closer to proving it vision believable. After all, despite all the trials and tribulations of one's life, that life has now brought us to an encounter with a transcendental vision for selves like our own, and from *that* perspective it becomes – hypothetically – possible to partake for a while of the symbolic self's conviction that literally anything can "be turn'd to beautiful results". Insofar as one agrees with Jaron Lanier that "Being a person is not a pat formula, but a quest, a mystery, a leap of faith", it certainly seems a *logical* possibility.[433] For his part, Viktor Frankl, plunged in the most heinous degradation and agony, involuntarily turned what happened to *him* into the "beautiful

[431] From "Starting from Paumanok".
[432] As for what that might mean for a reader, consider Fitzgerald in epigraphic perspective 11.
[433] At any rate, we seem to be coming up against the psychological notion of redescription (see footnote 277). Within that context, Adam Phillips has said that "It may not be that all accidents are meaningful, but that meaning is made out of accidents." From Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 11. I cite Lanier in footnote 69.

result" of being able to report to all of humanity that "a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind" may float free of the most destructive attempts to quell it.[434]

These consideration grew out of the Nietzschean "Thus I willed it"; Whitman transformed himself by "willing" a redemptive attitude into being. He did so by using poetry "instrumentally" – by "capturing" his ideal linguistically and "arresting" it poetically on paper. In my assessment, there is a profound psychological and existential lesson in that.

The lines immediately following "whatever happens . . . it may be turn'd to beautiful results" in "Starting from Paumanok" are as follows:

> And I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than death,
> And I will thread a thread through my poems that time and events are compact,
> And that all the things of the universe are perfect miracles, each as profound as any.
>
> I will not make poems with reference to parts,
> But I will make poems, songs, thoughts, with reference to ensemble,
> And I will not sing with reference to a day, but with reference to all days,
> And I will not make a poem nor the least part of a poem but has reference to the soul,
> Because having look'd at the objects of the universe, I find there is no one nor any particle of one but has reference to the soul.

This passage is telling in a different way. Whitman writes that he will "not make poems with reference to parts" nor "with reference to a day, but with reference to all days". Many of his poems – most notably those featuring so-called Whitmanian "catalogues" – subsume or dissolve the particular in what seems like the infinite or unbounded and achieve, finds John B. Mason, an "expansive, exhilarating" effects.[435] Mason adds that the catalogues are "a device through which Whitman expresses his faith in the expansiveness and all-inclusiveness of American democracy" and "extends himself out into the universe". In "Song of Myself", Whitman himself describes the cataloguing poet – that is to say, himself – as a "caresser of life". In my estimation, the catalogues exemplify a variant of the aforementioned willed affirmation, and like the affirmation associated with the redemption of past events, this phenomenon too is cogently outlined by Nietzsche. In the passage below from *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche is admittedly talking about Goethe – a figure greatly admired, as it happens, by both Nietzsche and Whitman – but it so aptly describes a perspective characteristic (also) of Whitman that it merits our attention. In other words, we can

[434] From Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 65.
[435] From John B. Mason's entry "Catalogues" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 107–108.

approach it as a *general* psychological description of a different (albeit related) "remote possibility" (to reference Cohen again); the passage I have underscored is particularly relevant to a discussion of Whitman:

> [W]hat he wanted was *totality*; . . . he disciplined himself into wholeness, he *created* himself . . . [He conceived] the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength because he knows how to use to his advantage even that from which the average nature would perish;[436] the man for whom there is no longer anything that is forbidden unless it be *weakness*, whether called vice or virtue.[437] Such a spirit who has *become free* stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—*he does not negate anymore*.[438] Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths.[439]

The excerpt finds several striking counterpart instances in Whitman (some of which I have indicated in footnotes within Nietzsche's text itself). The underscored sentence can be said to speak with especial fidelity for these lines from Whitman: "Copious as you are [you orbs, growths, mountains, brutes], I absorb you all in myself, and become the master Myself." Here, the speaking symbolic self (and arguably eventually the *actual* self) assumes and adopts the function of Nietzsche's "whole", i.e. something endowed with the power to "defang" and redeem threat and adversity.

Leaving aside the fact that Nietzsche is writing about another great poet – Goethe – the thematic and personal similarities between Nietzsche and Whitman (who both admired Goethe) come as less of a surprise when one takes into account that both men were heavily influenced by R. W. Emerson.[440] Although, as I say in footnote 427, there is no evidence of Whitman directly influencing Nietzsche, 1964 saw the publication of C. N. Stavrou's *Whitman and Nietzsche: A*

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[436] Cf. Whitman from his 1855 Preface: "He consumes an eternal passion and is indifferent which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune and persuades daily and hourly his delicious pay. What balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy."

[437] Cf. "What blurt is this about virtue and about vice? / Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent, / My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait, / I moisten the roots of all that has grown." From Whitman's "Song of Myself". It goes without saying that Whitman was not a moral relativist. But he was no defender of dogmatism, whether on behalf of or against morality.

[438] Cf. "Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing, / Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms, / Strong and content I travel the open road." "And henceforth I will go celebrate any thing I see or am, / And sing and laugh and deny nothing." From Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" and "All Is Truth", respectively.

[439] Cf. "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths." From Whitman's "Song of Myself".

The Nietzsche excerpt is from *Twilight of the Idols*, chapter 9, paragraph 49. It is cited in Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 281 (italicized emphasis in original; underscore added).

[440] "Emerson at one time influenced Nietzsche very deeply", writes Josiah Royce and adds: "With Walt Whitman he has not a few features of ideal and doctrine in common." From Daniel W. Conway and Peter S. Groff, eds., *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, vol. 3, 270

Comparative Study of Their Thought, which contains a detailed analysis of the two authors' works, which Stavrou find convergent in many relevant aspects. Not the least point of convergence is both men's conceptions of what constitutes an ideal man, a hero, an *Übermensch*. As I have said, Nietzsche held Goethe in great esteem (and he called Eckermann's *Words of Goethe* "the best German book there is").[441] At the risk of confusing my reader by alluding too frequently to German literature and thought, let me "come full circle" and bring it all back home with these words from Emerson. The sage of New England here talks about poetry and about coming to terms with debased and warped landscapes; the passage resonates with Nietzsche's remarks on Goethe – and, by proxy as I have claimed, with Whitman – which is understandable in light of the respect Emerson and Whitman had for each other:

> [As] it is dislocation and detachment . . . that makes things ugly, the poet, who reattaches things to nature and the Whole,—reattaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet seem them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web.[442]

Asselineau notes that Emerson himself never had the courage of his convictions to the same degree as Whitman who incorporated ("absorbed") prosaic motifs and workaday themes into *Leaves of Grass* much more "intrepidly" than Emerson.[443]

I said above that Whitman sometimes expresses himself in a style that would be appropriate for a sage or oracle. But language which tends in a "spiritual" direction without the mandate of the underlying sentiments is unlikely to keep from degenerating into a kind of poetic "virtue signaling". Howsoever that may be, Whitman's insistence on affirming reality (regardless of whether it strikes us immediately as unsightly or lovely) presents an attitude described by Gerald Heard under the rubric of "gratitude". The British-born author and philosopher, who became a friend of Aldous Huxley and of the other mystically inclined English intellectuals who settled in California during the 1930s, sees such a psychological state as being proportionate to a person's growing "creative insight" – in the direction of gratitude (a term related to "celebration", I would

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[441] I mention *Words of Goethe* in footnote 51. Nietzsche's praise is cited in Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche: Attempt at a Mythology*, 158.

[442] From Emerson's essay "The Poet", in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 455. The excerpt rewards comparison with that from "The Transcendentalist" in footnote 333.

[443] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 2, 193.

venture). Having obtained such a state, reality's "ugly colour" and "muddled design" are transformed into "opportunities for interpretation" from formerly being causes for condemnation. The interpretation I am trying to describe carries out a certain holistic operation effecting absorption of elements into wholeness. (Recall the Frame Problem of chapter 2: The Frame Problem is the formal articulation of what is at the center of Heard's, Nietzsche's, Watts's, Whitman's and others' psychologically inflected ideas in the present context.)[444] Heard continues:

> The disappointment and the pain—*these, too, enrich, not frustrate, the whole, when we can accept them*, not grudgingly but with gratitude. The gratitude that at first only gave thanks for all the obvious (and superficial) goods, is crowned in the end by the creative insight.[445]

We have seen Thoreau say that the tools of "the imagination and fancy and reason" can carve out "a new creation, independent of the world, and a possession forever", which could be likened to "cleared . . . wilderness." (See footnote 187.) Essentially the same thing is captured in Nietzsche's and Heard's passages where the particular is only "loathsome" when it is not (yet) "affirmed in the whole" or seen as "opportunities" for the "tool" of "interpretation" and "creative insight". A wonderful passage from William James establishes that the loathsome and offensive element could in theory be no less than "Satan" himself, "the negative or tragic principle", which is a notion that usefully anticipates my discussion of the Jungian shadow in the next chapter:[446]

> [In] its most characteristic embodiments, religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer to escape.[447] It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of

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[444] Note also in this context the significance of the philosophy of phenomenology, which Stephen de Paul describes thus: "Central to [phenomenology] is the notion that the world of appearing things [unsightly as well as beautiful] is governed, ordered and given meaning by consciousness itself." From Stephen de Paul, "Phenomenological criticism", in Irena R. Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. 139.

Peterson is a thinker who agrees that "consciousness plays a centrally important role in the generation of the predictable and comprehended world from the domain of the unexpected." A few lines from Whitman capture the same beautifully: "We consider bibles and religions divine—I do not say they are not divine, / I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still, / It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life, / Leaves are not more shed from the trees, or trees from the earth, than they are shed out of you." From "A Song for Occupations". Peterson's words are from Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 52

[445] From Gerald Heard, *Prayers and Meditations: Selections by Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley, and Others*, 88. That perspective was what J. B. Beresford was articulating (and giving a religious context) in the epigraph to his 1918 novel *God's Counterpoint*: "All apparent discords and ugliness are but accentuations of the eternal rhythm ; the necessary beat of an undertone ; God's counterpoint . . .".

[446] James talks about "religion consciousness" and "happiness", it is true, but the religious experience is equally a psychological state – again, I intend no mystification or superstition – and therefore eligible for attention in this context.

[447] Cf. "Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune, / Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing, / Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms, / Strong and content I travel the

> sacrifice—inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome. If you ask *how* religion thus falls on the thorns and faces death, and in the very act annuls annihilation, I cannot explain the matter, for it is religion's secret . . . [It is a] complex sacrificial constitution, in which a higher happiness holds a lower unhappiness in check. In the Louvre there is a picture, by Guido Reni, of St. Michael with his foot on Satan's neck. The richness of the picture is in large part due to the fiend's figure being there. The richness of its allegorical meaning also is due to his being there—that is, the world is all the richer for having a devil in it, so long as we keep our foot upon his neck. . . .

One term that seems indicated and comes to mind when reading these perspectives is *holism*, which is interesting for two (related) reasons. (The reader should also recall and reflect here on the remarks in footnote 80 on "quality of being" being dependent on balancing chaos and order.) I have previously clarified the etymological affinity between the words "hale", "heal", "health", "wholesome", "whole" and "holy". Although "holism" is evidently a coined word from 1926, it *can* be said to be derived from the Greek "holos", which means "whole" – appropriately enough.[448] The other interesting thing worth mentioning is predominantly a coincidence (implausible but, for all that, very satisfying): It turns out that the man who coined the word "holism" was none other than Jan Christian Smuts, the South African and British Commonwealth statesman and Whitman specialist (born 1870) whom I mentioned in the Preface (footnote 16). "Holism", which Smuts preferred to capitalize, is central to his 1927 mystically speculative book *Holism and Evolution*.[449]

Having said what I can about the role played by volition, effort, determination, will and resolve in crises of being, it remains, of course, an ultimately intractable problem – a humbling mystery – why some people come to find their existence fatally unbearable when others would consider a life haunted by the very same – or, for that matter, worse – scourges and ills perfectly tolerable, perhaps even conducive to their happiness and flourishing. I cited Stanley Cavell in footnote 90 – "Man is the animal for whom to be or not to be is the question: its resolution therefore must have the form of an answer" – which, alas, suggests that there is something existentially extreme or precarious about the human condition (Camus, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Freud, Jung and many others thought exactly that). Peterson suggested as much, too, when he stated that there are episodes in life that challenges our present understanding and ideas about the world so profoundly that not only must "part of the

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open road." From Whitman's "Song of the Open Road".

[448] The resource I draw on is www.etymonline.com.

[449] To reiterate: Smuts is of interest to Whitman scholars because he wrote a book length study on Whitman, published posthumously in 1973, entitled *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality*. In the manuscript to that book, which predates *Holism and Evolution*, Smuts introduces concepts and theories which his later wide-ranging philosophy of holism evolved and complicated.

"stupid old you" [perish]" but such "an awful lot of you" gets destabilized "that you just die; you just can't handle it."[450] (Let us at this stage not forget that the problem seems inextricably linked to the mystery of consciousness, which I have flagged a few times above, insofar as it appears to be the case that living organisms need to be conscious in order to suffer; and rather mysteriously in that context, it seems equally true that consciousness is no prerequisite for life at all – much of nature appears to be doing fine without it.) But if I confess myself defeated and uneasy before the concept and problem of psychic suffering, at least I am not alone. Adam Phillips cites Beckett in whose 1957 radio play *All That Fall* a character, Mrs Rooney, describes "a little girl, very strange and unhappy in her ways" whose critical condition completely stumps what Mrs Rooney calls "one of these new mind doctors":

> He could find nothing wrong with her . . . The only thing wrong with her as far as he could see was that she was dying . . . it was just something he said, and the way he said it that have haunted me ever since . . . When he had done with the little girl he stood there motionless for some time . . . Then he suddenly raised his head and explained, as if he had had a revelation. 'The trouble with her was that had never really been born!'[451]

There is, then, much in this domain which eludes confident and robust explanation. If one decides to take me at my word, I have extracted the lesson and made a case for the no doubt immediately curious – and probably provocative (if not offensive) – idea that it is in principle possible to tolerate any scenario whatsoever. (Derived from Frankl's Holocaust experience, I did, it is true, circumspectly appropriate this idea as *a conditional premise*.) I do not deny, of course, that circumstances can be – can grow – technically unbearable and insufferable. Shelly Kagan takes great pains to argue – convincingly – that suffering can assume such severity and chronicity that staying alive would result in a worse outcome than having life terminated.[452] But I am not primarily concerned with such cases; I own that we are fragile, mortal entities. Rather, I appeal to the words I offered at the outset – that "Life is a problem which has for each an individual solution" (see footnote 24) – from which insight I try to defend the notion that, plausibly as a result of the high standard of living in the West, we might each of us be very inadequately informed about the limits of our psychic endurance, resources and genius for "rebirth". Unless we are clinically depressed to a

[450] The full quote is given in footnote 313.
[451] The excerpt is cited in Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures*, 190. James Knowlson adds that the story "derives from a lecture given by the psychologist C. G. Jung, in the mid-thirties, that Beckett attended while he was staying in London." From S. E. Gontarski, ed., *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, 268.
[452] See Shelly Kagan, *Death*, chapter 15 (on suicide).

degree demanding prompt medical attention, a positive option (such as some form of therapy, including those enhanced by aesthetic activity) should not be sacrificed for the perverse temptation to capitulate immediately.[453] Adam Phillips writes that "the self is constituted partly by its unattained self, or selves," and partly by what is already manifest.[454] Ready access to the former would seem to be a great boon, but even so there is no escaping the awful human recognition that "to be or not to be" is a question we must answer performatively each moment of our lives.

As I say, ponderous discourse seems largely ineffective in this domain: When someone is about to fatally go under, it is such a delicate situation yet such an emergency that a fine philosophical point is really too late. Simon Blackburn has written about this, i.e. about the unwisdom of "prescribing" abstract thinking to the suicidal and those plunged in keenest distress: "In [certain] moods, however, everything goes leaden. Like Hamlet, we are determined to skulk at the edge of the carnival, seeing nothing but the skull beneath the skin. It is sad when we become like that, and once more we need a tonic more than an argument."[455]

I find that there are both romantic and classical (specifically Stoical) overtones to the idea that any crisis can in principle be endured, any amount of suffering transcended, and that a person's fate is written in his or her heart, so to speak, by which I mean that it is not the result of some actuarial calculus representing exterior events. Thoreau seems to have taken this heartening view:

> The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the alms-house as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace.[456]

To Thoreau, love of life is dependent on sheer determination to do so, irrespective of the inherent actual value of life. Emerson posited similarly romantic claims: He insisted that "we are wiser than we think" and that "[t]he soul refuses limits, and always affirms an Optimism, never a Pessimism,"

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[453] Speaking of depression, Neel Burton has said that with the exception of "the more severe intractable cases that are treated by hospital psychiatrists", the "vast majority" of cases can be understood in terms of "life problems, human nature or the human condition." From Neel Burton, *Growing from Depression*, 31.

[454] From Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures*, 188.

[455] Simon Blackburn, *Being Good*, 80.

[456] Thoreau, *Walden*, 345. However, Thoreau does not consider whether all are in fact equally free to choose to "love [their] life."

which suggests that the unknowable things about us (essential to us) work in our favor and can (at least potentially) come to our aid in an emergency.[457] But poverty is one category of adversity; pain and evil are others and generally not easily tolerated by the subject they torment and afflict. If there seems to be a glib residual quality, then, to the perhaps indefensibly sunny, romantic lesson I have extracted and defended, I would merely add this: From a certain perspective, such a conclusion is the *only one* that a person can legitimately get behind (that is to say, if what we are after is *one* conclusion – not *multiple* ones). This is because the opposite one will simply not do: One cannot coherently and defensibly advocate capitulation to adversity or validate as *a good* the fatal desperation which drive sufferers to self-abnegation and insanity – not when better, more valuable and constructive stances and perspectives might be adopted, despite being, in light of the actual facts and by any reasonable standard, deeply "illogical" and unusual. After all, for every Frankl and Solzhenitsyn who made it out of the hellish camps during World War II, thousands, if not millions, did not and *could* not. Though I have defended as noble and legitimate the Franklean freedom to choose a psychological attitude regardless of circumstances, then, there sometimes sadly is no choice at all. There is something miraculous and extraordinary (almost romantic and heroic) about "Frank's freedom", and that should not surprise us for there is something miraculous – I have used the word "saintly" – about transforming any process towards evil and being able to "will" it in the present and in hindsight. By the same rationale, genius such as Whitman's is exceptional, and so (incidentally) was the physical stamina and longevity he manifested. The very opposite of nihilistic, his was a condition in which he could, in Cavell's words, "at once want the world and want it to change – even change it, as the apple changes the earth, though we say the apple falls. (Nietzsche's word for the spreading inability to want the world is nihilism.)"[458] These fine things as exemplified by Whitman's "condition" are, as I say, not likely. But I stand by what I have said (at the bottom of page 5): The human self's potential upper limits and capabilities – particularly the psychological ones – are not easily defined, and it seem wicked to rush to insist that were are powerless on all fronts.[459]

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[457] The two lines are from Emerson's essays "The Over-Soul" and "Compensation", respectively.

[458] Appropriately enough, perhaps, Cavell calls the condition in question "Emersonian perfectionism." From Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, 18.

[459] As regards Whitman's stamina: Following the very lengthy list of issues revealed by an autopsy conducted of Whitman's body, his friend R. M. Bucke was led to say this: "Another would have died much earlier with one-half of the pathological changes which existed in his body." To this, Asselineau adds: "Only his indomitable will had enabled him to live so long in spite of all these maladies. The poet of perfect health had fought off illness and had finally been overcome by a combination of diseases the least of which would have been enough to kill another man." From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 268.

The mystery, of course – and it is a psychological mystery before it is a philosophical mystery, as far as I am concerned – is that human beings *ever* will or allow their own destruction and death, that they sometimes perversely desire to fall apart under the weight of burdens that would have been no match at another point in life or that others might gladly take on. I am unable to say much more about psychic distress of life-threatening magnitude. I remain someone who, with everybody who considers the matter honestly, stands in awe before the human mind which in internal complexity exceeds any other object in the universe. It is a valuable insight to this discussion perhaps that it is *biologically evolved* but that is not, in my opinion, sufficient to get a handle on all the problems and questions the human mind manifests and raises.

This dissertation is not a psychiatric investigation, and there would be no point in taking on problems that humble and defeat my intellectual abilities. What motivates me is merely showing, thinking about and learning from some of the intuitions and efforts that appear to have sheltered Whitman from ruin and carried him through the particular crises and traumas of his life. It is not that Whitman devotedly practiced seeing half-empty glasses as half-full.[460] *That* pose – prosaic and superficial – we could all pull off to varying degrees of credibility, and occasionally it is probably appropriate. But it is much more interesting to evaluate his genius for looking squarely at "chaos and death" and via the poem (here "Song of Myself") transform them into causes for celebration:

> Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
> It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.

Something about that transformation is mystical, saintly, religious (provided we make sure we know what we mean by such words). This is naturally exciting. But it also compels me to say, in the words of John Gardner: "A great deal more might be said on this subject, but not by me."[461]

[460] In some areas of life, however, he did just that – and found the approach worth the effort. Confined by ill health in the last years of his life, he said: "It is wearisome, almost sad, to be confined in this way, imprisoned for days, months, years. Yet I have made up my mind to be cheerful." What I am getting at above is, however, attitudes that significantly transform the experiential side of being. Cf. my words on Kenneth Burke and "whistling in the dark" in footnote 185.

[461] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 197.

Chapter 4. *"The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me"*: Poet of Light and Shadow

Chapter summary: Stable tolerable selfhood over time is predicated on the self's ability to endure its own psychic "company" and will its own continuation. According to all believable evidence, Whitman was for most of his life troubled and tormented by his sexual desires and longing for a number of men few of whom were ever able to approve or return the poet's ardour. Not surprisingly given Whitman's general post-1855 indifference to his culture's widely-held opinions of what exactly constituted poetry (and complicated feelings vis-à-vis the bodies of men and women were far from unanimously considered something a poet ought to explore), one finds in the poems ample evidence darkly suggesting that something was not quite right: The poems' pained meditations on love and male friendship are full of heartache, self-ambivalence, loneliness and frustration, while the passages of shameful confession apparently come close to naming and revealing the painful reality of something quasi-diabolic and criminal in the poet's heart. (Needless to say, sodomy laws in the US made homosexuality, which the poems never overtly mention, a felony punishable by imprisonment or death; these laws were not repealed until the second half of the twentieth century.) But despite his deteriorating health following a serious stroke in 1873, Whitman's conversations with Horace Traubel in the late 1880 and early 1890s reveal a person for whom it seems profoundly and accurately self-evident that "whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to beautiful results" ("Starting from Paumanok"); other writings, such as the 1889 essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", support such a reading. In this chapter I explain what function the poetry is likely to have had in terms of enabling Whitman to endure and redeem the "presence of evil within him", to quote Asselineau (even if that presence certainly does not merit the word "evil" by contemporary standards). The same writer suggests that "the serenity of his old age" was the result of a "continual struggle", and I nuance that picture by arguing that the "struggle" is best understood in Jungian terms, specifically as a patient attempt to integrate the "shadow" (short for the Jungian *shadow aspects of the psyche*). To be precise, I claim that the poetic effort directed towards a full integration of the shadow is methodologically similar – similar in nature – to the approach explored in the previous chapter: The alienating aspect must

be named (a “story [must] be told about it”, as Blixen woud say; cf. footnote 251) if its threatening import and menacing presence are to be transformed and redeemed. It has been claimed by Carl Martin Lindner that Whitman anticipates Jung (born when Whitman was in his mid-50s) regarding the shadow aspects of the psyche, “aspects which must be acknowledged if the individual is to progress toward wholeness or integrity”, but a proper explication of that foreshadowing has not been offered. This dissertation begins to redress that oversight.

* * *

Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb’d, blush’d, resented, lied, stole, grudg’d,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting . . .
—Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

How America illustrates birth, muscular youth, the promise, the sure
fulfilment, the absolute success, despite of people— illustrates evil as well as good,
The vehement struggle so fierce for unity in one’s-self;
—Walt Whitman, “Thoughts”

In the previous chapter I have explored the philosophically inflected and psychologically searching aesthetic of *Leaves of Grass*. I consider that aesthetic the work’s dominant mode and central to whatever claim it has to being considered a work of sublime, quasi-religious self-transcendence. One of the – to me – most fascinating things about Whitman and his iconic book is how unlikely it can seem that a man so psychically troubled and so dogged by ill fortune (see footnote 370) could produce a work so abundantly charged with the spirit of celebration and enthusiasm (see epigraphic perspective 26). I have made the point more than once that I consider it essential to the most fleeting understanding of *Leaves of Grass* that one gains a real appreciation for and sense of how vast a psychic gap it spans for its author.[462] In this chapter, I make the claim that the book is a

[462] Similarly, Harry James Cook has said that “Any valid interpretation of Whitman’s poetry must be in large part autobiographical.” From Harry James Cook, “The Individuation of a Poet: The Process of Becoming in

profound literary achievement precisely because it served instrumentally as a piece of bridging infrastructure within – and for the benefit of – a more than commonly divided self. In other words, this chapter is about the healing of internal psychic fracture via writing. At the end of the last chapter I implied the concept of dividedness by reiterating my assumption that we can for the sake of argument simplify the picture of psychic health thus: There are just two ways or directions in which psychic health can alter or "slide" – it can *progress* towards psychic wholeness and health (hence a "wholesome" state or, at least etymologically, "holy" state), or it can *regress* towards deterioration of psychic health, signaling a state of increased psychic dislocation and suffering.[463] Harold Bloom invokes a "gap" metaphor similar to mine above ("bridging") when he characterizes *Leaves of Grass* as the outgrowth of

> the mask "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," who *could not reconcile his soul and his true self and so took up the middle ground between them*.[464]

Very close to the spirit of this dissertation is Kinzie's insistence that a great work of literary art must reply to the "need for coherence in a human life", "reflect[] the facts of experiential complexity" and "speak memorably about our great anxieties—affliction, injustice, death." It is on a view like that that I base my own proposition (see footnote 63) that a poet can hardly be of great import if he or she is without an unillusioned attitude to human beings, in the form of a Terence-esque tolerance and sympathy in the face of the bizarre, the impossible and the exceptional. Whitman writes:

> I see all the prisoners in the prisons,
> I see the defective human bodies of the earth,
> The blind, the deaf and dumb, idiots, hunchbacks, lunatics,
> The pirates, thieves, betrayers, murderers, slave-makers of the earth,
> . . .
> I see male and female everywhere,
> I see the serene brotherhood of philosophs,
> I see the constructiveness of my race,
> I see the results of the perseverance and industry of my race,

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Whitman's 'The Sleepers'," 102.

[463] Clearly my concern is not with a very precise definition of these states; I consider them intuitive enough to suffice in lieu of actual clinical definitions. (In other words, to respectfully misquote Leonard Cohen: "If your apparatus for comprehending [psychic states] has collapsed to such a degree where you ask me for a definition of [psychic health] then you are beyond my therapy." From Leonard Cohen, "Leonard Cohen in 1964 – On being a Jewish writer, a Canadian and a seeker of G-d" [17:02].)

[464] Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows*, 57 (emphasis mine). Although I shall in the following *not* adopt Bloom's psychological model and nomenclature, his words (pertinent though they were to my remarks on "masks" in chapter 3) are nevertheless of *metaphoric* value to me here insofar as they correctly indicate the psychologically healing *bridging* function of the poetry.

> I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them, I mix indiscriminately,
> And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth.[465]

If a poet, I venture, is caught up in dogma and ideology to a degree that makes him or her unable to say, with Terence, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" [I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me], he is, it would seem, rather badly equipped to reply to the need for coherence in life and in the world (which comes down to the same thing finally); he would be unfit to be, in Shelley's phrase, an "unacknowledged legislator[] of the world" – but would probably do very well as an *actual* legislator or legal official employed by – and therefore necessarily speaking only for – a subsection of "the world".[466] (Recall that Paz calls Whitman "the only great modern poet who does not seem to experience inconformity vis-à-vis his world".) Admittedly, such thoughts are romantic and quaint by today's standards, but Terence's "idea" or position, which Jung updates with his work on the human shadow, has, it seems to me, an unchallengeable and timeless claim on our existential, psychological and therefore also aesthetic positions. (I have made reference to Jung several times already, and shall introduce his shadow concept shortly.) Concurring with the essentiality of artistically promoting coherence and dissolving the "barriers, differentiations, diversions that we manage to construct for ourselves", Leonard Cohen too had some thoughts about the differences between artists and those furthering more officially sanctioned agendas:

> [It] is important to understand the difference between an artist and a theologian, or a politician. To me an artist does not have a platform, does not have a message, does not have a party. His only message, his only party, is the *dissolution of differences*. And we have to leave it to these other kinds of experts to get us all inflamed about one particular view or another. But in the moment of a song or a poem – or an embrace between a man or a woman, or a handshake between two people – in *that* moment things are dissolved, and that's the art's realm.[467]

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[465] From "Song of Myself", these lines also exemplify the mode of absorption into wholeness that I explored in the previous chapter.

In the 1855 Preface, Whitman enjoins his readers to "stand up for the stupid". It is also worth observing that a reviewer of *Leaves of Grass* (either the first or second edition – I am unsure) felt it incumbent on him to "mildly suggest that the author should be sent to a lunatic asylum, and the mercenary publishers to the penitentiary for pandering to the prurient tastes of morbid sensualists." The anonymous review is available at the online *Walt Whitman Archive* and has Whitman Archive ID "anc.00030".

[466] This might sound cantankerous vis-à-vis government and formalized organization; it is not. When a legislator "contradicts [him]self" (to borrow the famous phrase from "Song of Myself", he is incompetent. Contrariwise, the interesting "self-contradiction" at the heart of Whitman's poetic attitude enables the creation of important poetry – inclusive, ecumenical and "catholic" (a word the poet favored). In short, art and politics are *categorically* different things.

[467] From Leonard Cohen, "Leonard Cohen on a tour bus (1979)" [0:20].

To regard heightened aesthetic experience in the metaphoric terms of an embrace or physical contact between two people was not far from Whitman's mind either:

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man,
> (Is it night? are we here together alone?)
> It is I you hold and who holds you,
> I spring from the pages into your arms . . .

Without moments like these, Cohen adds, when "distinctions are dissolved" and secret anguish addressed and redeemed, "you become a very narrow, bitter, prejudiced, dogmatic kind of individual." I have cited Octavio Paz to the effect that Whitman may have discovered a coping strategy for his frequently acute loneliness (to which his private correspondence is ample testimony) in making "his monologue [be] a vast chorus." Paz writes: "Doubtless there are, at least, two persons in him: the public poet and the private person, who conceals his real erotic inclinations" (see footnote 319). I have written above of "rapprochement" (in the context of equalizing or harmonizing the undeniable tension and contradistinction manifest in self versus not-self). Here, again, something very similar goes on: A degree of "coherence" is won, in and by the poet, by virtue of his unification – his recasting of multiple voices – into one. Consider the last line of the excerpt from "Thoughts" above.

Whitman's work would be remarkable, I think, even if it were not deepened, blackened and scarred by an element of grave psychological torment, which can best be characterized as suggesting the poet's evident abhorrence of and disgust with himself. I shall look into these apparently lamentable or untoward psychological states in the following.

I agree with Harold Bloom that *Leaves of Grass* is not primarily mystically or psychosexually motivated, and so I shall steer clear of a unidimensional identification of the poet's motivations with his apparent homoerotic orientation.[468] But I do not doubt at all that Whitman's sexual longing and – let us assume – the impossibility of reconciling his desire with the rest of his life was a *source of* suffering, a *cause* for despair (Asselineau has uncovered textual evidence from 1860 that the poet's "obsession with evil" is related to his sexual life resulting in self-torment).[469] I merely choose to emphasize the pain *itself*, not its origins, in order to raise and remove the work

[468] Cf. the introduction to Harold Bloom, ed., *Walt Whitman*, 9.
[469] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 128.

from the fraught and academically confused domain of gender and identity politics.[470] As James E. Miller writes, Jr., writes:

> [Not] all critics [are] ready to accept the assumption that such seismic chasms divide readers as implied by such ponderous sexual labeling. There remains the fact that innumerable "heterosexual" readers, both men and women, have felt the power, sexual and other, of Whitman's *Leaves*. His appeal is universal, not exclusive. Sexual labels are simplistic, distorting as they do the complexity of any "real" individual's sexuality. In short, all readers can share consciously and/or unconsciously, Whitman's omnisexual vision—omnisexual in the all-encompassing sense of embracing auto-, homo-, and hetero-erotic impulses.[471]

Speaking not to the cultural reception but to the qualitative merit and interest of the poems themselves, Judith Harris is a strong ally. She finds that

> Whitman's lines resonate with life regardless of the facts of his situation in life. A poet must bring sadness or lament into the reader's heart. Where else does the meaning and value of poetry, if not of all writing, lie but in the reader's ability to embrace the writer's deepest convictions? The reader of Whitman patterns his own suffering after the poet's and more important, on Whitman's convincing claim that he is able to bear it and to feel empathy for others.[472]

At a time when (in Ed Folsom's words) "dissembling or circumventing or euphemizing" was the consensual attitude among critics, i.e. mid-twentieth century, Asselineau is unique for cutting to the chase and calling Whitman's "wild homosexual desires" his "most difficult battle".[473] The desires

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[470] In Harold Bloom's opinion, Whitman deserves our interest and admiration for his "extraordinary sense of how complex human sexuality is." And then: "[T]hese days (and I find this very tedious) most Whitman scholarship and criticism and most Whitman teaching that goes on in the university is gay, gay, gay, gay. This is really very tiresome." From Harold Bloom, "Harold Bloom on Whitman and Jazz" [12:31].

Those interested in gay criticism may turn to Robert K. Martin's work *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979) in which Whitman is a seminal figure. Works bearing the imprint of queer theory and gender studies include *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (1991) by Michael Moon (who considers Whitman's homosexuality a cultural and political fact rather than merely as a biographical datum), *The Erotic Whitman* (2000) by Vivian Pollak, *Word, Birth, and Culture: The Poetry of Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson* (2002) by Daneen Wardrop and *Leaving the M/other: Whitman, Kristeva and Leaves of Grass* (2002) by Beth Jensen.

[471] From James E. Miller, Jr.'s entry "Sex and Sexuality" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 631.

[472] Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*, 5.

[473] From Ed Folsom's foreword to Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, xii.

To be fair, Asselineau himself singles out the German critic Eduard Bertz as the first to frankly discuss the problem posed by "Calamus". I return to this in chapter 5.

The Whitman biographer Justin Kaplan is not convinced that Whitman was ever intimate with another man. A friend of Ginsberg's, Kaplan tells this story: "For several years, every time I saw him [Allen Ginsberg], we argued over the same stupid point. You want to hear what it was? I'm quoting him: "You've got to listen to this!

"never left him at peace and constantly menaced his balance".[474] Asselineau grounds "Whitman's poetry in the poet's body", as Folsom writes – and of course desire is both a physiological and psychological phenomenon. I shall now, before bringing in Jung, try to characterize the poet's evidently unabated crisis.

As Asselineau notes in the chapter "Sex Life", if *Leaves of Grass* is like a rich and fragrant meadow of grass,

> there rise here and there high tufts of calamus or sweet-flag with long pointed leaves, yellow-ish green spikes (or spadices), and huge snaky rhizomes, mysterious and troubling phallic symbols.

Michael Moon explains that the natural objects evoked in the second line below –

> If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it,
> . . .
> Root of wash'd sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded duplicate eggs! it shall be you![475]

– "suggest the shape of the male genitals". "Sweet-flag" (or "Calamus"), as Whitman explains for the benefit of his English editor W. M. Rosetti, is "the very large & aromatic grass, or rush, growing about water-ponds in the valleys—spears about three feet high . . . [the plant represents] the biggest & hardiest kind of spears of grass—and the fresh, acquatic, pungent bouquet."[476] The poet's explanation is called for insofar as the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1860) had grown to include a whole group of poems gathered together as "Calamus". In the first of these poems, "In Paths Untrodden", the poet offers what Moon considers a resolute announcement, namely that

> [it is] clear to me that my soul,
> That the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades,

There's a letter from John Burroughs, or one of those people, one of those associates of Whitman, saying: 'Last night, I slept with Walt.' And so, doesn't that speak for itself?" [Laughs] And then, my side of the argument was: "Remember, when people visited in, let's say, the 1870s, they didn't have Motel 6"." From Kaplan, Justin, and Rob Couteau, " 'The Mystery of the Man': Justin Kaplan Talks About America's Greatest Poet".

[474] From Ed Folsom's foreword to Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, xii. The quotes in this line are Asselineau's, however, not Folsom's.

[475] From "Song of Myself", section 24.

[476] The 1867 letter is included in Walt Whitman, *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman*, 128.

And a few lines further on, we find the poet or symbolic self "Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment." Whitman, however, would never openly validate his reader's inevitable conclusions. As Moon writes:

> In response to John Addington Symonds's implicitly hopeful inquiry about whether the "Calamus" sentiment might be homoerotic, the aged WW [then 71] may have protested too much, emphatically denying the possibility, and attempting to quiet any doubts about his heterosexuality by claiming to have fathered six children (no trace of whom has ever otherwise manifested itself).[477]
>
> Both in *Democratic Vistas* and in his 1876 Preface to *LG*, WW was at pains to insist that the meaning of "Calamus" resides mainly in its political significance,—e.g. "It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, (the adhesive love, at least rivalling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it,) that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof."[478]

Presenting ample textual evidence from *Leaves of Grass*, Asselineau notes that Whitman

> glides just to the brink of confession, but suddenly regains his self-control and keeps to himself the great secret to which he has nevertheless drawn our attention. One feels that he would like to tell us all, but that, for some reason or other, he cannot – a disconcerting and unexpected attitude on the part of a poet who is at first sight so open and exuberant.[479]

More than the aborted confessions precisely, the degree and nature of his suffering are what interests me here. Orr makes the claim that what Whitman endured was severe enough to merit the word "trauma" (incidentally, that word seems not once to have crept into Whitman's letters or poems). What Orr says next happens to usefully add a dimension to the death-and-rebirth archetype I have been indicating along the way. Asking himself whether the "exuberant", "optimistic" and "healthy-minded" Whitman is really eligible for inclusion in a book on "hero-poets who have transformed trauma into visions of human possibility", Orr writes:

> We need to remember that a poet's poems *are* his or her self-creation [the reader

[477] Symonds was the first to suggest it in Whitman's own lifetime. Whitman appears to have not appreciated the curiosity. I return to this in chapter 5 (footnote 518). Symonds's words are cited in Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, vol. 5, 72n18.
[478] From Michael Moon's annotation in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, 96–97.
[479] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 2, 109–110.

> should reread that line till it is properly understood – there are two literal senses]; [we need to remember] that the self we meet in the poems is often the newly created self that has replaced the shattered and traumatized self of lived experience.[480] The Whitman we meet in the pages of *Leaves of Grass* [in this case, the 1855 Preface] is "a man cohered out of tumult and chaos," even if that new man is reticent about the tumult and trauma that engendered him.
>
> But what is the chaos from which the new self is born? What trauma precedes the magnificent act of self-creation that is Whitman's poetry?

Orr adds that Whitman was inclined to "hint that something major and transformative happened to him, but he never told what it was", which leads me to conclude that by 2002 Orr has probably not read Davis. S. Reynolds's 1996 *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. The reason I can posit that is that Reynolds's book identifies a particularly horrible trauma (probably occurring in January 1841) which Whitman seems to have never mentioned – but which roughly coincides with his outward transformation from resentful school teacher at Woodbury to young man of letters (he transformed himself into a New York reporter and *flaneur* before becoming the working-class "rough" and free-verse bard capable of writing *Leaves of Grass*).[481]

As far as Orr is concerned, Whitman's trauma is due to his being gay in a time and place when it was "far less safe to be homosexual than it is now", when it was "both illegal and dangerous to overtly profess such a sexual orientation".[482] Undoubtedly a culture so horrified by non-standard sexual orientation inevitably instills or catalyzes at least some self-disgust in the non-conforming individual. Adam Phillips observes that, quite in general, "If what we want is what we must not have we are going to be, to put it as mildly as possible, divided against ourselves."[483] Despite the apparently confident and cheerful timbre in *some* (not all) of the Calamus poems, "It is doubtful that Whitman was comfortable with his own sexual orientation; certainly the culture surrounding him would have been outraged at it."[484] I am going to assume that Whitman was, as a minimum, *divided* about his libido, and I am going to help myself to the claim that when we are divided about something our judgements about it – and therefore our general confidence and full psychic situation – is contingent, fluctuating, unstable. It is possible to catch Whitman very deep in thought and dejection (this poem, which I give in its entirety, is also from the "Calamus" section):

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[480] Cf. "I, now *thirty-seven years old* in perfect health *begin*, / Hoping to cease not till *death*." Emphases mine. Notice that the line juxtaposes metaphoric rebirth ("begin") with awareness of death and of having *already* lived (i.e. reached a moment when rebirth is necessary). From "Song of Myself".

[481] For Reynolds's words on the scandal involving charges of sodomy and the violent wrath of countless townsmen, see *Walt Whitman's America*, 70–74.

[482] From Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 167.

[483] From Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, 6.

[484] From Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, 168.

HOURS continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted,
Hours of the dusk, when I withdraw to a lonesome and unfrequented spot, seating myself, leaning my face in my hands;
Hours sleepless, deep in the night, when I go forth, speeding swiftly the country roads, or through the city streets, or pacing miles and miles, stifling plaintive cries;
Hours discouraged, distracted—for the one I cannot content myself without, soon I saw him content himself without me;
Hours when I am forgotten, (O weeks and months are passing, but I believe I am never to forget!)
Sullen and suffering hours! (I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am;)
Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of the like feelings?
Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover, lost to him?
Is he too as I am now? Does he still rise in the morning, dejected, thinking who is lost to him? and at night, awaking, think who is lost?
Does he too harbor his friendship silent and endless? harbor his anguish and passion?
Does some stray reminder, or the casual mention of a name, bring the fit back upon him, taciturn and deprest?
Does he see himself reflected in me? In these hours, does he see the face of his hours reflected?[485]

"I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am." Is seems safe to assume that this is one of those poems Asselineau considers practically a confession. Edward Carpenter, on his part, notes that this "remarkable" 1860 poem was omitted from subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass* "perhaps as being too personal."[486] The poem introduces the feeling of shame and immediately links it to an essential, unalterable characteristic that he is condemned to lament. The accepting, even-keel tone in "I am what I am" is not enough, of course, to buffer against loneliness, grief and a sense of being anomalous: "I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of the like feelings? / Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover, lost to him?" One can only speculate on whether it was dropped from *Leaves of Grass* because Whitman grew to think he had said too much – owned his pain too frankly – failed to transform it or give it a direction. In the words of Richard Raleigh, "Rarely does Whitman make it so clear that the object of his love is another man, or share his vulnerability and sense of abandonment so candidly."[487] To be sure, it is a deeply affecting poem – part love poem in its own way – about which much more could be said.

[485] The poem, published as number "9" in the "Calamus" cluster of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1860), was dropped from all subsequent editions.
[486] From Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman – with some Notes on his Life and Work* (New York: The Macmillan Company: 1906), 56.
[487] From Carl Martin Lindner's entry "Freedom" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 239.

There is similar self-despair and self-conviction at play in a poem (from which, by and by, the first eight lines were eventually dropped) known today as "You Felons on Trial in Courts" (the first line in later versions of the poem). The original first line ("O bitter sprig! . . .") reveals with perfect clarity that the poet – or *speaker* or symbolic self (to be circumspect) – had things to confess too:

> O BITTER sprig! Confession sprig!
> In the bouquet I give you place also—I bind you in,
> Proceeding no further till, humbled publicly,
> I give fair warning, once for all.
>
> I own that I have been sly, thievish, mean, a prevaricator, greedy, derelict,
> And I own that I remain so yet.
>
> What foul thought but I think it—or have in me the stuff out of which it is thought?
> What in darkness in bed at night, alone or with a companion?
>
> You felons on trials in courts,
> You convicts in prison cells—you sentenced assassins, chained and handcuffed with iron,
> Who am I, that I am not on trial, or in prison?
> Me, ruthless and devilish as any, that my wrists are not chained with iron, or my ankles with iron?
>
> You prostitutes flaunting over the trottoirs, or obscene in your rooms,
> Who am I, that I should call you more obscene than myself?
>
> O culpable! O traitor!
> O I acknowledge—I exposé!
> (O admirers! praise not me! compliment not me! you make me wince,
> I see what you do not—I know what you do not;)
> Inside these breast-bones I lie smutch'd and choked,
> Beneath this face that appears so impassive, hell's tides continually run,
> Lusts and wickedness are acceptable to me,
> I walk with delinquents with passionate love,
> I feel I am of them—I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,
> And henceforth I will not deny them—for how can I deny myself?

Now it is time to bring in Carl Jung, which only few Whitman scholars have so far found instructive.[488] One (Carl Martin Lindner) does, however, present the view that "Whitman anticipates

[488] Neither Stephen A. Black's *Whitman's Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Creative Process* nor Edwin Haviland Miller's *Walt Whitman's Poetry: a Psychological Journey* mention Jung. Harold Aspiz's *So Long!: Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death* makes one very peripheral mention of Jung. The major psychologically shrewd

Freud regarding the unhealthiness of sexual repression" in the same way he "anticipates Jung regarding the shadow aspects of the psyche, aspects which must be acknowledged if the individual is to progress toward wholeness or integrity." Also of value is Lindner's observation that Whitman dramatized "the courage necessary to [translate freedom into action] in his art and his life."[489] And Anne Gilchrist, whose 1870 "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" obviously predated Jung, nevertheless "foreshadows" Jungian thought by referencing "the dark and light aspects of personality".[490] However, Verdino-Süllwold and Hampson clarify that Gilchrist's "actual point of reference was William Blake's doctrine of contraries: those opposing dynamic forces whose counterpoint becomes a holistic coexistence when man is prepared to set aside what Blake considered the hypocritical dualism of Christianity: good vs. evil, body vs. soul." Certainly, Jung would have appreciated a certain passage from "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" where Gilchrist commends Whitman for the quality with which I opened this chapter, namely his acceptance and welcome of those individuals about whom the majority view tends to be – invariably and predictably – denunciatory:

> If he feared to stretch out the hand, not of condescending pity, but of fellowship, to the degraded, criminal, foolish, despised, knowing that they are only laggards in "the great procession winding along the roads of the universe," . . . how could he roll the stone of contempt off the heart as he does, and cut the strangling knot of the problem of inherited viciousness and degradation? And, if he were not bold and true to the utmost, and did not own in himself the threads of darkness mixed in with the threads of light, and own it with the same strength and directness that he tells of the light, and not in those vague generalities that everybody uses, and nobody means, . . . the *brotherhood* of the human race would be a mere flourish of rhetoric.[491]

Gilchrist stresses that there are deep and moral reasons why Whitman should "own in himself the threads of darkness mixed in with the threads of light". Original sin (as I suppose some would call it) or, in Gilchrist's phrase, "the problem of inherited viciousness and degradation" would simply be unmanageable, unbearable sources of misery if the person had not "made peace", so to speak, with

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biographies (Reynolds, Kaplan, Asselineau) are also silent on Jung as is The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman* (with one exception due to Carl Martin Lindner).

[489] From Carl Martin Lindner's entry "Freedom" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 239.

[490] From Carla M. Verdino-Süllwold and Thomas Hampson, " "The Frailest Leaves of Me": A Study of the Text and Music for Whitman's "To What You Said"," 144.

[491] From Anne Gilchrist, "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," in Anne Gilchrist, *Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings*, 296–297. Jung wrote: "When you accept the fact of your inferiority, it lives with you; you are it too, but not exclusively. You are not only white, one part is black, but both make the whole man." From Carl Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934,* vol. 1, 391. To "threads of darkness [and] light", compare the phrase "strongest lights and shades" in footnote 151.

the “darkness”. Gilchrist’s metaphor “mixed in with” has a faint echo in Whitman’s bitter “bouquet” of confession but not only confession:

> O BITTER sprig! Confession sprig!
> In the bouquet I give you place also—I bind you in,
> Proceeding no further till, humbled publicly,
> I give fair warning, once for all.

When Whitman promised his readers in the 1855 Preface that “What I tell I tell for precisely what it is” and added “You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me”, he may have promised more than readers assumed. “You Felons on Trial in Courts” complicates the picture of the poet’s self which at first seemed so obviously and consistently to invite spontaneous celebration. Now it appears that the mirror – in addition to confirming our good opinion of ourselves – can shatter it if we look closely enough at ourselves: “compliment not me! you make me wince, / I see what you do not—I know what you do not”.

Jung held that the shadow “forms, as it were, the centre of the field of consciousness”, and that only a “personal unconscious” (as opposed to an “impersonal unconscious”) will “enable us to recognize the shadow”.[492] The shadow is “a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form.” Yet, it “cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness.”[493] More disturbingly still, Jung warns against ignoring and neglecting to integrate the shadow in this passage:

> [W]hen one tries desperately to be good and wonderful and perfect, then all the more the shadow develops a definite will to be black and evil and destructive. People cannot see that; they are always striving to be marvellous, and then they discover that terrible destructive things happen which they cannot understand, and they either deny that such facts have anything to do with them, or if they admit them, they take them for natural afflictions, or they try to minimize them and to shift the responsibility elsewhere. The fact is that if one tries beyond one’s capacity to be perfect, the shadow descends into hell and becomes the devil. For it is just as sinful from the standpoint of nature and of truth to be above oneself as to be below oneself. It is surely not the divine will in man that he should be something which he is not, for when one looks

[492] From Carl Jung, *Aion*, paragraphs 1 and 261, respectively.

[493] Carl Jung, “Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype”, in *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, paragraph 44. To diverge from the primary sources for a second, let me feature Jung’s biographer’s Frank McLynn’s precis: “The shadow is the sum of those characteristics we wish to conceal not only from the world but from ourselves; the classic example comes in Roberg Luis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Mostly the shadow is projected so that we see our own dark side in others; hence scapegoatism.” Jung’s theory stretches to and includes the persona, but I shall not engage that concept for my present purposes.

> into nature, one sees that it is most definitely the divine will that everything should be what it is.[494]

And finally:

> The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance. Indeed, self-knowledge as a psychotherapeutic measure frequently requires much painstaking work extended over a long period.[495]

That Whitman was conscious early in life that the human self could harbor (and often did harbor) latent evil of baffling magnitude is clear from something he wrote for the *Long-Island Democrat* in 1840 when he was only 21 years old. Musing on the feelings and thoughts of mourners at a funeral, Whitman states that, first of all, nobody living is exempt from error in action:

> [W]e are well aware that men who have lived a length of time in the world, must have committed many little meannesses—must have done wrong on various occasions—must have had the fine bloom of simplicity and nature nearly rubbed off—and must have been connected with much that would sully that healthiness and freshness of character, which almost every body has for the first few years of life.[496]

But more sinisterly, he had this to say about what could be called inner error:

> When a man dies, who can say what deep stains may have rested, at one time or another, upon his soul? what crimes (untouchable, perhaps, by the laws of men or the rules of society) he has committed, either in evil wishes or in reality? How many persons go down to the grave, praised by the world and pointed to as examples, who were still far, very far, from good men! They may have respected custom, honored the government, followed the fashion, paid to public charity every cent which the law demanded, kept clear of glaring transgressions, stood up or bowed down their heads in houses of worship just at the due time, and still, if we could open their hearts and see what went on there we should be sickened and amazed! It is a true saying, that we can never, in the great drama of life, pronounce judgment upon the good or ill performance of his part by a fellow creature, until the last act and the last scene are

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[494] From Carl Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934,* vol. 1, 569.

[495] From Carl Jung, *Aion*, paragraph 14.

[496] The piece is entitled "From the Desk of a Schoolmaster" and is the 6th of the so-called *Sun-Down Papers.* It is available at the online *Walt Whitman Archive* and has Whitman Archive ID "per.00306".

"Little meannesses" brings this list from "You Felons on Trial in Courts" to mind: "I have been sly, thievish, mean, a prevaricator, greedy, derelict."

> over, the bell rung, and the curtain dropped.[497]

Whitman is clearly troubled by the coexistence of the self's shadow elements with more acceptable personality traits. Perhaps he is troubled too that the bad and evil sides of men are so easily kept from sight by a bit of careful deception. Something about that picture seems not quite right or just, and yet Whitman is in the piece above forced to accept this metaphysical fact about the world. This is a world, in other words, where the "guilty" (and of course, everything hinges on this word) are not offered swift justice in the form of cosmic retribution or at the hands of some omniscient deity – instead they must go on living, to some degree shielding a difficult truth.

In virtually all aspects of his life (certainly as the historical data present it), there is ample evidence that Whitman was a person who preferred to speak freely and sincerely, not painstakingly or circumspectly, certainly not deceivingly; the word "lied" is in the past tense in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (see the beginning of this chapter).[498] In his 1855 Preface, he had written that the great poets are to be known by

> the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor. Then folks echo a new cheap joy and a divine voice leaping from their brains: How beautiful is candor! All faults may be forgiven of him who has perfect candor. Henceforth let no man of us lie, for we have seen that openness wins the inner and outer world and that there is no single exception, and that never since our earth gathered itself in a mass have deceit or subterfuge or prevarication attracted its smallest particle or the faintest tinge of a shade—and that through the enveloping wealth and rank of a state or the whole republic of states a sneak or sly person shall be discovered and despised . . . . and that the soul has never been once fooled and never can be fooled.

"Candor" in this context should be considered as having the same kind of function as the function described in the context of the "divine Logos"; I am describing truthful sincere utterances that begin the work of linguistically and psychologically reflecting and tolerating the undifferentiated chaos that makes up reality.

Also, to almost greater effect, he had written in his book's first poem ("Song of Myself", as it came to be known):

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[497] Ibid.

[498] It was forever an embarrassment to him that he had accepted the seventy-five dollars offered him in 1842 for writing a rather dubious temperance novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*. Whitman, who was "so hard up at the time", claims to have completed the hypocritical novel in three days – fortified with "gin cocktails". In 1888, Whitman called the novel "damned rot—rot of the worst sort". See William G. Lulloff's entry "*Franklin Evans*" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 234.

> I am the poet of commonsense and of the demonstrable and of immortality;
> And am not the poet of goodness only . . . . I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.
> . . .
> . . .
> What blurt is it about virtue and about vice?
> Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me . . . . I stand indifferent,
> My gait is no faultfinder's or rejecter's gait,
> I moisten the roots of all that has grown.

This passage (and passages similar to it) must have been on Gilchrist's mind when she declared Whitman "bold and true to the utmost, and [determined to] own in himself the threads of darkness mixed in with the threads of light, and own it with the same strength and directness that he tells of the light". By suggesting that only good things come from integrating those things in us we initially find deeply dismaying, Gilchrist brilliantly – in a stroke – foreshadows current widely accepted therapeutic insights. As Jung would later put it: It "is a therapeutic necessity, indeed, the first requisite of any thorough psychological method, for consciousness to confront its shadow."[499] Naturally, the temptation not to do so – to "misrecognize" interior shadow elements – can be great. But the path of squeamish denial – inherent in declining, in Whitman's case, "to be the poet of wickedness" – is neither commendable nor recommendable. Although, to be sure, facing up to all the disagreeable aspects of the shadow is generally a process attended by anxiety, André Green sides with Jung in proclaiming it is the proper way to proceed. "Misrecognition and recognition" (of *any* psychic issue, as a matter of fact) must, rather, be brought into a fruitful psychic dialectic:

> [Misrecogntion] touches upon the essence of man, who, in order to construct an acceptable image of himself, is obliged to deny or misrecognize the essential aspects of it via a process of occultation with a view to avoiding *anxiety*. [This process erases] the frontiers between the different sectors of pathology, . . . [and] between the normal and the pathological, the divine and the infernal.[500]

What is so interesting about "You Felons on Trial in Courts" is the baffling directness and audacity with which Whitman "publicly" (his word) highlights the frontiers between the "divine and the infernal" (in Green's phrase). One can all too easily imagine that this edition of *Leaves of Grass* no

[499] Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, paragraph 514.
[500] André Green, *Key Ideas for a Contemporary Psychoanalysis: Misrecognition and Recognition of the Unconscious*, 109.

less than the 1855 or 1856 edition, would make certain reviewers – blithely unaware of any shadow in themselves perhaps – "mildly suggest that the author should be sent to a lunatic asylum" (see footnote 465). And Jung's chilling assertion that "if one tries *beyond one's capacity* to be perfect, the shadow descends into hell and becomes the devil" (my emphasis) is borne out by Whitman's infernal imagery (my emphases):

> Who am I, that I am not on trial, or in prison?
> Me, ruthless and *devilish* as any, that my wrists are not chained with iron, or my ankles with iron?
> . . .
> . . .
> Inside these breast-bones I lie smutch'd and choked,
> Beneath this face that appears so impassive, *hell's* tides continually run.

When he writes "O admirers! praise not me! compliment not me! you make me wince", we can only infer (from "wince", specifically) that there is painful discomfort associated with permitting (or tolerating) the lie which admirers' compliments effectively become to one who sees and knows "what [they] do not". A plausible reason would seem to be that accepting undeserved praise undoes or impedes (throws a preventive spanner in the works of) the self's necessary shadow-integration. (Recall that Bucke said that "[Whitman] always justified, sometimes playfully, sometimes quite seriously, those who spoke harshly of himself or his writings, and I often thought he even took pleasure in the opposition of enemies" (footnote 43).) True, the shadow-integration is frequently visited by discomfort ("anxieties and doubts", in Asselineau), but having set his eyes on being "candid" there really is no alternative to go on owning the "presence of evil within" (cf. footnote 307). Peterson writes that

> Individuality—which is the ability to establish a realm of experience that is unique to the self; the capacity for the creation of purely subjective experience—also means acceptance of vulnerability and mortality [and all the shadow's criminality, we might add]. The creative capacity is the divine Logos, which in the course of its development necessitates recognition of the inevitability of failure and death.[501]

It really seems that Whitman recognized the necessity of the interplay between light and dark, as it were. In a conversation with Traubel in 1889, he said:

[501] Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 325.

> I am a great contender for the world as it is—the ill along with the good. Indeed, I am more and more persuaded that the ill, too, has its part to subserve—its important role—that if ill did not exist, it would be a hopeless world and we would all go to the bad.[502]

Thirty-four years earlier he had written – perhaps at that time passionately *willing* or *desiring* it to be true (rather than being philosophically "persuaded" of its truth):

> Great is goodness;
> I do not know what it is any more than I know what health is . . . . but I know it is great.
>
> Great is wickedness . . . . I find I often admire it just as much as I admire goodness: Do you call that a paradox? It certainly is a paradox.
>
> The eternal equilibrium of things is great, and the eternal overthrow of things is great, And there is another paradox.[503]

Nietzsche asked "Who alone has reason to lie himself out of actuality?" and answered, "He who suffers from it" (footnote 227). Whitman seems to have been consistently aware of – and wary of – his moments of less than fully-realized authenticity, and probably found that they amounted to a kind of lie capable of warping his interior integrity. (Once senses why Green would speak of a "dialectic" here.) Dissembling for purposes of social acceptance – in order to endure "actuality", in other words – appears to have been counterproductive to healing suffering: One cannot go through life wincing.

As for becoming aware of the incorrectness and incompatibility of aspects of "actuality" and the soul, let us go back to the 1860 poem "In Paths Untrodden" (the first poem in the "Calamus" cluster). In the opening lines of this poem – whose title (like Robert Frost's "The Road not Taken") seems to hint at untried but achievable nonconformist possibilities – Whitman writes

> In paths untrodden,

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[502] Cited in Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 61.

[503] Known today as "Great Are the Myths", the poem underwent many changes but was dropped from *Leaves of Grass* after 1881. It also contains these lines amounting to a kind of collective confession: "Great are Yourself and Myself, / We are just as good and bad as the oldest and youngest or any, / What the best and worst did, we could do, / What they felt, do not we feel it in ourselves?" The Nietzsche quote ("Who alone has . . .") is cited in Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, 324.

> In the growths by margins of pond-waters
> Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
> From all the standards hitherto publish'd, from the pleasures, profits, conformities,
> Which too long I was offering to feed my soul,
> Clear to me now standards not yet publish'd . . .

But the dawning realization that there was no way around confessing fully and indiscriminately "I am what I am" – which, of course, necessarily had to be based on purely subjective perceptions of interior characteristics – seems to have stirred in Whitman ("possess[ing]" him; see below) for years before 1860. In late life he recalled:

> After continued personal ambition and effort, as a young fellow, to enter with the rest into competition for the usual rewards, business, political, literary, &c.—to take part in the great mèlée, both for victory's prize itself and to do some good—After years of those aims and pursuits, I found myself remaining *possess'd*, at the age of thirty-one to thirty-three, with a special desire and conviction. Or rather, to be quite exact, a desire that had been flitting through my previous life, or hovering on the flanks, mostly indefinite hitherto, had steadily advanced to the front, defined itself, and finally dominated everything else. This was a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, *emotional*, *moral*, intellectual, and æsthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America—and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.
>
> Perhaps this is in brief, or suggests, all I have sought to do.[504]

I am arguing that by "faithfully express[ing] in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly" his "emotional, moral" uneasiness and mortification, what Whitman achieved besides creating – an important work of literature – was an integration of his shadow in the Jungian sense. Archetypally speaking, such an integration amounts to a rebirth insofar as a rebirth can be conceptualized as a moment when the "tormented, unstable, storm-tossed" self achieves "equilibrium and . . . serenity".[505] Aspiz writes:

> Like Dante, who was "midway upon the journey of our life" when he entered the darkened woods, Whitman launched his poetic excursion in midcareer. When *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1855 he was thirty-six years old, halfway through his allotted life span. A young man's fancy may turn lightly to thoughts of love, but middle-age fancy becomes tempered by thoughts of death. Carl Jung's dictum that a philosophical acceptance of death invigorates the second half of one's existence certainly applies to

[504] From "Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (emphasis mine).
[505] From Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, vol. 1, 16.

> the fashioning of Whitman's literary career. "From the middle of life onward," says Jung, "only he remains vitally alive who is ready to die with life."[506]

Exactly what had to die in Whitman's case? It seems that the poet realized that he had to execute – by blunt, abrasive exposure – the lie that he was *not* acutely troubled internally and always by aspects of himself which – being common to the human race – Jung would classify as shadow aspects. By "recreating himself as the bold protagonist of compelling poems", as Orr puts it, as well as owning his deep occasional distress, he was able to unburden himself of – and gain release from – flattering lies about him ("O admirers! praise not me! . . . I see what you do not"). And by sacrificing those lies in the bright light of art, language and confession, what was true about him could, so it seems, to precisely that extent, live on that much lighter.

Chapter 5. *"The pleasures of heaven . . . and the pains of hell are with me"*: Trauma, Empathy and Self Psychology

Chapter summary: This chapter opens by repeating some of the previous chapters' most salient points and findings before noting that despite the considerable differences between schools of psychoanalytic thought, psychological treatments and insights from health professionals in general, there is relatively litte ambiguity about what constitutes a person's psychic improvement. What this means is that because all the major psychological theoretical systems are undoubtedly motivated by the desire to alleviate suffering and help people get better, they may – at least for the purposes of an abstract explication (as opposed to a therapy context) – be less irreconcilable than scholars generally seem to think. The chapter therefore, after an overview of the currently available psychological or psychoanalytically-informed scholarship on Whitman, zeroes in on a number of important thinkers' works: Kohut and Lacan, in particular. It also references empirical research on PTSD and considers the scholarship of several major Whitman scholars (among them Edwin Haviland Miller, David Cavitch and Stephen A. Black), all of whom adopt a psychological perspective. Central to the chapter is the paradoxical idea – explored in

[506] From Harold Aspiz, *So Long!: Whitman's Poetry of Death*, 33.

previous chapters – that desirable states of being can be arrived at from existential conditions that appear wildly contradictory to it. At the heart of the chapter is an engagement with the Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut whose theory concerning *compensatory structures* proves useful in describing therapeutic and redemptive writing. His ideas about empathy are of similar, if not greater, utility in this context and are intriguingly compatible with other concepts useful for talking about suffering and the deterioration of mental health. Descriptive words such as “cohesive” and “continuous” (both central to Kohutean self psychology) or “multiple” and “fragmented” prove especially useful in this dissertation given Whitman’s versatility, paradoxality and profound psychic evolution. Employing the theoretical framework of this chapter, his line “I am large, I contain multitudes” can be taken in many different interesting directions, some of which are revealed. The chapter also explores Lacanian Mirrors and presents textual evidence supporting the claim that Whitman’s poetry – if not his actual real-life being – anticipates Lacan’s theory to a remarkable degree. Particularly the poem “There Was a Child Went Forth” seems to exhibit an impressive comprehension of the imaginary unification at the heart of Lacan’s intersubjective theory. Again, as before, the emphasis is on getting better and surviving, and theory and primary text bear each other out very well with respect to that telos. In part because human beings have experienced mental suffering long before Whitman’s century and continue to do so to this day, it is interesting to ask whether Whitman (who was evidently capable of saving himself from his most difficult bouts) can be turned to for insights about post-traumatic stress disorder. After exploring Julian Rotter’s work on internal versus external locus of control work, the chapter answers in the affirmative and presents textual evidence for Whitman’s internal locus of control.

* * *

All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

In the previous chapters I have considered Whitman’s work exemplary of redemptive or psychologically healing writing and accepted that the biographical details of his life bear this out sufficiently. Drawing on a number of diverse thinkers and disciplines, I have argued for the

essentiality of truthful and sincere utterance, not as a guaranteed and surefire solution to crisis in all cases but as – at the very least – an eminently useful starting point. Focusing on states of acute or mild psychic distress, I have tried to defend the therapeutic utility in using language in a way that is analogous to a foreign correspondent or journalist reporting back from a site of anomaly in order that readers back home may gain a sense of the scale of the suffering. Language intended to capture the state of internal affairs may, I suggest, freely synthesize modes of writing commonly allied to literature (of the aesthetic type), philosophy, psychology, religion and more. Because human being is literally a multifaceted enterprise (by which I mean that it expresses itself across a wide range of domains), a too-faithful adherence to one domain's internal logic runs the risk of sacrificing to a fatal degree insights appropriate to other domains.[507] My argument rests on the irreducible premise that every moment of life finds us confronting systems the behavior and nature of which we can neither predict nor ultimately comprehend. Sometimes, this is no problem, but when it is it could be a terrible problem if we did not have, at least, the option of reflecting *coherently* (note that language manifests an obvious internal coherence) on our own roles in the world's frequently anxiety-provoking chaos. Such reflections come with the recommendation that they might reveal something worth knowing about ourselves, our psychic resources, courage levels, tolerance for emotional pain and capacity for psychic death and rebirth (self-transcendence).

I have previously registered my presupposition that psychic health can simplistically but profitably be thought of in *binary* terms, that is in direct contradistinction to psychic suffering. On this picture (metaphorically speaking), the psychically wholesome person is, in the poet and novelist Robert Nye's words, simply "someone who – against all the odds and in spite of most of the evidence – says 'More' to life". Corresponding well to Jung's aphorism that "No tree . . . can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell", Nye sees this "quality of joy" as an attitude existing "on the far side of despair".[508] However, one is conversely led to conclude that when the despair is sufficiently unmitigated, when no hope of redeeming it is forthcoming, the person may grow fatally *dis*inclined to say "More" to life and will increasingly confront life with a world-weary "Less".

In his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, often appropriately considered a poetic manifesto inaugurating a new life and a new man, Whitman delineates several succinct

[507] The Whitman scholar Stephen A. Black makes this point, as I show below.
[508] Robert Nye, Introduction to Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 5. For the Jung quotation, see Carl Jung, *Aion*, chapter 5.

characteristics of the man and character whose exceptional qualities he invites us to join him in praising:

> He consumes an eternal passion and is indifferent which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune and persuades daily and hourly his delicious pay. What balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy. Other proportions of the reception of pleasure dwindle to nothing to his proportions. All expected from heaven or from the highest he is rapport with in the sight of the daybreak or a scene of the winter woods or the presence of children playing or with his arm round the neck of a man or woman. His love above all love has leisure and expanse . . . . he leaves room ahead of himself. He is no irresolute or suspicious lover . . . he is sure . . . he scorns intervals. His experience and the showers and thrills are not for nothing. Nothing can jar him . . . . suffering and darkness cannot—death and fear cannot. To him complaint and jealousy and envy are corpses buried and rotten in the earth . . . . he saw them buried. The sea is not surer of the shore or the shore of the sea than he is of the fruition of his love and of all perfection and beauty.[509]

This portrait is rich with textual evidence that the state of being most desirable to the poet (the aforementioned state of psychological health and well-being) can, perhaps *must*, be arrived at from existential conditions that appear wildly contradictory to it. "What balks or breaks others" (presumably the "suffering and darkness" or "death and fear" mentioned later), is to Whitman's poet precisely the means to achieving "amorous joy". Corresponding well to Nye's redemption emerging only "on far side of despair", it is fitting too that we learn that a certain process unique to the poet's own soul (or mind) has to take place. That process ("progress" in the text) involves "burning", a both quasi-alchemical, cleansing and revitalizing kind of transformation. That metaphor is retraced in a poem written five years later:

> I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were threatening to consume me,
> I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering fires,
> I will give them complete abandonment,
> I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love.[510]

The state of being that is thus made possible is similar to what I shall later in this chapter describe as "self-contained" – or from having, in Kohutean terms, a "cohesive" and "continuous" self.[511] The

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[509] From the 1855 Preface.

[510] Composed in 1860 (or shortly before), these lines would end up in section 6 of "Starting from Paumanok", which achieved its final form in 1881.

[511] "Cohesion" and "continuousness" are concepts central to Kohut's self psychology. See, for instance, Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, 156.

In *How Does Analysis Cure*, Kohut characterizes "the psyche of modern man—the psyche described by Kafka and Proust and Joyce—[as] enfeebled, multifragmented (vertically split), and disharmonious." Although these

psychological work or effort on which the realization of the self-contained state depends, I see as a kind of "compensatory" process, insofar as it teleologically aims at something whose benefit is ample enough to transform the adverse initial state.

Elsewhere in the Preface – this time in the context of *morals* (for which reason the example is merely analogous to the mental health issue) – Whitman offers other indications that he too imagines mental states to unfold along a continuum, and that both extremes of it are involved in synthesizing a happy outcome:

> The soul . . . has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other. The inmost secret of art sleep with the twain. The greatest poet has lain in close betwixt both and they are vital in his style and thoughts.[512]

In this chapter, I am going to first give a brief overview of the psychological or psychoanalytically informed scholarship on Whitman. Following that, I shall explore a number of psychoanalytical theories whose usefulness in the context of Whitman has so far not been sufficiently explored.

From the opening inauguration in "Song of Myself" of the theme of self-celebration and the line "what I assume you shall assume", it is clear that Whitman is a friend of being – *human being* – in general. A line like "I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart" must be heard as coming from a man wishing the best for human lives and human bodies, his own as well as those of everyone else. So must the lines "If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my body, / . . . / Hands I have taken, face I have kissed, mortal I have ever touched, it shall be you."[513] That benevolent wish coincides neatly, at least in principle, with that of therapists, doctors, psychologists and, in principle, all other health professionals, which means that teleologically speaking there is agreement, in the following paragraphs, between the involved

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writers are significantly younger than Whitman, all their lives have some historical overlap. See Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, 60.

The terms "multiple" and "fragmented" are useful approximate antonyms to "continuous" and "cohesive", as Judith Guss Teicholz points out in "The Analyst's Empathy, Subjectivity, and Authenticity: Affect as the Common Denominator", which appears in Arnold I. Goldberg, ed., *How Responsive Should We Be: Progress in Self Psychology*, vol. 16, 38.

[512] Notice that the word "continuum" is in perfect semantic accord with the adjective "coherent" (as well as, of course, "continuous"). In other words, the self-contained self is apparently able to run the whole gamut of mental states without getting stuck in any position or direction.

[513] Once "Song of Myself" acquired its 52 numbered sections, these lines would appear in section 24.

parties – i.e. poem and secondary or theoretical material. Every approach, then, to comprehending being, self, world, suffering, remedy, strategy etc. is predicated on a shared desire to bring about improvement. This is by definition going to take the form of helping a person strengthen or recover the inclination to say "more" to life and try to engage with being in a sustainable manner. The implication of Whitman's insistence that "the writing and rounding of L of G has been to me the reason-for-being, & life comfort" and that it "has been the comfort of my life since it was originally commenced" (see page 134) is therefore that we are justified in looking for parallels and similarities between different psychological scholars' theories concerning how and why he survived his trials and suffering – and inspiringly distilled existential "comfort" out of himself.

I have cited David S. Reynolds a number of times above and drawn especial attention to his observation that though Whitman "is, of course, the definitive poet of joy[,] there are signs of personal trauma even in his most exuberant poems." Although formally psychological approaches to Whitman were not widespread before the middle of the twentieth century, that particular theme actually goes back to the first book in which an expert on – and fond friend of – Whitman tapped into psychological contemplation. The book is Carpenter's *Days with Walt Whitman* (1906) wherein Carpenter makes the claim that beneath Whitman's "ample and loving humanity" lay "a great tragic element in his nature". Carpenter takes stock of the poet's "cussedness" and suggests that his "contrary moods, [his] spirit of refusal, [and his] willfulness" may have been the reason why he was apparently never "happy in love affairs."[514] The portrait reveals a complex man who "celebrates in his poems the fluid, all-solvent disposition" while being himself, incongruously, a "fixed, silent" person and "less the river than the rock". In the arboreal metaphor of which Nietzsche (and, as mentioned, Jung) was fond, Whitman's "leaves" were reaching in the exact opposite direction of his subterranean (psychic) roots.[515] I shall return to trees (as Lacanian mirror object) once I have concluded my overview of the psychological scholarship Whitman has occasioned.

Although 1906 also saw the publication of the excellent literary biography *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* by Bliss Perry, this work is not sufficiently rich in psychological material to receive attention here. All I ought to mention is that Perry, after conducting several frank interviews with Whitman's disciples John Burroughs, Traubel and R. M. Bucke, wrote that "as far as I know there has never been the slightest evidence that Whitman practiced homo-sexuality."[516]

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[514] Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman*, 47.

[515] "One can dispose of one's drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis." From Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 225.

[516] See Bliss Perry, *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work*, 55–56. Of these three men, only Burroughs was not a literary

Evidence to the contrary did, however, eventually surface, with the publication of Gavin Arthur's *The Circle of Sex* sixty years later. In that work, Gavin quotes Edward Carpenter who in the 1920s had revealed to Arthur that his visits to Whitman in 1877 and 1884 (on which *Days with Walt Whitman* is based) did indeed have a sexual dimension (see footnote 473).[517]

In 1929, the first full-length *psycho*biography of the poet was published. *Walt Whitman: La naissance du poète*, by the French scholar Jean Catel, was the result of a careful study of rough drafts preceding the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Catel, who (controversially and, some say, erroneously) sees pre-1855 Whitman as an introverted and maladjusted man, concludes that poetry for Whitman offered a means of compensating for professional failures and personal difficulties and thus had a therapeutic value. Significantly, the book is the first to argue that *Leaves of Grass* liberated Whitman's homosexual eroticism (as a significant number of his disciples had probably long perceived) as well as other aspects of his identity that had suffered similar societal repression.[518] The theme of autoeroticism is also noted by Catel, which is a trend that continues to this day. Less controversially, Catel demonstrates how Emerson's Transcendentalism was instrumental in allowing Whitman to spiritualize the physical world in his poems in a process that drew heavily on Whitman's imagination. Other themes explored by Catel are Whitman's surrealism (arguably a concept of deep psychological interest), his sense of identity, concept of the soul and use of "I"-narration.

In 1968, Edwin Haviland Miller published the influential monograph *Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey*, unanimously admired among Whitman scholars. The author observes that by the late sixties, the Beat Generation was responsible for a renewed interest in Whitman who had suffered a partial eclipse during the era of New Criticism. Miller uses that opportunity to embark on an exploration into the psychic sources of Whitman's verse. From the fairly straight-forward observation that Whitman's verse is greatly autobiographical, Miller

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executor to Whitman after his death.

[517] See Gavin Arthur, *The Circle of Sex* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1966), 135–136. Another Whitman scholar (Emory Holloway, whose strong work on Whitman's prose and journalism earned him a position on the faculty of Queens College, New York) was repeatedly compelled to justify his views on Whitman's sexuality. In 1960, Holloway argues that Whitman was bisexual and was attempting to imagine an androgynous position from which to see the world and write about it. See Emory Holloway, *Free and Lonesome Heart: The Secret of Walt Whitman*, 16.

[518] As to his disciples' suspicion: In 1890, John Addington Symonds (1840–1893), an English literary critic well-known for his homoerotic poetry, angered Whitman (whom he had first corresponded with in 1871) by directly asking the dying poet about the homosexual content of the "Calamus" poems. Fiercely upset, Whitman hotly denied Symonds' "morbid inferences" (which of course invites the response from scholars that he "protested too much") and in his reply claimed (artfully but implausibly) to have fathered six children two of whom had perished. Three years later, Symonds' *Walt Whitman: A Study* was published (1893). See Gary Smidgall's introduction to Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, xiv.

concludes that the material of *Leaves of Grass* has its origins in unconscious and infantile sources, which is reflected by the fact that the poetry exhibits regressive imagery, fantasy and is often concerned with infantile longings. Crucially to what I shall say later in this chapter, Miller suggests that composing the poems seems to have had a palpable psychic effect on Whitman himself, one entailing a felt decrease in the importance of the external world (including its baffling and disorienting aspects, which is essential within this dissertation – a soothing effect consequently).[519] Miller's notion that "tensions and conflicts" in Whitman find "resolution or release" in his verse restates classic psychoanalytic theory, complete with the obvious therapeutic rewards of that process. Miller argues that "genius reveals itself not only by the profundity of its intuitive insights but also by its ability to put into artistic order what remains inarticulate and formless for lesser minds and sensibilities."[520] Agreeing with Reynolds (as cited earlier in this chapter) and the emerging model of the paradoxical nature of psychic health, Miller uncovers evidence that "Whitman from almost the beginning of his career was aware . . . that his poetry compensated for almost intolerable personal frustration."[521]

The originality of Stephen A. Black's psychoanalytic study *Whitman's Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process* (1975) rests fundamentally on its central thesis that the poems constituting *Leaves of Grass* "do not chronicle events: they are themselves the events".[522] In other words, Black argues (from the standpoint of ego psychology) that poetic composition was the crucial emotional activity of Whitman's life during the rich period between the early 1850s and 1860. Central to the theoretical approach is also Black's insistence on the inseparability of the artist's life (especially his unconscious life), his work and the process by which his work is done. Though the book acknowledges poems written as "late" as 1865, Black considers that "almost all of the important poems" predate 1860. His explanation for the decline in quality as the Civil War in coming on is the poet's decreasing inclination or willingness to return to the

[519] Another Whitman scholar, David Cavitch, who draws on both Miller and Stephen A. Black, concurs with Miller on this and suggests that "Whitman seemed to learn at an early age that he could survive by detaching himself from the life around him." Indeed, the poet himself knew and confessed in 1856 that he was "a man pre-occupied of his own soul" and – for that reason, the poem suggests – "need[ed] no assurances" ("Assurances"). For the Cavitch quote, see David Cavitch, *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman*, 12.

[520] Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey*, viii.

[521] Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey*, 138.

[522] Incidentally, Black clashes with Miller somewhat over the issue of homosexual desire. In Miller's estimation, Whitman's homoeroticism was conscious and overt since his youth. Black, on the other hand, develops his position by taking issue with Catel whose view of Whitman as inherently autoerotic he modifies before arguing instead that Whitman's consciousness of physical homosexual desire was repressed until some crisis in the late 1850s. In keeping with the central drift of his theory, Black supposes that the crisis may have been the very act of writing the "Calamus" poems (see chapter 4 of this dissertation).

psychic sources of his poetry which may only be accessed via a casting off of inhibitions (conventional thought and language patterns, chiefly).[523]

A powerful leitmotif is discernible when one reads across these Whitman scholars' works: a process of psychological *compensation* catalyzed by the writing of poetry. Variations of this term appear in the précis of both Catel and Miller above. Let me add to those the fact that Roger Asselineau (to whom I have referred especially frequently in previous chapters) sees Whitman as unstable and tormented yet able to use his poetry in a compensatory fashion, i.e. he was able to make the verse serve as a therapeutic substitute for what was missing from his life, something for which his longing was an abiding source of suffering.[524] As I have pointed out, Carpenter's and Reynolds's works contain strikingly congruous observations.

Central to the Austrian-American self psychologist and psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's programme was the concept of "compensatory" intrapsychic structures. In the opening pages of *The Restoration of the Self* (1977), Kohut (postponing, for the nonce, a necessary explication of the "bipolar nature of the self" necessary for an understanding of psychoanalytic approaches to narcissistic personality disorder) jumps right into his new subject:

> I call a structure compensatory when, rather than merely covering a defect in the self, it compensates for this effect. Undergoing a development of its own, it brings about a functional rehabilitation of the self by making up for the weakness in one pole of the self through the strengthening of the other pole. . . . [The] phase of termination of the analysis of a narcissistic personality disorder has been reached when [either] the *primary defect* in the self has been exposed . . . the sufficiently filled out so that the formerly defective structures of the self have now become functionally reliable [or] the *compensatory structures* have now become functionally reliable, independent of the area in which this success was achieved.[525]

The second and last of the two indicators above that treatment may be terminated is, where Whitman is concerned, the more interesting. Note, however, that I am not at this point suggesting that Whitman is exactly the kind of suffering patient Kohut imagines in this passage in order to explicate compensatory structures. The crucial issue for me at this stage of the argument is that Kohut recognizes that an adverse psychic condition need not define a person in any final sense nor

[523] In the following I refer to and engage even more recent scholarship on Whitman while pursuing my own arguments.
[524] Certainly, he felt his book uniquely contained and presented its readers with something hard to come by yet necessary: "Shut not your doors to me proud libraries, / For that which was lacking on all your well-fill'd shelves, yet needed most, I bring, / Forth from the war emerging, a book I have made, / The words of my book nothing, the drift of it every thing," he writes in "Shut not Your Doors".
[525] Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, 3–4.

have the last word on the wellbeing of that person's self. The mental pain, unpleasant and overwhelming though it may be, may nevertheless turn out to shrink in significance as a consequence of the patient's successful implementation of one or more compensatory structures. Mario Jacoby appreciates Kohut's point that "in the final phase of analysis *creative activities* or new life ideals may manifest, which provide the patient with a certain amount of inner satisfaction" (italics mine) – perhaps even a *satisfactory* amount, which was definitely true of Whitman as I have shown in previous chapters.[526] An admirable realism and resistance to unchecked optimism makes Kohut an ally of my own conceptualization of human striving for mental health. Kohut writes, for instance, that in some cases it must be accepted that therapy cannot produce a completely transformed and irreversibly healed individual but merely an "analysand[who has] at least preliminarily determined the mode by which the self will from now on attempt to ensure its cohesion."[527] Whitman seems exemplary of that state of healing in these lines:

> You broken resolutions, you racking angers, you smother'd ennuis;
> Ah, think not you finally triumph—*My real self has yet to come forth*;
> It shall yet march forth o'ermastering, till all lies beneath me;
> It shall yet stand up the soldier of unquestion'd victory.[528]

It seems possible to make the argument that Whitman effected a series of intrapsychic therapeutic changes in a manner that is compatible with the overall shape and import of Kohut's theory.[529] It seems he reaped the welcome psychological fruits of repeatedly trying to catch himself and his experiences in the net of language. He tells us in the 1855 Preface that he is a man "cohered out of tumult and chaos", and I shall suggest that "cohered" is approximately synonymous with "come forth" (cf. the verse fragment cited immediately above). Haviland Miller makes the valuable argument that the "coherence" of Whitman's self resulted from his exploration in poetry of the

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[526] Mario Jacoby, *Individuation and Narcissism: The Psychology of Self in Jung and Kohut*, 183–184.

[527] Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, 38.

Such modesty and cautious gratitude is surely wise in issues as delicately unpredictable as mental health. Cf. Jacoby: "Kohut is modest enough to see the limits of what analysis can reach and declares himself satisfied if the 'compensatory structures' of the patient are improved, while the primary defect in the self may often not– or at least not completely – be healed." From Mario Jacoby, *Individuation and Narcissism: The Psychology of Self in Jung and Kohut*, 183.

[528] From "Ah Poverties, Wincings, and Sulky Retreats" (italics mine, composed in 1865–66).

[529] Allen M. Siegel validates this by seeing a Kohutean compensatory structure as "a talent, skill or even a relationship that is reliable and may function . . . as a source of healthy self-esteem." From *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self*, chapter 9 (no pagination in online version).

"nature of the soul", which was motivated by a hunger "not for intellectual consistency but for emotional security."[530]

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

In exploring the "nature of the soul" – *his own* soul, specifically – Whitman finds that it "contains multitudes" which are not easily reconcilable. Their mutual incompatibility seems to run counter to the idea that the self is a homogenous, tension-free unity. There are no doubt countless ways in which "I am large, I contain multitudes" – Whitman's perhaps best-loved and most often-quoted line – can be interpreted. By drawing on Kohut and Lacan, I shall try to suggest and shed a little light on some of them in the following.

First, let me indicate David Cavitch's interesting response to a question which has haunted countless Whitman biographers: How could a man as apparently ordinary as Walt Whitman become such a great poet? Cavitch, building on Miller and Black, comes up with the interesting answer that Whitman's poetry is in large part the surprising consequence of his discovery that an ordinary man may represent everyone else. I think, in brief, that the successful integration of his own multitudinous contradictory psychological subelements, which he achieved through compensatory poetic labour, is to be understood as indistinguishable *psychologically* from his discovery that he "may represent everyone else." An old proverb compares ruling a city with ruling oneself, and it is this same distinction – between a psychic and a social domain – I am addressing here. I have said that Thoreau deemed Whitman "apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen", and it should be increasingly clear how that is a defensible characterization. Cavitch substantiates Thoreau's observation by elaborating on "Whitman's wide-ranging sympathy for all life":

> After stanzas of absorbing other people, Whitman emerges in stanza 18 [of "Song of Myself"] as a militant champion of oppressed humanity . . . His procession is like a triumphal approach to a city that will receive him as a reconciler of age-old conflicts. [After quoting ll. 361–371, Cavitch goes on:] He offers dignity to the defeated because he believes that equality of spirit is ordained by nature and should be brought openly into modern civilization, in the form of democracy. His internal struggle gave him the moral sensitivity to

[530] Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey*, vii.

> uphold democracy as the naturally evolving perfection of social order and to celebrate the egalitarianism of the United States over the hierarchies of Europe.[531]

Psychologists sometimes speak about the Fascist (versus Democratic) state of mind. In the

> Fascist state of mind doubts are expelled because they immediately reverberate weakness of spirit and all weaknesses are considered as something very negative. A unidimensional mind is formed and any other external counterviews completely disregarded and eliminated. Slogans, rhetoric, violent fallacious argumentations, icons and so on substantiate (also suitably stored in external materialities) the totality of the ideology/morality at play.[532]

Whitman's art seems to bear out Freud's insistence in epigraphic perspective 12 that "all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single impulse in the poet's mind". However, Freud adds that one implication of this is that they are thus "open to more than a single interpretation." Suppose that part of the impetus for writing autobiographically is the uncovering of a stable and unequivocal scan of the writer's self, then there is something unsettling about a text that remains open to an unknown number of different interpretations. From that perspective, it must take courage or resolve for an individual to defend and cultivate "democracy of mind", so to speak. This is because tolerating – as opposed to suppressing – internal dissent, whether psychic or social, is clearly the less squeamish, less paranoid attitude. While in Whitman's case, it allowed him to relate to and identify with in principle every other human being, it was at the cost of having to acknowledge aspects of his own self which seemed unworthy of celebration, to say nothing of the fact that it made him internally contradictory. To the latter, admirably, he was able to say "Very well . . . I am large" – and thus he redeemed himself, transcended psychic Fascisms and laid the foundation for self-containment or cohesion.

I think Whitman was able to extend that self-redeeming courtesy to himself, on which mental health may in large part be predicated, for two reasons: (1) because of a fundamental empathy with his own situation and suffering and (2) because he observed that most objects in the natural world (of which he was instinctively fond) manifested a similarly various (contradictory and paradoxical) internal structure: "[The greatest poet] has a perfect sense of the oneness of nature and the propriety of the same spirit applied to human affairs," he writes in the 1855 Preface. And yet, significantly, the Preface shows us that nature's "oneness" is an emergent (not essential) property,

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[531] David Cavitch, *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman*, 52–53.
[532] Lorenzo Magnani, *Understanding Violence: The Intertwining of Morality, Religion and Violence: A Philosophical Stance*, 207.

so to speak, resulting from the perfect cooperation of myriad constitutive elements. Both reasons – (1) and (2) – are reflected in his verse and can therefore, on the strength of my argumentation above, be thought of as Kohutean compensatory structures or tactics.[533]

Kohut provides important psychoanalytic insights on the phenomenon of empathy which he conceptualizes as

> the mode by which one gathers psychological data about other people and, when they say what they think and feel, imagines their inner experience even though it is not open to direct observation. Through empathy we aim at discerning . . . complex psychological configurations which we could either define only through the laborious presentation of a host of details or which it may even be beyond our ability to define.[534]

Empathy is, Kohut argues, a kind of analgesic when one suffers "hurts to one's pride, injuries to one's prestige needs, interferences with conscious, preconscious, or unconscious fantasies concerning one's greatness, power, and specialness."[535] Though Kohut specifies "other people" in the first sentence of the block citation above, the second contains no emphasis on interpersonal relationship and might arguably obtain *intrapsychically*, i.e. in cases when the self contemplates itself in solitude. The benevolent curiosity, so to speak, at the heart of empathy can – may reasonably – be directed at one's own self: "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" ("Song of Myself"). Self-scrutiny, self-therapy, self-investigation seem to be, in principle, followable pursuits. "You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me," Whitman informed his earliest readers, and I shall return to that metaphor in my words on Lacan below.[536] That the trope of directing empathy toward the self is of momentous significance to Whitman is even more conclusively reflected in the bluntly addressed and entitled poem "To You":

> I will leave all and come and make the hymns of you,
> None has understood you, but I understand you,
> None has done justice to you, you have not done justice to yourself,
> None but has found you imperfect, I only find no imperfection in you,
> None but would subordinate you, I only am he who will never consent to subordinate you,

[533] It is, I suppose, possible that point (1) is the corollary of point (2).
[534] Heinz Kohut, "Forms and Transformation of Narcissism," 262.
[535] Heinz Kohut, *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut 1978–1981*, 773.
[536] From the 1855 Preface.

> I only am he who places over you no master, owner, better, God, beyond what waits intrinsically in yourself.

The third line above is particularly revelatory here: You (meaning we – the multitudinous plurality of people) are tragically capable of withholding a fair treatment of yourself from yourself, but may learn to recognize such unjust moment by appeal to no authority except "what waits intrinsically in yourself." And elsewhere: "Once more I enforce you to give play to yourself—and not depend on me, or on any one but yourself."[537]

It is beyond question that *Leaves of Grass* is permeated throughout with the spirit of psychic redemption, no doubt most memorably (to most readers) when it takes the form of the poet sincerely assuring his reader that he will never abandon the lonely, never qualify his loyalty to the defeated, never cease trying to cheer up the sick, buoy up the dying, and so forth. The opposite side of the empathic nexus is also clearly featured however, which makes it, in principle, possible to carry out a neatly binary categorization of Whitman's crisis-ridden lines. Several lines – in fact, several entire poems, as we have seen – lend themselves to being read as pleas for emotional rescue or relief (empathy *desired*), which on it face of it appears the very opposite attitude to offering service and compassion to the desperate (empathy *extended*).

My point in noting this is that Kohut's emphasis of empathy as crucial to psychological healing is borne out by the adoption of the view that *Leaves of Grass* is a work in which a poet explores, distills, cultivates and self-applies an empathic approach to suffering – *regardless of the identity of the sufferer*. Like John Milton before him who sought to justify it, Whitman is confounded by human suffering in the abstract, and his writing reveals it. Though there are no guarantees ever in the complex psychodynamic realm, it ought not to surprise us greatly that the compensatory activity he undertook, to use Kohut's term, seems to have elicited a therapeutic effect on the practitioner himself. I am suggesting that he sometimes imagined his reader to be his analysand or client, sometimes his personal therapist.[538] Faced with and troubled by his complicated and incohesive self, he seems to have achieved the kind of solution which psychoanalysis, in Adam Phillips assessment, is uniquely capable of providing: Psychoanalysis, writes Phillips (see footnote 103), "doesn't cure people so much as show them what it is about themselves that is incurable."

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[537] These words from the 1860 version of "So Long!" Ten lines earlier, Whitman writes: "let none be content with me, / I myself seek a man better than I am, or a woman better than I am."

[538] A brief 1860 poem entitled "To You" includes the invitation: "Come! vouchsafe to me what has yet been vouchsafed to none—Tell me the whole story, / Tell me what you would not tell your brother, wife, husband, or physician."

It is of interest – and will serve as a segue to Lacan – that Jung proposes empathy to be based on *projection* and *introjection*. By way of clarifying the latter concept, Jung explains:

> [Empathy] brings the object into intimate relation with the subject. In order to establish this relationship, the subject detaches a content – a feeling, for instance – from himself, lodges it in the object, thereby animating it, and in this way draws the object into the sphere of the subject.[539]

This kind of dynamic informs much psychoanalytic theory. In his book *Risky Writing: Self-disclosure and Self-transformation in the Classroom*, Jeffrey Berman discusses Kohutean empathy and presents the observation from Walter Jackson Bate that it is

> one of the common tenets of English romantic criticism that the imagination is capable, through an effort of sympathetic intuition, of identifying itself with its object; and, by means of this identification, the sympathetic imagination grasps, through a kind of direct experience and feeling, the distinctive nature, identity, or 'truth' of the object of its contemplation.[540]

I think Whitman would, were he able, have heartily agreed. After all, name-checking Schelling and Fichte, he wrote in *Specimen Days*:

> [P]leasantly imprison'd here under the big oak—the rain dripping, and the sky cover'd with leaden clouds—nothing but the pond on one side, and the other a spread of grass, spotted with the milky blossoms of the wild carrot— . . . why am I so (almost) happy here and alone? Why would any intrusion, even from people I like, spoil the charm? But am I alone? *Doubtless there comes a time—perhaps it has come to me—when one feels through his whole being, and pronouncedly the emotional part, that identity between himself subjectively and Nature objectively which Schelling and Fichte are so fond of pressing.* How it is I know not, but I often realize a presence here—in clear moods I am certain of it, and neither chemistry nor reasoning nor esthetics will give the least explanation. All the past two summers it has been strengthening and nourishing my sick body and soul, as never before. Thanks, invisible physician, for thy silent delicious medicine, thy day and night, thy waters and thy airs, the banks, the grass, the trees, and e'en the weeds![541]

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[539] Carl Jung, *Psychological Types*, paragraph 784.

[540] Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, 132.

David Klugman writes that "Kohut's recognition of the role of empathy in the analytic process parallels the Romantic recognition of the role of the imagination in perception and experience", which is so apropos as to require no elaboration. From David Klugman, "Empathy's Romantic Dialectic: Self Psychology, Intersubjectivity, and Imagination," 700.

[541] From *Specimen Days and Collect*, 105 (italics mine). I mention Fichte in a related context in footnote 195.

The passage involves much of what has been addressed throughout this dissertation: the will to health (a theoretical issue I associate with Otto Rank, Thomas S. Szasz and Carl Rogers), objects relations, the creation of a literary voice celebrating being and the attendant benefit for psychic (indeed, psychophysical) health. I shall argue that observing and psychically interacting with the living (yet stable), coherent (yet multifarious), inscrutable yet undeniable objects with which the natural world is rife had an instructing effect on his own psychic integrity, and that this subject-object interaction is compatible with Lacan's Mirror theory. (The reader should recall the connection back to empathy outlined by the Jung above (footnote 539; Goethe's words in footnote 335, anticipating the point I shall make, merit attention too).

Speaking specifically about child development, it was Lacan's proposition that a child will at a certain stage of development before the age of 2 – the "Mirror Phase" – naturally identify with an image or other outside itself.[542] As a consequence of such identification, the child will perceive an apparent completeness of self – an imaginary construct behind which the real subject resides – as well as attain some mastery over its body. The latter increase in motor coordination is, I think, is a phenomenal testament to a shift towards higher *psychic* sophistication. And higher psychic sophistication is, as far as I can see, synonymous with psychic health – certainly if it be assumed, as I think it should be, that the excellence or success of the self's outward being (its motoric manifestation) is predicated on its sense a possessing a cohesive self within.[543] Lacan appeals to examples from biology (pigeons and locusts) to argue – in general – that one or more necessary changes are elicited when (in principle) any biological body is exposed "at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species."[544] This is the narrowly-formulated empirical example, but I see no reason why variations and derivations of the same dynamic might not inform and characterize the ongoing process of adaptation and self-acclimatization to reality which (up to a point) all individuals must – lest they perish – perform. Like Freud and the preponderance of scientists to this day, Lacan accepts that the human being is born "prematurely,"

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[542] One of Lacan's earliest contributions, the Mirror Phase theory was first presented in 1936. An English translation of the famous paper ("The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience") is contained in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1–7.

[543] Note that Lacan speaks of "ego", not self. I am unable here to adequately address the issue of reconciling Lacan's and Kohut's systems of terminology.

Judith Guss Teicholz suggests that Kohut's self is haunted by "conceptual complexities, multiple meanings, and ambiguities" while noting its commonality with the relational view of subjectivity. See Teicholz's article "The Analyst's Empathy, Subjectivity, and Authenticity: Affect as the Common Denominator," in Arnold I. Goldberg, ed., *How Responsive Should We Be: Progress in Self Psychology*, vol. 16, 38.

[544] From Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 3.

which leaves the infant fundamentally incomplete. My argument, radical though it may sound at first blush, is that human beings are by definition psychologically "incomplete" – always – for the simple reason that there would be no motivation for personal development if they were not incomplete, but such a condition would equal stagnation which is obviously unsustainable within a constantly changing environment. Sheer being in the world leaves thus us effectively "incomplete" because we are forced to evolve along with the environment in which we find ourselves.

The child of Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth" beautifully illustrates the *imaginary unification* at the heart of Lacan's intersubjective theory – and makes the point which I just mentioned that the process continues beyond the years of earliest developments:

> There was a child went forth every day,
> And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder, pity, love, or dread, that object he became,
> And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.
>
> The early lilacs became part of this child,
> And grass, and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phœbe-bird,
> . . .
> And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads—all became part of him.
>
> . . .
>
> These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day,
> And these become part of him or her that peruses them here.[545]

I can offer no better elaboration on these lines than entreat the reader to go back to and reread the quotes by Bate and Jung (footnotes 539 and 540), which connect such a process to the phenomenon of empathy.[546]

Another early and famous passage charged with Lacanian Mirror significance and exemplifying an intersubjective relationship with nature is section 32 of "Song of Myself" ("I think I could turn and live with animals"), which I cited earlier (footnote 344).

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[545] This early poem was part of every edition of *Leaves of Grass* from 1855 and onwards.

[546] Whether the empathy be directed at self or imaginary other may – in light of Bate's "sympathetic imagination" point – in the final psychological analysis be a trivial distinction; however, the argumentation required for directly arguing so would take more space than is practical here.

This picture of being in the world – a situation in which objects "looked upon" are "received with wonder, pity, love, or dread" and psychically accommodated to lodge and reverberate in the self potentially "for many years" – feels realistic and coherent because it enables one to account plausibly for the wide divergence characterizing human lives. In other words, it is readily believable that the degrees to which one must receive wonder, pity, love and dread will have an effect on one's emergent perspective on life, say, as well undoubtedly as one's mental health. A self forced to receive the world with unchecked degrees of dread, for instance, might emerge scarred, wizened, exhausted or traumatized.

When Whitman helped out in the military hospitals in Washington between 1862 and 1865, he exposed himself to a health-compromising strain and ordeal which presumably aged him prematurely.[547] Aware of the importance of appearing unaffected and cheerful while visiting the wounded, Whitman soon realized that being exposed day out and day in to "death and sickness and hard marching and hard fighting" was not only "bec[oming] part of him for the day", to cite from the poem, but, as it turned out, "for many years, or stretching cycles of years."[548] As he wrote his mother:

> It is curious: when I am present at the most appalling things, deaths, operations, sickening wounds (perhaps full of maggots), I keep cool and do not give out or budge, although my sympathies are very much excited; but often, hours afterward, perhaps when I am home, or out walking alone, I feel sick, and actually tremble, when I recall the case again before me.[549]

33 years after the Civil War, in 1888, Whitman hands Traubel the manuscript draft of a letter written by the poet in August 1863, addressed to the parents of a soldier who had died in Washington's Armory Square Hospital. He tells Traubel:

> [T]hey died all about us there just about in the same way—noble, sturdy, loyal boys. I always kept an outward calm in going among them—I had to, it was necessary, I would have been useless if I hadn't—but no one could tell what I felt underneath it

[547] It has been noted by several biographers that Whitman seemed to age prematurely. While the process may, as I say have been accelerated by the intense strain of his Civil War volunteering, Garrett Peck notes that "[h]is beard began graying in his twenties, and his hair soon followed" making him look "prematurely aged, like a vigorous older man." See Garrett Peck, *Walt Whitman in Washington: The Civil War and America's Great Poet*, 21.

[548] This line's first quote is from a letter to his mother dated December 29, 1862. See Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, 58–60.

[549] From a letter to his mother dated October 6, 1863. See Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, 156–158.

> all—how hard it was for me to keep down the fierce flood that always seemed threatening to break loose –[550]

– to which Traubel asks whether Whitman often returns in thought to those days. His response: "I do not need to. I have never left them. They are here, now, while we are talking together—real, terrible, beautiful days!"

An argument can be made that Whitman spent most of his adult life recovering from what would today be called post-traumatic stress – whether he contracted the condition during the 1860s' hospital years, as a result of inner despair around the issue of sex or as early as 1841 during the mysterious Woodbury scandal.[551] Similarly, it is possible to argue that Whitman's ways of effecting self-transcendence via his poems anticipate some of the current approaches to treating post-traumatic stress disorder. By the sheer fact of his rather impressive longevity (see my words on his autopsy in footnote 459), he is arguably a model of survival. But knowing how – or rather, being in a position to *infer* and *argue* how – he enabled his survival, I am able to declare him an exemplar of what Richard Tedeschi and others have called "post-traumatic growth".[552] The phrase indicates that something desirable and useful may arise from catastrophe, which is a motif we have seen reflected in the archetype of death and rebirth, in the alchemical phrase "In sterquiliniis invenitur" (see footnotes 132 and 133) and echoed in several writers' and philosophers' words, including Whitman's: "I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be turn'd to beautiful results."[553] The poem "Wandering at Morn" sees the poet "Emerging from the night from gloomy thoughts" to utter to the troubled United States the same insight:

> If worms, snakes, loathsome grubs, may to sweet spiritual songs be turn'd,
> If vermin so transposed, so used and bless'd may be,
> Then may I trust in you, your fortunes, your days, my country.

It is Tedeschi's (et al.) argument that a positive redefinition of threatening experiences tends to emerge from "see[ing] the threat as an opportunity to change".[554] This dynamic too has been addressed a number of times above, for instance in my argument for the necessity of continual change or in Adam Phillips's claim that by merely articulating problems with a psychoanalyst one

[550] Walt Whitman, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1, 115.
[551] I have alluded to this in footnote 481.
[552] See Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park and Lawrence G. Calhoun, eds., *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis*.
[553] From "Starting from Paumanok."
[554] Richard G. Tedeschi et al., eds., *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis*, 71.

may achieve a redescription of a problem, which is sometimes one's best option, particularly when no "treatment" exists (cf. footnote 277). Interestingly, Whitman tells us that he discovered that poetry could be instrumental in the pursuit of the indicated kind of redescription. In this line from "Song of Myself", what needs to be redescribed (note my italics) is the kind of Dionysian impulses I addressed in chapter 4:

> Through me forbidden voices,
> Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
> Voices indecent by me *clarified and transfigur'd*.

Even more succinctly, he describes the same process in the second half of each of these two lines, again from "Song of Myself":

> The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
> The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

Another variant of posttraumatic growth unfolding through writing is exemplified by Whitman's frequent and sincere attempts to conceive or contrive his self in writing (*symbolic self*, I have called it in previous chapters), complete with a detailed delineation of attitudes and inclinations (generally either sublimely admirable or admirably honest). Some psychologists would, with good reason, describe this activity as having the effect of internalizing the self's "Locus of Control of Reinforcement" (the latter two words are typically omitted nowadays). Developed by the American psychologist Julian Rotter in the 1950s, the concept concerns a person's sense of having the ability to influence outcomes and events that affect the person.[555] While those with an *internal* locus of control believe that they have control over reinforcing events in their lives and will attribute changes to themselves, those with *external* Locus of Control feel that most of what happens to them is beyond their control and ability to affect. In "The Resilient Trauma Survivor", John P. Wilson and Christine E. Agaibi write:

> In studies of trauma, PTSD and coping with stress, an internal locus of control has been associated with effective adaptation to stress . . . Persons with an internal locus

[555] See Julian Rotter, "Generalized Expectancies for Internal vs. External Control of Reinforcement," 1–7. Cf. Miller's argument earlier in this chapter that Whitman, as a result of his writing, felt a decrease in the importance of the external world's negative import.

> of control tend to exhibit less PTSD, psychopathology, and have better overall adjustment than persons with an external locus of control.[556]

As for personal factors that negatively predict developing post-traumatic stress from crisis exposure, the authors list: "personality coherence," "family cohesion" and "social support," as well as having personal autonomy, self-esteem, self-efficacy, good temperament and a positive social outlook. In other words, all these factors tend to make the individual psychologically resilient.

A famous passage from "Song of Myself" seems with particular clarity to describe the sense of having an internal locus of control – with the negligible exception that it does not seem to be interior to the body in any spatial sense:

> Trippers and askers surround me,
> People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,
> The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
> My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
> The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
> The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,
> Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events;
> These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
> But they are not the Me myself.
>
> Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
> Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
> Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
> Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
> Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

These lines anticipate Rotter's construct (here in its internal version) with surprising accuracy. It is evident that it is the portrait of a man whose psychological state permits his dynamic interaction with the external world and his sustainable and not unpleasant being in the world (cf. "These come to me . . . and go from me again" and "Both in and out of the game").

Reading *Leaves of Grass* is exciting because one gets the sense occasionally that Whitman knows things he does not know he knows until he discovers that he knows them. Maybe this is why he kept writing and rewriting it all his life.

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[556] John P. Wilson, ed., *The Posttraumatic Self: Restoring Meaning and Wholeness to Personality*, 382.

Conclusion

This dissertation offers new ways of evaluating the therapeutic, autobiographical and self-transcending aspects of Walt Whitman's poetry. Seeking to clarify both (1) Whitman's personal experiences as a beleaguered self reacting to life's challenges through his poetry as well as (2) the general potentials of the written word for everybody who puts pen to paper, the dissertation considers poems and to lesser degree other writings from across Whitman's career in the light of different theoretical contexts. These include existentialism, phenomenology, Franklean logotherapy, psychoanalysis (including trauma theory) and also makes reference to the philosophy of religion.

The central arguments of the dissertation are all nested inside and methodologically motivated by the claim that the arts in general, and literature in particular, suffer a degree of unnecessary obscuration if their implications for generalized human being are not to some degree acknowledged and considered. In other words, it is a premise for the dissertation that because the human condition is determined by certain existential *constants* (as well as many *variables*, of course), any work of autobiographical poetry is likely to explore aspects of being that poet and reader are going to have in common. Such experiences – timeless and culturally independent – I call *archetypal* in the Jungian sense, and I conclude that phenomenological and narratological approaches to expressing them represent the only viable approaches (both of these can be harnessed in the lyrical poem). Given the archetypal parallelism and overlap between all lives, I construct the argument that when the receptive reader enters into and shares the poet's experience in a linguistic sense, he or she may access experiences that transcend merely linguistic ones. The Whitman literature is full of reported instances of psychoemotional "rapport" where readers state they have been able to adopt and apply to their own lives the poet's poetically evident genius for seeing, thinking about, enduring and redeeming a number of archetypal situations (from becoming conscious of selfhood and acknowledging its precariousness to crises of despair and self-abnegation). It was Whitman's explicitly stated hope that this kind of literary rapport and exchange would occur, and it appears that to a degree it did for his best readers (I refer throughout to Henry Miller, Horace Traubel, Anne Gilchrist, Robert Louis Stevenson, Roger Asselineau, Harold Bloom and others).

The dissertation commences by investigating and detailing the human condition in its fundamental, archetypal structure. For that purpose, the writings of both existentialist philosophers,

psychoanalysts, scientists and other writers are considered. Based on a number of textual perspectives, I conclude that the fact of life's inherent contingency leaves the individual with no viable alternative but to enthusiastically welcome any source of respite, consolation and existential perspective that is forthcoming. While human relationships and the company of friends have no doubt historically provided effective buffers against all sorts of suffering, loyal relatives and sympathizing allies are not always to hand when the individual encounters crisis and psychic malaise. For the individual whom crisis catches alone this means, quite logically, that an intimate familiarity with the workings of the psyche – whether achieved and nourished via "expressive emotions therapy", "art-as-therapy", "redemptive" writing methods or psychoanalysis – can be a valuable thing regardless of whether the crisis is a present reality or a future likelihood or certainty.

Psychologically speaking, the best cuirass from within which to confront what Freud called "hostile life" seems to be an unterrified personal affirmation – an abiding acceptance – of the current (as well as timeless and universal) facts comprising our reality. Carl Jung used the word "wisdom" in this context, and along with Friedrich Nietzsche, Viktor Frankl and others he emphasized that the person's survival and flourishing had to be predicated on *willing* – or *affirming* and *agreeing* with – the facts, including the grimmest facts. However, it turns out that the individual can discover a degree of freedom in the act of coming to terms with these facts. Analogous to the biblical "divine Logos" which calls forth order out of chaos, the dissertation argues that the person can marshal the written word for similar purposes. Thomas Szasz and Jordan Peterson present and promote such an argument.

Becoming aware of psychic suffering – whether the source thereof is a physical, exterior threat to well-being or some essentially psychological crisis – the word can be used therapeutically in roughly two ways. Whitman is an exemplar of both of them: It can (1) make possible the constitution and inauguration of a symbolic self or persona ("protagonist" in Gregory Orr's nomenclature) uniquely possessing the wisdom, personal resources, courage or perspective that surviving the actual predicament seems to require and which the actual self presently lacks but may with effort grow into *actually* embodying; and it can (2) serve as a useful vehicle for confession, prayer and sublime lament. Harnessing the truthful written word for purposes of prayer amounts to willing something unrealized into psychic reality for a while; harnessing it for purposes of confession and lament amounts to (paradoxically) affirming something that weighs on and pains the psyche. In both cases, the effect seems to be – in psychoanalytic terms – integrative and unifying. Tormenting or lamentable aspects of either the self's *being* or the self *itself* (as it appears

to itself) emerge transformed for the better once the aspects have been given linguistic incarnation in this way. Interior tension, conflict, shame, want, regret and sorrow are not magically dispelled, of course, but redeemed to an extent that may make the unbearable bearable. Such poems are literally the concrete product or reflection of the self's triumph over adversity, and may (in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's phrase from "A Psalm of Life") be likened to footsteps that a victor leaves behind, "Footsteps, that perhaps another, / Sailing o'er life's solemn main, / A forlorn and shipwrecked brother, / Seeing, shall take heart again." Such thoughts are borne out by the fact that Whitman (according to David S. Reynolds) was given to "assume a parental role with his young male friends" and appears to have been happy to be "To young men my problems offering" and "To women certain whispers of myself bequeathing." Inspired by the epilogue to *Moby Dick*, I have compared that poetic mode to the line in the Book of Job "I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

Starting from the premise that psychic suffering – whether the source thereof is a physical, exterior threat to well-being or some essentially psychological crisis (e.g. shame or anxiety) – is a contingent possibility from which there is no attractive immunity, the question is: Where does that leave the individual self? Having addressed the fundamental conditions of selfhood and being as they are likely to appear to an imagined self in the world, I proceed in chapter 3, intrigued by the ways in which words can be used therapeutically, to address Whitman more closely. I explore a central issue (of which Whitman's poetry is exemplary) which is best described as the way in which words – poetry – offer the writing self an opportunity to constitutionally compose and inaugurate a symbolic self or persona (or "protagonist" in Gregory Orr's nomenclature) that uniquely possesses the wisdom, personal resources, courage and perspective that surviving some particular crisis of being seems to require and which the *actual* self cannot yet – but may with effort potentially – embody. To borrow Timothy Donnelly's words (see footnote 288), I have argued that Whitman's poetry can profitably be thought of as his attempt to investigate possible psychologies rather than straightforwardly dramatize his own as it is presently manifested. I have said too that creating and continually recreating a symbolic self in lines represent a convenient way of capturing, honing, augmenting and studying present and latent psychic possibilities and potentials. According to Asselineau, Whitman's life is a proof that "creat[ing] a book" and "creat[ing one]self" are sometimes mutually sympathetic (or symbiotic) projects and endeavors (see footnote 348). Perpetuating the dissertation's interest in the theme of existential well-being and survival, I conclude that survival finally hinges on the self's ability to, in Montaigne's words, "endure what [it] cannot avoid", and *that* includes the trials and tribulations inherent in embodied selfhood in the

midst of the concrete external world. I have detailed specifically those aspects of Whitman's symbolic selves which seem to be of relevance in contexts associated with being and living, thriving and surviving. It is a central argument in the dissertation that an existential disposition or attitude pervaded by "saintly" largeness and affection is a strong position from which to confront the reality of being and anticipate and finally welcome future threats to being. I have defined such a position with reference to a number of writers concerned with being in ways similar to those of Whitman. Although the sincere promotion of such an attitude is clearly theodicial in nature, I do not, in using the word "saintly", intend any implications having to do with a deity or with institutional religion. The argumentation learns from Friedrich Nietzsche in a number of ways, which I find interesting (but of course not especially surprising) given both men's considerable "debt" to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (although not to each other). It concludes (with Terry Mulcaire) that Whitman's triumph is to have found that the problems of the human condition "were not finally obstacles to overcome, but potential sources of beauty to be incorporated into an aesthetic view of the word, in which suffering, sorrow, and pain will always be essential moments in an endless and ultimately positive dialectical progress."

In addition to locating a way of being a sustainable self in the world, tolerable selfhood over time is predicated too on the self's ability to endure its own psychic "company" and will its own continuation. According to all believable evidence, Whitman was for most of his life troubled and tormented by his sexual desires for a number of men few of whom were ever able to approve or return the poet's ardour. Not surprisingly given Whitman's general post-1855 indifference to his culture's widely-held opinions of what exactly constituted poetry (and complicated feelings vis-à-vis the bodies of men and women were far from unanimously considered something a poet ought to explore), one finds in the poems ample evidence darkly suggesting that something was not quite right: The poems' pained meditations on love and male friendship are full of heartache, self-ambivalence, loneliness and frustration, while the passages of shameful confession apparently come close to naming and revealing the painful reality of something quasi-diabolic and criminal in the poet's heart. (Needless to say, nineteenth-century US sodomy laws made homosexuality, which the poems never overtly mention, a felony punishable by imprisonment or death; these laws were not repealed until the second half of the twentieth century.) But despite his deteriorating health following a serious stroke in 1873, Whitman's conversations with Horace Traubel in the late 1880 and early 1890s reveal a person for whom it seems profoundly and accurately self-evident that "whatever happens to anybody [including psychic malaise] it may be turn'd to beautiful results"

("Starting from Paumanok"). Other writings, such as the 1889 essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", support such a reading. I have shown that his poetry may have enabled Whitman to endure and redeem the "presence of evil within him", to quote Asselineau. I have also argued that the serenity Whitman achieved in his old age was the result of a "continual struggle" (Asselineau), and I have added to that picture by arguing that the "struggle" is best understood in Jungian terms, specifically as a patient attempt to integrate the "shadow". To be precise, I have argued that the poetic effort directed towards a full integration of the shadow is methodologically similar – similar in nature – to the approach explored in chapter 3. In other words, the alienating aspect must be named (a "story [must] be told about it", as Blixen woud say; cf. footnote 251) if its threatening import is to be redeemed and transformed. It has been claimed by Carl Martin Lindner that Whitman anticipates Jung (born when Whitman was in his mid-50s) regarding the shadow aspects of the psyche, "aspects which must be acknowledged if the individual is to progress toward wholeness or integrity", but a proper explication of that foreshadowing has not been offered. This dissertation begins to redress that oversight.

The dissertation agrees with Harry James Cook, that any "valid interpretation of Whitman's poetry must be in large part autobiographical". It seems that any scholarly position that rejects Cook's insistence is liable to miss the overall import and profound implication of Whitman's work, namely the fact that his oft-admired signature "optimism" (this word is rather inadequate but will suffice) is a quality achieved *wholly in spite of the odds*. As David S. Reynolds puts it, "some terrible pain lurks behind his verse", and several biographers have carefully chronicled the different catastrophes haunting his life: familial, sexual, social, cultural, economic and psychological. Given the prevalence of both necessary and unnecessary suffering in the world today it seems an unfortunate oversight to not try to learn from Whitman's example which is – among many different things – the example of a modern individual who, amid circumstances not particularly conducive to his happiness or hospitable to his full character, nevertheless managed proactively and retroactively to distill meaning and cheer from experiences which would have elicited disappointment and regret in many. To quote David Aberbach, amid deeply disheartening circumstances Whitman turned himself into "a father-healer" offering prescriptions of "health and Eros" and antidotes to "disease and Thanatos".

Given the considerable variety evident in even a small group of individuals, it would be ludicrous to insist that Whitman's example should be considered as a model delineating some kind of normative

ideal; that would be idolatry and dogmatism, as Horace Traubel reminded the poet's admirer in 1919 at the centenary of his birth:

> I know you can tell me how old Walt Whitman is this year. But how old are you? That's more important. How many years old or young are you? How many years sensible or senseless? How many years merciful or malignant? How many years illuminated or blind? It don't matter so much whether he served or not. Have you served? Are you serving? Can you really tell your own age? You think you've done enough when you've told about him. But you haven't. Not till you've told about yourself. You speak of honoring him with celebrations. You don't, you can't, honor him. You honor yourselves. His account is closed. Yours is still open. Tell your own story. Not mostly of what you've done. Chiefly of what you are. How old were you on your first birthday? Are you any older now? I hear the sayers say they've lived through so many noble years. How many noble years have the sayers lived through? He wasn't perfect. Nor are you or we. We'd be afraid of each other if we were. We don't have to romance about him or ourselves. The truth's good enough. Light enough and shadow enough. It's too late to pace him. Now we must pace ourselves. It's all right to indicate his loyalties. But what of our own? I've said at Whitman meetings: "We'll never have a real Whitman day till we come together to celebrate ourselves not him."[557]

Yet there is one insight – pervading the poet's works and life and securing his genius in my opinion – which we reject at our peril, and that is the insight that each person is a co-creator of his or her experience. "You must change your life", Rilke wrote, and it seems nothing short of a kind of premature death to embody and self-impose an existential outlook or nourish a *Weltanschauung* which deliberately negates Rilke's injunction and considers it expressive of a metaphysical impossibility. Whitman said of *Leaves of Grass* that it aimed to be the literary distillation of "a new breath of life" and that it contained "a basic model or portrait of personality for general use". It is the existential, psycho-metaphysical principle illustrated by such a model, *not* the qualitative particularities of its content, to which we should attend lest we prefer to survive on the breath of life we inhaled yesterday. Traubel once told the poet: "I think I know how you are bound to be regarded

[557] From Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, 294. See also footnote 50.

in the future—not as a man above other men but as one of the spokesmen of a new movement of the spirit".[558] Purposely ignoring all associations related to cultish affiliation, I claim that central to such a "movement of the spirit" would be the notion that being – in order to evolve and grow at all – must submit and devote itself to change (whether actively sought or passively suffered) and to the idea that change is, in Peterson's archetypally charged phrase, "endless micro-deaths and renewal". That survival has to do with "spirit", in Traubel's term, was essentially what Viktor Frankl discovered too, when from a life of security and happiness in the 1930s he was violently hurled by murderous Nazi ideologues into the most hellish experiences imaginable.

Towards the end of the dissertation (chapter 5) I explore a number of concepts from the Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut whose theory concerning compensatory structures is highly instructive in describing therapeutic and redemptive writing. His ideas about empathy are equally useful in this context and prove intriguingly compatible with other concepts useful for talking about suffering and the deterioration of mental health. Kohutean descriptions of selves such as "cohesive" and "continuous" (as apposed to "multiple" and "fragmented") prove especially useful in this dissertation given Whitman's versatility, paradoxality and profound psychic evolution towards a self-contained self: "Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul" ("Song of Myself"). I also show that the line "I am large, I contain multitudes" can be explored in several different ways, some of which I elucidate. Despite some minor terminological confusion, Lacan's and Kohut's view of the self turn out to compliment each other fairly well. I present textual evidence supporting the claim that Whitman's poetry – if not his actual real-life being – anticipates the concept of Lacan's Mirror to a remarkable degree. I find that particularly the poem "There Was a Child Went Forth" exhibits an impressive comprehension of the imaginary unification at the heart of Lacan's intersubjective theory. In part because human beings have experienced mental suffering long before Whitman's century and continue to do so to this day, it is interesting to ask whether Whitman (who was evidently capable of saving himself from his most difficult bouts) can be turned to for insights about post-traumatic stress disorder. After perusing Julian Rotter's work on internal versus external locus of control, the chapter answers in the affirmative while presenting textual evidence for Whitman's internal locus of control.

[558] From Walt Whitman, *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888–1892*, xx.

It seems to me an insight eternally worth stating and exploring that our psyche is an actively cooperating and co-authoring aspect of our experience – whether the particular experience strikes us as momentous and grand or trivial and forgettable. Whitman's admiration for Friedrich Schiller is interesting in this context. Being himself generally "more interested in poets' biographies than in their poetry", as R. W. French has observed, Whitman wrote in *Specimen Days* that Schiller admirably represented a person in whom "the perfect character, the good, the heroic, although never attain'd, is never lost sight of, but through failures, sorrows, temporary downfalls, is return'd to again and again."[559] Along similar lines, I argue that there is good reason to study Whitman's *life* as well as his *works* – not because they are categorically the same "thing", but because one grew out of and had an evident, discussable and arguably very positive effect on the other. I have therefore argued that it is appropriate to have a modicum of appreciation for Whitman's request that his verse be viewed not "as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or æstheticism." We may think we do justice to aesthetic creations by subjecting them to clinically precise and impeccably rational scrutiny, but the problem is that it is hard to remain alive to the humanity of the spirit in which, for instance, a poem is composed if we do not meet that spirit halfway in our analytical stance or attitude. That is the spirit in which I have here attempted to read and discuss Whitman's life and works.

Kasper Guldberg
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[559] See R. W. French's entry on "British Romantic Poets" in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 76. The section of *Specimen Days* from which Whitman's words are taken is entitled "Edgar Poe's Significance".

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