Chapter One

The Modern Sequence and Its Precursors

1. The "New" Genre and Organic Form

A "new" genre, the modern poetic sequence, has evolved over the past century and a half or longer. It has emerged so naturally, so without fanfare, as hardly to have been noticed. Yet, once its existence has been pointed out, and a name proposed for it, 'tis very like a camel or a mountain or a whale or—to return to things literary—an epic poem.

Its presence becomes abundantly obvious, for the modern sequence is the decisive form toward which all the developments of modern poetry have tended. It is the genre which best encompasses the shift in sensibility exemplified by starting a long poetic work "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," rather than "Sing, Goddess, the wrath of Achilles." The modern sequence goes many-sidedly into who and where we are *subjectively;* it springs from the same pressures on sensibility that have caused our poets' experiments with shorter forms. It, too, is a response to the lyrical possibilities of language opened up by those pressures in times of cultural and psychological crisis, when all past certainties have many times been thrown chaotically into question. More successfully than individual short lyrics, however, it fulfills the need for encompassment of disparate and often powerfully opposed tonalities and energies.

It is striking that the presence of this genre, the outgrowth of poets' recognition and pursuit of "new thresholds, new anatomies" (Hart Crane's visionary exclamation in a somewhat different context), has gone unappreciated for the most part. It is especially striking that experts in the very works that represent it so overwhelmingly—such works as Walt

Whitman's *Song of Myself,* the first great unmistakable exemplar of the form, and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*—should have missed the fact that they were confronting something new *artistically,* a creation of the genius of modern poetry to be closed with only through the dynamics of individual works.

How could this have happened? One explanation, we believe, is the character of poetic evolution itself. It is easy to detect superficial signs of newness: departures from traditional rhyme and meter, the absence of explanatory or narrative links between images or other evocative centers, the use of a vocabulary and subject matter hitherto taboo or considered unsuitable for poetry. But it is another matter to see the bearing of such signs. If not simply disregarded, they are usually thought odd or peripheral, although they may mark vast shifts of psychic direction and of the axes of aesthetic sensibility. Consider that Whitman is still a problematic figure to many people, and that Romantic poetry is still disdained by certain "classicists" who, as William Butler Yeats noted, would hardly know where to turn should "their Catullus" suddenly appear in the flesh. But for all of us it is, by definition, hard to recognize other people's originality and even harder to give it our complete empathy.

There is a further turn on the problem: critical recalcitrance. One needs to recall how seldom a literary work is actually treated without preconceptions, as a work of art that will tell us (if we allow it to do so) what its living character is. Now a work of art is made by a human being and reflects his or her empirical life and psychological set and times and general stock of ideas—these are points hardly in question. But as a work of *art* it is a construct, improvised to hold—however precariously—some sort of equilibrium or balance against disorder: especially, against its own internal disorder. The tendency to annihilate the thing that's made to a mere thought, however complex, or to a biographical shade, however humanly interesting, is the great and dominant retrogression of our criticism. We stress this position not out of any desire to renew familiar polemics, but for the good practical reason that it must be constantly sustained and reconceived if we are to see what is going on aesthetically in a literary work.

Critical recalcitrance results from the fact that "rational" scholarship and criticism too easily ignore the improvisatory, tentative nature of artistic experience, which is initimately related to the volatile richness of ordinary human awareness. But poets cannot ignore it; it is the primary condition of their art, and the key to the need for a formal resolution that a poem presses to fulfill. As William Carlos Williams tells us at the start of his sequence *Paterson,* they must work "with the bare hands." Their only recourse is

> To make a start,
> out of particulars
> and make them general, rolling
> up the sum, by defective means—
> Sniffing the trees,
> just another dog
> among a lot of dogs. . . .

Thus the poet's task. Not every poet would put it in so deceptively humble a way. Yet even Yeats, with his aristocratic yearnings, wrote that the dreams and images of his poetry had their source in "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." Commonplaces of poetic consciousness, these perspectives are hardly reflected anywhere in our poetic criticism; yet one might expect critics to use all their antennae to detect a poem's essential effort and idiom and then—by whatever "defective means"—to follow through as best they could. If, for example, one finds apparent fragmentation in a poem, one should want to get in touch with the fragments, get the tonal character of each, and open oneself to their internal relationships. Or if one finds apparently "unpoetic" elements, one must be ready for a possible widening of poetic range and the discovery of unexpectedly valuable dimensions. In short, what is called for is a critical method and theory congruent with and reflexive from poetic practice—a poet's poetics.

Criticism, however, has been drifting into various autotelic and self-adoring postures, rarely allowing itself to be instructed by the art of writers. Hence the strange blindness to what counts: here, to the towering presence of a genre that has dominated the ambition of every great modern poet. ("Blindness" may be too gentle a word in an era in which a number of critics begin to discount the value of artistic achievement altogether.) A cultivated empathy with the dynamic life of works can encourage the ability to discern new organic forms and aesthetic tendencies. Artistic change, in response to cultural change, goes on all the time independently of a critic's ability to recognize it. But the critic can at least try to be open to the most telling art, to its idiosyncratic energy and character, to the austere, driven intensity that Rebecca West named the "beautiful stark bride of Blake." The alerted state that devotion to such a modern muse entails draws language into discovery. Obviously the process precedes conscious formulation. By the same token, it leads to the only kind of "experimentation" that matters in art.

The whole development of the modern sequence, inseparable from that of modern poetry, has involved this sort of inevitable yet unformulated experimentation. These sequences have been written in the spirit

of our changed world, meeting the needs of sensibilities impatient with posturing and keyed to rigorous emotional accuracy. Of course it is sheer dogmatism to rule out any form or genre as obsolete ("the novel is dead"), and it is always possible that some genius will find a way of writing a long, continuous narrative poem or logically or thematically developed one that will satisfy the most knowledgeable and sensitized of contemporary readers. But a fatal ennui with such efforts does seem to have set in, and not even the gifts of a poet as truly remarkable as Wallace Stevens have been able to achieve more than a momentary, suspect remission.

Like the first modulations toward the writing of sequences, critical inklings of the major direction of modern practice came early and piecemeal and—naturally—from poets. The most notable is Poe's remarkable insight in his 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (developed more fully in "The Poetic Principle" shortly afterwards):

> What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. For this reason, at least one half of the "Paradise Lost" is essentially prose—a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions—the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect.[1]

Scholars in their serried ranks (Miltonists especially) have wittily or somberly demolished Poe's logic here, to their own satisfaction. What they have not dealt with is his unerring pointing of the new direction of sensibility. Poe may have been mistaken in any given assertion, but he was dead right in what is after all his essential position: that the traditional ways to structure the long poem no longer satisfy the modern poet.

A poem depends for its life neither on continuous narration nor on developed argument but on a progression of specific qualities and intensities of emotionally and sensuously charged awareness. A successful long poem, and the modern sequence pre-eminently, is made up of such centers of intensity. Its structure resides in the felt relationships among

1. James A. Harrison, ed., *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: 1902), XIV, 195–96. An interesting precedent for these ideas may be found in John Stuart Mill's essay "Alfred de Vigny" (1838), in his *Dissertations and Discussions* (London: 1867—second edition), I, 326–27. Mill holds it "impossible that a feeling so intense as to require a more rhythmical cadence than that of eloquent prose, should sustain itself at highest elevation for long together."

them. Narration and argument are useful poetically only as they provide certain kinds of dynamic structuring of the centers of intensity and tones—of suspense, expectation, thoughtfulness, or whatever—to go with them (Poe's "succession" of "brief poetical effects"). Chronological and rational ordering are but two among many possible structural devices subsumed in a work's lyrical structure. The problem cannot be solved by a debate over *Paradise Lost*. It is a matter of the fundamental character of lyrical structure: a way of making and viewing poetic constructs that concentrates on something other than logical and narrative and thematic links.

We shall return to the basic considerations of lyrical structure shortly. We should point out here that it is intimately related to the general conception of an organic rather than a mechanical approach to structure that has been with us for a long time, particularly in reference to the less subtle formal characteristics of a work—its rhyme scheme or stanza form or adherence to certain dramatic "laws." The sources of ideas about organic form lie in antiquity; in modern times they come to us by way of German and English Romantic theory, epitomized in Coleridge's defense of Shakespeare against the notion that he was a wild, undisciplined genius, "a sort of African nature, fertile in beautiful monsters." Borrowing his language directly from one of A. W. Schlegel's *Dramatic Lectures*, Coleridge said that such a mistake arises when we confound

> mechanic regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material . . . The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such the form.[2]

In the United States the first transmitter of the idea of organic form was Emerson. His essay "The Poet," published two years before Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," opened directly on the great poetry to come. Emerson's most striking formulation was derived from European ideas but absolutely original in its call for artistic exploration: our

2. Terence Hawkes, ed., *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 68. Coleridge's *Shakespeare Lectures*, published in 1818, were delivered between 1808 and 1814. The passage in question (from Coleridge's 1808 lecture notes) uses A. W. Schlegel's distinction between "*mechanische*" and "*organische*" form and comes close to exact translation. See Schlegel's *Über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (Heidelberg: 1817—second edition), III, p. 8. For bibliographical guidance to the Schlegel text and to the Mill reference in the previous note we are indebted to René Wellek's *A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), II, pp. 48, 354, and 359, and III (1965), pp. 135 and 315–16.

poets must find the form in which to "chaunt our own times and social circumstances." He understood the necessity for loosening the grip of tight, conventional formal structures. Although he—as a poet—lacked the nervy genius and the powerful pressures to make a reckless break himself, he helped create a climate less hostile to experiment than before. Charles Olson's 1959 pronouncement, echoing Robert Creeley, that "form is never more than an extension of content" was preceded by 115 years in Emerson's vivid and elegant declaration:

> For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. . . . The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.

It was—of course, it *would* be—an embarrassing and perhaps disreputable poet like Whitman who would respond to this thrilling challenge. It couldn't be the personally and poetically inhibited Emerson, who entertained the most daring ideas but whose verbal behavior was modest and respectable. Whitman's *Song of Myself* is the first realized modern poetic sequence, to be followed by *Calamus* and *Drum-Taps* as his other prime contributions to the genre. And not far from this poetic epicenter was the virtually secret work of the great American "underground" poet, Emily Dickinson, mistress of a realm of confessional lyricism whose volcanic beauty did not erupt into general view until well after her death. Her fascicles—the hand-threaded packets (or booklets) in which many of her most powerful poems are arranged—belong in any consideration of the modern sequence, despite their erratic success as integrated works of art.

We shall return to Whitman and Dickinson, as pioneers in the art of the sequence, in our next chapters. The genre's full flourishing, however, came only in the 1920s, with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's early cantos and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Yeats's Irish Civil War sequences, Crane's "Voyages," and Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Since that time, the outstanding poets writing in English have used the sequence to accommodate the complexities and passions of contemporary experience. When we speak of this dominating form we do not forget that any individual sequence has, in Emerson's words, its own "architecture." There are, for instance, obvious differences among the works just named and among the others we shall adduce, such as Crane's *The Bridge*, Williams's *Paterson*, Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Olson's *The Maximus Poems*,

Ramon Guthrie's *Maximum Security Ward*, Austin Clarke's *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, Ted Hughes's *Crow*, and Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*. These are works of varied quality, but all are high points in their authors' development and serious efforts within the genre: neither "long poem" nor "linked series" but "sequence." They exemplify a compelling process, the result of sheer, psychically powerful need on each poet's part to mobilize and give direction to otherwise scattered energies.

For reasons we have earlier suggested, we cannot assume general knowledge of the nature and achievement of this new genre. Nor can we assume general knowledge of the critical approach, emphasizing lyrical structure (but not confining that term to the short lyric poem), necessary for insight into the character of the sequence—its balancings of stress and interplay among its centers of passionate preoccupation. Indeed, this vital structuring principle in poetry has been almost as neglected as its major modern genre.

The modern sequence, then, is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope. (The intimate character, the strong sense we have of a highly subjective impulse of lyrical energy at work, makes it helpful to refer to the poem's "speaker" or "protagonist." Since this usage is more a convenience of critical discourse, very easily misleading, than a key to aesthetic structure, we must remember that we are not dealing with a literal speech or monologue or poeticized discourse but with something like a piece of music.) The intimate, self-conscious tonality is often present from the very start: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," "Bring me to the blasted oak," "April is the cruellest month," "So name her Vivian. I, scarecrow Merlin." It establishes an initial poetic pitch more than a theme or character. The pitch may change; so may the level of diction, the points of reference, and the contexts of evocation. The poem creates its own dynamics, in fact, whether or not it has a specified dramatic speaker.

Yet a dramatic speaker is often its *vehicle*, not controlling its movement but frequently presented as under a pressure felt as tragic. We may be confronted by a speaker *in extremis*. A piercing example is the mortal agony of Guthrie's "Today Is Friday" in *Maximum Security Ward*:

> You could taste it being fed intravenously through a
> skein of tubes into your most plausible dreams
> It was happening It was going on as suavely

as if it were a rank of drop-forges
smashing diamonds to dust as fast as
they could be fed to them.

Or, in a less acutely personal key of suffering but still in the realm of tragedy, the poem is oppressed by what Delmore Schwartz called "the burden of consciousness," the alienated music of "civilization and its discontents." Yeats gives us many instances, as in "The Stare's Nest by My Window"—part of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and, in its way, not really less desperate than Guthrie's lines:

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact can be discerned:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;
Some fourteen days of civil war;
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

Seeking to locate the elements of its oppressed yet volatile state, the associative pressure in such works stirs up sunken dimensions of consciousness and memory from the depths, moving through confusions and ambiguities towards a precarious balance. The process of association and of modulation among shifting intensities is both psychological and cultural in its contexts of reference. It involves the feeling of obsolescence, the need to recover an identifying past. Here enters the heroic or epic aspect of the sequence: its effort to pit primal values and personal, historical, and artistic memory or vision against anomie and desolation. Thus, Guthrie's title ("Today Is Friday") refers distantly to the Crucifixion, and Yeats powerfully suggests natural values to be clung to in the face of war's perversity. Similarly, Bunting and Clarke bring moments of secure childhood bliss into their sequences to help counteract psychological or moral distress; Hughes invents a drastic and cynical Creation "myth" that mocks and parodies the Bible but also suggests a source of strength in the mere will to survive (epitomized negatively in the appalled poem "That Moment" and in minimally positive terms in "Littleblood"); and Bunting, Williams, David Jones, and others use regional history and dialect to make a music of affirmation of identity.

In short, the modern sequence has evolved out of a serious need for an encompassing poetry, one completely involved with what our lives really mean subjectively. That need reflects the ultimate pressure on modern sensibility to understand itself and to regain what Olson called the "human universe." The pressure, right or wrong, is to reconceive reality in humanly reassuring ways rather than in chillingly impersonal ones. It is felt inescapably by poets, even when they hardly realize why they write as they do, as a pressure to remember and deepen their sense of our human reality while rejecting any hubristic, anthropomorphic self-deception. (See Hart Crane's poem "To Brooklyn Bridge" for a very pure projection of this pressure.) The struggle against depression and loss of morale in this context was waged powerfully by great poets in the past in work like Donne's "A Nocturnall upon St. Lucie's Day," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," and Tennyson's *Maud: A Monodrama*. These titles, in their chronological order, will suggest that certain pressures are a constant, cutting across differences of time and poetic genre. At the same time, the poems themselves may suggest an increasing emphasis, as poetry approaches its modern phase, on a complex music of feeling involving a number of radiant centers, progressively liberated from a narrative or thematic framework.

2. Lyrical Structure and the Genius of Modern Poetry

Here we must attempt a few basic observations on this liberated lyrical structure. Let's say, first, that *its object is neither to resolve a problem nor to conclude an action but to achieve the keenest, most open realization possible*. This realization is, naturally, rooted in a work's initial pressures but goes beyond them in scope. By initial pressures we mean the human occasion for the poem, its set of awareness, its situation (the felt reality within the poem), its condition of sensuous or emotional apprehension—whatever constitutes an emotional center energizing the poem, which moves towards a state of equilibrium that balances, resolves, or encompasses these pressures.

This state of equilibrium is generally a momentary one, among varied and volatile states of feeling, awareness, and active emotional or intellectual discovery. We may call it an equilibrium among affects in process. It provides a sense of encompassment or transcendence, because the poem has, as it were, reached a height of responsiveness to all pressures acting on it. The ability to hold in balance conflicting and logically irreconcilable energies, and to identify their presence and intensity, is felt as mastery over contradiction, mastery by poetic conversion into a pattern of unruly but mobilized affects.

It follows that the higher the work's level of responsiveness, and the more manifold the pressures acting on it yet held in balance, the more

satisfying the lyrical structure will be and the more powerful the illusion of transcendence. A short, concentrated poem, it is true, may also synthesize complexly or subtly related tonalities despite its surface simplicity:

> Westron winde, when will thou blow,
> The smalle raine downe can raine?
> Crist, if my love wer in my armis,
> And I in my bed againe.

The whole of this little song is charged with longing, yet each line resonates on its own. The first line—an impatient wish, whatever the reason, for a change in the weather—is followed by the ambiguously related vision of the "smalle raine," with a certain gentle ardor accompanying both lines. Then comes the expletive, and the song swells into a lover's frustrated outburst.

But we are here primarily concerned with poems on a larger scale, in which such a piece as "Westron Winde," though lovely and self-contained, might form a single affect. It is instructive to consider a long poem like Browning's magnificent "The Englishman in Italy"—292 lines in five unnumbered sections—as a model of lyrical structure. The brief opening and close provide a dramatic and intellectual frame. The middle 273 lines are so richly loaded with intertwined sensuous effects, gathering and multiplying from moment to moment, that the poem seems an epic of riotous openness. For the cultivated "Englishman" who is the vehicle of the poem's dynamics, the daily world of Italian life in the country region outside Sorrento is all splendor and surprise. In the twelve-line opening section we see him filled with solicitude for little Fortù, who is frightened by the sirocco:

> Fortù, Fortù, my beloved one,
> Sit here by my side,
> On my knees put up both little feet!
> I was sure, if I tried,
> I could make you laugh spite of Scirocco.
> Now, open your eyes,
> Let me keep you amused till he vanish
> In black from the skies,
> With telling my memories over
> As you tell your beads;
> All the Plain saw me gather, I garland
> —The flowers or the weeds.

To amuse the child, the speaker spins out a vivid account of his adventures in observation. The long second section (116 lines) is a continuous explosion of the senses that begins with an exclamation and continues in high excitement and with some unsqueamish whimsy:

> Time for rain! for your long hot dry Autumn
> Had net-worked with brown
> The white skin of each grape on the bunches,
> Marked like a quail's crown,
> Those creatures you make such account of,
> Whose heads,—speckled white
> Over brown like a great spider's back,
> As I told you last night,—
> Your mother bites off for her supper.
> Red-ripe as could be,
> Pomegranates were chapping and splitting
> In halves on the tree . . .

From these passages (the first strophe and the next twelve lines of the poem) we can see much of the whole poem's quality. The exuberance of all that is to come is foreshadowed here in the tones of robustly active kindness and in the eagerness to pour out fresh "memories" that are at once compared to a rosary and a garland. This comparison is an active one, full of word-play—with *telling* beads and with *making* a garland. (The word "garland" is a verb here.) The rhythmic movement is contained within the simple rhyme scheme *xaxaxbxb* . . ., and the meter sustains the entranced tone and overflowing spirits by its flexible energy—alternating trimeter and dimeter lines in a mixture of iambic and anapestic, with feminine endings for most of the longer lines. The form allows for luxurious expansiveness while militating against mere prolixity.

"The Englishman in Italy" is such a delight one could spend pages over it. But our point here is primarily to suggest the kind of dynamics, and considerations of formal analysis, involved in lyrical structure: the shifting of affects and the means of modulation as the poem changes key. The 100-line third section, as glorious though not as wild in its detail as the second, takes us on a muleback journey to the top of a neighboring hill. The arrival may be compared to moments of buoyant exultation, tempered by surprise and awe, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. From all the swarmingly physical, teeming, appetite-filled life on the plain below we rise, as on the higher reaches of the Purgatorial Mount—but not self-importantly, for the description of the mule provides a humorously delicate touch:

> Over all trod my mule with the caution
> Of gleaners o'er sheaves,

Still, foot after foot like a lady,
  Till, round after round,
He climbed to the top of Calvano,
  And God's own profound
Was above me, and round me the mountains,
  And under, the sea,
And within me my heart to bear witness
  What was and shall be.,
Oh, heaven and the terrible crystal!
  No rampart excludes
Your eye from the life to be lived
  In the blue solitudes.

The sudden leap into the language of revelatory terror is a triumph of virtuosity, one that gave every sort of clue to later poets. It is comparable to the passages in Browning's *Sordello* (Book One, lines 374–84 and 392–439) that Pound reprints in his *ABC of Reading* and that anticipate the sharper breaks of tonality in the *Cantos*. The narrative context that Browning provides is sloughed off in Pound's writing, which operates by juxtaposition without the inhibition of surface continuity. Early and late—say in the shift from the hell-scene to the sudden paradisal vision in Canto 16; and from the morass of associations, compounded of immediate prison-camp details, political outbursts, bits of rueful memory, and random items, to the sustained, increasingly exquisite Dionysian hymn that rises from the morass in Canto 79—Pound has made brilliant use of this method adapted from Browning. The leap, in the passage just quoted, to the images of "heaven and the terrible crystal" and of "the life to be lived / In the blue solitudes" is of the same order (in the intrinsic, rather than the overt poem) as Pound's leaps of focus and affect, or Yeats's sudden "The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven" in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." In "The Englishman in Italy" itself it prepares us for another miraculous shift at the heights, again anticipating Pound's method, that brings us some lines later into the mythical realm of Ulysses and the Sirens.

It also, however, introduces between these passages a strange element of hubris, from which perspective the ordinary folk below seem contemptible. An unexpected arrogance, foreshadowing the poem's amused condescension toward the end, intrudes on the tone of high solitude so thrillingly reached. By contrast the plains below are now seen as "soft" and "cowering"—"a sensual and timorous beauty" that is "how fair! but a slave." Thus we are prepared for the descent, which, when its moment comes, is so charmingly managed in the 57-line fourth section that one forgets the withering tone in the interim. But it returns. The sirocco has spent itself, and the child is directed to all the activities people have resumed—just a matter of looking out the window and seeing

the gypsy, "our tinker and smith," all set up for his work and keeping his eye on the mischievous urchins all around, and the whole village preparing for the Feast of the Rosary's Virgin, and the scaffold ready for the musicians—

All the fiddlers and fifers and drummers
  And trumpeters bold,
Not afraid of Bellini nor Auber—

and the fireworks laid out to be "religiously popped" when the "flaxen wigged Image" of the Virgin is carried in.—And so we have moved from protective concern to sheer life-zest to transported exaltation to responsive appreciation, at once exuberant and nastily snobbish, of the villagers' noisy bustle of religious celebration. Then, after a quick return to the world of cheerfully brutal earthy things ("a scorpion with wide angry nippers"), the poem ends in a seven-line section contrasting all this blazing life with England's repressive atmosphere. Specifically, the ending concerns the reactionary resistance to abolishing the Corn Laws—the politically black British "Scirocco," in Browning's metaphor.

The balance of affects—radiant tonal centers of specific qualities, and intensities, of emotionally and sensuously charged awareness—in Browning's poem provides the germ of how a sequence works. It precisely indicates the nature of lyrical structure, which is based on dynamics: the succession and interaction of units of affect. (We of course assume the work of a real poet, by which we mean someone superbly gifted in creating affects and building them into an organic structure.) The relevant questions are simple: What are the successive affects, and what poetic resources have been used to create them? is there a cumulative, psychologically satisfying curve of movement? is there sufficient variety to make for a rich and complex experience? Lyrical structure, incidentally, is by no means restricted to poems. It is a characteristic of all literary genres: plays, novels, short stories, sermons, speeches, even prose exposition. It is, precisely, the concrete aesthetic dimension of any piece of verbal expression. We are here deliberately oversimplifying what, in practice, makes for some subtle and demanding problems of evaluation, but the downright simplicities are essential to bring criticism in direct alignment with the literature it is concerned with.

Once the clarification of a work's progression of affects, its *dynamics* or curve of movement, has been accomplished, then all sorts of extrinsic considerations may be brought to bear, such as the pressures exerted on the lyrical structure by personal experience, historical events, poetic influence, myth and religion, psychoanalytical theory, or whatever. All such considerations are relevant if they can be shown to be shaping

forces within the work's movement and not, under the guise of poetic criticism, pursued for their own sakes.

We have stressed an approach to poetry that is not only analogous to the study of music but almost identical with it. Aaron Copland, in his essay "The Composer in Industrial America," could be a poet speaking of his art:

> What, after all, do I put down when I put down notes? I put down a reflection of emotional states: feelings, perceptions, imaginings, intuitions. An emotional state, as I use the term, is compounded of everything we are: our background, our environment, our convictions.

The composer's "emotional state," defined thus broadly, is a quality of his music similar to what we mean by a poetic affect—although, putting the matter more rigorously, we would say that a passage *presents* the affect rather than *reflecting* it. Further, Copland says that whatever "meaning" music has resides precisely in the particularizing of these "fluent emotional states." Just because it "particularizes and makes actual," art opens onto these states—the subjective "meaning" of the human condition. The "worlds of feeling" that musical themes project make up the "expressive plane" in music, which Copland sharply distinguishes from the "sheerly sensuous" and "sheerly musical" planes. The expressive plane, he says in "How We Listen," is the heart of the musical experience and should be the first concern of performers. "Professional musicians . . . often fall into the error of becoming so engrossed with their arpeggios and staccatos that they forget the deeper aspects of the music they are performing."

Here Copland's professional musicians are very much like those trained readers of poetry—whether students, professors, or critics—who likewise ignore the heart of artistic experience. They too forget that the "very nature" of poetry, as of music, is "to give us the essence of experience transfused and heightened and expressed in such fashion that we may contemplate it at the same instant that we are swayed by it." In music that "essence of experience" lies in the progression of themes; in poetry it resides in the progression of affects within the work's lyrical structure.

Now *Song of Myself* can be considered the first modern poetic sequence because it is the first poetic work of considerable length whose ordering is overridingly lyrical. It is not bound by thematic, philosophical, or formal conventions in the way that so many earlier so-called "sequences" were—Elizabethan sonnet sequences in particular—or in the way that more varied works such as Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* or Herbert's *The Temple* were. *Song of Myself* involves a more sustained

curve of movement than these or than such more nearly contemporary works as Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Nor is it like any exactly contemporary British work. Thus Whitman may be passionately concerned with death and immortality ("themes" in an abstractly topical rather than a musical sense); but the whole character of his sequence is entirely different, say, from that of *In Memoriam*. Tennyson's poem is intellectually far more self-conscious and at times attempts to set philosophical discussion and resolution to rhyme and meter. Even in *Maud*, published the same year as *Song of Myself*, Tennyson felt the need to set up a narrative-dramatic frame to justify his real structure: the juxtaposition of states of mind so intense they went beyond what his society considered normal. But *Song of Myself* is structured—on the surface as well as in its innermost life—neither to resolve a problem nor to conclude an action but to evoke the keenest, most open realization possible. As far as we know, only Dickinson was working along the same lines.

It may strike some readers as curious or naïve to speak of the "genius" of modern poetry, and especially to link it with the terms "heroic" and "epic" and with Coleridge's phrase "organic unity." Very serious people are now calling literature obsolete and seeking to discharge its mysteries along with its traditions and its distinction as art. Indeed, there is a strong tendency to deny the validity of both "art" and "distinction." Yet we must insist—whatever the theoretical attractions of exalting intellectual systems and ennui-generated positions over living works—that the individual work of genius is our one touchstone of value in the arts. As for "the genius of modern poetry," we refer to the stripping-away process, or liberation of sensibility, that marks the evolution of modern art. We cannot attribute the process to any one person or movement; it is a cultural phenomenon, a reflex of deep historical change. Poetry has, in a famous phrase, wrung the neck of rhetoric—that is, of "poetic" attitudinizing, sentimentality, and religious or philosophical preaching. It has sloughed off any notion that it is primarily a medium for story-tellers and moralists. Ideas, dramatic situations, narrative suspense—these have by no means disappeared from poetry, any more than has the sonnet or iambic pentameter or any other mode developed in the past. All have their uses. But the real poem, its dynamics always active beneath the surface structure of poems in any age, has come into its own.

As a result, the poet is now free to let his or her poem present itself directly in its own right and to create a movement, reversible and always in flux, of vital immediacies. Lyrical structure as we have described it is improvisatory but not undisciplined. Its rigor lies in the play of tonal depths and shadings and shiftings, grounded in human intensities but not translatable into general ideas or empirical problems and

solutions. Those human intensities are centered in moments of realization, shared in life and art, in which aesthetic conversion becomes possible. *Language,* with all its traditions and evocative possibilities, connects with the complex of human awareness in action and takes over from it. Poetic phrasing and structuring are a phase of our human lives (a reflex, as we have noted) that enables us to reorient, reassemble, and explore felt meanings and imagined states with but one responsibility: faithfulness to our most candid perceptions and to the implications of language. The most developed poets have clarified these simple principles in their practice and thus have revolutionized the art of poetry. The climactic development in the revolution is the modern sequence, still in process of formation.

3. Earlier Models: Shakespeare and Tennyson

We are convinced that this development was always implicit in the nature of poetic structure. The sonnet sequences of the distant past—say those of Petrarch or of Shakespeare—suggest a driving emotional pressure toward a balanced resolution; but they tend to be more successful in individual poems or very small clusters of poems than in their movement as a whole. For one thing, the formal redundancy—Shakespeare's sequence contains 154 sonnets—militates against either the poet's or the reader's seeing the whole work in terms of different major units of affect. Shakespeare's greatness as a poet reveals itself not in the unfolding of the sequence but in the isolated poems and clusters we have mentioned. There are magnificent lines and passages throughout, but scarcely twenty-five of the sonnets might be called outstanding as complete poems. Shakespearean scholarship has hardly distinguished itself in arguing this or that possible order of the poems. The chief attempts have been to arrange them thematically and in order of composition. J. Dover Wilson is characteristic, dividing them into eight basic groupings with a supposed autobiographical bearing: "The Marriage Sonnets," "The Coming of Love," "The Poet Goes a Journey," "Liaison Sonnets," "The Rival Poet," "Farewell Sonnets," "To the Dark Woman," and "Independent Sonnets" (the last heading being a desperate effort to deal with, but not account for, poems that cannot easily be categorized).

Looking at the order of the sonnets in Wilson's scheme and trying to conjecture what their actual dynamics might be, one does feel a modulation toward an actual lyric structure: from a light overture of involvement (the somewhat absurd campaign to persuade a young man to marry and beget children), to an unfolding of love (in whatever sense), to a vaguely introduced unhappiness at separation, to bitter misery at betrayal and neglect, and to renunciation—and then follows a parallel but briefer curve of poems revolving about an unfaithful mistress. But the undifferentiated form of *The Sonnets,* its pointless gaps in development, the heavy presence of its more boring poems, and its general unevenness make of it a very weak *sequence* no matter how the ordering is shuffled. The artistic problem is compounded by the way Shakespeare often throws away the endings of sonnets that begin superbly, just as he often throws away entire poems. C. S. Lewis's claim that *The Sonnets* as a whole constitutes "the supreme love-poetry of the world" is heartwarming but artistically almost meaningless. E. K. Chambers's assertion that the order of the poems is "an autobiographical one, following the ups and downs of an emotional relationship," is not much better either as description or evaluation. Few modern poets have equaled the power of the best of Shakespeare's sonnets, but many have created more successful sequences. (Incidentally, although we have no space to develop the point here, Shakespeare's plays are far truer forerunners of the modern sequence than *The Sonnets* or any other traditional sonnet-sequence. If we read *King Lear,* for instance, in this perspective—as a succession of variously charged affective units—the dynamics of a sequence is implicit in its movement.)

Among British poems of power in the last century, Tennyson's *Maud* may come the closest to the modern sequence of any of the works that do not quite break free of subservience to a plot line. It is at the opposite extreme from the Elizabethan sonnet-sequence, which was too redundant and theme-ridden to provide a genuine dynamics. The music of each sonnet was an isolated affair; at best one might find a few poems, more or less in the same key, driven by a unifying impulse and energy, and perhaps a few related shifts of tonal nuance and contrast as well. *Maud*'s structure, though reined-in by its character as a sustained dramatic monologue in several major movements—"the history," Tennyson said, "of a morbid poetic soul under the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age"—is beautifully articulated in its dynamics.

Maud is at the very meeting point of long poem and sequence. True, its narrative continuity prevents release into the freest play of relationship among centers of feeling and awareness. It presents an unfolding love story, shot through with melodrama and fused with a tale of social ruthlessness, hatred, and violence. As a sort of verse-novel (one would have to qualify this term considerably, however), it has a touch of *The Sorrows of Werther* but in some ways approaches the profound and ironic complexities of *The Sentimental Education* and *The Magic Mountain.* Yet Tennyson attempted something very like a modern sequence in the succession of tonalities and degrees of intensity, and the prosodic variety, of the twenty-eight separate poems making up his "monodrama"

(twenty-two in Part I, five in Part II, and one in Part III: a slow accumulation of manifold affects, then a plunge into the world of guilt, remorse, and madness, and then a final leap of self-sacrificial patriotic idealism that serves as a desperately makeshift effort at self-redemption). The work's ultimate emphasis, bringing it close to the great modern sequences despite its clankingly restrictive armor of plot, is on the psychological pressures within its cyclothymic and perhaps paranoid protagonist. He is *Maud*'s single overt voice, and his "morbid" state provides a rationale for its volatile leaps of affect.

For Tennyson's contemporaries such a rationale would have been indispensable. As it is, *Maud* still disturbs many readers in spite of the façade of a speaking character overloaded with carefully spelled-out motives. It is obvious that the fevered pitch of feeling and unpredictable mood-shifts are hardly mere fictional contrivance, and even recent critics instinctively shy away from the exposure of raw private intensities and pressures bursting through the fictional mask.[3] Even as late as 1963 a British critic and poet as astute and gifted as John Heath-Stubbs could say that *Maud* is "marred by a certain hysterical lack of control" (a position also taken by T. S. Eliot—last of the true Victorians—in his essay on *In Memoriam*). This, 108 years after both *Maud* and *Leaves of Grass* and forty-one years after *The Waste Land*! Thus does critical theory lag behind poetic practice, even in our all-knowing day and even when the critic is someone who really knows better. The suggestion that "hysterical lack of control" is no fit ground for poetry is objectionable here on several important grounds. Apart from the faintly moralistic implication that the artist must always keep a stiff upper lip, the phrase confuses the protagonist's condition in *Maud* with the character of the work itself. Whatever its faults, *Maud*'s original force derives from its artistic isolation of the emotional energies supposedly driving the protagonist, energies that have welled up in Tennyson's own psyche in such a way as to demand conversion into poetic process and structure. And *Maud* deploys these converted energies into a carefully articulated structure, by means of highly sophisticated skills. Thus Tennyson met the challenge of pressures demanding enough and intractable enough to be worthy of great artistic effort.

The major section of *Maud* is Part I, whose twenty-two poems make up almost four-fifths of the whole. Taken by itself this part, heavy though it is with fictional elements, would almost be a true sequence. Nothing could be more beautifully controlled than the way it moves, from the

3. Tennyson's own use of "morbid" to explain his protagonist's thoughts and behavior is a reflex of this circumstance. But he *was* a master of "morbid" poetry—in the sense of ability to cope with depressive awareness—and as such has provided a model for moderns like Yeats, Eliot, Bunting, and Kinnell.

bitterly alienated mood at the start to the anticipatory ecstasy at the end. Nor is this movement a simple one. There are counternotes all along the way—for instance, the warm ray of possible delight introduced near the end of the first poem and the darker notes amid the Keatsian joy of the closing one. The movement involves shifts of *proportion*. The ratio of harsher and more joyous affects (as well as, say, of more violent and gentler or more fearful ones, and of degrees of intensity), marked by many subtle modulations and lyric turns, is never quite the same at any two points along the way. The exploratory emotional search, with its dynamic juxtapositions, does constitute a potential sequence within the "monodrama."

We must be as clear as possible about the aesthetic conversion involved when we speak of "bitterness" or "joy" or "emotional search" in a poem. This is not a matter of rejecting the presence of the author's own empirical feelings and ideas but of seeing that they are initial pressures on the poem without determining its character as an artistic construct in language. The distinction explains itself as soon as we concentrate on a poem's particular language and form instead of speaking more generally. Take the opening quatrain of *Maud*:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood;
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, whatever is ask'd her, answers "Death."

The succession of images in the context of speech-tone and rhythmic arrangement defines itself intrinsically: an affect of horror and fear cumulative in force. This affect, naturally, is moving in a space of time, between "I hate" and "Death," that is an echo-chamber of patterned elements. After the abrupt personal assertion of the first line, in which the words "hate" and "dreadful," like a burst of offstage music, prepare us for what is to come, an equally abrupt visual metaphor personifies the "dreadful hollow" as a head whose lips drip blood and out of which the word "Death" oracularly echoes "whatever" question might be asked. The second and third lines present a figure with no exact referent save its own suggestions of a continuous revulsion and "horror," an endlessly bleeding wound of sensibility. The fourth line, personifying the inescapable death-enmeshment of the scene, is again psychologically rather than literally indicative. So we can respond to the quatrain's gathering movement, from its initial private outcry through its fierce surrealist images, to its vision of a primeval scene of blood and personified doom.

One reason the quatrain is so powerful is its succession of hexameter lines, unusually long lines for English verse and made all the more so

in the first three because each is sustained without an internal break. These are followed by the climactically arranged fourth line with its two caesuras. The second and third lines, crammed with imagery of grisly bleeding that recalls scenes of Dantean agony, are relentless in their increasingly appalled vision. The fourth line presents an aural reflex of this vision, a hideously reverberating monotone. Intellectually, it is as if the pondering mind had buckled under pressure and could only repeat the one death-message—brokenly, as the two caesuras indicate. Even the inexact rhymes sustain the affect of horror and fear. The whole impact of the quatrain falls heavily on the words "blood" and "Death," without any *facile* echo of sounds.

Compare the quatrain with this stanza that opens the final poem in Part I:

> Come into the garden, Maud,
> For the black bat, night, has flown,
> Come into the garden, Maud,
> I am here at the gate alone;
> And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
> And the musk of the rose is blown.

The tone of the final poem (deservedly one of our famous love-poems) is well represented in this stanza. It mingles passion and sensuous, joyous arousal with faintly morbid notes, matching the intensity and the authority of the opening quatrain of *Maud* though very different in affect. The same extremely heightened state of sensibility is present, but not the horror. The short lines, the refrain-like repetition in the first and third lines, the emphatically musical exact rhymes, the graceful expansion and then contraction in the two closing lines, and the associations of dawn and garden fragrances and a lover's insistent calling—all these elements make for an atmosphere that is the exquisite opposite of horror. In isolating these opposed yet related affects of the two passages, we see that we can become alert to them and characterize them but cannot *translate* them. Like the echo in the quatrain, they reflect meanings but have their own reality.

Because it has so many such centers of lyrical self-containment and naked self-awareness, Tennyson's *Maud* comes nearer to the modern sequence than his extended philosophical elegy, *In Memoriam*, which one would ordinarily think of first as a possible forerunner. It is certainly evident from these two brilliant improvisations that Tennyson was on his way toward the open road that Whitman discovered. But *In Memoriam* is more like an Elizabethan sequence than *Maud*. Despite many lyric virtues, it is weighed down by its endless succession of uniform

stanzas (tetrameter quatrains rhyming *abba*) and dominantly meditative tone, and by the redundancies one stumbles over in the long course of its 131 poems written during sixteen years (1833–49). It is less a sequence than it might have been, too, because of the steadily developing discursive argument and continuous account of a spiritual struggle.

This is to oversimplify. We are speaking of nothing less than a very moving work brought to birth because of the shock of an intimate friend's early death, the acute sense of life's bleakness when devoid of their finely affectionate relationship, and the consequent challenge to idealism and religious faith. Not a single poem is without its touch of quickened or deepened music, often startlingly poignant, in the midst of the more usual gravely somber intonations. Typical of such moments are the lines "O Sorrow, cruel fellowship" (III), "And, thy dark freight, a vanish'd life" (X), "How fares it with the happy dead?" (XLIV), and "Never morning wore / To evening, but some heart did break" (VI). In a few piercing instances, too, a whole poem breaks out of the meditative mode and stands as a touchstone of the deepest feelings animating the whole of *In Memoriam*. One thinks at once of certain poems in particular—notably, Poems VII ("Dark house, by which once more I stand"), XI ("Calm is the morn without a sound"), CVI ("Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky"), and CXIX ("Doors, where my heart was used to beat"). Other poems, more quietly or delicately alive in texture, contribute to the rich lyrical matrix. They provide an essential field of emotive reference that wards off the danger of tedious and lugubrious semi-profound philosophizing which accompanies an undertaking of this sort, much as some of Pound's more purely lyrical cantos counteract the rhetorically driven ones that surround them.

There is no question of *In Memoriam*'s place in the pantheon of English verse, although T. S. Eliot's praise ("never monotony or repetition") is subject to further discussion—as is his dispraise of *Maud* for its "effect of feeble violence . . . the result of a fundamental error of form." Eliot saw the problem of *Maud* as the poet's failure to commit himself to a clear choice between dramatic and lyric form. We would suggest that the issue was different: a struggle to recover the dramatic immediacy underlying lyrical structure—just the one thing lacking in the earlier *In Memoriam*, which Eliot describes with winning sympathy but not altogether accurately:

> It is unique: it is a long poem made by putting together lyrics, which have only the unity and continuity of a diary, the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself. It is a diary of which we have to read every word.

Eliot wrote his essay "In Memoriam" (originally an introduction to an edition of Tennyson's poems) in 1936, long after he had left *The Waste Land* behind him. That poem directly confronts the same artistic challenge Tennyson deals with in *Maud:* to project and relate different internal states with the greatest possible immediacy. The "peculiarity" of *Maud,* Tennyson observed, "is that different phases of passion in one person take the place of different characters." The methods of the two poets are certainly very unalike; yet it is reasonable to see a direct continuity in their work, with one great distinction. Eliot has shed narrative, discursive, and dramatic continuity and is free to use every possible mode presentatively. That was in 1922. But by 1936 Eliot's writing was far closer than it had once been to the spirit of *In Memoriam* and growing ever more distant from the nerve-end exacerbations of his own earlier work, let alone *Maud.* The year of the Tennyson essay was the year that Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909–35* appeared, containing "Burnt Norton" and the flatly discursive and liturgical "Choruses from 'The Rock.' " Compared with the "Choruses," even the lyrically most intractable passages of *In Memoriam* are all quicksilver and fire.

Be all that as it may, with Tennyson we are at the borders of the modern sequence. As for *In Memoriam,* Eliot's comment has enough validity to suggest its genuine artistic significance. In it, Tennyson's tremendous virtuosity blends with the whole past poetic tradition from Shakespeare to Landor and Keats and many another. We hear *their* magic, assimilated to Tennyson's own. It is also striking how we hear the music of future poetry as well, from characteristic notes of Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyât* (which would appear just a few years later) to Yeats and Eliot. However overloaded, conventional, repetitive, and occasionally pontifical, *In Memoriam* prepared the way for the more stripped-down experiment of *Maud.* By its plastic inventiveness within a constricting form, it helped clear the ground for the lyric sequence. But for all this it was Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Emily Dickinson's fascicles (although their importance has only lately begun to be recognized) that first broke the new ground of the modern sequence.

Chapter Two

American Originals I: Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*

1. "A Graduated Kinship of Moods": The Dynamics of *Song of Myself*

Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* and several of Emily Dickinson's fascicles, Numbers 15 and 16 in particular, are the great nineteenth-century exemplars of the dominant form of serious modern poetry in English. Critics and scholars have studied Whitman's major sequences—*Song of Myself, Calamus,* and *Drum-Taps*—extensively. Few have explored the arrangement of Dickinson's fascicles, or even entertained the promise they hold of being something more than miscellaneous collections of her poems stitched together in housewifely tidiness. With both poets, anyhow, the search has been for a conventionally conceived unity of theme, argument, or dramatic (or autobiographical) situation. Poetically, such "unity" would make little difference to the lyrical structure, and we propose, rather, to look at these sequences—and primarily at *Song of Myself* and Fascicles 15 and 16—in the terms developed in our preceding chapter.

When it first appeared in 1855, *Song of Myself* looked physically like a traditional long poem. Its division into 52 sections came only later; in one quasi-Biblical manifestation in the course of its evolution, its 372 stanzas were separately numbered. Naturally, it was no less a sequence in 1855 than in its final redaction in 1892; but the original form suggests that from the start Whitman felt the work as a whole, no matter what parts he completed first. The sheer variety of tonalities he found himself containing within it fragmented it enough so that it became our first great modern sequence. *Calamus, Drum-Taps,* and Dickinson's fascicles

are more obviously assemblages of individual lyrics. The fascicles do not always cohere; but when they do they are true sequences like Whitman's. That is, their characteristic dynamics makes for an integrated effect quite unlike that of a loosely ordered grouping.

Since we are about to plunge into *Song of Myself*, a momentary digression may be in order here concerning the way sequences define themselves. It is important to remember that they exist within a continuum. At one extreme they present themselves as long but highly fragmented structures whose progression towards encompassing awareness is at once implicit and a matter of shifts in perspective—presented states at different intensities and levels of consciousness: *Song of Myself*, Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn," Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. At the other extreme we find sequences clearly assembled from separate poems and fragments that have proved to cohere as a system of tensions, modulations, and reciprocal tonal forces: Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday*, Dickinson's fascicles, Yeats's *The Tower*, *Words for Music Perhaps*, and the lyric section in his *Last Poems and Two Plays*. In between the extremes are the myriad other works making up the genre.

And just beyond the tip, as it were, of each extreme fall the works that approach the sequence but are not, finally, sequences (although, precisely where questions of organic form are concerned, the issues raised are far more to the point than any overly rigorous answers might be). We have seen that Tennyson's *Maud* and Browning's "The Englishman in Italy" remain long poems in the traditional sense, despite being fragmented in their quite different ways. They verge on becoming sequences and no doubt embody the pressure to create such a form. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* has many of the ingredients of the sequences at the other end of the spectrum, if we consider the two sets of poems as reciprocal. Yet for all their powerful attractiveness and tendency to interact magnetically, the "songs" do not click together structurally in a decisive way. Blake's constant rearrangements of them reflected this predicament. This is not to say that his poems do not surpass the quality of many sequences, but merely that they make for a work of another kind—very likely because of their involvement with the engravings and because the slightly schematic moral intention interfered with purely lyrical organization.

It was not until the first quarter of the twentieth century that the problem was explicitly addressed and by some of the finest poets writing in English. For example, Thomas Hardy—to anticipate our discussion in Chapter Four—felt the need to create a sequence-like structure but could not, except in his *Poems of 1912–13*, solve the problem. Thus he referred apologetically to the fact that his volumes were "miscellanies." In the preface to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (and in that *annus mirabilis*

1922) he speaks of their unstructured character with regret, while at the same time chiding his critics for finding fault with tonal shifts between unrelated poems placed side by side in the same collection. These "journalists," he complains, are "deaf to the sudden change of key" when a satirical or humorous poem follows "verse in graver voice." Then, wistfully, and with an implication that it may be impossible to manage, Hardy suggests a method of ordering volumes that sorts exactly with the nature of lyrical structure.

> I admit that I did not foresee such contingencies as I ought to have done, and that people might not perceive when the tone altered. But the difficulties of arranging the themes in a graduated kinship of moods would have been so great that irrelation was almost unavoidable with efforts so diverse.

This is much to the point. If we allow the idea of a "graduated kinship of moods" full play, and subordinate the more mechanical one of "arranging the themes," then Hardy is proposing an artistic ideal close to what we have called the progression of specific qualities and intensities of emotionally and sensuously charged awareness. It is most interesting that not only was Hardy rueful at having missed creating such a progression but his critics too felt that way—in other words, something was in the air without which no one felt quite happy, although they could not say exactly what it might be: like the human race groping for expression the day before language was invented. But unlike his critics, and apparently without realizing it himself, he had found his way in the relatively compact elegiac grouping *Poems of 1912–13*.

But we are looking ahead.[1] To return now to *Song of Myself*, we shall try to proceed more as responders than as translators. The aim is to be open to its progression of tonalities, watching especially for peak moments when the language is most highly charged. We can then consider the relationship of such passages to the overall curve of movement: how the sequence gets from beginning to end. *Song of Myself* starts exuberantly and yet ceremonially, its speaking sensibility that of a man bursting with health and self-regard who yet is a bard chanting formulaically. "I celebrate myself, and sing myself"—the mixture of private and epic celebration is striking. The sequence ends with the dissolution of that sensibility, but in an ecstatic embracing of death and a vision of immortal communion with the reader. Its language is of delighted choice rather than of mournful brooding. "I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags"—one would think the prospect was sexual. And "I stop somewhere waiting for you"—a rendezvous, not a farewell.

1. Specifically, to pages 82–95.

So the movement involves a progression from one mode of sensuous immediacy to another, with both states deepened by their contexts: the sense of ritual occasion, the anticipation—assertive, consoling, gay, touching—of continuing identity beyond death. Especially if we glance at the language of physically aroused transport in Poem 2, we realize how much has been ventured on sheer sensuous openness in varied contexts in this sequence—how much self-exposure risked, how much glorious self-realization and transcendence sought, in making this openness the essential fabric of the work. The closing vision awakens even more glittering possibilities for sensuous as well as spiritual ecstasy. But within this curve are poems of desolation and excruciating sensitivity that resonate forcefully yet very subtly with the opening and closing affects. The opening poem, despite its celebratory tone, its attitude of nonchalance, and its proclamation of the speaker's "perfect health," does not forget his mortality and the risks and negative sides of life:

> I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
> Hoping to cease not till death.
>
> Creeds and schools in abeyance,
> Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
> I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
> Nature without check with original energy.[2]

And the final poem is flung out, as it were, in the face of death. The poem promises everything, yet there is a shadow of wistfulness over the language:

> The spotted hawk sweeps by and accuses me, he complains of my gab
> and my loitering.
>
> I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
> I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.
>
> The last scud of day holds back for me,
> It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd
> wilds,
> It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.
>
> I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
> I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
>
> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

2. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

> You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
> And filter and fibre your blood.
>
> Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
> Missing me one place search another,
> I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Oh, how the speaker wants what he affirms to be true! The whole power of the sequence has depended on this yearning, expressed not as desire but as certainty. The proud affirmations and the courageous facing-up, at once generous and bitter, to the degradations of existence are both emboldened by a faith in the transforming power of intensity in itself. That faith is Whitman's great throw of the dice, the "hazard" admitted in the opening poem, the essential link between modern aesthetic and the secular mysticism of so much modern thought (both in process of evolving when *Song of Myself* was composed). *Song of Myself* projects the interaction among its major fields of affect (affirmation, confrontation of the negative, ecstatic experience) in a series of dynamically related states, in the context of a recurring struggle for transcendence. The transcendence we speak of here is literally poetic: a mobilization of units of charged language that, taken together and in the succession of their appearance, encompass many opposed motives and self-contradictory feelings. In the next-to-last poem (number 51) this very point is made, in a tone at once insolent, defiant, and defensive:

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Because of its many radiating centers the sequence *is* "large," *does* "contain multitudes." To strike an idiosyncratic balance among competing moods and sensations is the overriding aim of lyrical structure. In the volatile realm of the subjective life no such balance can be reached unless the keen sharpness of each tonal energy the poem "contains" is actively present. *Song of Myself* is engaged throughout in realizing and "containing" these energies. Its final balancing point, in Poem 52, between the realms of the living and the dead bears a certain resemblance to the situation of Yeats's "All Souls' Night," the poem that completes *The Tower.* Both poets reach a pitch of pure volatility that is one great proof of their art.

The graduated kinship of moods (in Hardy's phrase) in *Song of Myself* proceeds through seven major groupings of poems, accumulating a dense context of emotional cross-reference, sometimes repeating an earlier tonal

motif or reorienting it, sometimes leaping abruptly into a new level of thought and feeling. In its unfolding the process is not unlike that of a group of Pound's cantos; Pound's method is indeed a proliferation of Whitman's. The seven groupings we propose define the overall curve of movement of *Song of Myself*—its dynamics or lyrical structure broadly considered.

I. *Poems 1–7:* varied centers of emotional reference: key notations of sensibility
II. *Poems 8–17:* varied projections of identity: objects of love
III. *Poems 18–25:* negative extensions of II: the defeated, the forbidden; passion for elemental realities
IV. *Poems 26–29:* the sensitized responder; "touch" poems at the heart of the sequence
V. *Poems 30–36:* credo-poems converted into particular moments fixed in historical memory
VI. *Poems 37–43:* the prophetic, divine, *crucified* self
VII. *Poems 44–52:* mystical and cosmic extensions of the self; the open road of reaching into the unknown, including death; recapitulations

Put more concretely in terms of lyrical structure, the first group provides a brilliant scattering of tones and intensities locating the work's nerve-centers of significant awareness. In the next two groupings, the sensibility attaches itself to a variety of human types, both idealized and misery-laden or corrupt; the movement drops into realms of depressive recognition, but elemental union with the night and the earth (expressed in lovers' language) converts the depressive energy into a transcendent state of hovering intensity. (Nature—air, sea, sunlight, night, animal life—plays this role throughout the work.) In the fourth grouping all that has gone before is placed in one unifying perspective: an unbearable sensitivity to, first, music and, second, "touch"—rapidly and powerfully developed as sexual response of an uncontrollable yet miraculously ordering intensity. This small, crucially generative unit, Poems 26–29, retrospectively illuminates and reinforces the notes of high ecstasy in the first group—in Poem 2, which has the speaker mad for contact with the air; and in Poem 5, where body and soul unite sexually. Its shocks of excitement echo the female erotic fantasy of Poem 11 (Group II) and the voluptuous love song to earth, night, and sea in Poem 21 (Group III). Poems 28 and 29, especially, ground *Song of Myself* in the nerve-centers of a sensibility that is prey to all the pressures acting on an extraordinarily awakened responder.

After the extreme pitch of these two poems, the fifth grouping retreats—or tries to—into less frenzied, broadly philosophical utterance.

Yet each of these poems seeks confirmation of its pronouncements in touchstones of intense experience. This time the touchstones are reported incidents: dramatic moments of heroism, terror, and violence recalled by war veterans. The moments hang in the air forever, eternal tableaux of passionate action fixed in the psyche like mythical events in Homer. Outlasting their empirical source, vivid as the sensual arousal of the responder confessing his vulnerability in Poems 28 and 29, they are—like his instants of confusion and bliss—transcendent flashes of felt meaning. Such memories, nourishing but also tormenting the mind they haunt, make it unable to forget the terrible instant, say, of a shipboard amputation or the death of a valiant officer. They wreak a sort of havoc on the imagination that can see, hear, smell, touch them. (Whitman is very close to Pound in this respect.) Hence, in Group VI, the sensibility's adoption of the role of Christ crucified and the various thrusts of aggressive prophecy and ironic, self-mocking humor. Renewed, but with a darker, more painful awareness to wrestle with than before, the sensibility in the poems of Group VII launches a series of mystical extensions of itself. The emphasis shifts to exploration of an unknown, dangerous world that is nevertheless endlessly promising. We face the mystery of "the road," which is also the call of Death and whatever lies beyond it:

> This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded heaven,
> And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolders of those orbs, and the pleasure and knowledge of every thing in them, shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?*
> And my spirit said *No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.*
>
> (Poem 46)

The seven groupings of the sequence we have proposed are of course not indicated by Whitman explicitly, nor do we mean to suggest that they should be considered absolutely essential to a grasp of the work. The surges of feeling overlap, and often a new set of perspectives is introduced even while the preceding movement is completing itself. Thus, Poem 7 is both an afterbeat of Poem 6, which rounded off the first grouping beautifully with its reassuring and compassionate meditation on grass and death ("A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands"), and an introduction to the succeeding group that concerns itself with multiple empathy—the enormous leap of sensibility into the communality of experience. And Groups II and III might readily be considered together, as the bright and the dark sides of that com-

munality. Whitman moves furthest into another being's sensibility in "twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore" (Poem 11), when he sinks into a young woman's secret daydream:

> The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair,
> Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.
>
> An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
> It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
>
> The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
> They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
> They do not think whom they souse with spray.

Again, we might think of Poems 21–29 as the climactic movement of the sequence, overlapping with what we have called Group III (Poems 18–25). This is primarily because of Poem 21, which introduces the deep-going surge of realized love that finds its climax in Poem 29. It is the moment of richest convergence of opposites in the sequence, rising up out of the identification with the depressive realm of loss and defeat and leading to the poems of self-acceptance in the midst of despair (Poems 23–25). Poem 21 is the night complement to the poems of Group II. Instead of the earlier daytime smells and sounds, the "play of shine and shade on the trees," the "full-noon trill," the poet "walks with the tender and growing night."

> Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!
> Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!
> Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.
>
> Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
> Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
> Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!
> Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
> Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
> Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
> Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!
> Smile, for your lover comes.
>
> Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!
> O unspeakable passionate love.

This love song is not addressed to any individual but to ecstasy-producing nature. To turn to worship of one's own body as a holy seat of

sensation is natural, then, and in Poem 24 Whitman offers a paean to the "luscious" all of him, in exclamations that parallel those of the paean to nature in Poem 21. A shorter excerpt will suffice:

> Root of wash'd sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded duplicate eggs! it shall be you!
> Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
> Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
> Sun so generous it shall be you!
> Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!

Paradoxically, the extreme delight here, isolating the glories of one's own body, also breaks down the distinction between the private self and the outside world entirely. The images for the body are all metaphors from external nature. "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from." The sexual exuberance threatens to get out of control: "Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven." The sensual overloading of sensibility almost breaks the sequence down at the end of Poem 26: "I lose my breath, / Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death." And in Poem 28 the structure of control does break down:

> I am given up by traitors,
> I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor,
> I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there.
>
> You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat,
> Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.

But with the masterly Poem 29—"Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch"—all the sensual elements fall into place. Now a new calm begins to pervade the sequence, until the historical memories in Poems 33–36 renew the violence of emotion in a new context. Thereafter the moments of high intensity come far less frequently. The body and context of the sequence have been established, and it would be possible to regard Poems 37–52 as the final, overlong grouping, with too much explanation and recapitulation. But this would be to ignore the leap into association of agonizingly hard-pressed sensibility with the world of the "outlaw'd and lost" that justifies the assumption of the role of crucified Christ in Poem 38 and gives rise to entirely new tones of self-irony in Poems 41 and 42. These poems, in Group VI, are farther-reaching afterbeats of Group III. And in Group

VII, the remarkable poem of the open road (Poem 46, whose compassion echoes that of "A child said *What is the grass?*" but whose tone also contains a cold insistence on the loneliness and rigors of the journey) and the closing poems on the "bitter hug of mortality" and the challenge of death add a new unsentimental rigor to the vision of the sequence.—Still, an open structure of affects can never be pinned down to a scheme. The individual poems are discoveries reaching in many directions. What we *can* assert is that we have a series of interacting surges of affect whose general limits and directions can be discerned and therefore repossessed by the responsive reader.

Now, given the passionate search by other critics (Strauch, Miller, Cowley, *et al.*, each with his own five or seven or nine divisions) for a logical or thematic structure, perhaps we should reiterate our own rationale here for breaking *Song of Myself* down into several groupings. Our divisions are not based on stages of discursive reasoning or on correlation with some process extrinsic to the poem such as mystical experience or Oriental religious disciplines or even Whitman's psychological history. No matter how incidentally useful and illuminating such correlations or logical components may be, our prime attention is to the aesthetic of the work: *its* dynamics of organic structure. We see, then, how its most powerful poems and passages gather others around them so that certain tentative groupings or surges of affect reveal themselves. These overlap and modulate or feed into one another. But they are also isolable, pragmatically speaking, and define the work's lyrical structure in the large.

2. Peak Moments and Renewal of Momentum in Altered Contexts

It should be clear, we hope, that approaching sequences through their lyrical structure forbids translation into abstractions and general principles, for every formulation—however tentative—must be tested, and inevitably corrected, by reference to the fluid life of poems. We are not allowed to forget that, although an overview is a grand thing for helping to relate poems to one another, it will not be worth much unless it results from engagement with one poem at a time. And not to grow too metaphysical, we must also say that immersion in any poem of substance will for the moment change the proportions of the whole sequence and make everything center on the one chosen center. This is a crucial consideration in getting in touch with a sequence; the object is never to *schematize* its movement, but rather to experience it. The successions of groupings we have proposed are not meant to diminish the centrality

of each key poem in its turn. Description of a process can never be more than indicative.

Thus, if we take Poem 1 ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself") in this spirit, we shall understand that despite its key position at the start of the sequence it does not exist only for the scheme of the whole. The bold, flaunting, debonair, yet completely democratic affect of this poem is a world unto itself, and therefore a complex of self-contained associations. For one thing, it presents a serious parody of conventional epic openings, echoing Vergil's "Arms and the man I sing" at the beginning of the *Aeneid*. To recall Williams's phrase, it is "a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands," the emphasis displaced from epic heroes to our common humanity and common corporeal being. The third line ("For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you") is, however, more than a courtesy or democratic commonplace. Very early on, Whitman is telegraphing what later turns out to be an almost desperate absorption in physical process and its promise of a kind of immortality. That promise will be movingly asserted at the very end, in Poem 52. We may be forgiven for repeating just two lines from that poem here:

> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

The image of "the grass I love"—bearing the speaker's own life-continuity—has appeared as early as the second strophe of the first poem. There the orotund expansiveness of the opening lines is suddenly dropped in favor of an entirely different tone, at once colloquial and revelatory. The speaker, a sort of American Rimbaud, gives us the key images of the whole sequence:

> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

Again, more is involved than a surface vignette. An early identification is being made between the speaker's soul and a whole state of alertness to the minute particulars of the natural world. The superbly casual posture of indolence is as of one of the elect in a pastoral paradise.

In its early versions, *Song of Myself* went directly from the first two strophes—with some modification—into what became the second poem, starting "Houses and rooms are full of perfumes." Originally the opening line was simply "I celebrate myself"; the addition of "and sing myself" reinforced the reference to earlier epic poems. But the most telling change was the addition of two strophes from "Proto-Leaf":

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

Again, Whitman is doing more than appears at first glance. Both the essential Americanness of this work and Whitman's plunge into the natural worlds are affirmed more strongly here than in the first two strophes. Whitman is singing not only himself, and by implication everyone else—especially those involved in the expansive American experience—but is carrying us into the realm of the spirit and of cosmic experience: "I permit to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy." His interrelationship with the natural world is affirmed in concrete terms like those of Poem 52, but here the process is one of formation ("My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air") rather than dissolution ("I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags / I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love"). Yet this very dissolution, at the end, is countered by the image of new growth and by Whitman's vision of infusing air and grass so powerfully that he will be able to "filter and fibre" the blood of his future readers. His impact, the imagery suggests, is not only spiritual but actually physical, as physical as the grass and as enduring as all natural process:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death . . .

(from Poem 6)

The "proof" of this immortality is given again and again in *Song of Myself* in images that seem, in themselves, to be charged with natural energy. This is a result of Whitman's intimate tones of expression, together with his gift for simple, immediate diction that makes a figure of speech seem a direct projection of experience. Poem 6 provides a brilliant instance:

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,

It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

The repeated word "dark," like the whole drift of the imagery, betrays the morbid side of hypersensitive awareness. It is the inevitable price of the volatile imagination that projects such satyr-like joy elsewhere in the sequence:

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn . . .

(from Poem 2)

This is a language of almost unbearable sensation. The state of arousal it presents is felt not as something shameful but as an absolute good. These lines are a touchstone for the most intensely alive moments of *Song of Myself*, found in Poems 28 and 29. "Mine is no callous shell," says the poet in the outstanding understatement in American poetry—in Poem 27—just before he absolutely lets go in Poem 28:

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,
My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself,
On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs . . .

Poem 29, on the other hand, despite the pitch of erotic feeling, is as close to classical balance and control as anything in the sequence and is worth pausing over:

Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch!
Did it make you ache so, leaving me?

Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan,
Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.

Sprouts take and accumulate, stand by the curb prolific and vital,
Landscapes projected masculine, full-sized and golden.

The first line here projects some of the intoxicated confusion of the preceding poem, where the touch was "villain" in its mastery of the speaker. But the line's overall effect is one of power, weight, and deliberation, carried rhythmically by the overwhelming presence of nine stresses in a twelve-syllable line. The stresses, moreover, all fall on long vowels and are further strengthened by consonant clusters. The line's two balanced outcries to "touch" are followed by a gentle, loving question addressed apparently to a sexual partner. The language suggests a feminine as well as masculine consciousness: "blind loving wrestling touch" is an excellent image for a man's sensual experience of a woman, and "sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch" for the woman's of the man. Questions of Whitman's hetero- or homosexuality are irrelevant (as is the manuscript "evidence" that "sharp-tooth'd" had its source in a fairly explicit description of fellatio—"Must you bite with your teeth with the worst spasms at parting?"). What the finished poem offers is both sides of love-experience. And either partner could ask wistfully, tenderly, and proudly: "Did it make you ache so, leaving me?"

This dual perspective, the give and take of all creative process, is retained in the next stanzas as the speaker expands the sexual imagery to embrace all fecundity. And he turns again to the image of the grass (here suggesting life-sustaining wheat as well) as emblematic of all creative energy, of whatever we mean by the life force. More explicitly visionary experience has the same fundamentally sensuous base for Whitman. Thus he opens Poem 5 with a statement of the equality of body and soul—neither should be "abased to the other"—but when he actually launches into his description of enraptured transport, the primacy of the body, of the senses—especially touch—is established:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

Here, as in Poems 1, 29, 52, and so frequently elsewhere, grass, sensation, vision, and sensually responsive communion combine in a complex image for Whitman's passionate desire to penetrate and change the being of others. If Whitman actually succeeds in allowing "Nature without check with original energy" to speak through his words, the effect on his readers will be equally transporting, and it is significant that the poet's apostrophe to his soul is also applicable to the kind of fundamental power he wishes his poetry to have:

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.

The dominant vision in Poem 5 is of sensuous existence penetrated at all points with spiritual existence; distinctions between God and man are unreal; love binds all beings together; nature's recurrence is an emblem of immortality:

And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

But *Song of Myself* is not limited to ecstatic affirmation. As we have seen, its affirmations are inseparable from its awareness of death and decay. This awareness is so keen that it must be converted into its opposite. Indeed, most of the more powerful passages in the second half of the sequence are the ones dealing with war. Here the poet takes on all suffering—"Agonies are one of my changes of garments"—and one thinks of Wallace Stevens almost a century later in "Auroras of Autumn" postulating a Being meditating on "The full of fortune and the full of fate." Whitman, exploring the "large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times, and all times," brings out the blackness as well as the glory—the massacre at the Alamo as well as the old artillerist recalling a successful defense, a hellishly hounded slave as well as a dying fireman "exhausted but not so unhappy." The climactic poems of this sort are 35 and 36.

The brisk narrative of Poem 35 centers on the bravery and humanity of both sides, English and American, and on the charismatic leadership of the "little captain" who paraphrases John Paul Jones at a desperate moment (or who is himself Jones)—"*We have not struck,* he composedly cries, *we have just begun our part of the fighting,*" and the understated victory despite seemingly impossible conditions:

Not a moment's cease,
The leaks gain fast on the pumps, the fire eats toward the powder-magazine.

One of the pumps has been shot away, it is generally thought we are sinking.

Serene stands the little captain,
He is not hurried, his voice is neither high nor low,
His eyes give more light to us than our battle-lanterns.

Toward twelve there in the beams of the moon they surrender to us.

And then comes the break to a new mode—"Stretch'd and still lies the midnight, / Two great hulls motionless on the breast of the darkness." Now the horrendous cost of victory can be reckoned: the sinking ship, the serene captain now "white as a sheet, / Near by the corpse of the child that serv'd in the cabin," the many dead—sailors and officers—leading up to the terrific closing lines:

Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves, dabs of flesh upon the masts and spars,
Cut of cordage, dangle of rigging, slight shock of the soothe of waves,
Black and impassive guns, litter of powder-parcels, strong scent,
A few large stars overhead, silent and mournful shining,
Delicate sniffs of sea-breeze, smells of sedgy grass and fields by the shore, death-messages given in charge to survivors,
The hiss of the surgeon's knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw,
Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull, tapering groan,
These so, these irretrievable.

Here are the barbarity and pathos of war set off by poignant reminders of all that the dying must give up. As so often in Whitman, his sensuous response to the sea evokes some of his finest passages. There is tremendous impact from the juxtaposition of images of carnage with the "soothe of waves" and the "delicate sniffs of sea-breeze." There is nothing in *Drum-Taps*, despite Whitman's actual experiences in the Civil War, that quite measures up to this extraordinary poem whose scenes are creations of imagination. The poem moves from the breath-taking image of the "Two great hulls motionless on the breast of the darkness," to the captain agonizing over the dead and wounded, to the unharmed survivors, and then to the passage just quoted, which ends with one of the simplest and most powerful indictments of war: "These so, these irretrievable." There is an absolute agony of war that nothing can expiate, and all of Whitman's affirmations of the positive meaning of death must be measured against this passage and the accumulated power of the last line.

We have been touching on peak moments in *Song of Myself* and

thinking a bit about their interrelationships. We mean by "peak" those passages that provide keys to the essential dynamics of the sequence. It is the charge of language, rather than doctrinal content, that makes such passages decisive. We have not by any means discussed them all. Rather we have selected them with a double aim: to point up their relationship, as deep centers of emotive reference, to the work's curve of movement as a whole; and to focus on them in their own right, as units of affect whose quality irradiates the structure—not schematically but in the float and energy of the process that is the sequence.

Renewal of momentum in altered contexts—the uncoiling of unexpected movements of realization that nevertheless sustain the process—is essential to the life of a sequence. When this occurs, the individual poem involved becomes a new epitome of the way the sequence works. Poem 49, for example, begins with engaging bravado, in a tone not unfamiliar and yet startling because of the stinging metaphor at the center of its first line: "And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me." The line stands on its own as a separate stanza: a wistful manifesto. One thinks, "Yes, I know that feeling. I know the pathos of that contradiction between the words 'bitter' and 'idle.' " And then the poem proceeds through certain recognizable phases, starting with a counter-imagery of birth in the next four lines. These lines, very gravely handled, have startling directness and force. "I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors," says courageous Walt, imagining himself watching the accoucheur at work. And who is the accoucheur? We are not told in so many words that he is Death, and yet much in the poem—the opening; the use of the words "outlet," "relief," and "escape" (admittedly ambiguous here); the return to the subject of mortality in the next stanza, this time in direct address to a "Corpse," and the description further on of Life as "the leavings of many deaths"—sustain the implied conceit.

If this were all, particularly at this late point in the sequence, one might admire much in the poem and yet feel a certain weariness with its echoing of earlier tones and attitudes and its weathered air of ingenuity. (On the whole, Donne did this sort of thing far better.) But then, suddenly, we have one of those unexpected uncoilings and pure leaps of realization with which *Song of Myself* teems. When Whitman wrote, in the line addressed to the Corpse, that "I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me," he did not seem to realize that *he* might be the one giving offense. But now, in the final section of the poem, he reaches through to what he was preparing for—the realm of continued existence beyond death, a rebirth of a kind in the cold and lonely cosmos. Nothing here—although the passage does affirm—is cheerful or sentimental.

I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven,
O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and promotions,
If you do not say any thing how can I say any thing?

Of the turbid pool that lies in the autumn forest,
Of the moon that descends the steeps of the soughing twilight,
Toss, sparkles of day and dusk—toss on the black stems that decay in the muck,
Toss to the moaning gibberish of the dry limbs.

I ascend from the moon, I ascend from the night,
I perceive that the ghastly glimmer is noonday sunbeams reflected,
And debouch to the steady and central from the offspring great or small.

The reality of the decay out of which the speaker must ascend is presented starkly enough to counter the prophetic posturing of much of Groups VI and VII. Poem 49, in fact, may be one of those quietly definitive poems that make their impression almost subliminally. One can imagine T. S. Eliot's imagination being literally infected with the whispering, sinister, moon-saddened tones and images of this passage, which is extremely close in affect to *The Hollow Men* and other poems of Eliot's. Poem 50, too, is quietly self-contained and leaves its stamp on the sequence. It adds a note of openness and hesitancy about the whole *Song of Myself* enterprise:

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.

Wrench'd and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes,
I sleep—I sleep long.

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Whitman of course goes on to define the "word unsaid" (one wishes he had let well enough alone for the moment): "It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness," but the essentially problematical nature of his answers does come through here. The same tentative attitude appears in Poem 51 in the slightly more grandiloquent "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself," and in the last lines of the sequence:

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Song of Myself is great in part because Whitman—to alter Matthew Arnold's dictum—presents life steadily and presents it whole. We suggested in our first chapter that the purpose, or formal end, of lyric structure is the most open possible realization of experience. Despite his willed assertions of being at "peace about God and about death," Whitman does not gloss over the darker aspects of existence. The sequence is a satisfying whole, with a kind of humble, vulnerable, opening oneself to experience counterpointing easy modes of encompassment. It is also the most gloriously sensuous of poems, and its moments of highest intensity present ideal centers for the structure of a sequence in our modern sense. And despite the length, despite the catalogues, despite the exhortations, it remains fresh and alive. Much of its vitality depends on the quick shifts, variety, and brilliant improvisations made possible by the sequence form. Coming to the end of one poem, the poet is not constrained by the demands of logic or narrative to take his work in any particular direction. Nor does Whitman apologize for relying on his intuitive sense of the architectural demands of the sequence. As we have noted, the defiant "Very well then I contradict myself" is a properly impatient assertion of the new poetics that Schlegel via Coleridge and Emerson was hypothesizing.

Neither *Calamus* nor *Drum-Taps* is as successful as *Song of Myself*—no doubt unfair comparisons, since *Song of Myself* and the long poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" are high points of Whitman's art. Whitman tinkered considerably with the two later sequences—to the detriment especially of *Calamus*, for the 1860 version is obviously superior to the later one. Clearly *Song of Myself* came into being in a single surge of feeling, while the other two sequences involved more intractable materials. As the external facts of the Civil War and postwar periods, and Whitman's immediate experience of them, changed, affective discontinuities among the *Drum-Tap* poems became more extreme. Whitman faced a more difficult problem, compared with the ordering of *Song of Myself*, of balancing and rearranging the war-poems for maximum effect. With *Calamus*, he lost his nerve to some extent, excising the more confessional poems revealing his devastating vulnerability in love relationships. Yet it was precisely these poems, along with the more flagrantly erotic ones, that had formed his initial impetus for the group. In the interests of a public stance, he took the heart out of *Calamus*: its dark crisis of jealousy, despair, and devastating loss. In their essential directions both *Calamus* and *Drum-Taps* parallel the movement of *Song of Myself*—from affirmation into despair and then to darkened reaffirmation. But this is true primarily for the first version of *Calamus*, as we have suggested, and *Drum-Taps*, altogether honorably, betrays its fullest possibilities. The focus settles on compassion and love

for the wounded, more than on their suffering and the terrible pity of war. The public stance (the necessity of the war to preserve the Union) to some extent displaces and distorts the subjective and confessional genius of the sequence.

Chapter Three

American Originals II: Emily Dickinson's Fascicles

1. What Are the Fascicles?

With both Whitman and Dickinson, the opportunity to improvise sequences had something to do with the publishing situation. They could both suit themselves in matters of arrangement, Whitman because he paid his own publication costs and Dickinson because she never put a whole book together. Both could have benefited from sympathetic and intelligent editors, but doubtless this deprivation was a boon to the new genre.

Emily Dickinson professed a reluctance to publish, and certainly she felt no public call in Whitman's sense. She never had, and perhaps never envisoned, a contemporary audience outside the half-appreciative few and her own sensibility. She realized that her thoughts might shock a genteel reader, but she had no *program*, even in fantasy, for doing so. Nor did she feel herself a Cassandra warning deaf ears. What she did share with Whitman, apart from exquisite lyrical gifts and sensuous alertness, was the passion that drives their work and the need to be discreet. The need was hopeless in both cases, because their most intense work gives the game away. Misunderstood, Whitman's self-exposure seemed unmanly and suspect to many readers. Dickinson's would have been thought unbecoming in a lady had she been published and understood.

But Whitman's discretion was a practical expedient, a minimal self-protection in a hostile environment. Dickinson's was a matter of her essential idiom of style and personality. As we shall see, much of her

greatest writing evokes boldly clear states of awareness within an indeterminate context. It is both reticent and revealing: "pure" as Whitman's "touch" poems are pure. The principle at work in Dickinson, the pressure to get an extreme emotional complex into focus while repressing its private source, may account for the unevenness of her work, given her prolificacy and the absence of reaction from peers. It also helps account for her greatness, whenever a poem springs a concealed trap upon some wrenching perception rooted in passionate feeling. The great poems give overpowering direction to their sequences. Sometimes embarrassing and unpleasantly committed to carrying their perceptions through—and then reaching a sort of empyrean of pure states of emotional realization—they carry the lesser pieces along in triumph. However "unbecoming" the desire or fear or obsession they unfold and expose on the way to this triumph, they stamp their authority on the sequences they inhabit.

After Emily Dickinson's death in 1886, her poems appeared in a number of small selected volumes, and with a good many editorial alterations calculated to make them smoother rhythmically and clearer grammatically. Then, in 1955, Thomas H. Johnson published his three-volume edition, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, based on original manuscripts or the best available texts.[1] This was, of course, an enormous step forward. At the same time, the reader of Dickinson was suddenly swamped with 1775 poems (and variants), eccentrically punctuated and capitalized, and arranged chronologically rather than in the groupings the poet had often indicated for them. Seen in the mass, the poems were hard to assimilate—there are so many short pieces, with innumerable cries of the heart, vivid little impressions of birds and sunsets and moments in nature, compressed elegies for unnamed persons, ambiguously oriented expressions of grief and love and deprivation, and wildly moving comments, at once abstract and deeply personal, packed with evocative imagery. The artistry is so precise and idiosyncratic, the tonalities so brilliantly moving, that one knew there was no question of mere redundancy. Yet in a sense the range of attention *is* limited. Certain emotional predicaments and resolutions and stimuli recur again and again, as they would from day to day in a given life. It seemed that all one could do was to select as best one could from the flood of entries by the world's most articulate emotional diarist.

Yet Dickinson herself had given mute guidance. Of the 1775 poems in Johnson's collected edition, almost half had originally been arranged by the author in little booklets (generally called "fascicles") of from eleven

1. Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), 3 vols. Our references to numbers of individual poems are all based on this text.

to twenty-nine poems. The fascicles, gatherings of four to seven folded sheets sewn together, have been reconstituted in R. W. Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*.[2] It is the fate, and therefore the nightmare, of editors to ignore the obvious, and it seems not to have occurred to her early editors that the poet must have had an artistic reason for making the fascicles.[3] Although Dickinson's first editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, appears to have ignored the fascicles except as sources of completely independent poems, she at least is probably guiltless of the unfortunate mutilation and dismantling of the booklets.[4] Fortunately, later scholars (not least of them Johnson, despite the arrangement he decided on for his collection) have been able to reassemble them with reasonable confidence in the results. With the publication of Franklin's facsimile edition, we can expect general agreement about which poems go into which fascicles, and in what order, despite some inevitable problems.

That Emily Dickinson had something like sequences in mind is the most natural of conjectures. After all, we do have the evidence of her own groupings. Enough of her work, too, is both superbly accomplished and imaginatively far-reaching to make her a peer of other major poets who have put whole poems into larger structures of intrinsic relationship. Her mind was subtle and original, and the reciprocities among her poems show her grasp (perhaps the best among poets writing in English in the last century) of the way separate poems within the same surge and float of feeling reinforce one another and grow into an encompassing, unified body. Had she prepared the fascicle groupings for *publication*, she would doubtless have worked with them further—for reasons we shall suggest in discussing sequence-formation in relation to Yeats's *Last Poems and Two Plays*, in Chapter Six. But that the fascicles are, by their very nature, either sequences as they stand or sequences in the making seems as obvious as such things can be.

Sensing this reality without letting themselves be guided by the obvious implications—namely, a poem is not a treatise; its phrasing moves organically or not at all—students of Dickinson have proposed thematic schemes to account for the fascicles. Ruth Miller, for instance, argues that each one follows the same basic pattern: "Each is a narrative structure designed to recreate the experience of the woman as she strives for acceptance or knowledge, is rebuffed or fails because of her limitations,

2. R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), two volumes.

3. See the apt comments on this situation in Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), pp. 537–38.

4. See the lucid discussion of Mrs. Todd's editorial role in R. W. Franklin, *The Editing of Emily Dickinson* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), especially pp. 31–34.

but then by an act of will, forces herself to be patient in order to survive, fixes her hopes on another world where Jesus and God await her, and remains content meanwhile with herself alone."[5] But apart from the overriding fact that one is hard put to find this scheme in the actual poems, the work of a Dickinson can hardly be reduced to a monotonous formula. She wrote, in a storm of creation over a relatively short space of time, a vast number of poems of high intensity. She arranged them into physically linked structures that enabled her to give tentative order to the chaos of emotions by which the writing was seized. This was not a matter of repeating the same exemplary tale over and over. The poems penetrate a life of secret turmoil, each striking a certain held pitch of awareness; and the fascicles mobilize these little systems of subjective energy into larger ones, permitting a more complex equilibrium among affects. Why translate all this orchestrated sensibility into gray commonplaces?

2. Towards a Multiple Sequence

Study of the fascicles as sequences has hardly begun, although Franklin's edition of the manuscript books is an enormous aid. Already, however, we can see that a number of fascicles are full-fledged ones and a fair number seem at least modulations toward the form. We have chosen only two for concentrated discussion: Fascicles 15 and 16.[6] Both come out of the violent psychological and artistic upheaval (perhaps not fortuitously coincidental with the outbreak of the Civil War) during which Dickinson found her level as a great poet. They include such poems of tragic force as "The first Day's Night had come" (poem 410), "The Color of the Grave is Green" (411), " 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (414), "I read my sentence—steadily" (412), "Before I got my eye put out" (327), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (280), and " 'Tis so appalling—it exhilirates" (281). Poems like these are revelatory, magnetic centers in themselves. Their relation to other poems in their respective fascicles is like that within a planetary system: a process of tensions and counter-

5. Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 249

6. We are following Franklin's essentially chronological fascicle-numbering—see *The Manuscript Books*, Vol. II, pp. 1391–1408 especially—rather than Mrs. Todd's random but hitherto standard numbering according to which 15 and 16 were originally 26 and 32. Also, the former originally ended with the nine poems Franklin places at the end of 14. (We had some years ago begun thinking of 26 and 32 as a double sequence, and so Franklin's purely scholarly reordering seems a welcome mutual corroboration by two disciplines.)

tensions in motion, self-contained yet not rigid. At the same time there is an accumulative forward motion from poem to poem. The whole system of relationships and balances, implicit from the start, reveals itself in the course of the sequence.

Franklin dates both fascicles "about 1862," and their inner reciprocities suggest that most of 16 was written after 15. But the literal order of composition of the individual poems is scarcely a vital question here; as we shall see with Yeats's civil-war sequences, the original order is often changed and even reversed during sequence-formation. What *is* important is that both fascicles issued forth in the same general creative period, under the same sustained impulse of feeling and at white-hot intensity. They seem to form a reciprocal or double sequence: a progression from the shock of devastating experience evoked in "The first Day's Night had come" at the start of 15 to the distanced, qualified, just-held affirmation of the final group of poems in 16—especially in "When we stand on the tops of Things" (242) and "He showed me Hights I never saw" (446). But each fascicle has its own independent curve of movement as well. For the reader wishing to reconstruct 15 and 16 on the basis of Johnson's text and numbering of poems, the order is as follows:

Fascicle 15: 410, 411, 414, 580, 415, 419, 420, 421, 577, 412, 416, 417, 418, 581, 413, 578, 579 (*17 poems*)
Fascicle 16: 327, 607, 279, 241, 280, 281, 282, 242, 445, 608, 446 (*11 poems*)

A certain affinity with Whitman is seriously present no matter what their differences were. Emily Dickinson might well have seen the 1855 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, despite her humorously suspect, prim denial. Replying to an inquiry of T. W. Higginson's, she wrote: "You speak of Mr. Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful." Yet the two poets are kindred sensibilities, a fact that becomes more visible when their reciprocities are seen in the magnifying lenses of their sequences. Whitman, to be sure, was more direct and explicit about sex, but no more sensitized to it if we read Dickinson aright. He plunged more ardently, with strongly sexual overtones, into his intoxicating commerce with nature, and was relatively untroubled by any sense of division between himself and nature or deity. In general, he provides external detail and circumstance plentifully, addresses himself to the reader, and relatively seldom keeps his literal subject hidden from us. Dickinson, more complex and starkly conscious of the betrayal of manifold hopes, finds many more shadings and levels and degrees of half-alienated relationship among self and nature and God, just as she

does in her relations with other persons and her sense of herself. She pushes further, with more psychological precision, than Whitman does into the subjective realm of self-doubt and of confusions and agonies of spirit.

This difference will be clear enough if we read the first poem of Fascicle 16 (poem 327) and compare it with the opening poems of *Song of Myself*. Whitman lays claim to the universe, nonchalantly, grandly, and of course assertively:

> Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
> You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

In the Dickinson poem an introspective sensibility, disheartened by some debilitating personal experience, cannot face possessing and being possessed by the universe. Her dominant image, shocking when we visualize it literally, is flung at us in the first line: "Before I got my eye put out."

And yet both works place the central sensibility on a vast stage: the cosmos. Dickinson's opening poem in Fascicle 16 reads as if, after all, she *had* read Whitman's "disgraceful" book and was replying: "I was like you, Walt, until disaster struck. Myself *I* celebrated too, and I looked into the sun as its equal and was blinded. I was blinded because the joy was fuller than I could endure." Poem 327 is on Whitman's scale in its reach into infinity; at the same time it closely matches those passages of *Song of Myself* that confess extreme vulnerability and personal defeat.

> Before I got my eye put out—
> I liked as well to see
> As other creatures, that have eyes—
> And know no other way—
>
> But were it told to me, Today,
> That I might have the Sky
> For mine, I tell you that my Heart
> Would split, for size of me—
>
> The Meadows—mine—
> The Mountains—mine—
> All Forests—Stintless Stars—
> As much of noon, as I could take—
> Between my finite eyes—
>
> The Motions of the Dipping Birds—
> The Lightning's jointed Road—

> For mine—to look at when I liked—
> The news would strike me dead—
>
> So safer—guess—with just my soul
> Upon the window pane
> Where other creatures put their eyes—
> Incautious—of the Sun—
>
> (327)[7]

So the two poets share extreme volatility and a vision of the cosmos as the theater of their feelings and imagination. One is tempted to make a major effort to account for the fact that they are soul-mates; it would not have taken much of *Leaves of Grass* to open Dickinson to her true possibilities and to the language of every kind of intensity. Stranger things have happened than that Dickinson should have read Whitman secretly. Whether she found him irresistible or disgusting or even mostly tiresome would not have mattered; the fertilization would have taken place. Compare, for instance, her poem 327 with poem 25 in *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.
>
> We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun,
> We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of the daybreak.
>
> My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
> With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.

Both poets find the natural world, especially the sun, murderous in its glory. Whitman, magnificently, summons up a rival inner glory as his only salvation. The process of converting terror into triumphant imagination is presented swiftly by Whitman, its stages collapsed into an assertion unsullied by self-examination. Dickinson's "Before I got my eye put out" is altogether subtler and humbler, but the predicament and pressure are much the same in both poems. She was as capable as he of writing in great high spirits. (One of her poems, in fact—poem 308 in Fascicle 27—begins "I send Two Sunsets," thus going Whitman's creation of his own sunrise one better.) If in poem 327 she gives us a developed imagery of fear and withdrawal, an internal stocktaking that confesses failure to cope adequately with blazing life, even here she flaunts her imagination as flamboyantly as Whitman does.

The poem sets a sensational scene at once. The opening, "Before I got my eye put out," is grotesquely drastic. Two ways of seeing—with

7. We are using the fascicle version of 327 without the suggested change in line 15, "The Morning's Amber Road."

the eyes, or senses, and with the soul, or imagining sensibility—are contrasted in an atmosphere of extreme emotional tension. In a succession of startling, paradoxical intensities, the middle stanzas present the pain of being forced to retreat, because of the brutally blinding effect of natural beauty, into the soul's possibly "safer" enclave. The only leavening elements are the occasional colloquialisms and the pun of "I" and "eye" in the first line. But the pun slams us into the gross physical image of "eye put out," and the colloquialisms (e.g., "got my eye put out," "as much of noon, as I could take," and "strike me dead") all emphasize the destructive effect of too keen awareness and fear.

The tension here, between lust for more experience and crushed withdrawal, is at the heart of the poem's volatility. It is an intimate ingredient of the structuring energy in Fascicles 15 and 16. After the riddling of the first stanza—its unexplained allusion to a wound, and its half-promise to reveal some "other way" of vision unknown to ordinary beings—the poem breaks into a paean to the natural world despite what has happened. But the paean is punctuated with notes of fear, and we see that the speaker is locked into a complex depressive state. Absolutely intoxicated with life, she can no longer face it except in imagination, for she cannot risk opening herself up at close range to powerful feelings once again. The final stanza, as riddling as the first, concentrates the whole psychic situation into a new image: of the soul facing the sun as the eyes, before they were blinded by too fierce exposure, had used to do:

> So safer—guess—with just my soul
> Upon the window pane
> Where other creatures put their eyes—
> Incautious—of the sun—

As so often with Dickinson, we have an emotional state whose basis is a mystery. The ambiguous word "guess" is another riddle. Probably the suggestion is that it is safer to imagine the world than to experience it nakedly; but another possible reading is that this may not be so—I only *guess* it will be safer—and that the soul too is dangerously exposed. Either way, what is the situation—a literal onset or threat of blindness? a crippling disappointment or humiliation? a miserable passage-at-arms in love? All the *poem* gives us is its affect of passionate recollection in a context of wounded withdrawal. The stanzas present so many centers of evocation that we need no "story." And still, they have the *form* of narrative and refer to unspecified crucial events. The poem presents the aftermath of a heart's voyage into lovely, unexpectedly deadly places, and it offers something like a resolution—all in the elusive context of

envisioned moments of choice and crisis, each with its own storm center of language. For these reasons, poem 327 epitomizes the process of the fascicles we are considering.

We have focused at some length on the one poem, and also on Dickinson's affinities with Whitman, to emphasize and re-emphasize the scope, variety, and shifting depths of which she is capable. Together, Fascicles 15 and 16 make an epic of the subjective life, as far-reaching and heroically brave as *Song of Myself* and far more pressing in its pursuit of the inmost depths of feeling—with no attempts to glamorize those depths. The drastic states with which these fascicles wrestle demand, and receive, large-minded, universally expressive presentation, and none of her successors—not even Eliot at his best—has surpassed her work.

Before going more fully into the two sequences and their reciprocities, we should note that Dickinson's proliferation of relationships among the fascicles goes beyond the connection of any pair of them. Fascicle 14, for instance (although we shall not pursue the matter here), seems clearly a testing ground, preparing the way for Fascicles 15 and 16. It has an opening group of poems that are in the main bitingly wry or bitter, then a single poem, "The feet of people marching home" (7), that is a masterpiece of restrained melancholy and longing, and then another group that reaches powerfully toward the kind of grief and shock with which Fascicle 15 begins. Similarly, Fascicle 17, after 16 has striven so bravely to contain and come to terms with that grief and shock, makes another turn on the struggle for equilibrium. In itself, it is an exquisite sequence that balances life's sources of ecstasy against its horrors—the first line of its opening poem (348) is perfectly indicative: "I dreaded that first Robin, so." And its antepenultimate poem, "The Soul has Bandaged Moments" (512), moves between these two states as Homer moves between a sense of divine prowess and the pathos of Hector's defeat in the *Iliad*. It seems likely that Emily Dickinson was heading toward a multiple sequence, compelled by the nature of her sensibility and her extraordinary copiousness, very much as certain successors—notably Yeats, Pound, and Williams—were to do later.

3. Fascicle 15: The Poetry of Psychic Trauma

The entire movement of Fascicle 15 is like that of poem 327 writ large. Its psychological and poetic coherence is extraordinarily powerful, and its dynamics are characteristic of the modern sequence. The opening poem, "The first Day's Night had come" (410), presents a protagonist—a sensibility, rather—unspecified as to sex or other external characteristics, staving off madness and chaotic self-disintegration in the wake of

some unnamed catastrophe. The closing poem, "I had been hungry, all the Years" (579), presents a psyche stunned into numbness after devastation. We have been carried from terrified whirling to a quietened desolation. There is much more to the sequence, however, than this simple curve, so reminiscent of poem 327. In seventeen poems the poet gave herself room to create many more dimensions and to explore drifts of related tonality more richly. It might not be amiss to call Fascicle 15 a kind of purer *Maud*, without the contrived support of plot, named characters, and exposition.

The opening movement of three poems is unrivaled as a powerfully lyrical grouping, although only the third is at all well known. They are "The first Day's Night had come" (410), "The Color of the Grave is Green" (411), and " 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (414). In these three poems the fascicle starts at the height of intensity: extreme feeling at once, together with an atmosphere of morbid horror, and then the ambiguous agony of the third poem. Yet all three have an iron discipline of sustained and subtly compressed association, as though a rigorously self-analytical Ophelia were speaking. This first movement culminates in a poem of anguished moral dilemma, recalled in a series of nightmare images beginning with the opening line, " 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch," and rendered doubly painful by the rueful confessional question at the end: "Which Anguish was the utterest—then— / To perish, or to live?"

It would be dogmatic, and therefore pointless, to argue that ideally a sequence should begin with a poem of great power, immediately creating a decisive affective center. The rest of the sequence would then define itself in relation to this initial field of force. Obviously, the position is too limiting; for many reasons, the location of a work's magnetic centers must vary according to its idiosyncratic character. Nevertheless, there are special advantages to beginning, as it were, climactically. It is the sequence's way of beginning *in medias res*.

Fascicle 15 does precisely this. It copes with an encompassing poem whose several rapidly developed phases present psychic trauma that changes but does not cease. The "grateful" feeling after enduring the first shock proves deceptive. The condition of extreme suffering persists from that shock onwards. It goes underground into shattered numbness that seems like relief for a brief time, then returns in a monstrous tidal wave of obliterating "horror," and remains as hysterical "giggling" and something like schizophrenic self-division within the sensibility at the moment of the poem's utterance. The succession of tenses—past perfect to past to present—accumulates the whole movement in a single time-compressed curve.

The first Day's Night had come—
And grateful that a thing
So terrible—had been endured—
I told my Soul to sing—

She said her Strings were snapt—
Her Bow—to Atoms blown—
And so to mend her—gave me work
Until another Morn—

And then—a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled it's horror in my face—
Until it blocked my eyes—

My Brain—begun to laugh—
I mumbled—like a fool—
And tho' 'tis Years ago—that Day
My Brain keeps giggling—still.

And Something's odd—within—
That person that I was—
And this One—do not feel the same—
Could it be Madness—this?

(410)

The poem is a grim mystery, and the sequence as a whole an extension of it. We are never told what the "thing so terrible" was. Later poems in the sequence imply that the shattering event was a lover's death or, alternatively, a symbolic death: the end of an overwhelming love relationship through separation or rejection or abrupt disillusionment. But other readings are conceivable; the sequence does not pin itself down to one limited, autobiographical event. The poems focus not on the event itself but on the way it is received—the sensibility's efforts to cope with hideous personal disaster. The "thing" is a secret, but the resulting hysteria and disorientation, the whole turmoil of feelings and introspection, must erupt. This double pressure, of what must be and what must not be expressed, fills the whole sequence with passionate paradox.

The first poem, just quoted, is a complex of riddles. Even the opening line, "the first Day's Night had come," may be read in two ways, both obvious: The "first Day"—first in the sense that it initiates a whole new chapter of the poet's life—was so dreadful it *was* "Night"; and, more likely, the evil day had at last come to an end. But this is all a language of feeling. We would be wrong to take the words altogether literally. In the poem language for states of feeling and language for points in time

run together inseparably. Years have passed, yet the "Day as huge / As Yesterdays in pairs"—the day when madness or overwhelming horror akin to madness took hold once and for all—goes on forever.

The lines on the Soul hold some mystery as well. Like the lines on days and nights, they do not spell out logical meanings or easily paraphrasable associations. Yet they do project emotional and subjective states, very purely. The speaking "I" is split off from her personified Soul, another "she," whose specific nature is not altogether consistently presented. They give each other instructions. "I" tells the Soul to sing. The Soul replies that she cannot; her "strings" and "bow" (her music-making ability, no doubt standing in for her poetry-making one) are ruined now and the "I" must set to work to mend them. But the poem says mend *her;* the Soul is its ("her") own instrument, then. Confusing, and utterly clear. The task of makeshift therapy is short-lived, however. When the full, sickening second wave of reality-recognition strikes, the enterprise is forgotten. The "Brain," its alienation from the Soul completed, is reduced to blind and "giggling" helplessness. All sense of the self's integrity is lost; it is now "that person that I was." And the question at the end ("Could it be Madness—this?") raises a final riddle, since it has apparently already been answered, in the affirmative, in the preceding stanza.

Two-thirds of a century later, in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, Yeats too employed misery-born riddling, sometimes in images strikingly like Dickinson's. Rich and vital as his poems are, Dickinson anticipates them and goes more directly to her crucial affects. The protagonist of "Sailing to Byzantium" seeks the very solution that "The first Day's Night" turns to at once: the Soul's "singing school." Yeats's poem loses itself in this dream, while the predicament of being "sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" persists. Dickinson's poem presses further, unremittingly. Again, she has anticipated, but with no self-indulgence, the condition of apparent madness envisioned in Yeats's "All Souls' Night" as the saving state that can put the living in touch with the dead and beyond intrusive reason. In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," too, there is a similarity to the Dickinson poem (apart from the bitter pressures underlying the poems, and the fact that self and soul speak to one another so demandingly in both cases) in the use of innocent ecstasy to escape from the unbearable. But there is a vast difference in Dickinson's presentation of the condition as sheer breakdown rather than transcendence—although her question at the end may be introducing the latter possibility. It might be argued that her work presents those perspectives she in some sense shares with Yeats more cogently and, if not more bravely, less swaggeringly than he does. The important fact, though, is that she is in her way ushering in the poetry

of psychological pressure through her drastically stripped down method and absolute directness of feeling. She shares the world of Yeats and the other great moderns and, in fact, points some directions they never had the opportunity to observe because so much of her work has been unavailable until fairly recently.

Sequences, ordinarily, tend to reach a state of equilibrium among centers of feeling that is elegiac in effect—a distanced perspective that marks the condition of "all passion spent." This too is anticipated in Fascicle 15, but at the same time too much power, and too much refusal simply to accept, manifest themselves for the sequence really to settle for such a balance. The succession of explosions of massive, painful insight in the first three poems would be enough to prevent it. But in any case there is another such explosion at the center of the sequence, in "If I may have it, when it's dead" (577). And the exhausted inability to accept newly proffered riches of life and love after all in the closing poem, "I had been hungry, all the Years" (579), is an afterbeat of the earlier poems of power, hardly a quietly passive resignation to fatality.

But to go on with the progression after the opening poem: The second poem, "The Color of the Grave is Green" (411), deserves to be known far better than it is:

The Color of the Grave is Green—
The Outer Grave—I mean—
You would not know it from the Field—
Except it own a Stone—

To help the fond—to find it—
Too infinite asleep
To stop and tell them where it is—
But just a Daisy—deep—

The Color of the Grave is white—
The outer Grave—I mean—
You would not know it from the Drifts—
In Winter—till the Sun—

Has furrowed out the Aisles—
Then—higher than the Land
The little Dwelling Houses rise
Where each—has left a friend—

The Color of the Grave within—
The Duplicate—I mean—
Not all the Snows c'd make it white—
Not all the Summers—Green—

You've seen the Color—maybe—
Upon a Bonnet bound—
When that you met it with before—
The Ferret—Cannot find—

(411)

The images here are even more immediate and wrenching than in the first poem, in which the speaker is describing a psychological event at least objectively enough to pin a name—"Madness"—to it and to present it, partly, in terms of a dialogue between self and soul that involves a project for healing the condition. In the second poem the dialogue form is dropped in favor of direct presentation of an inner desolation so black that the self—"That person that I was"—seems irretrievably lost. Horror is pushed to further extremes of presentation as the poem advances inexorably to its final, rank image of a ferret trying to unearth a corpse. This last image is telegraphed in the second line by the emphasis on the "outer" grave, which makes us think immediately of the blackness of the grave itself. But the opening four stanzas stress the gentle exterior—the grave as a natural part of the landscape—and the cozy companionableness of the dead. The shift comes with the fifth stanza, when Dickinson goes contrary to our expectations of the outer grave's complement. She is not talking of a physical grave at all; her concern is with the "Duplicate" grave within the human psyche. And whereas nature can beautify an actual grave and make it less terrifying, nothing can alleviate the inner blackness. There is so deep a nothingness that not even the corpse of the speaker's former self can be found. Spirit itself has shrunk into that same realm of concentrated, heavy non-being described long ago by Donne in "A Nocturnall upon St. Lucie's Day"—that touchstone of depressive lyric poetry of loss. But Dickinson has added the dimension of compressed hysteria close to madness.

Then, with a mighty torque-effect, the third poem, " 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (414), appears in the sequence. It strikes full force: a poem in which the murderous, forced renunciation suggested in the two previous poems is weighed against the crushing guilt of letting go and yielding to desire:

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing it's boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyed coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem—
And you dropt, lost,

When something broke—
And let you from a Dream—

As if a Goblin with a Gauge—
Kept measuring the Hours—
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws—

And not a Sinew—stirred—could help,
And sense was setting numb—
When God—remembered—and the Fiend
Let go, then, Overcome—

As if your Sentence stood—pronounced—
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt
To Gibbets, and the Dead—

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped "Repreive"!
Which Anguish was the utterest—then—
To perish, or to live?

(414)

To leap ahead for just a moment, this poem provides a significant link with the two most powerful poems of Fascicle 16: "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (280) and " 'Tis so appalling—it exhilirates" (281). It is the poem *par excellence* of agonized suspense and equally agonized release. Its complex of feeling is echoed in the whole of 280 and in the speaker's piercing thought in 281—after "bleak dreaded" woe has finally arrived—that "Suspense kept sawing so." Also, all three poems display drastic modes of imagery that serve as a kind of refrain in the two sequences: images of psychic numbness, terror, and dropping downward into bottomless disaster. But 414 is unique in the escalating power of its almost symmetrically balanced affects. It objectifies, with absolute authority, the quality of the predicament afflicting the central sensibility of both sequences.

Clearly, each of the poem's three major units of affect is an extended simile for an unspecified, suspense-ridden crisis of spirit. The crisis itself, in its dual nature of terror and release, is represented only by the word "it," in the contraction (" 'Twas") that starts off the poem. What "it" was like is presented to us in a long sentence—the first twenty-two of the poem's twenty-four lines—containing the three major affects. "It" was like a maelstrom sucking "you" into its center and dropping you downward (stanzas 1–2); like being in the grip of a monstrous being, "Goblin" and "Fiend," about to crush you in "his Paws" (stanzas 3–4); and like being on the verge of being executed for some crime after your

"Sentence stood—pronounced" (stanzas 5–6, except for the last two lines).

In each hideous image-complex, suspense builds up to an unbearable point, then collapses into release from the nightmare climactic moment. The escalation of power derives not from greater intensity of phrasing in each stanza-cluster but from new perspectives on essentially the same affect—the combination of helplessness in the grip of superior force and release by another superior force. Merely physical peril (Dickinson's maelstrom image is in some ways an intensification of the whirlpool with the coffin life-buoy at its center in the epilogue to *Moby-Dick*) is replaced by being helplessly in the grip of an evil supernatural force, and then by a death sentence because one has committed a crime. At the same time, the movement is accumulative, each stage of the poem providing a context for the next, so that the larger affect of the whole poem (through line 23) is of extreme physical and moral danger complicated by profound guilt. The question with which the poem ends then turns the poem right around in the opposite direction. All those last-moment escapes, always brought about from the outside—"something" breaking the maelstrom's force, God remembering, the "Creature" that gasps "Repreive"—are not blessed relief after all but a rival agony. One then recalls the sexually suggestive phrases in the opening stanza: "Maelstrom, with a notch," "boiling Wheel," and "delirious Hem." Hence, the struggle between God and fiend, and the sense of being condemned for a crime, take on the dimension of an inner moral struggle in which conscience is triumphant at the expense of fulfillment.

The poem thus puts into a certain focus the two preceding poems, which hove into view with such devastating impact at the start of the sequence. We do not mean that the poem is literally "about" the emotional and moral agony of a woman, stung by passion and almost drawn into yielding herself, who is "saved" from sinning but not from the poison of her loss thereafter. Yet the fascicle's contexts of association invite such a reading. They include the desperate extremes of feeling ("Could it be Madness—this?") of the first poem (410); the sexually suggestive admission that "I gave myself to Him" in a hopelessly uneven "contract" of the fourth poem (580); and the dimension of morbidity ("If I may have it, when it's dead") in the ninth poem (577). That is, the psychological float of the sequence includes drifts of guilt, sexual need, moral struggle, and dreams of gratification through imagined communion beyond death.

"'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch," then, is the critical unifying poem of its fascicle. In it the speaker has been terribly buffeted and shamed, and a deceptive reprieve has been granted that only forecasts the disappointed and sickened equilibrium of the closing poem. But many

of the intervening poems, as we shall see, suggest a great and vulnerable love, complicated by moral scruples, that has wrenched the speaker out of her simpler delight in the world and has been physically defeated either by a lover's death or an absolute termination of a relationship. Putting the matter this way oversimplifies the situations of the poems, which are always open to a number of possible interpretations. In "'Twas like a Maelstrom," for instance, many signs indicate a state of sexual need, guilt, and frustration. At the same time, the condition *might* be one of threatened loss of religious faith, or of total loss of self-control, or indeed of a mixture of these and other predicaments. The poem consists of a series of extended similes telling us what "it"—the unnamed crisis around which the poem is spun in an effort to characterize its quality—was "*like*" but not what it *was*.

The three succeeding poems then swirl around this central complex of experience. The first of them, "I gave myself to Him—" (580), even lets go into an atmosphere of sweetly precarious risk-taking, in fine contrast to the painful affects surrounding it. It gently foreshadows certain poems further along, such as the fancifully joyful eleventh poem, "A Murmur in the Trees—to note" (416); and also the thirteenth and fourteenth poems, "Not in this World to see his face" (418) and "I found the words to every thought" (581), which recall an indefinable ecstasy, never to be surrendered, from the passionate past. Poem 580 is more than a beam of charming sunlight, however. It makes room for visions of rich delight and love—commits itself to them—and leavens the general tone, anticipating similar later effects in the sequence. Still, it has its darker underside—its sense of making do within disillusionment. It seems to hark back to a moment before the trauma of the opening poems and remind itself of a time of hope and danger that preceded it, when there was a "contract" with a lover (or life, or God—but the language suggests a love-relationship) that was "solemn" and was "ratified" yet still uncertain:

I gave myself to Him—
And took Himself, for Pay,
The solemn contract of a Life
Was ratified, this way—

The Wealth might disappoint—
Myself a poorer prove
Than this great Purchaser suspect,
The Daily Own—of Love

Depreciate the Vision—
But till the Merchant buy—

Still Fable—in the Isles of Spice—
The subtle Cargoes—lie—

At least—'tis Mutual—Risk—
Some—found it—Mutual Gain—
Sweet Debt of Life—Each Night to owe—
Insolvent—every Noon—

(580)

If we have been at pains to suggest the large vision, and even epic scope, of this very subjective and private poet's art, we should also make bold to note the sophistication of a poem like this one. The imagery is worldly, yet might be read as religious. The sense of love as a contract, entered into with one whose expectations may be disappointed while the dreams behind them somehow can still prevail, is equally ambivalent. Ambivalent or not, however, there are fear and distrust of love, and marvelous, hovering dreams, and some oppression by the sense of dependency on a male figure. The poem's view of love and of existence generally is a bittersweet, gambler's view, almost gaily pessimistic.

It is this darker, subtler side of 580 that connects it with the starker poems preceding it and the two poems of disequilibrium immediately following it: "Sunset at Night—is natural" (415) and "We grow accustomed to the Dark" (419). The first of these swiftly recapitulates the opening poem's sense of total, dreadful disorder. ("Midnight's—due—at Noon"; "Jehovah's Watch—is wrong.") The second plays on the imagery of light and darkness, which recurs in Dickinson's work in many contexts, once more. Its nearly innocuous first line, "We grow accustomed to the Dark," telegraphs a shift from normal, commonsense talk (about the adjustments of vision to literal darkness) to the "larger—Darknesses" of depression close to madness: "those Evenings of the Brain." Here too there is adjustment of a kind, but the brooding irony of its character is obvious:

Either the Darkness alters—
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight—
And Life steps almost straight.

The sequence maintains its wobbling balance, with its inability to lift itself out of the negative even when, as in the next poem, "You'll know it—as you know 'tis Noon" (420), it strikes a cheerful note of faith. There is an immediate lapse, in "A charm invests a face" (421), into the precise mood of 580: wary, minimally hopeful, refusing to shut possibility out somehow. We would almost be persuaded that the wounded sensibility

of the sequence has kept itself in order pretty well after all, and has at least not lost all resiliency and capacity for self-renewal. But then a single strange poem, "If I may have it, when it's dead" (577), disabuses us and we are back in the world of the first three poems of the fascicle, albeit in a different key.

As with the ferret image in the second poem, so also the corpse-imagery in this ninth poem is rankly physical. At the very heart of the sequence, poem 577 is grotesquely obsessed with a lover's corpse. Its opening line, "If I may have it, when it's dead," is matched in necrophiliac ardor by its ending:

Forgive me, if to stroke thy frost
Outvisions Paradise!

This is at once one of the most riddling and most interesting poems in the sequence. In form it is a welter, a mélange of quatrains—some in ballad meter, both rhymed and unrhymed, and some made up of rhyming tetrameter couplets—together with an irregular cinquain ($aax^4x^2a^2$). The primary end-rhyme pair is *Thee-me* ("Thee" is used in terminal position four times, "me" three times), and the constant repetition helps considerably in binding the stanzas together. And it should be noted that the first and last stanzas, although separately unrhymed, together constitute somewhat of a rhyme scheme: *xaxb abxx*. The poem may have been conceived of as a "mad" poem, deliberately disoriented in various ways, that follows through on the state of "Madness" set up and then questioned in the first poem. Similarly, its morbidity may be an afterbeat of the second poem, whose attention is so riveted on the grave and what lies hidden within it (and on the self as its own grave once life has shattered its most cherished meanings). The initial affect has a certain literal grossness that counteracts the conventional sentimentality with which the passage is tinged:

If I may have it, when it's dead,
I'll be contented—so—
If just as soon as Breath is out
It shall belong to me—

Until they lock it in the Grave,
'Tis Bliss I cannot weigh—
For tho' they lock Thee in the Grave,
Myself—can own the key—

The repeated "it" in three of these lines is so suggestive of an inert body—a cadaver (with traces of the head Isabella buried in her pot of

basil)—that we must take the language at face value. The literal situation envisioned is that the "I" of the poem will have sole access to the body until it is buried, and that this contact will allow the speaker to bridge the distance between herself and her lover after death. The rapture at the prospect, combined with the macabre circumstances and hints elsewhere in the poem, indicates that this face-to-face meeting will be the first ever. That is, at last the poem's protagonist will be able to put a face on the warm presence, conjured up by her love and need, "buried" inside her and yet a living spiritual companion.

> Think of it Lover! I and Thee
> Permitted—face to face to be—
> After a Life—a Death—We'll say—
> For Death was That—
> And This—is Thee—
>
> I'll tell Thee All—how Bald it grew—
> How Midnight felt, at first—to me—
> How all the Clocks stopped in the World—
> And Sunshine pinched me—'Twas so cold—
>
> Then how the Grief got sleepy—some—
> As if my Soul were deaf and dumb—
> Just making signs—across—to Thee—
> That this way—thou could'st notice me—

These three middle stanzas seem to recapitulate the experience of suffering in the first two poems of the sequence, but now the imagined scene is one of trusting, self-revealing conversation by lovers (perhaps in one another's arms). We still do not know whether an actual lover has actually died, or whether the speaker is addressing a desired lover with whom there will never be a relationship, or whether there was a wrenching parting with a man still living—either of the last two possibilities would be a kind of death where such vulnerably passionate commitment has been present. But the deprivation, the sense of lonely abandonment, suggests that the poem's deepest motivation is the need for communion at all costs. The need is pathetic—felt to be desperately hopeless—and accompanied by the conviction that the desired communion will never be permitted, whether by God, or by society, or by the longed-for lover, or even by the speaker herself. The final stanza says:

> Forgive me, if the Grave come slow—
> For Coveting to look at Thee—
> Forgive me, if to stroke thy frost
> Outvisions Paradise!

Many tonalities in this complex poem come together in this stanza. "Thy frost," most literally, refers to a cold, dead body. The phrase also recalls the earlier conceit used to suggest an ambience of utter coldness: "And Sunshine pinched me—'Twas so cold." (We are probably also in the realm of poem 281, in Fascicle 16, where "Truth" is revealed as "Bald, and Cold.") The implication that it was sexual coldness, despite the intensity, which blocked off the relationship and prevented deeper communion, is an obvious possibility. The coldness may have been on either partner's side, or a matter of timidity or inhibition, or just the frozen-out isolation of the speaker from the person whose love she dreamed of but never experienced in any way. Even the reference to delaying Paradise in favor of a lesser but more immediate and perverse satisfaction ("stroke thy frost") may conceivably refer to a psychological problem related to fear of consummation. Literally, of course, in this near-conceit, the speaker is saying that she needs to cherish the dream of warm-cold communion even at the expense of putting off a quick death that would enable her to join her soul-mate in Heaven immediately—one of several instances of the simultaneous use and circumvention of sentimental clichés in this poem. However one reads it, the poem reveals enormous courage in facing and exposing psychic humiliation and embarrassment, whatever shocking imagery and morbid imaginings may be revealed in the process. In this respect, 577 more than matches the poems that precede it.

The quietly composed poem that follows, "I read my sentence—steadily" (412), has the taut understatement of "The Color of the Grave is Green." Also, it carries forward, in a different key, the humiliation or embarrassment (here called "the shame") that contributes to the emotional mixture of "If I may have it, when it's dead." It presents an excruciating experience of rejection, couched in courtroom terminology. Once more, the "I" does not spell out whoever or whatever has shamed her so deeply that she cannot feel death will be "a novel Agony." In the dynamics of the sequence, this poem is a magnificent moment of control. Its sudden, deceptive final calm ("And there, the Matter ends—") provides an essential conversion of affect. To attain a deathlike tranquility and so reduce the shock of being "sentenced" to eternal anguish, the speaker has trained her Soul to become "familiar—with her extremity" and has succeeded all too well. She has made her Soul so tranquilly friendly with "Death" that the dreadful abnegation of life's hopes has come upon her impersonally and irrevocably: "silently, invisibly," as Blake would have put it. (The subtle reciprocities with "If I may have it, when it's dead" are established simply by juxtaposition.)

Six poems in a relatively muted key follow in the wake of "I read my sentence—steadily," as if to hold its Lethe-tending balance steady for a

prolonged moment before the fascicle's final poem. A fey whimsy marks "A Murmur in the Trees—to note—" (416), whose charm reminds us of the more popularly known poems by Dickinson but which, in context, may suggest a soul on its way to the unknown and thereby isolated from the known world. "It is dead—Find it" (417) reinforces this latter impression about 416, which might otherwise be dismissed as forced, by its riddling questions and answers about the state of being dead. "Not in this World to see his face" (418) archly puts off the opportunity to experience that state; and "I found the words to every thought" (581) cheerfully reports a "thought" so blazing it cannot be expressed in language—although the speaker has never had the problem before. The rhetorical questions ending this tiny pair of quatrains make for a miniature climax of morale-sustaining within the set of seven poems that began with "I read my sentence—steadily." The questions suggest uncommunicable inspiration:

> Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal—
> Or Noon—in Mazarin?

The two final poems of the set following "I read my sentence—steadily," however, lean more toward that poem's mood than the emotional buffer-poems we have been noting. They remain lighter in spirit than 412, but nevertheless are tinged with its dark humiliation. "I never felt at Home—Below" (413) is playful in its distrust of "Paradise," echoing "If I may have it, when it's dead" in a folk-comic key, and in picturing God as an all-seeing telescope. But it is serious in presenting a wistful disorientation, together with unease at God's constant vigil and at the thought of a Judgment Day. "The Body grows without" (578) begins brightly and wittily ("The body grows without— / The more convenient way"), yet turns at once to an image of the harried spirit seeking shelter in the flesh. But the second of the two quatrains loses its edge. It is at once slightly complacent in its moralizing (as though the speaker were saying, "I've had these tempests of passion but nevertheless I'm virtuous through and through") and weakly derivative. Wordsworth tells us, with stirring tenderness in its context in "Tintern Abbey," that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her!" Dickinson says of the body that

> Ajar—secure—inviting—
> It never did betray
> The Soul that asked its shelter
> In solemn honesty

The first line of this quatrain is daring and beautiful, a marvelous image of feminine self-regard in seductiveness. But its glory hovers alone in the stanza, the rest of which hardly matches its style and volatility.

But the final poem of the fascicle, "I had been hungry, all the Years" (579), precisely and humanly places the state of the sensibility that has been riding the entire sequence. Essentially, it narrates a moment of triumph that has come too late and is fraught with sick and weary disillusion. A distant echo of the heart-wrung third poem, "'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch," it cannot rise to an eccentric fate that seeks to reverse the despair with which the sequence has seemed to come to terms, and that would stir one, again, to enjoy exuberant love or simply the available delights of being alive. Perhaps the affect here is a correction of the promising yet unsatisfying "The Body grows without." If that poem presumes self-satisfaction at resisting unworthy temptation (or self-reassurance at having, "in solemn honesty," yielded to another equally sturdy and sincere soul), the closing poem brings an end to such whistling in the dark. There can be no recovery from the blows evoked in the opening poems, and the trauma inflicted, and the morbid probings. The corruption of hope spelled out in "I gave myself to Him" is permanent:

> I had been hungry, all the Years—
> My Noon had Come—to dine—
> I trembling drew the Table near—
> And touched the Curious Wine—
>
> 'Twas this on Tables I had seen—
> When turning, hungry, Home
> I looked in Windows, for the Wealth
> I could not hope—for Mine—
>
> I did not know the ample Bread—
> 'Twas so unlike the Crumb
> The Birds and I, had often shared
> In Nature's—Dining Room—
>
> The Plenty hurt me—'twas so new—
> Myself felt ill—and odd—
> As Berry—of a Mountain Bush—
> Transplanted—to the Road—
>
> Nor was I hungry—so I found
> That Hunger—was a way
> Of Persons outside Windows—
> The Entering—takes away—
>
> (579)

We noted, at the start of our discussion of Fascicle 15, that the poem that opens Fascicle 16, "Before I got my eye put out" (327), might be regarded as epitomizing the movement of the seventeen poems we were about to deal with. To turn from "I had been hungry, all the Years" to Poem 327 is to recognize an embodiment, in altered imagery that is also a comment on the poet's art, of a process of realization that has reached one level of transcendence. Even the first line tells us the condition in which the new fascicle starts and its reciprocal relationship to Fascicle 15 within an enfolding multiple sequence.

4. Fascicle 16: A New Start

It is in the aftermath of the cruel struggle for balance between two levels of very highly charged affect (the horror concentrated near the start of Fascicle 15 and the incomplete repossession and final weakening and lost hope at the end, with intervening poems contributing to the balance) that Fascicle 16 acts in such finely attuned reciprocity with the longer sequence. The two fascicles share an obsession with death, literal and symbolic, and are charged with the same overwhelming memory of irrevocable loss. The link, and the difference, is beautifully clear in the first poem of Fascicle 16, discussed in some detail in the second section of this chapter. It presents a wounded, life-fearing condition paralleling that at the end of Fascicle 15. The self, at a minimal level of vitality, is just barely holding itself intact; but also, it makes a new start in recalling the full energies, however destructive, of the beautiful natural world the sunlight reveals. That is the ambivalent state presented in "Before I got my eye put out" (327), which conjures up the splendors of the world that have reduced it to its present misery: splendors it still perhaps longs for but that would kill again, at once, through their sheer generous brilliance could the speaker's vision be restored.

The second poem, "Of nearness to her sundered Things" (607), stresses memory—a force so powerful in this poem that images out of the safer past eclipse the present scene. The movement of the five stanzas is like that in the first poem. This time, though, the central three stanzas are not devoted to natural phenomena; instead, they center on a "Mouldering Playmate" and other "Shapes we buried."

The relationship between these opening poems, 327 and 607, is a hovering one within a narrow psychological border area between renunciation of the vital world and cherishing of what is irrevocably past. To recapitulate, the speaker in 327 has suffered a great disaster because of the full impact of "the Sun." Its appearance to her blinded her to lesser delights; now she has lost that Sun and, reduced to naked sensibility and imagination, could not bear the shock of new sensuous and emotional arousal. Yet the imagery shows how keen her response has been and would be again. The poem stands as an expression of most intense love for the world of seen things amidst a condition of darkness and fear. It has its "positive" side in the implication that the world's bright life is so beautiful it would, if restored to the speaker, break her heart with joy and make her mistress of more than she had realized before. But that would be a freedom treasonable to the love that has destroyed her. Poem 607 "therefore" (we are speaking of the logic of emotional displacement) converts the mood and context of the opening poem. In it the power of sensation becomes the power of memory; the dazzling Sun and all it reveals is replaced by loved persons, "Things," and moments that return from death's realm: "Bright Knots of Apparitions." Each loss of something dear to me was a death of myself—that is the implication, and it throws an intense light on the predicament of the first poem:

> The Grave yields back her Robberies—
> The Years, our pilfered Things—
> Bright Knots of Apparitions
> Salute us, with their wings—
>
> As we—it were—that perished—
> Themself—had just remained till we rejoin them—
> And 'twas they, and not ourself
> That mourned.

These are the closing stanzas of 607. In them an extraordinary evocation of the persistence of the past in memory takes a brilliant turn. For here the past mourns the future, and in a personal sense the child mourns its perishing into the adult. (The "Bright Knots of Apparitions" must be our former selves as well as other memories, with all the ways of seeing and loving we have formerly known.) Again—as in poem 577 of Fascicle 15—literal corpse imagery enters, in the figure of the "Mouldering Playmate" who returns. Then we move from the concentrated perception, couched hypothetically, in the line "As we—it were—that perished" in 607 to the desperately exhilarated "Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord" (279), and from there to the remarkable triad formed by the fourth, fifth, and sixth poems: "I like a look of Agony" (241), "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (280), and " 'Tis so appalling—it exhilirates" (281). In these poems we have a fling into an acid celebration of the end of doubts and ambiguities in death. The first is brief and fiercely unexpected—a remarkable foreshadowing of major affective modes in twentieth-century poets as far apart as Mayakovsky and Plath:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

(241)

The magnificent opening line of this poem seems emotional hyperbole. It was masterly to use the word "like" in such a harsh context—a shocking word full of savage irony here. The line cuts passionately, in deep recognition of inescapable truth, as though uttered by a cosmic diagnostician obsessed by the horror of things. From the third line on, the poem fixes on those physical symptoms of dying it is "impossible to feign." The cosmic diagnostician is also, in an angrily ironic sense, a comically impatient doctor who doesn't "like" uncertain symptoms, let alone mere play-acting at mortal suffering, in patients. People who aren't really dying are hypocrites. Meanwhile, the deeper affective energy comes from something like a thrill of recognition of the reality of death. The release of sensibility comes, once again, at the expense of a suspicion of morbidity or worse.

This rigorous little poem leads directly toward the even more dire "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," a poem that intensifies the sickeningly liberating hard recognition of the self's own fate:

Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

"And Finished knowing—then" is a phrase that cuts two ways. The variant, "And Got through—knowing—then," also carries both meanings: the end of knowing or the plunging into truth. The first ties in with the preceding poem and the finality of the glazed eyes; the second with the following poem. In either case, the soul is "secure" in its grasping of

ultimate horror—" 'Tis so appalling—it exhilirates"—an insight pounded home in the third and fifth stanzas of the sixth poem (281):

The Truth, is Bald, and Cold—
But that will hold—
If any are not sure—
We show them—prayer—
But we, who know,
Stop hoping, now—

and:

Others, Can wrestle—
Your's, is done—
And so of Wo, bleak dreaded—come,
It sets the Fright at liberty—
And Terror's free—
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!

This hard-won clarity of perception, related to poems in 15, allows the distancing in the seventh and eighth poems: "How noteless Men, and Pleiads, stand" (282) and "When we stand on the tops of Things" (242). These have something of the calm of "Of nearness to her sundered Things" but with the important shift to acceptance of distance—a kind of cosmic indifference—rather than the recapturing of closeness as an earnest of immortality. In the seventh poem both men and stars are taken for granted and then suddenly vanish—"O'ertakeless, as the Air"—and human "disappointment" (how calm a word after the "Wo, bleak dreaded" of the sixth poem) at their passing is, from the point of view of the smiling heavens, simply that—disappointment, not agony of spirit. It is perhaps no more worthy of an answer than an overly importunate child:

Why did'nt we detain Them?
The Heavens with a smile,
Sweep by our disappointed Heads
Without a syllable—

The "Pleiads" become in the eighth poem the "Stars" that "dare shine occasionally / Upon a spotted World." Sorting out the somewhat confusing multiplicity of sources of light—mirrors, lightning, stars, suns—we recall the potent comment on the speaker's state at the opening of the sequence (327):

So safer—guess—with just my soul
Upon the window pane—
Where other creatures put their eyes—
Incautious—of the Sun—

This eighth poem, however (242), celebrates the opposite mode of behavior:

The Perfect, nowhere be afraid—
They bear their dauntless Heads,
Where others, dare not go at Noon,
Protected by their deeds—

Sun and lightning hold no terrors for the "Sound ones," who reflect heavenly illumination like "Mirrorrs on the scene— / Just laying light." These "Stars dare shine occasionally / Upon a spotted World," and provide a "proof" for the terrified soul that the "Suns" will endure. This poem brings the sequence to a fragile yet inevitable equilibrium, for its vision of an eternal order is based purely on the extension of human stability and strength: "And Suns, go surer, for their Proof, / As if an Axle, held."

Three more poems follow, however: " 'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (445), "Afraid! Of whom am I afraid" (608), and "He showed me Hights I never saw" (446). As with the preceding fascicle, they project an overpowering sense of having missed out and of sheer weight of sad awareness: the morbid envisioning of one's own death and the lonely waiting in 445; the flamboyant, nearly hysterical self-reassuring in the face of death in 608; and finally, in 446, the appalled acceptance, too late, of the cosmic offer first tended in the sequence's opening poem. *Now*, after all has been lost or renounced, the soul would venture into the great cosmos and realms of transcendence. But the opportunity has passed although the will has grown more urgent and decisive. So the fascicle ends in the most poignant sort of wish-fulfillment:

He showed me Hights I never saw—
"Would'st Climb"—He said?
I said, "Not so."
"With me"—He said—"With me?"

He showed me secrets—Morning's nest—
The Rope the Nights were put across—
"And now, Would'st have me for a Guest?"
I could not find my "Yes"—

And then—He brake His Life,
And lo
A light for me, did solemn glow—
The steadier, as my face withdrew—
And could I further "no"?

(446)

We have lingered over these two fascicles because of the special challenge Dickinson offers. She wrote with her nerve-ends, massing the results in poem-clusters whose internal coherence impresses itself on us only after sufficient absorption in the individual poems in relation to one another. No other poet of power demands so much internalization by the reader who wishes to get the precise emotional set of her poems. The least extroverted of poets, she *presents* her affects with a minimum of personal intrusion.

We might well have chosen other sequences for extended discussion. Fascicle 20,[8] for instance, is less demanding than 15 and 16 and unfolds exquisitely. It involves contemplation of nature's impersonal continuity and beauty (whatever our private woes) and a considerable music of courageous loneliness, love, sacrifice, and transport. A strong insistence on subjective vision as primary truth suffuses this sequence with the bright intensity of an indomitable will. It is supported by such poems as the inspired "Dare you see a Soul at the 'White Heat?' " (365), whose images embody the artistic process that produces pure affects from personal experience; the well-known "The Soul selects her own Society" (303); and the passionately felt love poem "How sick—to wait—in any place—but thine" (368).

The interaction between Fascicle 20 and the two fascicles we have been considering is a matter of obvious interest, as in fact is the aesthetic relationship among all the fascicles. This is a question very similar to the one that Pound's cantos present. We chose to begin with Fascicles 15 and 16 because they are representative but also because they contain so much work of sheer power and are extraordinarily adventurous psychologically—that is, in their deep associative diving. But a thorough study of all the forty fascicles still lies ahead. It promises to be one of the great voyages of discovery in modern criticism.

8. Fascicle 20: 1725, 1761, 364, 524, 525, 365, 526, 301, 527, 366, 367, 670, 302, 303, 368, 528, 369, 370.