THE NIGHT SKY V

Attempts to dominate or monopolize the character of what is meaningful constitutes a profoundly political project, perhaps the most important project of the late modern era, when the struggle over material goods has extended most explicitly to the domains of language and communication, and when the spectacular casts a large shadow over small and quotidian matters.

—Thomas Dumm, A Politics of the Ordinary

Furthermore, there are an infinite number of worlds both like and unlike this world of ours. For the atoms being infinite in number, as was proved already, are borne on far out into space. For those atoms, which are of such nature that a world could be created out of them or made by them, have not been used up either on one world or on a limited number of worlds, nor again on the worlds that are alike, or on this which are different from these. So that there nowhere exists an obstacle to the infinite number of worlds.

—Epicurus

Artifacts are congealed ideology.

—Iain A. Boal, "A Flow of Monsters"

1. Ragged

Perhaps I should begin to make amends for the zigzag and apparently arbitrary inclusions in these, the foregoing, writings. Trusting to intuition's links,

and my own game with the subject, the topic, probably has gone too far, or maybe not far enough. Attention deficit disorder, a tendency to digress; perhaps just a desire to experience things as an endless set of beginnings, with the implied promise and permission; a sequence of dawns, of first kisses, a constellation without the picture-making lines drawn.

Against the sense of belatedness comes the desire for earliness, to be a creature born into birdsong and sun breaking over, the far ridge, to feel the turn of the earth.

The romance of the turn, whether it is toward or away. My turn, your turn.

Paul Celan's turn:

The poem holds its ground... the poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an "already-no-more" into a "still-here."

This "still-here" can only mean speaking. Not language as such, but responding and—not just verbally—"corresponding" to something.

In other words: language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens.

This "still-here" of the poem can only be found in the work of poets who do not forget what they speak from an angle of reflection which is their own existence, their own physical nature.

This shows the poem yet more clearly as one person's language becomes shape and, essentially, a presence in the present.

Celan's "still-here" implies a spatio-temporal presence, the "still" evoking the temporal stasis of duration, and the "here" fixing that stasis in place. The poem on this reading might be what most fundamentally stands for, or stands in for, the fact of someone's existence. The someone here is not necessarily the author—that is, the poem need not be in a literal sense "about" the author—but a re-encounter of the poet's self-witnessing, or as, language. It is as if the poet were composing her or his own ghost and sending it out to the place where it vanishes, leaving behind the herald of its having
been. (Jean-Luc Nancy: "Present is that which occupies a place. The place is place—site, situation, disposition—in the coming into space of a time, in a spacing that allows that something come into presence, in a unique time that engenders itself in this point in space, as its spacing.")

The poem is a temporal-spatial alignment of a given self with language, and this alignment is such that the poem exactly configures that self's transformation or inscription into linguistic experience. Here aura and excess spill from the text, questioning whether an idea of exact alignment is sufficient, as if a poem were an object that casts no shadow, or a shadow from which the object had been withdrawn, a residual presence whose materiality is a kind of illusion. Somewhere is the desire to separate the poem from the poet, while still allowing for a poetics of identity that does not inhibit, conceal, or overdetermine the poem's meaning.

Celan continues:

The poem is lonely. It is lonely and en route. Its author stays with it.

Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, in the encounter, in the mystery of encounter?

The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it.

For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading.

The attention which the poem pays to all that it encounters, its more acute sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of the "tremors and hints"—all this is not, I think, achieved by an eye competing (or concuring) with ever more precise instruments, but, rather, by a kind of concentration mindful of all our dates.

"Attention," if you allow me a quote from Malebranche via Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka, "attention is the natural prayer of the soul."

The poem becomes—under what conditions—the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation—often desperate conversation.

Only the space of this conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather it into a "you" around the naming and speaking I. But this "you," come about by dint of being named and addressed, brings an otherness into the present. Even in the here and now of the poem—and the poem has only this one, unique, momentary present—even in this immediacy and nearness, the otherness gives voice to what is most its own: its time.

Whenever we speak of things in this way we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an "open" question "without resolution," a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces—we have ventured far out.

The poem also searches for this place.

A musical alliance, the residual trace of what was once experience and may be, who knows, soon again, now that we are saturated with information and might want to dig our heels, our hands, into the loam we have created: the great Compost Heap. See here, I have found one half of a corn cob, and a shard from a Hellenic amphora, and some strange seeds, and that thing blinking on the horizon: a kite made of what? beach debris, condoms knit with seaweed.

I stepped on a wasp.

But every time the sun makes a gold scrim across the trees, which is any morning without cloud, there is simple amazement, a desire to hold it in place, but it goes, and comes again, and goes, and so forth, so one is, finally, glad for the repetition which erases the fear of only once, once only.

Your turn, as if you could invite the Morrow to save today.

2. re: Act

Tuesday morning, July.

I am back in the same room where the female cardinal battled against the window; this time there are no cicadas and no sign of her, although her mate has been flitting about, assiduously avoiding the glass. A woman across the
rough ground has come out of her house with her dog, an Irish setter on a leash, to her red car, and urged the dog to get into the backseat, but the dog balked. She said, "Make up your mind," and then "O.K., back to the house," and pulled the dog to where I could not see it. Then she reappeared and, once again, offered the dog a choice between the backseat of the car or the house. The dog looked morose, even from this distance, his head and tail hung low. Finally she gave up and attached the dog to a long tether which slides along a sort of clothesline running between the garage and the house, so the tether can move. Now she has gone off to work and the dog is lying on the grass.

While watching this scene I have also been reading essays by the artist Robert Smithson (1938–73). His writings perch between his own particular set of interests and concerns and the world’s somewhat arbitrary—that is, uncontrollable—events: examples, scenes, artifacts, linguistic as well as concrete, from which he draws. There is a mobile pleasure in this writing, in reading this writing, borne along by confident exploration, which seems now rare, cauterized in our mediated, indirect age.

The sense of the life of the mind, its rootedness in experience. Smithson’s freedom arises from a combination of intense focus, Celan’s attention, linked to the is-ness of the world, the world as a full place, a place full of so much stuff all you have to do is choose one thing over another until you build a sculpture or a poem or a house or a plane or a garden. Your being here gathers around you the way weather gathers around a day. Here is Smithson describing the site of his most revered work, the Spiral Jetty in Great Salt Lake, Utah:

About one mile north of the oil seeps I selected my site. Irregular beds of limestone dip gently eastward, massive deposits of black basalt are broken over the peninsula, giving the region a shattered appearance. It is one of the few places on the lake where the water comes right up to the mainland. Under shallow pinkish water is a network of mud cracks supporting the jigsaw puzzle that composes the salt flats. As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts,

no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled onto an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other. It was as if the mainland oscillated with waves and pulsations, and the lake remained rock still. The shore of the lake became the edge of the sun, a boiling curve, an explosion rising into a fiery prominence. Matter collapsing into the lake mirrored in the shape of a spiral. No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none.

I aspire to such fulsome engagement with the world, through or by which all things solid are absorbed into attention. It is an enviable economy, one that does not register deficit, but domesticates, by the concentration of focus, a Circuit call that draws forth from the vacant and diverse only what it wants, only what is of use. Smithson was not interested in the art object as such, but in the process of creation, in the synthesis of divergent realms of knowledge into the specifics of response. His work was inseparable from its spatio-temporal context.

The scale of the Spiral Jetty tends to fluctuate depending on where the viewer happens to be. Size determines an object, but scale determines art. A crack in the wall if viewed in terms of scale, not size, could be called the Grand Canyon. A room could be made to take on the immensity of the solar system. Scale depends on one’s capacity to be conscious of the actualities of perception. When one refuses to release scale from size, one is left with an object or language that appears to be certain. For me scale operates by uncertainty.

The Spiral Jetty remains an icon, the talismanic emblem of an artist who achieved a harmonious and haunting relation between specific site and individual perception. Like Marcel Duchamp’s before him, Smithson’s legacy rests as much in the turn of his mind (now most clearly available in his writings) as in manifestations and embodiments of physical objects. Smithson (who did not particularly admire Duchamp) resisted a Cartesian worldview, setting in motion a constant dialectic of engagement (site and nonsite), fed by as many sources as were necessary.

America Online: twenty-one channels to choose from, one of which is called Learning and Culture.
3. Penance

I took a trip. I went to Istanbul (once Constantinople, once Byzantium) and then flew to İzmir, and thence to Bodrum, where I (and others) boarded a ship, Orfeus (sic), and sailed down the southwest coast of Turkey. This is a part of the world about which I knew next to nothing. What initially drew me to this journey was a desire to stand inside of the Hagia Sofia, the astonishing cathedral in which currents of the Islamic East and Christian West converge.

It is always good to know something of a city’s history. It helps us to understand many of the things we see, and we are better able to cast our minds back hundreds of years and to imagine what things were like in olden days. In the case of Constantinople it enables us to see a city which, in early Greek times, was called ‘the Dwelling of the Gods’; then to become, under Constantine the Great and those emperors who followed him, the Queen City of Christendom and, until recent times, the heart of the most powerful Muslim country the world has known.1

—minaret, mosque, the Golden Horn, the Hippodrome, obelisk, sultan, the Grand Bazaar, seraglio, hareem, Bosphorus, mezzizin, Mecca, Topkapi, Ottoman, caliph, Persia—

I had seen slides of the Hagia Sofia when I was in college, and it had stayed in my mind as a central vision: mysterious, monumental, a place where a spiritual history, however dark, must be palpable. Dedicated in 537 by Justinian, it was the Church of Divine Wisdom for a thousand years; in 1453 it became a mosque, minarets were added. Under Atatürk, the leader of the modern Turkish Republic, it was made into a museum in 1935.

Most of the Christian mosaics have been eradicated, leaving desolate stretches on the vast walls; those that remain stare from their niches like the last creatures of a nearly extinguished species. The central nave is filled with scaffolding; and high above, huge discs, inscribed in a beautiful curvilinear Arabic with prayers to Allah, like shields against the infidels, stare down. I began to think about how we in the West derive so much of our self-knowledge from the relationship between image and story, icon and text, figure and landscape. It is a geometry of space, figure, and horizon (the image of a cross); Islam is all curvilinear, inscription, dome, a legacy of prophecy without icons, a call to prayer.

Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atmosphere of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand.2

The role of storyteller on our trip was taken first by Cornell Fleischer, an American historian of the Middle East, who speaks impeccable Turkish and knows the intricate lines of the region’s narratives as if he had woven them himself. His familiarity helped to ease the embarrassment of our ignorance.

Walking barefoot in the Blue Mosque, the cool sensuality of material: prayer rug, magic carpet.

Once we were at sea, our navigator was a Welsh archaeologist named David Price-Williams, who led our expeditions over rough rocky ruins, up steep hills, across torrid empty agoras. Everywhere, he would piece together a story of an ancient Dorian village, the site of a Byzantine religious pilgrimage, a Roman fortress, a Hellenic temple. Gemili, a high island promontory overlooking a narrow anchorage, gave rise to an incredible narrative, spanning three centuries (the fourth through the seventh a.d.). The ruins were like a broken syntax, and as we climbed up to the highest point overlooking the bay, we found ourselves in the grips of a story unfurling through the brilliantly illuminated open arches of a processional way. Here, according to Price-Williams, was probably the site of the death of Saint Nicholas, whose relics were carried down the mountainous terrain from the tiny high church to a lower church. He told the story as if it were a detective novel, animating the ruins with anticipatory intrigue, in which he asked over and over: Why would they have put this stone, this column, this wall, this ambulatory, here? What is this for? At each juncture, one could sense a physical relationship between particulars of place and the narration of histories. But without this continuous contextualization, the constant transformation of information into
knowledge, we would have climbed as if through so much mute rubble. Even reading the brief descriptive texts we were given, there is simply no way to apprehend the profound drama elicited from the actual site and Price-Williams's telling, so that one could bear, descending the treacherous, luminous path, the chanting of monks bearing sacred relics.

A woman knelt at the site and burned incense.

And there was yet another storyteller, Richard Steffy, a nautical archaeologist, whose work on classical and medieval shipwrecks has made him a legend in the field. There is the story of the stones and the rocks and then there is the story of the underworld, the seabeds, strewn with relics, wrecks, cargoes of ancient glass, amphorae, arms, hulls, masts, caskets. "The death of a lady," he said. "She came apart in fits and starts and gently settled to the bottom of the sea."

Later, sailing on the flat disc of sea, I wrote in a little journal:

Rocks along the coastline look folded, like elephant skin, with deep crevices, and you can imagine the faces and forms of creatures. The landscape emerges as a series of low horizontal but curvaceous outcroppings, one behind another behind another, so it has the effect of a veiled sequential layering. The forms of the rocks also resemble the piling up of wet clay; there are bright patches and low bushes and small trees, like punctuation marks.

As has happened before, I am aware of how a given landscape might give rise to the central myths of a culture.

I say to students: Write from the known into the unknown, as if on a journey. This is not a matter of forgetting everything so much as a coming upon the place where all belongings and habits and familiar surroundings are suspended, and you begin to move on, out, away, and what propels this movement, this trajectory, is a desire to find out what you do not yet know. As if language were a sea, buoyant, which will hold you up as you go along.

I say: Notice when the words you choose seem to come from the same word bag, and so to have the same weight or value, the same specific gravity, as if you had taken along only T-shirts, all the same color. This is poetic scale.

You want your poem to have variety; no word is intrinsically poetic; there is no vocabulary that belongs only to poetry.

I say: Create enjambment between the rhythm of meaning and the meaning of rhythm.

I say: What I value most in a writer is candor.

The morning as crisp and bright as any idea of pure vision, glittering little nodules of dew making their tinselled drama of passage. Staring is good for the soul, what passes for the soul.

5. Optics

The world of information and communication on line, much hailed as a technological advance, is also a social retreat accompanying a loss of the public and social space of the cities, the aesthetic, sensual and nonhuman space of the country, a privatization of physical space and a disembodiment of daily life. A central appeal cited for the new technologies is that their users will no longer have to leave home, and paens accumulate to the convenience of being able to access libraries and entertainments via personal computers that become less tools of engenderment than channels of consumption. This vision of disembodied an-chorities connected to the world only by information and entertainment mediated by the entities that control its flow seems more nightmarish than idyllic. Postulated as a solution to gridlock, crime on the streets, the chronic sense of time’s scarcity, it seems indeed a means to avoid addressing such problems, a form of acquiescence. Literacy is not about books read, not just about bibliographies; it is not synonymous with “literacy.” A literate culture is one in which distinctions are drawn in order that choices can be made, not just choices between the red and the black dress, but between Bill Clinton, say, and someone less intimidated by what he cannot be facile and ingratiating toward, in a lip service that passes for his word: the National Endowment for the Arts, for example. Literacy is a tool, an empowering weapon against ordinations of what constitutes a good and happy life. Literacy is one of our most subtle webbings between personal vision and public will, between personal will and public
vision. Literacy is necessarily dialectical; it instills a habit of question and answer, proposal and counter, supposition and elaboration, it breaches the gap between domestic intimacies and shared enthusiasms, between past histories and current journeys; it nurtures and supports habits of independence; most importantly, it does not shirk from the complexities of the multifaceted syntax of our reality. One might imagine a conversation that does not pivot around the computer's stark duality: yes/no, on/off. When aesthetics are reduced to marketplace agendas, then artists of every stripe begin to lose their connection to the rigors of controversy and settle instead for the easily consummated and reiterated surfaces of the unending sequels to the "new."

We need to explore the archives of our attention and attachment; we need to become archaeologists, dig around in the fertile soil of the past and redress, readress, the lost contexts of our diverse cultural enterprise.

I feel an enjambment between these polemics and actual intervention. It's not that I want persons to agree with me—few would argue against literacy—I want to make a space for myself and others that would allow us to write without feelings of futility. Perhaps this is vanity, and in vain, to want to insist on a world where our extraordinary privileges give rise to an increased interest in the love of things that don't necessarily feed our acquisitive natures and blind ambitions.

Don't get me wrong: I love the things of the world as much as the next girl; nothing comes easier to me than spending money. Just this morning I wrote out a check for fifty-eight dollars for more plants for my garden, a garden that is never the Garden I have in my mind's eye. My garden is a constant reminder of my faults and failings: extravagance and its handmaiden, impatience; learning the hard way, by trial and error (mostly error), so that I am always undoing as much as I am doing. If you had done it the right way in the first place, says the maepsirited scold of my inner voice, then there wouldn't be such a constant losing battle against the stone-enrusted soil, the weeds, the bugs. This same voice denounces my poems. Still, when I began to make a garden, many years ago, there was only a heap of old mattresses and rusting bedsteads, broken bottles and debris, and now at least there are moments of radiance when a shaped stillness holds sway in the late-summer sun.

Fact is, this little tract of earth captures my attention for hours and hours at a go. I obsess over it as I have over a lover's call, over a poem in progress. I have made it in the form of a circle, with stone paths within, so that I walk around it incessantly, viewing it from every perspective. There are two chairs in its center, but I rarely sit in either of them. When I do, I stare out at the pond, but before long I am up, pulling a piece of grass, a weed, clipping off a spent bloom. I wonder sometimes where my desire for a garden originated; after all, I am a city girl, born and reared in the dense verticality of New York's reflecting architecture. My grandmother, who lived in the country, had gardens, and I remember seeing her crouched down among her iris beds; I remember also a sense of the secrecy of place, where stone steps dipped down into a magic as colorful, varied, and animated as a circus, only without the crowds.

But there was another garden.

I think it was the summer after my father died, which we spent near Hanover, New Hampshire, when we visited the poet Archibald MacLeish, whom I believe had taught my father at Dartmouth. In any case, I remember walking through their gardens, and I remember, dimly, that I made a connection between being a poet and having a garden, as if the garden were a sort of language with a syntax of its own; it had to do with making a place receptive to human conversation, a setting, a provision, an entrance.

Indeed, what I notice about the garden is a visual syntax, a structure by which each individual plant is offset or augmented not only by its neighboring plants, but by the rhythms within the whole—variations in leaf shape, color, height; it works the way any language works, by contingency, so that meaning takes shape (takes its shape, is shaped) only through the accumulations of the proximities of each individual choice and decision. If I move a plant, I change the whole garden; if I change a word, I change, however slightly, the meaning of the paragraph or stanza. Over the years, I have lost more plants than I care to name (I barely remember names of the plants, but that is another matter), so that the garden also imitates real life, where early associations disappear, and new affinities come into being: the garden as palimpsest, an evolving record of its own mutated past. The garden has rhymes and half-rhymes, small internal rhythms and closures.

The little pale-yellow potentilla bush my aunt Priscilla gave me ten years ago is now five feet across. This summer I planted another, a white one, as small as the original was when I first planted it.

Sometimes I am amazed at how ruthless I can be, how roughly I will tear something out, how easily allow something to die; this makes me think I am not as kind as I imagine myself to be.

Sometimes I am also ruthless with my poems.
6. The Possible (Art)

I am rereading George Trow's precocious and powerful 1980 book *Within the Context of No Context*, a harrowing, eloquent indictment of the Age of Television, which has been reissued. It has made me think more about the liberal orthodoxy of my upbringing, not entirely dissimilar from his. Trow describes the false intimacy proffered by television; he speaks about "the cold child," his haunting image of the bleak landscape of the televised:

Television is dangerous because it operates according to an attention span that is childish but is cold. It simulates the warmth of a childish response but is cold... What is a cold child? A sadist.

What is childish behavior that is cold? It is sadism. After generations of cold childhood, cold childhood upon cold childhood, one piling on the other, moving, *at their best*, into frenzied adolescence, certain ugly blemishes have surfaced. An overt interest in sadism, for instance, and an interest in unnatural children. Americans, unrootted, blow with the wind, but they feel the truth when it touches them. An interest in sadism is an interest in truth in that it exposes the processes of false affection. A horror of children is the natural result of the spread, across the grid, of a cold childhood.

I grew up believing that the artifacts of human imagination—Woody Guthrie's, Pete Seeger's songs; the music in *Gays and Dolls* and *South Pacific*, of Billie Holiday and Burt Ives and Paul Robeson; the paintings of Matisse, Miró, of Philip Guston and Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline; the Brahms Double Concerto, Bach's Goldberg Variations, Mozart's Twenty-third Piano Concerto, the Beethoven Violin Concerto; Elvis's "Love Me Tender," Ray Charles's "What'd I Say?"; Marilyn's walk across a bridge (Niagara); Audrey Hepburn wearing Givenchy; Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*; Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Carroll's "The Jabberwocky," the poems of Robert Louis Stevenson, Alcott's *Little Women*; Charlie Chaplin's cunning comedy, the grace of Fred Astaire, Beckett's plays, *The Wizard of Oz*, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"—art, high and low, popular and arcane, was necessary.

Necessary to whom, for what?

There was, I suppose, an ideology: idealistic, progressive, pragmatic. The idealism was faith in the innate goodness, good will and good sense, of every individual; the progressivism was an ethics of community, understanding, and tolerance; the pragmatism was a commitment to action over reflection, doing over saying, and a correlative notion that the best way to learn about something was by doing, or at least by hearing witness, to it. Within this framework, art had a fundamental and essential role. It was the social element, the link, that might allow individual insight to be exposed to the strangeness of the other and then, through familiarity, to bring that strangeness into the communal. We learned national anthems in their native languages, and when Pete Seeger taught us songs, we were given lessons in local history. We learned countless dances from different countries; we visited, in the sixth grade, a Mennonite village in Pennsylvania and stayed on a family farm. Culture was not an elitist enterprise; it was what nourished and united the world by acknowledging difference, individuals and groups of individuals, and then providing a space (a public space) for persons of different persuasions (age, class, race, religion) with a common sense of the possible. This belief was fundamental to my sense of personal survival, it allowed me to resist certain temptations and to give in to others, and to discover for myself a terrain. It did not come along like the scent of a rose, it was inculcated, part of a deliberate, conscious, strategy on the part of parents and teachers.

Things went awry. Things do. But a fundamental notion was instilled: imagination makes form, and form is the exploration and cultivation of the limits of freedom; form is the fruition of choice as an expression of limit. The relation between the freedom to choose and the limits of choice was a relation of judgment, the basis of a morality anchored in ethics; it was, so we were taught, essential to democracy.

What interests me now about this vision is, apart from its obvious lack of cynicism toward human nature and the nature of human history, its sober, unironic earnestness, its optimism, is that the portrait of the artist that emerged was neither that of an individual isolated genius, romantic recluse, separate and insular, nor that of the celebrity icon. Artistic value was inseparable, locked into, the ongoing need for social transformation; there was not a separate, privileged vocabulary for art. Art provided gladness and hope and exuberance while simultaneously naming our darkest sorrows, struggles, and oppressions. We were encouraged to be iconoclastic, to resist homogenization as the sole means of integrating differences. The point was to encourage difference, to nourish individuation, while at the same time cultivating an ethos of response, of reciprocity and responsibility, by which to thwart pure self-centeredness. But if art were to be a vehicle for social
change, then it would have to be of and in its time, and individual artists would need to be aware not only of the history of a chosen genre, but of other significant intellectual and political events. Art was the result of many contexts.

The role of art was to be both a means of nonviolent protest, resistance, critique, and a source of spiritual consolation, historical compensation. This dual aspect continues to interest me, as it implies a relationship between form and content that is often overlooked. Artists had a job to do: to intercede and subvert, on the one hand, and to maintain and augment, on the other. The former aspect would be a vigilance against received notions of the Right, the Fair, and the Good, especially when used for advancement (for power), political, social, economic, or aesthetic; the latter has to do with respecting and caring for lines of legacy, to keep fresh earlier artistic expressions and their historical bearings. The context of an art object gives it cultural meaning; once it has been cut away (a flower in a vase), it quickly devolves into a commodity, lending itself to consumer ambitions, institutional as well as individual. Artists are persons who resist facile assimilation and false prophecies, truncated versions and quick-fix solutions; persons who, in fact, delight in the messy, warm refugence and inexhaustible re formations from which their particular will to order arises. On this view, new forms are inevitable.

Perhaps it is not that modernism failed, but that we have failed modernism.

What I have said here makes me feel dated, perhaps a little embarrassed. (I mean, we begged our mother to allow us to have a television set, and she finally relented, and we were glued to it.) My list of Early Artifacts is an attempt to say something about personal context, not about influence, to name some specific passages that have stayed with me as recoverable experience. For each, I could narrate how I came to know it, who first read it to me, when it was and where I was when I heard or saw it, found myself mystified, alerted, enchanted. The list in itself is nothing; it is in a sense a public list; everyone has her or his list. But loving the songs of Woody Guthrie somehow made it possible for me to be around when a scruffy kid named Bob Dylan wandered through Madison, Wisconsin, when I was an undergraduate there, and then hanging out on a roof one night, with others, him playing his tunes as we sang along. And who knows what precursor made it possible for me to awaken one afternoon after a nap to hear the Berlioz Requiem and think, really believe, I had died and was somewhere near Heaven, because, I thought, nothing this sublime can be human.

7. Encounter

find, v.t. (found, from Latin, fundare, fundus, bottom) 1. Come across, fall in with, light upon (was found dead; we ~ St John saying; administer the law as you ~ it; found a treasure); obtain, receive (~ favour, mercy, one's account in; ~ one's feet, get the use of them, develop one's powers); recognize as present, acknowledge or discover to be so & so (I ~ no sense in it, ~ the terms reasonable; how do you ~ yourself?; must take us as you ~ us, put up with us was we are); discover by trial to be or do or (that) or to (has to been ~) (rest agreable); ~ in to pay, I ~ it pays or that it pays, pay, or to pay, or to pay that it pays; ~ it impossible, necessary, to ~); discover by search, discover (game), discover game, in hunting, ~ oneself, discover one's vocation, & see below; succeed in obtaining (money, bail, sureties; can't ~ time to read, found courage to ~; could ~ it in my heart to ~, am inclined; ~ expression, place, vent); come home to, reach the conscience of; ascertain by study or calculation or inquiry (~ one's way to, contrive to reach, arrive at); (Law) determine & declare (it, i.e. the offense, murderer; person guilty etc.; that; true BILL) whence 'ING (2) n.; supply, provide, furnish (they found him in clothes; hotel does not ~ tea; all found, with all necessary provided; of servants' wages; ~ oneself, provide for one's needs & see above); ~ out, discover, devise, solve, detect in offence; hence ~ABLE a. 2.n. ~ing a fox; discover of treasure, minerals, etc; sure ~, place where something is sure to be found.7

"Where do we find ourselves?" Emerson wary and wanly asks as he begins his essay "Experience." His answer is a digressive list which, in turn, opens into a meditation. As he writes, the answer slowly accrues; writing leads him through thickets of negativity and an implored grief (for the loss of his young son) so frozen he cannot acknowledge it as such, to a rhapsodic affirmation which comes to him through the transformed agency of the trope of an excited child.

But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel. I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantile joy and amazement before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages,
young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future opens! I feel a new heart beating with love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West:

Since neither now nor yesterday began
These thoughts, which have ever been, nor yet can
A man be found who their first entrance knew.

Emerson seems to me an American writer who deeply felt the relevance of individual experience, how a self is formed by the world into which he or she comes and then in turn forms that world. This relationship is what Whitman, in particular, thematized:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume

In each case, the assumption was that an individual could be representative; that the narrating "I" could move easily from first person to the third person, gathering you up on the way, as if each dialogue could open up into a town meeting, as if the I, the Other, and the Us were coextensive. Both Emerson and Whitman imagined "genius" as a vision of practical possibility; words and actions were not severed from each other. For them, the visionary intellect had efficacy as a principal animus; both had the desire to arouse in others a sense of the joy of being through the agency of doing, and writing itself as a prime example of this activity. This is how the essay ends:

We dress our garden, eat our dinner, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations, which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power.

Jesus often raised questions from a literal to a metaphorical level. His sayings and parables were customarily metaphorical and without explicit application. Because his parables were told in figurative language, because the figures could not be taken literally, because the application of the sayings was left ambiguous, what he said was difficult to understand, and the disciples often did not know what he was saying. (Mark made the disciples out to be stupid, this was one of his particular biases, and it is he who has Jesus say such things to his disciples as: "Are you as dimwitted as the rest?") But Jesus did not explain. Instead, he gave them more questions, more stories with unclear references. The answer shifted the decision back onto his listeners. Jesus' style was to refuse to give straightforward answers.

—Lydia Davis, "Paring Off the Amphibologies"

Above all, Ovid was interested in passion. Or rather, in what passion feels like to the one possessed by it. Not just ordinary passion either, but human passion in extremis—passion where it combuts, or levitates, or mutates into an experience of the supernatural. The act of metamorphosis, which at some point touches each of the tales, operates as the symbolic guarantee that the passion has become mythic, has achieved the unendurable intensity that lifts the whole episode onto the supernatural or divine plane. Sometimes this happens because mortals tangle with gods; sometimes because mortal passion makes the breakthrough by sheer excess, without divine intervention—as in the tale of Terius and Philomela. But in every case, to a greater or lesser degree, Ovid locates and captures the particular frisson of that