THE NIGHT SKY VII

Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?

—Emerson, "The American Scholar"

1. There Is No Topic Sentence

as fear accumulates, everything getting more intense, more intensely difficult to manage, just at the level of output-input, so one feels one might in that old sense "lose it."

What is the "it"?

Here's Ed Hirsch talking about Federico García Lorca on National Public Radio: Only the mysterious makes it possible for us to survive.

careful, careful, careful
vigilance, sleeplessness, responsibility

Walking into a turning diaspora, the cat stinking of rabbit shit, she murderess, I with a pain in the pit of my stomach, some thing of the body, stone in the body, locating the missing, obdurate and singular—

Lorca murdered—
almost eternal on its stem, it looked for something else

In the pool, thinking I could just start writing and go on through to the end, as if I had that much to say about anything, that much stamina. I never write straight out, I have stopped believing that it might be possible. Turning, at night, from possible to impossible, the rumpled space there, past and future cut off, no place to go, no place from which to come, memory revoked, hope suspended like a canopy over the present, up there, the summer light

filtering through, moonlight trapped in a parking lot, the erasure of what is actually the case, the hour, the actual hour. And it could be a list, turn the whole thing into a list, this this this, designate the place where desire harbors its value, its cost: the cost of this desire will be 1, 2, 3, minting a new price. Then say you translate desire into a desire for the knowledge of an elsewhere. What was it Joseph Brodsky wrote? Something about the trajectory of a song. Turn, again, to Emerson:

The world,—this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. So much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion. I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom. The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power.1

It is not a list. The actual cannot settle into either a list or a sequence. Perhaps we make art to pluck some aspect from the actual, in its drifting temporal variety, and it is this aspect we call "the real."

We know it as "the real" because it is aligned to our understanding of what is true about the actual. Is this how the real and the true became inextricably intertwined?

The form of a thing, a poem: the condition through or by which it picks out its real: to structure possible meaning that might come out of the real. But sometimes the presumed alignment between the real, extrapolated from the actual, and the true, which is our will to judge, is incommensurate, so that we are forced to reassess it.

If we have a strong sense of what is good and bad in the moral sphere, this sense is linked to other kinds of human experience.

When we think a work of art is "bad," we sometimes mistake aesthetics with morals, because the way in which it aligns the real with the true we think is false, a lie. The Robert Mapplethorpe pictures of homoerotic
acts, extrapolating a real from the actual, and making it "true," because the photographs are convincing, and beautiful (as Dave Hickey has argued), caused some persons to be outraged because the photographs challenge the relation between what is actually happening among certain human beings, and the judgment of that activity by those who view this actuality as immoral.

One set of "values" is imposed on another set.

The good is linked to aesthetics by means of the beautiful.
The good is linked to ethics by means of happiness, the common good.

Can we say then, that aesthetics is linked to the ethical via the concept of the good?

But neither happiness (the common good) nor beauty (good art) is fixed in time.

They cannot be wholly defined by convention.

When law, and science, are unlinked from the pursuit of the good, they lose their ethical ground.

Technology is morally neutral, it is not innately good or evil.

Reason is one way of aligning the real with the true. Jurisprudence, it would seem, is now the most persuasive and ubiquitous way in which we in America attempt to make an alignment between the real and the true, to make the actual come into alignment with values. But when law is in the hands of persons with strong opinions about values, about what should be "true" in the moral sense, it can be used to impose these values on the public.

Art cannot be reduced to its subject matter, any more than the actual can be, finally, reduced to a real. Surely this is one of the lasting insights of modernism. Cézanne's pictures are not "about" fruit, Stevens's anecdote is not "about" a jar, in the sense that a newspaper article is about a seventh-inning home run, or the stock market, or genocide in Rwanda (there's a list). Poems which can be reduced to their subjects too often fail to show the asymmetry between real and true, and so fail to elicit from the reader's imagination its capacity to interpret (or make judgments about) his or her "actual" world.

This gap is where the sublime might be hidden, the sublime as an insight into the discrepancy between what is (actual) and what might be (true). The sublime as a glimpse of the present lifted up on the will of the good.

You want to go somewhere away from what you know, this is a human instinct, the desire to discover some (-thing, -one, -place) else. Why else do we begin to crawl, noticing that to sit inside the perimeters of a scrap of cloth on the floor won't provide enough room to find out more?

Knowledge as an intimate fact, an intimacy that somehow finds its way across to the other, as if across two counties on a dark road, past dark shapes, hills, the black water onto which the moon has leaked a path.

A child came to me and said, "What is that path of light on the water?"

I think it must be the scarf of Venus, dropped as she was racing across the heavens.

"And what are the stars?"

I think they must be the sieve through which Eros pours his dust.

You search the whole night sky to find your heart.

The arc beyond the already known, a radiance that enters so you know you are porous, possibly even contaminated as the skin, touched, knows itself as that which is touched.

Jesus said noli me tangere to Mary Magdalene, touch me not, knowing that once touched it would be impossible to be autonomous

in the face of love
in the face of betrayal

he would lose courage, his faith in the untouchable thing by which his immeasurable humanity had measured itself. Thomas, the Doubting Empiricist among the Disciples, insists, after the Crucifixion, that he put his fingers into Jesus' Wound. Jesus says:
Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithfull, but believing. (John 27)

Jesus seems to be making a distinction between empirical knowledge and faith. He wants to say that there are some things, some truths, that are not self-evident, and these truths involve the principle of faith. Faith, then, is blind, and the blindness of faith and the blindness of love are related, since neither can be "proven" except by action, by a way of being toward the world, the Other of the world. Faith is knowable, that is, perceivable, only by example.

The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular technique, her so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it... Human passions, however, are stronger than technical rules. "La coeur a ses raisons," as Pascal says, "que la raison ne connaît point"...²

The conundrum of it, how it haunts the boundaries between us, which language attempts to negotiate. The crisis in the White House, protracted around the site of the body, its cravings, its alliance with touch, in the name of "love." The young intern, guileless and attracted to her hero, has no idea of the consequences of her actions, no sense of how the private space of the body can come undone and spill—the stain on the blue dress—into the public, where issues of virtue, responsibility, accountability, are assessed. I am counting on you.

The comedy begins with our simplest gestures. They all entail an inevitable awkwardness. Reaching out my hand to pull a chair toward me, I have folded the arm of my jacket, scratched the floor, and dropped my cigarette ash. In doing what I willed to do, I did a thousand and one things I hadn't willed to do. The act was not pure; I left traces. Wiping away these traces, I left others. Sherlock Holmes will apply his science to this irreducible coarseness of each of my initiatives, and thus the comedy might take a tragic turn. When the awkwardness of the act is turned against the goal pursued, we are in the midst of tragedy. Laius, in attempting to thwart the fatal predictions, undertakes precisely what is necessary to fulfill them. Oedipus, in succeeding, works toward his own misfortune. It is like an animal fleeing in a straight line across the snow before the sound of the hunters, thus leaving the very traces that will lead to its death.³

Eros suspends and subverts the rules, in order to allow new rules to come into being, a new vocabulary, a revised story, not quite so set within convention—this first kiss will lead, ineluctably, to table settings, to the canon, to decorum; habits and their calm pleasures, replication, reproduction. The comfort of habit; the numbness of conformity.

Surely one way to argue for the necessity of art in a democratic society is that it proposes change without violence, that it has the capacity to alter received relations between each other, ourselves, and the world, without coercion; to allow us to see differently less afraid of what we do not know to include that which is, those who are, different from ourselves.

The common ground is not there waiting for us passively in the future, nor is it back there, in a fictive agrarian reciprocity, labor to harvest; it is under our feet in the present.

The fundamental contradiction of modern man is precisely that he does not yet have an experience of time adequate to his idea of history, and is therefore painfully split between his being-in-time as an elusive flow of instants and his being-in-history, understood as the original dimension of man. The twofold nature of every modern concept of history, as res gestae and as historia rerum gestarum, as diachronic reality and as synchronic structure which can never coincide in time, expresses this impossibility: the inability of man, who is lost in time, to take possession of his own historical nature.⁴

The things I know

under the museum's cast

shadow format
wondering what is to become of the dark night sky
what of these sayings
into the glass fear
spoken into
the ear
so that there is the story

genocide in Rwanda

could this be an example
as for example eight hundred thousand
inside the community
could we ask
what is eight hundred thousand
could I ask
what then is
what if it is what you cannot say is.

Under the eye's shadow

out of thin air
have we not anointed Remorse

thou wing betokened
thou among dilemmas
cast in bewilderment
over the hill
and the cello blooms
and the mountain carves
above the bleak
above the slain

things in October happen
as if they were not recalled

and ask does this dilemma
have a common chart

is this a necessary divergence
why crave repetition

how is it this road is hot
this sky still sky

how is it the one leaves a trail
for the other to follow

in the humid days
where the leaves are adrift

or to ask is this reason
where I wake to your eyes

the precision of seeing
entering each

open again and once again
kept alive
the intimate seizure
iterating belief

and the Sad Girls
awaiting their heroes

what had we said
for what did we hope—
rapture of the blindfold
trust or terror.

This way to an embrace, this way to be shot at dawn.
A heap of stones.

A woman sitting next to her white pebbles picking out weeds one by one
from her perfection, her lawn. Perfection, in human terms, is only another
term for destruction. It is antithetical to the construct of beauty, wound like
a vine around the stasis inheld at the core of change. The beautiful as only
the advent of itself.

Poetry as the demonstration of this.
The voice in your ear, the sea in a shell.

And you see, as you do, that what is perfect is possible only as an
approach, an anticipation, as when you look at the place where it isn’t and you
regard it happily because you are glad that the perfect has been delayed, off-
set, is, as it were, installed as incipience, as that which is not yet, as the lure
of futurity. What completes the incompleteness of a perfect incipience? An-
other? Affirmed from elsewhere, from the grace of a different perspective or
set, the one who comes along and says that’s perfect, because the thing—
event or thing—fits, or completes, what has been missing or incomplete over
there, in that person’s domain.

Blindfolded in embrace, one has an intimation of perfection.
Under threat at all times, under all conditions, and the only thing to do is
to somehow abide the relation between the perfect and its demise, having
and losing—to have a thing and long for it at once is fatal.

But the newly initiated, who has had a full sight of the celestial
vision, when he beholds a god-like face of a physical form which
truly reflects ideal beauty, first of all shivers and experiences
something of the dread which the vision itself inspired; next he
gazes upon it and worships it as if it were a god, and, if he were
not afraid of being thought an utter madman, he would sacrifice
to his beloved as to the image of a divinity. Then, as you would ex-
pect after a cold fit, his condition changes and he falls into an un-
accustomed sweat; he receives through his eyes the emanation of
beauty, by which the soul’s plumage is fostered, and grows hot,
and this heat is accompanied by a softening of the passages from
which the feathers grow; passages which have long been parched
and closed up, so as to prevent any feathers from shooting. As
the nourishing moisture falls upon it the stump of each feather
under the whole surface of the soul swells and tries to grow
from its root; for in its original state the soul was feathered
all over. So now it is in a state of ferment and throbbing; in fact
the soul of a man who is beginning to grow his feathers has the
same sensation of pricking and irritation and itching as children
feel in their gums when they are just beginning to cut their

You learn to be patient.
So we write to keep the present present, keep it from moving away.
Hannah Arendt, writing about the gap between past and future, which
she calls, wonderfully, "thinking":

The gap, I suspect, is not a modern phenomenon, it is perhaps
not even a historical datum but is coeval with the existence of
man on earth. It may well be the region of the spirit or, rather, the
path paved by thinking, this small track of non-time which the
activity of thought beats within the space-time of mortal men
and into which the trains of thought, of remembrance and anticipa-
tion, save whatever they touch from the ruin of historical and bi-
ographical time. This small non-time-space in the very heart of
time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born,
can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down
from the past; each new generation, indeed every new human be-
ing as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite
future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.6

Why count? Hours, days, weeks, years. To each her age, his age; begin-
ings, middles, endings. Ascent and decline. The term. How many books,
pages, lines? The poems get longer, pushing against the short days. The great long poems of James Schuyler; *The Morning of the Poem; A Few Days.* John Ashbery’s flowing charts of human perspicacity. Whitman’s expansive meadow. Stein’s reticulations, re-presentations of the present as wholly linguistic. These poets have no final horizon or frame, no fixed figure in landscape. American abstraction, proceeding from particular to particular, expanding as it goes. Imperialism and optimism. Sameness and difference.

[Jackson] Pollock was asked once if he imitated nature, and he replied, "I am nature." Nature is various, though, and the nature that Pollock most closely resembles is not the ordered, driven, purposeful nature of biological form but the nature where momentary order is produced by the dialogue between chance events and ordinary material, the randomly generated nature of waves and winds and clouds. Pollock’s poured pictures are ordered the way dunes and waterfalls are ordered, the way fire in the fireplace is ordered.

Once I wanted to enumerate: first, second, third; one, two, three. I counted the steps for some reason. At my grandmother’s house, where my mother and her four sisters were raised, the staircase curved at the top and at the bottom. Moving up, there was a powerful, indecipherable scent; the staircase was held by, enclosed in, a scent. Ascent. For as long as I was able to visit this house, the scent sent me into a dense indeterminate place without name, no single event affixed to it. It was as if I had access—a whiff—to a region outside of time, but which was also the accumulated patina of time, linearity collapsed; the event, unrecovered and unrecoverable, having left its excess, its trace.

The rational counting of the steps. The irrational accretion of experience into the as yet unnamed.

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous.
I keep wanting to argue for the place of the poem, for poetry. I want to make the grand and perhaps grandiose assertion that poetry—that art—is essential and necessary. And I feel a disparity, a gap, or breach, a huge anxiety. I feel as if I had trapped myself in a corner, and the corner is the fact of faith itself.

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity, a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.9

Okay, thanks. It's getting dark, I think I'll go out for a walk now.

WHAT IS THE GRASS?
NOTES LEADING UP TO AND
AWAY FROM WALT WHITMAN

This piece originated as a talk given on March 26, 1992, at the City University Graduate Center in New York; it was subsequently printed in American Letters & Commentary, no. 5 (Spring 1993), in Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song (Minneapolis: Holy Cow! Press). I have made some revisions.

A Dutch journalist friend came to dinner the other night. He has traveled the world extensively over the last fifteen years with a small television crew, following the news. He says he is concerned about the future of Europe, that the same xenophobic extremism which now characterizes what was the Soviet Union is far more rampant in Germany, France, and his own Holland than we in the United States realize. Meanwhile, the borders between European countries no longer exist as they did, since the EEC has come into being. Another friend, an American of Norwegian origin, says that in Oslo, the Pakistani population "has taken the jobs that the Norwegians don't want," and that for the first time Norwegians are faced with their own racial resentments, fears, and prejudices.

Walt Whitman, An American Primer (c. 1853):

For me, I see no object, no expression, no animal, no tree, no art, no book, but I see, from morning to night, and from night to morning, the spiritual. Bodies are all spiritual. All words are spiritual. Nothing is more spiritual than words. Whence are they? How many thousands and tens of thousands of years have they come? Those eluding, fluid, beautiful, fleshless, realities, Mother, Father, Water, Earth, Me, This, Soul, Tongue, House, Fire.

George Steiner, Real Presence (1989):