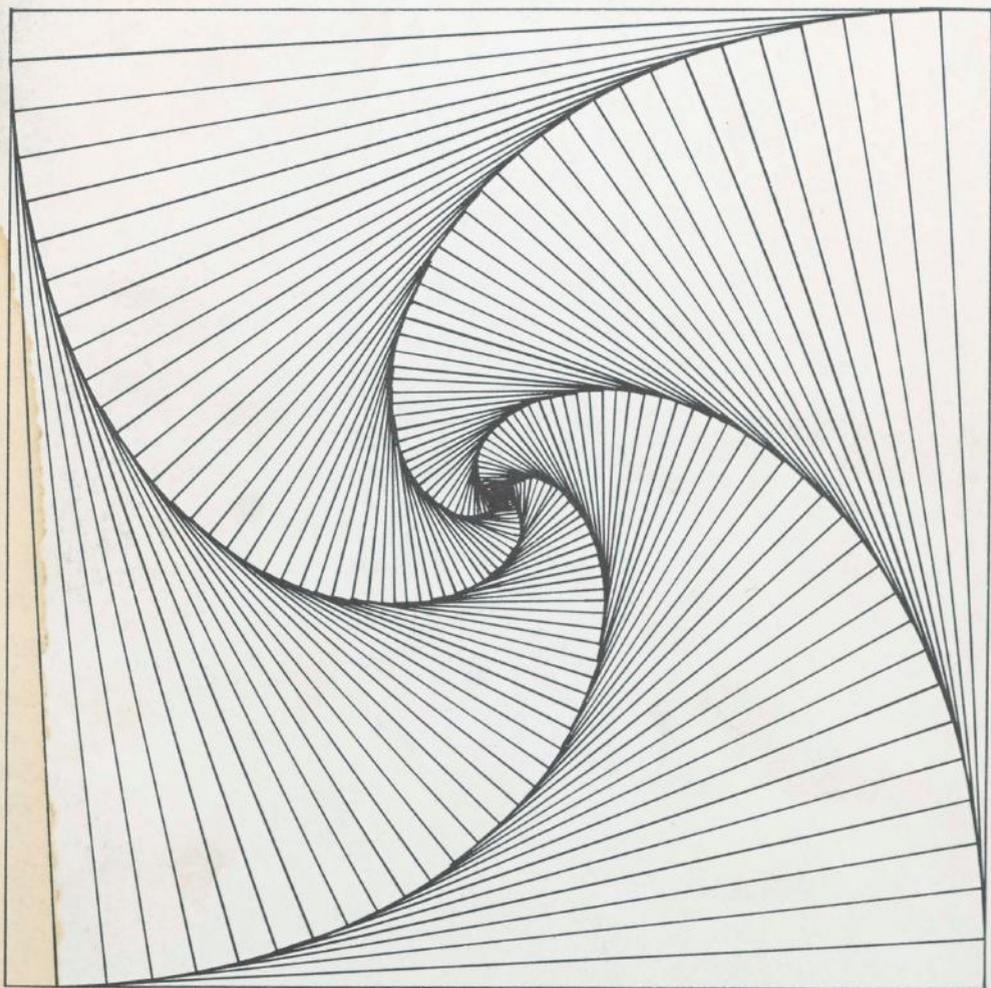


# ERA





# ERA

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Portrait of a man in a glasshouse

*Every so often you hit a certain age when you pause on the road in this life to take stock. I remember I did it when I hit 21. A muddle-headed pause it was I'll tell you. Like when you drive into a bay off the road marked out for a scenic view. Another bay was 30, then 42, now 55. Odd intervals I'll say. Because really I've come to measure my life in decadefuls. ME and MYSELF. Although really I can't say for sure at any time who of the two is observer-commentator, who the driver. I live in a glasshouse, the one I ran into 17 years ago. It's roomy but borrowed. I can live in it as long as I pay the rent and as long as I don't start kicking things about scratching or staining the walls, I'm told. I can see the change of seasons light tints patterns of shade clearly when the rain is gone. In a way I could never have done in the painful south. I go down in the cellar often to sharpen the arsenal of my brain, oil grease it, generally train the pantzer division of my mind. I'm here not because I was invisible. Sometimes it's cold in here sometimes warm sometimes full of light sometimes shadows come down upon me. There are no ultrabright light bulbs not one, not one thousand three hundred and sixty-nine of expensive filament type. I hear ghetto blues too and so I know what I've done to feel so black and blue. I'm not invisible I say, have never been. How could I be? For every one of THEM there are four of ME in that southern corner of Africa. That's why I ran. Always I hear a river. So often it has become part of ME and MYSELF. For hours I can stop and listen to it feel it rub against the sides of this glasshouse sometimes right under my basement. Sets wild things quivering and grating like pebbles back of my skull sending clues to my ego center about the togetherness of happenings even while I hear a warcry voices from the whirlwind prophesying chaos and doom like I think not even that dome-crazy reefer-stricken Kubla Khan would have dreamed in the splendor of his sacred river . . . . Not yet time for him to stand and stare out the window, stare at nothing special just stare, fingers interlocked behind him or twitching with athritic messages or arms folded at the chest. Just staring, rain or shine. Not yet time for him to scratch his armpit selfindulgently mop wet eyes with heel of the hand. Not yet time to act grandfather: that can wait, he says,*

until he's a drooling old fart too old to care when children climb on his lap or tug at his sleeve. Brought up five of his own children and says *enough is enough!* That was steep and rough enough in ghetto shanty for him not to want to mess with the dumb things now *whoever* their parents may be. Never had a babysitter for mine, he says. Says why should these young folks have babies and not want to look after them without conning grandpas and grandmas with chocolate candy or tobacco to babysit? If I had to do it all over again I'd still have five at the age we were. We'd still look after them. I'd still come to this point where a day with small kids — well that's the day I resign. Now look at this mess around us . . . look . . . these people hang on to their children with hoops of steel man, won't let them go live their own lives until there's a crisis . . . see them go and then pa and ma are after them again with hoops of steel. Parents drive them around to keep their dates, lend them cars for their dates no matter how erratic each new friendship, see them almost kill their children with protection and entertainment; see them project their own neurotic anxieties into their kids and dogs and cats; see the children try to run from them as they grow up and ma and pa still after them with hoops of steel. Hear the kids talk to their parents or about them and the parents follow the book that tells them to give children free scope and speech. See them resent parenthood drag it into the mud I say and pa and ma out again after them with hoops of steel. Funny how a culture helps people contain its own mess its own miscarriages and abortions and monstrosities. Same all over. Cultures of Africa will do it with theatre ritual poetry. Give me small kids in small doses mix every dose with Scotch every time. The day the African allows his children to devour him — that'll be the day the grief of the gods'll strangle Time mutilate it leave us wandering mindlessly without day without night.

*I could if I chose renew my lease indefinitely in this glasshouse, quite forget write off my past take my chances on new territory . . . I shall not. Because I'm a helpless captive of place and to come to terms with the tyranny of place is to have something to live for to save me from stagnation, anonymity. It's not fame you want it's having your shadow noticed it's the comfort that you can show control over your life that you can function. Comforting also is to feel you can coil around the ego center feel and hear the juices flow within and when time is ripe uncoil stretch out and feel and hear the spiral motion of body and mind interwoven with other lives at a specific time and place. The place is not here alas, so the moment must wait come renewal time. Something else: I could seek to enlist*

*for the Blackamerican cause. But I'm still captive of the place I fled. The common pangs and joys, the crossroads and forkways of blackness? Yes. Time enough to learn and feel them. That is all, that is all that's possible. To fight a cause you've got to feel its history and its future in your blood and bones and dreams. Outsider . . . always on the outside . . . . In this ghetto of the soul what need have I for rats and cockroaches of the western hemisphere its gun-toting cops when all my life in the painful south they crawled all over me and nibbled on the marrow of my being — what need have I? Time enough time enough to feel and learn time enough. . . .*

Not yet time for him to fart like a horse and dangle on an elongated burp without care who's around. Nor time yet for him to gargle with words and syllables and sighs and saliva and spit them out together. Nor yet time to flip over on his side before he carries his partner to the hilltop, flip over and wheeze in long irresponsible bars, the heart panting like it's just turned back on the edge of a precipice, now scared of what could have happened, partner looking at the ceiling and thinking madly, "superannuated cock!" or else "well, we're not getting any younger dear don't fret on it. . . ." No, not yet time: he can hold his own still at the peak of manhood. He's past the age for any new regrets to bother him. They can wait. The old ones have mellowed. They don't confront him, stick their tongues out at him, or stab him between the ribs with needles. They plod like oxen inside him resigned enduring sure of surviving many more ploughing seasons or of getting their freight to its destination noble in their patience. New regrets can kick about buck like an untamed donkey, head down, ears pointing back at a mean angle, tail swishing and fanning off one anal explosion after another. He has learned to wait dead certain he'll wear off the young bucking regrets.

*Teaching writing writing teaching — the same interminable cycle in the long long quest for a metaphor, for the right word lucid fresh like water straight out of rock, or like city lights on a clear night that I have viewed from the foothills — reassuring promising seeming to breathe like the life that is stirring down there. If only, if only — ah these days the if-onlys seem to come from unexpected corners, in numbers, in broken ranks like bedbugs: if only I could teach in my own native land or continent! Here among strangers where the young grind the aged under with steamrollers, here where to be forty is an affront to youth, I can't help but say under my breath as I stand before undergraduates; You're going to listen to me you dumb clattering tincans and cymbals you bouncing bundles of tender cartilage, because you want to gather credits like ripe mangoes be-*

cause you're on your way up to the middle-class totempole that you spit upon because you crave the respectability you pretend to scorn because to shake off Papa's subsidy you've got to earn your independence because among your stampeding herd are those who'll take to other hills other pastures other streams for their own survival . . . . I know left to yourselves you'd kill me kill all the fifty-year-olds because they stand for the stability you still have to earn . . . . but you're going to listen aren't you? Yes? I thought so. . . . The gods help us: how can a man teach among people whose cultural goals he cannot share?

A little while longer, you keep saying to numb the pain: just a while longer, the lease must hold, stretch it out a little longer just to function like they'd never let you do in the painful south. So inch along there's ample margin for your classroom style to stretch expand its muscle. The solid core of students — ten or eight or six — will still be there to join you at the crossroads where minds must meet and mate. For I'll concede this much as one of many many dissenters: there's something rotten in the state of middle-class values: certain notions of success, the way parents want to devour their offspring, the where-did-we-go-wrong refrain, the phony sanctity of marriage and notions of manwife fidelity and christian morality. . . I choke with anger at the elders who declare wars recklessly for no love of country that is threatened and push youngbloods to the battle front outlaw them if they refuse to die. And then my river whispers it's none of your business here, none, you hear! Anger splutters and settles down to a smoulder which is called indignation. The glass around me registers again on my senses reminds me that I have been looking at the landscape outside so hard the glass dissolved merged into the light out there.

Deborah Burnham

Walking on Glass

Back from a healthy year, you turned and slipped  
From that ordered grid of clock  
And calendar. Not the first time  
Nor, I know, the last, but love, each time  
This slipping's worse. Your ground is sealed  
In glass, your feet are silk, you fly  
In crazed ellipses. False geometry.

And still you spin. Your landscape rings, cries  
For speed and tightening circles. It's there  
But you refuse it, that  
Pick or spike, that blunt weapon  
To crush the glass to powder, back to sand —

Your eyes glare no. Dark mirrors, they show  
Slow cracking on the glassy floor you love.  
You beckon, and he rises, armed with sand  
And fire, grim glazier,  
Sealing your battered shell.

We Floated Out to Sleep Like

Two islands in this bed,  
Unmapped, unrecognized,

No rocks, no rooted boundaries;  
Only our hands, defining

Lines on air and flesh as we  
Slept through worlds of water knowing

No bright dolphins crowd our beaches —  
Frightened, they shun a phantom shore.

### The Spirit Of The Place

So we agree, the spirit of the place.  
Is dead. In perfect silence we divide  
All we possess. We watch, we shake our heads.  
What most involved us we are most disposed  
To give away. Not much remains. And now  
We browse among the books, the odds and ends  
Of furniture: the spirit of the place.  
Then nothing happens, till we happen on  
The years it took us to unmake one vow.

What could not happen did. Who cast the spell  
That made our house transparent, made it stand  
Like glass upon a little rise of lawn,  
So open to the public and the sun?  
We have become our public. Let us bathe.  
The spirit of the place is dead. We wax  
The floors for those who shall come after us,  
And leave the box of keepsakes in a place  
Where no one but ourselves would think to look.

At these: the bowl of oranges you sketched,  
Your one still-life. What talent you possessed!  
Your fruit have been disfranchised: oranges  
Like eyes adrift with belladonna, eyes  
Like oranges, a glimpse of Florida, a pause.  
And these: old letters in whose signatures,  
'With love', I read the style of the place  
As one does braille, and learn again to touch  
The spirit of the place, but miss the sense.

After the marriage manuals, what then?  
What of that other world beyond the zones  
Erogenous, the world for which we stood,  
At such a close remove we sometimes heard  
Our doubles breathing? Dear, you know exactly  
What I mean. It has to do with where  
The ether formed a pocket of repose  
For us, and with the spirit of the place,  
And with this last, this bodiless last kiss.

Dan Burton

DUSK

On the watery edges of late afternoon  
A gray figure drifts,  
Its movements cautious,  
Its head held quiet  
And low.

From my bedroom window I watch  
The slipping day, and sink  
To swim in ocean currents far below  
The shifting surface:  
Filtered lights fuse  
With muffled sounds; underwater  
Thoughts float amidst wavering moments;  
Moist shadows tremble and curl.

Somewhere beneath the liquid light  
Of the dying afternoon, night lies in wait.  
Soon she will raise her dark head,  
Breaking the evening calm of the seas,  
And, spreading her thick, heavy cloaks,  
Blacken the quiet still tones  
Of the settling gray.

It is dusk now and I believe it rained yesterday. The pavement is dark and steamy. Alex and Susan lie together in a small room lit only by the coming sun. The sheets drape over their bodies in a wide brown arc and reach to the floor. A large circulating fan lies motionless from the ceiling. There are few noises at this time, slow measured breathing and the clink of bottles in a metal tray as the milkman delivers his milk this morning. I sit here crosslegged, awake and listening, my room is too warm and would be unbearable, save for the breeze that shakes the curtains.

I don't know how long they've been lying there. Time goes too fast to keep track of. They came in late last night. Just went out walking. I saw them near 65 and Fifth, but I'm not sure where it began. They seem to want to be alone, walking on the other side of the street. I'd been alone the whole night near the Armory. There's nothing to do there, so I went out walking, wandering in New York City is one of my rituals. I saw two young people, together, who looked so alone. They walked a long way, longer than I was used to. The streets sounded softer from the rain. After crossing the river, I stood on the bank and listened to its thick flow, down to the ocean, looking through the surface, would it be warm? I pushed the thought away and saw them disappear into a hole in the wall. I followed them quickly and peered through the window as an Italian woman brought them thin cheese, filled pastries and dark coffee. They leaned over the table and grasped hands, clutched them even. The Italian woman remembered them and put her thick hand on Susan's neck and stroked her softly. I couldn't hear them talking, they spoke small talk, I think. The swish of the cars was all I could hear clearly.

Alex looked dissatisfied, a gentle frown rested on his head as he and Susan sat huddled together on the wooden bench with a high back that reached above their heads, forming an archway. The restaurant had quieted down from when they first walked in and now the Italian woman was busy resetting all the tables for tomorrow. I watched them sit together in that cold dirty restaurant, on the hard bench for three hours. I waited patiently, I don't think they said more than four words to each other. All I could see was their backs and knees pressed together. Alex's fingers encircled Susan's hands and they rested together. The only noise outside was the disappearing sound of people on the wet streets. It was raining hard now and only the

echoes were audible. I fumbled in my jacket for a cigarette and felt warmer as I lit the match.

They left the restaurant at about two that morning and would have stayed longer if the lady who knew them hadn't asked them to leave. I don't usually follow people and watch, listening to everything they say. It is very seldom that I do this. I didn't want to scare them. They didn't know I was following them anyway, how could they with all the rain. I was very cautious and so they never noticed. I had to follow them last night, you must understand, they moved lithely across puddles, glided down blocks and through the intersections, weaves timed just right so as to cross through two directions of traffic without breaking stride. Alex held in his left hand an umbrella, one of those black ones that New Yorkers seem to carry on rainy days for self protection. I kept a low profile under my wool cap, it barely kept me dry and warm, I was getting wet, thinking of stopping. Alex suddenly pulled Susan toward his side with his right hand, he held Susan's hand tightly and, sharing their warmth, they began to quicken their pace.

I don't think it's normal for plant stores to be open this late at night, but that is where Susan wanted to go. She wasn't taking no for an answer, and kept looking 'til she found what she was looking for. She wanted a plant that would be very green and sturdy with flat, large leaves. The kind that flop over and have a tough outside waxy cuticle. One needn't give sunlight to these, or water them very often. It's a plant that will last a long time and stay green. Carrying the plant outside was very awkward, but this was an important plant. Alex thought it was silly, buying a plant this late at night and then hauling it along the wet streets of the city. She carried it with her left hand as her right hand clenched Alex's waist. The man at the plant store was doing his books when they knocked on his window. I don't think the store was open, but he opened his door anyway. He closed up directly after they left and I noticed him watching them walk away together, clutching the plant. He turned the key, closing the latch and paused before turning the light out after turning away from their silhouette. Just for an extra moment, a holding of a beat, that caused me to wonder what was in his mind at that instant. A second later, the reflection of the light from the street vanished and everything went back to being quiet. I was leaning on a stone wall that was damp and cold, I waited to see if he would follow them too, but I heard the whine of his engine start. As he pulled away, all that was left was the patter of our steps upon the wet pavement.

While leaning on the wall and looking at the merchant, I lost track of Alex and Susan. I probably would have never found them, had I not heard their voices from a bench in the park, the plant resting on Susan's knees as they spoke. I was ready to stop this chase and go back. I was tired of the game, chasing a fox, I was ready to talk to them, tell them who I was and what I was doing, but I liked the anonymity, the secret way of never having to be seen . . . only when I wanted to, would they know who I was?

It wasn't raining anymore and, for a cloudy night, it was bright outside. They have got these new orange lights that stream color up and in the sky, clouds of sodium light. The colors stayed low, second story high, a low ceiling for the night. It was getting late and my pace was sluggish. Less cars drove by and my watch had stopped telling me the time. I plodded ahead, reaching for an end, something to happen. Alex leaned down between the branches of the plant and kissed Susan. She turned her head so his lips met only the edge of her mouth. As she closed her eyes, her forehead was smooth. She never broke stride and their feet swung to the same cadence. I hustled behind them—why, what am I doing? We were walking through Central Park, and Alex had the umbrella out again. The wind pushed the moist leaves to spray water; I walked out in the street so as not to get wet. Susan's eyes were blue, Alex's green. . .

We'd walked out of the park now, and I was feeling the wind, edging through my coat. I kept walking, faster to stay warm. They were starting to look for a place. I blew smoke from a cigarette into my hands; I wasn't happy now, no reasons . . . no place to go anyway, everyone leaves sometimes, I needed the change. Why make all this seem so hard, why complicate, and think where I am and where I should be going. There's no reason to worry, there's no place to go. I like these people, I don't know them well, but I like them. Ah, sometimes I think too damn much! They're walking into a grey brownstone with the name draped over the sidewalk. The clerk eyed them wearily as they walked in so late, clutching the plant. He seemed to trust them; they believed in themselves and you had to believe in them too. The clerk, white shirted, cigar unlit puffing, flecks of skin on his shoulder, clerk inscribed their name in his ledger and watched them trot up the stairs. Alex seemed protective now of her. Susan's eyes were green. They walked together to their room, opened the door and closed it, after they brought the plant in.

I saw the door close, and I took the room next door. Very dark gray rooms with large doorknobs, brown bureaus with proper white starched napkins protecting stained veneer. The bed was big and a

circular fan was in the room. I didn't know how to turn it on, so I sat and watched it and listened to the early morning sounds. Twilight now, night getting undressed, becoming the day, streets drying. It was hard to listen to what Susan and Alex were saying. I never really heard it all. Drifts of some of their thoughts, but never whole passages. They spoke softly, it was quiet last night and I wish I could've heard more. I told you that it was a long talk. It must have been an hour long, and I think it was very serious. It was about Susan leaving someplace, I'm not sure where because they spoke softly, Susan did most of the talking. The only reason I say that was because I heard her voice best, it was like she leaned to me and breathed the words in my ear. I could only hear the hum of Alex's voice, never the words he said.

Alex it's been a good night

Susan, maybe we should sleep now

Yes, I feel better, I feel you are being more understanding than before.

Susan, I love you

Come close ALEX

I don't know what brought me here. More than no other action on the street. Women watching me always, wondering about the thoughts I have, can they ever be true? I think they went to sleep. I can hear only the night now. No murmurs slipping out behind cold brown walls. I clearly heard the last thing Susan said. It was a lower pitch than everything else she said, and not that loud. It wasn't the kind of thing I'd usually remember either. Something about how plants need water. . .

There was silence between them and sleep evaded the stillness. I heard friction on sheets, between skin and listened to their breathing. I'd gone to sleep before they had, but I saw them leave in the morning. It was 12 now and the sun softened the night's chill. The streets had dried, and winds sailed down to the sea. They walked quickly together uptown on Canal Street, past rows of windows with hanged, plucked chickens and rabbits. I don't know what went on there last night. I woke up about three hours after my eyes had been closed and heard her crying. It didn't sound like Susan—they were deep cries, maybe it was a man's lonely moaning through the night, of slow breathing. I wanted to cry almost, I didn't though, don't need to cry, I saved the tears as I walked outside. I'm glad the sun came out, for it's morning now and bright. The weatherman says it'll probably stay like this for a while. Did I tell you it rained yesterday?

Night Tree

Crushed peaches and black earth:  
No stars penetrate the heavy  
Peach tree branches folding down.  
A leaf strikes my face  
Your mouth  
Bruised ripe peaches  
My mouth  
Your weight and touch  
Meld me to the roots  
The dreams of this dark tree  
The untouched  
The crushed  
Fruit

Darcy Cummings

Found Child

Small child bones  
Found in the tall grass  
She wraps them tenderly in her frayed shawl  
Rock Rock  
Gently sway  
Sing a half remembered incantation  
For all lost and abandoned children  
Hum a lullaby  
Soft undertone  
For the pale howl arching to the still moon.

The cradled bones stir  
She sees  
Under the shawl's fringe  
The small skull  
fleshed in cold ivory  
The eyelids unglue  
Glass eyes glare at her caught eyes  
The mouth gapes  
Sucks  
Nuzzles insistently  
Her breast recoils from its chill touch

Is it too late  
Too late - echoes through the dark fields  
Too late to leave small bleached bones  
In the tall grass  
Under the blanched moon

## Found Poems: Conquistador and Imam

*Message from a Portuguese captain to the Imam of 'Oman, Saif ibn Sultan, upon 'Oman's annihilation of Portugal's colonial forces in east Africa at the end of the seventeenth century*

Praise be to God, Creator of Heaven and Earth:  
 You, who judge between your subjects in their differences:  
 Know that we are the legions of the Lord,  
 created by His wrath  
 and granted authority  
 over those upon whom His wrath has fallen.  
 No pity have we upon those who whimper  
 nor compassion on those who weep;  
 God has surely taken all mercy from our hearts,  
 and woe, all woe  
 to those who do not yield to our command!  
 Their cities we have ruined  
 and their people we have destroyed,  
 and we have made plain  
 the corruption of the earth.  
 If you find our terms agreeable,  
 it is your benefit, not ours;  
 and if you reject them and persevere in sin  
 then your castles shall not block us  
 nor shall your hosts protect you —  
 for you have eaten the fruit of evil  
 and you have squandered your all. So rejoice  
 today in your terror and shame;  
 your penalty is light for what you have done.  
 And if our words are agreeable to you —  
 for you are infidels,  
 and it is certainly apparent to us that you are vile —  
 our hearts are as stone, and our numbers as the sand;  
 we count your many as few, and your mighty as base;  
 we surely rule the world, from sunrise to sunset.

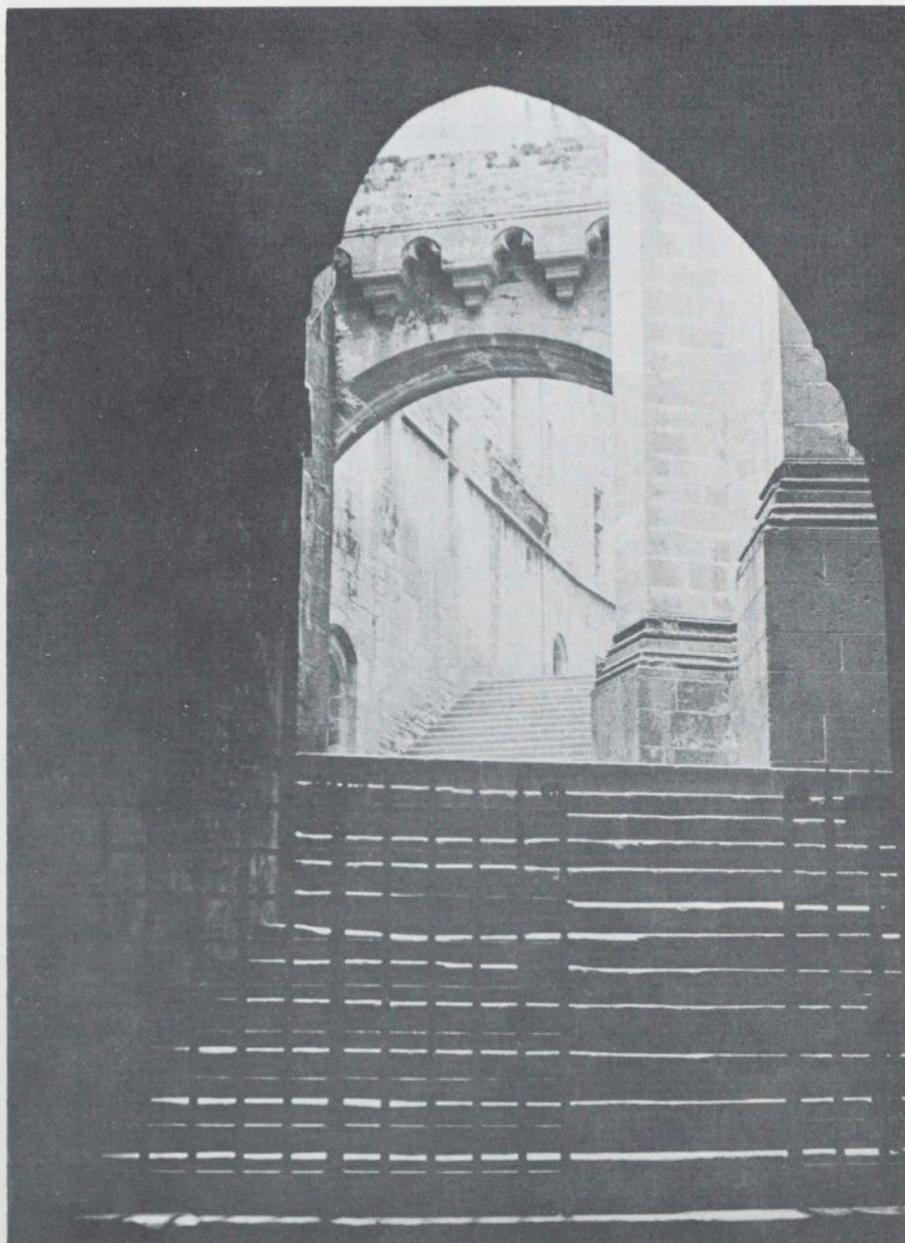
We send you this letter; hasten your reply  
before your protection is torn away  
and nothing remains to you at all.  
We send you this proclamation of our words,  
with greetings.

*Reply of the Imam*

*“Say, Oh God, Possessor of authority!  
You grant authority to whom You will  
and You withdraw authority from whom You will  
You honor whom You will and You humble whom You will.  
All good is in Your hand,  
and You have power over all things.”*

This letter  
which proclaims that God has taken  
all mercy from your hearts  
has been read;  
and this is one of your ugliest faults  
as well as the worst and most horrible.  
You reproached us calling us infidels;  
we are the believers in truth.  
No defect will restrain us from you  
and doubt will not enter us, nor hesitation.  
We are mounted well on land and sea  
and lofty is our resolve.  
If we kill you, it is good;  
and if you kill us,  
then there is but a moment  
between us and Paradise.  
You said, “Our hearts are as the rocks  
and our numbers as the sands” —  
But the butcher is not concerned  
about the number of sheep and goats,  
and God is with those who are steadfast.  
Ours is the stamina which surpasses desire:  
if we live, we live happy,  
if we die, we die martyrs.

So, messenger, say to your master  
that even if he inlaid his message with gems  
and constructed his essay with care,  
the reading of this letter  
would be the creaking of a door  
or the buzzing of flies.  
Nothing more have we to say  
except that horses shall rain down woe,  
fire is the discloser of shame  
and swords are tempered in necks.



### Is There Anybody There?: Some Black, Aesthetic Notes

To set out for the firm ground presumed to exist just beyond the phrase, "The Black Aesthetic," is to immediately confront the realization (an insight that dawns with its own disappointment and perplexity) that the phrase itself represents a failure of lexical categorization. "Aesthetics" denotes a realm of philosophical inquiry. "The Black Aesthetic" seems to signify — if not demand — a certain nominal referent that can be grasped through the musical incantations of John Coltrane or seized by a descent into that traditionally ignored abyss of "the man in the street." Rhythm, colloquial language, what Stephen Henderson has labelled "the destruction of the text," and there you have it. The search for a Black aesthetic, in short, has been pursued as a safari leading to a tangible product, or, a lived reality.

If the empiricist camp in contemporary aesthetics had received some attention from "Black aestheticians" several years ago, we might not currently be at what seems a stalemate of assertion and ill-informed counter assertion, such as a recent *Saturday Review* article. The empiricists of analytical bent are, of course, those who examine problems occasioned by language usage in philosophy — including aesthetics. They might well have pointed out to some recent spokesmen on Black American literature and art that the substitution of an adjectival construct for an enterprise nominally designated carries with it — infused in each new utterance — certain a priori assumptions. For example, a "black aesthetic" as object has been assumed to contain a host of essential qualities. To describe the object by an enumeration of its qualities (which are often randomly or arbitrarily selected from a dense cultural field) seems to have become an end in itself for a number of Black writers. The descriptive nature of their reflections has, perhaps, resulted from the adjectival overtones inherent in the initial substitution. Scorning the general foundations of Western aesthetics — at times without the slightest conception of the constituent elements of those foundations — Black artists and critics have donned the war garb of rhetoric and launched biting attacks on a white, literary-critical establishment. Unfortunately, due to the confusion that usually accompanies such a stance, they have yet to dent the thick and longstanding surface of aesthetics. The process of evaluation, the determination of good-criteria in judging art, is

merely one component of aesthetics. And the exclusive treatment of issues in evaluation has often bypassed essential work that must be done if a genuine theory of Black art is to be formulated.

And yet, there is a clear and positive aspect in the endeavors of those who have spoken of a Black aesthetic. In the main, they have been artists themselves, and their employment of the term has been in the nature of sloganeering — a traditional practice in the history of art. Wordsworth wrote his prefaces last, and Eliot pontificated on “dissociated sensibilities” and “objective correlatives” only after he had found diverse manifestations of British writers at work in peculiar ways. As an artistic slogan, “The Black Aesthetic” has been used to indicate a clearer view of the Black writer’s relationship to his audience. In other words, the phrase actually confronts one with a primary consideration in the realm of aesthetics. For the artist — like it or not — is compelled at the very outset to ask: “Is there anybody there?” The fact that recent spokesmen have not approached the question in an informed, theoretical manner — and hence, have not come at it by way of aesthetics per se — does not minimize the kind of attention they have called to it.

It is not so much a matter of the rigidly specified group to which an artist appeals as it is an issue of what compels him to render his personal/private/instinctual experience in a form accessible to others. Any theory of aesthetics must treat this issue as fundamental. The mode of existence — the ontology — of the work of art is primary, and for the Black writer in America, the situation is extremely complex because questions of the ontology of the work of art are integrally related to those concerning the ontology of the Black American himself. “Is there anybody there?” is closely bound to “Am I really here?” According to Christopher Caudwell (and Ezekiel Mphahlele, who follows his lead in *Voices in the Whirlwind*), it is a cultural collectivity which validates the existence of the artist and the relevance of his work. Black America as a collectivity, however, has been prevailed against by the obdurate and repeatedly affirmed codes of those who have for centuries held power over it. The words “Negro” (or “Black”) and “culture” have been deemed mutually exclusive by a group that has distorted the latter to the point where students enter college hoping to obtain “culture” without realizing they are invested in it.

And what of the Black artist in this complex? No, there was no perceivable Black collectivity to answer his question, only whites at the budding nascence of what has come to be called the white, literary-critical establishment. Questions of form, standards, audience composition and expectation had all been answered by a white Other

when Phillis Wheatley completed her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* and, perhaps, when Ralph Ellison inscribed the final enigmatic line of *Invisible Man*, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

The urge toward a "general American" culture so strong in a nation currently celebrating its very short life and, perforce, in a proximate Black nation (in the Fanonian sense of "nation"), often neglected the type of analysis — one beyond clichés and the detailing of large all-consuming properties — that brings a clearer awareness of who precisely we are. I think what I have described thus far captures the background of our present-day employment of "The Black Aesthetic."

There was, however, always someone else there, someone very dark of hue and experience. Some one who had his own music and poetry, his own fictions and sculpted images. He could not respond to the Black writer's inquiry because the forms in which it was placed were not accessible to him. Until they were modified to suit his needs, or until his own nature was altered forever by formal education, or until the Black artist awakened one fine morning with a sense of the nearly irretrievable loss of contact with the primal forms of his culture, the audience determining the Black artist's work was destined to be perceived as that "great, vast, blank, generality" that is white America at large. Formal education has come; traditional forms are being scrutinized for their adaptability to the needs of a Black audience, and artists have begun to gaze back over a long and accomplished past. The process, in other words, of determining the nature of one's private experiences and how they can be made effectively accessible (in works of art, as aesthetic experiences) to an audience that is primarily Black has begun.

James Emanuel writes: "The black aesthetic, having at least a name, consequently has a past." Like Ellison, he believes it is through our names that we place ourselves in the world. But if the Black aesthetic has a past, we must hope it is not one whose future is bound by a name. More enumerations and passionate rhetorical searches for a clean, objective essence (a perpetuation of the original lexical confusion, in short) will not suffice. To accept the name as the artistic slogan for which it has, in fact, served, on the other hand, is to raise the considerations touched on here. For "The Black Aesthetic" signals for the Black artist a felt alteration in his role. And implicit in its statement is a revised assessment of a fundamental issue in aesthetics — the function of art. Only the most committed (one might almost say, foolish) formalist feels that a work of art's

prime function is autonomous: to reflect and feed upon itself. Theoreticians from schools other than formalism have always seen the question of function as one that occasions a view of the effect, purpose, and place of art in relationship to the lives of an audience.

While one concedes, therefore, that even a sincere nominalism on the part of Black aestheticians will scarcely produce the ideal entity they seem to envision, one can not ignore the phrase "The Black Aesthetic." It is a poetic construct, one whose words call attention to themselves and force the reader to make associations carrying him to a new organization of his experiences. It represents a dislocation of language that returns a forceful affirmation to the query: "Is there anybody there?" Not only is there an audience awaiting the transforming works of the Black artist, but also an energetic group of scholars who wish to move beyond Victorian concerns like the appropriate subject matter and language for literary works and the requisite moral bearing of the artist who is to produce moral works of art. The presence of a substantial body of Black American art and the rapid strides of Black scholars have assured that Black artists of today need not suffer the anguishing (though frequently heroic) isolation of the past. Black aesthetics — philosophical inquiries into the nature, mode of existence, and judgment of Black art — is proceeding with its work. And even that traditional, lonely forging of self-identity, that autobiographical impulse, so important in the Black American literary tradition can now advance with a new certitude and ease. To be brief, there is a newly engaged collectivity, one more deeply aware of the presence of its past and dedicated to uses of art, aesthetics, and criticism that will ensure survival and growth.

The slogan "The Black Aesthetic" will not disappear, because it is already an important reference point in our history. But the course it dictated and the confusion it initially occasioned have already been transcended by insightful work in aesthetics as such. Yes, some one is unequivocally here.

A Lesson in Diction

Dalliance would be the word:  
Aristocratic sort of sport,  
Light pleasure at small cost,  
Along the road to court, perhaps —

Sword unloosed, plume set aside,  
While, midst banter, grass is tumbled  
And a nose-gay, bright with dew,  
Is casually plucked and lost.

Sue Schwartz

**You Ask Too Much**

How beautiful if I could smooth  
unconforming edges, and wrap  
myself around you; perfect fit,  
    Youandi as one . . .

—i, your second half (afterthought)  
trailing slow-alone behind, cramped  
by my lower case confinement:  
    The image suffocates.

Donna Harrison



Starling, Singing Of Singing

"I wish I could imitate thirty different birds  
Like Mockingbird," sang Starling one day  
On a heap of trash. "Everything could be known  
From thirty points of view. Think of the song

Of that dandy, Pigeon, squat behind some broken toy  
In an alley. What he knows about children and dogs!  
Or nervous Sparrow, dancing a one-step over broken glass  
And stones, pieces as big as himself. What does it mean

To find stones big as you when you're able to fly  
And you don't? To be hatched and to live in the city  
Means not knowing eagles and hens. To live with one song  
And few monuments — a bakery, a park, City Hall, a wire.

Is to be outsung by the trucks, eyes burning,  
Melting to a ledge. But I've heard in the "Cheer-up!"  
Of Robin the wrenching of southerly flight.  
If I knew her freedom would I know where to nest?

The clipped canary in two feet of space  
Sings more beautifully than the nightingale.  
Loss produces the song.  
Her wings fan the dust in her cage.

I dream of sea-birds down by the smelly river.  
Gulls, terns, pelicans, and cranes, swooping for fish.  
Is there a war-call or do they share? I have never  
Flown to the ocean. The city is a shooting-star."



### The Family of 'Imran

*(According to the Koran, the family of 'Imran was the family of prophets that included Jesus and John the Baptist. In the SURAH, or revelation, named for them, their deaths are mentioned by way of analogy to those mutilated after the battle of Ohod, the first Moslem set-back.)*

*"And verily you used to wish for death, before ye met it in the field."*

*—The Koran*

You who would pass this way,  
think of this field of stones  
as dead eyes, locked in this relentless staring  
as though expecting rain,  
and think of us  
who fell at Ohod, in the way of the prophets,  
and knew nothing but that our words, our faces,  
filled suddenly with stones.  
And in the spring  
when the rains come and the mud flows again,  
and groups of women come to clear these stones  
for the new planting,  
think of them  
as the women of Qureysh, who once, barefoot,  
wading among us ankle deep in blood,  
cut off our ears and noses as they went,  
and, choking back the surges of their own vomit,  
ate of our hearts what they could.

The Red Mountain of Ohod

On this red mountain  
not a blade of grass grows  
only scattered thorns.  
Among these naked spines of rock  
you will hear no doves call  
only the eagles screaming overhead.  
Under these volcanic crags  
that glower on the unmarked graves  
of men and mares of war  
We await the storm.

Roaring with the song of thunder,  
black clouds are galloping.  
Rain claws the red dust  
and the storm-gashed gorges flood.  
We shiver, turn in terror  
flee carefully, step gently  
on this old earth that's made of bodies.

Lesson

The mustard-yellow tooth-glow  
Of this city's jaws  
Slights the eyes in my head. I say  
Jesus Christ! I wasn't borne  
By my mother to bear this.

In the Poconos I was disgusted by  
The "sticks," and the diner serving steaks  
At midnight, to a real hungry crowd.  
Illogical, that Lake Constance could  
Teach me how to fish, and make me remember  
The tearing of skin from bone.

Malik, Where Have You Gone?

Myself: 'Negro child, to grow in vicious cycle of urban delinquency.'  
You stared me down with icy black countenance.  
Blood shot eyes,  
faintly discolored yellow, said,  
"Little man yo' mama is fine as shit!"  
In gaudy silk mohair pants you bopped,  
leaning ever so much to the right while  
arms flailed behind your swollen chest,  
and left foot seemed to drag. . .  
You just knew you could do IT to any girl/woman walking.  
Then one day boy eyes and ears  
made me know you had been shot.  
Brooklyn Bed-Stuy- bad gang:  
    'Sing'in hi-lo get me a CHAPLAIN,  
    Hi-lo kill'em all myself,  
    The birds and the bees in the sycamore trees. . .'  
Times changed, you became the wavy haired city black boy,  
who could always play 'ball and shoot dope.  
Unshamed, yet half bent over be'in high,  
Blood boldly gurgled from proud skin boils  
around your arm veins. . .  
Casting your gun with an eyedropper trigger into the garbage,  
You became a man.  
AFRO became the talisman. . .  
Magic/charismatic 'goddamn nigger boy of arrogance,'  
You hurriedly picked up the gun, "Viva la Revolutionario!"  
Leather jacket, beret, Chairman Mao. . .  
Silhouettes in black fury came to life.  
The RBI promised vengeance,  
and your neighbor should have slit your throat right then.  
When he told.  
Us, we became dead at the lightning snap of the fingers.  
Legerdemain, you were gone, I was still here.  
You have left me a legacy.

Not sidewalks shaking from a bebop,  
Not horse running scatter bang oooh . . . through your brain,  
Not the Park Avenue penthouse liberal vogue,

Give MANHOOD, warrior.

Hemorrhage. . .the blighting pain,  
between legs and in the mind's eye—

“Malik, forgotten?”

CASTRATION, your hate-filled heart must be spared no compassion;  
For you:

Only *ageless* black fingers,  
tearing the very life from you within.



## John Milton Among The Nightengales

It is customary to think of Shakespeare as the most enigmatic of geniuses, a man without distinct identity, aloof from the various orthodoxies in which his commentators have tried to ensnare him, without peer in his own time or successor in later ages. His influence can be felt as late as the nineteenth century, especially among dramatists who appropriate phrases and whole lines as a sort of obligatory lip-service expected by bardolatrous audiences and readers. Yet, even where aspiring dramatists place their talent under Shakespearean protection, as, say Wordsworth does in *The Borderers* or Shelley to some extent in *The Cenci*, their best moments are their own, wrenched free from the stifling milieu and seemingly unassociated with it. It is not simply that Shakespeare stands above us, but that, without an identifiable personality, he seems not even to be one of us. Despite the fact that his example inhibited the progressive development of a later theater into the forms and themes appropriate to it, Shakespeare casts no real shadow. He provides no extended context for subsequent literature: He is simply a monumental presence.

The case of Milton is opposite in every particular except the last. He is the other great presence of English literature, but one whose complex personality is well documented, whose ideological commitments are inseparable from his greatest moments of poetry, whose influence is perhaps supreme among poets of the English language. Minor figures, one might suppose, have quailed before him; but with the writers whose careers constitute the main lines of literary history, no single one has had such impact—and for the most part a salutary impact—as John Milton. To return to the examples of Wordsworth and Shelley neither *The Prelude* nor *Prometheus Unbound* could have been written in the form they are without Milton. One is tempted to say that they could not even have been conceived, so rich are the allusive patterns and the intellectual contexts of which he is the source. The climactic episode of Blake's epic-prophecy, *Milton*, the passing of Milton's mantle to the aspiring genius of a later century, is neither a curious oddity nor an embarrassing pretension, no matter how obscure Blake's purposes may seem on an initial exposure. Indeed, Blake, with his uncanny genius in such matters, has identified one of the central archetypes of our culture. Shakespeare

may be honored with unstinting praise, yet at the same time ignored. But sooner or later every distinguished poet in English has had to confront Milton, to accept his mantle or deliberately to refuse it.

On the simplest level, as Barbara Lewalski has recently documented in the case of Pope, the influence has been stylistic. From the artful sensuousness of the early poetry to the sublime austerity of *Paradise Regained*, Milton exhibits a range that until Wordsworth's startling elevation of the meanest of styles, subjects, and genres in the *Lyrical Ballads* more than a century later, marked the reliable limits of English verse. And though Wordsworth's democratization of verse style has generally held sway since, Milton remains the master of the grand manner and 'Miltonic' a deceptively simple term to convey technical wizardry of astonishing variety. Whatever mode he chose—even the octosyllabic couplets of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*—left Milton's hands with a weight never before possessed. Milton taught his successors, whether or not like Keats they squirmed under the tutelage, richness of sonority and compression of line. If the first of these attributes leads us to talk of organ tones, the apt analogy for the second and most influential is the art of the sculptor. *The Faerie Queene* is elaborately painted; *Paradise Lost* is chiselled. But to mention Spenser, not to say Shakespeare, is to allow that later poets had alternative mentors for technical mastery. Milton may have had a predominant impact on later English verse, but paradoxically it happened because Miltonic style became indistinguishable from what may loosely be called the Miltonic vision.

It is not stylistic influence one marks in the adoption of that inimitable Miltonic noun, "hubbub," by Wordsworth and Keats, independently attempting epics in a post-Miltonic world. Rather, it is a contextual shorthand of a type that only Milton fosters; and that a single word is sufficient indicates the richness of the legacy he willed his heirs. The context is the famous passage of Satan into Chaos late in the second book of *Paradise Lost*:

At length a universal hubbub wilde  
Of stunning sounds and voices all confus'd  
Born through the hollow dark assaults his eare  
With loudest vehemence: thither he plyes.

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Wordsworth invokes the term in the seventh book of *The Prelude* (1. 211) as he concludes his first quick survey of the teeming distraction of human life he finds in London.

Now homeward through the thickening hubbub, where  
See, among less distinguishable shapes,  
The begging scavengers with hat in hand. . . .

It is our first indication that midway through this naturalized, auto-biographical epic we are following a conventional descent into the underworld. Since there have been numerous, equally original allusions to epic conventions in *The Prelude*, perhaps Wordsworth's invocation of the Miltonic tag for chaos is less subtle than is Keats's in the first book of *Hyperion*. His recreation of an infernal council scene is reserved, like Milton's, for his second book where the Titans assemble. But his shorthand allows the initial statement of a theme reserved for later development, as he quickly establishes the terms of hell within a psychic framework. Hyperion, who still wields the sun, has vowed to overwhelm "that infant thunderer, rebel Jove":

He spake, and ceas'd, the while a heavier threat  
Held struggle with his throat but came not forth;  
For as in theatres of crowded men  
Hubbub increases more they call out "Hush!"  
So at Hyperion's words the Phantoms pale  
Bestir'd themselves, thrice horrible and cold. . . .

The mannered, anachronistic epic simile is a generalized Miltonism, to which the emphasis on "Hubbub" gives a sudden, specific force, preparing us to see the mental turmoil of the frustrated, but as yet un-fallen, Titan as already an inferno that makes his overthrow inevitable. When he rejoins his fallen race at the close of Book II, ostensibly as the single embodiment of hope, he is an incarnate despair.

Although the instances may be limited where a single word can promote such extensive connotations, these minor examples typify the way Miltonic echoes function in English literature—not for ornament, but for context. Earl Miner has suggested in the case of Dryden how quickly this pattern established itself among Milton's successors; and Barbara Lewalski's consideration of Pope's extended relationship with his predecessor would seem to indicate that where his concerns are largest, Milton's presence is most important. But what these treatments also point to, as does the extent to which all the Romantic poets made Milton a living presence in their art, is a remarkable fact: There is scarcely a major poem—and certainly no major narrative poem—from the time of Milton's death to that of the Romantic poets over a century and half later that does not make reference in some measure

to Milton. The impact on other forms of narrative may be less pronounced, but is assuredly evident. Fielding's assemblage of wanderers comes out of the traditions of romance, but Parson Adams's inability to function in a post-lapsarian world bears as complicated a relationship to Milton's epics as do the experiences of Tom Jones, the eighteenth-century Adam evicted from Paradise Hall by a distrustful Allworthy and forced to confront an exceedingly rich history of embodied voices before he at last joins that paradisaical Sophia who is the goal of all human striving. Without Milton's Satan gothic villainy might never have achieved its few indubitable artistic successes—Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, for instance—nor could Mary Shelley have set in motion whatever it is that she did in *Frankenstein*, whose epigraph from *Paradise Lost* introduces the most extensive reworking of Miltonic contexts in English fiction. The most total of all artistic obsessions with Milton must be that of Blake, whose entire canon, S. Foster Damon has observed, is modelled on Milton's, and who in addition to his literary debt illustrated five major poems of Milton's, three of them in multiple sets, in a remarkable series of engravings in which iconographic shorthand allows a complex statement at once critical and celebratory.

Contextual allusion to Milton both in its extent and its type goes beyond the Stylistic or structural echoes of Shakespeare or Spenser that one discovers in subsequent poetry. There are two main reasons for this, one having to do with the kind of poetry Milton wrote, the other deriving from Milton's conception of himself, of his place and role in history. Although one separates these elements for purposes of discussion, it must be acknowledged that the particular strength of Milton's impact derives from the inseparability of the poetry from the man.

Among English writers Milton is without peer as a creator of myth. Others undoubtedly excel him in attributes that we commonly associate with mythopoesis. Surely the sheer exuberance of Spenser's invention within an allegorical mode is matchless, as is—Milton's depiction of Satan notwithstanding—the gallery of characters that come from the pens of Shakespeare and Dickens. And no one can compete with the magnitude of Blake's unique creation of an independent mythological system. But even as one testifies to these achievements of the human imagination, one must recognize that Milton accomplished something beyond them, something that touches the very essence of mythopoesis. His immense learning and disciplined craft were brought to bear on the reigning mythology of the western world, which with an unparalleled conceptual brilliance he recreated.

Perhaps only Augustine has had so great an impact on the elaboration of Christian ideas as Milton, and since the city of God is even more remote from common experience than the Garden of Eden, Milton's achievement is more compelling. And, indeed, Eden is only one of the mythological centers to which *Paradise Lost* gave lasting form for future generations. The heaven in which God and his appointed Son converse is deliberately made impalpable, but there are few moments in world literature more memorable than that in which its fabric opens as the Son's chariot compels the rebel angels into the void. Milton's hell is curiously restrained in its sublime depiction, but, when compared with medieval versions with their grotesque sensationalism, reveals a conceptual power that has altered the very notion of hell. In a very real sense Milton created a universe, and, though its physics and astronomy are well enough understood to provoke charts and drawings among teaching techniques, what is more striking is the extent to which this universe exists as an imaginative idea with what can be named and placed nearly lost in its immensity. That is not, of course, to say that *Paradise Lost* stands alone as a testament to Milton's mythmaking powers. The same capacity can be discerned both early and late, in the finely realized abdication of pagan deities in *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, in the transfiguration of English culture and landscape into the contrary psychological states of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and into the moral problems of *Comus*, and in the exploration of the nature of Christ that occurs in *Paradise Regained*, a work which, if second to *Paradise Lost* in popularity, is scarcely so for its visionary penetration of the central mystery of Christianity.

But if *Paradise Regained* may be seen as containing the same potentiality for simultaneously revivifying and redirecting the cultural heritage of the west, it is *Paradise Lost* that has actually done so. How little of what passes for popular knowledge of the fall of man is in Genesis, and how much is in Milton! Some of it is drawn from Biblical commentary, it is true, but it has been assimilated and raised to the level of tradition by Milton. Medieval debate on the nature and hierarchy of angels has an antique charm, but in Milton's hands angels accrue dimension and life, personality, the capacity to blush. The conceptual fertility is such that Pope, as Barbara Lewalski notes, can derive the underlying mythos of *The Dunciad* from the relatively minor treatment of Chaos, and the departure of Adam and Eve from paradise can haunt the imaginations of the English Romantics to the point that most of their major poems make at least oblique reference to it. No single piece of literature in the modern world—not *Hamlet*, not *Faust*—has so dominated subsequent writers.

*Paradise Lost*, however, is no mere adult's garden of verses, and, though a critic may understandably aspire to be the Linnaeus of this continuing life, it is easy to forget the central principles that sustain its profusion—and that of *Paradise Regained* as well. There are two such principles, as genetically intertwined as good and evil. Although conceived within a Christian framework, they strain its confines and because of that are even more pertinent when observed by subsequent writers from an independent perspective. From the distance of three centuries the conflation that Milton undertook seems inevitable. But was it? Was it not rather that history had placed Milton, like his Christ, upon a mountaintop from which to survey western civilization and to yoke together the sacramental vision of Christian history and the secular humanism with which the Enlightenment was to alter the lineaments of human aspiration? Milton's hell, so powerful in its conception as to appear to a number of readers to be the great achievement of *Paradise Lost* (and how that persists can be judged by the inexcusable truncations of anthologies and college survey courses) is structurally balanced by the wasteland of human history foreseen by Michael, with which Milton forges symbolic analogies. To say that both hell and a degenerate history are unfortunate is, perhaps, to put it mildly but by the same token to emphasize that both are negative, denying life and human aspiration. The true emphasis of Milton's complementary epics—the one looking backward, the other forward—is on paradise, which Milton determines to be the essential human goal, the craving of all humanity. But it can only be achieved, as he redirects Christian mythology, by accommodating the essential human demand, that of knowledge, which is the corollary of self-doubt. Five years before the publication of *Paradise Lost* the restored monarch Charles II licensed the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge, which was to promote the new science and its major spokesman Isaac Newton. The Enlightenment had begun as *Paradise Lost* was published.

The demand for knowledge and the compulsion for paradise are not antithetical, as Milton interprets Christian doctrine, but they can only be unified through an act of mature will. As Adam and Eve fell through the acquisition of self-consciousness, so the Christ of *Paradise Regained* rises. Satan's temptations to fall become the successive steps of an ordeal by which Christ resolutely accepts and transcends his knowledge of human transgressions and their distance from divine freedom. His apotheosis, like its contrary the fall of Adam and Eve, is a psychic event, the end of human consciousness even as the original transgression had been its beginning. One must feel, before the magnitude of these dual epic poems that Milton had the prophetic

vision Blake ascribed to him, foreseeing that consciousness and utopian cravings would become the polarities of intellectual life that they have. It was not until the rumblings of the French Revolution were already in evidence that the other major literatures of Europe announced the coming of the modern age. Blind amid the ruins of what began as sectarian strife but soon assumed the form of Europe's first revolution, to whose success he devoted the prime of life, Milton saw far into the future.

Perhaps he saw far enough to envision what Wordsworth was to make of the legacy he claimed from the distance of over a century. Certainly Wordsworth, who claimed a power over the past equivalent to that of prophets over the future, saw deeply into Milton's visionary conception, assuming a like burden in a new age. Although his own direct claim to the Miltonic mantle, the great fragment of *The Recluse*, was not printed as a whole—inexplicably—for almost forty years after his death, Wordsworth appended the quintessential statement when he published *The Excursion* in 1814:

Paradise, and groves  
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old  
Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be  
A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?

Wordsworth's question had a direct impact on two of his young contemporaries, Shelley and Keats, and in many respects became the major concern of their poetic careers. But, in truth, Wordsworth speaks for his entire generation, focussing the essential question of England's second poetic Renaissance, and, beyond that, for the combined literary voice of post-Miltonic Europe.

Resolving the question, however, is another matter, and to suggest the ways in which solutions and irresolutions were offered is to document the diversity of voices that willingly entered into the arena of contention that John Milton formed. The major Romantics generally answered Wordsworth's question affirmatively, though with a complexity of vision that matched his own and with an equal sense of urgency. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* bows in its title to the original Aeschylean trilogy, but one need not read very far to realize that its major context is Milton. Prometheus and the human race of which he has been the ironic champion have been imprisoned by the knowledge bestowed by the Titan: their liberation can result only from its direction to humane ends, its assimilation to a human society as undismayed by its potential shortcomings as it is humbly confident

of its capacity to recognize and triumph over them. It is that same "Knowledge enormous" which in Keats's *Hyperion* makes a god out of Apollo, who must submit himself to the tragic awareness by which humanity struggles into maturity. In *The Fall of Hyperion* Apollo's consciousness is transposed into that of the contemporary poet, who must himself internalize the tragic knowledge in order to undertake the ordeal of epic vision. So, in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* Blake and his mythic intermediary, the Eternal Prophet Los, hammer six thousand years of history into the archetypal form of error, willingly submitting to the knowledge that is preliminary to truth and redemption. But, above all, it is Wordsworth who charted the subsequent course of western literature—charted it most clearly and yet obliquely, since *The Prelude* was held back until the midst of the Victorian period, and its distancing reviews indicate how easy it was for an age that had become what it now beheld to miss the originality of the vision. It is Wordsworth who, reversing the movement of *Paradise Lost*, extricates himself from an urban hell with the claim that "the earth is all before [him]" at the beginning of his first book, and, after successive failures to find a heroic subject ends the book ("The road lies plain before me") prepared to chart the way to paradise through the labyrinth of his own experience and the chaos of the history in which he has lived. The quest is not fundamentally Christian, but from the "blessing" of the first line to the "fabric more divine" of the last is irreducibly religious.

The sober optimism of this line in the Miltonic succession, though in spirit closest to the original, is by no means the only response to Milton's identification of the imperatives of human existence. Byron, who matured through successive self-divisions, announces his reduction of the Miltonic principle at the beginning of *Manfred*: "The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life," a principle that can only issue in the qualified victory of a suicidal renunciation—for *Manfred*, as for his unacknowledged successor among the touchstones of Victorian art, Arnold's *Empedocles*. And yet, for all the obvious torment of the Byronic hero, a reconciliation, one of the most memorable and influential in literature, occurs, as Byron wrestles with the ruins of history and of his own soul in the progressive self-anatomy of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and, above all, in the comic individuation of *Don Juan*, which like *The Prelude* earns a place among the triumphs of the post-Miltonic epic. Although not capable of matching Byron's achievement in poetic fragments, Coleridge in his own great fragments—*Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*—testifies to a like ambivalence between the claims of consciousness and aspirations toward the infinite.

And in his major completed poem, Coleridge's mariner confesses the redemptive unity of all creation, but is forever barred from the wedding feast by a sin that can be forgiven but not forgotten. Yet, where these writers equivocate, others pursue the darker consequences of a knowledge that, in retrospect, seems truly an original sin and of the tragic society it engenders, which replicates through its own consciousness the fall of man. Pope's empire of dullness, with its apocalyptic uncreation, is the most striking of the antithetical responses to Milton; but hardly less so, though mitigated by the presence on a page or two of a single decent human representative, is Swift's portrait of Gulliver, prepared by the perversion of intellect in Book III for the maniacal withdrawal into self-disgust of the end. One may add to this Tennyson's vision of the seemingly inevitable disintegration of ideals and society in the *Idylls of the King* and of their decline into a less apocalyptic, but no less hopeless, mediocrity in Eliot's *Wasteland*. Ironies of such magnitude have an identifiable, positive source. And yet, to undertake this survey is to realize that it does not end here, that, to be complete, it must be a survey of all writings with epic pretension in English after Milton, that, indeed, it is the great line of English and American literature, drawing in the fiction of Melville, Dickens, George Eliot, and Joyce, the democratic expansionism of Whitman, the tenuous spanning of Crane, the lifelong, encyclopedic quest of that successor to *Don Juan*, Pound's *Cantos*, and the urban environment in which Blake's successor, William Carlos Williams, attempts to imagine a new *Jerusalem* by the name of *Paterson*. Milton's genius went beyond imagining hell and heaven and the wasteland of history. He also imagined the modern world, which, after all, is no more difficult. The central concerns of his two epics are those within which his successors over three centuries have struggled for identity and salvation.

Still, there is more. For, what compelled those written in Milton's wake goes beyond his crucial achievement of mythologizing within the central Christian tradition the predicament of modern consciousness. He also mythologized himself as the embodiment of that predicament. He made himself the first artist hero, a paradigm yet without peer, if universally emulated. It is through him that the imitation of Christ was transformed into an assimilation of the expanding consciousness of art.

It is in *Lycidas* that we are first aware of the distinctive Miltonic voice, with its surprising intensity of self-concern that breaks the conventional decorum of elegiac reflectiveness, with its violent denunciation of the corrupt who remain to wield power while the good

shepherds perish at sea or ply their homely trade in unrecognized solitude. That voice, matured, will not merely utter the intonations of England's foremost poet, but will assume the obligation to speak for its revolution as one of its major politicians, and then, robbed of sight and of worldly fortunes, will force from the ruins of the man, and his humane principles the prophetic vision of regeneration. If, like Dr. Johnson contemplating the radical power of *Lycidas*, we are disingenuous enough to assert the primary value of sincerity, we may wonder about the ostentation of the role Milton created only to fill. And yet, what a role! There is the original egotistical sublime. Simply to conceive it gave Milton the right to assume it. Voltaire essayed it, writing an epic and a revelatory tribute to Milton at the same time, but in the end managed only the witty urbanity credited with bringing France and its church to the debacle of 1789. But his predecessor speaks with thunder—the world citizen, committed to human liberty, antagonist of all social and mental systems that would curtail it, affirming man's responsibility to attain the vision requisite to such liberty, the commanding conscience of his people, of all people. The arrogance is astounding, enough perhaps to save Milton's life when the Restoration occurred, but no less so is the humility born of his blindness and political defeat. It is that paradoxical combination that underlies the power of Milton's intrusions in Books I, III, VII, and IX of *Paradise Lost*, where decorum is not so much violated as transcended; and from it Milton's successors take their voice. The grand posture seeking light in blindness and hope from the substance of despair relies on a perfect integrity to sustain it: the long years of darkness have been devoted to an effort unparalleled in history, except for that of the legendary Homer, to focus all human culture through a single mind to the end of salvation, the paradise within. The voice that creates is the goal of creation. And that process is externalized in the compressed clarity of the successor to *Paradise Lost*, that epic which records the dialectical process by which Christ draws mankind into godhood, regaining paradise by the expansion of his consciousness. If this Christ is Milton's exemplar for human responsibility and spiritual striving, it is not surprising that the poet who projected his imitation of Christ in analogous terms should have become the exemplary model for generations of writers. Milton, in simple truth, redefined the nature of the artist for the modern world, demanding his freedom from dependence on a patron or a secular power, but simultaneously forcing upon him the burden for the coherence of civilization, for defining, and thereby in a real sense for creating, his race.

And yet, it must be admitted that neither this statement, nor perhaps those that precede it, would be necessary if Milton's impact had remained at the level of intensity it reached during the Romantic period. There is nothing in its nature that made its decline inevitable, but there may well have been something in those structures of history with which we record the ongoing flow of civilization. It is too much to expect that any single man by the greatness of his art and the power of his mind could be expected to hold together cultures that must, through elemental tension, separate. Douglas Bush's recent examination of Keats and Arnold as representatives of their generations, sharing preoccupations and yet almost beyond communication, is revelatory. It is not Keats's well-known wrestling with what Milton demanded of him that is most compelling, but rather Arnold's ability to assume the Miltonic position within his own society without recognizing what he had done. It is not from ignorance, nor from want of sensibility, that Arnold considers Milton as a stylist and sectarian without entering the sorts of claims he made so well for writers both more distant and more immediate. Arnold exemplified for his own age the central man of culture and of a synthesizing imagination that Milton appeared to be to the Romantics. Yet, surrounded by the complexities of industrial democracy, his voice strives for the grand tonalities of Miltonic principle, only to fall back into the contradictions of a society that is scarcely recognizable as Milton's. In the early part of the present century that central voice is reasserted by T.S. Eliot whose humanity testifies with evident strain against a world that he feels no longer capable of tolerating a Miltonic vision. But still, as B. Rajan has suggested, Eliot's attempt in his major criticism to raise minor figures to eminence against the towering presence of Milton is itself a symptom of the burden Eliot felt constrained to bear, and it is finally impossible for him to dissociate himself from his precursor even where he cannot assert a comparable vision. Too many revolutions have failed since Milton raised his voice from the shameful wreckage of the first modern commonwealth; too many secular mythologies have collapsed from inadequate faith and the denial of liberty; too many have testified to truth from the wilderness and have gone unheeded. Arnold asserted the coherence of human culture and the need for its liberating influence on a society composed of factions in conflict; but his greatest poem documents the tragically private liberation of a solitary philosopher from dependence on either society or culture. Tennyson comes closest of modern figures to recreating Miltonic grandeur, but he does so through wholesale irony, pulling apart the mythology to which

Milton gave coherence, disintegrating the vision, replacing Milton's faith with doubt of an equal magnitude.

Let us, however, acknowledge that poets, in their demand for integrating principles, have always found it easy to claim their lack: "The center cannot hold" is merely Yeats's version of Donne's "All coherence gone." Critics have an equal facility for spanning epochs of human history as if there were little difference between them. That Milton made a sublime and influential achievement from the combination of his life and art signifies neither that the achievement is singular and virtually unrepeatable nor that every poet who aspires to greatness must somehow manage to do it over. But the legacy survives, not only in the ongoing exploration of human consciousness and not only in the indestructible human compulsion to aspire beyond present circumstances, those inescapable obsessions of the modern world, but more simply and perhaps immediately in that form that not even the most pessimistic of writers can deny, the crucial position of the artist in modern society. With the death of Eliot, who uniquely linked the United States and England, one may truly mark the passing of an era. But it is just as true that culture, like nature, does not endure vacuums, and true, with an assurance equal to any of these, that Milton's mantle will be—or has been—assumed by another successor, whether acknowledged or not.

Nimbus

What do you call  
your urge from the Arctic to the Arctic,  
what feminine name do you give it?

I wish when you focus  
you would see things as I see them;  
then I know

our halos would apprehend each other  
and rings would spill

and labels would no longer  
adhere to their jars.

Patience Merriman

Dogs

A black dog shadowing a tan dog:  
Two dogs running in the snow,  
So synchronized they seem to be  
Two sides of one dog running

For the joy of it! Only I notice  
What the dogs no longer feel  
And never see: two studded collars  
Of red and black leather.

How blank and vast the snow is!  
How deeply, exactly, it notes  
The footprints of the dogs  
Who leap and smile and stare at nothing

Ahead of them, for there is nothing  
But more snow and looming shapes of things  
Obscured by snow. The dogs are running  
For the joy of it, for a little while

Until the calls and whistling home  
Part them into the two halves  
Of one thought I had, that we were reckless  
And strong in running, my dark one.

Peach Leather

I

Peach Leather, page 522, *Fannie Farmer*:

Put through a meat chopper  
Twice, using the finest cutter:  
2 pounds dried peaches  
1 pound dried apricots  
Sprinkle a board thickly with powdered sugar.  
Put the fruit mixture on it  
And pat and roll it  
Until it is 1/8 inch thick.  
Cut in strips.  
Roll each strip into a tight roll.  
Store in a tightly closed tin box.

II

Some women die young, from excessive beauty:  
Grabbed like summer fruit  
They are torn on the teeth of impulse,  
Their slaughtered flesh spurts nectar,  
Their hearts become headstones, the stones  
Break open in spring and release trees.  
Life continues.

Other women fall suddenly:  
A stem cracks in the night orchard  
And some woman's cheek to cheek with the earth  
Dying slow in brown rot  
Itching with red stinging ants, wincing  
At the casual dipping of the knife-beaked birds.  
Life continues.

But the ripest peaches are culled into baskets,  
Taken to the house,  
Washed, pitted, peeled, dried, bleached,  
Chopped with fine knives,  
Ground to paste,  
Pounded to pulp and shot with sugar,  
Crafted to rosebud confection  
And sealed in a tin coffin to await  
Hot-bellied hell – peach leather!  
Oh my sweet life!



de Chirico's Ozymandias

Larger than life, half sunk,  
rotted sun-bleached timbers shake  
loose of brittle splinters of iron fixtures  
polished by whirling sand and apprehensive stillness.  
What madness hauled lumber  
ore and craftsmen to construct this behemoth ship  
landlocked in the desert —  
greatest of whales, stranded by a casual tide  
to belly and collapse on itself on this alien shore?  
Those beams and masts, but a shadow  
of some unknown king of kings, form  
an over-sized skeleton if ever there was one, dwarfing  
scattered workmens' bones still working  
their way out from hasty graves, overwhelming  
silent single-minded termites busy under the watchful sky.

Footfall

Darkness at five in the afternoon  
Leads to a knowledge of silence  
Walk softly where you go  
Wear moccasins to break the blow  
Avoid stepping on dead leaves

A telephone in a passing house  
Forces rhythmic quiet into rings  
Ignore the half-moon's muted sound  
Keep eyes directed towards the ground  
Avoid stepping on dead leaves

Noises on a hot November eve  
Require vital attention  
Move carefully upon the grass  
But don't touch me when you pass  
And avoid stepping on dead leaves

Chiaroscuro

I know, I know, I know.  
It's good to have a head full of thoughts,  
A mind full of numbers.  
One, two . . .  
Things I know.

Chiaroscuro.  
The mind sifts and sifts,  
Light into dark into light.  
Yin, yang;  
One, two.

Columns of thought,  
Fray at the edges,  
becoming lace,  
in the blackness.  
Tenuous.

Q. "What is the foundation of knowledge?"

A. "You are told something,  
And you,  
Keep saying:  
"I know, I know, I know." "

Opening Day

And—if like Paul Revere  
he rode from Boston to Philadelphia—  
would he feel reverence for promise, bounty,  
desperate birth  
or see that liberty untracked by Amtrak's  
Silver Meteor?  
New Haven. New York. Camden.  
In his saddlebag  
bicentennial baseballs.  
the streets resound with hoof beats,  
smell of Gasoline Alley.

Game ball in hand, he  
rides New Jersey . . . Exxon Jungle  
laced with turnpikes, Garden State Parkways,  
power plants and endless rows  
of stark cat-head derricks . . .  
the patriot gallops to his goal, but  
stops to rest his horse  
or pay a toll.

In the bull pen waits the Rocket Man,  
rip cord at ready.  
The ball—oh torch of history—  
is passed on,  
and—glorious 20th C!—  
the space man roars and soars  
to the pitcher's mound.

Air sharp and cool, banners flap.  
Athletes lounge or run on the artificial grass.  
Smells of spring. Sweet cigars.  
Venders in paper hats,  
prices red on a field of white,  
walk the endless circle and  
scream the slogans of their existences:

Beer!  
Peanuts!  
Crackerjack!

In the glassed in boxes of the executive mezanine,  
waiting for the honorary pitch,  
modern men in double-knits  
search the vacuumed corners of  
their patriotic minds  
for an even better packaged sell.

And the modern hero snaps a curve.

America.

**Baseball:** *"Paul Revere" rides again*

*Paul Revere was not only a midnight rider—he also rode for distance.*

*Bill Giles, Phillies' executive vice president, made the discovery while thumbing through a history book. According to the book, Revere once rode horseback from Boston to Philadelphia in 1774. Giles plans to have the ride re-enacted as part of the Phillies' opening-day ceremonies here on April 10 when they play the Pirates.*

*A rider will leave Old North Church in Boston with the game ball two weeks in advance and arrive at Veterans Stadium on opening day. He will then present the ball to a rocket man (with jet backpack), who will fly with the ball from the bullpen and present it to Robin Roberts, who will make the first throw. Three riders will take part in the Boston to Philadelphia trek.*

*(Excerpt from Philadelphia Inquirer)*

Sestina: to Sea-Born Aphrodite

Morality originates in mountains,  
Antagonistic to a plain that's level.  
Hills have a way of generating passion  
For marking any person who is different  
With moral stigma boundless as the sea.  
The sinner has no place beneath the sun.

Still there's a place where even violent passion,  
Which elsewhere might be able to rend mountains,  
Seems strangely changed; and that is by the sea.  
A tendency to keep things at one level,  
Encouraged by the warm and mindless sun,  
Where even low debauchery seems different.

You all have seen some cottage by the sea,  
Its only function tending rented passion,  
Its paint long gone, wood bleaching in the sun;  
But one thing sure, it's very far from mountains,  
And what the hills might think seems here indifferent,  
For life is led here at another level.

There is some sort of blessing in the sun;  
An antiseptic salt blows from the sea.  
Hangovers on the beach seem wholly different,  
Or cooling winds evaporate the passion.  
No monuments protrude above the level;  
Only the sifting sand forms playful mountains.

The ancient seashore smell is very different —  
Damp sweetness, slightly rotten; but the sun  
Is warm and vital always, keeps the level  
Of pleasure still in motion like the sea;  
In moderate waves, no vulgar heaving mountains;  
A calm lagoon, the golden mean of passion.

Yet, several thousand feet above sea-level,  
On Sinai, or Old Smoky, things are different:  
The holy terrors wave hell-fire on mountains,  
Call the Almighty to put out the sun;  
Hairshirted hermits sublimate their passion,  
Their fearful rages working like a sea.

Strange how it seems so different on each level —  
Up in the mountains, down beneath the sun,  
Where, from the sea, arose the sea's own passion.

Interlude

I was here  
then there—snatched  
from the midst of my life,  
hurled across the sky  
I left my lovers piled  
in a jumbled heap  
with my laundry,  
I grabbed some books, some poems,  
some clothes and flew.

I was there  
then here—returned  
to face what I had left.  
Nothing changed,  
there was still  
a pile of dirty clothes  
I had to sort.

of threshing floors

had i known that these fields  
were unploughed before  
and that under heavy sod were  
boulders i might not  
have begun such a task

had i known that these waters  
were yet unscathed by nettings  
and draggers i might have stayed  
hidden lest i catch a fish too  
large for my wants and needs

had i known that children hid  
among the barley my forearms'  
scything stroke might not have  
swept so wide and i might not  
have sung so in threshing

oh but had i known all the things  
i need know now  
i might not have let a fertile  
germ lead me  
or kicked at the portals such as there  
were

but there were no walls, i could have  
seen, made and mended by fields clearing  
and there were no sails, nor stalls  
of decaying fish  
no crushed paths where children run  
and lay, no choice  
no doors





All creatures are God's family,  
and the creature dearest unto God  
is that which doth the most good  
unto God's family.

—saying of the Prophet Muhammad

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CHAPTER I  
THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

1. The discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The early exploration of the continent by Spanish and English navigators. The establishment of the first permanent English colony at Jamestown in 1607. The growth of the colonies and the struggle for independence.

2. The American Revolution and the formation of the United States. The Declaration of Independence in 1776. The Constitution of 1787. The early years of the republic and the expansion of the territory.

3. The Civil War and Reconstruction. The secession of the Southern States in 1861. The war between the States from 1861 to 1865. The Reconstruction period and the struggle for civil rights.



