The Wilds of Poetry

Adventures in Mind and Landscape

David Hinton

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The Wilds of Poetry

Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact*! *Contact*! *Who* are we? *Where* are we?

H. D. Thoreau

These Very Wilds

Midway in his two-year stay at Walden Pond (1845–47), a period of solitary reflection on the nature of things, of *who* and *where* we are, Thoreau set out on a grueling two-week journey to the summit of Mount Ktaadn in Maine.* Far from the relatively tame and domestic environs of Walden Pond, it was a challenging and disorienting journey into extremely remote wilderness. Indeed, the mountain was so remote that only a few white people had ever climbed it. After more than a week of travel by boat and foot through increasingly wild territory, he and his friends arrived at the mountain. Thoreau made two attempts to climb the peak and failed because the mountain was smothered in windblown cloud, though it almost seems he found the raw wildness of the place as daunting and impassable as the billowing cloud-cover.

It was on the descent that Thoreau's experience of existential *contact* occurred: a moment where all the explanations and assumptions fell away, and he was confronted with the inexplicable thusness of things, this immediate reality, unknowable and unsayable, reality that is pure question, pure mystery. We can imagine Thoreau's state of mind. His perceptual experience on the mountain had been intense and bewildering: following a tumbling torrent of water, he had struggled up steep and tumultuous rock

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* This journey is recorded in the "Ktaadn" section of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*.

tangled with strange weather-stunted vegetation, the broken rocks seemingly coming to life (as he says); on a flat shoulder below the summit, he had crawled across the top of a dense and gnarled expanse of black spruce, krummholz that he occasionally slumped through or gazed down through seeing bears in their dens; and looking out from the mountain, views had been largely reduced to the whites and grays of windblown mist and cloud ("hostile ranks of clouds"), but had occasionally opened to vistas of mountain and surrounding landscape that were in turn quickly erased. All of this made his reason "dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air" as he faced "vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature," and it was "more lone than you can imagine." Thoreau had failed in his mission and was now descending with no further goal, which would have left him open to absorb unexpected implications of his disorienting experience on the mountain. The physical difficulty of the journey was continuing, the cumulative exhaustion building. This all led somehow to an intensification of Thoreau's encounter with the Ktaadn wildness he described as "primeval, untamed, and forever untamable N*ature*, or whatever else men call it . . . pure Nature . . . vast and drear and inhuman."

How powerful questions can be. They can suggest so much more than is known at the time they are asked, for if there were an adequate answer they would not be posed. They are therefore wiser than answers, and they point the way forward. Answers settle things, end movement, but questions open the possibility of something more, something to come. Thoreau's questions about *who we are* and *where we are* do all of this for his moment in Western intellectual history, and they encapsulate the philosophical inquiry driving the central thread of innovative poetry in twentieth-century America, the subject of this book. They are the most profound questions possible, really, for at their deepest level they allow no answer. They simply pose the unsayable reality of *contact*, which is all question and all mystery—a moment in which the mind's orienting certainties fail, even the certainty of self-identity, leaving one open to the experience of sheer immediacy. It is the experience of a mind perfectly emptied of all content, all the received explanations and assumptions about *who we are* and *where we are*; and so, a mind open to the fundamental reality of the material Cosmos in and of itself, open therefore to *these very wilds* we inhabit day by day, however rarely we are aware of that existential level of immediacy.

That experience itself is absolute. As soon as we try to explain, it is lost,

because explanation involves language and concepts, the human structures that preclude wholesale *contact*. Thoreau's foundational questions are in fact rhetorical questions that actually say: *there is no knowing who and where we are*. And it's true, there is no knowing at this level. Nevertheless, those questions can be taken as a starting point, and they distill the central issue in nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history: What is the self? What is the Cosmos? And what is the interrelation between them? They were crucial questions because science and common sense had rendered the culture's traditional answers no longer tenable.

Those answers, handed down from Greek and Judeo-Christian philosophy, went something like this: We are souls, made from spirit-stuff fundamentally different from the material world we inhabit. This transcendental soul is the center of abstract rational thought; it is immortal; and it is a visitor on this planet, a kind of alien whose true home is in some heavenly sphere, dwelling-place of God, who created both the spirit-realm of souls and the material realm of the empirical universe. The implications of this scheme are manifold, but they all devalue the physical earth and our relation to it. Abstract "truth" is valued over immediate experience. Rational mind is valued over body, which is considered impure and evil. The earth is considered nothing more than a resource base for human use, and additionally, as a proving ground, the backdrop for our human drama of eternal salvation or damnation. Thoreau witnessed in the early days of his Ktaadn journey the menacing impact this clutch of beliefs has on the world, for he spent those days traveling through the wastage of clear-cut logging that was destroying the primeval Maine woods. While native cultures had inhabited those woods for ten thousand years and left the ecosystem intact, white colonizers devastated the ecosystem in a matter of decades.

Enlightenment science was showing how false those traditional assumptions were, which left the field open for answers that were more empirically valid than the traditional ones. By the time of Thoreau's *contact*, the traditional cosmology had long since been replaced in intellectual history by various kinds of post-Christian/scientific pantheism—most notably Deism, which had been the prevailing conceptual framework among America's intellectuals for over a century, including America's Founding Fathers. Deism considered art and science to be the true religion, because those practices engaged us with the immediate reality of the Cosmos, and that reality was itself the divine. Closely related to Deism's scientific pantheism

were various versions of pantheism among Romantic poets and painters, for whom the natural world evoked a profound sense of awe, awe they could only explain as a kind of religious experience.

A realm that is beautiful and spiritual, sustaining and transforming—we take for granted these attitudes toward the wild, but they were all but unknown in the West prior to the Deists and Romantics. Instead, the wild was generally seen as loathsome and hideous, fearsome and threatening, desolate and evil and devilish. Hence, Romantic and Deist thought represents a transformation in our relationship to the natural world so profound it is difficult now to imagine it. At the outset, pantheism was necessary to invest the wild with an aura of the divine, thereby explaining that Romantic feeling of awe or wonder or the sublime, but eventually that began to change in the work of the naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, and following him, Thoreau and Whitman.

Humboldt was an international superstar, and his hugely influential science dispensed with God or the divine and proposed that romantic awe in the face of sublime wilderness derives from our "communion with nature" as a magisterial presence, "a unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole animated by the breath of life." Here he means *breath* not in the sense of some divine agency, but as a single unifying life-force inherent to the material Cosmos, for he elsewhere describes the Cosmos as "animated by one breath" and "animated by internal forces." Humboldt described earth as an organic whole, a living web of interrelated life: a "net-like intricate fabric," a "wonderful web of organic life." In this he essentially invented the idea of "nature" as we now know it.

No less important in terms of intellectual history, he confirmed romantic intimations that the human mind is woven into the material web of life:

> External nature may be opposed to the intellectual world, as if the latter were not comprised within the limits of the former, or nature may be opposed to art when the latter is defined as a manifestation of the intellectual power of man; but these contrasts, which we find reflected in the most cultivated languages, must not lead us to separate the sphere of nature from that of mind. . . .

Standard pantheism leaves the human out of divine nature, as soul, but the powerful inner experience Humboldt and the Romantics found in the

presence of nature (communion, awe, the sublime, etc.) suggested otherwise, suggested for the first time in a broadly influential statement that consciousness is integral to the material Cosmos.

Humboldt's revolutionary ideas appeared not only in the form of conceptual propositions but also in the form of widely read books, which combined scientific information with poetic descriptions of landscape to form an emotional fabric of communion between the human and the wild. This combination (which we now call "nature writing") was transformative for Thoreau, making him into the writer we know, and for Whitman, who kept Humboldt's books on his desk as he wrote "Song of Myself" (see p. 18). And they turn out to be the very ideas this book will follow through twentieth-century poetry, where they are accessible not simply as ideas, but as immediate poetic experience.

It is in the midst of this transformation in intellectual history, just prior to encountering Humboldt, that Thoreau found himself on Mount Ktaadn with all explanations (old and new) gone, experiencing *contact*. As that *contact* returns us to a place before the structures of mind, it is an experience of an original nature of consciousness prior to its separation from the world as alien soul: consciousness in its primitive openness, before writing and ideas and religions started closing us in on ourselves, separating us out as centers of identity somehow disconnected from all of that *other*. In this openness, *who we are* is woven into *where we are*, and consciousness moves with the same patterns and rhythms as everything else—the seasons and winds, mountains and stars.

The philosophical transformation from a spiritualist to an empiricist worldview remained central to philosophical and scientific endeavor, culminating philosophically in the existentialists (as the name suggests), especially in the radical phenomenology/ontology of Husserl ("Back to the things themselves"), Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. But this transformation has perhaps found its most radical manifestation in modern American poetry, whose central task over the last century has been to rediscover that primal nature of consciousness, to reimagine consciousness not as a spirit-center with its abstract process of self-enclosed thought, but as an openness to immediate experience—as, indeed, a site where the Cosmos is open to itself. For it is in that immediate experience that *who we are* is woven into *where we are*. In this, the twentieth-century American avant-garde has been a philosophical/spiritual endeavor, reinventing that form

of consciousness as actual lived experience rather than the kind of abstract ideas that philosophy and science offer.

Between 3,000 and 2,500 years ago, ancient China underwent a cultural transformation very similar to that of the modern West: the transformation from a spiritualist to an empiricist worldview, which entailed a rediscovery of consciousness in its original nature as woven into the tissue of existence.* And as we will see, modern American poetry's reinvention of consciousness was a reformulation of the insights that emerged from that cultural transformation in ancient China and eventually migrated to America beginning in the early years of the twentieth century—insights embodied in Taoist and Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) Buddhist thought, the arts, and the classical Chinese language itself.

The historical beginnings of Chinese civilization lie in the Shang Dynasty (1766–1040 B.C.E.), during which it was believed that all things were created and controlled by Shang Ti ("Celestial Lord"), an all-powerful monotheistic deity very like the Judeo-Christian God. As high ancestor of the Shang rulers, Shang Ti provided those rulers with a transcendental source of legitimacy through lineage. Indeed, it gave them supernatural power because they could, through prayer and ritual, influence Shang Ti's shaping of events. All aspects of people's lives were thus controlled by the emperor: weather, harvest, politics, economics, religion, etc. Indeed, as in the traditional West, people didn't experience themselves as substantially different from spirits, for the human realm was simply an extension of the spirit realm.

Eventually, the Shang emperors grew tyrannical, and the dynasty was overthrown by the Chou Dynasty (1040–223 B.C.E.), whereupon the Chou rulers reinvented Shang Ti as an impersonal "heaven," thus ending the Shang's claim to legitimacy by lineage. The Chou rulers justified their rule by claiming they had the "Mandate of Heaven," so when their rule was in turn challenged, the last semblance of this theocratic cosmology crumbled, leaving no organizing system to structure society. Philosophers like Lao Tzu and Confucius (c. fifth to sixth centuries B.C.E.) struggled to invent a new philosophical system that could replace the spiritualistic system with a humanistic one based on empirical reality. One aspect of

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* For a more detailed description of this process, see the introduction to my translation of the *Tao Te Ching* (Counterpoint, 2015).

this transformation was the reinvention of heaven as an entirely empirical phenomenon: it became the generative cosmological principle that drives change, thereby secularizing the sacred while at the same time investing the secular with sacred dimensions. Here, China had invented something akin to the pantheism that appeared 2,500 years later in the West's Deism and Romanticism.

This transition moment was soon superseded by an entirely secular concept: Tao (道), which was essentially synonymous with "heaven," but without the metaphysical stretch. *Tao* is the central concept in Taoism as formulated in Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, a poetic text that is the seminal work in Chinese spiritual philosophy. *Tao* means most literally "Way," as in a road or pathway, but Lao Tzu uses it to describe the empirical Cosmos as a single living tissue that is inexplicably generative in its very nature. As such it is an ongoing cosmological process, an ontological path*Way* by which things come into existence, evolve through their lives, and then go out of existence, only to be transformed and reemerge in a new form. Our belonging to this magical tissue made the world of our immediate experience wholly mysterious and wondrous and sufficient in and of itself. There was no need for the "sacred" or "divine." So while much of the West saw the natural world as godless evil even into modern times, China has a three-thousand-year engagement with the wild as spiritually sustaining. And over those millennia, Chinese culture developed a philosophical and artistic tradition founded on the wild—a tradition that, again, transformed modern American poetry and the possibilities of experience that poetry helped to open.

Lao Tzu's vision apparently derives from a primal oral tradition that persisted outside the mythological power structures of the Shang and Chou dynasties, for it represents a return to the earliest levels of proto-Chinese culture: to the Paleolithic, it seems, where the empirical Cosmos was recognized as female in its fundamental nature, as a magisterial and perpetually generative organism in constant transformation. In fact, Lao Tzu often refers to Tao as *female* or *mother*. This is the root of a remarkable fact: high Chinese civilization, for all its complexity and sophistication, never forgot its origins in the primitive. The primitive was the very thing responsible for the distinctive nature of its complexity and sophistication. Indeed, for the artistic-intellectual tradition that followed Lao Tzu, sage wisdom involved dwelling as an integral part of Tao's generative cosmological process. This involved practices of philosophical and artistic self-cultivation supported

by a number of key concepts that became central in America's modern poetic avant-garde.

In his attempts to explain Tao, Lao Tzu deployed the concept of *tzu-jan* (自然). The literal meaning of *tzu-jan* is "self" + "thus," from which comes "self-so" or "the of-itself," which leads to a more descriptive translation, "occurrence appearing of itself," for *tzu-jan* is meant to describe the ten thousand things emerging spontaneously from the generative source, each according to its own nature, independent and self-sufficient, then eventually dying and returning to that source, only to reappear transformed into other self-generating forms. That source is Tao, reality seen at the deep ontological level as a single tissue rather than as ten thousand individual things. And so, *tzu-jan* emphasizes the *thusness* of individual things, the ten thousand things as we can know them in attentive immediate experience. Tao is reality seen as a single tissue; *tzu-jan* is that same reality seen as an assemblage of individual forms. This *tzu-jan* cosmology entails a different, more primal sense of time that we will see enacted in some of the avant-garde poets: rather than the linear time of the West, time as a kind of metaphysical river flowing past, it is nothing other than the movement of change itself, an ongoing generative moment in which things emerge from and return to the generative ontological tissue.

A closely related concept is *wu-wei* (無為), which means "not acting" in the sense of acting without the metaphysics of self, or of being absent when you act. This selfless action is the movement of *tzu-jan*, so *wu-wei* means acting as an integral part of *tzu-jan*'s spontaneous process. It was a spiritual discipline that ancient Chinese artist-intellectuals pursued in their daily lives and in their artistic practices. Tao, *tzu-jan*, *wu-wei*: these terms provide a concise framework through which to understand the poetic thought of innovative modern American poets. Even if poets often didn't use this terminology, the concepts were foundational, and, as we will see, they came from China through a complex process of cultural translation.

Lao Tzu's insights were eventually honed into a formalized spiritual practice in Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism. After it took shape around 400 C.E., virtually all artist-intellectuals in ancient China practiced Ch'an as a form of Taoist thought that was refined and reconfigured by the arrival of Buddhism from India, and artistic practice (poetry, painting, calligraphy) was considered Taoist/Ch'an spiritual practice. Even more than Taoist thought, Ch'an was a fundamental transformative influence in the

American poetic avant-garde, and in all of the arts in post–World War II America.

There are two aspects of Ch'an practice. One is koan practice, wherein students are asked to resolve insoluble puzzles as a way to break down conventional structures of thought, to see through our stories and explanations about the world and so return to *contact*, to our original nature as consciousness in the open. Solutions to such koans always involve responding with a spontaneous immediacy that lies outside any logical analysis; and in koan training, the teacher may push the student toward that goal with enigmatic utterances and outbursts and antics. The correct answer to a koan is whatever emerges spontaneously from that primal silence and emptiness where the logical construction of thoughts has not yet begun. The difficulty is learning how to inhabit that place. That goal was widely shared in various ways by much of the twentieth-century American avant-garde, and it engendered a frequent use of koan-like strategies to get at those deep levels of consciousness.

The other aspect of Ch'an practice is meditation, Ch'an's primary means of fathoming reality at the more primal level that lies beyond words and concepts, which also means moving past that illusory separation between consciousness and Cosmos. Meditation was also widely practiced among postwar avant-garde poets, and in its barest outlines it involves sitting quietly and watching thoughts come and go in a field of silent emptiness. From this attention to thought's movement comes meditation's first revelation: that we are, as a matter of observable fact, separate from our thoughts and memories. That is, we are not the center of identity we assume ourselves to be in our day-to-day lives—that center reified as a soul in Christian mythology, and surviving in our post-Christian world as a center of abstract thought that takes the empirical realm as the object of its contemplation, thus defining us as fundamentally outside that realm. Instead, we are the empty awareness (known in Ch'an terminology as "empty mind") that watches identity rehearsing itself in thoughts and memories relentlessly coming and going.

Eventually the stream of thought falls silent, and you inhabit empty mind, free of that center of identity—free, that is, of the self-absorbed and relentless process of thought that precludes *contact* in our day-to-day experience. And so, you inhabit the most fundamental nature of consciousness, the dark and empty awareness that is nothing other than the Cosmos looking out at itself. It is here that you inhabit the full depth of immediate

experience, of *contact*, for here all assumptions and explanations have fallen away, leaving consciousness in the open. In this empty mind, the act of perception becomes a spiritual practice in which the opening of consciousness is a mirror allowing no distinction between inside and outside. Identity becomes whatever sight fills eye and mind, becomes all of existence itself. This is simply a deep description of everyday mindfulness, that attentiveness to things at hand that enables us to inhabit our lives with all immediacy as a rich and profound experience.

So the end result of Ch'an practice is an awakening in which all our structures of understanding fall away and consciousness is left wide open to all the depths of immediate experience, exactly what Thoreau encountered on Mount Ktaadn. This was a familiar and desirable experience for the artist-intellectuals of ancient China: the heart of spiritual practice, a way to see the Cosmos whole, to dwell as an integral part of Tao, and thereby establish a deeper everyday experience of life. Philosophically, it is what we would now call "deep ecology," a reweaving of consciousness and landscape, planet, Cosmos. But in Thoreau's West it was not so familiar; and indeed, it was quite terrifying, a terror that continued in the philosophical tradition as existential angst, nausea, etc. While thinkers like Thoreau felt utterly lost when their fundamental assumptions vanished, the experience was reassuring for the ancient Chinese, renewing a sense of belonging to Tao, that numinous generative tissue, and it led to a poetic tradition in which *contact* is the fabric from which poems are made:

At Hsieh Cove

The ox path I'm on ends in a rabbit trail, and suddenly
I'm facing open plains and empty sky on all four sides.

My thoughts follow white egrets—a pair taking flight,
leading sight across a million blue mountains rising
ridge beyond ridge, my gaze lingering near then far,
enthralled by peaks crowded together or there alone.

Even a hill or valley means thoughts beyond knowing—
and all this? A crusty old man's now a wide-eyed child!

Yang Wan-li, 1127–1206 C.E.

Evening View

Already at South Tower: evening stillness.
In the darkness, a few forest birds astir.

The bustling city-wall sinks out of sight—
deeper, deeper. Just four mountain peaks.

Wei Ying-wu, c. 737–792 C.E.

The difference is that the West had not yet completed that transition from otherworldly monotheism to secular spirituality—a fact witnessed in Thoreau's fearful question itself, with its *who*, which implicitly assumes the otherworldly soul that Thoreau inherited from the Western tradition. It seems clear now that the question would more accurately be: *What are we?*

It is striking how closely this transition in the West follows the outlines of the transition in ancient China. Just as *heaven* came to mean something like "natural process" in China as a way of making empirical reality "divine," Deist and Romantic pantheism invested our everyday world with mystery and wonder by calling it "God." Just as Taoism's sense of the Cosmos as a generative tissue appears to have survived outside of the power structures of Shang monotheism, survived from perhaps Paleolithic levels of Chinese culture, the West's pantheism too grew from an alternative tradition that survived outside of the power structures: from Spinoza to Lucretius and back to the pre-Socratics Epicurus and Heraclitus, who represent the earliest emergence from a more primal preliterate intellectual framework. (As we will see, the modern avant-garde had a sustained interest in returning consciousness to the primitive.) And just as China secularized this sacralized reality in Tao, the West secularized it in the Cosmos as known by modern science, which is also (though how often is it described this way?) essentially female: an organic and harmonious system that is a tissue of perpetually self-generating transformation.

This transition became the engine driving literary innovation: the British Romantic poets, Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman. But Thoreau's experience on Ktaadn signals a further step in the transformation from a spiritualist to an empiricist conceptual framework. Thoreau didn't have the tools to understand what happened to him, what he was seeing, so it was all question and wonder, but the ancient Chinese did have the tools,

and it was for them an *awakening*, a moment in which the ongoing process of self-absorbed thought and all the explanatory structures of the mind fail, leaving you open to the experience of unmediated immediacy: *contact*. And that immediacy was for them the spiritual experience of belonging profoundly to empirical reality as pure wonder and mystery. The goal of spiritual practice in ancient China was to make that awakening the form of everyday experience, and Thoreau's later *Journals* (see p. 119, 267) indicate Thoreau shared that practice in some sense, for in them Thoreau's self-expression is increasingly descriptive: the world itself, as if he found more and more over his life that mirror-deep identity the Chinese ancients cultivated.

Poetry is most deeply a way of doing philosophy—not as mere juggling of abstractions, but as lived and felt experience. This is how the twentieth-century avant-garde used it, as a way to construct and inhabit a worldview. Ancient Chinese thought is a crucial influence driving the innovations of that tradition—and it makes perfect sense, for the Taoist/Ch'an conceptual framework represented a fuller and more coherent account of the radical insights that were ripe for realization in the West. And like China's ancient artist-intellectuals, that avant-garde took *contact* as its central concern, certain that only in empirical immediacy was it possible to achieve authenticity in living, and clarity in *who* and *where we are*.

Contact, the primacy of the immediate: it is not such a difficult idea, but in terms of actual experience, the stuff of life and poetry, it is a difficult lesson we must learn over and over. *Contact* itself is unsayable precisely because it lies outside all concepts, but these poets, each in their own way, guide us to the experience of *contact*. They show us new ways of being alive to the world in the tangible here and now. And from that beginning point, they explore the implications of that elemental experience, most importantly a different sense of self-identity: Thoreau's *who we are*. This line of poetic thought represents a lived form of deep ecology, the "rewilding" of consciousness. It involves ways of knowing ourselves outside of received Western assumptions; and so, not surprisingly, it is often informed by other cultures, especially ancient Chinese and primal cultures. Hence, the poets in this innovative tradition establish consciousness as wild each in their own way, together creating their own wilderness: "the wilds of poetry."

Central to this for most poets is the way they push language into wild forms in various ways: organic and open-field, breath-driven, text

interspersed with fields of open space/silence, fragmentation and collage. Language is the medium of thought, essence of self-identity, so by rewilding language they rewild identity. And it makes sense this rewilding often takes place in the context of wilderness, where the cocoon of human culture is absent and the vastness of the Cosmos is most dramatically and immediately present. As a philosophical instrument, poetry is especially powerful because it can operate in that wilderness, open experience to the silent depths outside of language and thought, reveal areas of consciousness outside our language-centered day-to-day identity. Prose can talk about this, but poetry can enact it through its reshaping of language. It can create wild mind as immediate experience for the reader.

Innovative poetry in twentieth-century America is at heart an ecopoetic tradition, though not in the sense of poetry where "nature" happens to appear, where that traditional Western spirit-center encounters an animal or tree, ocean or mountain. Instead, it is ecopoetic in the deeper sense that it articulates a weave of consciousness and landscape, a deep reexperiencing of consciousness as an integral part of the Cosmos, the wild. Although we live in a post-Christian world, we generally still experience a radical separation between a kind of spirit-center and the world it looks out on, a separation enshrined (to take one small example) in concepts such as *nature* and *wild*, which refer to the world exclusive of human consciousness, thereby defining as a matter of cultural assumption the human as fundamentally different from and outside of empirical reality. Ecopoetry reintegrates human consciousness into landscape and Cosmos, into *nature* and the *wild*. Even if this happens most often in some kind of engagement with wilderness in the broad sense of empirical reality outside of human cultural constructions, it sometimes happens in more human and urban settings, for they too are part of the wild Cosmos. The important thing for ecopoetry is the weaving together of consciousness with landscape, ecosystem, Cosmos—thereby returning it to its original wild nature.

This is primarily a philosophical book, and as such it traces that ecopoetic strand of thought by presenting the voices of its major innovators, those who established the terms for innovative poetic practice. The poets included here are all male, but the interest is to follow their attempts to reimagine the male self, that abstract cerebral "soul" separate from and lording over the earth (part and parcel with a Christian cosmology and domineering male sky-god). These poets try to replace that with a gentler

self that dwells as an integral part of the generative, female Cosmos known by modern science—that is, to use the Chinese term, the female *Tao*. Given the line of thought this book explores, it would make perfect sense that women would play a major role in the tradition traced here. That is not the case for the well-rehearsed reason that women were largely excluded from the intellectual and literary world through the years discussed in this book (though soon afterward they began rising quickly in prominence and have now established themselves as an equal or even dominant force in contemporary poetry). However, this book is an attempt to excavate a female dimension in the tradition, to track the discovery that it is the tradition's most powerful and transformative proposition, that it is the impulse driving the tradition and the conceptual source for virtually all innovative poetry in the second half of twentieth-century America.

Shaped by the Taoist/Ch'an conceptual framework, classical Chinese poetry is at heart a "mountains-and-rivers" ("landscape") tradition, an ecopoetic tradition in every sense; and remarkably, the modern American avant-garde can be seen as an extension of that mountains-and-rivers tradition. Because they did not inherit a deep-ecological system of thought, innovative American poets needed to borrow and conjure new ideas as they reinvented poetic language and thought outside of cultural/poetic norms. Their richest borrowing came from ancient China, and it led to exciting new ways of making poetry.

Tracing the development of this ecopoetic tradition is a way not only to understand the weave of consciousness and landscape more deeply, but also to *experience* it more deeply, for that immediate experience is what the poems themselves offer. Hence, this book represents a kind of philosophical method, exploring ideas in the introductions and then letting the poems make those ideas available as immediate poetic experience. As such, the following chapters attempt to present and think through a collage of the work that transformed the possibilities of the poetic tradition and of human consciousness. It is work from a range of poets who each create in their work the experience of consciousness woven into landscape and Cosmos in their own singular and innovative way, each in their own *talk of mysteries*.

Procreant Wilds

Walt Whitman

(1819–1892)

THIS STORY OF THE INNOVATIVE/ECOPOETIC TRADITION in modern American poetry really begins in the mid-nineteenth century with Walt Whitman. A few years after Thoreau posed his existential questions, Whitman began making a poetry from the immediacy of *contact*, and in doing so he pushed the revelations of post-Christian science, Deism, and Romantic pantheism to new depths. Whitman too was still caught in the terminology of the Western intellectual tradition—soul and the pantheist god of Deism—but the actual contours of his poetic thinking had moved beyond that conceptual framework. Keeping Humboldt's insights always in mind (see p. 4), Whitman gave them poetic voice and in fact pushed them to the point that they could most accurately be described as Taoist.

Whitman speaks always at the level of *contact*, where the distinction between self and Cosmos has vanished. It is noteworthy that with Whitman, Thoreau's terror at *contact* has become a sense of belonging or enlightenment (much as it does in ancient China, where it is the very definition of sage insight), a sense that will continue through the twentieth-century poetic tradition. Whitman speaks everywhere and in myriad ways of himself being integral to things, identifies himself over and over with long catalogs of things and events, scenes and tales (told in the straightforward language of his day-job as a journalist). He speaks as the Cosmos itself: the miracle

of empirical reality, immediate and unsayable. "Song of Myself" (1855), his signature poem, begins with the words "I celebrate myself," "celebrate" not only in its familiar sense, but also in its earliest sense of performing a religious ceremony. And as part of this integration of self and Cosmos, Whitman speaks as a body, sexual in its deepest nature. It was a voice all but unprecedented in English. Language is the material of self-identity, and the dominant language of English poetry was that of the soul, its deep rhythms often echoing the King James Bible. It was a privileged language of rhyme and meter, abstract and linear thought, embellishment and arch diction. When Whitman reinvented language as the voice of the body, he reinvented identity as embodied and organic and integral to earth.

Rather than following a linear development of thought, that linear abstract thought of the soul, "Song of Myself" is a collage of juxtaposed fragments: identity as an ecstatic field of simultaneous perception and thought. The poem sprawls with a strange intensity, driven by its own propulsion rather than the artificial constraints of rhyme and meter—an impulse marked by the frequent use of commas to divide sentences, rather than periods that stop the forward movement. It is the voice of a sexual body adrift in the energy flow of the Cosmos, and it is driven by the spontaneous energy of the Cosmos. Most fundamentally, it is mind rewilded, thought moving with the motion of natural process—and so, identity wholly integrated into the Cosmos seen as an ongoing process of transformation.

Whitman recognized that the Cosmos revealed in *contact* is an organic sexual whole in constant transformation, and that each individual being is part of that whole and part of that process of transformation through which one life becomes another by means of death and sex: "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world." This procreant Cosmos is by nature generative—and so, female. And Whitman thought experiencing the wild could return us to "the naked source-life of us all—to the breast of the great silent savage all-acceptive Mother." It is a concept that could not survive with its implications in any deep way, given the dominant male-oriented conceptual framework; but as we will see, it emerges as a broader cultural force in modern American poetry. And understood fully as a female cosmology—"source-life" and "savage"—it is nothing other than Lao Tzu's Tao.

All of this is radically innovative in terms of both poetry and philosophy. Whitman's poetry concerns itself not with spiritualized ideas and dramas,

nor with poeticized and beautified language. It speaks instead of concrete and immediate reality in his "barbaric yawp" of plain speech. This is the other reason for Whitman's long catalogs: it is his way of celebrating things in and of themselves without distinguishing between beautiful and ugly, poetic and unpoetic, celebrating them because they are all part of the self-sufficient *thusness* of things (Lao Tzu's *tzu-jan*). And his long poems are brawny sprawling affairs ("Song of Myself" runs to 1,336 lines in its original edition), a form that replicates the sprawling plenitude of the Cosmos. Plainspoken, collage-like, organic, propulsive—this form is no less important than what it says, for it embodies the philosophical dimensions he talks about, dimensions that remain central throughout the innovative twentieth-century tradition. It is Whitman's attempt to say the unsayable, the reality of consciousness and Cosmos in all the immediacy of *contact*, where *who we are* is essentially the procreant Cosmos of *where we are*.

from SONG OF MYSELF

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

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

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . . . the shelves are crowded with
perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

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

The smoke of my own breath,
Echos, ripples, and buzzed whispers . . . . loveroot, silkthread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration . . . . the beating of my heart . . . . the passing
of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and darkcolored
sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belched words of my voice . . . . words loosed to the eddies
of the wind,
A few light kisses . . . . a few embraces . . . . a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hillsides,
The feeling of health . . . . the full-noon trill . . . . the song of me rising from
bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?
Have you practiced so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . . there are millions
of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . . nor look through
the eyes of the dead . . . . nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . . the talk of the beginning and
the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . . Always substance and
increase,
Always a knit of identity . . . . always distinction . . . . always a breed of life.

To elaborate is no avail . . . . Learned and unlearned feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure . . . . plumb in the uprights, well entretied,
braced in the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery here we stand.

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

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

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward . . . . and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless
as myself;
They do not know how immortal, but I know.

The pure contralto sings in the organloft,
The carpenter dresses his plank . . . . the tongue of his foreplane whistles its
wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanks-giving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready,
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats and rye,
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case,
He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's bedroom;
The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco, his eyes get blurred with the manuscript;
The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist's table,
What is removed drops horribly in a pail;
The quadroon girl is sold at the stand . . . . the drunkard nods by the
barroom stove,
The machinist rolls up his sleeves . . . . the policeman travels his beat . . . .
the gate-keeper marks who pass,

The torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahoochee or Altamahaw;
Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and great grandsons around
them,
In walls of adobie, in canvas tents, rest hunters and trappers after their day's sport.
The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
The living sleep for their time . . . . the dead sleep for their time,
The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife;
And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine,

---

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and of the
fatherstuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.

I dote on myself . . . . there is that lot of me, and all so luscious,
Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy.

I cannot tell how my ankles bend . . . . nor whence the cause of my faintest
wish,
Nor the cause of the friendship I emit . . . . nor the cause of the friendship
I take again.

To walk up my stoop is unaccountable . . . . I pause to consider if it really be,
That I eat and drink is spectacle enough for the great authors and schools,
A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.

. . . to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And that we call Being.

To be in any form, what is that?
If nothing lay more developed the quahaug and its callous shell were enough.

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand.

Is this then a touch? . . . . quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?
I follow you whoever you are from the present hour;
My words itch at your ears till you understand them.

I do not say these things for a dollar, or to fill up the time while I wait for a boat;
It is you talking just as much as myself . . . . I act as the tongue of you,
It was tied in your mouth . . . . in mine it begins to be loosened.

I swear I will never mention love or death inside a house,
And I swear I never will translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately
stays with me in the open air.

If you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore,
The nearest gnat is an explanation and a drop or the motion of waves a key,
The maul the oar and the handsaw second my words.

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

Wrenched and sweaty . . . . calm and cool then my body becomes;
I sleep . . . . I sleep long.

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

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,
To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.

Perhaps I might tell more . . . . Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death . . . . it is form and union and plan . . . . it is eternal life . . . . it is happiness.

The past and present wilt . . . . I have filled them and emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! Here you . . . . what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
Talk honestly, for no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then . . . . I contradict myself;
I am large . . . . I contain multitudes.

I concentrate toward them that are nigh . . . . I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work and will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove already too late?

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me . . . . he complains of my gab
and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed . . . . I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadowed wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air . . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

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

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

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

China Wilds

Ezra Pound

(1885–1972)

Ezra Pound reinvented language in a way quite different from Whitman. Rather than making it more organic and embodied and spontaneous, he attempted to clarify and distill language, to make it more precise and immediate. In reaction to a poetic tradition that had come to be characterized by a highly subjective language of sentiment, abstraction, decorative metaphor, and rhetorical embellishment, Pound and a few fellow "imagists" formulated a new idea of poetry based on the concrete image, and in doing this they were very self-consciously adapting the strategies of Japanese haiku.

Around the eighth century C.E., Japan sent intellectual emissaries to China with the mission of mastering Chinese culture and bringing it back to Japan. All aspects of Chinese culture were then adopted as Japan's own: philosophy, painting, calligraphy, poetry, even the classical Chinese language itself. Haiku was one product of this cultural transmission, for it is a distilled version of the shortest poetic form in ancient China: the briefest Chinese quatrain form has four lines with five words per line (twenty total), while haiku has three lines and seventeen word/syllables. And like the Chinese quatrain, haiku is intensely imagistic and embodies the entire Taoist/Ch'an conceptual framework (see pp. 7–11) in a particularly concise form.

Haiku was very much in the air and central to the imagists' poetic thinking. They often, in fact, wrote haiku. And this influence led them to their

imagist poetic revolution, led by Pound who concisely defined the image in 1913 as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." He further described this new kind of poetry as: direct and imagistic; spare, using the least possible words; and musical in rhythm, rather than following the artificial constraints of rhyme and meter. All of which, of course, describes haiku perfectly. If language is the medium of thought, then the closer language is to things, the closer thought is. Illustrating these ideas, Pound published that same year the most famous poem in the strict imagist model:

> In a Station of the Metro
>
> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

In spite of its brevity, this poem may be the most influential poem of the twentieth century, and Pound later described it as a direct extension of classical Japanese haiku:

> Three years ago in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion.
>
> . . . A Chinaman said long ago that if a man can't say what he has to say in twelve lines he had better keep quiet. The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the *hokku* [i.e., haiku].
>
> "The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:
> A butterfly."
>
> . . . The "one image poem" is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion. I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work "of second intensity." Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence:—

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals, on a wet, black bough."

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.

With his Metro poem and the poetics surrounding it, Pound unwittingly brought into English poetry the entire Taoist/Ch'an complex of insight (see pp. 7–11). Ch'an too was imported to Japan, where it was known according to the Japanese pronunciation of the word: Zen. And haiku is most essentially an expression of Zen/Ch'an awakening. In that awakening of empty mind, the act of perception becomes a spiritual practice in which the opening of consciousness is a mirror allowing no distinction between inside and outside. Indeed, Pound intuited as much in this description of his "hokku-like" poem as "trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." And so, through ancient Chinese thought via haiku, Pound's project effectively replaced the spiritualized subjectivity of the West with an intellectual/emotional world made up of the things around us, thereby opening a deeper form of experience: rather than alienated abstract thought, a language of concrete images allows us to think in concrete things, and therefore to dwell in a more immediate relation to the world. To dwell so deeply, in fact, that consciousness is woven into landscape and Cosmos. Hence, Pound's poetry of images was a poetry of Ch'an enlightenment.

Soon after writing his poem, Pound described the struggle to render his Metro experience slightly differently:

> . . . only the other night, wondering how I should tell the adventure, it struck me that in Japan where a work of art is not estimated by its acreage and where sixteen syllables [*sic*] are counted enough for a poem if you arrange and punctuate them properly, one might make a very little poem which would be translated about as follows:—The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough—And there, or in some other very old, very quiet civilisations, some one else might understand the significance.

It is noteworthy here that Pound considered his poem so Japanese that he conceived it as a translation of a poem written in ancient Japan, and he thought it only understandable to someone from ancient Japan or "some other very old, very quiet civilization."

He would soon find that "other very old, very quiet civilization" in China, source of haiku, Zen, and all ancient Japanese culture. Pound's haiku-inspired Imagism was only the beginning of a much larger conceptual revolution. He stumbled into the full picture a year later. Hearing of Pound the imagist through Pound's friend Yone Noguchi, who had written an essay on haiku that was apparently the immediate catalyst for Pound's haiku-like poem, Mary Fenollosa approached him with the unpublished notes and manuscripts of her deceased father, the orientalist Ernest Fenollosa. In Fenollosa's writings on Chinese language and poetry, Pound discovered how Chinese poems are constructed from pictographic ideograms juxtaposed to create constellations of meaning in a poetic field with almost no grammatical structure. This was the very form of poetic thought Pound had been trying to imagine. Using Fenollosa's notes, he translated a group of seventeen Chinese poems (pp. 33–34), in which he created a direct and concrete poetic language in English. He came to think of this poetic form as an "ideogrammic method," an expansion of Imagism in which poetic thought takes on a new complexity as a constellation of image-facts, "luminous details" presented in a direct voice.

Pound's vision gained more explicitly philosophical dimensions when he edited and revised some of Fenollosa's lecture notes, publishing them in 1919 as *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (p. 35), which has come to be seen almost as much Pound's writing as Fenollosa's because it so perfectly explores and enlarges Pound's imagist thought. The essay, only forty-five small pages in length, is a rambling polemic not without misunderstanding and misguided exaggeration in the details, as critics have been quick to point out. However, it is generally forgotten that Fenollosa lived for many years in Japan, where he moved in the highest cultural circles, and his education in Chinese language and poetry came from classically-trained Japanese scholars (and later, a European-trained scholar at Columbia University). Those Japanese scholars were educated in the classical tradition handed down from China, so Fenollosa's ideas are at least based on a native Chinese/Japanese understanding that should not be easily dismissed.

Building on what he learned in Japan, Fenollosa presents in his essay a group of profound and seminal ideas that make it the most influential American poetic manifesto of the century, providing the theoretical framework that helped make Pound's imagist/ideogrammic poetics the foundation for virtually all poetry afterward. However much individual poets may have adapted or transformed or even reacted against it, even conventional poems are inevitably constructed as a fabric of directly observed image and action, presented in a direct natural language. And Pound intends his poetics to have a revolutionary and broadly philosophical import, his Fenollosa speaking of "the enormous interest of the Chinese language in throwing light upon our forgotten mental processes." And indeed, half a century later, Jacques Derrida claimed that the Fenollosa essay marked an end to Western metaphysics.

The guiding interest of Fenollosa's essay is a poetry that brings language and thought close to things themselves, thereby returning us to a more primal and profound form of experience, to that *contact* Thoreau describes, where we might discover *who* and *where we are*. And rather than Thoreau's terror, *contact* is here an occasion for enlightenment, as it was for Whitman and the ancient Chinese. Here, Fenollosa is describing the experience of belonging to Tao or *tzu-jan* (pp. 7–8): he doesn't use these terms, but as we will see, the concepts are embedded in the ideas he borrows from ancient China.

In essence, the essay proposes a rewilding of self-identity. Remarkably, Fenollosa's discussion assumes throughout that the mind is an integral part of the Cosmos—an assumption acquired from the ancient Chinese conceptual world, both through his Chinese studies and through his immersion in Japanese culture that is based on ancient Chinese culture. He describes the mind as an entity conjured by primitive humans through a system of metaphoric transference wherein language and thought/emotion are created as metaphors based on physical facts in the world. He calls these primal shapers of thought and language "poets," the original and perhaps purest poets, and describes them as hewing to a "scientific" fidelity to empirical facts. The essay contrasts this with the solipsistic "tyranny of logic," which might also be described as the machinery of the Western *soul*, that self-enclosed system of rationalist thought, which the imagist Pound found crystallized in the reigning poetry of subjectivist rhetoric and abstraction and embellishment.

The implications are revelatory. We have lost that primitive sense of connection to things around us, of being part of the movements of natural process, because our thought (language) has drifted far from its sources in the things around us. Renouncing its pictographic roots, it became alphabetic (phonetic), and so words lost their immediate pictographic connections to things. And compounding this, language evolved complex systems of grammar that packaged reality in an intricate mental framework. With its pictographic words and virtually no grammar, classical Chinese avoids these problems, and so became for Pound a model for poetry.

For Fenollosa/Pound, poetry is capable of returning us to a lost experience of dwelling, to thought and expression at that level of primitive immediacy; and this valuation of the primitive as a more authentic and profound form of experience was prescient, for it too becomes a central impulse in the innovative tradition that follows. Pound took the Chinese written language as his exemplar because it still operated at that primitive level of immediacy. In its pictographic ideograms, we witness things themselves in all their concrete immediacy; and so the language represents a system of thought made from the things of this world, as it was for those primitive poets who invented our mental realm. The metaphoric roots of thought/emotion remain visible in the pictographic ideograms of classical Chinese, and its minimalist grammar largely avoids the intricate structures that package the world in a distancing human construction that leaves the mind turning in its own world, "juggling mental counters."

Fenollosa's essay further recognizes that Chinese embodies a more primitive and accurate experience of the world because it does not bifurcate things into dead nouns and living verbs. A Chinese word can generally operate as any part of speech, and so the language recognizes the world as an interrelated system of living processes. This more primitive and accurate perception reflects Taoist philosophical insight (p. 7 ff.) that sees the world as primarily verbal, as flows of Cosmic energy. We tend to see things as noun, and so the world as static, a reflection of our intellectual heritage that values the permanence of abstract idea and spirit. But things we refer to with nouns are in fact verbal processes, moments of transition in that flow of energy; and a poetry of clear images and active verbs could embody and describe that energy flow.

Although English poetry can never equal Chinese for primal immediacy, Pound thought it should aspire to approach that immediacy. And here

we have returned to Pound's original imagist poetics: a language spare and concrete and active (verbal), with no unnecessary grammatical or rhetorical complications, and relying for thought and expression on images, on things themselves. In this, poetry can return us to a more embodied and primitive awareness, which is nothing other than Thoreau's *contact*.

It is an interesting study in inter-cultural translation. Language, Taoist/Ch'an thought and practice, the arts: all dimensions of ancient Chinese culture are interrelated, manifestations of a single conceptual framework; so when Pound brings a few of these dimensions into Western culture, he implicitly brings all the others. When he talks about pictographic language and imagist poetics, he is also talking about a Ch'an mirroring of the particulars in that dynamic Cosmos (*tzu-jan*). With that mirroring comes thinking in things and the spiritual practice of empty mind, both of which weave consciousness wholly into the generative movements of the Cosmos. When he talks in his Imagist principles about a poetry following musical rhythm rather than artificial constraints of rhyme and meter, he is also talking about practicing *wu-wei* (see p. 8), acting as part of *tzu-jan*'s perennial unfurling. Fenollosa says nothing specific about the Chinese philosophical world—but when he proposes that reality is verbal, always in motion, he is essentially proposing the Taoist Cosmos as a living organism, female and generative and in perpetual transformation. Indeed, he speaks of "lines of force [that] pulse through things," which is a concise definiton of *ch'i*, the breath-force that animates all things in the living Taoist Cosmos. At bottom, this all but unspoken philosophical framework is the conceptual revolution that Pound handed down to the tradition that followed.

Pound's interests eventually moved elsewhere. Rather than creating a body of imagist/ideogrammic poetry, he followed the grand aspirations of his *Cantos*, an eight-hundred-page epic poem, in which ideogrammic structure becomes a sweeping patchwork of erudition. But at the end of his life, in the *Cantos*'s poignant final poem, he harkens back to the simplicity and directness of his imagist roots:

> I have tried to write Paradise
>
> Do not move
> Let the wind speak
> that is paradise.

Let the Gods forgive what I
have made
Let those I love try to forgive
what I have made.

The task of putting Pound's imagist/ideogrammic insights into practice fell to his poetic descendants, chief among them being the poets presented in this book. In fact, poetic expression by means of immediate and concrete images, that poetics of Ch'an enlightenment, became the operating assumption that shaped virtually all of twentieth-century poetry in America. And the same is true of his "musical rhythm" which became, as we will see, breath-driven organic form. A revolution indeed.

THE RIVER-MERCHANT'S WIFE: A LETTER

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You sent into far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Chō-fū-Sa.

Li Po

THE JEWEL STAIRS' GRIEVANCE

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Li Po

SEPARATION ON THE RIVER KIANG

Ko-jin goes west from Kō-kaku-ro,
The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river.
His lone sail blots the far sky.
And now I see only the river,
The long Kiang, reaching heaven.

Li Po

from THE CHINESE WRITTEN CHARACTER AS A MEDIUM FOR POETRY

Thought is successive, not through some accident or weakness of our subjective operations but because the operations of nature are successive.

Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature.

In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate.

A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things, and so the Chinese conception tends to represent them.

. . . the discredited, or rather the useless, logic of the Middle Ages. According to this logic, thought deals with abstractions, concepts drawn out of things by a sifting process. These logicians never inquired how the "qualities" which they pulled out of things came to be there. The truth of all their little checker-board juggling depended upon the natural order by which these powers or properties or qualities were folded in concrete things, yet they despised the "thing" as a mere "particular," or pawn. It was as if Botany should reason from the leaf-patterns woven into our tablecloths. Valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as may be the actual and entangled lines of forces as they pulse through things. Thought deals with no bloodless concepts but watches *things move* under its microscope.

The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation. All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the *transference of power*. . . .

This brings language close to *things*.

. . . how poetical is the Chinese form and how close to nature. In translating Chinese, verse especially, we must hold as closely as possible to the concrete force of the original.

Like nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated. The Chinese language naturally knows no grammar.

The fact is that almost every written Chinese word is . . . *not* abstract. It is not exclusive of parts of speech, but comprehensive; not something which is neither a noun, verb, nor adjective, but something which is all of them at once.

. . . the enormous interest of the Chinese language in throwing light upon our forgotten mental processes . . .

Chinese poetry demands that we abandon our narrow grammatical categories.

You will ask, how could the Chinese have built up a great intellectual fabric from mere picture writing? To the ordinary Western mind, which believes that thought is concerned with logical categories and which rather condemns the faculty of direct imagination, this feat seems quite impossible. Yet the Chinese language with its peculiar materials has passed over from the seen to the unseen by exactly the same process which all ancient races employed. This process is metaphor, the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations.

The whole delicate substance of speech is built upon substrata of metaphor. Abstract terms, pressed by etymology, reveal their ancient roots still embedded in direct action. But the primitive metaphors do not spring from arbitrary *subjective* processes. They are possible only because they follow objective lines of relations in nature herself.

It is a mistake to suppose, with some philosophers of aesthetics, that art and poetry aim to deal with the general and the abstract. This misconception has been foisted upon us by mediaeval logic. Art and poetry deal with the concrete of nature. . . . Metaphor, its chief device, is at once the

substance of nature and of language. Poetry only does consciously what the primitive races did unconsciously. The chief work of literary men . . . lies in feeling back along the ancient lines of advance.

I believe that the Chinese written language has not only absorbed the poetic substance of nature and built with it a second work of metaphor, but has, through its very pictorial visibility, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue.

Our ancestors built the accumulations of metaphor into structures of language and into systems of thought.

There is little or nothing in a phonetic word to exhibit the embryonic stages of its growth. It does not bear its metaphor on its face. . . .

In this, Chinese shows its advantage. Its etymology is constantly visible. It retains the creative impulse and process, visible and at work. After thousands of years the lines of metaphoric advance are still shown. . . . The very soil of Chinese life seems entangled in the roots of its [language].

The true formula for thought is: The cherry tree is all that it does. Its correlated verbs compose it. At bottom these verbs are transitive. Such verbs may be almost infinite in number.

In diction and in grammatical form science is utterly opposed to logic. Primitive men who created language agreed with science and not with logic. Logic has abused the language which they left to her mercy.

Poetry agrees with science and not with logic.

The moment we use the copula, the moment we express subjective inclusions, poetry evaporates. The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things the better the poetry. We need in poetry thousands of active words, each doing its utmost to show forth the motive and vital forces. We can not exhibit the wealth of nature by mere summation, by the piling of sentences. Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within.

In Chinese, each word accumulated this sort of energy in itself.

Should we pass formally to the study of Chinese poetry, we should warn ourselves against logicianised pitfalls. . . . We should be ware of English grammar, its hard parts of speech, and its lazy satisfaction with nouns and

adjectives. We should seek and at least bear in mind the verbal undertone of each noun. We should avoid "is" and bring in a wealth of neglected English verbs.

Chinese poetry gets back near to the processes of nature by means of its vivid [image], its wealth of such [image].

The prehistoric poets who created language discovered the whole harmonious framework of nature.

Local Wilds

William Carlos Williams

(1883–1963)

POUND'S IDEAS WERE ADOPTED AND TRANSFORMED IN a range of singular and surprising ways across the tradition of innovative poets to come later in the twentieth century, first among them William Carlos Williams, with whom Pound shared an enduring literary friendship that began when they met in college. Williams spent his entire adult life in the same modest town—Rutherford, New Jersey—which was semi-rural well into his middle age. His schooling was cosmopolitan, in Switzerland and at the University of Pennsylvania, but he chose to return to his hometown where he practiced medicine and pursued a poetic commitment to local and everyday experience. This commitment amounts to a kind of anti-poetry, in fact, because he made poetry from the most ordinary and seemingly unpoetic material, infusing it with genuine affection, child-like wonder, and a warm sense of humor.

For Williams the doctor, poetry represented a remedy to a problem he diagnosed in the introduction to his breakthrough book, *Spring and All* (1923): "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world." *Contact*, Thoreau's word again, and Williams continues much in the vein of Thoreau's query on Mount Ktaadn:

> the thing [a person] never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested.

So Williams's poetry becomes a response to Thoreau's impossible question, a way to return us to that experience of *contact*. And as with Whitman and Pound, this *contact* is not at all an occasion for terror. Quite the contrary, Williams saw it as self-revelation.

In addition to the direct influence of Pound's Imagism, Williams too was influenced by the then widely popular haiku form. He wrote numerous haiku in the years prior to his first publications, and the quintessential Williams poem can be seen as an extended haiku, or perhaps a series of linked haiku-like stanzas. Williams's innovations became central to the avant-garde tradition that followed, generating wildly diverse poetic practices. His poetry seems clear, direct, simple, and plainspoken: an "artless Imagism," but that concept contains considerable philosophical complexity, philosophical complexity that clearly reflects the ancient Taoist/Ch'an ideas carried below the surface in haiku, Pound's imagist poetics and Chinese translations, and the Fenollosa essay.

Unlike Pound, for whom the image is a carefully chosen moment that "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," Williams avoids poeticizing the real. He prefers to leave things as they are in all their ordinariness. This represents a step beyond Pound in terms of rewilding consciousness, for it brought mind as close as possible to Ch'an's "immediate contact with the world," to the routine flow of actual experience, the actual texture of day-to-day life: *tzu-jan*, things in and of themselves. Williams famously summarized this in an almost too perfect and too quotable axiom that insistently recurs in his writing, notably numerous times in his epic poem *Paterson*, based on the city as "an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me":

> For the poet there are no ideas but in things.
>
> . . . no ideas but in things.
>
> —Say it, no ideas but in things—
>
> —No ideas but in the facts . . .
>
> Not prophecy! NOT prophecy!
> but the thing itself!

This insistence reminds us that we can trace *idea* back to the Greek *idein* and the Indo-European root *weid*, both meaning "to see" in the direct

physical sense of seeing an object in the world: so, not an abstract concept, but the physical content of sight.

Williams's poems are meant to have an emotional impact, to make us *feel* things themselves, or perhaps even to let things feel themselves in us (though he would not have quite said it this way). Williams wants to reveal the emotional content inherent to things in and of themselves, not imposed by humanity:

> Writing is not a searching about in the daily experience for apt similes and pretty thoughts and images, [for that] destroys, makes nature an accessory to the particular theory he is following, it blinds him to his world.

That is, the poems with their tenderness and love cultivate an *attentiveness* to things, and that is the basis for *contact*, for the reweaving of consciousness and Cosmos.

For Williams, the mind's efforts to shape and understand experience are also a part of natural process, as much so as a river flowing or flower blooming:

> poetry . . . affirms reality most powerfully and therefore . . . creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

This leads to a poetry remarkably at ease, responding spontaneously and effortlessly to everyday experience, a poetry of *wu-wei*: artless and improvisational (prefiguration of Olson's poetics), as opposed to the traditional poetic practice of the Western rationalist and otherworldly "soul," a practice that involved careful choice of appropriate subject matter and intricate crafting of an artificially dense and formalized language. At the same time, the poem is itself an "object," a thing in the world. It is an act of nature made by a primate body, its words having an ontological status no different than a stand of poplar trees or a herd of elk.

Though Williams wrote poems in a broad range of size and shape, the result of a sensibility responding freely and spontaneously to the range of experience, his poetic thought appears most clearly in his signature poems: brief, and with very short lines. The short chiseled lines and their off-kilter line breaks were all but unprecedented in English poetry. Indeed, they were a revolution, the first time poetry was organized primarily as a *visual* event on the page. Here is another extension of Pound's discovery in

Chinese of a visual language. It was a new poetic form meant to emphasize "things" themselves (*tzu-jan*), the "ideas" of the poem. It forces a reader to slow down and *attend* to things: not necessarily rare or captivating things, compelling or dramatic things, but routine and unexceptional things, as in the iconic wheelbarrow poem:

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Here, the line breaks force us to weigh *wheel* and *barrow* as separate entities before combining them into *wheel barrow*, *rain* and *water* before *rain water*, *white* and *chickens* before *white chickens*.

At the same time, Williams's new poetic form emphasizes the physicality of the language itself, forcing readers to encounter the presence of words and their relationships, and the quiet music of the poem as a "thing," as "a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—." Just as Williams values all experience equally, even the most everyday, he values words equally, using short lines with their frequent breaks to emphasize the little everyday words we tend not to notice or value particularly: articles, prepositions, conjunctions. And if words are the material of thought, this is to value any piece of thought equally. So even while Williams's poetry cultivates an attention to the facts of the world itself (*tzu-jan*), it also cultivates an attention to the facts of the mind itself, the mind too as *tzu-jan*. And miraculously, in a poem of "no ideas but in things," the two become one and the same: objective and subjective a single living tissue. It is Williams's way of rewilding consciousness, of dwelling as integral to *tzu-jan*'s ongoing transformations.

THE LOCUST TREE IN FLOWER

Among
of
green

stiff
old
bright

broken
branch
come

white
sweet
May

again

THE LOCUST TREE IN FLOWER

Among
the leaves
bright

green
of wrist-thick
tree

and old
stiff broken
branch

ferncool
swaying
loosely strung—

come May
again
white blossom

clusters
hide
to spill

their sweets
almost
unnoticed

down
and quickly
fall

TO A POOR OLD WOMAN

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

SUMMER SONG

Wanderer moon
smiling a
faintly ironical smile
at this
brilliant, dew-moistened
summer morning,—
a detached
sleepily indifferent
smile, a
wanderer's smile,—
if I should
buy a shirt
your color and
put on a necktie
sky-blue
where would they carry me?

THE RIGHT OF WAY

In passing with my mind
on nothing in the world

but the right of way
I enjoy on the road by

virtue of the law—
I saw

an elderly man who
smiled and looked away

to the north past a house—
a woman in blue

who was laughing and
leaning forward to look up

into the man's half
averted face

and a boy of eight who was
looking at the middle of

the man's belly
at a watchchain—

The supreme importance
of this nameless spectacle

sped me by them
without a word—

Why bother where I went?
for I went spinning on the

four wheels of my car
along the wet road until

I saw a girl with one leg
over the rail of a balcony

THE WILDFLOWER

Black eyed susan
rich orange
round the purple core

the white daisy
is not enough

Crowds are white
as farmers
who live poorly

But you
are rich
in savagery—

Arab
Indian
dark woman.

POEM

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

BETWEEN WALLS

the black wings
of the

hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken

pieces of a green
bottle

FINE WORK WITH PITCH AND COPPER

Now they are resting
in the fleckless light
separately in unison

like the sacks
of sifted stone stacked
regularly by twos

about the flat roof
ready after lunch
to be opened and strewn

The copper in eight
foot strips has been
beaten lengthwise

down the center at right
angles and lies ready
to edge the coping

One still chewing
picks up a copper strip
and runs his eye along it

YOUNG WOMAN AT A WINDOW

She sits with
tears on

her cheek
her cheek on

her hand
the child

in her lap
his nose

pressed
to the glass

AUTUMN

A stand of people
by an open

grave underneath
the heavy leaves

celebrates
the cut and fill

for the new road
where

an old man
on his knees

reaps a basket-
ful of

matted grasses for
his goats

PICTURE OF A NUDE IN A MACHINE SHOP

and foundry,
    (that's art)
    a red ostrich plume
in her hair:

Sweat and muddy water,
coiled fuse-strips
    surround her
poised sitting—
(between red, parted
    curtains)

the right leg
    (stockinged)
up!
    beside the point—
at ease.

Light as a glove, light
as her black gloves!
Modeled as a shoe, a woman's
high heeled shoe!

—the other leg stretched
out
    bare
    (toward the top—
and upward)
        as
the smeared hide under
shirt and pants
stiff with grease and dirt
is bare—
    approaching
the centrum

(disguised)
the metal to be devalued!

—bare as
a blow-torch flame,
undisguised.

BREAKFAST

Twenty sparrows
on

a scattered
turd:

Share and share
alike.

SUZANNE

Brother Paul! look!
—but he rushes to a different
window.
The moon!

I heard shrieks and thought:
What's that?

That's just Suzanne
talking to the moon!
Pounding on the window
with both fists:

Paul! Paul!

—and talking to the moon.
Shrieking
and pounding the glass
with both fists!

Brother Paul! the moon!

Coastal Wilds

Robinson Jeffers

(1887–1962)

While Pound and Williams reshaped language to reestablish "immediate contact with the world," with the actual material of our lives, they were working from within a human-centered perspective. Jeffers operates outside of that perspective. He speaks with the elemental voice of the planet itself, the "solid earth" and "actual world" Thoreau *contacts* in that moment when he sees himself and reality clean. This voice is most clear in Jeffers's short lyric poems, such as the archetypal "Continent's End" (p. 62), where Jeffers takes on the same elemental status as the sea he addresses as "mother." Often using commas rather than periods between sentences to create momentum rising through the poem, he uses long booming lines that move with the cadences of the sea pounding against the continent's edge, and indeed the cadences of some deeper source that he shares with the sea.

> Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-beat's ancient
> rhythm I never learned it of you.
> Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our tones
> flow from the older fountain.

Remarkably, however elemental this voice is, it is the voice of Jeffers's everyday immediate experience. With his wife, Jeffers moved at the age of

twenty-seven to Carmel-by-the-Sea, then a small village on the Northern California coast. He apprenticed himself to a stonemason, and thereby built a house of stone looking out over the sea on a relatively pristine stretch of granite coastline a few miles south of the village. Just as Williams made a poetry of his locale, Jeffers made a poetry of his: the wild California coast. The raw seascape and his physical work with stone came together in a kind of magical alchemy for Jeffers, a gradual enlightenment experience that led to a singular poetic vision, a vision first voiced in *Tamar and Other Poems*, published in 1924, the year after Williams's *Spring and All*. Jeffers lived far from Europe and the East Coast, and his work was far outside the mainstream of literary Modernism. He had little interest in formal experimentation; he was pursuing an explicitly philosophical vision:

> I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. (This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.) The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars, none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it, and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort of love; and that here is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one's affection outward toward this one God, rather than inward on one's self, or on humanity, or on human imagination and abstractions. . . .

Here we see again that interest in direct *contact* with "The solid earth! The actual world!" Jeffers's impulse was to probe the philosophical implications of this experience of *contact*. In this, he was caught at the terminological limit of Christianity and nineteenth-century Romanticism, still depending on divinity to explain his experience of a Cosmos so wondrous. In this, Jeffers represents an extension of the pantheist line from Deists and Romantics through Thoreau and Whitman, but with two additions: (1) Jeffers is wholly a part of the divine wild, while his predecessors generally

saw themselves as separate and looking out on divine wilderness; (2) that wilderness is utterly indifferent to human concerns, elemental and indifferent as the vast stone basement beneath the continent.

Sometimes Jeffers uses the cooler "it," which was truer to the reality of his vision. But he uses the term *God* in numerous poems, perhaps most notably in the phrase: *the wild God of the world*. That it is a terminological placeholder, a kind of cultural image evoking breathtaking splendor, is suggested by his use of the wild swan, the thundering storm of its huge wings, when virtually the same phrase appears in another poem (p. 66): "this wild swan of a world."

Poets often write more than they know. If Jeffers had encountered ancient Chinese thought, he might have called the universe Tao, for he shares with Lao Tzu a vision of reality as a single living "organic whole" whose most fundamental nature is change and transformation. And he shares the assumption (now translated into American poetry via Fenollosa/Pound) that it is through "immediate contact with the world" that one dwells as integral to that "organic whole." Lao Tzu describes his Tao in lines that also struggle with terminology, but might almost be a gloss on "Continent's End," with its "mother" and "older fountain":

> There was something all murky shadow,
> born before heaven and earth:
>
> o such utter silence, utter emptiness.
>
> Isolate and changeless,
> it moves everywhere without fail:
>
> picture the mother of all beneath heaven.
>
> I don't know its name.
> I'll call it *Tao*,
> and if I must name it, name it *Vast*.

Jeffers inhabits time at vast scales of elemental transformation, scales at which linear time is replaced by a unity of time and space moving like Lao Tzu's ongoing generative moment (p. 8). And Jeffers shares with Lao Tzu and China's classical poets the recognition that even as we humans belong

to it as integral parts, this organic Cosmos has no particular interest in our welfare.

If Jeffers's thought appears heartlessly misanthropic in its indifference to human welfare, it is simply a reflection of how deeply he identifies with the elemental Cosmos. And if that misanthropy sometimes seems overbearing and polemical, it is because he is struggling against the entire Western tradition, in which the human is assumed to be qualitatively separate from and superior to everything else in the material universe. Jeffers blames this assumption for virtually all evil—especially war and environmental destruction. He believes humans have become too numerous, too self-involved and self-important in their greed, too ruthless and destructive. It is a belief that would become commonplace in intellectual circles and for many poets to come in this ecopoetic tradition. Jeffers assumes humans are, in their basic natures, animal and good; but that the assumptions of Western civilization have cut humans off from their true selves as part of the larger whole, and that their success as a species had become a blight on that whole. Like many poets in this book, he thought we need to return to a more primitive level of existence and consciousness:

> We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
> We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
> As the rock and ocean that we were made from.

For Jeffers, we humans are our beautiful and true and elemental selves only when we are in *contact*, for only then do we wholly belong to the larger whole. This belief that we should return to primal levels of identity and culture is no different from Lao Tzu's vision of sage wisdom as belonging to the ontological process of Tao. It is the essence of deep ecology as a radical critique of the separation between consciousness and earth, and why Jeffers marks the manifest beginning of a modern American ecopoetic tradition. And it is Jeffers's answer to Thoreau's questions: *Who are we? Where are we?* In fact, Jeffers reveals the Western assumptions lurking in Thoreau's first question, assumptions that predetermine any possible answer. The question should be: "What are we," for the "who" assumes some kind of self or spirit-center separate from the "where." But in Jeffers *who we are* is integral to *where we are*:

A severed hand
Is an ugly thing, and man* dissevered from the earth and stars and
his history . . . for contemplation or in fact . . .
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness, the greatest
beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine
beauty of the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that. . . .

* It is impossible not to cringe at such usages, here and in many of these male poets who worked before sexist language conventions were challenged.

CONTINENT'S END

At the equinox when the earth was veiled in a late rain, wreathed with
wet poppies, waiting spring,
The ocean swelled for a far storm and beat its boundary, the ground-swell
shook the beds of granite.

I gazing at the boundaries of granite and spray, the established sea-marks,
felt behind me
Mountain and plain, the immense breadth of the continent, before me
the mass and doubled stretch of water.

I said: You yoke the Aleutian seal-rocks with the lava and coral sowings
that flower the south,
Over your flood the life that sought the sunrise faces ours that has
followed the evening star.

The long migrations meet across you and it is nothing to you, you have
forgotten us, mother.
You were much younger when we crawled out of the womb and lay in
the sun's eye on the tideline.

It was long and long ago; we have grown proud since then and you have
grown bitter; life retains
Your mobile soft unquiet strength; and envies hardness, the insolent
quietness of stone.

The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, life is your child, but
there is in me
Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye that watched
before there was an ocean.

That watched you fill your beds out of the condensation of thin vapor and
watched you change them,
That saw you soft and violent wear your boundaries down, eat rock, shift
places with the continents.

Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-beat's ancient rhythm
I never learned it of you.
Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our tones flow
from the older fountain.

NATURAL MUSIC

The old voice of the ocean, the bird-chatter of little rivers,
(Winter has given them gold for silver
To stain their water and bladed green for brown to line their banks)
From different throats intone one language.
So I believe if we were strong enough to listen without
Divisions of desire and terror
To the storm of the sick nations, the rage of the hunger-smitten cities,
Those voices also would be found
Clean as a child's; or like some girl's breathing who dances alone
By the ocean-shore, dreaming of lovers.

NOVEMBER SURF

Some lucky day each November great waves awake and are drawn
Like smoking mountains bright from the west
And come and cover the cliff with white violent cleanness: then suddenly
The old granite forgets half a year's filth:
The orange-peel, egg-shells, papers, pieces of clothing, the clots
Of dung in corners of the rock, and used
Sheaths that make light love safe in the evenings: all the droppings of the summer
Idlers washed off in a winter ecstasy:
I think this cumbered continent envies its cliff then. . . . But all seasons
The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep,
Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm that prepares up the long coast
Of the future to scour more than her sea-lines:
The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous,
The rivers mouth to source pure; when the two-footed
Mammal, being someways one the nobler animals, regains
The dignity of room, the value of rareness.

ROCK AND HAWK

Here is a symbol in which
Many high tragic thoughts
Watch their own eyes.

This gray rock, standing tall
On the headland, where the sea-wind
Lets no tree grow,

Earthquake-proved, and signatured
By ages of storms: on its peak
A falcon has perched.

I think, here is your emblem
To hand in the future sky;
Not the cross, not the hive,

But this; bright power, dark peace;
Fierce consciousness joined with final
Disinterestedness;

Life with calm death; the falcon's
Realist eyes and act
Married to the massive

Mysticism of stone,
Which failure cannot cast down
Nor success make proud.