

“Every Poem an Epitaph”: Sea-Changes
in Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle . . .”
and Crane’s “Voyages”

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“EVERY POEM,” in the words of T. S. Eliot, is “an epitaph” when it pronounces an elegy upon a former poetic self and announces rebirth of the artist as a mature poet.¹ “Every poem” is an “epitaph” which celebrates a ritual death — “a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea’s throat” to the place “where we start” — and the initiate’s restored imaginative power. “Every poem” in which we suffer a death and live an incarnation is epitaphic, whether it take the form of Neoplatonic allegory of descent, as in Blake’s *The Book of Thel* or ritual marriage to a death principle, as in Mallarmé’s *Les Noces d’Hérodiade*. The prototype of these dramas of the literary mind is the initiation scenario enacted in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and in the long tradition of the pastoral elegy.² But the Scene of Instruction, to borrow Harold Bloom’s revision of Freud’s primal scene and Derrida’s Scene of Writing, is as various as the poets: from conventional pastoral *locus amoenus* to Hérodiade’s tower, from Spenser’s wedding altar to Hart Crane’s rooftop jazz club, from the rim of Blake’s generated world to the open sea of Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the impulse that links all poems of passage and ceremony is the “refusal of mortality.”³ And the way poets get around the issue of mortality is by incorporating structures of transcendence and rebirth into their works. For this reason funeral poems ceremonially invoke the power of the dead even as they lay to rest the souls of itinerant forbears. For this reason too marriage poems emphasize passage — often in terms of ritual decease of an earlier, virgin state — and preoccupy themselves with future “issue,” literary or otherwise. In these

works especially the poetic imagination willingly submits itself to ritual trial; during the course of these works it eulogizes a past state of literary consciousness and enters into another.

In modern poetry, in the wake of diminishing influence of the doctrine of imitation, a diffuse, but recognizable, initiation poem continues to be written. In its way, this poem is as ritualized and formal as Milton's *Lycidas*, that elegy which immortalized the form of seaside meditation upon the subject of death. After *Lycidas* poems tend to imitate its form closely and ultimately unsatisfactorily, in the end pronouncing a dirge on pastoral elegy's power to assuage. Hart Crane's "At Melville's Tomb," for example, embraces the same bleak sea vision as the writer it memorializes. If once a tombstone poem promised a sea-change — "Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars" echoes Ariel's song from *The Tempest* — now "wrecks passed without the sound of bells," now "monody shall not wake the mariner. / This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps."⁴ "Monody," of course, is the Miltonic catchword, signalling the difference between that poem and this admission of defeat, this abandonment of corpse to the "whelming tide."

Otherwise poems respond to *Lycidas* less directly, dropping the elegiac fiction of singing over a bier and drawing instead upon Milton's orphic poem of self-announcement for the model of literary initiation it provides. These modern pictorials tend to be lyric-philosophical pronouncements on mortality and art. They take place by water, "at least in vision, if inland far they be," writes Bloom paraphrasing Wordsworth.⁵ Each of these works records an encounter with death which purges the neophyte of his fear of immersion and engulfment. Each is linear and marks stages of evolving consciousness toward a vision that is transcendent, self-celebrating, and vital to continued literary productivity. They have been called, with *Lycidas*, odes of incarnation or immortality odes because, recording rising poetical character, they promise transcendence of imaginative death.⁶ Paul Fussell, Jr., who briefly links some of the poems discussed below under the heading "The American Shore Ode," supplies a context insufficiently comparative for these works. He notes that the poems take place on American beaches and that they memorialize an Ameri-

can initiation ritual — that of the representative American work in which a “boy like Huck Finn . . . positioned in the midst of physical nature, discovers the idea of death and then enacts some strategic ritual by which his discovery is brought into coherence with his journey toward maturity.”⁷ But by rooting them so firmly in American soil, Fussell denies the works a heritage and future resonance. Leo Spitzer, in an essay on Whitman, comes closer to finding a context in world literature for such works as that poet’s “Out of the Cradle . . .” when he calls it a “powerful original synthesis of motifs which have been elaborated through a period of 1,500 years of Occidental poetry,” a democratization of the ode form.⁸ I suspect with Spitzer that Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle . . .” and Crane’s “Voyages,” that for that matter Hopkins’s “The Wreck of *The Deutschland*” and Eliot’s “Dry Salvages,” have more in common with the European ode’s successful mix of public reference and private utterance than with American elegiac prose. I would also suggest that the iconography of these poems is rather that of Milton’s “whelming tide” and Wordsworth’s “immortal sea” than that of picturesque American seashores.

Before reading these poems as important transformations of the classical and Miltonic elegiac, however, I shall briefly sketch a continental context as well for the seaside setting of displaced elegy to demonstrate the complexity of modern piscatorialism. Paul Valéry’s *Le Cimetière marin*, it seems to me, has a place in this tradition of dense, philosophical, sea-inspired poetry, as does St.-Jean Perse’s collection, *Amers*. The former is an odic exploration of consciousness in the face of death, inspired by a constellation of sea, sky and grave. Valéry called the work “un monologue de ‘moi,’ dans lequel les thèmes les plus simples et les plus constants de ma vie affective et intellectuelle . . . fussent appelés, tramés, opposés . . . Tout ceci menait à la mort et touchait à la pensée pure.”⁹ For all its seeming anti-pastoralism, however — Valéry ironically portrays himself as a smiling shepherd pasturing “le blanc troupeau de mes tranquilles tombes”¹⁰ — the poem borrows certain elegiac conventions and takes up its familiar consoling statement, even if to reject it:

Maigre immortalité noire et dorée
 Consolatrice affreusement laurée
 Qui de la mort fait un sein maternel,
 Le beau mensonge et la pieuse ruse!
 Qui ne connaît, et qui ne les refuse!
 Ce crâne vide et ce rire éternel!

Gaunt immortality in black and gold,
 Consoles grimly wreathed in laurel, making
 Believe that death's a warm maternal breast,
 Sublime falsehood, consecrated fraud!
 Who does not recognize them and reject
 That empty skull, that everlasting grin!

St.-Jean Perse's *Amers*, translated by Wallace Fowlie as *Sea-Marks*, is a hymn to the sea of such dimension and power as perhaps to be the single most sustained work on the sea in the French language. It is an incarnational lyric, a ritual incantation, a Mariner's tale, a "chant d'épousailles" and a dirge, a seasonal miscellany, a monody and a choral hymn at once. Perse conceived the work "comme l'arène solitaire et le centre rituel," "la table d'autel du drame antique" of humanity.¹¹ The genesis of the creative Word, about which Whitman, Hopkins, Crane, and Eliot all have more to say, is churned out of the sea by means of a choral song. Pierre Emmanuel writes of *Amers*: "from this chorus around the sea the sea itself rises: it is the song, the energy shared by all men, the prophecy, the Supreme Word, which goes beyond them, and yet is born of them."¹²

I do not mean here to attempt an unwieldy iconography of the sea as symbol. I merely mean to remind the reader by way of modern evidence of the sea's long significance as a source of poetic power and inspiration of a tradition which originally came to focus in pastoral's piscatorial corpus—Sannazaro's seaside confrontation with death during the course of an elegy for Phyllis, Milton's watery depiction of Lycidas's bier. But between Shakespeare's allegorizable notion of suffering a baptismal sea-change and Freud's initiatory immersion in the oceanic wellspring of creative power, is a long-founded tradition, borrowed by pastoral piscatorialists, of viewing risk of the "open sea" as evidence of a daring and imaginative poetic life.¹³ Keats's 1818 letter to

James Hessey charts this shift of favour from a safe and landed pastoral “green” to a Romantic piscatorialism:

In Endymion, I leapt headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.

“Sounding seas” is a Miltonic formulation which I sense Keats intends to echo here. Braving the open sea becomes an initiatory motif which signals readiness for spiritual trial and passage to mature poetic style. Here is Whitman’s version of the injunction:

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea.

For Valéry, too, at the close of *Le Cimetière marin*, the “puissance salée” of the sea “me rend mon âme.” Immersion invigorates and replenishes, even baptizes, and the sea-change experienced by the initiate makes possible the composition of the poem.

Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle . . .” and Crane’s “Voyages” share a certain number of literary motifs which I shall trace to Milton’s *Lycidas* and Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode and to the classical pastoral elegiac tradition in general. As initiatory scenarios, each takes place by water, where, Bloom tells us, poets tend to incarnate. Each explores in this context the nature of death and rebirth. Each stages a quest for the word, that secret talisman rendered up to the *mystes* by the sea — a word that becomes incarnate during the course of the elegy. Finally each initiate succeeds by virtue of some interceding female figure who has the power to bestow or confiscate poetic power. In Hopkins’s “The Wreck of *The Deutschland*” and Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, treated briefly in conclusion, the intercessor is Mary herself and the word out of the sea is the Word made Flesh. In the case of the latter poems, of course, the language is sacramental, the imagery devotional. But in all four cases the ritual being enacted remains the same: “A Word Out Of The Sea,” Whitman’s working title for “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” applies equally well to each of the four poems. We get in Whitman, Crane, Hopkins, and Eliot, a sea-change “into something rich and strange” worthy

of comparison with Milton's transvaluation of the drowned Lycidas, although in the later poems we witness an utter displacement of pastoral elegiac machinery. What survives the demise of pastoral convention in these modern poems, however, is a range of ceremonial forms with attendant imagery of passage from one state to another: nuptial anthems, nativity odes, funeral elegies, orphic hymns of self-announcement.

II

Whitman's "Out of the Cradle . . ." and Crane's "Voyages" are both initiatory experiments: each work chronicles a poetic coming-of-age which involves dissolution of personality and subsequent graduation to orphic stature. Each poem views this process metaphorically as a voyage into the sea, out of the confines of the merely personal. Each poem personifies the sea as a deeply ambiguous female figure, a mother-bride capable of maternal caresses or seductive postures — confrontation with whom, erotically achieved, is tantamount to passage to poetic manhood. Each poem locates the moment of incarnation at the point where eros and thanatos meet: the going outside oneself toward another, being laved in a lover's embrace, is — as mystic poets have always known — a kind of death. During the course of this figured *descensus* in search of a mature poetic voice, the Word is ritually bestowed upon each poet. I would suggest that each work is in this sense a pastoral, an apprenticeship work: Whitman reworks a childhood "reminiscence"¹⁴ during the process of which he becomes an "outsetting bard," writing a nativity ode upon his own double birth not unlike that announced by Milton in his transcendence of "swainishness"¹⁵ in Lycidas or by Wordsworth in the Immortality Ode. Crane brings *White Buildings*, the important lyric *oeuvre* of his early years, to a close with his elegiac "Voyages," signalling his readiness for the epic venture of *The Bridge*.

Whitman literally gives birth to himself during the course of "Out of the Cradle." In fact the entire progress from cradle to grave is ritually charted: in the parturition of the prologue, in the marriage song of the bird, in the dirge for separation, loss of

love, rupture. The first twenty-one lines of the poem, which Whitman labelled Pre-Verse when he first published the poem in 1859 as "A Child's Reminiscence," represent the "Ninth-month midnight" of gestation, and imitate, in the repetition of phrases, the almost biblical anaphora, the expulsive rhythm of birth itself. The first lines are not only a prologue to the poem as a whole, assembling its imagery ("cradle," "shuttle," "sands," "child," "bird," "moon," "word," "sea") and initiating its rhythms, they actually generate the speaker out of the encompassing surround: prepositional phrases beginning "out of," "over," "down from," "up from," "from," literally spawn the subject "I" some twenty lines into the poem. Even the moon, late-risen and swollen with tears, is ready to parturate. The progression toward incarnation of the man/boy is, however, difficult, as if the poet fears the poem may not get written "ere all eludes me." The last word of the twenty-one-line sentence is the verb "sing," which Whitman, purposely dislocating the syntax, takes great pains to generate last. "Out of the cradle" of the sea, onto the "sand" is born a man capable of orphic song. A "uniter of here and hereafter," the bard is born who will recover from the sea the word incarnate, poetry's guarantee.

The beginning of "Out of the Cradle" is one of those "junctions elegiac" which Crane noted in the "Cape Hatteras" section of *The Bridge*: in the image of the singer as "a man, yet by these tears a little boy again," singing a poetic "reminiscence," we catch Whitman looking backward at Wordsworth in the first stanzas of the Immortality Ode. As Wordsworth viewed the epithalamic harmony of the child's world from a distanced adult perspective, so Whitman invokes the spring — "when the lilac scent was in the air and fifth-month grass was growing" — of a pastoral seedtime, one in which, figuratively, he watched a "he-bird" and "she-bird" marry and nest expectantly on the seashore.¹⁶ Not only does Whitman invoke Wordsworth's lost Eden of immediacy and primal joy, he emphasizes rather pointedly in the twice-repeated "both together," his own analogue for the pastoral flock-battening scene of Milton's *Lycidas*, that time of youthful obliviousness when "both together" Milton and King kept schoolboy company. The evocation of earlier — Blake would

say Innocent, or ungenerated — states of consciousness is the first task of elegy; the next is to accommodate in a way that allows for future literary productivity the unalterable fact of death.

The birds' idyll, set apart from the narrative by italicization and by its assignment to another speaker, is short-lived; and the untimely separation of the couple forces upon the poet, by virtue of his identification with "my brother" the "lone singer," the confrontation with the waves of death hinted at in the prologue. We have *not*, here, a pastoral dialogue between shepherd and older goatherd as in the classical elegies of Theocritus and Virgil, but we do have an analogue to such an initiatory encounter. The child of "Out of the Cradle" recognizes immediately in the bird's song the music of mystery and entrusts himself to that spiritual mentor for guidance and direction.

The bird/boy relationship is that of shaman/initiate: the one sings a song, "pouring forth the meanings"; the other "treasur'd every note . . . listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes." In point of fact, however, the filial relationship of swain to angel, as in Milton's *Lycidas*, or shepherd to goatherd, as in Theocritus's first idyll, is replaced here with an untraditional, democratic American relationship. "Following you my brother," the boy tells the bird, explicitly labelling his mentor with a familial term suggesting equality. Critics note in this elegiac, but fraternal recognition something of Huck Finn's respect for his raft companions and Isabel Archer's poignant cry, "O my brother!"¹⁷ It is quite probable that the impulse to project a community of brothers is utterly American; I suspect as well that Whitman, viewing himself as the first American bard and recognizing no real precursors in American literature, was privileged with the status of the "new." His evocation of that "demon or bird" — and I read this as an appeal to the Genius of the Shore, as in *Lycidas*, or the procreative father Genius in Spenser's *Epithalamion*, the daimon, or other — can afford to be tender and reciprocal rather than violent. Whitman is a father figure to American poets like Crane and Stevens; his place in American literature is analogous to that of Milton in English or Hugo in French literature, yet the lack of a strong American lyric tradition preceding him gives him greater originary stature than Milton and Hugo. His sense of competi-

tion with Milton still exists, however, and there can be no doubt that his model for elegy was Milton's own. Here is Edgar Lee Masters's record of Whitman on Milton, too thoroughgoing a dismissal not to be suspect:

It seems to me that Milton is a copy of a copy — not only Homer but the Aeneid: a sort of modern repetition of the same old story: legions of angels, devils: war is declared, waged: moreover, even as a story it enlists little of my attention: he seems to me like a bird — soaring yet overweighted: dragged down, as if burdened — too greatly burdened: a lamb in its beak: its flight not graceful, powerful, beautiful, satisfying, like the gulls we see over the Delaware in midwinter — their simple motion a delight — attracting you when they first break upon your sight: soaring, soaring, irrespective of cold or storm. It is true, Milton soars, but with dull, unwieldy motion . . . There's no use talking, he won't go down with me.¹⁸

One wonders whether the bird figure in “Cradle,” with whom the boy so charmingly dialogues, is not a wishful portrait of Milton within the poem itself. In any case, the bird's effect on the boy is analogous to that of Michael on the swain: in *Lycidas* the archangel projects a vision of the heavenly company as nuptial choir; in Whitman's poem the bird sings a love song with the undertones of a dirge, a bridal invitation to his lost mate so heavily erotic, so fused with the idea and imagery of death, so enticingly pitched, that it hovers just on the line between ecstasy and despair — “a reckless despairing carol” with the force of a hymn.

When the bird's “aria” sinks, the boy experiences an epiphany or transference of poetic energy so productive of a metamorphosis that it has been likened to the sunrise of the youthful Apollo, a figure for the emergence of the poetic spirit.¹⁹ Until this point in the poem “that lagging, yellow, waning moon” dominated the landscape. Now, with the transmission of mystical knowledge to initiate, a revolution occurs, and light replaces night. In this instant the poet achieves a second birth:

The aria sinking,
All else continuing, the stars shining,
The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing,
With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,

On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
 The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face
 of the sea almost touching
 The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the
 atmosphere dallying,
 The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last
 tumultuously bursting,
 The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,
 The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
 The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
 The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,
 To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd secret
 hissing
 To the outseting bard. (ll. 130-43)

In the first lines of the poem a man is born; in the lines following
 the bird's dirge, a second birth of the poet as bard is projected
 out of that trinity there, the trio of bird, boy, and fierce mother.
 The birth is sexual and psychological (pent-up emotions burst
 forth tumultuously in tearful and ecstatic release) as well as
 vocational: the old mother hisses "some drown'd secret" in
 answer to the "boy's soul's questions" and in the process acts as
 midwife to the birth of Whitman as poet, the "outsetting bard."
 At this pivotal moment in the poem, the poet literally finds his
 voice — "for I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I
 have heard you" — and begins his poetic career:

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
 And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder
 and more sorrowful than yours,
 A thousand, warbling echoes have started to life within me, never
 to die. (ll. 147-49)

The crucial shift here is from the bird's "solitary song" to
 Whitman's "thousand warbling echoes" of communal, even epic,
 song. Vocation in the double sense makes Whitman one of the
 elect. These lines of positive self-celebration should be compared
 with the following lines from "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life,"
 in Bloom's words, "Whitman's great elegy of Orphic disincarn-
 ation,"²⁰ in which "sobbing dirge" provides no transcendence:

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
 Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,

Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me
 I have not had the least idea who or what I am,
 But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet
 untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd,
 Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and
 bows,
 With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have
 written,
 Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.²¹

On this shore too he listens “to the dirge,” but incarnation does not occur:

I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single
 object, and that no man ever can,
 Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart
 upon me and sting me,
 Because I have dared to open my mouth.

“As I Ebb'd” is a meditation on impotence and unfulfilment which ends with an image of spent and wasted seed. “Out of the Cradle,” on the other hand, is a positive discovery of twinned sexuality and poetry. Whitman makes explicit that which is implicit in Milton and Wordsworth: that sexual and poetic power are related, that writing is a kind of mastery with the symbolic power of potency. Milton's success at raising Lycidas's drooping head and Wordsworth's compensatory marital relationship to nature both sexualize poetic achievements. Literary initiation in this displaced elegy, it should come as no surprise, calls for explicitly sexual imagery.

Initiation in this poem is mediated by two figures, the “dusky demon and brother” bird and the muselike mother sea. What is in fact imparted to the boy in the form of the death carol is a secret knowledge of sexuality; the bird transfers to him a tension from which he will never be immune again, but which will empower him to create poetry:

Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
 Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what
 there was in the night,
 By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
 The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
 The unknown want, the destiny of me. (ll. 153-55)

The nexus of this complex fusion is the place where eros and thanatos meet: from the bird, the boy-poet learns the "sweet hell" of love; the second part of the mystery is death itself. The sea, the other parent in this poem of birth and generation, is mother to the boy, "an old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments." She is the one who passes to him, in the form of a lisped "word final, superior to all," the "clew" he needs to make sense of the bird's love song. The word is, of course, "death," love's opposite and dynamic contrary—that which circumscribes life and lends urgency to all our actions. In this confrontation with death, Whitman achieves psychological mastery over his own fear of annihilation: with reiteration, the word "death" takes on some of the quality of what psychoanalysis calls "magic words," words that give their speaker a sense of omnipotence and the illusion of control. To this interpretation of "the low and delicious word death" must be added an additional qualification: the repetition, incantatory and incremental, of this formula becomes for me a linguistic approximation to the act of coitus. The incarnation that takes place in the last section of the poem is a fleshly act in every sense: it is at once an expulsion of infant from amniotic fluids up on to the "sands" where the boy stands for the first time on his own "feet" and a baptismal immersion, "laving me softly all over." In this sense the sea-mother "whisper'd me," literally breathing life into the boy. On the other hand, this section makes the sea into a bride with whom sexual consummation must take place: "hissing melodious," an oxymoronic formulation not unlike Spenser's "doolful pleasaunce" in the "November" elegy of his *Shepherd's Calendar* conveys something of the ambivalence of this initiation to manhood. "Death, death, death, death, death," signifying the merging of poet and mother-bride, becomes the sexual rhythm itself.

For the act of writing an elegy, as Whitman makes clear, is a sexual accomplishment; in this instant sexual destiny and poetic destiny fuse. "My own songs awakened from that hour" of first sexuality, Whitman ends his poem, "and with them the word up from the waves." In an associative passage on potency and language, messengers and intercession, Norman O. Brown offers a gloss on Whitman's and Milton's initiatory dramas:

Speech resexualized . . . The tongue made potent again, out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword. The spermatic word, the Word as seed; the sower soweth the word. Annunciations, messages, messengers, angels, having intercourse with the daughters of men, making pregnant through the ear; angels or birds, winged words or doves of the spirit. The flying bird or angel is an erection or winged phallus; "a single word stands for the penis and the sentence for the thrust of the penis in coitus." A supernatural pregnancy: "A being, it man or woman, who has the Holy Ghost within him is pregnant or full of semen and in ejaculating words of prophecy the wizard either ejaculates or gives birth to a child."²³

The similarity of symbols in Milton's elegy and Whitman's ode is tantalizing — potent birds, messengers, angels, intercessors, mediators — but beyond the association of powerful images their procedures are identical: Milton achieves by resurrection of *Lycidas* from the waves what Whitman gains by immersion in the sea: imaginative and literary mastery of a situation in which, at the outset, he was a neophyte.

If in fact an elegy lays to rest a former self in the act of articulating the poem and with it the burden of apprenticeship, and if, in that moment, an elegy represents a gesture toward the future (death of the child promises potency to the man and confrontation with death provides for transcendence), then "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is a more powerful imitation of *Lycidas* than Whitman's better-known "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Dirge, mourners, flowers, drooping star, establish in that poem an incontrovertible relationship to Milton's elegy and the shopworn literary conventions of previous pastoral dirges; still "Lilacs" captures none of Milton's tone of orphic success. "Out of the Cradle," on the other hand, is at once farther from and closer to *Lycidas* and the Immortality Ode — poems to which at first reading it bears no visible relation. On the one hand, the elegiac framework is so attenuated and displaced in "Cradle" that the poem appears to be an independent creation, not one in debt to elegy's store of imagery. Yet on the other, "Out of the Cradle" so accurately taps the energy of Milton's and Wordsworth's incarnational odes, so successfully renders the initiatory drama in a range of ceremonial forms, that

it, and not Whitman's elegy for Lincoln appears to take its place in "simultaneous order" with them.

III

Crane's "Voyages," a six-part meditation on the sea, love, death, potency, and poetry, reproduces under guise the same set of characters as Whitman's poem: poet-initiate, ambiguous sea-woman, both mother and bride, and "Prodigal," from whom Crane is imparted the mystery of sexuality.²³ Like Whitman's poem, it is not a formal funeral elegy, but an odd love poem which traces the course of love from consummation to separation and in so doing locates poetic strength in ultimate separation, or death, and unexpected consolation in a permanent kingdom of poetic immortality. Like Whitman's poem, it traces a personal and literary history: from innocent, unseasoned childhood to the knowing adult state preliminary to visionary experience. Like that poem, it is an elegiac initiation, calling, at its close, for the traditional, if somewhat "splintered," "garlands" of poetic accomplishment.

The first poem in "Voyages" serves as a prologue to the whole and provides an analogue to the birth or childhood section of Whitman's ode. We have already traced this evocation of an earlier state of pastoral bliss to the seedtime passages in Milton and Wordsworth. In fact in "Voyages I" we watch Crane watching Wordsworth's adult exclusion from the May morning festivities: the contrast drawn in the first poem is between "bright striped urchins . . . gaily digging and scattering" upon the beach and the grown man watching the children frisk with their dog. As in Wordsworth, the man sees what the children innocently fail to perceive — "And could they hear me I would tell them" — that the growth process is a perilous journey on treacherous water:

but there is a line
 You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it
 Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses
 Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.
 The bottom of the sea is cruel. (p. 35)

The children are warned not to trust the sea’s “too wide” breast and lichen-like affection; even the “spry cordage” of their bodies does not guarantee that they are seaworthy. The line between their safe beach frolic — in the Immortality Ode too the children “sport upon the shore” — and the harrowing voyage is, of course, the decision to brave the waters. The last line of the warning becomes a prophetic utterance with something of adult recognition of mortality in its tone. Compare Milton’s “but O the heavy change” and Wordsworth’s elegiac “But now . . .” to the sudden shift in the last line of the first voyage poem. This utterance sounds the bass note of the entire suite of poems; the remaining lyrics climb with difficulty back from that bleak recognition that any risk of self entails loss of self in the enveloping, yet treacherous, waters of maturity. Untimely death prompts once more an elegy, but it is death of the self explicitly that is at stake.

The second and third poems of the sextet explore love and lovemaking in the bed of the sea in a manner that so fuses love and death as to recall the carol of Whitman’s bird. The telling thing about these poems is that sexual experience, the erotic metaphor, stands for literary experience — the imagery of consummation is superimposed upon the ritual language of initiation. The sea is at once a seductive lover whose “undinal vast belly moonward bends” and a judge or lawgiver “whose diapason knells / On scrolls of silver snowy sentences” — the “sceptred terror of whose sessions” rends all but those who trust themselves to the death that is love.

Bequeath to us no earthly shore until
 Is answered in the vortex of our grave
 The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise. (p. 36)

The vortex in which love and death meet is, of course, as in Whitman’s poem, orgasm. “Sleep, death, desire” come together in the moment the Elizabethan’s termed “little death”; the three “close round one instant in one floating flower,” Crane’s image for post-coital bliss. The sea, in this second poem of the collection acts as mistress-of-ceremonies to the occasion: the real consummation, mirrored in her “turning shoulders,” takes place between poet and Prodigal, who is called up, like the bird of Whitman’s

ode, to “complete the dark confessions her veins spell.” Critics note that Crane enjoyed the most passionate affair of his life — with a sailor — at the moment of the poem’s conception; no doubt too in Whitman’s sexual initiation by a male bird, Crane found inspiration and sanction for his own homosexual portrayal of initiation. The biographical proof of such intent, however, remains less convincing to me than the literary evidence: in pastoral initiation poems from Theocritus to Milton, a man is treated to arcane lore and welcomed to mature poetic stature by a member of the same sex. The homosexual pair of each poem derives from the Greek initiatory pattern and the father/son rivalry of the Freudian model. Literary genetics, as the treatment of women in literary history attests, is not merely metaphorically dominated by patriarchal custom.

The third poem is the climax of the sequence. In this lyric, in a supreme invocation of pathetic fallacy, sea and sky achieve cosmic intercourse which bears “infinite consanguinity” to the consummation of the poet and his other or Prodigal — “sea plains where the sky / Resigns a breast that every wave enthrones.” In these “ribboned water lanes,” the poet and his lover have made ritual ablutions (Crane uses Whitman’s word “laved” for the baptismal effect of immersion in the sea); in a show of support for their union the sea lifts “reliquary hands.” This poem, of the entire suite, is the initiation poem *par excellence*. Note the overlay of conventional symbols of initiation — “gates” recalling those Neoplatonic portals of Blake and Spenser, the “pillars” and “pediments” of Psyche’s house in Apuleius’s allegory — and sexual merging:

And so, admitted through black swollen gates
That must arrest all distance otherwise, —
Past whirling pillar and lithe pediments,
Light wrestling there incessantly with light,
Star kissing star through wave on wave unto
Your body rocking! (p. 37)

The moment of passage itself, termed a “death,” “presumes no carnage, but this simple change,” the metamorphosis undergone in the waves:

Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
 The silken skilled transmemberment of song. (p. 37)

Not only Ariel's lyric evocation of a sea-change, but also Milton's fifth stanza of *Lycidas*, stands beyond these lines: that verse beginning with reference to the "remorseless deep" which "clos'd o'er the head of your lov'd Lycidas" and ending with the "gory visage" of Orpheus floating down the "swift Hebrus." Crane condenses this passage into two reverberant lines: the initiate is, like the drowned Lycidas, tossed by the relentless waves, but the drowning proves restorative and "transmemberment," a coinage, supersedes its primary association with the dismemberment of Orpheus. This line, coupled with the prayer, "permit me voyage, love, into your hands," marks the midpoint of the poem and sets our "gaze toward" the "paradise" regained at the close of the series in the poet's mythic "Belle Isle." Just as in *Lycidas* the violent death of Orpheus looks forward to Lycidas's retrieval but does not guarantee immortality until the Christian transvaluation at the end of the poem, so in this poem of "Voyages," immersion in the sea and consequent dissolution of self prepare for the consolations of the last.

"Voyages IV" and "V" backtrack in characteristic elegiac fashion and follow upon the orphic climax much as Milton's long meditation on the uses of poetry and the need for fame fills out the reference to ritual dismemberment. Milton likens flirtation with fame to earthly erotics, the pleasurable tangling in Neaera's hair which distracts him from both worldly and heavenly vocation. Crane, in his post-coital speculation on the risks and pleasures of self-expenditure cries: "No, / In all the argosy of your bright hair I dreamed / Nothing so flagless as this piracy." In fact both reach the same conclusion: Milton resolves to let others "sport with Amaryllis in the shade" while he devotes himself to earning his heavenly "meed" of fame; Crane greets post-coital separation and the inevitable mortality of human love with a resolve to find a principle of permanence in "the signature of the incarnate word," that is, in the sacred, imperishable word of poetry rather than physical union. One of the initiated now, Crane considers love from an experiential perspective in "IV" and "V."

Crane's flower imagery is deserving of further discussion because, as his experiment with the pastoral catalogue in the "Cape Hatteras" section of *The Bridge* reveals, he was very much aware of the peculiar eroticism — at once bridal and funereal — of the pastoral floral bouquet. As mentioned previously, the love-death of orgasm is figured in "one floating flower." In "Voyages II," "crocus lustres" of stars and "poinsettia meadows" of the sea's tides are offered to the Prodigal in a gesture of sexual invitation. The fourth poem relies on the language of flowers to evoke that safe harbour, couched in nuptial terms, which would cement their union and confer upon it a permanence, "the chancel port and portion of our June." In a telling chiasmus of elegiac and epithalamic imagery, Crane calls for flower-strewing: bouquets marking the path of wedded lovers are superimposed upon the staves honouring the bier of the one "lost in fatal tides."

Shall they not stem and close in our own steps
Bright staves of flowers and quills to-day as I
Must first be lost in fatal tides to tell? (p. 38)

He still hopes for transcendental recovery of song through love:

No stream of greater love advancing now
Than, singing, this mortality alone
Through clay aflow immortality to you. (p. 38)

But if the last lines of "IV" leave the lover still hoping to achieve a wedding with the beloved — "widening noon within your breast for gathering," expecting still to "receive / The secret oar and petals of all love" — the fifth poem of the sequence renounces love and sex in favour of poetry. The lover literally dissolves and falls away as the poet realizes nothing is there for futurity and permanence:

Knowing I cannot touch your hand and look
Too, into that godless cleft of sky
Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing. (p. 39)

The ultimate "piracy" has been the betrayal that is mortality — the recognition that human life is as transient and unreliable as "moon light, moon light loved / And changed. . . ."

The last poem of "Voyages" is a nuptial hymn and a benediction, a vision of that Wordsworthian rainbow of covenant which promises resurrection. The poem is, like the close of Whitman's ode, a retrieval of the "word" out of the sea — Whitman's secret word "death" and Milton's "unexpressive nuptial song" — which the poet fears to name: "waiting, afire, what name, unspoke, / I cannot claim." Suddenly, as in Whitman's poem, the sea becomes a collaborator rather than an adversary: "ocean rivers, churning, swift green borders" have the power to lift the "lost morning eyes" of "swimmers." In fact the last poem is as much about loss and restoration of vision as it is about failure and recovery of voice. The poet, as "derelict and blinded guest" must, in the words of the paradox, lose his vision in order to find it; in the "lost morning eyes" of the "swimmers" too we recall that "those are pearls which were his eyes." Supreme poetic vision replaces ordinary sight and earthly expenditures are transmuted into ideal and enduring values, but not without cost. For example, in this last poem of the series, all the words associated with the purgatorial fire of sex now return transformed; "creation's blithe and petalled word" becomes a consoling substitute for the "floating flower" of orgasm; a goddess rises from her couch, "conceding dialogue with eyes / That smile unsearchable repose," to replace the treacherous sea-muse of the earlier poems. Finally the sargasso sea of the lover's hair entwines transcendently with rainbows in the final poem, and rebirth is promised in an image recalling Richard Crashaw's nurturing "phoenix' breast," that symbolic evidence of epithalamic harmony in his *Epithalamion*. Paradise is at last achieved in the "fervid covenant" of "Belle Isle," "white echo" of the poet's imaginative Eden.

"Voyages VI," especially in the transvaluations of imagery, has learned its technique from Milton's *Lycidas*. In the conventional manner of the pastoral elegy too it calls for recognition of the poet and announces his ascension to mature poetic style. It was this poem which closed *White Buildings* and served as a prelude to *The Bridge*, Crane's version of American epic. No wonder, then, that he begs for the "waves" to "rear" "some splintered garland for the seer." A highly conventional symbol of poetic achievement, the wreath is in this poem self-claimed, even if, at

this late date in literary history, somewhat the worse for wear. R. W. B. Lewis's reading of the phrase, by transposition, as a garland for the splintered seer,²⁴ finds in "Voyages" as "dramatic a statement as one can find to say about the nature of the Romantic tradition. . . ."²⁵ The poem "bespeaks what is probably the key historic event in that tradition: the emergence of the poet — replacing the king or prince — as the hero of poetry; and of the exacting processes of the creative imagination that most absorb the poet's attention." Beyond that "Voyages" restages an initiatory drama with ancestral ties before the Renaissance. Crane's conversion to the "imaged Word" of poetry is not unlike Platonic consecration to the philosophical life, or Mopsus's devotion to the profession of singing *carmina* in Virgil's fifth bucolic: it offers the poet of this world an enduring relation to the next — an "unbetrayable" and "anchored" connection to a principle of permanence and rebirth.

The imaged Word, it is, that holds
 Hushed willows anchored in its glow,
 It is the unbetrayable reply
 Whose accent no farewell can know. (p. 41)

In this poem of Crane's, "monody" not only wakes the mariner, it guarantees him transcendence and poetic recognition: resuscitation of the orphic head "transmembered," laureled and immortally capable of song.

IV

The "Word" Crane and Whitman recover from the waves has sacramental undertones — all poetic ritual borrows a liturgical vocabulary — but its tone is more archetypal than devotional. The same trinity — father, mother, poet — which in "Cradle" and "Voyages" together effected the initiation to stature of the poet dominates the ritual stage in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of *The Deutschland*" and T. S. Eliot's "The Dry Salvages," two Catholic responses to the preoccupations and procedures of Milton's *Lycidas*.²⁶ Eliot even alludes to Whitman's "Lilacs" in his opening stanza, using as point of departure for his own meditation a translation of Whitman's doorstep blooms:

“the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard.” In these poems, of course, the shaman/initiator is the Father God himself; the intercessor is Mary, who like the Holy Ghost mediates between God and men, spirit and flesh. But both “*Deutschland*” and “The Dry Salvages” borrow the central occasion, shipwreck, of Milton’s poem. Each attempts, during the course of a dirge for worldliness, to recover the voice of “prayer” that might prove a source of permanence, a “ragged rock” in the “restless waters” of our uncertain life. Each attempts to rebuild a foundation for faith in the face of senseless destruction and failure of nerve. Each appeals, for succour and strength, to the “Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory” — that female muse who might once again teach the stuttering poet to articulate. Finally each attempts, as did Milton in *Lycidas*, to reverse the course of elegy by ending with a nuptial anthem or a nativity ode, symbolic accompaniments to successful incarnation: Eliot devotes himself, by “selflessness and surrender,” “prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action,” to an exacting spiritual life in hopes of gaining initiated vision.

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, Is Incarnation
 Here the impossible union
 Of spheres of existence is actual,
 Here the past and future
 Are conquered and reconciled.

Hopkins too views himself as an initiate who, from a “pastoral forehead in Wales,” attempts to enter the ordeal by water of that martyr shipwrecked on *The Deutschland*. Like the “elegies” of Whitman and Crane, his poem is a meditation upon linguistic incarnation which the poet figures in the tall nun’s relationship to Christ. That pair serve as parents to the poet’s birth here much as the sea and Prodigal function to initiate the poet of “Voyages.”²⁷ “The Wreck of *The Deutschland*” also reverses the dirge by recourse to epithalamium; during the course of this piscatorial elegy, shipwreck gives way to “harvest.” Hopkins ultimately sings a bridal invitation in the language of Canticles — “Sister, a sister calling” — and makes of his dirge for faithlessness and imaginative bankruptcy a birth announcement. As triumphantly as his Lord is Hopkins as poet “new born to the world.”

NOTES

- 1 T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 140-45.
- 2 I cover this ground in my "The Trigger of the Literary Man's Biggest Gun": The Funeral Elegy and Careerism," currently in preparation.
- 3 Harold Bloom, *The Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford, 1975), p. 19.
- 4 Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 34.
- 5 Bloom, p. 13.
- 6 Bloom, p. 15.
- 7 Paul Fussell, Jr., "Whitman's Curious Warble: Reminiscence and Reconciliation," in *The Presence of Walt Whitman: Papers from the English Institute*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1962), p. 31.
- 8 Leo Spitzer, "Explication de Texte Applied to Walt Whitman's Poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,'" in *A Century of Whitman Criticism*, ed. Edwin H. Miller (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), p. 273.
- 9 Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres complètes*, I (Paris: Pléiade, 1957-60), 1503-04.
- 10 Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetière marin*, trans. Graham Dunstan Martin (Edinburgh: University Press, 1971), Bilingual Edition.
- 11 St.-Jean Perse, quoted in Introduction to *Sea-Marks*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Pantheon, 1958), p. 16.
- 12 Pierre Emmanuel, *Saint-Jean Perse: Praise and Presence* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1971), p. 17.
- 13 R. W. B. Lewis, *The Poetry of Hart Crane* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 105, n. 16. The following quotations from Keats and Whitman are cited by Lewis in this connection.
- 14 My text for "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is that of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 246-53. Line numbers for longer quotations follow in the text.
- 15 Geoffrey Hartman in "Toward Literary History," *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-70* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), p. 381, finds the end of *Lycidas* inconclusive, suggesting that Milton "vacillates" and returns to "swainishness" at the close.
- 16 Stephen Whicher quite rightly notes the "brief May idyll of Two Together" which the poet evokes in "flashback," in his "Whitman's Awakening to Death — Toward a Biographical Reading of 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,'" *The Presence of Walt Whitman*, p. 21.
- 17 Fussell, p. 31.
- 18 Whitman, quoted by Edgar Lee Masters in his *Whitman* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1937), pp. 250-51.
- 19 Bloom, *Map*, p. 15.

- ²⁰ Bloom, *Agon: Towards A Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford Press, 1982), p. 259. Bloom writes that "the assumption of that daemon, or what the poets of Sensibility called 'the incarnation of Poetical Character,' is the inner plot of many of the lyrics in *White Buildings*. The kenosis or ebbing away of the daemon is the plot of the *Voyages* sequence, where the other Orphic deities reduce Crane to a 'derelict and blinded guest' of his own vision," p. 255. He writes on the more fully orphic poems, "Repose of Rivers" and "Passage," in his chapter on Crane.
- ²¹ "As I Ebb'd . . .," *Collected Writings*, pp. 253ff.
- ²² Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 250-51.
- ²³ My text of "Voyages" is that of *Complete Poems*, pp. 35-41.
- ²⁴ Lewis, p. 175, reads this line, by transposition, as a garland for the splintered seer.
- ²⁵ For a reading of the poem against "an age old tradition of romance" see Lewis, pp. 150-51.
- ²⁶ My texts of these poems are as follows: "The Wreck of *The Deutschland*" in *Chief Modern Poets of Britain and America*, ed. Gerald Sanders, John Nelson, and M. L. Rosenthal, I (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 52-60; "The Dry Salvages," *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1971), pp. 130-37.
- ²⁷ See in this context Michael Sprinkler's "The Elegiac Sublime and the Birth of the Poet: 'The Wreck of *The Deutschland*,'" in "*A Counterpoint of Dissonance*": *The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 96-119.