



**A DIRTY BIRD IN A SQUARE TIME:
WHALEN'S POETRY**



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“Anatman” or nonself, a central tenet in Buddhist thought, derives from the insight that ego is transitory, that self is not an essence but an aggregate, something conditioned. An informal translation might be “the perception of emptiness of self.” I think this perception of emptiness provides a useful way to talk about Philip Whalen’s poetry, although I should add that by “emptiness of self” I don’t mean self-abnegation, and I don’t mean that Whalen writes “about” emptiness. When I speak of the perception of emptiness in Whalen’s poetry I mean a kind of detachment or watchfulness—the Buddhist term is “mindfulness”—which I relate back to his remark (in the late fifties) that his poetry is “a picture or graph of a mind moving” (*Overtime* 50), since at the least that statement suggests heightened self-scrutiny, mind watching mind. I see that self-scrutiny as a key feature in Whalen’s work. Again informally, Buddhists “practice” this insight into the emptiness of self, the effects of which transform daily life. Whalen is a practicing Buddhist,¹ so one expects that his practice has effected his verse. The effect is most readily seen in the content of the poems, but the detachment is also evident in certain techniques, like phrasing and voice, and can be seen in his methods of composition, where, for instance, the form of the poem has become an explicit part of the content. In the following, I’d like to show how Whalen’s poems have been shaped by this insight or detachment—in content, technique, and method—and how, consequently, what begins as self-exploration becomes a way to eclipse self.

Part of the story behind Whalen’s poetry involves Kenneth Rexroth, for Whalen’s early work owes much to the model Rexroth provided, especially the historical context. That context includes an active Greek and Roman tradition in combination with a conspicuously Eastern disposition, albeit one shaped by a Modernist sensibility.² Rexroth passed that context on (as well as his use of landscape) to both Whalen and Snyder, and you can also see, in both, the early poetry used as a site for philosophical interrogation, just as with Rexroth. Whalen’s “Sourdough Mountain Lookout” provides a good example, with its dedication to Rexroth, its use of landscape

¹ Whalen began meditating in the mid-50s and formal practice in Zen in 1972 (Allen 3, 71).

² As comments on his early reading suggest, Whalen probably moved in this direction independently. He speaks of reading Lin Yutang’s *The Wisdom of China and India* (1942) just after high school and Gertrude Stein’s *Narration* during World War II (Allen 7, 16, 58, 69). That is, my point about Rexroth is debatable.

and its quotes from Heraclitus, Empedocles and Buddha. The poem was written in 1955-6 and proceeds (somewhat analogically) as a meditation on the transitory and on individual purpose or identity, a theme I'll pursue here. It's set in the North Cascades where Whalen was stationed as a fire lookout, makes conspicuous reference to immensities of earth and sky, and has an almost geologic context. In his discussion of time, landscape and identity, Whalen pulls together Western notions of multiplicity, flux and oneness with Buddhist concepts of the transitory and the Void in order to situate himself in that landscape both physically and metaphysically.

Within this philosophical context, Whalen employs a standard subject/object paradigm, formulated as Self and World, and he parallels that binary with several others, for instance, wakefulness and sleep, day and night, love and strife, but most importantly, the One and the Many, for he is concerned with reconciling the unity of experience with its polarities. Towards the conclusion of the poem, Whalen imagines the mountains surrounding his lookout cabin to be a "circle of 108 beads, originally seeds / of *ficus religiosa* / Bo-Tree" (*Overtime* 19). As readers probably know, the Buddha attained enlightenment meditating under a Bo-Tree. The beads exemplify diversity, the Many, but there's "one odd bead / Larger than the rest and bearing / A tassel (hair-tuft) (the man who sat / under the tree) . . ." The unity of the World, Whalen says, is provided by the emptiness at its center: "In the center of the circle, / A void, an empty figure containing / All that's multiplied; / Each bead a repetition, a world / Of ignorance and sleep" (19). As Buddha once sat, so now Whalen sits. What we see as phenomena is Void.

One other image deserves note, for Whalen also conceives of the universe as an egg, with Self emerging as a bird does, by transforming "molecules of albumen / To beak and eye / Gizzard and craw" (*Overtime* 18). Consequently, Self is understood as composed of the World to which it posed in opposition (as a binary); Self mirrors the World. Consider then how he writes about "mind" as he reaches the conclusion to "Sourdough Mountain Lookout"; that is, how mind is said to be both of the World and in the World:

What we see of the world is the mind's
Invention and the mind
Though stained by it, becoming
Rivers, sun, mule-dung, flies—
Can shift instantly
A dirty bird in a square time
(*Overtime* 20)

Mind has invented the World it perceives, but it has invented this perceived World from the

World it's composed of, the prior egg. That invention may stain the mind, but mind is inherently free of its inventions, "can shift instantly," like a bird in flight. This shifting about I also see as central to Whalen's poetry, and I'll speak of it again. I should mention though that "mind" is not Self and that this freedom of mind carries a further corollary, namely, a distrust of those products or inventions that stain the mind.

Whalen's equivocal conclusion to "Sourdough Mountain Lookout" allows for both the unity and multiplicity of the World, Void and phenomena, but that is largely because he won't acknowledge either as having priority, chicken and egg; he simply sets them in parallel. His conclusion is: "I'm still on the mountain" (*Overtime* 20). That equivocation emerges again in another early poem "The Same Old Jazz" (1957), where he argues explicitly for duality, a distinction between subject and object, illusion and reality, rather than for the unity of both, as Buddhist doctrine states. The poem opens:

OK, it's imperishable or a world as Will
& Idea, a Hindu illusion that our habits continuously
Create. Whatever I think, it
Keeps changing from bright to dark, from clear
To colored: Thus before I began to think and
So after I've stopped, as if it were real & I
Were its illusion

But as Jaime de Angulo said, "What's wrong with two?"
(*On Bear's Head* 14)

The opening lines concede that the illusion of World is "imperishable" and that this illusion—or invention—perpetuates the duality of experience, dark and bright.³ This illusion moreover is posited as prior to the subject experiencing it, so that any existent "Self" which emerges is built from illusion, is illusory. But this involves a paradox, doesn't it? For the perceiver must in some way be real, in order for that illusion to occur, and if we grant the perceiver reality, doesn't that require that the World be real also? Why not simply accept the paradox, Whalen argues, that World is both reality and illusion?

³ Whalen may be responding to Schopenhauer here, indeed Schopenhauer may be the source of Whalen's notion of a "world body," but the focus of these opening lines is on the nature of the World as an illusion, rather than as an idea, as Schopenhauer argued.

The poem continues:

So Sunday morning I'm in bed with Cleo
She wants to sleep & I get up naked at the table
Writing
And it all snaps into focus
The world inside my head & the cat outside the window
A one-to-one relationship
While I imagine whatever I imagine
(*On Bear's Head* 14)

The relationship between the World “outside” (as object) and the representation of that World “inside” the speaker perhaps comes from Schopenhauer, as the opening lines imply, but the relationship is just as likely part of that subject/object paradigm mentioned before, a paradigm troubled however by the very nature of thought, as Whalen himself soon understands. That is, the World and its representation in mind are not in “a one-to-one relationship,” as he posits here. But Whalen’s point again seems to be about the freedom of the mind from its illusions, “While I imagine whatever I imagine,” because from here on the poem develops largely as a narrative about the transforming effects of love, about Cleo. Such effects would entail a clear sense of purpose and a distinction between illusion and reality. Notice then that the poem concludes with the same equivocation seen in “Sourdough Mountain Lookout”:

She'll go away. I'll go away. The world will go away.
 (“The idea of emptiness engenders compassion
 Compassion does away with the distinction
 between Self & Other . . .”)
But through her everything else is real to me & I have
No other self.
“What’s wrong with two?”
(*On Bear's Head* 16)

To restate the closing lines in terms of our paradigm: There’s no other Self than that Self which the World provides, so even granting this World as illusory or empty, the World is nevertheless what makes us “real”; and in this case, sexual love provides a basis for individual purpose and

identity.⁴ But what's wrong with two, to answer Whalen's question, is that the phenomenon of Self emerges from the Void, as does the World, and these "two" are both illusory; the Void is neither one nor two; hence, the pleasures of sexual love are also illusory; and Whalen is way too circumspect to stay satisfied with this kind of answer. One can trace his explorations beyond it in several other early poems, such as in "All About Art & Life," written two years later (composed "28:viii:59—9:ix:59").

It's important to mark first, though, that the reality or illusion of World and Self is an important early concern of Whalen's, and that these poems show him working from a Modernist dichotomy between subject and object, with the World identified as the object of knowledge and Self identified as an individual agent or experiencer. To anticipate, what Whalen is moving towards is an understanding of Self and World as fundamentally the same, without division, and both as empty. In "All About Art & Life," for example, Whalen begins to argue against evaluations of good and bad, love and hate, as modes of identity or self-knowledge, because those judgments are so obviously relative: "Why bother to say I detest liver / & adore magnolia flowers / Liver keeps its flavor the blossoms / drop off / & reappear, whoever / cares, counts, contends" (*On Bear's Head* 91). As he remarks a few lines later, to make such judgments is "merely talking to hear my head rattle." But there is a different way of perceiving the World, and in that poem Whalen tries to refocus: "Not I love or hate: // WHAT IS IT I'M SEEING // & // WHO'S LOOKING" (*On Bear's Head* 91). Here Whalen steps back from acts of ascription in order to look at ascription itself, steps back to look at identity, and the poem functions as a mode of self-interrogation, a way to explore Self and World. What he implicitly argues for (evident in the capitalization) is a more direct way of perceiving the World, one not based on superficial states of identification, same and different, or further, not based on the duality of Self and World, the very concept that he argued for in "The Same Old Jazz."⁵ This resolution can be amplified with a poem written earlier that same year, "I Return To San Francisco" (written "20:iii:59—15:iv:59"). For instance, Whalen writes there:

While I'm looking for sleep
Bright shapes of day bedevil my eyes

⁴The quote in parenthesis is likely from Schopenhauer—note the phrase "idea of emptiness"—but I could not locate the source.

⁵In another poem written at this time, "I Am King Giant Dragon Sun," Whalen speculates "We are known by the character of those things to which we visibly / REACT?" Later he responds, "I don't belong to that and I don't belong to myself" (*On Bear's Head* 249).

identification with one's "good" qualities
and vice versa—where does that put you?
identification with neither—what do you call that?
or with both?
With ANYTHING ELSE . . . shape, form, quality, mode
what then?

"What was your original face, before you were conceived?"
(*On Bear's Head* 86)

As I said above, identification is singled out in these early poems because so obviously relative, but there is a deeper problem here, for Whalen is acutely aware that the mind is disposed to such attributions (positive and negative) and that the mind shapes the experience it supposedly receives from the World. For instance, (again) in "All About Art & Life," Whalen writes: "It comes to us straight & flat / My cookie-cutter head makes shapes of it // CHONK: 'scary!' / CHONK: 'lovely!' / CHONK: 'ouch!'" (*On Bear's Head* 91). The disposition to ascribe positive or negative values—the Buddhist terms would be attachment and aversion—distorts as it receives experience. How would you respond, Whalen asks, if you didn't sort by yes and no, good and evil, and as his quote on "original face" indicates, the question invokes a famous Zen koan from Hui Neng's *Platform Sutra*. One's response to that koan reveals one's penetration into the fundamental unity of Self and World, illusion and reality. There is no division between who you are and what you perceive.

Collectively, then, the above four poems provide some sense of the way Whalen understood the problem of "Self" or identity in the 1950s, namely as suspect, perhaps a construction, but the poems also provide an important context to his well-known remark that his "poetry is a picture or graph of a mind moving, which is a world body being here and now which is history . . . and you" (*Overtime* 50). The remark was made at the end of *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age*—entitled "Since You Ask Me (A Press Release, October 1959)"—and it was written within months of "All About Art & Life" and "I Return To San Francisco." So at the very least, Whalen's stated problems with illusion and self-identity play a key role in the notion of "graphing" the mind.⁶ Moreover, such statements show that in 1959 Whalen was methodically taking "Self" as his object, with the plausible corollary that mind was understood as not only *in process*

⁶ The subject/object dichotomy he used, as mentioned above, is part of a Modernist legacy, and that paradigm also provides an important context for his remark that his poetry is "a picture or graph of the mind moving." You'll notice, for instance, there is a sense of scientific objectivity at play there, i.e. in the very idea of "graphing" the mind. (This is more evident in the full text, where he talks about the Wilson Cloud-chamber.) The statement is troubled by that

but *as* a process, and—to use a term from “Sourdough Mountain Lookout”—a process constantly in the act of invention. That said, the pivotal term in Whalen’s formulation (above) is the verb “moving,” since it’s the *activity* of mind, rather than its *content*, which has priority, i.e. recognizing mind in its acts of construction. And I think this is the most important point, for it is in acts of construction that Whalen’s detachment is most clearly seen. Bear in mind also that this movement of mind relates back to the capacity of mind to shift instantly as in “Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” because of its inherent freedom from its inventions, and finally, that configurations of Self are likely such inventions. Here’s why I find that crucial: The consequence of this freedom from Self is a poetry grounded neither in representations of Self nor in objective statements about the World—the polarities—but rather grounded between those two in the activities or motions of the mind (understood to be a world body).

One other point needs development, namely, that Whalen’s stated concerns with perception and identity and his goal of documenting the movement of mind as a “world body” involve a kind of splitting or detachment. Whalen’s purpose in the 1950s was no doubt to see into or develop insights about his own self-nature, if only to transcend routine ways of perception, such as his conditioned likes and dislikes. But in order to look into or listen to that Self in its construction, a suspension from Self occurs. That suspension or detachment stands in contrast to normative processes of cognitive investment, processes in the construction of self-identity. Further, this suspension from Self is a key element in allowing a different kind of poetry to emerge, for what begins as self-exploration soon becomes a way to go beyond limitations of Self. As a consequence, the poem is no longer understood as a mode of self-expression, and what the poem emerges from is not simply the poet’s intent.⁷ The poet’s intention plays an obvious role, but there is, in Whalen’s work, a disposition to step back and *listen* to both Self and World.⁸ This disposition entails a propensity to listen for something unexpected—to some extent inducing novelty in the poem—but it also involves a disposition to transcend expectation, transcend the limitations of Self, e.g. those normative, largely regulatory thought processes which compose the way we do things. Said a different way, whatever Self is, Self is always under construction. But mind is not Self, and the mind’s constructive processes are potentially revelatory.

notion of objectivity, for it seems to lack a sense of agency—Whalen wasn’t simply recording thoughts; he was producing thoughts and then constructing poems from them, a selective process. But the importance of the statement is obvious.

⁷ Whalen himself makes this point in the preface to *Decompressions* (see for instance pp vii-viii).

⁸ See also *The Diamond Noodle* where Whalen talks of “conscious composition—interior direct report of internally heard speech (thought)...as now—as if another person were listening to me . . .” (63).

One place where a noticeable suspension from Self occurs is in poems where Whalen addresses himself as the speaker, for the speaker's role becomes conspicuously self-reflexive, dual. That is, Whalen's "I" becomes other. Whalen makes an important comment on that "I" in "Minor Moralia" (written mostly in 1959), when he writes, "I change, I tell myself, 'I IS ONLY THESE PASSING STATES, THEIR ACTUAL PASSAGE'" (*sic*; *On Bear's Head* 190). As his use of "only" and the capitalization indicate, this insight into the transitory nature of self-identity comes as something of a surprise. But we can tease out an important critical distinction about the dual role of "I" from this quote, for notice that Whalen is discussing an *experience* of Self and that there is an implicit gap or distance between the Self as an object of experience and the Self who experiences. That is because the "experienced Self" is composed of representations, is representational. This is in contrast to the agent "I" or speaking Self and the experiencing "I." In this quote, then, that experienced Self is not adhered to. Rather that Self is seen as transitory, part of the world, marking the passage through various states of experience, as the reflection of one's agency. To repeat the point: this experience of Self is what is disengaged from.

Disengagement from representations of Self is common enough, but in Whalen's hands, the gap or displacement between "selves" allows for the evolution of a speaker or lyric subject who observes himself as "I" speaking, a doubling effect or "dialogic splitting" (I becomes you) which is standard in his work by the 1960s. He both occupies and does not occupy the lyric subject position. While he readily identifies himself as the speaker, he just as readily steps aside, and that representation of Self never constitutes more than, as he says above, a kind of "passage." As a passage, however, it can be understood as an element of the mind in motion, and I would hazard that Whalen continually displaces that represented Self in his work by mediating between Self as agent and Self as experiencer, setting up rhetorical distance between the two, conspicuous in his use of pronouns. Importantly, from these early notions of Self and from this heightened self-scrutiny—taking that experienced Self as an object or other—there emerges one of Whalen's most striking poetic achievements, his renditions of fallibility. As an example, consider the final stanza of "What Are You Studying, These Days?" The "you" and "I" are both Whalen:

Your trouble is you're not very real, are you.
Hallucinatory fountain pens, eh?
Skin chips and flaky on the outside
Internal organs all blackened and shriveled
What do you expect with too much on mind
Too busy to see or hear a single particular?

I have put on a gown of power I didn't know I had—
Or wanted.
(*Overtime* 293)

This mode of self-interrogation and these renditions of fallibility, often undermining the speaker's "authority," are commonplace in Whalen's poetry and probably overlooked because characteristic, part of his vast sense of humor. But this banter or self-talk is also a serious form of self-reflection, a very sophisticated kind of play. While such forms of self-address may have begun with early experiments—with "graphing" the mind⁹—as they develop in sophistication, they become a mode of self-disclosure and allow for something larger than "person" to emerge; they allow for the transpersonal to emerge, an eclipse of ego.

To reiterate my main point, these acts of self-scrutiny that Whalen takes as his subject matter in the 1960s require a suspension or sense of detachment. The second phase of my argument is that this detachment or distance effects various aspects of the work, such as phrasing and voice, and finally that the detachment becomes procedural, a way of generating texts. Notice then below how "The Dharma Youth League" proceeds as a series of self-corrections, caused by that same kind of self-interrogation, and how the procedure effects both the poem's phrasing and pace. Take note also of Whalen's punctuation.

I went to visit several thousand gold buddhas
They sat there all through the war,—
They didn't appear just now because I happen to be in town
Sat there six hundred years. Failures.
Does Buddha fail. Do I.
Some day I guess I'll never learn.
(*Overtime* 172)

This poem was written in 1966, probably in Japan, and initiated by visiting gold buddhas who "sat" (or meditated) throughout World War II. But as Whalen marvels, he qualifies himself because of several unstated conflicts. These conflicts operate as part of the text. For example, his comment that "They didn't appear just now because I happen to be in town" presupposes a prior

⁹ At the conclusion of "Minor Moralia," Whalen writes of permitting all the repetitions, pauses, gropings to emerge, even those "which aren't actually necessary or real" (*On Bear's Head* 191). This kind of self-exploration, I'm arguing, was a deliberate project in the late 50s and early 60s.

thought, an initiating egocentricity, which this statement corrects. The supposed profundity of the gold buddhas' ability to sit, as another instance, is emblematic of a persistence Whalen wishes he had, so he then amplifies his statement about their sitting "all through the war" to "Sat there six hundred years." And a curious thought emerges there, as further evidence of conflict, for he then labels the buddhas "failures." Whalen does so perhaps because meditating buddhas don't actually "do" anything; they didn't stop the war. He doesn't explain why. But he's establishing a point, and at this point it's apparent that the poem is partaking of a pendulum motion, back and forth. Whereas at first Whalen marvels, now he swings in the opposite direction and criticizes the buddhas, clearly a projection, for the new statement is also in error, and Whalen then moves to yet another position. By foregrounding this motion of mind over the propositional content, this motion becomes a dynamic part of the content, in fact, transforms the content, since the propositions are now suspended from a direct referential function. To an extent, the poet follows the mind's motion back and forth rather than identifies with any point of reference, for there's no overt position stated, and Whalen hasn't erased his acknowledged errors; they still operate as part of the text. Internal conflict, then, is the *modus operandi* from which a deeper perspective emerges, and Whalen apparently listens for and incorporates these conflicts, rather than suppresses them. But Whalen obviously doesn't believe these buddhas have failed, either, so there is a position established, albeit one which incorporates the conflict. This inclusiveness is part of a method, and it's made possible by detachment; a detachment in explicit contrast to arguing for a proposition about gold buddhas or the mind.

Another point: The poem proceeds one phrase at a time, is composed of "phrasings," rather than larger conceptual units (such as clauses in an argument). Composing with the phrase allows Whalen to shift direction or improvise with each new phrase, but that shift also involves an act of listening to himself, what might be termed "following the poem."¹⁰ The poem's oscillation, back and forth, occurs as a consequence of stepping back and listening to Self, even as he engages Self. Consequently, "The Dharma Youth League" extends as a series of oscillating phrases or corrections, each building on its predecessor, until the poem finally turns back to the source of error, arrives at the doorstep of Self, with "Do I." That question discloses the poem, to some extent, as a meditation on the efficacy of Whalen's own meditation practice. The Buddha obviously doesn't fail, and according to Buddhist belief, Whalen and the Buddha are one, so by extension he doesn't fail either. His twisted last line ("Some day I guess I'll never learn") has to

¹⁰ Whalen made a related comment to Anne Waldman in a 1971, when he talked of discovering that a poem "could be what I was going to be or what it was going to be itself, and it started making itself and I started having to go along behind it and write it the way it was . . ." (Allen 1972, 22-3).

do with achieving “Original Mind” through meditation, getting beyond self-conflict, for Whalen’s resolve is that he must drop such corrective thought processes “some day.” Paradoxically, when that happens, he’ll find himself right where he always has been—since all mind is Original Mind—already beyond those thought processes. This then is the same freedom of mind posited in “Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” freedom from the products of mind, from thought itself, the inventions. The poem works by taking these thought processes as both its content and its procedure, explicitly takes thought as its subject and its mode of pursuit, and Whalen’s focus is as much on these processes—the motion of the mind—as it is on content. Moreover, the progression of thoughts is composed of inward turns, and as Whalen twists inward, the phrases shorten. These inward turns or moments of self-recognition in fact generate the text and provide an example of how Whalen’s detachment shapes the phrasing of the poem, since the turns are made possible by a cultivated inner space, by watchfulness.

Regard also that Whalen’s interrogatives lack question marks. The lack of punctuation or the use of periods instead of question marks signals of course that he has no intention of answering those questions—they’re statements, rhetorical questions, one a marker of self-reflection (“Do I”). The overall effect is that as statements the interrogatives chart the progression of Whalen’s thoughts, “mind moving,” in a kind of short hand. But the lack of question marks and the innovative punctuation are also part of the rhetorical dimension of Whalen’s work, related to use of voice, in this case intonation. That use of voice emerges from the same kind of detachment.¹¹ Consider, for example, the way he manipulates voice in the following “Homage to WBY.”

after you read all them books
all that history and philosophy and things
what do you know that you didn’t know before?
Thin sheets of gold with bright enameling
(*On Bear’s Head* 112)

Whalen’s use of direct address can be misleading, but perhaps it’s obvious here that the lack of capitalization and punctuation, misuse of “them” and the poorly paralleled direct objects in the first two lines convey a speaker being belligerently dumb, and that this is in contrast with Yeats’s supposed learning. If you imagine this poem as involving only that one voice and imagine that belligerent speaker as representing Whalen, you probably miss the point. The belligerent voice in

¹¹ For anyone interested, I’m currently working on an essay on Whalen’s use of voice.

effect “compliments” Yeats, for that voice is not only deliberately dumb, it’s undermined by the shift in tone at the end. The third line mediates between the two “voices” and poses a legitimate question. The compliment isn’t without ambiguity. But Whalen also is a scholar, as scholarly as Yeats was, and Whalen’s “homage” consists of the transition to that final line, with the positive image of enameled gold, the skilled use of vowels, the capitalized “Thin” and rimed “enameling.” These are in contrast to the undistinguished “things” in line two, the miming in the first two lines juxtaposed to the concluding trope. This use of voice is central to the construction of the poem and, as said, emerges from the same detachment from Self.

Use of voice contributes to the emotional complexity of Whalen’s poetry, and I’d like to talk of that emotional complexity briefly, but the point requires clarification, because (again) I don’t mean that Whalen is writing “about” an emotion, nor is he simply motivated by an emotion, and I don’t mean to imply that emotional complexes and images are fully distinguishable from ideas. It’s apparent however that emotional complexes and images are not used simply to reinforce themes in Whalen’s poems; they aren’t subordinate to ideas, and in Whalen’s poetry they often are used as registers significant in and of themselves, with the same force that a proposition has. In the simplest terms, what’s of chief concern is the feeling produced by a poem, not the ideas elaborated on, for what motivates the poetry is largely experiential, sometimes a matter of sensibility. This focus on feeling and sensibility is related back to the notion of graphing the mind, as distinguished from developing “statements” about the World, as well as to the dynamic organization of the poem. To an extent, the same could be said for many poems, i. e. that they are importantly experiential rather than ideological. But in Whalen’s case the watchfulness or detachment balances with the assertion, listening with speaking, such that his detachment alters his phrasing. The main impulse is centrifugal, expansive, yet in Whalen’s phrasing there is often a strange inward curve or reflexivity, evident, for example, in his renditions of fallibility.

One place to look at Whalen’s detachment in tandem with the emotional underpinning of the poem is in “Weather Odes,” composed in 1972, though for brevity I’ll concentrate on the first two (of six) sections. Here is the opening:

Just before I fell asleep
In the middle of the afternoon
I told myself, “It is NOW
That I must work that change make
That move which will be the foundation
For that spectacular success which must illumine

All my later days”
(*Heavy Breathing* 114)

The section is framed by the reportorial opening clause and is obviously self-reflexive, so one could produce thematic readings. But surely the point is the funny dichotomy between what the speaker says he'll do and what he's about to do, i. e. fall asleep after making an inflated resolution to change. That is to say, the experience of reading this section is significantly emotional, and we are provided with that emotional experience—we feel it—several ways. There is, obviously, the sense of humor; terms like “foundation,” “spectacular,” and “must illuminate” are conspicuously inflated terms, formal in register. The phrasal extensions—chaining effects caused by varied uses of “that” and “which”—produce another kind of inflation, as do the rhythms, for the rhythms push us forward, noticeable in the percussive use of /m/, “must,” “make,” “move” “my.” So this isn't simply reportage, even though it presents itself that way, and it's of critical importance to note that Whalen has constructed rather than simply captured this dichotomy. That is, the insights and emotions involved, perplexity, irony, false resolve and sense of self-absorption, are *produced* by the poem. They are moreover shaped by the two subject positions established, the speaker who observes and reports to us, and the speaker who is the object of observation, the one who had originally addressed himself, making the resolution to change. The two speakers are of course identical, but notice that the first selectively reports on the second—himself—as a somewhat unregenerate “other,” that this reporting Self is noticeably smarter, and that he has an insight that the other lacks. Notice also that the distinguishing insight emerges from experiencing Self as a representation—in common parlance, by listening to oneself speak, in distinction to “engaging” Self—and that this insight is the very antithesis of self-absorption. In fact, the speaker's detachment here indicates that he is not at all self-absorbed, and part of the emotion generated by the poem arises from a kind of torsion between the two positions, self-absorbed and self-aware. In terms of the argument, the emotions generated by this section arise from that central insight into Self, and that insight shapes the phrasing (e.g. the use of inflation). But that is also to say that the emotions and the phrasing are both the result of a detachment from Self and further are the result of a literary practice. In effect, the actual author situates himself *between* two positions, Self speaking and Self listening, agent and experiencer, assertion and reception, just as he does in “The Dharma Youth League,” an oscillation which the poem “graphs.”

This opening passage is terminated with three asterisks and followed by the second section. The link between the two is perhaps one of topical or chronological extension, but it is also importantly emotional (recall Whalen's resolution to change):

With a head full of sunlight
What's killing you now?

No patience to sit and watch the ivy grow
No patience with sleep

Exhausted by a band of mare's tails
Moving down from the north
Right across the sky from west to east
(West is the beginning of Ocean)
(*Heavy Breathing* 114)

The distinction made earlier between stating emotions and producing emotions can be demonstrated here, for although Whalen states emotions (e.g. no patience), the more important fact is, I think, that the piece produces emotions. One key emotion produced here is that of exasperation—exasperation with Self. Again, rhetoric plays a role in this, with the use of hyperbole, for Whalen's three complaints about his malady all function to induce exasperation through a sense of conflict and entrapment, largely because of the underlying expectations.¹² One such expectation is that, when your head is full of sunlight (good weather), you feel content. His apparent lack of contentment relates back to the earlier uneasiness and resolution to change. But it obviously doesn't follow that, once content, one would then have the patience "to sit and watch the ivy grow," and it's part of the complexity of the poem that Whalen hasn't produced a convincing demand of himself in response to his cranky question about what's upsetting him. To expect such prolonged patience of himself—even humorously—is indicative of something more serious motivating the question. Again two subject positions emerge. One can tease out why the speaker wants change, for example, a sense of failure or stasis. But the point remains that the demands he makes of himself are motivated by a sense of exasperation and, further, the tensions produced in this section are actually felt by the reader as conflict rather than simply reported as such, even though Whalen reports his feelings. One could say then the emotional dynamic, feeling, takes priority over the propositional content, the ideas, for that emotional dynamic is more properly the focus. That dynamic emerges because of a priority put on feeling, but it is also part of a method or procedure.

¹² The exasperation is also produced by word choice and phrasing, of course, for example, by the deliberately impatient way he asks "What's killing you now?"

What's additionally important about emotion in a poem like "Weather Odes" is that the poem proceeds from section to section by unfolding that emotional dynamic. Here's why I think that's important. When Leslie Scalapino interviewed Whalen in the late 1980s, she apparently asked him whether one of his modes of composition was collage (Scalapino 1990, 108). Whalen explicitly said no, that his poems were not collage, a point that Scalapino reiterates in a second essay (1999, *xvii*). This is significant because Whalen's most obvious way of composing poems is by juxtaposition, placing passage beside disparate passage, just as in collage (and that's probably why Scalapino asked the question). Yet Whalen insisted the poems were an "interweaving of different strands of ideas or notes, sounds that come around and about and all make a strange harmony. Somehow the overall object has its own proportions and its own working parts inside but it's hard to see 'em I think" (Scalapino 1989, 109). That is to say, the poem is not simply pieced together, nor arranged as collage; there's an underlying connection. My point is fairly simple. The unity Whalen speaks of is often achieved by emotional linkages, sometimes by an emotional under-paneling between parts and, further, the complexity of the poems often consists of emotional juxtapositions whose linkage is felt rather than ideological. This is important because the progression of Whalen's poems is not simply propositional and not always thematic. Whalen's poems move in several ways, in several directions, but often on the basis of feeling, and feeling has its own rationales, its own dimension. As suggested, this involves a method or procedure that not only alters the content of the poem but also the dynamic, the way the poem moves.

I'd like to conclude by discussing another late poem, "Tassajara" (1972), in terms of its dynamic, or rather how detachment transforms Whalen's poetry from concerns with Self and identity to concerns with thought and nonthought, in effect eclipsing Self. For just as the self-interrogation evolves into a self-reflexive "banter" (and the renditions of fallibility) through a kind of dialogic splitting, so that same splitting effect or detachment further develops into an interrogation of one's thought processes, superseding considerations of Self. I also choose "Tassajara" because receptive processes here play an important role in resolving the subject/object dichotomy we began with; Whalen now provides us with a different model of that relationship; subject and object, Self and World, are understood as unified. But finally, with this poem, I'd like to show how the movement or progression of the poem—a movement that relates back to graphing the mind moving—has become an explicit part of the content, how the form becomes dynamic.

"Tassajara" is Tassajara Springs, the site of *Zanshinji*, the Zen Mountain Center (in California) where Whalen practiced as head monk in the late 70s. At one level, the poem is most obviously about his meditation practice, sitting in silence, as the first four lines indicate, and

the poem enacts a moment of insight, *kensho*, although in this instance Whalen is probably having fun with us. The poem reads:

What I hear is not only water but stones
No, no, it is only compressed air flapping my eardrums
My brains gushing brown between green rocks all
That I hear is me and silence
The air transparent golden light (by Vermeer of Delft)
Sun shines on the mountain peak which pokes
The sun also ablaze &c.
Willard Gibbs, Hans Bethe, what's the answer
A lost mass (Paris gone)
Shine red in young swallow's mouth
Takagamine Road

The water suffers
Broken on rocks worn down by water
Wreck of THE DIVINE MIND on the reef called Norman's Woe
"Suddenly, ignorance," the *Shastra* says.
Moon arises in my big round head
Shines out of my small blue eyes
Tony Patchell hollers "Get it! Get it!"
All my treasure buried under Goodwin Sands
(*Overtime* 247)

The poem unfolds in a series of associations and assertions, but the overall mode is one of self-observation. It begins with an analysis of sensation, and, as with "The Dharma Youth League," initially proceeds by inward turns; the initial misdirections are elements of a pattern, and they operate as both content and procedure. Mark also that the speaker practices an insight: the World is not "outside," but rather is indistinguishable from the speaker (e.g. "My brains gushing brown"). This initial recognition—or invocation—of nonduality, Self as World, induces a meditative silence. Here's the narrative thread. As the speaker settles into place, sunlight becomes noticeable and triggers a comparison with Vermeer (riming with hear), then an explicit observation of sunlight on the mountain. Other thoughts emerge. The sun is recognized as "ablaze" and

that apparently invokes “energy,” for we literally veer into a discussion of energy and mass. The two figures mentioned, Gibbs and Bethe, are theoretical physicists, Bethe concerned with solar energy. Ideas cluster here, as they often do in meditation. We shift from Gibbs and Bethe—presumably their attempts to solve the riddles of energy and matter—down through several fragmentary images to end with the phrase “Takagamine Road,” a road in Kyoto leading to Takagamine Mountain. (Whalen lived in Kyoto for three years.) The two mountains are paralleled, one inside, one outside. But while “lost mass” follows from Gibbs and Bethe (mass and energy), the parenthetical “Paris gone” and image of the swallow are difficult to decode, perhaps intentionally so. Nevertheless they do function in emotive and associative ways; the mass is “lost” and Paris is “gone”—both figuratively consumed?—in contrast to positive integers like “shine,” “red,” “young,” and the open swallow’s mouth. Perhaps the point is we’re drifting, in a moment of self-absorption. Perhaps the point is regeneration.

The stanza break after “Takagamine Road” is a procedural one, for the speaker stops reflecting and refocuses on the stream, shifts back to his point of concentration. And while the first stanza is largely descriptive, bounces from thought to thought, the second stanza is plotted. Water is said to “suffer” rocks, invoking Buddha’s first noble truth, that existence is characterized by suffering. The rocks likewise suffer water. Once the mind becomes clarified by this truth, thinking becomes “right thought,” part of the Eightfold Noble Path. The passage also invokes the Buddhist concept of *pratitya-samutpada* or “interdependent origination,” that all things arise interdependently. This moment of clarity then (perhaps about the interdependence of phenomena and suffering) is what shipwrecks THE DIVINE MIND—the gist being that the transcendent subject or Self is also interdependent and goes down with the ship. Self is not an essence but an aggregate, a transitory phenomenon. THE DIVINE MIND breaking against Norman’s Woe parallels water breaking against rocks. But a second incident also occurs here, for Whalen appropriates from Olson’s *Maximus Poems*. “Norman’s Woe” is a reef in Gloucester and appears in “All My Life I’ve Heard About Many”; “divine mind” is cribbed from Melville’s “Divine Inert” (Olson 177). Olson’s poem was composed in 1959, the year Whalen visited Olson in Gloucester, so the citation may have historical reference. I think moreover entrance of THE DIVINE MIND marks the point where the sly sense of humor becomes conspicuous; the tone shifts slightly; the gesture is histrionic. But notice that we don’t lose focus, like before. There follows citation from the *Shastra*, a classic Buddhist text, on our fundamental ignorance (emptiness), and with that citation the moon, a symbol of enlightened mind, rises *inside* the speaker, that is, after the shipwreck of THE DIVINE MIND. Inside and outside are now identical. (Moonrise contrasts with sunset in the first stanza.) While I don’t know who Tony Patchell is, he functions

somewhat like a Zen master, shouting “Get it! Get it!,” a reference to the Ungraspable perhaps, a famous Zen paradox (get it?). So *kensho*, insight into the fundamental identity of Self and World (as Ungraspable), is invoked. Whalen’s final line about Goodwin Sands makes reference to a breakwater off Kent on the coast of England, a site of frequent shipwrecks, where he recognizes that his “treasure” is now buried. This recognition of loss acts as the resolve, though perhaps “mimics a resolve” would be the more accurate phrase.

Several questions emerge from this reading which I have only provisional answers for, but it’s clear first off that the poem is initiated by listening (“What I hear”)—perhaps even listening to listening—and that, secondly, it proceeds by following sequences of thought. The sequence of thoughts is given as the motion of the mind, but I would hazard that this is made possible only because the speaker is detached from that motion. The third point follows from this, in that the activity of the mind is prioritized over its content, for the poem’s propositions are collectively far less important than its transitions, the movement between thoughts, and those progressions are sometimes logical, sometimes not. Said a different way, the dynamic form—the motion of the poem—is an explicit part of the content, and perhaps could be said to eclipse propositional content as the poem’s focal concern, even as it transforms that content; again, it’s Whalen’s detachment from the subject position that makes that new focus possible. My fourth point would be the rejoinder that these thoughts don’t proceed willy-nilly. “Tassajara” proceeds by establishing thought as its subject—to an extent by following thoughts—within a larger context which guides and eventually determines thought. That larger context is the practice of meditation, nondoing (even though it’s not likely that Whalen was actually meditating when he wrote this). The intention is to disengage from thought, and that intention plays an explicit role in the poem’s content and context.

While thoughts remain the basis of the poem, in the second stanza the poem is more overtly informed by ideology and by an underlying stillness, the cessation of thought (just as prior poems were informed by an underlying conflict). In these terms, the line, “‘Suddenly, ignorance,’ the *Shashtra* says,” becomes pivotal. That line would seem to coincide with the sun setting. From that posited ignorance or darkness, the moon emerges, importantly inside the speaker, rather than outside, which signals that Self has been eclipsed and that the speaker (or “nonspeaker”) has now arrived at the fundamental unity between inside and out, Self and World. This nonduality is obviously the poem’s theme. I recognize that the juxtaposition of Patchell yelling “Get it!” with the final comment on buried treasure suggests loss, further, suggests searching for that treasure, but these lines are noticeably ambiguous, and tone here provides as much guidance as reference does. As I said, a sly sense of humor enters at the wreck of THE DIVINE

MIND, and something other may be at play. For Whalen's final line on Goodwin Sands implies distance and is subdued, not active. The last line achieves finality with the panoramic "All" and beach scene. A plausible reading might be, "All that I took as treasure is now buried under sand," with sand having an association with time. But this is something of a storybook ending, isn't it? and one senses an underlying joke, hence my comment that the resolve is mimicked. While the second stanza talks about loss and shipwreck, the comic effect of Patchell yelling "Get it!," Whalen's invocation of the Ungraspable, and the fictional treasure buried under "Goodwin Sands" (along with commonplace associations between ignorance, darkness and poverty), all work against taking that sense of loss too seriously. There's nothing lost if the World is an illusion, one might say, since there was actually nothing to have. Alternately, if Self is identical with the World, as the moon rising inside the speaker seems to imply, there is nothing to lose, either.¹³ So Whalen's conclusion might (so to speak) be taken with a grain of sand.

When Whalen was ordained Abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center in 1991, he said on officially assuming that position, "The seat is empty. There is no one sitting in it. Please take good care of yourselves" (Schelling and Waldman 224). The statement involves several characteristic ironies, if only because the seat will always remain empty, for as he said in "Sourdough Mountain Lookout," the center is void, and if no one occupies that seat, responsibility shifts to the individual; please take good care, or as the Buddha advised, work out your salvation diligently). Those ironies aside, however, this is clearly a statement of anatman. Insight into no-self is why the seat is empty, and this insight into the emptiness of Self, I've tried to show, is not only central to Whalen's meditation practice, it's also had a shaping effect on his verse. That shaping effect occurs on several levels, most obviously in content, but also at the level of phrasing and voice, and importantly it alters the dynamic of the poems, because the methods of composition change. I think it has several other consequences. The notion of "graphing" the mind, for instance, in contrast to a poetic construed as making statements "about" the World, led Whalen to a poetry that was less reliant on thematic development and topical unity, less philosophical, more direct and inclusive, more wide ranging, a poetry based on the mind in motion, on immediate perception, on emotion. As a consequence, the principles of poetic unity change, and Whalen's poems can be said to extend or progress in a wild variety of ways. One related aspect of this "redirection" has been Whalen's ability to shift about, unconstrained by perspective, tone and logical bridgework. As I've also tried to show, that emphasis on the mind in motion soon trans-

¹³ Not to belabor the point, but in addition one might argue that scattered treasure from shipwreck of THE DIVINE MIND is likely to be illusory treasure. I should also mention here that there are odd parallels between "Tassajara" (1972) and poems by Dogen that Whalen helped translate several years later. See for instance Dogen, 218-9 (e.g. "When breakers are high, what kind of moon do you see?").

form the dynamic of the poem into an explicit part of the content. For rather than securing a philosophical perspective, establishing a stance, Whalen continually shifts stance and perspective, disrupts thought, and undermines a fixed sense of Self, and such procedures inform the poem's content, as they shape and transform that content. Further, what begins as a mode of self-exploration, I've argued, now becomes a way to eclipse Self. The consequence of this is a poetry grounded in the activity of mind, rather than grounded in a theoretical stance, referent, or sense of identity, and its brought about by watchfulness, by detachment, by listening to both Self and World. This detachment or freedom in turn results in a poetry which comes to take thought itself as its object, the constructive processes of mind, rather than assertions of identity or value. That is as much to say Whalen has found a way beyond Self by disengaging from constructions of Self, letting Self drop away, as Dogen has it.

The result is a poetry of sometimes bizarre, but always diverse emotional effects, constantly humorous, of enormous but troubling appetites, of startling particularity, with wild variations in tone and striking uses of rhetoric and slang, a poetry consistently varied and expansive. Whalen is, as Scalapino said, the most formally innovative of the Beats (1999, xv). His poems unfold in a dazzling number of ways, in multiple directions, for mind and line can shift instantly, "a dirty bird in a square time." A poem might start from something as innocuous as the imperative to "Find twenty beautiful pages for Thomas Clark," then list twenty precious "things hitherto unincluded," as in "October First": "5. Indian shrine, gift of J. Kyger / 6. Blue Mexican glass pitcher / 7. Three onyx eggs" (*Overtime* 236-8). Whalen then shifts from this twenty-item fantasy—as if he had been compiling treasure—in a lateral direction by obsessively listing replacements—bizarrely related—for each one ("5-a. Curious dream of thunder and lightning / 6-a. I am drinking buttermilk while I write this / 7-a. WHUMP!"). This twist in direction invokes the problem of maintaining possession of such objects. But this new obsession is even more revealing, for as he creates the second list, he calls into question not only the value of those original objects, but also the notion of value itself, for many of the new items conspicuously divert or captivate his attention in some way. What's at first considered precious is now understood to fixate attention, hold it in place, and, as we compulsively complete that second list, an "African daisy mantra" emerges, with the refrain, "UNGUM UNGUM UNGUM," which in turn morphs into several resolutions, e.g. "If the door knocks or the telephone rings / It's not my problem" (*Overdrive* 236-8), punctuated by that imperative to "UNGUM." But then mind can shift again, take us beyond whatever we're gummed to—those inventions which stain the mind—and Whalen's conclusion reads (note the relation between Self and World) like this:

Outside as if suddenly happily naked
Top of my head painlessly removed
Effortless: beyond glad or tears in space beyond security outside

H U M !

The world really being I there
Lots of air the oceans and mountains
Bodega Bay sand cup hook
Waves can be heard and felt the whistle buoy also
Weimaraner puppy glad to see me again
Up beyond hope or wish or high

Z O P !

(*Overtime* 238)

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