Part Two
VI • The Engulfing of Others and Delicious Unions with Death

Having so ruthlessly appropriated that canvas and text which once belonged to Bruegel and Auden, I think it only fair to bring them back intact for a moment, especially since I am about to exploit them once again.

MUSEE DES BEAUX ARTS

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

I am about to open the picture to some new and rather different sorts of witnesses, but I want to gaze just a little longer
upon those already present who have not turned away quite leisurely from the disaster. Along with the children skating on the pond at the edge of the wood, there are those other children: Nick Adams, who is still young enough to believe in his own immortality and to wish for it, but who has not turned away from the sympathies and questions engendered by the childbirth and suicide he has witnessed; Ivan Velikopolsky, somewhat deaf to the pain of the widows and the torment of Jesus, and padded enough to blot up all his knowledge of suffering into an enchanted sense of his own intelligence and vitality, but still much penetrated for a while with his understanding of Peter's bitter weeping; Richard, desperately seeking to appreciate Christ's agony through acute discomfort of his own without tripping into fantasies of his own saintliness; and poor Stevie, unable to witness anyone's suffering without a desperate wish to ease it. If only he could have been taken to skate on a pond at the edge of a wood instead of to Greenwich as a tool to blow up the Observatory. The grown men are harder to think about. There is enough of Shrike in me to envision Miss Lonelyhearts leaping into the water to save Icarus and drowning both Icarus and himself in the process. But I still prefer his Christ-complex to Shrike's amusement and to the Shrike in myself. If I were Icarus, I would rather drown in Miss Lonelyhearts' embrace than to the sound of Shrike's laughter. And if somehow my battered Icarus self had been pulled out of the water by that lifeboat in which Helen lay clutching her stamp album, I would be glad if Scobie were waiting on shore. Among other things, he would understand that after so momentous a failure I might not wish to be saved. I suppose, though, that I would wish to be attended as well by a skilled nurse even if she were one of those "literal examples of practical charity" with "the brisk, decided, undisturbed, and slightly brutal air of a busy surgeon" and a face devoid of compassion. After a few days, I might welcome a visit from Bertrand Russell.

I do not know how one saves the victims of "that dreadful martyrdom." But were I one such nameless victim about to be tortured, I would rather have as witnesses any of the foolish
rescuers, whether Stevie, Scobie, or Miss Lonelyhearts, or such “idiots” as Don Quixote or Prince Myshkin, than any of the sensible men and women who sentenced me, or any of the thirty-eight sensible residents of Kew Gardens in Queens, New York, who watched and listened behind their windows for thirty-five minutes while I was being stabbed to death and would not become involved enough even to call the police,¹ to say nothing of those who sensibly did their duty at Dachau or Gulag 17. I would rather have nearly any of those who are now about to be pulled into the picture, even though most of them would have a hard time giving my predicament as much attention as they would their own responses to it and their sense of their own relationship to me. In my own person, I sometimes want to resist them quite vigorously, although I cannot imagine the full picture or even my own life without them and their lonely embraces. I will look first at some who wish to eliminate distance entirely and then at a larger number who are driven by the more usual human wish both to preserve and overcome it.

The new witness I remain most mixed up about is the one who seeks most persistently to obliterate distances and who, far from turning leisurely away, again and again responds to other’s misfortunes with sentiments like these:

I am the man, I was there.
The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother of old, condemn’d for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her children gazing on,
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing cover’d with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave. I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn’d with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head
with whipstocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments.
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself
become the wounded person.
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and
observe.²

There is no way to be fair to Whitman without quoting
pages and pages of him because his effect depends so much
upon the sweep of his tone and the hypnotic repetition of the
idea that he is both Walt Whitman and the spirit of us all: his
effort to flesh out the opening lines of Leaves of Grass
(“One’s-self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the
word Democratic, the word En-Masse”) and these that open
the most powerful poem within those leaves, “Song of
Myself” (“I celebrate myself, and sing myself. / And what I
shall assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to
me as good belongs to you”). And the persuasiveness of a pas­sage like the one I have begun with depends especially upon
the incantatory effect of what has gone before. But even in its
context, there is something abstract and unconvincing about
the passage and glib about the “all those I feel or am” that
encourages me to make the kind of observation Auden might
have made about it—that Whitman does not, in fact, become
the wounded person but remains the poet writing about
himself becoming the wounded person; he is experiencing
not the full ache of the wound but the exaltation of writing.
Yet even as I write this, I must insist that it is better for him to
say what he does as he does than to say, “It’s no skin off my
ass,” or “It serves him right,” or even an official “I’m sorry, but
there’s nothing I can do.”

More moving and convincing to me is a similar passage
that suggests that an armored part of himself guards against
the identifications and that he finds them really painful, as
they should be.
THE ENGULFING OF OTHERS

You laggards there on guard! look to your arms!  
In at the conquer'd doors they crowd! I am possess'd!  
Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering,  
See myself in prison shaped like another man,  
And feel the dull unintermitted pain.  

For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and  
keep watch,  
It is I let out in the morning and barr'd at night.  

Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'd  
to him and walk by his side,  
(I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with  
sweat on my twitching lips.)  

Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am  
tried and sentenced.  
Not a cholera patient lies at last gasp but I also lie at the last  
gasp,  
My face is ash-color'd, my sinews gnarl, away from me  
people retreat.  
Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in  
them,  
I project my hat, sit shame faced, and beg.  

(Pp. 55–56)

Despite the power and necessity of these embodiments,  
however, I respond most to Whitman when he is most aware  
of the spaces as well as the connections between self and other  
and of the paradoxes in his attempt to be both. As he is when  
he writes:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle,  
unitary,  
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable  
certain rest,  
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come  
next,  
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.  

(P. 27)

As he is when he remembers to intersperse injunctions like  
“You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (p. 26), “You are also asking me questions and I hear you, / I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself” (p. 64), and “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (p. 65). And as he is in this wonderful duet between “I” and “you” at the end of “Song of Myself,” even though it begins with too much traffic with those sorts of hawks and eagles I worried so much about earlier:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.
I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslateable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.
The last scud of day holds back for me. It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’d wilds, It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.
I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fiber your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you.

(P. 68)

(I think more than a footnote is owed to a similar duet to be found in a book by a far less confident espouser of the American Dream, the black writer Ralph Ellison. His Invisible Man begins: “I am an invisible man,” goes on to illustrate many of the ways in which the black man has been made invisible to himself and others, and ends, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you.”)
But however much I would like to see this duet or dialectic as the heart of Whitman’s vision, I think his deepest yearning is toward a mystical unity of time and space and past and present in which all distance will be dissolved, not only between man and man but between man and nature; a unity in which there will even be “the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!” Here is a moment of such yearning from “Passage to India,” perhaps his loveliest and farthest-reaching expression of that dream:

After the seas are all crossed, (as they seem already cross’d)  
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish’d their work,  
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,  
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,  
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.  

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,  
All these hearts as of fretted children, shall be sooth’d,  
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told,  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook’d and link’d together,  
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified,  
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish’d and compacted by the true son of God, the poet,  
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,)  

Nature and Man shall be disjoin’d and diffused no more,  
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.  
(Pp. 290-91)

I cannot help wondering what Richard, Miss Lonelyhearts, or Scobie would make of such a son of God. Yet each of them, and Icarus too, would find interest, and perhaps solace also, in the lines with which the poem ends.
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail.
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

(P. 294)

Despite a faint stirring of youthful yearning at such sentiments, I shall have to give way soon to my middle-aged inclination to shrink from Whitman and nearly all such vociferous expansionists and engulfers. But first I should remember the service he performs for many young Romantics. Like James Agee, for instance, who at the age of eighteen wrote to Father Flye: “I’ve been reading Leaves of Grass since I came back. You know, since last winter or so I’ve been feeling something—a sort of universal—oh, I don’t know, feeling the beauty of everything, not excluding slop jars and foetuses—and a feeling of love for everything—and now I’ve run into Walt Whitman—and it seems as if I’d dived into a sort of infinitude of beautiful stuff—all the better (for me) because it was just what has been knocking at me unawares.” And like a student of mine who ended an essay on Whitman by saying: “Before Whitman if something dropped into the toilet bowl, like the soap, or toothbrush, whatever, I’d fish for it with a hanger. Now I’d roll up my sleeve and reach in.” And I should remember how much all such huge affirmations of human unity truly require substantial time and space to achieve their resonance. As is true of all great choral Masses and Messiahs and of Beethoven’s Ninth, to whose sounds and final sentiments Auden and his poem should also be exposed and which he might find more difficult to dismiss than those of Whitman.

A somewhat older Agee, five years so, also writes to Father Flye about this music, and in a context that provides it with a sobering counterpoint that I shall wish to develop further later on.
Are you fond of Swift? I never read him till last winter, and am re-reading *Gulliver's Travels* now. I can't say the love and dumb reverence for him I feel. I don't think many people have ever lived with as little compromise to the cruelties in human nature, with such acute pain at the sight of them, and such profound love for what the human race could or might be. People who call him a Hater of Humanity make me writhe—they are likely to be the very hardest of human sorts to show true humanity to—because the are by intention kind and easy-living, and resigned to the expedient corruption of living quietly and happily in the world.

When you get down here again I'll have my phonograph working—not here but in my office, to play at night. An empty skyscraper is just about an ideal place for it—with the volume it has. Something attracts me very much about playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony there—with all New York about 600 feet below you, and with that *swell* ode, taking in the whole earth, and with everyone on earth supposedly singing it; all that estranged them and all except joy and the whole common world-love and brotherhood idea forgotten. With Joy speaking over them: O ye millions, I embrace you . . . I kiss all the world . . . and all mankind shall be as brothers beneath thy tender and wide wings.

In all this depression over the world, and the whole Communist thing, I get two such feelings as strongly as I have the capacity for them: one the feeling of that music—of a love and pity and joy that nearly floors you, and the other of Swift's sort, when you see the people you love—any mob of them in this block I live in—with a tincture of sickness and cruelty and selfishness in the faces of most of them, sometimes an apparent total and universal blindness to kindliness and good and beauty. You have a feeling that they could never be cured and that all effort is misspent—and then you also know the generations of training in pain that have made the evil in them, and know it would be more than worth dying for.  

Let me hold off the darker side a while longer though by sounding for Auden and Icarus a somewhat less pretentious note on human unity than Beethoven's Ninth, one struck by another young traveler who plunges into the sea, Ishmael of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The scene occurs before everything has been swallowed up in the wild chase of Moby Dick and while the crew is still engaged in the normal tasks associated with whaling. One of these is the squeezing of lumps of sperm back into liquid form, and Ishmael and other members of the crew are sitting around a huge tub of such lumps engaged in
what he calls that “sweet and unctuous duty.” It is a lovely, peaceful day in which the ship sails serenely along, and as Ishmael bathes his hands in that rich aromatic substance, he forgets about his horrible oath to follow Ahab’s mad pursuit of Moby Dick and feels “divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance or malice, of any sort whatsoever.” And he goes on with this wonderful ejaculation:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget, that at last I was continually squeezing their hands and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we any longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all such cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti.6

The passage may be jocular and reflect only one of Melville’s moods, and Ahab is also able to call upon those same impulses toward unity for his ugly and unattainable ends; but it is an aspect of Melville’s vision worth more attention than it gets, especially in conjunction with the fact that Ishmael is the only survivor in the book, saved by the loyal and loving Queequeg’s coffin and by the compassionate quest of the Rachel “that in her retracing search after her missing children, found only another orphan.”7 While Ahab, that eagle, that man who would strike the sun if it offended him, joins Icarus in his watery grave.

In a mood such as this, I want to think about some of
William James's more hopeful thoughts and observations about impulses toward unity, as when he is describing how well charitableness and humility harmonize with all the states of mind and feeling he regards as more or less religious.

... We must, I think consider them (i.e., charity and humility) not subordinate but coordinate parts of that great complex excitement in the study of which we are engaged. Religious rapture, moral enthusiasm, ontological wonder, cosmic emotion, are all unifying states of mind, in which the sand and grit of selfhood tend to disappear, and tenderness to rule. The best thing is to describe the condition integrally as a characteristic affection to which our nature is liable, a region in which we find ourselves at home, a sea in which we swim; but not to pretend to explain its parts by deriving them too cleverly from one another. Like love or fear, the faith state is a natural psychic complex, and carries charity with it by organic consequence. Jubilation is an expansive affection and all expansive affections are self-forgetful, and kindly so long as they endure. 8

Still immersed in the spermaceti, I like it also when James tells me that although he has never had a truly mystical experience, the keynote of all his partial or artificial mystical experiences is "a reconciliation... as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties, were melted into unity." 9 So immersed, I am not anxious to observe that opposites also make for much of the pleasure and interest in our world. And I remember only the less sodden and pugnacious conditions I have witnessed when he notes the affinity of alcoholic states and mystical ones, and goes on to say that

the sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth... The drunken consciousness is one bit of mystical consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole. 10

Giddy from such spirits I cannot resist saying yes to a poem that ordinarily strikes me as too cute. It shows how far meta-
phorical alcoholism can take even one normally so self-contained as Emily Dickinson.

I taste a liquor never brewed—
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air—am I—
And Debauchee of Dew—
Reeling—thro endless summer days—
From inns of Molten Blue—

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door—
When Butterflies—renounce their "drams"—
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats—
And Saints—to windows run—
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the—sun—

No doubt Icarus would have something to say worth listening to about those final lines—not only about the heat of the sun but about the probabilities of such an inebriate noticing his or any other human predicament. But even if we are unwilling to fly quite so high as James or Dickinson, we can take some comfort in recognizing that the enormous human appetite for alcohol is not just a measure of how much people wish to escape the pain or poverty of their lives and not just a measure of their loneliness, but a measure also of their yearning for oneness and connection. For alcohol can penetrate armors and loosen intellectual catatonias, and can allow warmth and intimacy that are not adequately defined as loss of inhibition. And it can also provide a finer as well as coarser tuning to what is going on around one.

But this is really a willed cheerfulness because, at bottom, I fear, distrust, and usually dislike drunkards. And do so whether their intoxication comes from alcohol, religion, patriotism, a cause, an idea, love, or even an excess of good
will. The same impulse toward unity that immerses Ishmael and other crew members into a vast bath of benevolence as they squeeze the spermaceti earlier helped them become one with Ahab when he demanded their allegiance in his vengeful quest, a union into which even Ishmael is carried away. And if it can sweep up people into reassuring white-robed choirs singing "Halleluja" or "We Shall Overcome," or as in Beethoven's Ninth "Be embraced all ye Millions! / With a Kiss for all the world!" it can whip them into rows of brown- and black-shirted drunkards heiling Hitler and singing "Deutschland über Alles," believing so much in unity that they provided it even for their victims—in mass graves.

The same intoxication that impels Shelley and Whitman to obliterate themselves and me into a seasonal circle that always returns to springtime also entices them, and would me, toward a less fertile annihilation. Thus Shelley coaxes in "Adonais":

... From the world's bitter wind  
Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb  
What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,  
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!  
Follow where all is fled!—Rome's azure sky,  
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak  
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?  
Thy hopes are gone before; from all things here  
They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!  
A light is past from the revolving year,  
And man, and woman; and what still is dear  
Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.  
The soft sky smiles,—the low wind whispers near:  
'Tis Adonais calls! oh hasten thither,  
No more let life divide what Death can join together.
And Whitman, seeking in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" a final word that will answer his "cries of unsatisfied love . . . the sweet hell within, / the unknown want, the destiny of me", happily accepts the answer of the sea, which

Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous’d
child’s heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly
all over
Death, death, death, death, death.

(P. 184)

In passing I must observe that it is a bird, a mockingbird who has lost its mate, that stimulates Whitman’s painful yearnings in this poem, helps him give voice to them, and forms part of the constellation that makes him seek that delicious oceanic extinction. Worth noticing too is how much the boy and the bird are governed by loneliness: “Oh you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me, / O solitary listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you” (p. 184).

I am moved when Jonathan Edwards tells me that as he approached his conversion experience there came into his mind “so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction; mystery and meekness joined together; it was a gentle, an holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; a high, great, and holy gentleness.” But I am chilled when he keeps repeating and repeating that he wishes to be “swallowed up” in God and says he yearns desperately to be “emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust.” And I am mostly chilled by the mystics whose acquaintance I have made in William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience. When I read this passage from Jacob Behman, I cannot block out the sound of the old waiter’s voice in Hemingway’s “A Clean Well Lighted Place.” Behman says, “Love” is nothing, for
when thou art gone forth wholly from the Creature and from that which is visible, and art become Nothing to all that is Nature and Creature, then thou art in that Eternal One, which is God himself, and then thou shalt feel within thee the highest virtue of Love. . . . The treasure of treasures for the soul is where she goeth out of the Somewhat into that Nothing out of which all things may be made. The soul here saith, I have nothing, for I am utterly stripped and naked; I can do nothing, for I have no manner of power, but am as water poured out; I am nothing, for all that I am is no more than an image of Being, and only God is to me I AM; and so, sitting down in my own Nothingness, I give glory to the eternal Being, and will nothing of myself, that so God may will all in me, being unto me my God and all things.¹⁴

The old waiter insists on the need for clean, pleasant, well-lighted cafes to be open late at night to protect the lonely ones from the kind of nothingness he knows and talks about in lonely conversation with himself, for “he knew it was all nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who are in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada / Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nasas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.”¹⁵

I am chilled even when I read of an experience like this one of Malwida von Meysenbug, where again, as for Whitman (and Icarus too) the ocean is the entrance to eternity:

. . . . I was impelled to kneel down, this time before the illimitable ocean, symbol of the Infinite. I felt that I prayed as I had never prayed before, and knew now what prayer really is: to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is, to kneel down as one that passes away, and to rise up as one imperishable. Earth, heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-encircling harmony. It was as if the chorus of all the great who had ever lived were about me. I felt myself one with them, and it appeared as if I heard their greeting: “Thou too belongest to the company of those who overcome.”¹⁶

I should think the final sentence might read “who have been overcome.” But here, as with many mystics, there is a curious ambiguity that goes beyond the usual Christian paradox of gaining the self through losing it, an ambiguity as to whether
the soul has been absorbed by, become part of, the larger unity or whether it has expanded to such a degree that it has incorporated everything else.

I know the self has taken over when I read:

He who would hear the voice of Nada, "the Soundless Sound," and comprehend it, he has to learn the nature of Dhanana. . . . When to himself his form appears unreal, as do on waking all the forms he sees in dreams; when he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the ONE—the inner sound which kills the outer. . . . For then the soul will hear and will remember. And then to the inner ear will speak THE VOICE OF SILENCE. . . . And now the Self is lost in SELF, thyself into THYSELF, merged in that SELF from which thou first did radiate. . . . Behold! thou hast become the Light, thou has become the Sound, thou art thy Master and thy God. Thou art THYSELF the object of thy search: the VOICE unbroken, that resounds through eternities, exempt from change, from sin exempt, the seven sounds in one, the VOICE OF THE SILENCE. Om tat Sat.  

Probably I should feel more sympathy here than I do, for surely the strength of these desires for unity and even death reflects an equally strong sense of unwholeness, incompleteness, and loneliness, or, as with some of the more Christian mystics, profound unworthiness. The extent to which this is true is suggested by the number of people like Tolstoi and Bunyan whose conversions or mystical experiences followed upon serious periods of depression. It is worth noting that even Agee's celebration of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that I quoted earlier follows and remains intimately connected with despair and that the symphony itself was perhaps in part the creation of Beethoven's own despair as his deafness progressively increased his distance from the rest of mankind. Similar conjunctions occur with Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, Melville, Dickinson, John Stuart Mill, Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, and William James himself, and no doubt numerous other authors I am less acquainted with. One need not reduce all mysticism to pathology to understand that for many the religious sense itself might adequately be defined as "the feeling of unwholeness, of moral imperfection, of sin, to use the technical word [as Scobie might] accompanied by the
yearning after the peace of unity,” or to accept James’s phrase “sick soul” to describe the condition of many who are particularly susceptible to the deliverance of all-engulfing religions. I should try to remember Rollo May’s sympathetic observation that extremely isolated and lonely people often feel in danger of losing their boundaries and their ability to discriminate “between wakefulness and sleep—between the subjective self and the objective world around them.”

Though I do not wish to “explain” Whitman in such a way, his Calamus poems suggest he was hardly the comfortable “comarado” he often made himself out to be. One can even go so far as to view most of these self-annihilations as a form of metaphorical suicide that saves such anguished people from literal self-destruction.

Having said all this, however, I still am frightened of all those who want to unify me or themselves into one kind of stuff—whether they are messiahs, mystics, monists, or mere moneymakers, and whether that stuff is death, pure spirit (either Western or Eastern style), Leibnitz’s monads, Bergson’s *elan vitale*, Blake’s “Universal Man,” a totalitarian organism (either right or left), or one of those blobs that science fiction writers love to scare us with. But even much gentler intoxications, expansivenesses, and impulses toward unity leave me with a fear of being gobbled up. There are so many ways of swallowing things. I am uneasy when Emerson writes: “From within or behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend.”

It seems to me dangerous, perhaps even suicidal or murderous, to remove respect from that part of us which plants and eats. I am even more frightened by the ending of the celebrated passage in which he says: “Standing on the bare ground [in the woods]—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted
into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance." 22 How dare he say that so blithely! Such a bath makes it necessary to repeat that observation of Orwell that "the essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals." 23 Somewhere, though quite distant at the moment, is a voice that mocks: "Swallowed up or broken up. Some choice!"

Although I will later have some kind things to say about voyeurism, I think Jonathan Bishop gives a necessary warning when he writes in his book on Emerson that "the eye is the megalomaniac among the senses; it takes possession of the universe from a distance and seems itself to be the center from which all existence radiates." 24 With all his awareness of the dangers of appropriating the tenant farmers in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee, as Dan McCall observes, is in danger of "summon[ing] the world into an imperious eye." 25 And here is probably as good a place as any to present McCall's brilliant observation in connection with Agee's visual possessiveness, that the "deepest feeling of guilt is incurred when the eye of the artist is affronted by the opposing eye of his subject—where the urge to locate the world's suffering in a visual moment is suddenly brought up short by one of the world's sufferers looking back." 26 How slippery that line is between observing and ingesting is evident in even so seemingly innocent a comment as this one in another of Agee's letters to Father Flye:

At night I'm starting to draw, heads of Alma and copies of postcard American streets. I would never have known how much even a little of it sharpens your eye and gives you more understanding
and affection for even some small part of a human or architectural feature. Also back with the whole primitive bases of art, when people made effigies that they might have power over the animals they needed for food. I now "possess" and "know" Alma’s face and a Brooklyn street in 1938 as if they were a part of me, as much as my hand, the same with one of the tenant houses from memory.27

In this very mild intoxication, how smooth the transition from “understanding and affection” to “power over” to “possess[ion]” to translation into a part of his own body. The more I look at such a passage, the less distant it seems from that frightening equation of Goethe’s in which the artist is likened to “the eagle, who flies with free glance over every land” and carries off his prey into the realm of “the good, the noble and the beautiful.” The less distant from the frightening image in this passage from Kierkegaard, of eaglehood, suffering, loneliness, artistic possession, and self-annihilating self-inflation (or self-inflating self-annihilation).

My grief is my castle, which like an eagle’s nest is built high up in the mountain peaks among the clouds; nothing can storm it. From it I fly down into reality to seize my prey; but I do not remain down there. I bring it home with me, and this prey is a picture I weave into the tapestries of my palace. There I live as one dead. I immerse everything I have experienced in a baptism of forgetfulness unto an eternal remembrance. Everything finite and accidental is erased.28

In the face of such obliteration—of acquaintances, friends, and brothers, of everything finite and accidental—there is little to be said or done, for life itself, and even love, are extinguished. It does, of course, solve all the problems of suffering and distance, end all internal division and debate. And there can be few of us who have not at some time been tempted by one or another of the delicious unions with death proposed above. It is more comfortable to be rocked in the cradle of the ocean than to worry about Icarus or that nameless martyr. It may be that there is in every one of us, as the psychiatrist Edith Weigert says is present in every “patient,” “a repressed nostalgia for the oceanic feeling of trusting harmony, for the
original symbiotic unity of mother and infant." It may even be, though I doubt it, that we all are afflicted with some degree of death wish or natural entropy, but most of us have more interesting pursuits in mind.

If nothing else, we wish to do as Janie does in my favorite myth about a part of the mystery we have just been exploring, a myth, we may note, in which the unity is the point of departure and not the goal. It is the myth that Zora Neale Hurston uses to describe her heroine’s efforts to exhibit to others her personal worth, “a jewel down inside herself,” to walk “where people could see her and gleam it around.” But the context is oddly ambiguous with respect to whether her fulfillment will lie more in connection with others or separation from them.

When God made the Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks made them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine.

I like the myth in part because it counters a little George Eliot’s and my own too gloomy sense that dominates what I have so far written, that what lies on the other side of silence is chiefly a roar, the sort of roar we would hear if we were not so well wadded with stupidity, and never a shine and a song.

I like the myth also because of the way it captures at once the loneliness of the separate sparks, their yearning for one another, and the muddy composition of their self-encasement. How much more simple it would be if we were made like billiard balls and could simply bump or kiss and bounce away, or else, like paramecia, had entirely permeable membranes and could ingest and absorb one another completely. But how dull. How we love the private space beneath our muddy skins, the silence in which to shine out our aloneness, the separateness with which to contemplate the idea of unity.
the chance to select a few other mudballs to tumble against.

   A final note:

   The move here toward mysticism began with Whitman’s “I was the man, I suffer’d, I was there,” and went on into all sorts of extinctions, another commentary on the fruit of fusion. But we must not forget that Scobie’s way too ended in self-annihilation. And I must be fair enough to allow William James a further word here about the mystical regions of consciousness: that although “they cannot furnish formulas,” they “open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.”31