

# SELVES AT RISK

*Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Letters*

IHAB HASSAN

The University of Wisconsin Press

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We Americans are the peculiar chosen people—the Israel of our time. . . . We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.

—Herman Melville

If you are ready to leave father and mother, brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk.

—Henry David Thoreau

O we can wait no longer!

We too take ship, O soul!

—Walt Whitman

Old men ought to be explorers

Here and there does not matter

We must be still and still moving . . .

—T. S. Eliot

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Selves at Risk

## In-Quest: A Synoptic Introduction

I am afoot with my vision . . .

—Walt Whitman

Much of the extraordinary ignorance of most Americans about what has been happening elsewhere . . . is due to the fact that their eyes and ears—their writers—have stayed home.

—Edward Hoagland

**T** HIS IS a book about quests in contemporary American letters, and about contemporary reality. These quests are of a particular kind. They solicit adventure—I would call them “questures,” but we have had critical neologisms enough.\* They also affirm essential values even as they assay new modes of being in the world. Spirit, effort, peril constitute these journeys, in fiction or nonfiction, as does the great wager with death. Such journeys put articulate selves at risk, selves that may incur failure or folly but always spurn the glossy ironies, the camp and kitsch of our day.

Still, one may ask: Quest? Adventure, in the fading glare of our century? In this era of satellites and supersonic jets, of the ubiquitous McDonald's and pervasive Panasonic? In our coddled jacuzzi culture, our cybernetic, if not quite cyborg, society of acronyms and first names, where acedia measures lives between hype and fix? Indeed, the very name of quest may strike some as quaint, lacking as it does deconstructionist brio, Marxist bravura, or feminist coloratura.

Yet the spirit of quest endures, unquavering, with stiff upper lip. It endures, moreover, confident of its future and proud of its (largely British) pedigree. From rain forests, across oceans, steppes, savannahs, saharas, to the peaks of the Andes or Himalayas, men and increasingly women still test the limits of human existence. They test spirit, flesh, marrow, imagi-

\*Henceforth, *in this work*, I will use quest and adventure freely, interchangeably, though the terms may not be identical in other contexts.

nation, in a timeless quest for adventure, for meaning really, beyond civilization, at the razor edge of mortality. And they return, with sun-cracked skin and gazes honed on horizons, to tell the tale.

Indeed, seekers can be eloquent, even loquacious. I limit myself in this book, therefore, to postwar American prose writers whose works reshape the traditional genre of quest in hybrid forms. In a way, we are, both reader and author, in quest of an ideal text of quest. Though we may never find such a text, we may in the process develop a working concept, an effective sense, of the enterprise. We may also discover in these vicarious voyages compelling images of our own concerns. And who knows but that we may take some pleasure in works uncommonly blessed with style, the vivid, verbal grace of human beings under pressure?

Already, the reader notes, certain qualities of quest have begun to emerge: hope, movement, danger, exposure to otherness in alien cultures or natures, all rendered in a distinct personal voice. And since the authors I address all write in the first person about the present—no historical quests or romances here—their works have the timbre of autobiography. Still, the word quest evokes projects as various as those of Parsifal, the Pilgrim Fathers, and Indiana Jones. Thus quest, metaphor of life itself, of life even beyond death, requires from us sharper demarcation.

I have taken quest here in its singular sense, though from the Argonauts to the Astronauts seekers have also journeyed in groups. But “super-alpinists” now scale Everest alone, dispensing with oxygen if not with faith, thus confirming Salman Rushdie when he says: “the myth more often seems to require the existential purity of a single human being pitted against the immensity of the universe. . . .”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, I have not considered quest simply as a personal matter, a private transaction between an individual and the universe. Rather, I have viewed quest as a vital, symbolic option in the postmodern world, a focus of choices and constraints in American society, and, beyond that, as a signal to us all about risk, strangeness, achievement, the terrible splendors of self-renewal. Therefore, I have eschewed quests that are mainly interior, those night journeys through the inverted forests of the soul. For once, D. H. Lawrence missed the mark when he wrote: “Superficially, the world has become small and known. . . . There is no mystery left, we’ve been there, we’ve seen it, we know about it. We’ve done the globe, and the globe is done. . . . Yet the more we know superficially, the less we penetrate vertically. . . . There still remain the terrifying under-deeps, of which we have utterly no experience.”<sup>2</sup> But the mystery remains, and it is both “vertical” and “horizontal,” private and public: in *both* dimensions quests persist, discovering spirit in action, making meaning.

## 2

The public aspects of quest and adventure merit our first attention, for they reveal a central, historical tendency in the West. Michael Nerlich traces this tendency back to the high Middle Ages, perceiving there the beginning of a “systematic glorification of the (knightly, then bourgeois) adventurer as the most developed and most important human being,” a glorification that “defined the inalienable fundamental condition of human existence.”<sup>3</sup> This “ideology of adventure,” Nerlich argues, transgresses boundaries of class, abets change, tolerates uncertainty, and entails confrontation with others, “other races, other languages, other names, other necessities, other desires, etc.”<sup>4</sup> All this leads to our modernity, the climax, Nerlich insists, of that dynamic, innovative impulse no society can stifle in its individuals without becoming sterile.

The ideology of adventure finds its preeminent instance in the American experience. As Todorov put it: “the discovery of America, or of the Americans, is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history. We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the ‘discovery’ of other continents and of other peoples. . . .”<sup>5</sup> Discovered first by Europeans, America perpetuated the quest on its own continent; later, it repatriated the quest to Europe, Africa, Asia, repatriated, as it were, the American Sublime together with its native versions of cultural imperialism. In the process, America constructed its own histories, myths, and legends, its own ethos of quest, in and out of literature.

Certain commonplaces of criticism reverberate still in our minds. American literature, critics have said, is largely autobiographical, a literature of the Self, enacted most often on the margins of society, from Poe’s Arthur Gordon Pym through Melville’s Ishmael, Twain’s Huck Finn, and Whitman’s *Myself*, to Salinger’s Holden Caulfield or Bellow’s *Augie March*. It is also, we are often told, a symbolic, visionary literature, less social than metaphysical, with a prepossession for myth and romance. Its bias is for innocence, evasion, solitude, wonder, change, errancy, as the titles of even scholarly books intimate: *The American Adam*, *The American Newness*, *The Imperial Self*, *The Reign of Wonder*, *Errand into the Wilderness*, *The Virgin Land*, *A World Elsewhere*, *Radical Innocence*. Finally, it is a literature, though Adamic, of extremity, of intense and brooding modernity, as D. H. Lawrence insisted.

Such critical commonplaces shift with the moods of historical revisionism, as if we know “now” better than “then,” see things more clearly—in fact, we see them only otherwise.<sup>6</sup> Yet even revisionist works confirm quest in the American grain. The quest moved west, absorbing that dire and daz-

zling energy Europeans expended in their colonial empires. The quest, as Myra Jehlen has noted, also translated time into space. "The most interesting aspect of the general belief in a national destiny to expand ever westward is one we tend to overlook, perhaps because we take it for granted," Jehlen says; "the American teleology cites the will of heaven and the human spirit, but it rests its case on the integrity of the continent"; and so Americans traveled restlessly, leading "lives in a state of perpetual landing."<sup>7</sup> Moving out, the quest also found its need for otherness in the wilderness, and found its motives in the eternal search of misfits, outlaws, scalawags, crackpots, vagrants, visionaries, individualists of every stripe, for something they could hardly name: El Dorado, the New Jerusalem, the Earthly Paradise, the Last Frontier. "Philobats" (walkers on their toes), as Gert Ræithel argues in his psychohistory of *voluntary* American immigrants, they formed weak attachments to objects, persons, places; they relished stress, movement, exposure, transgressive fantasies.<sup>8</sup> Yet Americans could no more exempt themselves from history than from power or desire. Their quests, therefore, reveal certain social attitudes, historical patterns, that we also need to ponder.

Here Martin Green's *The Great American Adventure* proves pertinent. Green reviews classic adventures, from Cooper to Mailer, and discerns in them particular features—and I would say manners. These include a pagan, anti-intellectual, antipacifist outlook; a masculinist, often misogynist, stance; a concept of manhood linked to nationalism, patriotism, America's Manifest Destiny; and a strong sense of caste, if not class, led by military aristocrats and democratic woodsmen (hunters, trappers, Indian fighters) who magnificently possess the frontier virtues of valor, self-reliance, knowledge of the wilderness, and, above all, a rude *ecological ethic*. Thus, for Green, venturesome quests mark "the highest achievement of American literature," a counterpart to the "Great Tradition" (F. R. Leavis) of the European novel.<sup>9</sup>

In any event, though adventure became secular in the last century, possibly anti-Christian, it often took a spiritual, even mystic, turn. As Green says: "Although hunting is an activity of the aristo-military caste, being a hunter in the American sense is in some ways not a caste activity, in that it takes place in a non-social space, outside the frontier of society. . . . Just for that reason, however, it represents more vividly the sacramental function of the man of violence. . . . Thus, if the hunter fails to represent the social aspect of caste, he nonetheless represents its religious aspect vividly."<sup>10</sup> The religion in question is, I believe, "natural," the kind we sometimes see shimmer through the paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin Church, Winslow Homer, or Albert Pinkham Ryder.

Spirit was never a stranger to violence, of course, the violence of nature

first, the sacramental violence also of the hunter or primitive warrior who on behalf of his tribe breaks the taboo against killing. Indeed, some historians of the American frontier have come to consider the notion of "sacramental violence" as crux. Thus, for instance, Richard Slotkin claims that "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience." He continues: "an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars."<sup>11</sup>

Slotkin's use of the feminine pronoun with reference to nature is instructive. The American hero loves nature but must also violate "her," either profanely—exterminating the buffalo, wasting the land—or sacramentally.<sup>12</sup> This ethos also affects the hero's attitude toward women, as Leslie Fiedler has famously argued in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. For quest always tempts the hero to abandon hearth, family, friends, leave society behind, a willed alienation aggravated by frontier conditions which released one kind of desire (freedom) only to constrain another (love).

We can plausibly conclude, then, that the historic experience of America proved singularly congenial to the spirit of quest. That experience provided an alternative to European colonialism, provided a colonialism within, a dramatic, often destructive encounter that became, through dime novels and Hollywood movies, an international myth: the myth of the Indian, the myth of the Frontier and the Wild West. Similarly, the "journey centeredness" of that historic experience offered "matter, form, directional association for the literary imagination," offered a mythic focus for all the contradictions of American democracy and empire.<sup>13</sup> It is as if the "complex fate" of which Henry James spoke at the turn of our century really entailed, more than a confrontation between Europe and America, a spirited adventure into the uncharted wilderness both of the New World and of the Old Adam, Caliban, whom Lawrence derisively invoked:

Ca Ca Caliban  
Get a new master, be a new man.<sup>14</sup>

3

Lawrence might as well have invoked the new American woman. For quest also concerns gender, and in this concern touches all the sexual complexities of America.

Women, of course, rarely engaged in adventurous quests or explorations before the end of the eighteenth century. Increasingly, though, they have become intrepid travelers—witness Leo Hamalian's *Ladies on the Loose*, Mary Russell's *The Blessings of a Good Thick Skirt*, and Elizabeth

Fagg Olds's *Women of the Four Winds*. Still more recently, women have undertaken daunting tasks: Libby Riddles won the solo Alaska Dog Sled Race, covering 1,135 miles; Enda O'Coineen crossed the Atlantic alone in a rubber dinghy; Pam Flowers reached, in fifty-four days, the North Pole by a route hitherto impassable; Jan Reynolds skied down 24,757-foot Mount Mustagata in western China; and Julie Tullis perished *after* conquering K2.

The tradition of errant women, though, was largely British; Americans, male or female, expended themselves on their own westerling frontiers.<sup>15</sup> Later in the nineteenth century, some doughty Americans—Fanny Bullock Workman, Annie Smith Peck, Delia J. Akeley, Marguerite Harrison, Louise Arner Boyd—ventured far, high, and wide, founding the Society of Woman Geographers in 1925. But the historical climate of strenuous travel was already changing, affecting its appeal to women. Elizabeth Fagg Olds puts it thus:

The new women travelers were largely American. And they were different from most of their predecessors, who had tended to be romantic dreamers, more intrigued by the exotic aspects of travel, the "spell of the East," for instance, and with the novelty of independence than driven toward defined goals. The new women explorers, by contrast, were highly goal oriented, single-minded, and stoutly dedicated to specific objectives. They freed themselves from their Victorian upbringing to organize and lead expeditions of their own, with institutional or other backing if possible, but in any case asserting themselves as serious explorers.

They are important as a transitional group in the evolving advances of women, for they were the direct forerunners of today's trained women scientists and field workers. Although themselves heirs and successors to their Victorian counterparts, they cast off, as soon as possible, the quaint and inhibiting sidesaddles, flowing skirts, long tresses, and veils of their sisters. But they were not yet modern, either. Having after all been born in the Victorian era, they donned their knickers with misgivings, rode astride but wore concealing robes or jackets, and bivouacked with their porters and bearers with uneasy apologies. But meanwhile they managed to explore some of the earth's most unlikely spots, encounter adventures as wildly improbable as their predecessors' and contribute much to our knowledge of people, customs, and geography.<sup>16</sup>

This new attitude, "stoutly dedicated to specific objectives," encourages science more than quest.<sup>17</sup> Also, pure motion in space, without inner need or visionary gleam, without a quality of awareness that gives resonance to narrative, indeed without narrative itself, can not serve us as model for quest. Hence the relative scarcity, in *Selves at Risk*, of postwar American

women writers, writers of the order, say, of Freya Stark, who was English and traveled in another age.

But the question of gender in quest does not arise only in the recent history of women. The question inhabits myth, and is charged with contradictions. Male seekers have traditionally kept aloof from women, only to discover the woman within. Inspired often in their adventures by some actual woman, these mythic heroes also used their journeys against the "other sex," to liberate themselves from social and erotic bonds. With clear intuition, Paul Zweig summarizes the paradox: "This is where the adventurer discovers the elusiveness of woman. She is the house from which he frees himself in order to give birth to himself as a pure male. But she is also the means within him by which he escapes. And she is still more: her various incarnations appear before him as occasions for adventure, mysteries beckoning to him out of the obscure fertilities of chance."<sup>18</sup> Thus hoping to reinvent himself arduously as a man's man, the questing hero ends, as we shall see, by sublimating his "femininity" into a cosmic vision.

It is not essential for us to speculate here on the differences between men and women regarding their inherent character or behavior. Such speculations usually draw on a large, common fund of ignorance and prejudice, recycle debates about nature and culture, and finally expend themselves in ideological fictions of resentment or self-esteem. Some ideas about gender, though, are relevant to quest; they enjoy reasonable consensus, and so warrant review. Only men, for instance, seem to have hunted, headed tribes, made war, and sought some form of violence to validate themselves.<sup>19</sup> Men also seem more prone than women to catastrophic fantasies, feelings of insecurity, hence to striving and strain.<sup>20</sup> They generally evince, as Walter J. Ong puts it, a higher degree of "adversativeness," restlessness, solitude—also, paradoxically, of extreme bonding—a larger need for self-redemption.<sup>21</sup> In their stance toward risk, men also differ from women:

Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim in *The Managerial Woman* (1977) put very pointedly what countless proverbs, folktales, and literary works express about the human experience of male and female agonistic attitudes across the world: "Men see risk as loss or gain; winning or losing; danger or opportunity," while women "see risk as entirely negative. It is loss, danger, injury, ruin, hurt. One avoids it as best one can. . . ."<sup>22</sup>

Risk and contest, Ong further argues, also relate to "othering," differentiation between individuals or species. This process of differentiation creates the "I," the self, which exists both in connection with other "I's" and "in a state of terrifying isolation"; thus when "the human ego is threat-

ened with dissolution, often there is nothing like a good nonlethal fight, a contest, to get it back together again, even if the contest is lost.”<sup>23</sup>

How do these ideas about gender illumine the subject of quest? In so far as quest entails isolation, combat, delight in risk and strain, it expresses a *traditionally* male aspect of the human character, and this may also account for the relative paucity of female quests, *quests as here defined*.<sup>24</sup> To moot the “biological” or “social” character of this tradition, moot its origin, is futile. In all things human, biological evolution and social conditioning have become inextricable, their separation, in favor of one or the other, an egregiously ideological act. Nor is the “individual” more or less a fiction than “society,” since in all things human, again, idiolect, sociolect, and biolect continually interact.

But the decisive point about gender in the literature of quest envisages the near future rather than the distant past. If literary narratives now turn inward, as Erich Kahler has argued, if the oral stage of epic feats now yields to more subtle introspections, can we also conclude that quest, like American culture itself, has become “feminized”? I am tempted to answer with an ambiguous “yes.” Ong, I think, is in the main right: “Narrative centered on raw male combat, such as the Western or the typical television whodunit, is today usually regressive, for it can no longer be made to carry the serious psychic load of combat stories in oral cultures.”<sup>25</sup> But history, we should also recall, is often “regressive,” and cultural fashion even more so—witness *Rambo I, II, and III*, and all the arts of nostalgia in our space age. Moreover, contemporary quests may signal a renewal of literature, a restitution of belief, a way past the wasteland of our ironies and ideologies. Thus Zweig would argue against Ong: “The very movement inward, which undermined the traditional framework of adventure, created in its place the medium for a new exploit, and a new simplicity. . . . We have circled back to a level of primitive certainties.”<sup>26</sup>

Have we? It remains to be seen whether this “new simplicity” will prove wish or prophecy, and whether a “level of primitive certainties” can still provide a base for the mixed, multiform, anfractuous communities of the future.

## 4

The wish for a “new simplicity,” though, betrays our lacks, betrays the conditions of American society from which seekers flee and to which they return. What conditions? One may as well ask: which American “society”? Nearly half a century has elapsed since the end of the last world war, and America has suffered seismic changes, suffered ruptures, reversals, restorations on a planetary scale. What rubrics or abstractions, then,

can describe these years? None, of course, though hints of our collective energies may be found among the fading stamps, peeling labels, of the last decades.

Since the war, we have been told that America—successively, sometimes concurrently—became conformist, “a lonely crowd” (David Riesman); that it entered an “age of discontinuity” (Peter Drucker); that the “greening of America” (Charles Reich) was at hand; that the “coming of a post-industrial society” (Daniel Bell) was already fact; and that the republic had yielded to a “culture of narcissism” (Christopher Lasch); still, “astral America” (Jean Baudrillard) remained a “haloed energy” of simulacra, affecting the future.<sup>27</sup>

In all this, beneath the rubrics and abstractions, there is much to offend men and women of spirit, much to drive them out. Kitsch and hype, boredom and banality, sterility and satiety, spurious values everywhere, the arrogance of pervasive bureaucracies, the cheery cretinism of media, crime, pollution, deprivation, and overcrowding, nature itself on the wane, the prospect of high-tech genocide, the rust of dreams, the ashes of failure—all these surround them. Threatened in their autonomy, they choose to test their purpose elsewhere. Can they win through to the divine, or at least to their own version of reality?

The maladies of civilization are, of course, nothing new; we have simply become inured to their facts. Our most brilliant cities are more menacing than jungles—homicide, rape, drugs, cancer, heart failure. They seethe with anger while inhibiting its expression, until anger reaches the flashpoint.<sup>28</sup> They, the best evidence of our civilization, generate motley freedoms while incarcerating millions within their crumbling walls. Can we wonder that C. L. R. James makes both Ellis Island and Melville’s doomed *Pequod* his metaphors of American society, American cities?<sup>29</sup> They, the most vital evidence of our culture, sustain myriad arts while thriving on death. Can we wonder that Al Alvarez considers contemporary artists as masters of suicide or degeneration who “survive morally by becoming . . . an imitation of death in which their audience can share.”<sup>30</sup>

The authors in *Selves at Risk* “imitate death,” confront it, in other, more salubrious ways. They leave, for a time, “civilization,” *their* civilization, and move east or south rather than west. In doing so, they do not deny the crisis of American society, which they rightly perceive as part of a world crisis, a geopolitical spasm. Rather, they engage the crisis by trying to face it in themselves; and if they flee somewhere, they still carry it with them, hoping to resolve it in encounters with otherness, especially that gray, gluey otherness within. The risk they take, though, is not only of death; it is also of failure, repetition, the secular and unoriginal sin of self.

But what crisis precisely is this? In a sense, the crisis is permanent—call

it the human condition. In another sense, our discontents have grown with modernization, which inspired John Donne to write in 1611:

And freely men confess that this world's spent,  
When in the Planets, and the Firmament  
They seek so many new; then see that this  
Is crumbled out again to his Atomies.  
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
All just supply, and all Relation.

("An Anatomy of the World")

Hundreds of bristling tomes have since tried to explain the anatomy of our world—alienation, fragmentation, dehumanization, etc.—nor is the end of explanations in sight. This is due to the changing character of modernity itself, its willed and intrinsic fugacity. Modernity "deinstitutionalizes," as Arnold Gehlen put it, destabilizes, and so permits the extremes of isolation and collectivism, subjectivity and enforced totality. "'Tis all in pieces," Donne said, but also all compacted together in mass movements and fanatic ideologies. For Gehlen, therefore, the crisis is "a total one, in the sense that the basic coordinates themselves of the interpretation of the world have become doubtful."<sup>31</sup>

Gehlen exhibits the conservative's sense of decline in the West, and his understanding of recent, cybernetic society is scant; yet his conclusion about the "coordinates of interpretation" accords with Lyotard's desuetude of "master narratives" in the postmodern world and my own concept of "indeterminance."<sup>32</sup> Certainly after the creative, and inevitably destructive, convulsions of the sixties, canons, authorities, values, "relations" of every kind came into deeper (Donnian) doubt. Not only that but the social ecology of America, indeed the very existence of a coherent society, turned moot. For Baudrillard, society became invisible to the rational eye, like an impacted black hole in space, or else visible only as a "hyperreal" frenzy of "simulacra," a vertigo of paralyzed images.<sup>33</sup>

## 5

Within this motley world—archaic here, postindustrial there, hybrid and decolonized nearly everywhere—seekers go their sundry ways, their very powers of motion fraught with political as with spiritual import. As Mary Louise Pratt has shown about traditional travel narratives, they always codify the Other, and express fantasies of dominance over peoples and even landscapes. Inevitably, often unwittingly, the very information they produce is locked in a particular ideology which legitimizes their explicit or implicit violence. This is not to say that all such narratives express the

same ideology; in fact, Pratt admits, "European penetration and appropriation" in these tales "is semanticized in numerous ways that can be quite distinct, even mutually contradictory."<sup>34</sup>

None is exempt from ideology, as it is now fashionable, and inane, to say. In any case, the ideology of contemporary displacements draws on other, more postmodern, assumptions. Whether seeker, explorer, or simply traveler—and we must distinguish the first from the others—we have all become tourists, Dean MacCannell claims. This is because "a complex and sometimes arduous search for an Absolute Other is a basic theme for *our* [my italics] civilization," a search predicated on the expansionist, if not imperialist, tendency of modernity, predicated too on "mass leisure, especially international tourism and sightseeing."<sup>35</sup>

But the seeker is, of course, no ordinary "tourist." He, sometimes she, does not respond to ads saying: "Spend 21 days in the land of the Hatfields and McCoys for \$378, living in with some of the poorest people in the U.S. in Mingo County, West Virginia"; nor does he go to Kenya and cry: "Let us shoot at every living thing we can find today and see what bag is possible in one day."<sup>36</sup> Again, the seeker rarely imitates the "human cougar," the tough, independent loner-drifter whose habitat was mainly the American West; nor does he appear simply as an individualist, intent on his own selfish gains, the kind of person that the gregarious authors of *Habits of the Heart* condemn as a "cancer" in American society.<sup>37</sup>

The seeker, as I hope to show, has many faces. But he is not characterless or faceless. He is certainly self-reliant, tolerant of risk. He is mobile. He seeks meaning, even if danger must attend his pursuit; he intuits that individuals need and consume meanings far more than products. And he suspects that the sacred, as Mircea Eliade would say, camouflages itself in that pursuit. Though contemporary life shields him from hazard, he feels that his best moments blaze in peril, or at least insecurity. He disdains vicarious jeopardy, pseudo risks, packaged by prurient media or professed by amusement parks. He knows unreal America.<sup>38</sup> He knows, therefore, that in venturesome quests he may recover reality, constitute significance, maintain his vigor, all in those privileged moments of being when life vouchsafes its most secret rewards. Is this not the whole sense of Emersonian experience?

In all these stirrings, the seeker may not be fully conscious, wide awake. He becomes so only in his story, more precisely in the author's narrative and art. Yet in the *literature of quest*—the quest itself does not come within our purview—the author is often himself the seeker, or at least in imaginative and spiritual cahoots with his errant hero. This accounts, as I noted, for the autobiographical resonance of literary quests. Given the crisis of value, authority, belief in the West, the crisis of discourse itself, where may

words finally come to rest but in the dying flesh? How else join autobiography to myth, beliefs to the world? How else speak to the cosmos?

Beliefs—their scope, glory, corruption—are what these selves at risk test and tempt. Like William James, they “will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences,” and “will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that would seem a likely place to find him.”<sup>39</sup> Their “will to believe” impels them through jungles, over glaciers, across deserts or swamps; and though they may never find what they seek, and may forsake their hope, they leave behind them a verbal trace of some inner pain or radiance to make our journey in this “half-saved, half-wild” universe more right.

## 6

But who speaks in these pages beside the writers I write about? I do, of course. A word then about my bias. All writing is refined avoidance, a mode of autobiography. I can not speak of my own “quest” here, though I may note that *Selves at Risk* has been itself both an expression of my displacements—from Egypt to America, from engineering to literature, from criticism to paracriticism and back—and a displacement of some “true” expression I have not yet found. I have been, and so remain, amateur of change, addicted to travel and avant-gardism, forms of restlessness. The first is desire in space, the second in time; or perhaps I should say desire of space, desire of time, which our lives mask or transpose. This is a kind of radical innocence, the human project to conquer death. Conquer how? By defiance? By death itself? By a rage for life?

No one feels that he, that she, has lived fully enough, and when I read stories of genuine quest and adventure, this feeling, beyond envy, jabs some vital part. But I have no talent for regret, and I push my life as I can. There is something existential in this attitude—call it an existential pathos—which affected my first book, *Radical Innocence* (1961). This pathos returns, perhaps, in *Selves at Risk* (1990), mutant, recursive, altered irrevocably by time. A critical sympathy for certain authors and texts also recurs here, breaking through postmodern theories and distractions.

How do I read these authors, these texts? Not transparently, I hope, but neither according to any prescriptive ideology or theory. If that be “ideology” too, then it’s mine.<sup>40</sup> But is “everything ideological,” as goes the slogan? Ideologies differ greatly with regard to their claims, values, procedures, their overt and hidden exactions; they cry for discrimination. Some require us to denounce parent and child to the state, or to torture; others persuade us to avoid violence to all life. What prevents us from making such crucial distinctions in the humanities, especially in the study

of literature? Perhaps it is GRIM, acronym for the Great Rumbling Ideological Machine. This is an Orwellian machine, grinding out slogans and theories—no one asks when “theory” is theory, when not—and scattering all pavid spirits in its path. True, racism, sexism, imperialism surround us, as do the neglect of poverty and abuses of power. But GRIM finally concerns itself less with these dire realities than with its own “ideospeak,” its own ideological clang.

In *Selves at Risk*, I neither argue for or against theory nor address a particular “community of scholars”—this book must take its chances with whoever reads it. I also try to heed the languages of texts, follow the “itinerary of the signifier”; but language also means to its users, and I concern myself urgently with meanings, all kinds of meanings, stable, shifty, or complex. Not Deconstructionist, Marxist even less, not a “straight” Humanist reader, I construe the books of our time with the discipline of my experience, construe them finally as they move me and as I imagine they move some readers. Still, no frame of intellectual tolerance is infinite, and mine has its grains, knots, and warps. I confess: my bias is for an independent critical stance.

But what can “independent” mean in a transactive, semiotic, cybernetic age, rife with simulacra, rampant with global cargo cults? It does not mean, in any case, “robust” nineteenth-century individualism, from Andrew Carnegie to Dale Carnegie. It means, rather, a tough-minded, Emersonian “whim,” to which I will return in later chapters. It means resistance to one’s own immediate community, not only to the Kremlin or the White House, the KGB or the CIA, but also to “the herds of independent minds” (Harold Rosenberg) that surround us. It means a certain agility, mobility, nimbleness of spirit, what Lyotard calls “*sveltesse*,” with regard to all systems. It means less a position than a process, a continual struggle among perspectives. It means a recognition of difference, heterogeneity, a way to inhabit the space of otherness. It means an acceptance of marginality, knowing how to skate on edges. It means a cheerful skepticism of solidarity, of the raised voice, pointed finger, clenched fist. It means a distinctive style, in writing, thinking, acting, in being in the world. It means an ability to choose, answer, and perhaps to love. Can we attain these, in the West, without some felt sense of self? I think not: hence my title, *Selves at Risk*.

The authors I engage here—some less canonical than others, all brightly accomplished, and I quote from them copiously for that very reason—exemplify different aspects of quest. But their exemplifications remain selective, refractions of the human spirit in stress. This makes *Selves at Risk* selective too, not an exhaustive survey of a field. The book, rather, is a small imitation of a quest, going over quests, or more precisely, going over accounts of quests, re-covering them, in search of its own idea of quest.

Thus the book seems to be, in Aristotelian terms, an imitation of an imitation of an action. This is safe enough as adventures go, though all writing also makes its acquaintance with death: one ages in writing as one traverses the time of a book.

The book proceeds in three parts. The first explores some general issues pertaining to quest; here, and particularly in Chapter 2, is occasionally dense discussion of the topic. The second reviews, in fiction and nonfiction, works that begin to define the idea of quest. The third, more leisurely in pace, comprises three exemplary writers, Paul Bowles, Paul Theroux, and Peter Matthiessen, who develop that idea. Brief prefaces summarize the arguments of each part. Thus, in describing the structure of *Selves at Risk*, these précis may also hint at the syntax of quest. Introduction and Conclusion try to frame what must remain finally frameless, the radical aspirations of human beings. These aspirations, despite the epigraph from Edward Hoagland, are still in the American writer's keeping.

## Part I Contexts of Quest

*Quests are horizons of personal desire, but that horizon also circles the world. Put another way, quests, even in narrower focus, illumine the concerns of men and women in society; they mirror the human universe.*

*In Part I, therefore, I examine some contexts of quest: literary, philosophical, psychological, and geopolitical. I inquire, in Chapter 1, about the formal properties of quest as literature, its generic affiliations with myth, adventure, romance. In Chapter 2, I moot the question of the self, challenged now by sundry theories, and try to recover a pragmatic, a working concept of self, which sustains all our pursuits. Next, in Chapter 3, I review various motives of quest, those mysterious urgencies that impel men and women to far errands in the wilderness. But what is the politics of that "wilderness" now? This is the question I address in Chapter 4, address it in a world both planetized and tribalized, wherein powers, cultures, histories continually clash.*

*The contexts of quest, then, are also contexts of all human aspirations, and of the miseries to which we are heir in the postmodern world. Still, may not the idea of quest itself, personal quest in the face of high-tech genocide, hint at a larger destiny for our race? The hint, implicit in this first part, emerges, I hope, with ever greater insistence in *Selves at Risk*.*

## Chapter One

# Quest as a Literary Mode: The Forms of Quest

I distinguish in Literature a genre of major significance to me, which would include those works where the [bull's] horn is present in one form or another, where the author assumes the direct risk either of a confession or of a subversive work, a work in which the human condition is confronted directly or "taken by the horns". . . .

—Michel Leiris

W

1

HAT IS QUEST, and what forms does it take? Etymology leads to Latin *quaerere*, to ask or seek; and in English, meanings cluster around substantives like search, inquiry, inquest, expedition, pursuit, venture, chivalrous enterprise, and even the collection of alms. There is movement in the word, restlessness, the itch of want. There is a roving curiosity in some fabulous or emblematic space, seeking knowledge—knowledge of being, knowledge as being, some gnosis of a dangerous or ultimate kind. Yet uncertainty shadows quest. A self, often solitary, is at risk, and self-realization of the highest kind is the rare reward. But doubt and strain contend there, even when the effort becomes its own mystery, its own end or balm. How, then, define quest?

As always, definition proves elusive, asymptotic, insufficient to the mind's need. What possessed Captain Ahab, lured Sinbad the Sailor, drove the Wandering Jew? Was Odysseus or Alexander a leader, adventurer, seeker? And closer to our time, Lindbergh and Hemingway—were they merely celebrities or questers beyond fame?<sup>1</sup> What was Mishima, with his exorbitant desire for purity, when he says: "I gladly go to meet the messenger from the ends of the earth . . . and in the instant of my departure, I abandon everything that is comfortable and familiar"?<sup>2</sup> And T. E. Lawrence, who became bound to his desert myth like Prometheus to his rock?

In another day, quest may have been defined by its genre, the forms it takes; or if not defined, its ambiguities contained. But the idea of genre has become questionable, as has the concept of literature itself. This has prompted Alastair Fowler to claim that "variations in *paideia* mask a greater

difficulty in the concept of literature: namely, the instability of its generic structures."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such instability often permits "individual works [to] convey literary meaning."<sup>4</sup> But what happens when the instability becomes almost a norm, as it has become in the febrile, experimental clime of the last hundred years? How judge by genre?

Our moment seems congenial to "carnivalization," proliferating in parody and pastiche, paracriticism and paraliterature, crossings of every kind.<sup>5</sup> Canons open, definitions blur, margins shift, leaving no clear line between inside and outside, text and context. Deconstructive terms like "trace," "difference," "supplement," "remainder," "ornament," "parergon," and "hors d'oeuvre" contest all the binary concepts of the humanist tradition. Thus, in "The Law of Genre," Derrida argues for an "impurity" or "principle of contamination" lodged "within the heart of the law itself," making it a "mad law," even if madness fails to define it.<sup>6</sup>

How, then, engage contemporary quest as a literary mode, verbal construct? Perhaps by adverting briefly to its cognate historical types: myth, epic, and romance; the literature of travel and adventure; autobiography; conceivably the picaresque novel; certainly narratives of the American frontier; perhaps even the Sublime, transcending the human. Though these may not be clearly identifiable in postwar American quest — and are themselves impure genres — they help recall its provenance and transmutations, help reveal the particular energies of its evasive form. Thus, perhaps, may we gradually imagine, if not define, the mapless region of quest.

2

Quest reverts to myth which still pervades our social existence, informing our knowledge and arts. Originally, quests related to such narratives as the shamanistic flight, the hero's night journey, his search for ultimate knowledge. Later, these narratives provided the structures and archetypes of epic, romance, and picaresque, inspiring to this day the gothic novel, science fiction, the detective story, all manner of travel and action tales that find analogues in the great epics of the world.

We, of course, shun myth nowadays, preferring ideological "demystification." Yet myth inspired the masters of modernism, and impressed crucial thinkers — Nietzsche and Heidegger, for example — since Vico. Vico himself discovered the new historical science in the postulate that "the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters."<sup>7</sup> Myths were the "civil histories" of these primordial poets; "tropic speech" was their first speech; metaphor constituted "the primary operation of the human mind."<sup>8</sup> And "when the golden bough" of life was "torn from its trunk" another grew in its place because

nature thought poetically.<sup>9</sup> For Vico, then, mythopoiesis was the necessary angel, the indwelling power of history.

More than a century later, James Frazer offered, in *The Golden Bough*, a dramatic compendium of human destiny under the twin aspects of a dying and rising god; and the old masters of psychoanalysis — Freud, Jung, Rank, Roheim, Ferenczi, others — probed the archetypes of myth, dream, and art. At the same time, the magi of literary modernism found in myth a renewed sense of their world and word. Thomas Mann spoke for many when he said, in "Freud and the Future": "The myth is the foundation of life, the timeless *schema*, the pious formula into which life flows when it reproduces its traits out of the unconscious."<sup>10</sup> A literary theory of myth would later follow, propounded by such diverse critics as Joseph Campbell, Philip Wheelwright, Leslie Fiedler, and Northrop Frye. "And so it was," writes Campbell, "that . . . the old horizons were dissolved and the center of gravity of all learning shifted from the little areas of local pride to a broad science of man himself in his new and single world."<sup>11</sup> In this "broad science," or rather, in this mythic tapestry, we can pick out the brilliant thread of quest.

The thread runs through Campbell's classic work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Though Campbell knows that "no final system of interpretation" can apply to myth, he proposes a pattern, a "monomyth," of separation, initiation, return: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."<sup>12</sup> It is this "mysterious adventure" that also bears the name of quest, a journey inward as well as outward — there are parallels between heroes, artists, and mystics — a perilous journey of attainment and re-cognition. Finally, the hero and his daemon become one. "The two . . . are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world. The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known."<sup>13</sup> This knowledge is at once sacred and profane — spiritual, oneiric, erotic, martial — a knowledge of at-onement within the great cosmogonic cycle.

In the ancient epics, those closest to the primary vision of myth, quest and adventure are indeed inextricable, inextricable like life and death. In the *Gilgamesh*, for instance, the titular hero, one-third man and two-thirds god, strives mightily to attain everlasting life, only to fail when a serpent steals from him the sweet flower of immortality. Beauty, strength, fame will not suffice, though Gilgamesh possesses them all in supreme measure; nor wisdom even, if it cannot bring the conquest of death. In despair he

Utnapishtim, the only man to escape the Flood and achieve immortality:

Why should not my cheeks be starved and my face drawn? Despair is in my heart and my face is the face of one who has made a long journey. . . . Enkidu, my brother whom I had loved, the end of mortality has overtaken him. I wept for him seven days and nights till the worm fastened on him. . . . For this I have wandered over the world, I have crossed many difficult ranges, I have crossed the seas, I have wearied myself with travelling; my joints are aching, and I have lost acquaintance with sleep which is sweet. . . . I have killed the bear and the hyena, the lion and panther, the tiger, the stag and the ibex, all sorts of wild game and the small creatures of the pastures. . . . Oh, father Utnapishtim, you who have entered the assembly of the gods, I wish to question you concerning the living and the dead, how shall I find the life for which I am searching?<sup>14</sup>

The epic hero ventures, suffers, overcomes; but death, or rather a deep knowledge of something beyond life or death, seems always the true object of his quest. His heroic self aspires to what is not itself, yet often remains entrapped in fame, glory, just another version of the self.

Adventure, I have said, is essential to epic quests, though raw action is seldom their goal. The *Gilgamesh* begins: "I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh. This was the man to whom all things were known; this was the king who knew the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labour, returning he rested, he engraved on a stone the whole story."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Gilgamesh is a gnostic of love, history, nature, and dream, and epic writer no less than warrior or king.

In the most resonant quests or adventures, then, we find a spiritual element, an ontic affirmation, an urge first to transgress, then to restore the order of Creation in pure moments of being. As Paul Zweig luminously remarks: "The gleams of intensity which invest . . . [such moments] have an otherworldly quality, as if a man's duel with risk were not a 'vacation' at all, but a plunge into essential experience. . . . Adventure stories transpose our dalliance with risk into a sustained vision."<sup>16</sup> The vision can be demonic; for the true mythic quester predates the ordinary hero, standing outside the circle of social obligations. He offers us the disturbing "spectacle of the self-determined man who defends not us, but himself. His inner destiny is his law. He reclaims for man an area of the forbidden ground."<sup>17</sup> He conquers the underworld because he contains it in part; the problem is inserting him into a human world, into society, a problem persisting to our day.

All this may suggest an archetypal pattern, though archetypes, like

myths, now seem suspect, without ontological, without even psychological, ground. Yet their historic weight presses on us all, and their exemplary recurrence in the world's literature is what we call *tradition*, perpetuated by readers and writers as they attend continually to compelling forms of their past. That is why Eliot adverts in *The Waste Land*—is it not our modern epic?—to Jessie Weston's work on the Grail. That is also why Jessie Weston herself concludes:

The Grail story is not *du fond en comble* the product of imagination, literary or popular. At its root lies the record, more or less distorted, of an ancient Ritual, having for its ultimate object the initiation into the secret of the sources of life, physical and spiritual. . . . The study and the criticism of the Grail literature will possess an even deeper interest, a more absorbing fascination, when it is definitely recognized that we possess in that literature a unique example of the restatement of an ancient and august Ritual in terms of imperishable Romance.<sup>18</sup>

Origins and influences aside, literature lives on fathomless interactions with its verbal past. Weston's "imperishable Romance" becomes for Northrop Frye a great order of literature in which "romance, tragedy, irony, and comedy are episodes in a total quest-myth."<sup>19</sup> Frye, we know, articulates this "total quest-myth" into cycles of Comedy (Spring), Romance (Summer), Tragedy (Autumn), and Irony (Winter), and identifies its protagonist, in declining order, as the divine hero of myth, the human hero of epic or romance, the *alazon* or *miles gloriosus* of tragedy, the *eiron* of comedy, and the *pharmakos* or victim of farce and satire.

But the erudite taxonomy of Frye concerns us less than his perception of quest-romance as central to both the formal and historical schemes of literature. For Frye, "quest-romance has analogies to both rituals and dreams. . . . Translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain the reality. . . . Translated into ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land."<sup>20</sup> Episodic in structure, because adventure is intrinsic to its plot, quest takes naturally a sequential or processional form. Four phases mark the hero's journey: *agon* or conflict, *pathos* or death struggle, *sparagmos* or (provisional) dismemberment, and *anagnorisis* or recognition of a newborn world. The enemy—giant, behemoth, leviathan—is a demonic power, associated with winter, darkness, sterility, the old world of sin and death. These motifs of quest command us because "they impart the mysterious rapport with nature that so often marks the central figure of romance," because they enact "a greater degree of metaphorical identification," because they recount the essential dialectic of existence, which sometimes "means that