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“FULL DISCLOSURE”

OR

A MEMOIR BY REED WHITTEMORE,

***AGAINST THE GRAIN:
THE LITERARY LIFE OF A POET***

Someone in authority should probably pass a law immediately prohibiting a person like me—or not like me, but *me*—from writing about this book, which I’m happy to say will be appearing in October from <http://www.dryadpress.com/> Dryad Press.

The reasons such a law should be enacted are two—*mainly*.

The first goes something like this: I’ve now finished reading Whittemore’s memoir and find it wondrous, superb, stupendous, invaluable, extraordinary, wholly delightful—and also very, very melancholy, sorrowful, even overwhelmingly sad. It has made me more contemplative than I’ve been for a long time, perhaps in good part because of the powerful contrast between reading *it* and doing what I’ve more *generally* been doing for the past many, many, months—namely, writing rants and rages and then more rants and rages, all despairing of the future, cursing the present, and wishing with a miserable intensity that we were all living in a completely different and better time than we are, and one with far, far better future prospects than *this* one has.

So that’s *one* reason: I’ve been slaving too hard for too long, trying feverishly to build up my little crumbling dams against the rising and vile waters of Bush-era muck, treason, depravity, squalor, crime, animal corruption and greed—I’ve been doing *that*, and so I’m soiled, sweaty, and tainted by the stink of my dreadful subject, the subject that’s everywhere, like the very air, all around us.

And then along comes Reed Whittemore’s memoir, and I don’t feel *prepared* for it. I don’t feel *fit* for it. I ought to shower and scrub, soap up and rinse off, change into a

fresh shirt and clean socks. There's the book, poised and fresh and clean, almost *towering* with a clear-headed modesty and candor, calm-voiced plainness, quiet insight, thoughtfulness and *honesty*.

It's the beauty and I'm the beast. I love the book.

All right, so that's *one* problem. Another—bigger—is that I *know* Reed Whittemore. It's true that I haven't seen him for a great many years—last time was lunch one day in the hot summer of 1988—but I *know* him. It so happens that I was born and raised in Northfield, Minnesota (West Tree in my own books). That's where Carleton College is. And Carleton College—to its immense good fortune—is where Reed Whittemore taught in the English department from 1947 (when I was six) until 1966 (when I was twenty-five).

On top of that, not only was I a townie but I also *went* to Carleton, starting in 1959 and ending the typical four years later. But it gets worse. I was, besides all that, also a Carleton faculty brat—and my bratitude was due to having a father in the *English* department. You can probably imagine what that meant. Among other things, it meant that, in the years between about 1957 and 1965 or so, I was near-countless times in attendance at faculty (mainly English dept) gatherings, picnics, cocktail parties, and the like—in attendance a lot of times because these affairs took place in the house where I myself lived, but also, later on, because I, too—a kind of token young person—had been invited myself.

One way or the other, over all those years, on the floor in the dark at the top of the stairs or standing out in the open with a glass in my hand along with actual grownups—either way, I watched and watched, listened and listened, soaked up, drank in, stored away every impression and hint and word and idea and sound and image that I conceivably could.

I got, I'd say, something along the lines of fifty percent of my undergraduate education that way. At least. That crowd of people—the “English Department” but not *only* them—was smart, colorful, energetic, gifted, intelligent, resourceful, dedicated, witty, amusing, *and* they drank a lot. The more they drank, the more I learned. Later on, the more they drank, the more *I* drank. And then the learning rate doubled, tripled, kept on going.

Of everyone I knew who was involved in the Carleton of those years, the most appealing, alluring, and dashing, the wittiest and smartest and handsomest, the most amusing and subtle and sensitive and deep and—well, the most enviable, desirable, and wonderful—were the Whittemores.



And so somebody should pass that law, the one I mentioned. But, on the other hand, forget it. It's too late anyway. I've already written what I've written. And I'm pretty sure I'm going to write more.

A lot of what's in *Against the Grain* I already knew before I read the book, but not all of it, by a long shot. I had no idea that R¹ flew around in a Cessna light plane during his first years at Carleton—and I'm sure *he* had no idea that I, likely as not, was watching him from the front yard of the farmhouse I lived in north of town and west of the little Stanton airport. I *did* know that R's beautiful wife, Helen, had been a student at Carleton in those years and that that was the circumstance of the couple's meeting. But I *didn't* know that Helen was “not taking any class of R's” *or* that the immediate cause of the meeting was that “at a student-faculty party she stole R's pork-pie hat.” (Or that he “gave her a ride in his Cessna 170.”)

And there's another thing that R may not have known also. In his 1959 volume, <http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=Whittemore&sts=t&tn=The+Self-Made+Man&x=57&y=10> *The Self-Made Man*, appeared the gorgeous, melancholy, tone-perfect, gem of a poem, “The High School Band in September.”

On warm days in September the high school band
Is up with the birds and marches along our street,
Boom boom,
To a field where it goes boom boom until eight forty-five
When it marches, as in the old rhyme, back, boom boom,
To its study halls, leaving our street
Empty except for the leaves that descend,
to no drum
And lie still.
In September
A great many high school bands beat a great many drums,
And the silences after their partings are very deep.

What R may not have known (and why would he) was that hidden among the members of that band marching along his street and heading for the field was I, me, Eric Larsen. And I? What I didn't know (how could I) was that R was right then at work in his writing studio up above the garage, bringing into existence what's doubtless the most wonderful poem the world has ever known—and ever will, most likely—about high school bands.



¹ First off, Whittemore says, in his Preface: “Call him R. I do, in this literary memoir of Reed Whittemore. . .” So I'm going to do as instructed and call him “R.” Even now, as a man of 65, I don't find it easy to address him as Reed. And certainly it's far out of the question to use “Mr. Whittemore,” the way all students at Carleton in my years ritually and expectedly did. Even I, inveterate disliker of the premature use of first names, know that *that's* too stiff. I'm really grateful for “R.”

I knew that in 1939, when he was still a sophomore at Yale, R and others had started up the famous little magazine <http://webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/beinecke.FURIOSO.con.html> *Furioso*, and I—who as a sophomore scarcely knew what a little magazine *was*—considered this fact to be yet another validation of R’s eastern sophistication, precocity, poise, achievement, and dash. I now know, thanks to the memoir, a whole lot more about *Furioso* and its origins than I knew then, including the part that the ever-energetic http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Jesus_Angleton#Early_life Jim Angleton played in it and just exactly how it came about that Issue No. 1 (“the cover dominated by the zany figure, designed by Graham Peck, that became the guiding spirit of *Furioso*”) had contributions in it from Archibald Macleish, William Carlos Williams, Dudley Fitts, E. E. Cummings, Richard Eberhart, James Laughlin, and Ezra Pound himself.

Some things I knew and some I didn’t. I didn’t know, example, that R had been in the army for a considerable period of time during WWII. Nor did I know that “on the parade ground” R had trouble because he “couldn’t shout as a leader was supposed to,” with the result that readers today are lucky enough to have in store for them a great many paragraphs filled with R’s typical skillful combinations of seriousness, drollery, quickness, and wit:

[R’s] earnest Saturday morning training officer tried and tried to help him cope with the squad in ways that the squad could hear, but R wasn’t ready to be helped. Finally the officer—so R liked to think years later—actually cried. Was R not a Yale man? He was, but that was incidental on the parade ground. On the parade ground one was expected to cope even if one couldn’t. How, then, did R do this? He quickly picked up scarlet fever.



But in reading this memoir, along with all its other treasures and pleasures—and its most, most grave sorrows, as in the simply pitiable death of Helen and R’s son Jack—I found something that I already knew very well and had known for some considerable time—namely, that R’s part in shaping, preserving, and defining both the *literary* and the *idea* of the literary in America over the past sixty years is a part that’s major, unique, and invaluable.

He has always been modest and yet also vitally ambitious, and this is because he understood instinctively and accurately—and all his life honed and honed and honed this understanding—just what the relation *is* between the great and the small in American literature. The same may be true in any twentieth-century literature (Irish, certainly), but it is especially and essentially true in American. And R is an *American* poet, an *American* thinker, an *American* writer—and I only wish that all America, particularly now, as it loses its bearings possibly for keeps, would understand these facts and qualities about him and turn to him as the indispensable model and achiever of the very, very best of what’s *literary* in America.

The very word itself, “literary,” has a poor and faded, even a scorned, reputation these days, and this is because the “literary” is now associated, incorrectly and mistakenly, with activities and achievements in life of a kind that don’t have anything practical to do with improvements in the economy, say, or social justice, or civil rights, or fair taxation, or ending war.

Nonsense, I say. What’s truly literary not only helps *make* people alive so that they *can* improve their world, but it does this in very great part by showing, emblemizing—and creating things out of—the real, true, *actual* relationship between the individual tiny self and the great enormous world. Between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Like, say, in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

But the vital pattern or relationship is necessary and true not *only* in the dizziest heights of Renaissance drama, but it’s just as necessary and true—though it may be drawn to a scale far smaller—in American literature, and certainly also in twentieth-century American literature, with examples in William Carlos Williams, or Sherwood Anderson, or Willa Cather, or E. E. Cummings—or Reed Whittemore.

This understanding, whether it be aesthetic or philosophic—this understanding of the *real* relationship between the self and the world, a relationship in which *no falsification of either one can or will be permitted*—this understanding allows great range and great expression in those gifted enough to see it and dedicated enough to work and work and work at getting it *right*.

I think of the stories of Sherwood Anderson, for example, the *good* ones. Ignored or even maligned today by those who have no understanding of the relationship we’re talking about and therefore little or no understanding either of the self *or* of the world, the stories of Anderson that are successful—“The Egg,” for example—are all at one time modest, amusing, and towering in their reach.

It’s that way with Reed Whittemore, and it has been that way with him and his work through all his adult, poetic, and productive life. He knows the relationship. And because he knows it—and *knows* his self—he is free from the devil’s lure of falsification, or aggrandizement, or hyperbole, or all the sins of the false front. Among many other things, this means that he can have and take the freedom to be *funny*. Here he is, early in the chapter of the memoir called “Wartime”:

More data. He was near-sighted but wore no glasses. He had a medium-grade mind and managed to mix intellectual modesty with sudden arrogance. He was not cut out to be a mathematician, a philosopher or a teetotaler, and some of his best friends were as commonplace as he. He preferred to think of himself as a genuine rebel yet couldn’t help being polite. Also he was remarkably unobservant, had a poor memory and slept too much.

May we add to this passage of self-confidence (self-confidence of the kind, being authentic and based on the real, that truly matters) and amusing self-deprecation that R

was also handsome as a dog, sharp as a tack, quick as a wink, funny as a crutch, sensitive, modest, subtle, and perceptive.

The confidence that comes from knowing that the self is the self and the world is the world allows for all manner of continued exploration of how the two are actually related—and for fine expression of what’s discovered, whether in emotion or in meaning or both, as a result.

Look, for example, at this, the first of “Three Poems to Jackson” from <http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=Whittemore&sts=t&tn=The+Boy+from+Iowa&x=55&y=16> *The Boy from Iowa* (1962). As you read it—as you have that pleasure and as you *take* that pleasure—keep thinking about the personal and the universal, the little and the big, the self and the cosmos, now and antiquity. And see what you find:

Darkness comes early, stays late
 In my winter country; the frost
 Goes four feet down; trees are like sticks;
 A light snow lingers
 For a month or two, getting dirty. I write every day
 But throw much away.

My third book will appear in the spring, a small book,
 A slight book,
 Containing no plays or long narrative poems,
 Borrowing hardly at all from the Middle Ages,
 Making few affirmations, avoiding inversions,
 Using iambic distrustfully, favoring lines
 Of odd lengths and irony.

I am forty.

I seem to know the dimensions of what I can do
 And the season to do it in.
 Give me a few more winters like this one, and spring—
 Or the thought of spring—
 Will cease to be a disturbance, and I’ll be
 Solid,
 Jackson.

And so? What *do* you find? Well, one thing—among many—is that *they’re all there*. After all, look, the personal is definitely there (though not the saccharine or the confessional), but it’s put, right off the bat, in the context of the cosmic, almost like twin stars in orbit around one another. The darkness, the cold, the freezing, the amazing depth of the frost that comes from the tilt of the earth and the indirectness of light from the sun—and then comes “I.” But look *how* it comes! Watch closely: the “snow lingers / For a month or two, getting dirty. I write every day. . .” There could have been a line break after dirty—and probably *would* have been in a lesser poet, one who wasn’t thinking or wasn’t feeling with and within the real subject, that ever-present relationship between the individual and the cosmic. And so “dirty” is followed by “I.” The cosmos brings the

snow, the snow is trapped by the winter and grows old; and the “I” then “[writes] every day,” just as the earth turns every day, but, just as does the earth—with its endless cycles of birth and death, sprouting and decaying—“[I] throw much away.”

You can do the rest for yourself, look closely and find more of the little and the big, the self and the cosmos, the now and the ancient, the eternal and the transient. And that’s not even to *mention* the relationship—this one the same in kind as the others—between the profound and the jauntily amusing.

This is the way—these are the ways and the creations—of the real literary mind and of the real literary self. Look at one more example (and then find for yourself all the relationships and the riches). These are the first two stanzas from “Out of My Study Window,” again from back in 1959 and

<http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=Whittemore&sts=t&tn=The+Self-Made+Man&x=57&y=10> *The Self-Made Man*:

It is late afternoon. Out of my study window
The icicles lengthen, the sun descends, and the world
I am left in, lined with unpainted plaster,
Begins to resemble a cave in a dirty glacier.
I was in such a cave once, in Switzerland. Now, feeling ill,
I remember only that in it I got a chill
And sneezed my way the length of the Rhine thereafter.

In a few minutes friends will be coming for cocktails. The chatter
Of cigaret smoke and alcohol
Will warm us up some; darkness will hide the icicles;
And perhaps if the fire is hot and the lights are bright
And someone has news about someone we all dislike,
The evening will pass without thought of what is the matter
With all of us, burrowing here in our winter hole.



The last two sentences of R’s fifth chapter, “War’s End and Home,” are these:

Well, at least the war had given him two dozen or so poems and also the
illustrator, PFC

http://www.parsons.edu/faculty_and_staff/faculty_details.aspx?dID=80&sdID=106&pType=1&id=3911 Irwin Touster, for

<http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=Whittemore&sts=t&tn=Heroes+and+Heroines&x=0&y=0> his first book. It had also begun shaping the questions about poetry that he would be preoccupied with over the years ahead, two big ones for starters: what did it mean to be a poet and what was poetry’s *use* anyway.

Those two big questions are only the more interesting in light of another sentence that R wrote. This one was all the way back at Yale, after he’d been recounting some of

his correspondence—about poetry—with Richard Eberhart. The sentence says, “It was a heady literary time.”

And there you are—another manifestation of R’s lifelong awareness of the small and the large, the self and the world, and his lifelong concern with the right—I myself have said *literary*, though it’s not the only possible word—relationship between the two. In “Wartime,” not unexpectedly, he’d written, “The self as subject in poetry is one that has preoccupied him like most other American poets.” And he added: “It’s a subject I will return to.”

In one way or another, it’s the great subject he did return to, for his whole career. And, given the particular complexities of R’s ideas of and about poetry and the self vis a vis the world, it’s a subject that became and remained inseparably related to another great subject for R, and that’s the subject, or the *fact*, of satire. It turned out, early on, that satire was one of the things poetry was *for*. In his sixth chapter, “History and *Furioso* Redux,” R wrote:

Clearly *Furioso*’s radicalism—if it was that—was directed locally, at institutions within the ken of a few Vets new to civilization as practiced in their neighborhood. Whether they were or were not serious was not a question to be answered simply—and R would worry that word “serious” for some years, even reaching the point of writing an essay in the mid-50s, “But Seriously,” in which he argued about how to be serious his way—that is, as a social-political satirist—and not merely clever.”

I remember that essay probably more vividly than any other of R’s many essays—and over the past forty-five years I’m sure that I’ve referred to it, or have referred *others* to it, more times than I could count (seriously). In classroom after classroom or conversation after conversation or review after review, that essay’s importance came up again and again—with its argument that the serious and the comic aren’t separate from one another, shouldn’t have to be, and in many cases *can’t* be.² R himself makes the case again, in brief form, following the quote above beginning with “*Furioso*’s radicalism.” Important names arise as examples, including Swift, Dryden, and Auden. Shakespeare ought to be there too (and he is, later on in the book).

Later, in a passage about R’s then-colleague http://reading.cornell.edu/reading_project_06/gatsby/mizener.htm Arthur Mizener (chapter 7, “Out in Minnesota”), the importance of the whole idea comes up again, along with its relevance to poetics, life, and self.

Arthur kept his own life off to the side of his poetry, but his feelings were never missing. They were steadily addressed to the sad state down below of the moral, political, aesthetic world he was born to. Shakespeare had helped here. Arthur had taught the plays for years, and had brought their wonderful dealings with the down-below state to R, in and out of class. He was full of quotes from

² Traces of the subject even found their way into *A Nation Gone Blind*. You <http://www.ericlarsen.net/occasionforthought4.2.2007.html> can read an example here if you like.

the plays, with the quotes tending to be messages that recommended *Looking Below* and *Not Faking It*. When he took on his biography of Scott Fitzgerald, <http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=mizener&sts=t&tn=the+far+side+of+paradise&x=0&y=0> *The Far Side of Paradise*, his steady theme about the man was that he was knowing about himself and, though a thorough romantic, was *not* a faker. And partly because of Arthur's influence R's wartime literary sonnets broadcast, in their ironic way, such a credo. So, eventually, did R's performance in class.

I never took a class from R (though I *did* take six credits of independent study with him), but I know well indeed that he was *not* a faker—and I know well indeed, too, that the same was also true not only in the classroom, but also in the poetry *and* in the man.

So humble a “credo” as this one—that a man or a poet be *not* a faker—may *seem* simple, plain, obvious, and of little real import or weight. In actuality, though, it governs, supports, and informs true enormities when it's held—both seriously *and* honestly—by one whose work and thought and existence take place inside a *general* culture that in a great many if not *most* ways *is* a faker.

R remained ever-conscious of the correspondent relationship between the little-big, as I talked about earlier, but there was always another dimension to that consciousness, or perhaps what you could call a variable. That variable is that R, like almost any *genuinely* honest observer and thinker in America between WWII and now, couldn't ignore the trouble caused by the corruption of one sort and another taking place not initially in the “little” but certainly in the “big.” Taking place, that is, not in the self, at least not at first, but in the institutions inside which that self *lives*.

One such institution is academia, where R spent a very great part of his life (thank god for me, I might add). In his eighth chapter (“Poetry and the *Miscellany*”), he quotes himself at some length, citing from a piece that began as a 1962 lecture and that was called “The Alienated Poet Insists.” It has to do with the poet and the institution of the academy, and it came about, R tells us, because “He worried about being Don Quixote reveling in his apartness from society while at the same time claiming, like Shelley, that poetry is the unacknowledged legislator of the world.” *Was* the relationship between writer and institution both a real and an honest one?

Poetry [R quotes from the lecture] has not been flexible, comprehensive, and farseeing, though poets have wanted it to be. Mr. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conrad_Aiken [Conrad] Aiken has expressed the ideal, not the fact of our art, and this is a distinction that poets and institutions have collaborated upon in our time to blur. Our benevolent institutions have created a refuge from comprehensiveness, farseeingness; and the artists have jumped at it. Only the rare poet nowadays thinks of his art as an adjunct to anything; it is the whole hog. And the institutions with which he allies himself either agree with him or are willing to go along with him by providing conditions under which he can think it is the whole hog. The critics, meanwhile, safely ensconced in their halls of graduate studies, strengthen the poet's notion of self-

sufficiency by churning out grand new doctrines of self-sufficiency. . . . It is also easier for the poet than for the playwright or novelist to ply his trade in the isolation of Yale and Yaddo without ever thinking about anything but his art. Perhaps this very ease has been the chief cause of the present conspiracy between critics and poets, a conspiracy to kill poetry by making it free, free of the culture, the world.

Being killed with kindness, you might say, a situation that leads to the dust and dry-rot of academic writing, or of writing *in* academia. It would take enormous vigilance and strength for such a writer to survive, and R knew it all along, and he struggled with that knowledge. “These themes,” he writes, “—the poet’s isolation from culture, and the complicity of institutions that give safe harbor to poets and critics where they can live apart from, rather than be *a part of* [emphasis in original], the American culture—were ones that R sounded in poems and in essays and reviews.” The struggle, he adds, “meant doing more than just writing poetry or writing about poetry—it meant going against the current of conventional ideas intellectual and otherwise, often in writing and even in the publishing of his work.”

But the going would get tougher. In “The Return East” (chapter 10), R reiterates the academia-problem, saying that “At least, schools and teaching were things R felt he knew about and certainly had definite opinions on, especially the way that English Departments had been managing to isolate themselves from American culture.” But what happens when even *larger* institutions go bad, spoil the little-big relationship, and begin to “kill” poetry and literature?

Vietnam came, for example, though plenty else had also come before it. R reprints a wonderful http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Nemerov Howard Nemerov poem, “On Being Asked for a Peace Poem,” and remarks that “The quality of Nemerov’s poem that seems relevant here is the anger in it, and contempt.” The poem, apparently, isn’t entirely typical, since, as R points out, Nemerov was normally reserved,” a quality shared only in part by R: “R could agree with his [Nemerov’s] aloofness part of the time, but he kept being troubled by activist urges telling him what poetry might modestly at least *try* to do and be” [emphasis in original]. And at this point we’re introduced to the increasingly serious breaking up of the relationship between the small and the big. R writes that

Though he was still full of the problem forty years later (2005) he had by then at last learned that poetry’s practical worldly functions, never great, had been so drastically reduced by power-hungry modern entities such as social science, Madison Avenue, radio and TV, that any poor versifying fool who thought to use his art for world-saving purposes was out of date, unless. . . .

Readers will find out for themselves what that suggestive “unless. . . .” leads to, although I will let myself add that it leads nowhere very far from the path that R has followed so far. In fact, my own part in this matter is pretty much finished, I think, and it’s near time for me to end. R continues to explore and ponder the relation of self to institution (and vice versa) in various ways and places, by becoming Poetry Consultant to

the Library of Congress, afterward literary editor of *The New Republic*, then a faculty member at the University of Maryland, even making a cultural good-will trip to Russia. Those who are going to read this wonderful book for themselves certainly don't need me as guide of any sort, and I feel a bit grudging about giving any more of a tour than I already have to those who *aren't* going to read it. But I *will* follow R to Houston, Texas, and then bid farewell.

In the fall of the troubled war-year of 1968—a year that had also seen the assassination of Martin Luther King—the National Council of Teachers of English invited twelve poets to its convention in Houston, proposing that they be part of a “Festival of Contemporary Poetry.” “The others,” R writes, included Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Donald Hall, Galway Kinnell, Carolyn Kizer, W.S. Merwin, Josephine Miles, Gary Snyder, May Swenson, and William Stafford.”

Quoting from an article that William Stafford later wrote about the festival, R lets us know that Richard Eberhart led things off with a speech whose

general drift had been that poetry draws on the well-springs of life and that we should all accommodate to various kinds of poetry, and be happy to bring students into such a rich heritage.

At speech's end, the “fireworks,” as R calls them, began. Stafford:

“Not at all!”—from the front row. And—alive and kicking—the assembled ingredients went critical. Robert Bly did not accept easily some kinds of poetry. Further, he contended that poets and all others present should never blur immediate first issues that their society faced—namely, for the American people, the war in Viet Nam.

Later, R himself gave a lecture about the festival, called “Poetry and the Skinner Box” because the event had been “a significant one in which they [the poets] broke out of that box as R called it where they were expected to perform as it [the NCTE festival] was set up.”

Some of us rose to complain about the Eberhart speech. He had maligned the sternness and integrity of poetry, we said, making it a namby-pamby all-around good thing like Wheaties and democracy. And others of us rose shouting to say that we should each be allowed to read an introductory poem to the big audience before being shipped off to smaller rooms. We were eloquent and loud. The teachers were fascinated. In half an hour our dozen, with Eberhart concurring, had formed a team to fight the Establishment.

R's next paragraph admits that something fresh and good had happened:

We reorganized our own program. Then we performed in gangs for the rest of the day. We not only read poems but also talked and talked about Vietnam and dirty words and teaching. . . It was a breath of fresh air. English-teacher meetings are not known for their fresh air.”

I'm sure it *was* a “breath of fresh air,” and I'm also sure that it was the beginning of a long stretch of changes and events that have finally ended up dumping us where we are now, in early September 2007, with the republic itself not only at grave risk for its survival but, in the eyes of many, already dead.

But that isn't our subject here and now. *That* subject is Reed Whittlemore. And so I'm going to quote the paragraph immediately following the last one quoted. It's fascinating, revelatory, and—strange as it may seem for me to say—simultaneously reassuring and an unhappy reminder of our present woes and losses.

“Though R had his disagreements with the Beats,” it begins,

It was they he acknowledged who had taken poetry out of its private place. “The revolution that took place [began] with the poem “Howl” at its center. . . . It left us with engaged poets preaching disengagement, poets with an audience, with public-speaking obligations, shouting down the public.” Though the affair during those two days [in Houston] changed things forever, wrote R, still from his perspective it “was mixed with doubt. . . the uneasiness of preaching the virtues of self and the spontaneous, free shopping life, while remembering urgently the hell of self, and the hell of always asserting the self, which has been the poet's special hell in our time. . . . I am upset as much as pleased by Houston. I still don't know what to make of it.”

What's reassuring is that R is still *thinking*, and not only just that he's still thinking, but that he's still thinking like a *poet*, he's still a *literary* thinker. The relationship between one thing and another that we talked about many pages back, between the small and the big, the self and the cosmos—whether the cosmos be political or metaphysical—that relationship is still there for R, it's still important, it still preoccupies him, and *it's not simple*.

In short, R remained literary in an age—the one I call The Age of Simplification—when very, very few others did. Or he did so in an age when very, very few others were *able* to remain literary, or understood *how* to remain literary, *why* to remain so, or—worst of all—understood or had the least inkling of the enormities that were destined to be lost in the aftermath of their failure to remain literary, no idea of the intellectual and aesthetic powers and strengths and delights that would first be unattended to, would then go un nourished, and then would up and die, to be replaced by the cheap, pseudo-politicized, pre-fabricated “imitation-think” that passes now for what most publishers publish and that passes for “content” in the wretched and diminished humanities classrooms of those for whom all thought, and certainly all *literary* thought, can and must occur in and through and about only those four meager and simple-minded replacements for the entirety of human life and art and experience, the four airless little rooms of race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

R remains a great treasure in a country that seldom knew well *enough* how to understand him and therefore to value and laud him, and that now hardly knows how to do so at all and that doesn't even *know* that it doesn't know.

So that's the unhappy part, knowing that another R isn't likely to come along any time soon, making one wish only that we could, forever, keep the one we've got.

"Now it is 2007," Whittemore writes near the end of the book,

and R is on his way to 88. All his old literary comrades are long gone. Arthur Mizener (1977), Allen Tate (1979), Jim Angleton (1987), John Pauker (1991), Howard Nemerov (1992), Bill Johnson (2007). At the moment he's not looking for a grand exit but simply for a way to end this memoir.

And, take it from me, he ended it the right way. And that was—how? I'm not about to tell you. What you ought to do is get hold of the book, post-haste, and experience that particular and inimitable treasure for yourself.

Eric Larsen
September 2, 2007