Hip Sublime

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In a 1964 panel discussion with fellow poets Gary Snyder and Lew Welch, subsequently published as *On Bread and Poetry*, Philip Whalen characterizes himself as a “poet like Homer was a poet, or like Ben Jonson,” then compares himself to Callimachus (Snyder, Welch, and Whalen 1977, 18). Whalen’s poetic affinities here reflect his historical and cultural milieu in the United States of the mid-twentieth century and his general interest in and knowledge of classical culture. Whalen, associated with the San Francisco Renaissance, is known primarily as a Beat generation poet. A participant in the 6 Gallery reading in San Francisco in 1955, he joined East and West Coast poets to create an originary moment for a bicoastal Beat Movement, with Kenneth Rexroth presiding as master of ceremonies. As one of the Beat avant-garde who called into question Western values after World War II, he looked instead to Eastern philosophies and religion, especially Zen Buddhism. However, through his poetic influences and poetry, he demonstrates an extensive knowledge and firm grounding in Western literary and philosophical traditions, including classical Greek and Latin authors. This essay will view Whalen’s relation to the classics through his historical context and in conversation with his poetic predecessors as well as contemporaries, his attitude being at times superficial, at times knowledgeable, and ultimately critical. Under the influence of Bud-

1. Donald Allen in his *New American Poetry* anthology (1960) categorized Whalen along with Gary Snyder and Michael McClure as having no geographical location in contrast to Beat, San Francisco Renaissance, or New York School writers.
dhism, he would eventually come to the conclusion that there had to be a synthesis or melding of Western and Eastern cultures.

Born in 1923, Whalen came from a working-class background. He was raised in The Dalles, a small town in Oregon on the banks of the Columbia, upriver from Portland, served in the army Air Corps during World War II, then attended Reed College on the GI Bill from 1946 to 1951. At Reed, a selective liberal arts college in Portland where he met fellow poets Gary Snyder and Lew Welch, he studied the humanities, concentrating in creative writing and literature. Students were required to take Humanities 11 and 12 during their freshman year, from which they would have gotten a solid grounding in the classics as the fall semester was devoted primarily to Greek and Latin texts, the time frame of the class extending from Egypt to the Byzantine Empire. Humanities 11 used Michael Rostovtzeff’s 1930 two-volume *A History of the Ancient World*, along with selections from the *Odyssey*, *Thucydides*, *Aristotle*, *Herodotus*, *Aeschylus*, *Pericles*, *Plutarch*, *Sophocles*, *Euripides*, *Aristophanes*, *Demosthenes*, *Isocrates*, *Plato*, *Theophrastus*, *Plautus*, *Tertence*, *Polybius*, *Lucretius*, *Cicero*, *Virgil*, *Horace*, *Juvenal*, *Lucian*, and *Marcus Aurelius*, as well as Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

Despite this background, Whalen was similar to those classics enthusiasts called out by W. H. Auden in his introduction to *The Portable Greek Reader*, a volume possibly familiar to Whalen. Auden claims that the classics are an endangered species: “The days when classical studies were the core of higher learning have now passed and are not likely in any future we can envisage, to return. The educated man of today and tomorrow can read neither Latin nor Greek” (Auden 1948, 3). Whalen appears to be one of those “educated men” with a superficial knowledge of the classics because in his 1956 poem, “The Slop Barrel: Slices of the Paideuma for All Sentient Beings,” the poem’s speaker states, “Now let’s regret things for a while / That you can’t read music / That I never learned Classical languages” (2007, 90–92).

However, Whalen’s numerous allusions to classical literature and myth, along with his use of Greek and Latin phrases, indicate his wide reading in the classics and his overall knowledge, expanded on from his freshman-year coursework. In “Since You Ask Me,” the press release for a poetry tour he

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2. For further biographical information, see Falk’s (2007) Philip Whalen entry in *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature.*

3. Note that most of these readings were excerpts rather than complete texts. References to the 1946 Reed College Humanities 11A/12A syllabus are courtesy of Special Collections, Eric V. Hauser Memorial Library, Reed College, Portland, Oregon.

4. Whalen may have seen this book in Charles Olson’s library when he visited Olson on an East Coast poetry reading tour with Michael McClure in 1959. See Maud 1996, 292.
made in 1959, and included as a prose poem in his 1960 volume, *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age*, he likens himself to Dr. Samuel Johnson in taking on the title of doctor or teacher, one who is “constantly studying.” He adds, “I do not put down the academy but have assumed its function in my own person, and in the strictest sense of the word—*academy*: a walking grove of trees” (Whalen 2007, 8–10). This seems a somewhat oblique reference, but for those familiar with Greek classics, recalls the olive grove owned by Academus, reputed to be the site of Plato’s Academy.5 In this brief description of his poetic and pedagogic mission, Whalen indicates his interest in not only the British neoclassical tradition (Samuel Johnson), but the classical itself, as well as demonstrating the essentially didactic nature of his poetry. In this regard, in an interview of 1992 with Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling, he notes that his work is “supposed to encourage you to learn things. . . . If nowhere else then just in what I’d written, to see what I was talking about . . . where Samuel Johnson said this or that, or Democritus, or Shakespeare” (Whalen 1994, 230–31).6 In Whalen’s letter of June 28, 1958, to fellow poet Charles Olson, he compares himself to Michael McClure (“a poet in the sense that Robert Graves means poet”) stating, “Hell, I am a didactic poet. A pedant, a prig. In other words some sort of anti-poet.” He goes on to classify himself among “Silver Age types. As I said before pedantical, priggish . . . commentators, like Lucian, Martial, Dante” (Whalen 1958, 1).7 Here Whalen’s self-identification with writers like Lucian or Martial indicates his privileging of the witty, satirical, and humorous over the lyrical and an interest in history and social commentary in the role of critic and teacher.

Part of his pedagogical duty, as he must have realized from his knowledge of Ezra Pound’s various guides such as *Culture* (1938) or *ABC of Reading* (1934) (texts he mentioned reading at Reed in his 1971 interview with Anne Waldman [Whalen 1978, 28]), was to provide reading lists and scholarly advice. In a letter of 1968 to fellow poet and friend, Joanne Kyger, Whalen provides a reading list, noting that “a writer reads a lot,” then proceeds to recommend a number of Greek texts, among them Homer, Hesiod, Greek lyric poetry, Pindar, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes, as well as Plato, Herodotus, Sophocles, and Plutarch. He includes Latin texts also, adding that “those English writers we must read all take it for granted that we know writers such as Virgil, Horace, Plau-
tus, Terence, Cicero, Ovid, and Martial” (Whalen 1968, 1–2). He mentions Liddell and Scott’s *Greek Lexicon*, which he calls “an invaluable accompaniment” to the Loeb Classical Library, noted as “bilingual.” This list demonstrates not only his familiarity with the classics but also his belief in the value he and any poet in the English and American literary tradition, should place on them.8

Moving from a consideration of Whalen’s role as teacher to that of poet, numerous classical allusions in his poetry range from what one might call the ridiculous to the sublime. Whalen’s most superficial, though humorous, use involves punning and word play, often in shorter poems. This could be considered as elitist name-dropping, but is often a clever and concise way to express his ideas. One of the more effective allusions of this type, in a later poem that shows that classical name-dropping never really left Whalen’s poetic tool kit, comes in “Treading More Water,” written in 1978 after Whalen had begun Zen practice under Richard Baker Roshi at the San Francisco Zen Center. The poem may be about a meditation session as it begins, “It is very hard to understand that / We are where we are at; I am here intentionally” (Whalen 2007, 1–2). The speaker’s stream of consciousness continues, as he begins the third stanza, “Start again. Direct the imagination” (13), which implies control of the wandering mind. The poem concludes: “Seven minutes from now. You hear the words, ‘Caught between Sybil and Charisma’ / I am grown invisible and very wise” (21–23). Here the timing may relate to a period of sitting meditation coming to an end, while recalling Odysseus’s journey and his escape from the Sirens with passage between Scylla and Charybdis. Thus Whalen presents the poem’s speaker as caught between two ways of being viewed by others: Sybil or charismatic poet. These lines also convey the feeling that the speaker is caught between a rock and a hard place, spiritually treading water as the poem’s title suggests.

In other poems, Whalen simply incorporates Greek or Latin expressions or stock phrases, one of the most frequently used being the Latin expression, *desunt cetera/ae*, meaning “the rest is missing.” This phrase sometimes appears at the end of poems that seem unfinished, the phrase suggesting that something has been left out. This is despite the fact that he has reversed the usual order of this phrase (*cetera desunt*). For example, “Translation of a Lost Play by M. M.” (1958), a possible reference to a play by Michael McClure, is a short dialogue between Maurice and Ferdinand about baby Moses. On hearing a baby crying, Maurice asks who and why, with Ferdinand’s answer: “He weeps there for that he is already a prophet” (Whalen 2007, 11), followed by

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8. Later, in his 1971 interview with Anne Waldman, Whalen refuted this kind of list-giving advice, noting that people have to find out for themselves (Whalen 1978, 28).
Maurice’s “Ah, glorious wretched little! / desunt ceterae” (12–13). With this somewhat abrupt ending, is Whalen likening himself to a prophet to whom no attention is paid?

Some of these stock phrases occur as titles to poems, a hint at how the poem should be read. For example, Whalen uses “Poeta Nascitur,” as title of a 1984 poem with reference to the aphorism, *poeta nascitur non fit*, meaning a poet is born not made. Although the poem does not directly address this issue, Whalen may be questioning his role as poet. A more nuanced use is the title of the short poem, “Gradus ad Parnassum” (1963), recalling the Latin title of a dictionary of prosody, which means “a step to Parnassus.” The four-line poem appears to be a simple, literal description of an urban scene:

Palmetto tree, its shadow on the house corner
And the light upon them:
A single proposition.

(Where was the sky?)

(Whalen 2007, 1–4)

Whalen may have recalled the Latin phrase as he walked up Parnassus Street in San Francisco, a steep street in the Upper Haight. This movement upward may in turn have recalled the guidebook, what it takes to write a poem, and his gradual progress therein. The poem then becomes more than a simple description of light, tree, and shadow (what can be seen); it demonstrates what a poem can be made of. In addition, the poem may also pay homage to Ezra Pound and his *ABC of Reading*, prefaced by this explication of its title as frontispiece: “ABC or gradus ad Parnassum, for those who might like to learn. The book is not addressed to those who have arrived at full knowledge of the subject without knowing the facts” (Pound 1934, 9).

Whalen also uses classical myths or personae in a more substantive way to comment on contemporary situations. For example, “To My Muse” is a short poem in which the poet/speaker is represented by Tithonus with his muse, Eos, goddess of Dawn:

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9. Another of Whalen's poems with classical reference is “Past ruin'd Ilion,” its title quoting and appropriating a line, “Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives,” (1), from W. S. Landor’s “To Ianthe” (1964). Whalen, however, in contrast to Landor, launches into a stream of consciousness ramble about his contemporaries, not at all about Helen, Troy, or a lovely woman. Interestingly, Whalen may have found Landor's poem in Pound's *ABC of Reading*. Note that Pound, himself, echoed this line in his Canto IX, changing it to “Past ruin'd Latium,” with reference to Isotta, love of Sigismundo Malatesta. Thus Whalen demonstrates the continued importance of the classics to the English literary tradition in the lineage of Ezra Pound, while similarly rewriting Landor.
Now I see my part in the story:
Tithonus, immortal & wrinkling
greying and fading, voice
from a big pot,
A seashell echo, prophesying

and you pink sunrise, Eos, ever young
opening
(Whalen 2007, 1–7)

Eos had a child, Memnon, by Tithonus, a mortal whom she had begged Zeus to make immortal. Since she forgot to also ask for eternal youth, he became old, while she, immortal, remained young. The retelling of this myth suggests not only the speaker’s troubled relationship with the muse and doubts about his poetic ability but also a love relationship with someone he considered as muse.10 Such short poems have an epigrammatic quality about them, perhaps one reason he associates himself with Callimachus and Martial.

A more literal and explicit type of classical allusion appears in homage poems, dedicated to figures Whalen admires in the world of classical studies, such as, “Spring Poem to the Memory of Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928)”; Edward Gibbon, “Life in the City, in Memoriam Edward Gibbon”; “For Kenneth Rexroth,” a poem inspired by reading Rexroth’s translations of the Greek Anthology; and “M” for Robert Duncan. This last poem highlights the letter M or μ, referring to Duncan’s interest in alphabets of various languages as evident in his Passages series, especially the poem “Spelling.” “M” also relates to Duncan’s interest in muthos (myth), a term he found in Jane Ellen Harrison’s work, which is evident in his long essay “The Truth and Life of Myth,” with an epigraph from Harrison’s Themis: “Possibly the first muthos was simply the interjectional utterance μ; but it is easy to see how rapid the development would be from interjection to narrative” (Duncan 1985, 1).

In this poem, Whalen’s references in relation to the letter M are somewhat esoteric as is typical of his poetic method: Kabala, Roman numerals (line 12 reads “In Rome M = 1000”), and Egyptian, Phoenician, and Greek alphabets: “μ μ μ μ in Greek / Aeschylus makes the Eumenides / cry ‘μ μ μ μ’” (Whalen 2007, 8–10). This last line echoes the chorus’s lines from Aeschylus’s Eumenides

10. For a similar conflation of muse and lover, see Whalen’s 1964 poem, “To the Muse.”
11. Duncan read the Passages series at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, July 1965. “Spelling” was also published in the eighth number of Open Space, August 1964, a journal to which Whalen contributed. “M” also relates to Charles Olson’s interest in muthos as evidenced by his using the same quote from Harrison in The Special View of History.
translated by George Thompson in the Auden Portable Greek Reader: “Chorus: Mu, mu! Clytemnestra: Ah, you may mew, but he is fled and gone; For he has friends far different from mine. Chorus: Mu, mu!” (Auden 1948, 343).

The classics were perhaps most significant for Whalen, however, as one aspect of his New Paideuma, a term first mentioned in his 1956 poem “The Slop Barrel: Slices of the Paideuma for All Sentient Beings.” Here he references Pound’s use of the term in Culture, a text with which Whalen was familiar. Pound goes to Frobenius for this term (probably a neologism derived from the Greek paideia), explicated as “the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period” (Pound 1938, 57). For Pound, this “New Learning . . . can imply whatever men of my generation can offer our successors as means to the new comprehension” (58). Whalen will make this term relevant to his own time, as evidenced in a letter to Gary Snyder of June 10, 1957, in which he complains about “kritics” misrepresentation of the Beat generation, adding that “the trouble is none of us has published anything like a manifesto” and concludes that whatever any of them may write “could present Slices of the New Paideuma” (Whalen 1957, 1).

Whalen’s 1956 poem is about growing up and gaining knowledge, as well as about ways to write poetry using a new vocabulary, specifically one that juxtaposes several layers of language: American speech and slang (“Native Speech,” as he titles several 1963 poems); Western (often classical); and Eastern (often Buddhist) terms and concepts. Thus three levels or kinds of language are combined in this title representing that triumvirate of colloquialism (slop barrel), Greek term, (paideuma), and Buddhist phrase (sentient beings). Whalen’s title is thus typical of his method in this and other poems, introducing readers to new possibilities for poetry.12 He will continue to use such juxtapositions as representative of his New Paideuma project in subsequent poems.13

An early poem exemplifying Whalen’s method is the 1958 poem, “Hymnus ad Patrem Sinensis,” which uses a Latin title to pay homage to classical Chinese hermit poets. Whalen also includes contemporary slang in the penultimate line in spondaic meter describing the poets: “& conked out among the busted spring rain cherry blossom wine jars / Happy to have saved us all”

12. Compare Pound’s juxtaposition of languages in The Cantos as precedent for Whalen here.
13. Another possible influence here may be Kenneth Rexroth for the idea of combining Greek/Latin classics and Asian religion and culture as he does in his collections, More Classics and More Classics Revisited. For Rexroth’s importance to Whalen, see Whalen’s interview with Anne Waldman: “Rexroth, who is really one of the brightest and liveliest persons that I have known, and he’s been of immense help to me getting things published and getting people to invite me to read, material and spiritual help of all kinds” (Whalen 1978, 29).
(Whalen 2007, 12–13). To some, this title may seem pretentious, but as part of Whalen’s new Paideuma project, an effective demonstration of his method. 14

“Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” one of Whalen’s best-known poems, exemplifies his assertion of a relationship between Western and Eastern philosophy. Here he juxtaposes quotations from the Presocratics and the Buddha to make direct and literal connections with the speaker’s situation in the poem. The poem recounts a summer spent as a fire lookout, and the speaker’s meditations on life as he observes the mountains, rivers, planets, and stars, the view from a ridge “encircled by chiming mountains” (Whalen 2007, 10). He quotes Heraclitus as he drowses in the sun, remembering his dreams: “‘The waking have one common world / But the sleeping turn aside / Each into a world of his own’” (32–34). 15 Thoughts of what it is to be a man, “That there is more to a man / Than the contents of his jock-strap,” (56–57) lead to a quotation from Empedocles:

At one time all the limbs  
Which are the body’s portion are brought together  
By Love in blooming life’s high season; at another  
Severed by cruel Strife, they wander each alone  
By the breakers of life’s sea.  
(58–62)

Later as his “sweat runs down the rock,” (69), Heraclitus again comes to mind:

The transformations of fire  
are, first of all sea; and half of the sea  
is earth, half whirlwind. . . .  
It scatters and it gathers; it advances  
and retires.  
(70–74)

He then quotes the Buddha on the transitory nature of life, which could relate either to Heraclitus on the flux and change of the world or Empedocles’s Strife against Love. Whalen ends the poem with his departure from the lookout

14. Michael Davidson reads this poem differently, stating that Whalen’s “ponderous Latin title is gradually debunked as his hymn of praise illustrates the endurance of the absolutely temporary” (1989, 118).

15. Whalen provides as a source for these quotes John Burnet’s Early Greek Philosophy (1957).
at the end of the season and his slangified translation of the Prajnaparamita Sutra’s conclusion:

Gone
Gone
REALLY gone
Into the cool
O MAMA!
(167–71)16

In a less well-known poem, “With Compliments to E. H.” (1959), Whalen uses a similar approach. The poem appears to be about Zen and archery, the E. H. of the title referring to Eugen Herrigel and his book, Zen and the Art of Archery, a popular book on Zen in the 1950s, but is actually about the process of writing a poem. The classical reference is again to Heraclitus, archery recalling fragments 45 and 66, which Whalen adds as addenda to the poem:

(45) Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre.

(66) The bow . . . is called life . . . , but its work is death.
(Whalen 2007, 94–97)17

Here Heraclitus’s “attunement of opposite tensions” can apply to those inherent in the poem or the process of poetry, itself. Whalen also compares hitting the target to the making of verbal distinctions in poetry, the Zen approach being not so much to hit the target as to gain the correct attitude toward the process. As he juxtaposes West and East in the poem, he demonstrates that the poet can gain from both worlds, another way opposites are attuned.

It is in the long poem format, however, that Whalen’s New Paideuma project becomes most evident. His long poems often originate in his journals and notebooks; he selects passages, types them into a draft, then collages the pages, “cutting” and “rearranging,” as he puts it in his interview with Anne Waldman, often over a period of time. He adds that “any of the longer poems which took a year or so or more to write, have rewritings in them and cut-

16. This sutra is one of the key texts of Zen Buddhism. Note here Whalen’s combination of Presocratic and Buddhist philosophy and his affinity with A. N. Whitehead’s process philosophy, which privileges process over substance.
17. Interestingly, Octavio Paz makes reference to these same passages in The Bow and the Lyre. Whalen’s source for these quotes is also given as Burnet (1957).
tions and are all worked out. The original material from which it’s written is spontaneous writing. . . .” (Whalen 1978, 37). In many instances, his journal entries transform into poems, as in his Scenes of Life at the Capital. His poems often include quotes from his wide reading, which serve as meaningful commentary on the ideas he tries to express and a way to add other voices to the conversation of the poem.18

A long, collaged poem with multiple quotations, including some from classical Coolidge, is “The Education Continues Along,” dedicated to Clark Coolidge and written over the period of a year from 1965–66. This rambling poem about education and questions of epistemology reflects Whalen’s thoughts about poetry, music, history, and science with specific allusion to a question from Coolidge regarding the Tesla coil, Tesla’s invention of a “machine that could extract electric voltage out of the very ground on which he stood” (Whalen 2007, 121–22). A report on Whalen’s research on Tesla is followed by “assertions about history” (228) in which the poet refers to an extended passage from Denys Page’s History and the Homeric Iliad to supplement his own ideas.

Page’s argument concerns the historical validity of the Iliad and specifically the historical record, who makes it, its reliability, and its truth value. Whalen has directed readers to a chapter in which Page discusses tablets from Pylos and Knossos and what can be learned of Mycenaean society from these documents, the point being that facts without context are not particularly useful. Page notes the “theoretical” nature of a reconstruction based on analogies between societies that “might be true, or it might be false.” He adds that “the whole system is an hypothesis, a pattern not revealed by the Tablets but impressed upon them from outside” (Page 1959, 184). Whalen’s use of Page adds to the nuanced view of history presented in this poem.

In the poem’s conclusion, Whalen meditates further on history, using his New Paideuma approach with quotes from the colloquial, the classical, and the modern. He juxtaposes memories of his grandmother’s sayings, “None of it came to nothing in the end / None of it amounted to a hill of beans’ / That’s what my grandmother used to say,” with fragment 173 of Alcaeus, a drinking song quoted in Greek and with translation: “And nothing will / come of anything.” Whalen then quotes Gertrude Stein: “Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches” (Whalen 2007, 273–80). In these juxtaposed quotes, his grandmother’s as important as Alcaeus’s, Whalen demonstrates history as

record and process and points again to the difficulty of determining historical truth, even though humans continue to record their own versions.

Although Whalen’s use of the classics in his poetry is ubiquitous and often provides a positive complement to his twentieth-century worldview, especially through his interest in the Presocratics, he is sometimes critical of this heritage. Such a position is in keeping with the penchant (shared by other Beats) to critique Western culture after World War II with memories of recent examples of barbarity: the atomic bomb at Hiroshima or the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz. An important influence on Whalen, especially in regard to the direction in which he moved away from classical Greek philosophy, was the work of poet Charles Olson.

When Whalen graduated from Reed, he moved to California, eventually making the San Francisco Bay area his home. Here he may have first encountered Olson at a series of lectures based on Olson’s *The Special View of History* given at the San Francisco Poetry Center in 1957.  

The epigraph for this work comes from Heraclitus: “Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar,” Olson’s argument being that modern man has become estranged from a vital part of himself, as Heraclitus realizes. Olson notes that “man lost something just about 500 BC and only got it back just about 1905 AD,” adding, as of the twentieth century, “the absolute or ideal has been tucked back where it belongs—where it got out of in the 5th century BC and thereafter” (Olson 1970, 15–16).

Olson argues further that the problem lies with Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. In one passage, Olson notes we inherited from Plato “an either-or, from the split of science and fiction,” then blames Aristotle for classification which “divided up anything into its parts” (1970, 20). He adds that “an enormous fallacy called discourse invented by Socrates drove science, myth, history, and poetry away from the center” (1970, 21). The problem lies in the fact that the “rational mind hates the familiar and has to make it ordinary by explaining it in order not to experience it” (1970, 31). Olson had made his case against the Greeks as early as “Human Universe,” an essay first published in 1951–52: “We stay unaware how two means of discourse the Greeks appear to have invented hugely intermit our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery.” He refers here to both “Socrates’ readiness to generalize” and Aristotle’s “logic

19. Whalen also corresponded with Olson, especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s after the San Francisco lecture series. The lectures were subsequently published in 1970.

20. Jane Ellen Harrison also figures in these talks. Olson is particularly interested in her intent to take the basis of Greek religion back to what might be considered primitive ritualistic practices. Olson notes of Harrison in these lectures, that she as a “modern has stated the mythological with some approximation to the reason of its practice” (1970, 21).
and classification . . . that have so fastened themselves in habits of thought that action is interfered with” (Olson 1967, 4). Plato, too, is implicated for his “world of ideas, of forms as extricable from content” (1967, 5). This division would become problematic in relation to the Beat interest in physicality, through an emphasis on the oral and performative aspects of poetry.

Whalen takes up Olson’s critique of the Greek classics in his own poetry, for example, in “The Greeks” (1965). Here the speaker complains about the Greeks’ division and fragmentation of the universe as the poem begins:

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divided it three ways
Underworld, earth and sea, heavens above

Hades    Poseidon    Zeus

3 ways
body, soul and spirit
We’ve been fragmented ever since
(Whalen 2007, 1–6)
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The poem ends with an implicit comparison with the Sumerians who “were smart enough to combine sixes and tens / Their year was exact, their poetry / Who knows if their poetry scanned?” (32–34).  

Whalen further points out Greek inadequacies in several other poems. In “The Best of It” (1964), he records mind ramblings and considers various activities while listening to the sounds of the city:

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Read the Greeks, read nudist propaganda with bright colored photographs
The Greeks are enchanting
as far as they go but there are many more things
to know and discuss, more worlds of
trouble and delight than they had time to know
(Whalen 2007, 88–93)
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Whalen makes a similar point in the long poem, “Minor Moralia,” begun in 1959, returned to and completed in 1962, which posits an ideal relation of soci-
ety and the individual with instructions for living on a personal as well as social level. Although Whalen does not mention Plutarch in the poem, a case where the reader must make the connection, the title recalls Plutarch’s collection of ethical essays *Moralia*. The first part of the poem begins with the quest for knowledge: “Looking at a man trying to decide what he knows” (Whalen 2007, 1), but moves to the need for action: “After you understand it all / How do you behave?” (69–70). Action is more significant as it involves feeding the hungry; an abecedarian logic is not the answer:

The Greeks went “A, B, C, D, E. . . .”
They kept slaves and superstitions
They got cynical and vanished after letter “P”
(Letter “N” standing for *Nicomachean Ethics*).

(81–84)

Here as with Plutarch, Plato and Aristotle are not mentioned by name, although Whalen appears to suggest Plato (“P”) and Aristotle (“N”). In the second part, “THE FINAL PART OF MINOR MORALIA, FOUR YEARS LATER, A NEW END A NEW BEGINNING, 27:x:62,” Whalen claims that the “real problems of poverty, injustice, war, cruelty and ignorance / MUST BE SOLVED,” adding a “(hiatus) . . . WHY THE GREEKS WERE FAILURES” (19–21, 24). In the third and last section, “SECRET ARCANE AND HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED PRIVATE NOTES TO MINOR MORALIA,” he presents love as an alternative with reference to Buddhism and its *sangha* or community of monks and lay people that make up the Buddha’s followers: “The community, the *sangha*, ’society’—an order to love; we must love more persons places and things with deeper and more various feelings than we know at present” (1–3).

Whalen’s most outspoken anti-Greek statement appears in his long poem, *Scenes of Life at the Capital*, written from Japan during the Vietnam War. Whalen’s diatribe against Western civilization includes the Greeks with a reference to Plato’s *Symposium* on the philosophy of love:

22. Aristotle’s text presents the idea that conduct should be directed to the good, and in his introduction to this text, Ostwald notes that, for Aristotle, “the mean which is virtue is not arithmetical. . . . Accordingly, the mean, and with it virtue, is not one fixed point. . . . It is a median which is fixed absolutely only in that it lies between the extremes of excess and deficiency. . . .” (Aristotle 1962, xxiv). Whalen may have been influenced here by Pound’s discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the concluding chapters of *Culture* (1938) where Pound is also critical of Aristotle.
If Socrates and Plato and Diotima
And all the rest of the folks at that party
Had simply eaten lots of food and wine and dope
And spent the entire weekend in bed together
Perhaps Western Civilization
Wouldn't have been such a failure?

Rooty-toot, Plato's Original Institute
(Whalen 2007, 87–93)

In this last line, the slang phrase, rooty-toot, rhyming with institute furthers the put-down of Plato, the implication being that Plato's ideas are as simplistic as Whalen's rhyme.

Despite these somewhat harsh critiques, and the fact that classical allusions diminish in Whalen's poetry after the late 1960s with his stay in Kyoto and subsequent immersion in Buddhism, Whalen strove to keep alive Western cultural and literary traditions in his poetry, as indicated by such poems as “Treading More Water.” His long poems can be seen as documents or texts containing the history of the age, including the Greek and Latin authors he knew so well and recalling Pound’s famous definition from ABC of Reading regarding the epic as a poem containing history. His initial embrace of the classics was also part of his Reed experience in the mid-twentieth century. Although Whalen's use of classical texts may be considered at times to be superficial, elitist, or appropriative, ultimately his many clever and sophisticated classical allusions and wide ranging knowledge affirm his claim to be a teacher of future generations.

More significantly his use of the classical demonstrates his interest in juxtaposing and combining Western and Eastern philosophical traditions and kinds of language to create his New Paideuma, a project that enables Whalen to think through his responses to important texts and ideas of both West and East. In addition, rather than replacing one tradition with another, Whalen's juxtapositions create a tension and attention to differences and similarities. Whalen discusses his attitude in this regard and what is behind his desire to create a new inclusive Paideuma for the mid-twentieth century in an interview of November 1965, an NET Outtake Series from USA: Poetry produced by KQED, San Francisco. In this interview, he considers his poetry as part of a longer historical tradition, what he calls Western civilization. Toward the end of the interview he reiterates his interest in history, specifically mentioning the importance of the Greek classics and his desire to break down barriers between Eastern and Western thinking. The interview ends with Whalen's
idea that Western civilization has kinks that need hammering out, and the hammers come from India and China. Whalen and his New Paideuma will be the hammerer.

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