BLOOM'S LITERARY CRITICISM 20TH ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION

NOVELISTS and NOVELS
NOVELISTS
AND
NOVELS
Dramatists and Dramas
The Epic
Essayists and Prophets
Novelists and Novels
Poets and Poems
Short Story Writers and Short Stories
NOVELISTS AND NOVELS

Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University
Table of Contents

PREFACE
Harold Bloom
xiii

INTRODUCTION
Harold Bloom
xvii

Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616)
Don Quixote
1

Daniel DeFoe (1660–1731)
Robinson Crusoe / Moll Flanders
3

Jonathan Swift (1667–1745)
Gulliver’s Travels
10

Samuel Richardson (1689–1761)
Clarissa
22

Henry Fielding (1707–1754)
Tom Jones
28

Laurence Sterne (1713–1768)
Tristram Shandy
33

Tobias Smollett (1721–1771)
Humphry Clinker
38

Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774)
The Vicar of Wakefield / She Stoops to Conquer
43
Fanny Burney (1752–1840)
  *Evelina*
  48

Jane Austen (1775–1817)
*Pride and Prejudice / Mansfield Park / Emma / Persuasion*
  51

Stendhal (1783–1842)
*The Red and the Black*
  72

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851)
*Frankenstein*
  77

Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850)
*Père Goriot*
  87

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)
*The Scarlet Letter*
  91

Charles Dickens (1812–1870)
*A Tale of Two Cities / Great Expectations / David Copperfield / Hard Times / Bleak House*
  93

Anthony Trollope (1815–1882)
*Barchester Towers / The Warden*
  119

Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855)
*Jane Eyre*
  125

Emily Brontë (1818–1848)
*Wuthering Heights*
  131
George Eliot (1819–1880)
*Daniel Deronda / The Mill on the Floss / Silas Marner / Middlemarch*
  
137

Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880)
*Madame Bovary*
  
151

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881)
*Crime and Punishment / The Brothers Karamazov*
  
155

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)
*Anna Karenina*
  
163

Mark Twain (1835–1910)
*Huckleberry Finn*
  
169

Émile Zola (1840–1902)
*Thérèse Raquin*
  
171

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)
*The Mayor of Casterbridge / The Return of the Native / Tess of the d’Urbervilles / Jude the Obscure*
  
173

Henry James (1843–1916)
*The Ambassadors / The Portrait of a Lady*
  
192

Kate Chopin (1851–1904)
*The Awakening*
  
204

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924)
*Lord Jim / Heart of Darkness / Nostromo*
  
210
Edith Wharton (1862–1937)
*The Age of Innocence / The Custom of the Country / Ethan Frome*

220

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936)
*Kim*

228

Willa Cather (1873–1947)
*My Ántonia / A Lost Lady*

235

Herman Hesse (1877–1962)
*Steppenwolf / Magister Ludi*

240

Upton Sinclair (1878–1968)
*The Jungle*

242

Stephen Crane (1879–1900)
*The Red Badge of Courage / Maggie*

245

E.M. Forster (1879–1970)
*Howards End / A Passage to India*

249

Robert Musil (1880–1942)
*The Man Without Qualities*

259

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)
*Mrs. Dalloway / To the Lighthouse*

262

James Joyce (1882–1941)
*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

269

Franz Kafka (1883–1924)
*The Castle / The Trial*

272
D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930)
*Sons and Lovers / The Rainbow / Women in Love*

294

Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951)
*Arrowsmith / Babbitt*

302

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960)
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

306

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)
*The Great Gatsby*

311

William Faulkner (1897–1962)
*The Sound and the Fury / Sanctuary / Light in August / Absalom, Absalom!*

313

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)
*The Sun also Rises / A Farewell to Arms / The Old Man and the Sea*

327

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977)
*Lolita*

339

André Malraux (1901–1976)
*Man’s Fate*

343

John Steinbeck (1902–1968)
*The Grapes of Wrath / Of Mice and Men*

347

Nathanael West (1903–1940)
*Miss Lonelyhearts*

353

George Orwell (1903–1950)
*1984 / Animal Farm*

363
Graham Greene (1904–1991)
*Brighton Rock*
372

Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989)
*All the King’s Men*
380

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989)
*Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*
387

Richard Wright (1908–1960)
*Native Son*
393

William Golding (1911–1993)
*The Lord of the Flies*
399

Albert Camus (1913–1960)
*The Stranger / The Plague*
401

Bernard Malamud (1914–1986)
*The Fixer / The Tenants*
408

Ralph Waldo Ellison (1914–1994)
*The Invisible Man*
412

Saul Bellow (1915–)
*Herzog*
418

Walker Percy (1916–1990)
*The Moviegoer*
426

Carson McCullers (1917–1967)
*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter / The Ballad of the Sad Café*
433
Anthony Burgess (1917–1993)
*The Enderby Cycle / Nothing Like the Sun*

438

Iris Murdoch (1919–1999)
*The Good Apprentice*

445

William Gaddis (1922–1998)
*The Recognitions*

452

José Saramago (1922–)
*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

455

Norman Mailer (1923–)
*Ancient Evenings*

476

James Baldwin (1924–1987)
*The Fire Next Time / The Price of the Ticket / Go Tell It On the Mountain*

482

Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964)
*The Violent Bear It Away*

491

Gabriel García Márquez (1928–)
*One Hundred Years of Solitude / Love in the Time of Cholera*

500

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–)
*The Left Hand of Darkness*

505

Toni Morrison (1931–)
*Sula / The Bluest Eye / Song of Solomon / Beloved*

515

Philip Roth (1933–)
*The Zuckerman tetralogy / Portnoy's Complaint*

524
Cormac McCarthy (1933–)
_Blood Meridian / All the Pretty Horses_
532

Don DeLillo (1936–)
_White Noise / Underworld_
540

Thomas Pynchon (1937–)
_Gravity's Rainbow_
547

Paul Auster (1947–)
_The New York Trilogy_
557

Amy Tan (1952–)
_The Joy Luck Club_
559

Further Reading 561
Index 563
About the Author 588
Preface

Harold Bloom

I began editing anthologies of literary criticism for Chelsea House in early 1984, but the first volume, Edgar Allan Poe: Modern Critical Views, was published in January, 1985, so this is the twentieth anniversary of a somewhat Quixotic venture. If asked how many separate books have been issued in this project, I no longer have a precise answer, since in so long a span many volumes go out of print, and even whole series have been discontinued. A rough guess would be more than a thousand individual anthologies, a perhaps insane panoply to have been collected and introduced by a single critic.

Some of these books have surfaced in unlikely places: hotel rooms in Bologna and Valencia, Coimbra and Oslo; used-book stalls in Frankfurt and Nice; on the shelves of writers wherever I have gone. A batch were sent by me in answer to a request from a university library in Macedonia, and I have donated some of them, also by request, to a number of prisoners serving life sentences in American jails. A thousand books across a score of years can touch many shores and many lives, and at seventy-four I am a little bewildered at the strangeness of the endeavor, particularly now that it has leaped between centuries.

It cannot be said that I have endorsed every critical essay reprinted, as my editor’s notes have made clear. Yet the books have to be reasonably reflective of current critical modes and educational fashions, not all of them provoking my own enthusiasm. But then I am a dinosaur, cheerfully naming myself as “Bloom Brontosaurus Bardolator.” I accept only three criteria for greatness in imaginative literature: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. What is now called “relevance” will be in the dustbins in less than a generation, as our society (somewhat tardily) reforms prejudices and inequities. The fashionable in literature and criticism always ebbs
away into Period Pieces. Old, well-made furniture survives as valuable antiques, which is not the destiny of badly constructed imaginings and ideological exhortings.

Time, which decays and then destroys us, is even more merciless in obliterating weak novels, poems, dramas, and stories, however virtuous these may be. Wander into a library and regard the masterpieces of thirty years ago: a handful of forgotten books have value, but the iniquity of oblivion has rendered most bestsellers instances of time’s revenges. The other day a friend and former student told me that the first of the Poets Laureate of twentieth-century America had been Joseph Auslander, concerning whom even my still retentive memory is vacant. These days, Mrs. Felecia Hemans is studied and taught by a number of feminist Romantic scholars. Of the poems of that courageous wisdom, who wrote to support her brood, I remember only the opening line of “Casabianca” but only because Mark Twain added one of his very own to form a couplet:

The boy stood on the burning deck
Eating peanuts by the peck.

Nevertheless, I do not seek to affirm the social inutility of literature, though I admire Oscar Wilde’s grand declaration: “All art is perfectly useless.” Shakespeare may well stand here for the largest benign effect of the highest literature: properly appreciated, it can heal part of the violence that is built into every society whatsoever. In my own judgment, Walt Whitman is the central writer yet brought forth by the Americas—North, Central, South, Caribbean—whether in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Yiddish or other tongues. And Walt Whitman is a healer, a poet-prophet who discovered his pragmatic vocation by serving as a volunteer, unpaid wound-dresser and nurse in the Civil War hospitals of Washington, D.C. To read and properly understand Whitman can be an education in self-reliance and in the cure of your own consciousness.

The function of literary criticism, as I conceive it in my gathering old age, is primarily appreciation, in Walter Pater’s sense, which fuses analysis and evaluation. When Pater spoke of “art for art’s sake” he included in the undersong of his declaration what D.H. Lawrence meant by “art for life’s sake,” Lawrence, the most provocative of post-Whitmanian vitalists, has now suffered a total eclipse in the higher education of the English-speaking nations. Feminists have outlawed him with their accusations of misogyny, and they describe him as desiring women to renounce sexual pleasure. On this supposed basis, students lose the experience of reading one of the
major authors of the twentieth century, at once an unique novelist, storyteller, poet, critic, and prophet.

An enterprise as vast as Chelsea House Literary Criticism doubtless reflects both the flaws and the virtues of its editor. Comprehensiveness has been a goal throughout, and I have (for the most part) attempted to set aside many of my own literary opinions. I sorrow when the market keeps an important volume out of print, though I am solaced by the example of my idol, Dr. Samuel Johnson, in his *Lives of the Poets*. The booksellers (who were both publishers and retailers) chose the poets, and Johnson was able to say exactly what he thought of each. Who remembers such worthies as Yalden, Sprat, Roscommon, and Stepney? It would be invidious for me to name the contemporary equivalents, but their name is legion.

I have been more fully educated by this quest for comprehensiveness, which taught me how to write for a larger audience. Literary criticism is both an individual and communal mode. It has its titans: Johnson, Coleridge, Lessing, Goethe, Hazlitt, Sainte-Beuve, Pater, Curtius, Valéry, Frye, Empson, Kenneth Burke are among them. But most of those I reprint cannot be of that eminence: one makes a heap of all that can be found. Over a lifetime in reading and teaching one learns so much from so many that no one can be certain of her or his intellectual debts. Hundreds of those I have reprinted I never will meet, but they have helped enlighten me, insofar as I have been capable of learning from a host of other minds.
Introduction

Harold Bloom

The novel began as the ungrateful child of prose romance, but romance revenges itself these days with the apparent death of the novel, and a rebirth (in strange guises) of picaresque. Cervantes mocked and exorcized the romance form in Don Quixote, but from Mark Twain until now the influence of Cervantes has reversed direction, with parody and phantasmagoria, as embodied in the Knight of the Woeful Countenance, outdoing the realism and naturalism that dominate his career.

This large volume discourses upon some fifty-six novelists and one hundred (or so) novels, with some essays by James Baldwin and a play by Oliver Goldsmith inextricably mixed in. Certain huge structures, like Joyce’s Ulysses and Proust’s vast narrative have been excluded here, and located in the volume The Epic in this Anniversary Collection. Melville’s Moby-Dick inevitably is also placed there.

In brooding upon my memories of these hundred novels, I find myself setting Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa second only to Don Quixote in aesthetic eminence. I am aware that this judgment will seem eccentric to many, but I urge them to read the uncut Clarissa, knowing that Dr. Johnson, foremost among all literary critics ever, preceded me in such an estimate.

I have a few regrets about some novels missing from this volume, particularly Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying and Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, which receive intense appreciations in my book, How to Read and Why.
INTRODUCTION

2

The revival of romances from Twain on through Kipling and Kafka achieved a first apotheosis in D.H. Lawrence, now an absurdly neglected writer, because of a feminist crusade that has largely exiled him from the academies of the English-speaking world. In the United States, romance form dominated in the triad of Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway, all strongly influenced by Joseph Conrad.

The Brontës composed their own sub-genre of Northern romance, which has an echo in Ursula K. Le Guin’s beautiful fantasy, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Though Toni Morrison insists she is related only to black literary tradition, she fuses romance elements from Faulkner and from Virginia Woolf into her own highly individual art.

Faulkner’s legacy is extensive and includes such varied figures as Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, Flannery O’Connor, Gabriel García Márquez, and Cormac McCarthy. There is a line of descent that moves from *Moby-Dick* through Faulkner to McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, which for me stands with Philip Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater*, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* as the four grand narratives composed by living Americans.

This volume, large as it is, cannot pretend to be a history-in-little of the birth, life, and death of the dominant literary form since Shakespeare ended his career as a dramatist. Shakespeare’s own influence on the novel is reflected here from Jane Austen and Stendhal on through Balzac and Dickens until it culminates in Dostoevsky’s nihilists, and in Hardy’s pastoral tragedies, then to renew itself in Woolf and Joyce, Lawrence and Beckett, Iris Murdoch and the Philip Roth of *Sabbath’s Theater*.

No one can prophesy the future of the novel, or even if it has a future, except in the mixed form of belated romances. There are, for me, several candidates for the great American book, and none of them is exactly a novel: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson’s *Essays*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Doubtless Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* is the best-made American novel, but it cannot compete with the strongest works of the American Renaissance.

Though this is indeliberate on my part, almost a third of the novelists commented upon in this book are women. If there is a single thematic vision that links together the traditions of the Anglo-American novel, it is what I would name as the Protestant Will, whose prime novelistic
instances are heroines, whether created by women or by men. From Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe through Austen’s protagonists, and Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, the line continues unbroken through the Brontës, Hardy, James and Wharton to culminate in E.M. Forster, Woolf, and Lawrence. Toni Morrison may be the last exemplar of this tradition, which exalts the Protestant Will, however secularized, as the heroine’s right of private judgment, particularly in exchanges of estimate and mutual esteem with male partners. It may be that the Protestant Will and the novel now are dying together, and that something beyond the revival of an eccentric romance form is yet to come.
Don Quixote is to the Spanish language what Shakespeare is to English, Dante to Italian, and Goethe to German: the glory of that particular vernacular. There is no similar singular eminence in French: Rabelais, Montaigne, Molière, and Racine vie with Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and Proust. Perhaps Cervantes’s masterwork is the central book of the last half-millennium, since all the greater novelists are as much Don Quixote’s children as they are Shakespeare’s. As I have remarked elsewhere, Shakespeare pragmatically teaches us how to talk to ourselves, while Cervantes instructs us how to talk to one another. Hamlet scarcely listens to what anyone else says (except it be the Ghost), while Falstaff so delights himself that Prince Hal can seem merely the best of resentful students and half-voluntary audiences. But Don Quixote and Sancho Panza change and mature by listening to one another, and their friendship is the most persuasive in all of literature.

Don Quixote or Hamlet? Sancho Panza or Falstaff? The choice would be difficult. But Hamlet has only Horatio, and Falstaff ends in solitude, dying while playing with flowers and evidently dreaming of the table promised in Psalm 23, to be prepared for one by God in the midst of one’s enemies. Don Quixote dies in Sancho’s loving company, with the wise squire proposing fresh quests to the heroic knight. Perhaps Shakespeare did invent the ever-growing inner self, compelled to be its own adventure, as Emily Dickinson (an authentic heir of Shakespeare) proclaimed. Cervantes, whose life was arduous and darkly solitary, was able to achieve a miracle that Shakespeare evaded. Where in Shakespeare can we find two great natures in full communion with each other? Antony and Cleopatra...
are giant forms, but they never listen to what anyone else says, including one another. Lady Macbeth fades out, Lear is most himself addressing the heavens, while Prospero has no human peer. I fantasize sometimes that Shakespeare, in eternity, brings together his most vital characters upon one stage: Falstaff, Hamlet, Rosalind, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra. But in this life, he chose otherwise.

The reader needs no better company than Sancho and the Don: to make a third with them is to be blessed with happiness, yet also to be favored with self-insight. The Don and Sancho, between them, know all that there is to know. They know at last exactly who they are, which is what, finally, they will teach the rest of us.
Daniel Defoe

(1660–1731)

Of his prayers and the like we take no account, since they are a source of pleasure to him, and he looks upon them as so much recreation.
—KARL MARX on Robinson Crusoe

I got so tired of the very colors!
One day I dyed a baby goat bright red
with my red berries, just to see
something a little different.
And then his mother wouldn’t recognize him.
—ELIZABETH BISHOP, “Crusoe in England”

HAD KARL MARX WRITTEN ROBINSON CRUSOE, IT WOULD HAVE HAD EVEN more moral vigor, but at the expense of the image of freedom it still provides for us. Had Elizabeth Bishop composed it, Defoe’s narrative would have been enhanced as image and as impulse, but at the expense of its Puritan plainness, its persuasive search for some evidences of redemption. Certainly one of Defoe’s novelistic virtues is precisely what Ian Watt and Martin Price have emphasized it to be: the puzzles of daily moral choice are omnipresent. Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders are human—all-too-human—and suffer what Calvin and Freud alike regarded as the economics of the spirit.

Defoe comes so early in the development of the modern novel as a literary form that there is always a temptation to historicize rather than to read him. But historicisms old and new are poor substitutes for reading, and I do not find it useful to place Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders in their contemporary context when I reread them, as I have just done. Ian Watt usefully remarked that “Defoe’s heroes ... keep us more fully informed of
their present stocks of money and commodities than any other characters in fiction.” I suspect that this had more to do with Defoe than with his age, and that Defoe would have been no less obsessed with economic motives if he had written in the era of Queen Victoria. He was a hard man who had led a hard life: raised as a Dissenter in the London of the Great Plague and the Great Fire; enduring Newgate prison and the pillory in bankrupt middle age; working as a secret agent and a scandalous journalist until imprisoned again for debt and treason. Defoe died old and so may be accounted as a survivor, but he had endured a good share of reality, and his novels reflect that endurance.

Dr. Johnson once said that only three books ought to have been still longer than they were: Don Quixote, The Pilgrim’s Progress, and Robinson Crusoe. Defoe has authentic affinities with Bunyan, but there is nothing quixotic about Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders. All of Defoe’s protagonists are pragmatic and prudent, because they have to be; there is no play in the world as they know it.

Robinson Crusoe

I did not read Robinson Crusoe as a child, and so missed an experience that continues to be all but universal; it remains a book that cannot fail with children. Yet, as Dickens observed, it is also “the only instance of an universally popular book that could make no one laugh and could make no one cry.” Crusoe’s singular tone, his self-baffled affect, does not bother children, who appear to empathize with a near-perfect solipsist who nevertheless exhibits energy and inventiveness throughout a quarter-century of solitude. Perhaps Crusoe’s survival argues implicitly against every child’s fear of dependency and prophesies the longed-for individuality that is still to come. Or perhaps every child’s loneliness is answered in Crusoe’s remarkable strength at sustaining solitude.

Though the identification of Defoe with Crusoe is never wholly overt, the reader senses its prevalence throughout the narrative. Defoe seems to me the least ironic of writers, and yet Crusoe’s story is informed by an overwhelming irony. A restless wanderer, driven to travel and adventure by forces that he (and the reader) cannot comprehend, Crusoe is confined to an isolation that ought to madden him by turning him towards an unbearable inwardness. Yet his sanity prevails, despite his apparent imprisonment. Defoe had borne much; Newgate and the pillory were nightmare experiences. Crusoe bears more, yet Defoe will not describe his hero’s suffering as being psychic. As Virginia Woolf noted, Defoe “takes the opposite way from the psychologist’s—he describes the effect of emotion on the body,
not on the mind.” Nowhere is this stronger than in Crusoe’s agony as he views a shipwreck:

Such certainly was the Case of these Men, of whom I could not so much as see room to suppose any of them were sav’d; nothing could make it rational, so much as to wish, or expect that they did not all perish there; except the Possibility only of their being taken up by another Ship in Company, and this was but meer Possibility indeed; for I saw not the least Signal or Appearance of any such Thing.

I cannot explain by any possible Energy of Words what a strange longing or hankering of Desires I felt in my Soul upon this Sight; breaking out sometimes thus; O that there had been but one or two; nay, or but one Soul sav’d out of this Ship, to have escap’d to me, that I might but have had one Companions, one Fellow-Creature to have spoken to me, and to have convers’d with! In all the Time of my solitary Life, I never felt so earnest, so strong a Desire after the Society of my Fellow-Creatures, or so deep a Regret at the want of it.

There are some secret moving Springs in the Affections, which when they are set a going by some Object in view; or be it some Object, though not in view, yet rendred present to the Mind by the Power of Imagination, that Motion carries out the Soul by its Impetuosity to such violent eager embracings of the Object, that the Absence of it is insupportable.

Such were these earnest Wishings, That but one Man had been sav’d! O that it had been but One! I believe I repeated the Words, O that it had been but One! a thousand Times; and the Desires were so mov’d by it, that when I spoke the Words, my Hands would clinch together, and my Fingers press the Palms of my Hands, that if I had had any soft Thing in my Hand, it would have crush it involuntarily; and my Teeth in my Head would strike together, and set against one another so strong, that for some time I could not part them again.

These are the reactions of a compulsive craftsman who has found his freedom but cannot bear its full sublimity. Crusoe, himself the least sublime of personages, is embedded throughout in a sublime situation best epitomized by the ghastly cannibal feasts he spies upon and from which he rescues his man Friday. Against his superior technology and Puritan resolve, the cannibals offer almost no resistance, so that the rapid conversion
of the cannibal Friday to Protestant theology and diet is not unconvincing. What may baffle the average rereader is Crusoe’s comparative dearth of Protestant inwardness. It is not that Marx was accurate and that Crusoe becomes Protestant only upon the Sabbath, but rather that Defoe’s God is himself a technocrat and an individualist, not much given to the nicer emotions. Defoe’s God can be visualized as a giant tradesman, coping with the universe as Crusoe makes do on his island, but with teeming millions of adoring Fridays where Crusoe enjoys the devotion of just one.

Moll Flanders

With Robinson Crusoe, aesthetic judgment seems redundant; the book’s status as popular myth is too permanent, and so the critic must ground arms. Moll Flanders is another matter and provokes a remarkably wide range of critical response, from the late poet-critic Allen Tate, who once told me it was a great novel of Tolstoyan intensity, to equally qualified readers who deny that it is a novel at all. The overpraisers include James Joyce, who spoke of “the unforgettable harlot Moll Flanders,” and William Faulkner, who coupled Moby-Dick and Moll Flanders as works he would like to have written (together with one of Milne’s Pooh books!). Rereading Moll Flanders leaves me a touch baffled as I thought it had been better, it being one of those books that are much more vivid in parts than as a unit so that the memory holds on to episodes and to impressions, investing them with an aura that much of the narrative does not possess. The status of the narrative is curiously wavering; one is not always certain one is reading a novel rather than a colorful tract of the Puritan persuasion. Moll is a formidable person who sustains our interest and our good will. But the story she tells seems alternately formed and formless, and frequently confuses the rival authorities of fiction and supposed fact.

Martin Price notes how little thematic unity Defoe imposes upon the stuff of existence that constitutes Moll Flanders. As a man who had suffered Newgate, Defoe gives us only one key indication of his novel’s vision: Moll was born in Newgate and will do anything to avoid ending there. The quest for cash is simply her equivalent of Crusoe’s literal quest to survive physically upon his island, except that Moll is more imaginative than the strangely compulsive Crusoe. He does only what he must, she does more, and we begin to see that her obsession has in it an actual taste for adventures. This taste surprises her, but then, as Price observes, she is always “surprised by herself and with herself.” She learns by what she does, and almost everything she does is marked by gusto. Her vehemence is her most winning quality, but most of her qualities are attractive. Male readers are
charmed by her, particularly male readers who both exalt and debase women, among whom Joyce and Faulkner remain the most prominent.

Puritan force, the drive for the soul’s exuberant self-recognition, is as much exemplified by Moll as by Bunyan’s protagonist. I suspect that was why William Hazlitt, the greatest literary critic to emerge from the tradition of Protestant Dissent, had so violent a negative reaction to *Moll Flanders*, which otherwise I would have expected him to admire. But, on some level, he evidently felt that she was a great discredit to Puritan sensibility. Charles Lamb greatly esteemed her and understood how authentic the Puritan dialectic was in her, pointing to “the intervening flashes of religious visitation upon the rude and uninstructed soul” and judging this to “come near to the tenderness of Bunyan.” Infuriated, Hazlitt responded, “Mr. Lamb admires *Moll Flanders*; would he marry Moll Flanders?” to which the only response a loyal Hazlittian could make is, “Would that Hazlitt had married a Moll Flanders, and been happy for once in a relationship with a woman.” All proportion abandoned Hazlitt when he wrote about *Moll Flanders*:

We ... may, nevertheless, add, for the satisfaction of the inquisitive reader, that *Moll Flanders* is utterly vile and detestable: Mrs. Flanders was evidently born in sin. The best parts are the account of her childhood, which is pretty and affecting; the fluctuation of her feelings between remorse and hardened impenitence in Newgate; and the incident of her leading off the horse from the inn-door, though she had no place to put it in after she had stolen it. This was carrying the love of thieving to an *ideal* pitch and making it perfectly disinterested and mechanical.

Hazlitt did not understand Moll because he could not bear to see the Puritan impulse displaced into “carrying the love of thieving to an *ideal* pitch.” Brilliant as the horse-stealing is, it is surpassed by Moll’s famous second theft, the episode of the child’s necklace:

I went out now by Day-light, and wandred about I knew not whither, and in search of I knew not what, when the Devil put a Snare in my way of a dreadful Nature indeed, and such a one as I have never had before or since; going thro’ *Aldersgate-street* there was a pretty little Child had been at a Dancing School, and was going home, all alone, and my Prompter, like a true Devil, set me upon this innocent Creature; I talk’d to it, and it prattl’d to me again, and I took it by the Hand and led it a long till I came to a
pav’d Alley that goes into Bartholomew Close, and I led it in there; the Child said that was not its way home; I said, yes, my Dear it is, I'll show you the way home; the Child had a little Necklace on of Gold Beads, and I had my Eye upon that, and in the dark of the Alley I stoop’d, pretending to mend the Child’s Clog that was loose, and took off her Necklace and the Child never felt it, and so led the Child on again: Here, I say, the Devil put me upon killing the child in the dark Alley, that it might not Cry; but the very thought frightened me so that I was ready to drop down, but I turn’d the Child about and bade it go back again, for that was not its way home; the Child said so she would, and I went thro’ into Bartholomew Close, and then turn’d round to another Passage that goes into Long-lane, so away into Charterhouse-Yard and out into St. John’s-street, then crossing into Smithfield, went down Chick-lane and into Field-lane to Holbourn-bridge, when mixing with the Crowd of People usually passing there, it was not possible to have been found out; and thus I enterpriz’d my second Sally into the World.

The thoughts of this Booty put out all the thoughts of the first, and the Reflections I had made wore quickly off; Poverty, as I have said, harden’d my Heart, and my own Necessities made me regardless of any thing: The last Affair left no great Concern upon me, for as I did the poor Child no harm, I only said to my self, I had given the Parents a just Reproof for their Negligence in leaving the poor little Lamb to come home by it self, and it would teach them to take more Care of it another time.

This String of Beads was worth about Twelve or Fourteen Pounds; I suppose it might have been formerly the Mother’s, for it was too big for the Child’s wear, but that, perhaps, the Vanity of the Mother to have her Child look Fine at the Dancing School, had made her let the Child wear it; and no doubt the Child had a Maid sent to take care of it, but she, like a careless jade, was taken up perhaps with some Fellow that had met her by the way, and so the poor Baby wandred till it fell into my Hands.

However, I did the Child no harm; I did not so much as fright it, for I had a great many tender Thoughts about me yet, and did nothing but what, as I may say, meer Necessity drove me to.

The remarkable moment, which horrifies us and must have scandalized Hazlitt, is when Moll says, “the Devil put me upon killing the Child in the dark Alley, that it might not Cry; but the very thought frightened me
so that I was ready to drop down.” We do not believe that Moll will slay the child, but she frightens us because of her capacity for surprising herself. We are reminded that we do not understand Moll, because Defoe does not understand her. That is his novel’s most peculiar strength and its most peculiar weakness. Gide’s Lafcadio, contemplating his own crime, murmurs that it is not about events that he is curious, but only about himself. That is in the spirit of Defoe’s Moll. The Protestant sensibility stands back from itself, and watches the spirits of good and of evil contend for it, with the detachment of a certain estrangement, a certain wonder at the immense energies that God has placed in one’s soul.
Twice a year, for many years now, I reread Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub*, not because I judge it to be the most powerful prose work in the language (which it is) but because it is good for me, though I dislike this great book as much as I admire it. A literary critic who is speculative, Gnostic, still imbued with High Romantic enthusiasm even in his later middle age, needs to read *A Tale of a Tub* as often as he can bear to do so. Swift is the most savage and merciless satirist and ironist in the history of Western literature, and one of his particularly favorite victims is the critic given to Gnostic speculations and Romantic enthusiasms.

*A Tale of a Tub* is a queerly shaped work, by design a parody of the seventeenth-century “anatomy,” as exemplified by Sir Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* or Robert Burton’s magnificent *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The most important section of the Tale outrageously is not even part of the book, but is the attached fragment, *A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*. The philosopher Descartes, one of the leaders of the Bowmen among the Moderns in their confrontation with the Ancients in Swift’s *The Battle of the Books*, is the inventor of the dualism that always will haunt the West, a dualism called “the Ghost in the Machine” by the analytical philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, and more grimly named *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* by Jonathan Swift. In *The Battle of the Books*, Descartes expiates his radical dualism by dying of an Aristotelian arrow intended for Bacon:

Then Aristotle observing Bacon advance with a furious Mien, drew his Bow to the Head, and let fly his Arrow, which mist the valiant Modern, and went hizzing over his Head; but Des-Cartes it hit; The Steel Point quickly found a Defect in his Head-piece; it pierced the
Leather and the Past-board, and went in at his Right Eye. The Torture of the Pain, whirled the valiant Bow-man round, till Death, like a Star of superior Influence, drew him into his own Vortex.

Not even the dignity of an heroic death is granted to poor Descartes, who pays for his cognitive defect and perishes via an anti-Baconian shaft, swallowed up into a vortex that parodies his own account of perception. Yet even this poor fate is better than the extraordinarily ferocious drubbing received by the Cartesian dualism in *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*:

But, if this Plant has found a Root in the Fields of Empire, and of Knowledge, it has fixt deeper, and spread yet farther upon Holy Ground. Wherein, though it hath pass’d under the general Name of Enthusiasm, and perhaps arisen from the same Original, yet hath it produced certain Branches of a very different Nature, however often mistaken for each other. The Word in its universal Acceptation, may be defined, *A lifting up of the Soul or its Faculties above Matter.* This Description will hold good in general; but I am only to understand it, as applied to Religion; wherein there are three general Ways of ejaculating the Soul, or transporting it beyond the Sphere of Matter. The first, is the immediate Act of God, and is called, Prophecy or Inspiration. The second, is the immediate Act of the Devil, and is termed Possession. The third, is the Product of natural Causes, the effect of strong imagination, Spleen, violent Anger, Fear, Grief, Pain, and the like. These three have been abundantly treated on by Authors, and therefore shall not employ my Enquiry. But, the fourth Method of Religious Enthusiasm, or launching out of the Soul, as it is purely an Effect of Artifice and Mechanick Operation, has been sparingly handled, or not at all, by any Writer; because tho’ it is an Art of great Antiquity, yet having been confined to few Persons, it long wanted those Advancements and Refinements, which it afterwards met with, since it has grown so Epidemick, and fallen into so many cultivating Hands.

All four “methods” reduce the spirit or soul to a gaseous vapor, the only status possible for any transcendental entity in the cosmos of Hobbes and Descartes, where the soul must be ejaculated in sublime transport “beyond the Sphere of Matter.” Within *A Tale of a Tub* proper, Swift keeps a very precarious balance indeed as he plays obsessively with the image of the spirit mechanically operated. So operated, the wretched soul is capable
of only one mode of movement: digression. What Freud called the drive is to Swift merely digression. Digression is a turning aside, a kind of walking in which you never go straight. Digress enough, in discourse or in living, and you will go mad. A Tale of a Tub is nothing but digression, because Swift bitterly believes there is nothing else in a Cartesian universe. Spirit digressing is an oxymoronic operation, and so falls from spirit to gaseous vapor. Vapor properly moves only by turning aside, by digressing.

Swift’s principal victims, all high priests of digression, he calls “the Learned Aeolists,” acolytes of the god of the winds, among whom he counts: “All Pretenders to Inspiration whatsoever.” His savage indignation, so constant in him as a writer, maintains a consistent fury whenever the Aeolists are his subject. They are introduced as apocalyptics for whom origin and end intermix:

The Learned Aeolists, maintain the Original Cause of all Things to be Wind, from which Principle this whole Universe was at first produced, and into which it must at last be resolved; that the same Breath which had kindled, and blew up the Flame of Nature, should one Day blow it out.

As he is kindled by the Aeolists, Swift’s Tale-teller mounts to an intensity worthy of his subject, and attains an irony that is itself a kind of hysteria:

It is from this Custom of the Priests, that some Authors maintain these Aeolists, to have been very antient in the World. Because, the Delivery of their Mysteries, which I have just now mention’d, appears exactly the same with that of other antient Oracles, whose Inspirations were owing to certain subterraneous Effluviums of Wind, delivered with the same Pain to the Priest, and much about the same Influence on the People. It is true indeed, that these were frequently managed and directed by Female Officers, whose Organs were understood to be better disposed for the Admission of those Oracular Gusts, as entering and passing up thro’ a Receptacle of greater Capacity, and causing also a Pruriency by the Way, such as with due Management; hath been refined from a Carnal, into a Spiritual Extasie. And to strengthen this profound Conjecture, it is farther insisted, that this Custom of Female Priests is kept up still in certain refined Colleges of our Modern Aeolists, who are agreed to receive their Inspiration, derived thro’ the Receptacle aforesaid, like their Ancestors, the Sibyls.
This ends in a passing blow at the Quakers, but its power is dangerously close to its horror of becoming what it is working so hard to reject. Rather like King Lear, the Tale-teller fears the ascent of vapors from abdomen to head, fears that hysteria, the womb or mother, will unman him:

O how this mother swells up toward my heart!
Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow,
Thy element’s below.—

Swift cannot be, does not want to be, the Tale-teller, but the Tale-teller may be, in part, Swift’s failed defense against the madness of digression, and the digressiveness that is madness. Compulsiveness of and in the Tale-teller becomes a terrifying counter-Sublime of counter-Enthusiasm, a digressiveness turned against digressiveness, a vapor against vapors:

Besides, there is something Individual in human Minds, that easily kindles at the accidental Approach and Collision of certain Circumstances, which tho’ of paltry and mean Appearance, do often flame out into the greatest Emergencies of Life. For great Turns are not always given by strong Hands, but by lucky Adaption, and at proper Seasons; and it is of no import, where the Fire was kindled, if the Vapor has once got up into the Brain. For the upper Region of Man, is furnished like the middle Region of the Air; The Materials are formed from Causes of the widest Difference, yet produce at last the same Substance and Effect. Mists arise from the Earth, Steams from Dunghils, Exhalations from the Sea, and Smoak from Fire; yet all Clouds are the same in Composition, as well as Consequences: and the Fumes issuing from a Jakes, will furnish as comely and useful a Vapor, as Incense from an Altar. Thus far, I suppose, will easily be granted me; and then it will follow, that as the Face of Nature never produces Rain, but when it is overcast and disturbed, so Human Understanding, seated in the Brain, must be troubled and overspread by Vapours, ascending from the lower Faculties, to water the Invention, and render it fruitful.

Are these the accents of satire? The passage itself is overcast and disturbed, not so much troubled and overspread by vapors ascending from below, as it is by the not wholly repressed anxiety that anyone, including the Tale-teller and Swift, is vulnerable to the Mechanical Operation of the
Spirit. King Henry IV of France (Henry of Navarre), rightly called “the Great,” is the subject of the next paragraph, which tells of grand preparations for battle, perhaps to advance “a Scheme for Universal Monarchy,” until the assassination of Henry IV released the spirit or mighty vapor from the royal body:

Now, is the Reader exceeding curious to learn, from whence this Vapour took its Rise, which had so long set the Nations at a Gaze? What secret Wheel, what hidden Spring could put into Motion so wonderful an Engine? It was afterwards discovered, that the Movement of this whole Machine had been directed by an absent Female, whose Eyes had raised a Protuberancy, and before Emission, she was removed into an Enemy’s Country. What should an unhappy Prince do in such ticklish Circumstances as these?

What indeed? This is genial, and quite relaxed, for Swift, but his subsequent analysis is darker, rhetorically and in moral substance:

Having to no purpose used all peaceable Endeavours, the collected part of the Semen, raised and enflamed, became adust, converted to Choler, turned head upon the spinal Duct, and ascended to the Brain. The very same Principle that influences a Bully to break the Windows of a Whore, who has jilted him, naturally stirs up a Great Prince to raise mighty Armies, and dream of nothing but Sieges, Battles, and Victories.

As a reduction, this continues to have its exuberance, but the phrase, “raised and enflamed” is at the center, and is yet another Swiftian assault upon Enthusiasm, another classical irony set against a romantic Sublime. The Author or Tale-teller forsakes digressiveness to become Swift at his calmest and most deadly, a transformation itself digressive. Swift cannot be censured for wanting it every which way, since he is battling not for our right reason, but for our sanity, and ruggedly he fights for us, against us, and for himself, against himself.

_Gulliver’s Travels_

The terrible greatness of _A Tale of a Tub_ has much to do with our sense of its excess, with its force being so exuberantly beyond its form (or its calculated formlessness). _Gulliver’s Travels_, the later and lesser work, has
survived for the common reader, whereas Swift’s early masterpiece has not. Like its descendant, Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus, *A Tale of a Tub* demands too much of the reader, but it more than rewards those demands, and it now seems unclear whether Sartor Resartus does or not. Gulliver’s first two voyages are loved by children (of all ages), while the third and fourth voyages, being more clearly by the Swift who wrote *A Tale of a Tub*, now make their appeal only to those who would benefit most from an immersion in the *Tub*.

Gulliver himself is both the strength and the weakness of the book, and his character is particularly ambiguous in the great fourth voyage, to the country of the rational Houyhnhnms and the bestial Yahoos, who are and are not, respectively, horses and humans. The inability to resist a societal perspectivism is at once Gulliver’s true weakness, and his curious strength as an observer. Swift’s barely concealed apprehension that the self is an abyss, that the ego is a fiction masking our fundamental nothingness, is exemplified by Gulliver, but on a level of commonplaceness far more pathetic than anything reductive in the Tale-teller. Poor Gulliver is a good enough man, but almost devoid of imagination. One way of describing him might be to name him the least Nietzschean character ever to appear in any narrative. Though a ceaseless traveler, Gulliver lacks any desire to be elsewhere, or to be different. His pride is blind, and all too easily magnifies to pomposity, or declines to a self-contempt that is more truly a contempt for all other humans. If the Tale-teller is a Swiftian parody of one side of Swift, the anti-Cartesian, anti-Hobbesian, then Gulliver is a Swiftian parody of the great ironist’s own misanthropy.

The reader of “A Voyage to Lilliput” is unlikely to forget the fatuity of Gulliver at the close of chapter 6:

I am here obliged to vindicate the Reputation of an excellent Lady, who was an innocent Sufferer upon my Account. The Treasurer took a Fancy to be jealous of his Wife, from the Malice of some evil Tongues, who informed him that her Grace had taken a violent Affection for my Person; and the Court-Scandal ran for some Time that she once came privately to my Lodging. This I solemnly declare to be a most infamous Falshood, without any Grounds, farther than that her Grace was pleased to treat me with all innocent Marks of Freedom and Friendship. I own she came often to my House, but always publickly ... I should not have dwelt so long upon this Particular, if it had been a Point wherein the Reputation of a great Lady is so nearly concerned, to say nothing of my own; although I had the Honour to be a Nardac, which the
Treasurer himself is not; for all the World knows he is only a Clumglum, a Title inferior by one Degree, as that of a Marquess is to a Duke in England; yet I allow he preceded me in right of his Post.

The great Nardac has so fallen into the societal perspective of Lilliput, that he sublimely forgets he is twelve times the size of the Clumglum’s virtuous wife, who therefore would have been quite safe with him were they naked and alone. Escaping back to England, Gulliver has learned nothing and sets forth on “A Voyage to Brobdingnag,” land of the giants, where he learns less than nothing:

The Learning of this People is very defective; consisting only in Morality, History, Poetry and Mathematicks; wherein they must be allowed to excel. But, the last of these is wholly applied to what may be useful in Life; to the Improvement of Agriculture and all mechanical Arts; so that among us it would be little esteemed. And as to Ideas, Entities, Abstractions and Transcendentals, I could never drive the least Conception into their Heads.

No Law of that Country must exceed in Words the Number of Letters in their Alphabet; which consists only of two and twenty. But indeed, few of them extend even to that Length. They are expressed in the most plain and simple Terms, wherein those People are not Mercurial enough to discover above one Interpretation. And, to write a Comment upon any Law, is a capital Crime. As to the Decision of civil Causes, or Proceedings against Criminals, their Precedents are so few, that they have little Reason to boast of any extraordinary Skill in either.

Effective as this is, it seems too weak an irony for Swift, and we are pleased when the dull Gulliver abandons Brobdingnag behind him. The Third Voyage, more properly Swiftian, takes us first to Laputa, the floating island, at once a parody of a Platonic academy yet also a kind of science fiction punishment machine, always ready to crush earthlings who might assert liberty:

If any Town should engage in Rebellion or Mutiny, fall into violent Factions, or refuse to pay the usual Tribute; the King hath two Methods of reducing them to Obedience. The first and the mildest Course is by keeping the Island hovering over such a Town, and the Lands about it; whereby he can deprive them of the
Benefit of the Sun and the Rain, and consequently afflict the Inhabitants with Dearth and Diseases. And if the Crime deserve it, they are at the same time pelted from above with great Stones, against which they have no Defence, but by creeping into Cellars or Caves, while the Roofs of their Houses are beaten to Pieces. But if they still continue obstinate, or offer to raise Insurrections; he proceeds to the last Remedy, by letting the Island drop directly upon their Heads, which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men. However, this is an Extremity to which the Prince is seldom driven, neither indeed is he willing to put it in Execution; nor dare his Ministers advise him to an Action, which as it would render them odious to the People, so it would be a great Damage to their own Estates that lie all below; for the Island is the King’s Demesn.

The maddening lack of affect on Gulliver’s part begins to tell upon us here; the stolid narrator is absurdly inadequate to the grim force of his own recital, grimmer for us now even than it could have been for the prophetic Swift. Gulliver inexorably and blandly goes on to Lagado, where he observes the grand Academy of Projectors, Swift’s famous spoof of the British Royal Society, but here the ironies go curiously flat, and I suspect we are left with the irony of irony, which wearies because by repetition it seems to become compulsive. Yet it may be that here, as subsequently with the immortal but senile and noxious Struldbriggs, the irony of irony is highly deliberate, in order to prepare Gulliver, and the battered reader, for the great shock of reversal that lies just ahead in the Country of the Houyhnhnms, which is also the land of the Yahoos, “a strange Sort of Animal.”

Critical reactions to Gulliver’s fourth voyage have an astonishing range, from Thackeray calling its moral “horrible, shameful unmanly, blasphemous” to T. S. Eliot regarding it as a grand triumph for the human spirit. Eliot’s judgment seems to me as odd as Thackeray’s, and presumably both writers believed that the Yahoos were intended as a just representation of the natural man, with Thackeray humanistically disagreeing, and the neo-Christian Eliot all too happy to concur. If that were the proper reading of Swift, we would have to conclude that the great satirist had drowned in his own misanthropy, and had suffered the terrible irony, after just evading the becoming one with his Tale-teller, of joining himself to the uneducable Gulliver. Fit retribution perhaps, but it is unwise to underestimate the deep cunning of Swift.

Martin Price accurately reminds us that Swift’s attitudes do not
depend solely upon Christian morals, but stem also from a traditional secular wisdom. Peace and decency are wholly compatible with Christian teaching, but are secular virtues as well. Whatever the Yahoos represent, they are not a vision of secular humanity devoid of divine grace, since they offend the classical view of man quite as profoundly as they seem to suit an ascetic horror of our supposedly natural condition.

Clearly, it is the virtues of the Houyhnhnms, and not the squalors of the Yahoos, that constitute a burden for critics and for common readers. I myself agree with Price, when he remarks of the Houyhnhnms: “They are rational horses, neither ideal men nor a satire upon others’ ideals for man.” Certainly they cannot represent a human rational ideal, since none of us would wish to lack all impulse, or any imagination whatsoever. Nor do they seem a plausible satire upon the Deistic vision, a satire worthier of Blake than of Swift, and in any case contradicted by everything that truly is admirable about these cognitively advanced horses. A rational horse is a kind of oxymoron, and Swift’s irony is therefore more difficult than ever to interpret:

My Master heard me with great Appearances of Uneasiness in his Countenance; because *Doubting or not believing*, are so little known in this Country, that the Inhabitants cannot tell how to behave themselves under such Circumstances. And I remember in frequent Discourses with my Master concerning the Nature of Manhood, in other Parts of the World; having Occasion to talk of *Lying*, and *false Representation*, it was with much Difficulty that he comprehended what I meant; although he had otherwise a most acute Judgment. For he argued thus; That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if any one *said the Thing which was not*, these Ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in Ignorance; for I am led to believe a Thing *Black* when it is *White*, and *Short* when it is *Long*. And these were all the Notions he had concerning the Faculty of *Lying*, so perfectly well understood, and so universally practised among human Creatures.

Are we altogether to admire Gulliver’s Master here, when that noble Houyhnhnm not only does not know how to react to the human propensity to say *the thing which was not*, but lacks even the minimal imagination that might allow him to apprehend the human need for fictions, a “sickness not ignoble,” as Keats observed in *The Fall of Hyperion*? Since the
noble Houyhnhnm finds the notion “that the Yahoos were the only governing Animals” in Gulliver’s country “altogether past his Conception,” are we again to admire him for an inability that would make it impossible for us to read Gulliver’s Travels (or King Lear, for that matter)? The virtues of Swift’s rational horses would not take us very far, if we imported them into our condition, but can that really be one of Swift’s meanings? And what are we to do with Swiftian ironies that are too overt already, and become aesthetically intolerable if we take up the stance of the sublimely rational Houyhnhnm?

My Master likewise mentioned another Quality, which his Servants had discovered in several Yahoos, and to him was wholly unaccountable. He said, a Fancy would sometimes take a Yahoo, to retire into a Corner, to lie down and howl, and groan, and spurn away all that came near him, although he were young and fat, and wanted neither Food nor Water; nor did the Servants imagine what could possibly ail him. And the only Remedy they found was to set him to hard Work, after which he would infallibly come to himself. To this I was silent out of Partiality to my own Kind; yet here I could plainly discover the true Seeds of Spleen, which only seizeth on the Lazy, the Luxurious, and the Rich; who, if they were forced to undergo the same Regimen, I would undertake for the Cure.

His Honour had farther observed, that a Female-Yahoo would often stand behind a Bank or a Bush, to gaze on the young Males passing by, and then appear, and hide, using many antick Gestures and Grimaces; at which time it was observed, that she had a most offensive Smell; and when any of the Males advanced, would slowly retire, looking often back, and with a counterfeit Shew of Fear, run off into some convenient Place where she knew the Male would follow her.

Swift rather dubiously seems to want it every which way at once, so that the Yahoos both are and are not representations of ourselves, and the Houyhnhnms are and are not wholly admirable or ideal. Or is it the nature of irony itself, which must weary us, or finally make us long for a true sublime, even if it should turn out to be grotesque? Fearfully strong writer that he was, Swift as ironist resembles Kafka far more than say Orwell, among modern authors. We do not know precisely how to read “In the Penal Colony” or The Trial, and we certainly do not know exactly how to interpret Gulliver’s fourth voyage. What most merits’ interpretation in
Kafka is the extraordinary perversity of imagination with which he so deliberately makes himself uninterpretable. Is Swift a similar problem for the reader? What is the proper response to the dismaying conclusion of *Gulliver’s Travels*?

Having thus answered the *only* Objection that can be raised against me as a Traveller; I here take a final Leave of my Courteous Readers, and return to enjoy my own Speculations in my little Garden at Redriff; to apply those excellent Lessons of Virtue which I learned among the Houyhnhnms; to instruct the Yahoos of my own Family as far as I shall find them docible Animals; to behold my Figure often in a Glass, and thus if possible habituate my self by Time to tolerate the Sight of a human Creature: To lament the Brutality of Houyhnhnms in my own Country, but always treat their Persons with Respect, for the Sake of my noble Master, his Family, his Friends, and the whole Houyhnhnm Race, whom these of ours have the Honour to resemble in all their Lineaments, however their Intellectuals came to degenerate.

I began last Week to permit my Wife to sit at Dinner with me, at the Farthest End of a long Table; and to answer (but with the utmost Brevity) the few Questions I ask her. Yet the Smell of a Yahoo continuing very offensive, I always keep my Nose well stopt with Rue, Lavender, or Tobacco-Leaves. And although it be hard for a Man late in Life to remove old Habits; I am not altogether out of Hopes in some Time to suffer a Neighbour Yahoo in my Company, without the Apprehensions I am yet under of his Teeth or his Claws.

Who are those “Courteous Readers” of whom Gulliver takes his final leave here? We pity the poor fellow, but we do not so much pity Mrs. Gulliver as wonder how she can tolerate the insufferable wretch. Yet the final paragraphs have a continued power that justifies their fame, even as we continue to see Gulliver as deranged:

My Reconcilement to the Yahoo-kind in general might not be so difficult, if they would be content with those Vices and Follies only which Nature hath entitled them to. I am not in the least provoked at the Sight of a Lawyer, a Pick-pocket, a Colonel, a Fool, a Lord, a Gamster, a Politician, a Whoremunger, a Physician, an Evidence, a Suborner, an Attorney, a Traytor, or the
like: This is all according to the due Course of Things: But, when I behold a Lump of Deformity, and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with Pride, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an Animal and such a Vice could tally together. The wise and virtuous Houyhnhnms, who abound in all Excellencies that can adorn a rational Creature, have no Name for this Vice in their Language, whereby they describe the detestable Qualities of their Yahoos; among which they were not able to distinguish this of Pride, for want of thoroughly understanding Human Nature, as it sheweth it self in other Countries, where that Animal presides. But I, who had more Experience, could plainly observe some Rudiments of it among the wild Yahoos.

But the Houyhnhnms, who live under the Government of Reason, are no more proud of the good Qualities they possess, than I should be for not wanting a Leg or an Arm, which no Man in his Wits would boast of, although he must be miserable without them. I dwell the longer upon this Subject from the Desire I have to make the Society of an English Yahoo by any Means insupportable; and therefore I here intreat those who have any Tincture of this absurd Vice, that they will not presume to appear in my Sight.

What takes precedence here, the palpable hit at the obscenity of false human pride, or the madness of Gulliver, who thinks he is a Yahoo, longs to be a Houyhnhnm, and could not bear to be convinced that he is neither? As in A Tale of a Tub, Swift audaciously plays at the farthest limits of irony, limits that make satire impossible, because no norm exists to which we might hope to return.
I first read Clarissa as a Cornell undergraduate in the late 1940s, under the skilled direction of my teacher, William M. Sale, Jr., a fierce partisan of Richardson and a remarkable critic of fiction. Since I cannot read a novel other than the way that Sale taught me, it is not surprising that forty years later I hold on fast to his canonical judgment that Clarissa is the finest novel in the English language. Rereading it through the years, I find it the only novel that can rival even Proust, despite Proust’s evident advantages. The long and astonishing sequence that ends the novel, Clarissa’s protracted death and its aftermath, is clearly at one of the limits of the novel as an art. I find myself fighting not to weep just before the moment of Clarissa’s death, but as a critic I submit that these would be cognitive tears, and would say little about me but much about Richardson’s extraordinary powers of representation. It remains a mystery that Richardson, with no strong novelistic precursors, should have been able to make Clarissa Harlowe the most persuasive instance of a kind of secular saint, a strong heroine, in the entire subsequent history of the Western novel.

Ian Watt, still our best historian of the rise of the novel, emphasizes that one of Richardson’s major advances upon Defoe was in solving the problem of plot by centering it upon a single action: courtship between the sexes. That action necessarily entails Richardson’s other grand innovation: the novelistic representation of the protagonists’ inwardness, a mode of mimesis in which Richardson had only the one inevitable precursor, Shakespeare. If Jan Hendrik van den Berg is right, then historical psychology is essentially the study of the growing inner self, from Luther’s “inner man” (1520) through Shakespeare’s almost fully secularized tragic heroes.
on to Rousseau's and Wordsworth's solitary egos confronting, with ecstasy, the estrangement of things in a “sense of nature.” *Clarissa* (1747–48) preceded all of Rousseau’s publications, so that while Rousseau could have had something to tell Richardson about the sentiments and sensibility of inwardness, he did not teach the first great English novelist about the fictional representation of the inner life.

Whether anyone since has surpassed Richardson in this mimetic mode seems to me at least doubtful. George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke, Henry James’s Isabel Archer, D.H. Lawrence’s Ursula Brangwen, and even Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway, do not take us farther into the portrayal of a single consciousness than the original Clarissa brings us, and perhaps they all of them retreat to some degree from her full inwardness. Price remarks that “Richardson has transformed highly particularized characters so that their dense and familiar social setting fades away in the course of the slow disclosure of consequences.” That transformation, in *Clarissa* and to some extent in Lovelace, replaces the social and historical context with a not less than tragic inwardness. If Clarissa is a saint and a martyr, then what she bears heroic witness to is not so much supernatural faith in Christ as it is natural faith in the heroic integrity of her own perpetually growing inner self.

II

Richardson’s power as a novelist centers in the wildly antithetical and fiercely ambivalent relationship between Clarissa and Lovelace, who destroy both themselves and one another in what may be the most equivocal instance of a mutual passion in all of Western literature. I do not venture that assertion lightly, but no single love affair in Shakespeare, Tolstoy, or Proust seems comparable in its strength and complexity to the terrible agon that consumes Clarissa and Lovelace. We can no more speculate upon what a marriage between Richardson’s protagonists might have been than we can visualize a world harmoniously ruled by a perpetually united Antony and Cleopatra. Lovelace and Clarissa are mighty opposites yet uncannily complementary, and it is Richardson’s consummate art to have so created them that they must undo one another.

I begin with Lovelace, if only because his power of being, immense as it is, finally is eclipsed by the transcendental transformation of the gorgeously dying Clarissa. But that indeed is a finality; until Clarissa begins to die, the sheer force of her resistance to Lovelace compels him to become even more himself. Conversely, Lovelace’s aggression greatly strengthens Clarissa, though the cost of her confirmation is her life. In the novel’s most
terrible irony, the slow dying of Clarissa directly causes a steady waning in Lovelace, a dwindling down from a heroic Satanist to a self-ruined libertine, drowning in remorse and confusion.

A.D. McKillop usefully traced Lovelace’s literary ancestry to the libertine man-of-fashion in Restoration comedy and to the Herculean hero of Dryden’s dramas, such as *Aureng-Zebe* and *The Conquest of Granada*. This lineage accounts both for some of Lovelace’s obvious faults and for his few but authentic virtues: healthy disdain for societal appearances and for false morality, a curiously wistful longing for true virtue, and a brutal honesty. But a fusion of a Restoration witty rake and Herculean rhetorician is no more a match for Clarissa Harlowe than a Jacobean hero-villain would have been, and part of the novel’s fascination is in watching Lovelace slowly realize that Clarissa is necessarily an apocalyptic defeat for him. The turning point is not the rape, but a moment late in Letter 266, when Lovelace suddenly apprehends the dialectical entrapment that he and Clarissa constitute for one another:

A horrid dear creature!—By my soul, she made me shudder! She had need, indeed, to talk of her unhappiness, in falling into the hands of the only man in the world who could have used her as I have used her! She is the only woman in the world who could have shocked and disturbed me as she has done—So we are upon a foot in that respect. And I think I have the worst of it by much. Since very little has been my joy; very much my trouble: and her punishment, as she calls it, is over: but when mine will, or what it may be, who can tell?

Here, only recapitulating (think, then, how I must be affected at the time), I was forced to leave off, and sing a song to myself. I aimed at a lively air; but I croaked rather than sung: and fell into the old dismal thirtieth of January strain. I hemmed up for a sprightlier note; but it would not do: and at last I ended, like a malefactor, in a dead psalm melody.

High-ho!—I gape like an unfledged kite in its nest, wanting to swallow a chicken, bobbed at its mouth by its marauding dam!—

What a devil ails me!—I can neither think nor write!—

Lie down, pen, for a moment!—

The devil that ails him is the beginning of his own end, his falling outwards and downwards from his last shreds of a libertine ideology into the dreadful inner space of his defeat by Clarissa, his enforced realization that self-willing and self-assertion are permanently over for him. Clarissa, a
great Puritan withholder of esteem will not accept him at his own evaluation, and he begins to know that pragmatically they have destroyed one another. His actual death is a release from the death-in-life he has suffered since Clarissa’s death:

He was delirious, at times, in the two last hours; and then several times cried out, Take her away! Take her away! but named nobody. And sometimes praised some lady (that Clarissa, I suppose, whom he had called upon when he received his death’s wound) calling her, Sweet Excellence! Divine Creature! Fair Sufferer!—And once he said, Look down, blessed Spirit, look down!—And there stopped—his lips however moving.

At nine in the morning, he was seized with convulsions, and fainted away; and it was a quarter of an hour before he came out of them.

His few last words I must not omit, as they show an ultimate composure; which may administer some consolation to his honourable friends.

_Blessed_—said he, addressing himself no doubt to Heaven; for his dying eyes were lifted up—a strong convulsion prevented him for a few moments saying more—But recovering, he again with great fervour (lifting up his eyes, and his spread hands) pronounced the word _Blessed_—Then, in a seeming ejaculation, he spoke inwardly so as not to be understood: at last, he distinctly pronounced these three words,

LET THIS EXPIATE!

And then, his head sinking on his pillow, he expired; at about half an hour after ten.

Lovelace dies in his own acquired religion, which is the worship of the blessed Clarissa, whom he personally has converted into something considerably more than a saint or even an angel. Being himself pure will and having been conquered by an even purer one, he worships his conqueror as God. Dying as a Clarissian rather than a Christian, as it were; Lovelace sustains his final pride, a peculiar sense of glory that has gone beyond remorse and has little left in it of mere love. This is hardly expiation in any moral or spiritual sense whatsoever, as Richardson on some level must have known, but is certainly an aesthetic expiation, worthy of Baudelaire or of Proust.
III

Clarissa, as is radiantly appropriate, ends many trajectories beyond her lover’s destination. I dissent from the entire critical tradition, from Watt and Price to my younger contemporaries, that has overemphasized Clarissa’s supposed self-deceptions. Dr. Samuel Johnson first noted that Clarissa could not confront the truth of having fallen in love with Lovelace, but that hardly seems to me a duplicity in her, however unknowing. We cannot choose whom we are free to love, but Clarissa wars more strongly against every mode of overdetermination than any comparable character in secular fiction. What matters to her, and this is her greatness, is that her will cannot be violated, even by her own affections. She refuses to see herself as anyone’s victim—whether Lovelace’s, her family’s, or her own turning against the self.

Lovelace becomes a wounded narcissist, and so is aggressive down to the end. But Clarissa could honestly say, if she wanted to, that it is not her narcissism but her eros that has been crucified. If Lovelace indeed represented her desire for what she did not have, and was not in herself, then her desire died, not so paradoxically, with the violation of her body. Lovelace becomes still more naturalistic after the rape, but she is transformed into a dualist and begins the process of dying to the body of this life. The issue has nothing to do with society and little to do with conventional reality. It is an aesthetic issue, the ancient agon of the Sublime mode, which always seeks to answer the triple question: more? equal to? less than? She was never less than Lovelace, hoped vainly he could be reformed into her equal, and knows now that she is far more than he is, and more indeed than anyone else in her world. At that height of the Sublime, she can only commence dying.

If her will is to remain inviolate, then its independence and integrity must be manifested by a death that is anything but a revenge, whether it be against Lovelace, her family, herself, or even against time. Rather, her death is the true expiation, which can bring forgiveness upon everyone else involved, though I surmise that she is more interested in forgiving herself even as she forgives the bewildered Lovelace. A Puritan saint, as Shaw’s St. Joan shows, is rather more interested in her own integrity than in anyone else’s suffering. The cost for Clarissa or for Shaw’s St. Joan is an absolute, inner isolation, but is that not the essence of Protestantism?

There is nothing like Clarissa’s virtually endless death-scene in all of literature, and while no one would wish it longer I do not wish it any shorter. Extraordinary as the actual moment of death is, in Letter 481, the most characteristic revelation of Clarissa’s apotheosis is in Letter 475:
Her breath being very short, she desired another pillow; and hav-
ing two before, this made her in a manner sit up in her bed; and
she spoke then with more distinctness; and seeing us greatly con-
cerned, forgot her own sufferings to comfort us; and a charming
lecture she gave us, though a brief one, upon the happiness of a
timely preparation and upon the hazards of a late repentance,
when the mind, as she observed, was so much weakened, as well as
the body, as to render a poor soul unable to contend with its own
infirmities.

I beseech ye, my good friends, proceeded she, mourn not for
one who mourns not, nor has cause to mourn, for herself. On the
contrary, rejoice with me that all my worldly troubles are so near
their end. Believe me, sirs, that I would not, if I might, choose to
live, although the pleasantest part of my life were to come over
again: and yet eighteen years of it, out of nineteen, have been very
pleasant. To be so much exposed to temptation, and to be so liable
to fail in the trial, who would not rejoice that all her dangers are
over!—All I wished was pardon and blessing from my dear par-
ents. Easy as my departure seems to promise to be, it would have
been still easier had I had that pleasure. BUT GOD ALMIGHTY
WOULD NOT LET ME DEPEND FOR COMFORT UPON ANY BUT HIM-
SELF.

This is certainly the purest Protestantism, and we might still be tempt-
ed to call this pride, particularly since Clarissa reminds us that she is all of
nineteen years old. But we do Clarissa violence to name her total knowl-
edge as a form of pride. The Protestant will by now has been blamed for
practically everything that has gone wrong in our spiritual, intellectual,
economic, and political life, as well as our sexual life, and the United States
is the evening land of Protestantism and so the final stage for the travails
of its will. Clarissa, as she dies, shows us the other side, the glory of the
Protestant will. If God would not let Clarissa depend for comfort upon any
but himself, then he gave her the ultimate accolade of the Protestant will:
to accept esteem only where it chose to bestow esteem, and only on its own
terms.
Martin Price remarks that “Fielding can reward his heroes because they do not seek a reward.” As a critical observation, this is in Fielding’s own spirit and tells us again what kind of novel Fielding invented, a comic Odyssey, ancestor of Smollett and Dickens, and of Joyce’s Ulysses. My teacher Frederick W. Hilles liked to compare Tom Jones to Ulysses, while acknowledging that Fielding the narrator was neither invisible nor indifferent. Certainly Fielding was a fabulous artificer, which must be why he provoked so formidable a critical enemy as Dr. Samuel Johnson, who loved Alexander Pope while despising the most Popean of all novelists. Johnson vastly preferred Samuel Richardson to Fielding, a preference I myself share, though without prejudice to Fielding, since Richardson’s Clarissa seems to me still the strongest novel in the language, surpassing even Austen’s Emma, Eliot’s Middlemarch, and James’s Portrait of a Lady, all of them its descendants. Tom Jones founds another line, the rival tradition that includes Dickens and Joyce, novelists as exuberant as Fielding, and metaphysically and psychologically more problematic.

Samuel Johnson evidently resented what he took to be Fielding’s simplistic vision, a resentment understandable in a great moralist who believed that human life was everywhere a condition in which much was to be endured, and little to be enjoyed. No one can match Johnson as a compelling moralist, but he necessarily undervalued Fielding’s moral shrewdness. The true issue between Richardson and Fielding was in modes of representation, in their different views of mimesis. It is as though Richardson and Fielding split Shakespeare between them, with Richardson absorbing the Shakespearean power to portray inwardness, and Fielding inheriting Shakespeare’s uncanny ease in depicting a romance world that becomes more real than reality.
Johnson told the protesting Boswell that “there is more knowledge of the heart in one letter of Richardson’s, than in all Tom Jones.” To Johnson, the personages in Fielding were “characters of manners,” but in Richardson they were “characters of nature.” This distinction is at least critical; one feels that many modern scholars who prefer Fielding to Richardson do so upon Coleridge’s affective premises: “and how charming, how wholesome, Fielding always is! To take him up after Richardson is like emerging from a sick-room heated by stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day in May.” That has the same persuasiveness as Richardson’s explanation of why he would not read Tom Jones: “I was told, that it was a rambling Collection of Waking Dreams, in which Probability was not observed.”

The seven volumes of Clarissa were published throughout the year from December 1747 through December 1748; Tom Jones came out in February 1749. Rivalry between the two novels was inevitable, and both seem to have sold very well. Between them, they established the modern novel, still the dominant literary form now, after two and a half centuries. Ian Watt, the definitive chronicler of The Rise of the Novel (1957), probably achieved the most balanced judgment on Fielding’s crucial strengths and limitations:

In his effort to infuse the new genre with something of the Shakespearean virtues Fielding departed too far from formal realism to initiate a viable tradition, but his work serves as a perpetual reminder that if the new genre was to challenge older literary forms it had to find a way of conveying not only a convincing impression but a wise assessment of life, an assessment that could only come from taking a much wider view than Defoe or Richardson or the affairs of mankind.

Tom Jones

What is Shakespearean about Tom Jones? The violent, daemonic, mindless energy of Squire Western, or the bodily ego rampant, is certainly part of the answer. Martin Price calls Western the finest English comic character after Falstaff, and the judgment seems indisputable. Yet here also a shadow falls. Falstaff, like his precursor, the Wife of Bath, is a heroic vitalist, raising vitalism, as she does, to the sublime of wit. Like Falstaff, the Wife is a great parodist, and a dangerously sophisticated Bible interpreter, as Talbot Donaldson demonstrates. But Western is energy without mind, and so is himself a living parody of vitalism. Fielding’s genius nevertheless is so incarnated in Western that he breaks the limits of representation, and leaps
out of the novel into that supermimetic domain where Falstaff and the Wife of Bath join Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Western’s simplicity is so exuberant and physical that it achieves a new kind of complexity, as in this astonishing comic reversal:

*Western* had been long impatient for the Event of this Conference, and was just now arrived at the Door to listen; when having heard the last Sentiments of his Daughter’s Heart, he lost all Temper, and bursting open the Door in a Rage, cried out.—“It is a Lie. It is a d-n’d Lie. It is all owing to that d-d’d Rascal *Juones*; and if she could get at un, she’d ha un any Hour of the Day.” Here *Allworthy* interposed, and addressing himself to the Squire with some Anger in his Look, he said, “Mr. *Western*, you have not kept your Word with me. You promised to abstain from all Violence.”—“Why so I did,” cries *Western*, “as long as it was possible; but to hear a Wench telling such confounded Lies.—Zounds! Doth she think if she can make Vools of other Volk, she can make one of me?—No, no, I know her better than thee dost.” “I am sorry to tell you, Sir,” answered *Allworthy*, “it doth not appear by your Behaviour to this young Lady, that you know her at all. I ask Pardon for what I say; but I think our Intimacy, your own Desires, and the Occasion justify me. She is your Daughter, Mr. *Western*, and I think she doth Honour to your Name. If I was capable of Envy, I should sooner envy you on this Account, than any other Man whatever.”—“Odrabbit it,” cries the Squire, “I wish she was thine with all my Heart—wouldst soon be glad to be rid of the Trouble o’ her.”—“Indeed, my good Friend,” answered *Allworthy*, “you yourself are the Cause of all the Trouble you complain of. Place that Confidence in the young Lady which she so well deserves, and I am certain you will be the happiest Father on Earth.”—“I Confidence in her!” cries the Squire.—“’Sblood! what Confidence can I place in her, when she won’t do as I would ha her? Let her gi but Consent to marry as I would ha her, and I’ll place as much Confidence in her as wouldst ha me.”—“You have no Right, Neighbour,” answered *Allworthy*, “to insist on any such Consent. A negative Voice your Daughter allows you, and God and Nature have thought proper to allow you no more.” “A negative Voice?” cries the Squire—“Ay! ay! I’ll shew you what a negative Voice I ha. Go along, go into your Chamber, go, you Stubborn.”—“Indeed, Mr. *Western*,” said *Allworthy*,—“Indeed, you use her cruelly—I cannot bear to see this—You shall, you must behave to her in a
kinder Manner. She deserves the best of Treatment.” “Yes, yes,” said the Squire, “I know what she deserves: Now she’s gone, I’ll shew you what she deserves—See here, Sir, here is a Letter from my Cousin, my Lady Bellaston, in which she is so kind to gi me to understand, that the Fellow is got out of Prison again; and here she advises me to take all the Care I can o’ the Wench. Odzookers! Neighbour Allworthy, you don’t know what it is to govern a Daughter.”

The Squire ended his Speech with some Compliments to his own Sagacity; and then Allworthy, after a formal Preface, acquaint-ed him with the whole Discovery which he had made concerning Jones, with his Anger to Blifil, and with every Particular which hath been disclosed to the Reader in the preceding Chapters.

Men over-violent in their Dispositions, are, for the most Part, as changeable in them. No sooner then was Western informed of Mr. Allworthy’s Intention to make Jones his Heir, then he joined heartily with the Uncle in every Commendation of the Nephew, and became as eager for her Marriage with Jones, as he had before been to couple her to Blifil.

Here Mr. Allworthy was again forced to interpose, and to relate what had passed between him and Sophia, at which he testified great Surprize.

The Squire was silent a Moment, and looked wild with Astonishment at this Account—At last he cried out, “Why what can be the Meaning of this, Neighbour Allworthy? Vond o un she was, that I’ll be sworn to.—Odzookers! I have hit o’t. As sure as a Gun I have hit o the very right o’t. It’s all along o Zister. The Girl hath got a Hankering after this son of a Whore of a Lord. I vound’em together at my Cousin, my Lady Bellaston’s. He hath turned the Head o’ her that’s certain—but d-n me if he shall ha her—I’ll ha no Lords nor Courtiers in my Vamily.”

Western is equally passionate, within moments, in swearing that Sophia shall not have Jones, and that she shall. We are delighted by his stance, either way, and most delighted at his childish ease in moving from one position to the other without pause, embarrassment, or reflection. A passionate infant, Squire Western is sublime on the page, or on the screen, where as played by Hugh Griffith he ran off with the Osborne-Richardson Tom Jones; but in mere reality he would be a monster. As a representation he is triumphant because like the much greater Falstaff he is free of the superego. We rejoice in Western because he is freedom gone
wild, including freedom from nasty plotting; yet his mindlessness almost frightens us.

Price is as accurate as ever when he observes that “Fielding controls his characters by limiting them,” but Western is the grand exception, being out of control and extravagant, beyond all limits. No other eighteenth-century novel could accommodate Western, which is another indication of the power of *Tom Jones*. Something primeval in the mode of romance survives in Western the wild man, who hardly seems to belong to a post-Swiftian novel that still exalts the Augustan vision. Fielding, like Pope and Swift, joins the Enlightenment consciousness and ideas of order to an ongoing sense of the demands of energy. Johnson, who shared with Fielding the heritage of Pope and Swift, may have felt, obscurely but accurately, that Fielding, like Swift, gave too much away to the daemonic force of vitalism. “This kind of writing may be termed not improperly the Comedy of Romance,” Johnson said of Fielding, thus relegating Fielding to the dark and enchanted ground not yet purified by reason. Johnson meant to condemn, perhaps, but guides us instead to Fielding’s most surprising strength.
Laurence Sterne

(1713–1768)

Sterne remarked, in a letter, that *Tristram Shandy* “was made and formed to baffle all criticism,” but he probably knew better. Dr. Johnson, greatest of critics, insisted that *Tristram Shandy* would not last, a hopelessly wrong prophecy. Sterne gives the critic and reader everything to do, and can anyone resist, one wonders, a novel in which the hero-narrator declares (volume 1, chapter 14) that “I have been at it these six weeks, making all the speed I possibly could,—and am not yet born”? Published in nine short volumes from 1760 to 1767, *Tristram Shandy* is the masterpiece of what Northrop Frye has taught us to call the Age of Sensibility, the era of Rousseau, and of a secularized, vernacular, “Orientalized” Bible, described by Bishop Lowth (*Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 1753) as the true source of the “language of the passions.” It is also the era of John Locke, much as we still live in the Age of Sigmund Freud. Johnson, who also opposed the poetry of Thomas Gray and of his own personal friend, William Collins, was quite consistent in setting himself against *Tristram Shandy*. Henry Fielding may have subverted novelistic forms, but Sterne subverts the entire Augustan mode of representation and truly ends the cultural enterprise in which Pope had triumphed.

It cannot be accidental that so many of the best contemporary Spanish-American novels are Shandean, whether or not the particular writer actually has read Sterne. One such distinguished novelist, when told by me how grand a fantasist he seemed, amiably assured me that his intentions were merely realistic. In the presence of extraordinary actuality, Wallace Stevens observed, consciousness could take the place of imagination. For Sterne, consciousness itself was the extraordinary actuality, so that sensibility
became one with imagination. Dualism, Cartesian and Lockean, comes to us now mostly in Freudian guise. “Shandean guise” would do as well, since Sterne is a thoroughgoing Freudian five generations before Freud. The fundamental Freudian frontier concepts—the drive, the bodily ego, the nonrepressive defenses of introjection and projection—are conceptually exemplified in *Tristram Shandy*, as is the central Freudian idea or trope of repression or defense. Most readers of Sterne see this at once, and many of his critics have reflected upon it. A Freudian exegesis of *Tristram Shandy* therefore becomes a redundancy. Far more vital is the question: What is Sterne trying to do for himself, as a novelist, by his dualistic, solipsistic, psychological emphasis?

That there is an aesthetic and moral program in the Shandean philosophy, most critics agree, but phrasing it has led to some unfortunate banalities. You can sum up Pope’s or Fielding’s designs upon the reader rather more easily than you can express Sterne’s. This is not simply a rhetorical dilemma; Sterne is a great ironist and parodist, but so are Pope and Fielding, while Swift excels even Sterne in such modes. But if all three of the great Augustans are cognitively subtle, Sterne is preternaturally subtle, to the point of being daemonic. Swift is ferocious, yet Sterne is uncanny; his artistry is indeed diabolic as Martin Price comments, comparing it to the skill of Ionesco. The spirit of the comparison is right, but Ionesco hardly can work on Sterne’s scale, which is both vast and minute. I prefer Richard Lanham’s comparison of Sterne to Chaucer, who also is too wise to fall into an Arnoldian high seriousness. Like Chaucer and Cervantes, Sterne is very serious about play, but he is even more playful about form than they are.

II

What is love, to an almost perfect solipsist? Can it be more than sex? Is sex all, and does every trembling hand make us squeak, like dolls, the wished-for word? Sterne is reductive enough to muse on the question, and to intimate an affirmative answer:

I had escaped, continued the corporal, all that time from falling in love, and had gone on to the end of the chapter, had it not been predestined otherwise—there is no resisting our fate.

It was on a *Sunday*, in the afternoon, as I told your honour—

The old man and his wife had walked out—

Every thing was still and hush as midnight about the house—

There was not so much as a duck or a duckling about the yard—
—When the fair *Beguine* came in to see me.

My wound was then in a fair way of doing well—the inflammation had been gone off for some time, but it was succeeded with an itching both above and below my knee, so insufferable, that I had not shut my eyes the whole night for it.

Let me see it, said she, kneeling down upon the ground parallel to my knee, and laying her hand upon the part below it—it only wants rubbing a little, said the *Beguine*; so covering it with the bed cloaths, she began with the fore-finger of her right-hand to rub under my knee, guiding her fore-finger backwards and forwards by the edge of the flannel which kept on the dressing.

In five or six minutes I felt slightly the end of the second finger—and presently it was laid flat with the other, and she continued rubbing in that way round and round for a good while; it then came into my head, that I should fall in love—I blush'd when I saw how white a hand she had—I shall never, an' please your honour, behold another hand so white whilst I live

—Not in that place: said my uncle *Toby*—

Though it was the most serious despair in nature to the corporal—he could not forbear smiling.

The young *Beguine*, continued the corporal, perceiving it was of great service to me—from rubbing, for some time, with two fingers—proceeded to rub at length, with three—till by little and little she brought down the fourth, and then rubb'd with her whole hand: I will never say another word, an’ please your honour, upon hands again—but it was softer than satin—

—Prithee, *Trim*, commend it as much as thou wilt, said my uncle *Toby*, I shall hear thy story with the more delight—The corporal thank'd his master most unfeignedly; but having nothing to say upon the *Beguine*’s hand, but the same over again—he proceeded to the effects of it.

The fair *Beguine*, said the corporal, continued rubbing with her whole hand under my knee—till I fear'd her zeal would weary her—“I would do a thousand times more,” said she, “for the love of Christ”—In saying which she pass'd her hand across the flannel, to the part above my knee, which I had equally complained of, and rubb'd it also.

I perceived, then, I was beginning to be in love—

As she continued rub-rub-rubbing—I felt it spread from under her hand, an’ please your honour, to every part of my frame—The more she rubb’d, and the longer strokes she took—the more the
fire kindled in my veins—till at length, by two or three strokes longer than the rest—my passion rose to the highest pitch—I seiz’d her hand—

—And then, thou clapped’st it to thy lips, Trim, said my uncle Toby—and madest a speech.

Whether the corporal’s amour terminated precisely in the way my uncle Toby described it, is not material; it is enough that it contain’d in it the essence of all the love-romances which ever have been wrote since the beginning of the world. (8, 22)

To be in love is to be aroused; no more, no less. Sterne, something of an invalid, was abnormally sensitive, as W.B.C. Watkins remarked, “—partly because he was inevitably self-conscious physically to an abnormal degree. He was acutely aware of the very circulation of his blood and the beating of his heart.” Much of Sterne’s alleged prurience is actually his heightened vulnerability, cognitive and bodily, to sexual stimuli. The sense of “Sensibility” in Sterne is fully sexual, and aids us in seeing the true nature of the cultural term, both morally and aesthetically. A susceptibility to tender feelings, however fine, and whether one’s own or those of others, becomes objectified as a quality or stance that turns away from the Stoic and Augustan ideal of reason in affective response. This is Sensibility or “the Sentimental” ideologically free from either right-wing celebration of bourgeois morality or left-wing idealization or proletarian or pastoral natural virtues. Its politics, though Whiggish in origin, diffuse into a universal and histrionic vision of the force and beauty of the habits of the heart. Martin Price terms it “a vehement, often defiant assertion of the value of man’s feelings.” Overtly self-conscious and dramatic, yet insisting upon its sincerity, the stance of Sensibility is a kind of sexualization of all the other effects, as Sterne most clearly knew, showed, and told. Richard Lanham sums this up when he writes that “For Sterne, we finally become not only insatiable pleasure-seekers but, by our nature, incurable poseurs.”

All Shandeans have their favorite episodes, and I am tempted to cite all of volume 7, throughout which Tristram/Sterne flees from Death by taking a Sentimental journey through France. One could vote for the story of Amandus and Amanda, or for the concluding country-dance with Nanette, two superb moments in volume 7. But, if we are pleasure-seeking poseurs, we cannot do better than chapter 15 of volume 8, which precedes the Widow Wadman’s direct attempt to light Uncle Toby at both ends at once, in the sentry-box:
It is a great pity—but 'tis certain from every day’s observation of man, that he may be set on fire like a candle, at either end—provided there is a sufficient wick standing out; if there is not—there's an end of the affair; and if there is—by lighting it at the bottom, as the flame in that case has the misfortune generally to put out itself—there's an end of the affair again.

For my part, could I always have the ordering of it which way I would be burnt myself—for I cannot bear the thoughts of being burnt like a beast—I would oblige a housewife constantly to light me at the top; for then I should burn down decently to the socket; that is, from my head to my heart, from my heart to my liver, from my liver to my bowels, and so on by the meseraick veins and arteries, through all the turns and lateral insertions of the intestines and their tunicles to the blind gut—

—I beseech you, doctor Slop, quoth my uncle Toby, interrupting him as he mentioned the blind gut, in a discourse with my father the night my mother was brought to bed of me—I beseech you, quoth my uncle Toby, to tell me which is the blind gut; for, old as I am, I vow I do not know to this day where it lies.

The blind gut, answered doctor Slop, lies betwixt the Illion and Colon—

—In a man? said my father.

—'Tis precisely the same, cried doctor Slop, in a woman—That's more than I know; quoth my father. (8, 15)

We confront again Sterne’s marvelous sense of the dualistic perplexities of human existence. Man is not exactly the Puritan candle of the Lord, burning with a preternatural will-to-holiness, but a sexual candle altogether, burning with the natural will-to-live. When Tristram/Sterne asks to be lit at the top, presumably with cognitive fire, then he asks also to “burn down decently to the socket.” Sterne’s fierce metaphor rejects the Cartesian ghost-in-the-machine (Gilbert Ryle’s fine formulation) and desires instead a conflagration of the mind through the senses. Though he is perhaps the most satirical of all vitalists, Sterne’s final affinities seem to be with Rabelais and Blake, visionaries who sought to redeem us through an improvement in sensual enjoyment.
Tobias Smollett

(1721–1771)

Despite the vigor and humor of Humphry Clinker, Smollett is currently the most neglected of the major eighteenth-century British novelists. Since he is not of the aesthetic eminence of Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne, one would not expect him to provoke the intense critical interest that they perpetually sustain. But Humphry Clinker, in my judgment, is a stronger novel than Defoe’s Moll Flanders or Goldsmith’s The Vicar of Wakefield, and compares favorably also with Fanny Burney’s Evelina. Since it is now less read and studied than any of those three, its eclipse perhaps indicates that something in Smollett is not available to what is dominant in our current sensibility. The era of Thomas Pynchon, apocalyptic and beyond the resources of any satiric vision, is not a time for accommodating Smollett’s rough tumble of an expedition towards a yearned-for health.

Smollett, a surgeon, probably knew he had not long to live even as he composed Humphry Clinker. Resident in Italy from 1768 on, for his health, Smollett died there in 1771, just fifty, some three months after Humphry Clinker was published. The expedition that is the novel, winding from Wales up through the length of England well into Smollett’s native Scotland, is the author’s long farewell to life, rendering Britain with a peculiar vividness as he remembers it from abroad.

Why the novel is named for Humphry Clinker rather than its central figure, Matthew Bramble, who clearly is Smollett’s surrogate, never has been clear to me, except that Clinker is a representative of the future and may be Smollett’s wistful introjection of a life he would not survive to know. Clinker and Bramble rise together from the water, a natural son and the father he has saved from drowning, and both undergo a change of name
into the same name: Matthew Loyd. This curious mutual baptism seems to have been a mythic transference for Smollett, since Matthew Loyd was Bramble’s former name, and will be his son Humphry Clinker’s future name. It is as though the slowly dying Smollett required a double vision of survival: as a Matthew Bramble largely purged of an irascibility close to madness, and as Humphry Clinker, a kindly and innocent youth restored to a lost heritage.

I have found that many of my friends and students, generally very good readers, shy away from Humphry Clinker and from Smollett in general, because they are repelled by his mode, which at its strongest tends toward grotesque farce. The mode by definition is not pleasant, but, like the much greater Swift, Smollett is a master in this peculiar subgenre. It is hardly accidental that Thomas Rowlandson illustrated Smollett in the early 1790s, because there is a profound affinity between the novelist and the caricaturist. Smollett’s reality, at its most intense, is phantasmagoric, and there are moments early on in Humphry Clinker when the irritable (and well-named) Bramble seems close to madness. His speculations on the origins of the waters at Bath are not less than disgusting, and he is more than weary of mankind: “My curiosity is quite satisfied: I have done with the science of men, and must now endeavour to amuse myself with the novelty of things.” Everywhere he finds only “food for spleen, and subject for ridicule.”

Bramble satirizes everything he encounters, and is himself an instance of the mocker mocked or the satirist satirized. One can cultivate an amused affection for him, but he is not Don Quixote, and the vivid but unlikable Lismahago, my favorite character in the book, is no Sancho Panza. Smollett evidently identifies with Bramble, but we cannot do so, and surely Smollett intended it that way. We may enjoy farce, but we do not wish to find ourselves acting in one as we stumble on in our lives. I think of my favorite farce in the language, Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta. I have acted on stage just once in my life, playing Falstaff in an emergency, an amateur pressed into service, and played the witty knight more or less in the style of the late, great Zero Mostel playing Leopold Bloom in Ulysses in Nighttown. The one part I would love to play on stage is Barabas, bloody Jew of Malta, but in life obviously I would prefer being Falstaff to being Barabas.

When a novel conducts itself as realistic farce, which is Smollett’s mode, we are denied the pleasures of introjection and identification. But a novel is wiser to forsake realism when it moves into farce. Sometimes I wish, reading Smollett, that he had been able to read the Evelyn Waugh of Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, A Handful of Dust, because I think that Waugh
would have been a good influence upon him. But that is to wish Smollett other than Smollett; one of his strengths is that he drives realistic representation almost beyond its proper limits, in order to extend the empire of farce. Perhaps his own fierce temperament required the extension, for he was more than a little mad, in this resembling certain elements of temperament in Swift, Sterne, and Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Sterne, in *A Sentimental Journey*, robustly satirizes Smollett as “the learned Smelfungus,” who “set out with the spleen and jaundice, and every object he passed by was discoloured or distorted.” Coming out of the Pantheon, Smelfungus comments, “’Tis nothing but a huge cock pit,” and all his travel adventures lead to similar judgments, provoking Sterne to a good retort: “I’ll tell it, cried Smelfungus, to the world. You had better tell it, said I, to your physician.” All of us would rather travel with Sterne than with Smollett, but reading Smollett remains a uniquely valuable experience. Let us take him at his most ferociously grotesque, in the account of the sufferings of Lismahago and the still more unfortunate Murphy at the horrid hands of the Miami Indians:

By dint of her interrogations, however, we learned, that he and ensign Murphy had made their escape from the French hospital at Montreal, and taken to the woods, in hope of reaching some English settlement; but mistaking their route, they fell in with a party of Miamis, who carried them away in captivity. The intention of these Indians was to give one of them as an adopted son to a venerable sachem, who had lost his own in the course of the war, and to sacrifice the other according to the custom of the country. Murphy, as being the younger and handsomer of the two, was designed to fill the place of the deceased, not only as the son of the sachem, but as the spouse of a beautiful squaw, to whom his predecessor had been betrothed; but in passing through the different whigwhams or villages of the Miamis, poor Murphy was so mangled by the women and children, who have the privilege of torturing all prisoners in their passage, that, by the time they arrived at the place of the sachem’s residence, he was rendered altogether unfit for the purposes of marriage: it was determined therefore, in the assembly of the warriors, that ensign Murphy should be brought to the stake, and that the lady should be given to lieutenant Lismahago, who had likewise received his share of torments, though they had not produced emasculation.—A joint of one finger had been cut, or rather sawed off with a rusty knife; one of his great toes was crushed into a mash betwixt two stones; some
of his teeth were drawn, or dug out with a crooked nail; splintered reeds had been thrust up his nostrils and other tender parts; and the calves of his legs had been blown up with mines of gunpowder dug in the flesh with the sharp point of the tomahawk.

The Indians themselves allowed that Murphy died with great heroism, singing, as his death song, the Drimmendoo, in concert with Mr. Lismahago, who was present at the solemnity. After the warriors and the matrons had made a hearty meal upon the muscular flesh which they pared from the victim, and had applied a great variety of tortures, which he bore without flinching, an old lady, with a sharp knife, scooped out one of his eyes, and put a burning coal in the socket. The pain of this operation was so exquisite that he could not help bellowing, upon which the audience raised a shout of exultation, and one of the warriors stealing behind him, gave him the coup de grace with a hatchet.

Lismahago's bride, the squaw Squinkinacoosta, distinguished herself on this occasion.—She shewed a great superiority of genius in the tortures which she contrived and executed with her own hands.—She vied with the stoutest warrior in eating the flesh of the sacrifice; and after all the other females were fuddled with dram-drinking, she was not so intoxicated but that she was able to play the game of the platter with the conjuring sachem, and afterwards go through the ceremony of her own wedding, which was consummated that same evening. The captain had lived very happily with this accomplished squaw for two years, during which she bore him a son, who is now the representative of his mother's tribe; but, at length, to his unspeakable grief, she had died of a fever, occasioned by eating too much raw bear, which they had killed in a hunting excursion.

This is both dreadfully funny and funnily dreadful, and is quite marvelous writing, though evidently not to all tastes. If it were written by Mark Twain, we would know how to take it, but Smollett renders it with a dangerous relish, which makes us a little uncertain, since we do not wish to be quite as rancid as the learned Smelfungus, or even as the dreadful Lismahago for that matter. Reading Smollett is sometimes like eating too much raw bear, but that only acknowledges how authentic and strong his flavor is.

To have inspired Rowlandson and fostered Charles Dickens (who took his origins in a blend of Smollett and Ben Jonson) is enough merit for any one writer. Smollett is to Dickens what Marlowe was to Shakespeare, a
forerunner so swallowed up by an enormous inheritor that the precursor sometimes seems a minnow devoured by a whale. But, considered in himself, Smollett has something of Marlowe's eminence. Each carried satirical farce and subversive melodrama to a new limit, and that too is merit enough.
Oliver Goldsmith

(1730–1774)

Oliver Goldsmith, versatile and graceful in every genre, compels a critic to speculate upon the disproportion between the writer-as-person and the writer-as-writer. Some (not all) of the most accomplished writers I have known have been the most colorless of personalities, or if more vivid and interesting as people, then they have been remarkably unpleasant or foolish or merely mawkish. Goldsmith appears to have been a luckless individual and even what Freud called a “moral masochist,” a victim of his own death-drive at the age of forty-four. Indeed, Goldsmith is a fairly classic instance of many Freudian insights, and both The Vicar of Wakefield and She Stoops to Conquer sustain immediate illumination when Freudian categories are applied to them. What Freud termed “the most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life” is a clear guide to young Marlow’s backwardness with well-born women, and exuberant aggressivity with inn barmaids, college bedmakers, and others of whom he remarks: “They are of us you know.” And the lumpish Tony Lumpkin becomes an even more persuasive representation when his descent into the company of the alehouse is seen, again in Freudian guise, as a reaction-formation to his dreadful mother, Mrs. Hardcastle.

Goldsmith aped Johnson in most things, even to the copying of the critic’s manner, according to Boswell. Johnson spoke the last word upon his friend and follower: “If nobody was suffered to abuse poor Goldy but those who could write as well, he would have few censors.” Yet it is a curious sadness that the best lines in any poem by Goldsmith, the concluding passage of The Deserted Village, were written by Johnson himself:

That trade’s proud empire hastes to swift decay,
As ocean sweeps the laboured mole away;
While self-dependent power can time defy,
As rocks resist the billows and the sky.

An ironical reading might interpret that humanly constructed breakwater, “the laboured mole,” as Goldsmith’s ego, in contrast to Johnsonian self-dependence, the great critic’s rock-like ego. Still, Goldsmith’s laboured breakwater has defied time also, though not quite with the massive Johnsonian force. Goldsmith’s writing survives on its curious grace, curious both because it resists strict definition and because it extends across the genres: from the Popean verse of *The Traveller*, through the Bunyanesque revision of the Book of Job in the sentimental novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, on to the elegiac pastoralism of *The Deserted Village*, the permanently successful stage comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*, and the urbane good nature of the posthumously published poem *Retaliation*, a gentle satire upon the members of Dr. Johnson’s Club.

The strongest case for Goldsmith was made by William Hazlitt, second only to Johnson in my estimate, among all critics in the language:

Goldsmith, both in verse and prose, was one of the most delightful writers in the language.... His ease is quite unconscious. Everything in him is spontaneous, unstudied, yet elegant, harmonious, graceful, nearly faultless.

A kind of natural or unconscious artist, Goldsmith prevails by disarming his reader. He seems the least tendentious of all authors, writing as though he had no design upon us. Even now he has not lost his audience, although critics sometimes treat his works as period pieces. He is strangely close to popular literature, though he hardly can sustain comparison with the far more powerful Bunyan. Perhaps he moves us now primarily as an instance of our continuity with a past that we seem otherwise wholly to have abandoned.

*The Vicar of Wakefield*

The canonical status of *The Vicar of Wakefield* is beyond doubt, though I do not advise rereading it side by side with Bunyan’s far stronger *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as I have just done. But then, Bunyan is so powerful a visionary as to claim the company of Milton and Blake. Goldsmith gives us a gentle theodicy in the *Vicar*, and theodicy is hardly a gentle mode. Henry James, writing an introduction to the novel in 1900, called it “the spoiled child of our literature,” a work so amiable that it seemed to him “happy in the
manner in which a happy man is happy—a man, say, who has married an angel or been appointed to a sinecure.”

Like the Book of Job, the Vicar brings a good man, here Dr. Primrose, into the power of Satan, here Squire Thornhill. Some recent revisionist readings of the Vicar have attempted to give us a Dr. Primrose who is more self-righteous than virtuous, more smugly egoistical than innocent. These seem to me weak misreadings because they overlook Goldsmith’s most surprising revision of the Book of Job. With singular audacity, Goldsmith makes his Job the narrator. Whatever you have Job do, you ought not to make him the hero of a first-person narrative. Consider the aesthetic and spiritual effect that even the opening would then have upon us:

I was a man in the land of Uz, and my name was Job; I was perfect and upright, and I feared God, and eschewed evil.

No one proclaims his own virtues without alienating us, and no one recites his own sufferings without embarrassing us. The opening of The Vicar of Wakefield is not quite like that of a first-person Book of Job, but it is problematic enough:

I was ever of opinion, that the honest man who married and brought up a large family, did more service than he who continued single and only talked of population. From this motive, I had scarce taken orders a year, before I began to think seriously of matrimony, and chose my wife, as she did her wedding-gown, not for a fine glossy surface, but such qualities as would wear well.

At best, poor Primrose sounds a pompous fool; at worst, a bore rampant. Why did Goldsmith take the risk? Was Primrose intended to be a satiric butt and Burchell a reality instructor? Dickens evidently did not think so, and something of Primrose got into Mr. Pickwick. Unlike Goethe and Dickens, we do not find Primrose to be altogether comically lovable. However, we also ought not to fault him. Perhaps he does represent a secularization of the figure of Job or a Johnsonian allegory of an education in true humility, but I suspect that he is primarily Goldsmith’s introjection of Job. This is not to suggest a composite figure, Job/Primrose-Goldsmith as it were, but to intimate that Primrose is a loving self-satire on Goldsmith’s part, or an amiable Jobean parody directed against the feckless writer’s own penchant for catastrophe.

Goldsmith takes the risk of first-person narration because he knows that the Vicar Primrose is his own somewhat ironic self-portrait and that
his personal Jobean tribulations do not exactly achieve sublimity. Yet Goldsmith, in life, and the Vicar, in the novel, cannot refrain from self-praise, from a kind of snobbery of virtue, even as they are altogether the passive victims of fortune. Goldsmith, though an impossible personality, was a literary genius, but Dr. Primrose is simply not very clever. An unintelligent Job startles us, if only by reminding us what a formidable moral psychologist and reasoner the biblical Job was, so much so that he finally infuriated John Calvin, his greatest commentator. Calvin, in his sermons on the Book of Job, is finally provoked to cry out that God would have had to make new worlds to satisfy Job. No one would say that God would have had to make new worlds to satisfy Dr. Primrose. Goldsmith himself, I suspect, was about halfway between Job and the Vicar in this regard.

_She Stoops to Conquer_

_The Citizen of the World, The Vicar of Wakefield_, and the three major poems may be the best of Goldsmith, but I myself prefer _She Stoops to Conquer_. It has held the stage for more than two hundred years and may well be the authentic instance of a popular drama in English after Shakespeare. Though it was intended as a parody upon what Goldsmith called Sentimental as opposed to Laughing Comedy, we have lost the satire without losing the value of the work. It remains very funny and evidently always will be funny. Goldsmith did not intend farce, but that is what _She Stoops to Conquer_ assuredly is: major farce. There is something Shakespearean about Kate Hardcastle, though to compare her to the Rosalind of _As You Like It_ is an offence against literary tact, as is any comparison of Tony Lumpkin to Puck.

Goldsmith had the literary good sense to keep his farce simple, reductive, and almost primitive; the portrait of Mrs. Hardcastle has a kind of unrelenting savagery about it. And Tony Lumpkin’s ordeal-by-fright for her is not less than sadistic, with a cruelty in which we are compelled to share:

**TONY.** Never fear me. Here she comes. Vanish. She’s got from the pond, and draggled up to the waist like a mermaid. _Enter Mrs Hardcastle._

**MRS HARDCASTLE.** Oh, Tony, I’m killed. Shook. Battered to death. I shall never survive it. That last jolt that laid us against the quickset hedge has done my business.

**TONY.** Alack, mama, it was all your own fault. You would be for running away by night, without knowing one inch of the way. _Mrs Hardcastle._ I wish we were at home again. I never met so
many accidents in so short a journey. Drenched in the mud, overturned in a ditch, stuck fast in a slough, jolted to a jelly, and at last to lose our way. Whereabouts do you think we are, Tony?

TONY. By my guess we should be upon Crack-skull Common, about forty miles from home.

MRS HARDCASTLE. O lud! O lud! the most notorious spot in all the country. We only want a robbery to make a complete night on’t.

TONY. Don’t be afraid, mama, don’t be afraid. Two of the five that kept here are hanged, and the other three may not find us. Don’t be afraid. Is that a man that’s galloping behind us? No; it’s only a tree. Don’t be afraid.

MRS HARDCASTLE. The fright will certainly kill me.

TONY. Do you see anything like a black hat moving behind the thicket?

MRS HARDCASTLE. O death!

TONY. No, it’s only a cow. Don’t be afraid, mama; don’t be afraid.

MRS HARDCASTLE. As I’m alive, Tony, I see a man coming towards us. Ah! I’m sure on’t. If he perceives us we are undone.

TONY (aside). Father-in-law, by all that’s unlucky, come to take one of his night walks. (To her) Ah, it’s a highwayman, with pistols as long as my arm. A damned ill-looking fellow.

MRS HARDCASTLE. Good heaven defend us! He approaches.

TONY. Do you hide yourself in that thicket, and leave me to manage him. If there be any danger I’ll cough and cry, Hem!

When I cough be sure to keep close.

Mrs Hardcastle hides behind a tree in the Back Scene.

To find a comparable savagery, one would have to turn to W.S. Gilbert. There is a touch of Gilbert to She Stoops to Conquer, if only because we are already in that cosmos of nonsense that is shadowed by the Freudian reality principle. Freud, writing on “Humor” in 1928, heard in it the voice of the super-ego, speaking “kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego.” This does not take us far when we consider Shakespearean comedy at its most complex, As You Like It or All’s Well That Ends Well. But it beautifully enlightens us as to Goldsmith’s holiday from the superego in She Stoops to Conquer. Goldsmith was very uncomfortable as Job, even as that most amiable and silly of Jobs, Dr. Primrose. But he was supremely comfortable as Tony Lumpkin, his kindly word of comfort to his own intimidated ego.
Evelina or the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World (1778) earned the approbation of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who remains in my judgment, as in that of many others, the best critic in Western literary history. These days Evelina seems to attract mostly feminist critics, though it is hardly a precursor of their ideologies and sensibilities. A reader who knows the novels of Samuel Richardson will recognize immediately how indebted Fanny Burney was to him, and any reader of Jane Austen will be interested in Evelina in order to contrast the very different ways in which Richardson influenced the two women novelists. In itself, Evelina provides a rather mixed aesthetic experience upon rereading, at least to me. Its largest strength is in its humor and in Fanny Burney’s quite extraordinary ear for modes of speech. What is rather disappointing is Evelina herself, who records the wit and spirits of others, while herself manifesting a steady goodness that is not ideally suited for fictional representation.

Entrance is indeed the novel’s central metaphor, and Evelina enters the social world as a kind of lesser Sir Charles Grandison, rather than as a lesser Clarissa. This is not to say that Evelina’s advent in the book does not please us. Fanny Burney shrewdly delays, and we do not have direct acquaintance with Evelina until the lively start of Letter 8:

This house seems to be the house of joy; every face wears a smile, and a laugh is at every body’s service. It is quite amusing to walk about and see the general confusion; a room leading to the garden is fitting up for Captain Mirvan’s study. Lady Howard does not sit a moment in a place; Miss Mirvan is making caps; every body so
busy!—such flying from room to room!—so many orders given, and retracted, and given again! nothing but hurry and perturbation.

Ronald Paulson praises *Evelina* as a careful balance of the old and the new, of Smollettian satire and a pre-Austenian ironic sensibility. I am surprised always when Smollett's effect upon Fanny Burney is judiciously demonstrated, as it certainly is by Paulson, precisely because Evelina cannot be visualized as journeying in the superbly irascible company of Matthew Bramble, whereas one can imagine her in dignified converse with Sir Charles Grandison. That seems another indication of a trouble in *Evelina* as a novel, the trouble alas being Evelina herself. In a world of roughness and wit, she remains the perpetual anomaly, too good for her context and too undivided to fascinate her reader. One implicit defense of Evelina is the polemic of Susan Staves, who views the heroine’s dominant affect as being one of acute anxiety, since she is frequently in danger of sexual (or quasi-sexual) assault. Staves has a telling and lovely sentence: “Evelina’s progress through the public places of London is about as tranquil as the progress of a fair-haired girl through modern Naples.” Surrounded by Smollettian characters, the non-Smollettian Evelina must struggle incessantly to maintain her delicacy. That is clearly the case, and yet again, this creates a problem for the reader. Delicacy under assault is very difficult to represent except in a comic mode, since more of our imaginative sympathy is given to rambunctiousness than to virtue.

This makes it highly problematic, at least for me, to read *Evelina* either as a study in the dynamics of fear or as a chronicle of assault. If I find Evelina herself a touch too bland in her benignity, nevertheless she seems to me commendably tough, and rather less traumatized than some feminist critics take her to be. Historical changes in psychology are very real, and eighteenth-century men and women (of the same social class) have more in common with one another than say eighteenth-century women intellectuals have in common with our contemporary feminist critics. Evelina (and Fanny Burney) are less obsessed by Electra complexes, and less dismayed by female difficulties, than many among us, and a curious kind of anachronism is too frequently indulged these days.

Like her creator, Fanny Burney, who knew so well how to live in the forceful literary world of her father’s companions, Evelina is ultimately stronger and shrewder than any of the men, and nearly all of the women, in her own universe. They may assault her delicacy, but she outwits them, and subtly triumphs over them. Her goodness does not exclude the skills of a grand manipulator. She is an anomaly in her sensibility, but not in her
admirably poised social sense, and her manifold virtues coexist with an enigmatic cunning, suitable to the social psychology of her era.
The oddest yet by no means inapt analogy to Jane Austen’s art of representation is Shakespeare’s—oddest, because she is so careful of limits, as classical as Ben Jonson in that regard, and Shakespeare transcends all limits. Austen’s humor, her mode of rhetorical irony, is not particularly Shakespearean, and yet her precision and accuracy of representation is. Like Shakespeare, she gives us figures, major and minor, utterly consistent each in her or his own mode of speech and being, and utterly different from one another. Her heroines have firm selves, each molded with an individuality that continues to suggest Austen’s reserve of power, her potential for creating an endless diversity. To recur to the metaphor of oddness, the highly deliberate limitation of social scale in Austen seems a paradoxical theater of mind in which so fecund a humanity could be fostered. Irony, the concern of most critics of Austen, seems more than a trope in her work, seems indeed to be the condition of her language, yet hardly accounts for the effect of moral and spiritual power that she so constantly conveys, however implicitly or obliquely.

Ian Watt, in his permanently useful The Rise of the Novel, portrays Austen as Fanny Burney’s direct heir in the difficult art of combining the rival modes of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. Like Burney, Austen is thus seen as following the Richardson of Sir Charles Grandison, in a “minute presentation of daily life,” while emulating Fielding in “adopting a more detached attitude to her narrative material, and in evaluating it from a comic and objective point of view.” Watt goes further when he points out that Austen tells her stories in a discreet variant of Fielding’s manner “as a confessed author,” though her ironical juxtapositions are made to appear not those of “an intrusive author but rather of some august and impersonal spirit of social and psychological understanding.”
And yet, as Watt knows, Austen truly is the daughter of Richardson, and not of Fielding, just as she is the ancestor of George Eliot and Henry James, rather than of Dickens and Thackeray. Her inwardness is an ironic revision of Richardson’s extraordinary conversion of English Protestant sensibility into the figure of Clarissa Harlowe, and her own moral and spiritual concerns fuse in the crucial need of her heroines to sustain their individual integrities, a need so intense that it compels them to fall into those errors about life that are necessary for life (to adopt a Nietzschean formulation). In this too they follow, though in a comic register, the pattern of their tragic precursor, the magnificent but sublimely flawed Clarissa Harlowe.

Richardson’s Clarissa, perhaps still the longest novel in the language, seems to me also still the greatest, despite the achievements of Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joyce. Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolyn Harleth, James’s Isabel Archer and Milly Theale—though all these are Clarissa Harlowe’s direct descendants, they are not proportioned to her more sublime scale. David Copperfield and Leopold Bloom have her completeness; indeed Joyce’s Bloom may be the most complete representation of a human being in all of literature. But they belong to the secular age; Clarissa Harlowe is poised upon the threshold that leads from the Protestant religion to a purely secular sainthood.

C.S. Lewis, who read Milton as though that fiercest of Protestant temperaments had been an orthodox Anglican, also seems to have read Jane Austen by listening for her echoings of the New Testament. Quite explicitly, Lewis named Austen as the daughter of Dr. Samuel Johnson, greatest of literary critics, and rigorous Christian moralist:

I feel ... sure that she is the daughter of Dr. Johnson: she inherits his commonsense, his morality, even much of his style.

The Johnson of Rasselas and of The Rambler, surely the essential Johnson, is something of a classical ironist, but we do not read Johnson for his ironies, or for his dramatic representations of fictive selves. Rather, we read him as we read Koheleth; he writes wisdom literature. That Jane Austen is a wise writer is indisputable, but we do not read Pride and Prejudice as though it were Ecclesiastes. Doubtless, Austen’s religious ideas were as profound as Samuel Richardson’s were shallow, but Emma and Clarissa are Protestant novels without being in any way religious. What is most original about the representation of Clarissa Harlowe is the magnificent intensity of her slowly described dying, which goes on for about the
Novelists and Novels

The last third of Richardson’s vast novel, in a Puritan ritual that celebrates the preternatural strength of her will. For that is Richardson’s sublime concern: the self-reliant apotheosis of the Protestant will. What is tragedy in *Clarissa* becomes serious or moral comedy in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, and something just the other side of comedy in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.

**Pride and Prejudice**

Rereading *Pride and Prejudice* gives one a sense of Proustian ballet beautifully working itself through in the novel’s formal centerpiece, the deferred but progressive mutual enlightenment of Elizabeth and Darcy in regard to the other’s true nature. “Proper pride” is what they learn to recognize in one another; propriety scarcely needs definition in that phrase, but precisely what is the pride that allows amiability to flourish? Whatever it is in Darcy, to what extent is it an art of the will in Elizabeth Bennet? Consider the superb scene of Darcy’s first and failed marriage proposal:

While settling this point, she was suddenly roused by the sound of the doorbell, and her spirits were a little fluttered by the idea of its being Colonel Fitzwilliam himself, who had once before called late in the evening, and might now come to inquire particularly after her. But this idea was soon banished, and her spirits were very differently affected, when, to her utter amazement, she saw Mr. Darcy walk into the room. In an hurried manner he immediately began an inquiry after her health, imputing his visit to a wish of hearing that she were better. She answered him with cold civility. He sat down for a few moments, and then getting up, walked about the room. Elizabeth was surprised, but said not a word. After a silence of several minutes, he came towards her in an agitated manner, and thus began:

“In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Elizabeth’s astonishment was beyond expression. She stared, coloured, doubted, and was silent. This he considered sufficient encouragement; and the avowal of all that he felt, and had long felt for her, immediately followed. He spoke well; but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family
obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit.

In spite of her deeply-rooted dislike, she could not be insensible to the compliment of such a man’s affection, and though her intentions did not vary for an instant, she was at first sorry for the pain he was to receive; till, roused to resentment by his subsequent language, she lost all compassion in anger. She tried, however, to compose herself to answer him with patience, when he should have done. He concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. As he said this, she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He spoke of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security. Such a circumstance could only exasperate farther, and, when he ceased, the colour rose into her cheeks, and she said:

“In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could feel gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot—I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to anyone. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope will be of short duration. The feelings which, you tell me, have long prevented the acknowledgment of your regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.”

Mr. Darcy, who was leaning against the mantelpiece with his eyes fixed on her face, seemed to catch her words with no less resentment than surprise. His complexion became pale with anger, and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature. He was struggling for the appearance of composure, and would not open his lips till he believed himself to have attained it. The pause was to Elizabeth’s feelings dreadful. At length, in a voice of forced calmness, he said:

“And this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of expecting! I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am thus rejected. But it is of small importance.”
Stuart M. Tave believes that both Darcy and Elizabeth become so changed by one another that their “happiness is deserved by a process of mortification begun early and ended late,” mortification here being the wounding of pride. Tave’s learning and insight are impressive, but I favor the judgment that Elizabeth and Darcy scarcely change, and learn rather that they complement each other’s not wholly illegitimate pride. They come to see that their wills are naturally allied, since they have no differences upon the will. The will to what? Their will, Austen’s, is neither the will to live nor the will to power. They wish to be esteemed precisely where they estimate value to be high, and neither can afford to make a fundamental error, which is both the anxiety and the comedy of the first proposal scene. Why after all does Darcy allow himself to be eloquent on the subject of his pride, to the extraordinary extent of conveying “with a warmth” what Austen grimly names as “his sense of her inferiority”?

As readers, we have learned already that Elizabeth is inferior to no one, whoever he is. Indeed, I sense as the novel closes (though nearly all Austen critics, and doubtless Austen herself, would disagree with me) that Darcy is her inferior, amiable and properly prideful as he is. I do not mean by this that Elizabeth is a clearer representation of Austenian values than Darcy ever could be; that is made finely obvious by Austen, and her critics have developed her ironic apprehension, which is that Elizabeth incarnates the standard of measurement in her cosmos. There is also a transcendent strength to Elizabeth’s will that raises her above that cosmos, in a mode that returns us to Clarissa Harlowe’s transcendence of her society, of Lovelace, and even of everything in herself that is not the will to a self-esteem that has also made an accurate estimate of every other will to pride it ever has encountered.

I am suggesting that Ralph Waldo Emerson (who to me is sacred) was mistaken when he rejected Austen as a “sterile” upholder of social conformities and social ironies, as an author who could not celebrate the soul’s freedom from societal conventions. Austen’s ultimate irony is that Elizabeth Bennet is inwardly so free that convention performs for her the ideal function it cannot perform for us: it liberates her will without tending to stifle her high individuality. But we ought to be wary of even the most distinguished of Austen’s moral celebrants, Lionel Trilling, who in effect defended her against Emerson by seeing Pride and Prejudice as a triumph “of morality as style.” If Emerson wanted to see a touch more Margaret Fuller in Elizabeth Bennet (sublimely ghastly notion!), Trilling wanted to forget the Emersonian law of Compensation, which is that nothing is got for nothing:
The relation of Elizabeth Bennet to Darcy is real, is intense, but it expresses itself as a conflict and reconciliation of styles: a formal rhetoric, traditional and rigorous, must find a way to accomodate a female vivacity, which in turn must recognize the principled demands of the strict male syntax. The high moral import of the novel lies in the fact that the union of styles is accomplished without injury to either lover.

Yes and no, I would say. Yes, because the wills of both lovers work by similar dialectics, but also no, because Elizabeth's will is more intense and purer, and inevitably must be dimmed by her dwindling into a wife, even though Darcy may well be the best man that society could offer to her. Her pride has playfulness in it, a touch even of the Quixotic. Uncannily, she is both her father's daughter and Samuel Richardson's daughter as well. Her wit is Mr. Bennet's, refined and elaborated, but her will, and her pride in her will, returns us to Clarissa's Puritan passion to maintain the power of the self to confer esteem, and to accept esteem only in response to its bestowal.

*Mansfield Park*

John Locke argues against personifying the will: persons can be free, but not the will, since the will cannot be constrained, except externally. While one sleeps, if someone moved one into another room and locked the door, and there one found a friend one wished to see, still one could not say that one was free thus to see whom one wished. And yet Locke implies that the process of association does work as though the will were internally constrained. Association, in Locke's sense, is a blind substitution for reasoning, yet is within a reasoning process, though also imbued with affect. The mind, in association, is carried unwillingly from one thought to another, by accident as it were. Each thought appears, and carries along with it a crowd of unwanted guests, inhabitants of a room where the thought would rather be alone. Association, on this view, is what the will most needs to be defended against.

Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park*, might be considered a co-descendant, together with Locke's association-menaced will, of the English Protestant emphasis upon the will's autonomy. Fanny, another precursor of the Virginia Woolf of *A Room of One's Own*, was shrewdly described by Lionel Trilling as "overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous," and therefore almost impossible to like, though Trilling (like Austen) liked Fanny very much. C.S. Lewis, though an orthodox moralist, thought Fanny insipid:
“But into Fanny, Jane Austen, to counterbalance her apparent insignificance, has put really nothing except rectitude of mind; neither passion, nor physical courage, nor wit, nor resource.” Nothing, I would say, except the Protestant will, resisting the powers of association and asserting its very own persistence, its own sincere intensity, and its own isolate sanctions. Trilling secularized these as “the sanctions of principle” and saw *Mansfield Park* as a novel that “discovers in principle the path to the wholeness of the self which is peace.” That is movingly said, but secularization, in literature, is always a failed trope, since the distinction between sacred and secular is not actually a literary but rather a societal or political distinction. *Mansfield Park* is not less Protestant than *Paradise Lost*, even though Austen, *as a writer*, was as much a sect of one as John Milton was.

Fanny Price, like the Lockean will, fights against accident, against the crowding out of life by associations that are pragmatically insincere not because they are random, but because they are irrelevant, since whatever is not the will’s own is irrelevant to it. If Fanny herself is an irony it is as Austen’s allegory of her own defense against influences, human and literary, whether in her family circle or in the literary family of Fanny Burney, Fielding, and Richardson. Stuart Tave shrewdly remarks that: “*Mansfield Park* is a novel in which many characters are engaged in trying to establish influence over the minds and lives of others, often in a contest or struggle for control.” Fanny, as a will struggling only to be itself, becomes at last the spiritual center of Mansfield Park precisely because she has never sought power over any other will. It is the lesson of the Protestant will, whether in Locke or Austen, Richardson or George Eliot, that the refusal to seek power over other wills is what opens the inward eye of vision. Such a lesson, which, we seek in Wordsworth and in Ruskin, is offered more subtly (though less sublimely) by Austen. Fanny, Austen’s truest surrogate, has a vision of what Mansfield Park is and ought to be, which means a vision also of what Sir Thomas Bertram is or ought to be. Her vision is necessarily moral, but could as truly be called spiritual, or even aesthetic.

Perhaps that is why Fanny is not only redeemed but can redeem others. The quietest and most mundane of visionaries, she remains also one of the firmest: her dedication is to the future of Mansfield Park as the idea of order it once seemed to her. Jane Austen may not be a Romantic in the high Shelleyan mode, but Fanny Price has profound affinities with Wordsworth, so that it is no accident that *Mansfield Park* is exactly contemporary with *The Excursion*. Wordsworthian continuity, the strength that carries the past alive into the present, is the program of renovation that Fanny’s pure will brings to Mansfield Park, and it is a program more Romantic than Augustan, so that Fanny’s will begins to shade into the
Wordsworthian account of the imagination. Fanny’s exile to Portsmouth is so painful to her not for reasons turning upon social distinctions, but for causes related to the quiet that Wordsworth located in the bliss of solitude, or Virginia Woolf in a room of one’s own:

Such was the home which was to put Mansfield out of her head, and teach her to think of her cousin Edmund with moderated feelings. On the contrary, she could think of nothing but Mansfield, its beloved inmates, its happy ways. Everything where she now was was in full contrast to it. The elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony, and perhaps, above all, the peace and tranquillity of Mansfield, were brought to her remembrance every hour of the day, by the prevalence of everything opposite to them here.

The living in incessant noise was, to a frame and temper delicate and nervous like Fanny’s, an evil which no super-added elegance or harmony could have entirely atoned for. It was the greatest misery of all. At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence, was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; everybody’s feelings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place; and as to the little irritations, sometimes introduced by Aunt Norris, they were short, they were trifling, they were as a drop of water to the ocean, compared with the ceaseless tumult of her present abode. Here, everybody was noisy, every voice was loud (excepting, perhaps, her mother’s, which resembled the soft monotony of Lady Bertram’s, only worn into fretfulness). Whatever was wanted was halloo’d for, and the servants halloo’d out their excuses from the kitchen. The doors were in constant banging, the stairs were never at rest, nothing was done without a clatter, nobody sat still, and nobody could command attention when they spoke.

In a review of the two houses, as they appeared to her before the end of a week, Fanny was tempted to apply to them Dr. Johnson’s celebrated judgment as to matrimony and celibacy, and say, that though Mansfield Park might have some pains, Portsmouth could have no pleasures.

The citation of Dr. Johnson’s aphorism, though placed here with superb wit, transcends irony. Austen rather seeks to confirm, however implicitly, Johnson’s powerful warning, in *The Rambler*, number 4, against
the overwhelming realism of Fielding and Smollett (though their popular prevalence is merely hinted):

But if the power of example is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken, that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects.

Fanny Price, rather more than Jane Austen perhaps, really does favor a Johnsonian aesthetic, in life as in literature. Portsmouth belongs to representation as practiced by Smollett, belongs to the cosmos of *Roderick Random*. Fanny, in willing to get back to Mansfield Park, and to get Mansfield Park back to itself, is willing herself also to renovate the world of her creator, the vision of Jane Austen that is *Mansfield Park*.

*Emma*

Sir Walter Scott, reviewing *Emma* in 1815, rather strangely compared Jane Austen to the masters of the Flemish school of painting, presumably because of her precision in representing her characters. The strangeness results from Scott's not seeing how English Austen was, though the Scots perspective may have entered into his estimate. To me, as an American critic, *Emma* seems the most English of English novels, and beyond question one of the very best. More than *Pride and Prejudice*, it is Austen's masterpiece, the largest triumph of her vigorous art. Her least accurate prophecy as to the fate of her fictions concerned *Emma*, whose heroine, she thought, “no one but myself will much like.”

Aside from much else, Emma is immensely likable, because she is so extraordinarily imaginative, dangerous and misguided as her imagination frequently must appear to others and finally to herself. On the scale of being, Emma constitutes an answer to the immemorial questions of the Sublime: More? Equal to? Or less than? Like Clarissa Harlowe before her, and the strongest heroines of George Eliot and Henry James after her, Emma Woodhouse has a heroic will, and like them she risks identifying her will with her imagination. Socially considered, such identification is catastrophic, since the Protestant will has a tendency to bestow a ranking upon other selves, and such ranking may turn out to be a personal phantasmagoria. G. Armour Craig rather finely remarked that: “society in *Emma* is not a ladder. It is a web of imputations that link feelings and
conduct.” Yet Emma herself, expansionist rather than reductionist in temperament, imputes more fiercely and freely than the web can sustain, and she threatens always, until she is enlightened, to dissolve the societal links, in and for others, that might allow some stability between feelings and conduct.

Armour Craig usefully added that: “Emma does not justify its heroine nor does it deride her.” Rather it treats her with ironic love (not loving irony). Emma Woodhouse is dear to Jane Austen, because her errors are profoundly imaginative, and rise from the will’s passion for autonomy of vision. The splendid Jane Fairfax is easier to admire, but I cannot agree with Wayne Booth’s awarding the honors to her over Emma, though I admire the subtle balance of his formulation:

Jane is superior to Emma in most respects except the stroke of good fortune that made Emma the heroine of the book. In matters of taste and ability, of head and of heart, she is Emma’s superior.

Taste, ability, head, and heart are a formidable fourfold; the imagination and the will, working together, are an even more formidable twofold, and clearly may have their energies diverted to error and to mischief. Jane Fairfax is certainly more amiable even than Emma Woodhouse, but she is considerably less interesting. It is Emma who is meant to charm us, and who does charm us. Austen is not writing a tragedy of the will, like Paradise Lost, but a great comedy of the will, and her heroine must incarnate the full potential of the will, however misused for a time. Having rather too much her own way is certainly one of Emma’s powers, and she does have a disposition to think a little too well of herself. When Austen says that these were “the real evils indeed of Emma’s situation,” we read “evils” as lightly as the author will let us, which is lightly enough.

Can we account for the qualities in Emma Woodhouse that make her worthy of comparison with George Eliot’s Gwendolen Harleth and Henry James’s Isabel Archer? The pure comedy of her context seems world enough for her; she evidently is not the heiress of all the ages. We are persuaded, by Austen’s superb craft, that marriage to Mr. Knightley will more than suffice to fulfill totally the now perfectly amiable Emma. Or are we? It is James’s genius to suggest that while Osmond’s “beautiful mind” was a prison of the spirit for Isabel, no proper husband could exist anyway, since neither Touchett nor Goodwood is exactly a true match for her. Do we, presumably against Austen’s promptings, not find Mr. Knightley something of a confinement also, benign and wise though he be?
I suspect that the heroine of the Protestant will, from Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe through to Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway, can never find fit match because wills do not marry. The allegory or tragic irony of this dilemma is written large in Clarissa, since Lovelace, in strength of will and splendor of being, actually would have been the true husband for Clarissa (as he well knows) had he not been a moral squalor. His death-cry (“Let this expiate!”) expiates nothing, and helps establish the long tradition of the Anglo-American novel in which the heroines of the will are fated to suffer either overt calamities or else happy unions with such good if unexciting men as Mr. Knightley or Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*. When George Eliot is reduced to having the fascinating Gwendolen Harleth fall hopelessly in love with the prince of prigs, Daniel Deronda, we sigh and resign ourselves to the sorrows of fictive overdetermination. Lovelace or Daniel Deronda? I myself do not know a high-spirited woman who would not prefer the first, though not for a husband!

*Emma* is replete with grand comic epiphanies, of which my favorite comes in volume 3, chapter 11, when Emma receives the grave shock of Harriet’s disclosure that Mr. Knightley is the object of Harriet’s hopeful affections:

When Harriet had closed her evidence, she appealed to her dear Miss Woodhouse, to say whether she had not good ground for hope.

“I never should have presumed to think of it at first,” said she, “but for you. You told me to observe him carefully, and let his behavior be the rule of mine—and so I have. But now I seem to feel that I may deserve him; and that if he does choose me, it will not be any thing so very wonderful.”

The bitter feelings occasioned by this speech, the many bitter feelings, made the utmost exertion necessary on Emma’s side to enable her to say in reply,

“Harriet, I will only venture to declare, that Mr. Knightley is the last man in the world, who would intentionally give any woman the idea of his feeling for her more than he really does.”

Harriet seemed ready to worship her friend for a sentence so satisfactory; and Emma was only saved from raptures and fondness, which at the moment would have been dreadful penance, by the sound of her father’s footsteps. He was coming through the hall. Harriet was too much agitated to encounter him. “She could not compose herself—Mr. Woodhouse would be alarmed—she had better go;”—with most ready encouragement from her friend, therefore, she passed off through another door—and the moment
she was gone, this was the spontaneous burst of Emma’s feelings: “Oh God! that I had never seen her!”

The rest of the day, the following night, were hardly enough for her thoughts.—She was bewildered amidst the confusion of all that had rushed on her within the last few hours. Every moment had brought a fresh surprise; and every surprise must be matter of humiliation to her.—How to understand it all! How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself, and living under!—The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!—she sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery—in every place, every posture, she perceived that she had acted most weakly; that she had been imposed on by others in a most mortifying degree; that she had been imposing on herself in a degree yet more mortifying; that she was wretched, and should probably find this day but the beginning of wretchedness.

The acute aesthetic pleasure of this turns on the counterpoint between Emma’s spontaneous cry: “Oh God! that I had never seen her!” and the exquisite comic touch of: “She sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery—in every place, every posture, she perceived that she had acted most weakly.” The acute humiliation of the will could not be better conveyed than by “she tried the shrubbery” and “every posture.” Endlessly imaginative, Emma must now be compelled to endure the mortification of reducing herself to the postures and places of those driven into corners by the collapse of visions that have been exposed as delusions. Jane Austen, who seems to have identified herself with Emma, wisely chose to make this moment of ironic reversal a temporary purgatory, rather than an infernal discomfiture.

*Persuasion*

“Persuasion” is a word derived from the Latin for “advising” or “urging,” for recommending that it is good to perform or not perform a particular action. The word goes back to a root meaning “sweet” or “pleasant,” so that the good of performance or nonperformance has a tang of taste rather than of moral judgment about it. Jane Austen chose it as the title for her last completed novel. As a title, it recalls *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice* rather than *Emma* or *Mansfield Park*. We are given not the name of a person or house and estate, but of an abstraction, a single one in this case. The title’s primary reference is to the persuasion of its heroine, Anne
Elliot, at the age of nineteen, by her godmother, Lady Russell, not to marry Captain Frederick Wentworth, a young naval officer. This was, as it turns out, very bad advice, and, after eight years, it is mended by Anne and Captain Wentworth. As with all of Austen's ironic comedies, matters end happily for the heroine. And yet each time I finish a rereading of this perfect novel, I feel very sad.

This does not appear to be my personal vagary; when I ask my friends and students about their experience of the book, they frequently mention a sadness which they also associate with *Persuasion*, more even than with *Mansfield Park*. Anne Elliot, a quietly eloquent being, is a self-reliant character, in no way forlorn, and her sense of self never falters. It is not her sadness we feel as we conclude the book: it is the novel’s somberness that impresses us. The sadness enriches what I would call the novel’s canonical persuasiveness, its way of showing us its extraordinary aesthetic distinction.

*Persuasion* is among novels what Anne Elliot is among novelistic characters—a strong but subdued outrider. The book and the character are not colorful or vivacious; Elizabeth Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse of *Emma* have a verve to them that initially seems lacking in Anne Elliot, which may be what Austen meant when she said that Anne was “almost too good for me.” Anne is really almost too subtle for us, though not for Wentworth, who has something of an occult wavelength to her. Juliet McMaster notes “the kind of oblique communication that constantly goes on between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, where, though they seldom speak to each other, each constantly understands the full import of the other’s speech better than their interlocutors do.”

That kind of communication in *Persuasion* depends upon deep “affection,” a word that Austen values over “love.” “Affection” between woman and man, in Austen, is the more profound and lasting emotion. I think it is not too much to say that Anne Elliot, though subdued, is the creation for whom Austen herself must have felt the most affection, because she lavished her own gifts upon Anne. Henry James insisted that the novelist must be a sensibility upon which absolutely nothing is lost; by that test (clearly a limited one) only Austen, George Eliot, and James himself, among all those writing in English, would join Stendhal, Flaubert, and Tolstoy in a rather restricted pantheon. Anne Elliot may well be the one character in all of prose fiction upon whom nothing is lost, though she is in no danger of turning into a novelist. The most accurate estimate of Anne Elliot that I have seen is by Stuart Tave:

Nobody hears Anne, nobody sees her, but it is she who is ever at the center. It is through her ears, eyes, and mind that we are made
to care for what is happening. If nobody is much aware of her, she is very much aware of everyone else and she perceives what is happening to them when they are ignorant of themselves ... she reads Wentworth's mind, with the coming troubles he is causing for others and himself, before those consequences bring the information to him.

The aesthetic dangers attendant upon such a paragon are palpable: how does a novelist make such a character persuasive? Poldy, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, is overwhelmingly persuasive because he is so complete a person, which was the largest of Joyce's intentions. Austen's ironic mode does not sanction the representation of completeness: we do not accompany her characters to the bedroom, the kitchen, the privy. What Austen parodies in *Sense and Sensibility* she raises to an apotheosis in *Persuasion*: the sublimity of a particular, inwardly isolated sensibility. Anne Elliot is hardly the only figure in Austen who has an understanding heart. Her difference is in her almost preternatural acuteness of perception of others and of the self, which are surely the qualities that most distinguish Austen as a novelist. Anne Elliot is to Austen's work what Rosalind of *As You Like It* is to Shakespeare's: the character who almost reaches the mastery of perspective that can be available only to the novelist or playwright, lest all dramatic quality be lost from the novel or play. C.L. Barber memorably emphasized this limitation:

The dramatist tends to show us one thing at a time, and to realize that one thing, in its moment, to the full; his characters go to extremes, comical as well as serious; and no character, not even a Rosalind, is in a position to see all around the play and so be completely poised, for if this were so the play would cease to be dramatic.

I like to turn Barber's point in the other direction: more even than Hamlet or Falstaff, or than Elizabeth Bennet, or than Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, Rosalind and Anne Elliot are almost completely poised, nearly able to see all around the play and the novel. Their poise cannot transcend perspectivizing completely, but Rosalind's wit and Anne's sensibility, both balanced and free of either excessive aggressivity or defensive-ness, enable them to share more of their creators' poise than we ever come to do.

Austen never loses dramatic intensity; we share Anne's anxiety concerning Wentworth's renewed intentions until the novel's conclusion. But
we rely upon Anne as we should rely upon Rosalind; critics would see the rancidity of Touchstone as clearly as they see the vanity of Jacques if they placed more confidence in Rosalind’s reactions to everyone else in the play, as well as to herself. Anne Elliot’s reactions have the same winning authority; we must try to give the weight to her words that is not extended by the other persons in the novel, except for Wentworth.

Stuart Tave’s point, like Barber’s, is accurate even when turned in the other direction; Austen’s irony is very Shakespearean. Even the reader must fall into the initial error of undervaluing Anne Elliot. The wit of Elizabeth Bennet or of Rosalind is easier to appreciate than Anne Elliot’s accurate sensibility. The secret of her character combines Austenian irony with a Wordsworthian sense of deferred hope. Austen has a good measure of Shakespeare’s unmatched ability to give us persons, both major and minor, who are each utterly consistent in her or his separate mode of speech, and yet completely different from one another. Anne Elliot is the last of Austen’s heroines of what I think we must call the Protestant will, but in her the will is modified, perhaps perfected, by its descendant, the Romantic sympathetic imagination, of which Wordsworth, as we have seen, was the prophet. That is perhaps what helps to make Anne so complex and sensitive a character.

Jane Austen’s earlier heroines, of whom Elizabeth Bennet is the exemplar, manifested the Protestant will as direct descendants of Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe, with Dr. Samuel Johnson hovering nearby as moral authority. Marxist criticism inevitably views the Protestant will, even in its literary manifestations, as a mercantile matter, and it has become fashionable to talk about the socioeconomic realities that Jane Austen excludes, such as the West Indian slavery that is part of the ultimate basis for the financial security most of her characters enjoy. But all achieved literary works are founded upon exclusions, and no one has demonstrated that increased consciousness of the relation between culture and imperialism is of the slightest benefit whatsoever in learning to read *Mansfield Park*. *Persuasion* ends with a tribute to the British navy, in which Wentworth has an honored place. Doubtless Wentworth at sea, ordering the latest batch of disciplinary floggings, is not as pleasant as Wentworth on land, gently appreciating the joys of affection with Anne Elliot. But once again, Austen’s is a great art founded upon exclusions, and the sordid realities of British sea power are no more relevant to *Persuasion* than West Indian bondage is to *Mansfield Park*. Austen was, however, immensely interested in the pragmatic and secular consequences of the Protestant will, and they seem to me a crucial element in helping us appreciate the heroines of her novels.
Austen's Shakespearean inwardness, culminating in Anne Elliot, revises the moral intensities of Clarissa Harlowe's secularized Protestant martyrdom, her slow dying after being raped by Lovelace. What removes Clarissa’s will to live is her stronger will to maintain the integrity of her being. To yield to the repentant Lovelace by marrying him would compromise the essence of her being, the exaltation of her violated will. What is tragedy in Clarissa is converted by Austen into ironic comedy, but the will’s drive to maintain itself scarcely alters in this conversion. In *Persuasion* the emphasis is on a willed exchange of esteems, where both the woman and the man estimate the value of the other to be high. Obviously outward considerations of wealth, property, and social standing are crucial elements here, but so are the inward considerations of common sense, amiability, culture, wit, and affection. In a way (it pains me to say this, as I am a fierce Emersonian) Ralph Waldo Emerson anticipated the current Marxist critique of Austen when he denounced her as a mere conformist who would not allow her heroines to achieve the soul’s true freedom from societal conventions. But that was to mistake Jane Austen, who understood that the function of convention was to liberate the will, even if convention’s tendency was to stifle individuality, without which the will was inconsequential.

Austen’s major heroines—Elizabeth, Emma, Fanny, and Anne—possess such inward freedom that their individualities cannot be repressed. Austen’s art as a novelist is not to worry much about the socioeconomic genesis of that inner freedom, though the anxiety level does rise in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. In Austen, irony becomes the instrument for invention, which Dr. Johnson defined as the essence of poetry. A conception of inward freedom that centers upon a refusal to accept esteem except from one upon whom one has conferred esteem, is a conception of the highest degree of irony. The supreme comic scene in all of Austen must be Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy’s first marriage proposal, where the ironies of the dialectic of will and esteem become very nearly outrageous. That high comedy, which continued in *Emma*, is somewhat chastened in *Mansfield Park*, and then becomes something else, unmistakable but difficult to name, in *Persuasion*, where Austen has become so conscious a master that she seems to have changed the nature of willing, as though it, too, could be persuaded to become a rarer, more disinterested act of the self.

No one has suggested that Jane Austen becomes a High Romantic in *Persuasion*; her poet remained William Cowper, not Wordsworth, and her favorite prose writer was always Dr. Johnson. But her severe distrust of imagination and of “romantic love,” so prevalent in the earlier novels, is
not a factor in *Persuasion*. Anne and Wentworth maintain their affection for each other throughout eight years of hopeless separation, and each has the power of imagination to conceive of a triumphant reconciliation. This is the material for a romance, not for an ironical novel. The ironies of *Persuasion* are frequently pungent, but they are almost never directed at Anne Elliot and only rarely at Captain Wentworth. There is a difficult relation between Austen’s repression of her characteristic irony about her protagonists and a certain previously unheard plangency that hovers throughout *Persuasion*. Despite Anne’s faith in herself she is very vulnerable to the anxiety, which she never allows herself to express, of an unlived life, in which the potential loss transcends yet includes sexual unfulfillment. I can recall only one critic, the Australian Ann Molan, who emphasizes what Austen strongly implies, that “Anne ... is a passionate woman. And against her will, her heart keeps asserting its demand for fulfillment.” Since Anne had refused Wentworth her esteem eight years before, she feels a necessity to withhold her will, and thus becomes the first Austen heroine whose will and imagination are antithetical.

Although Austen’s overt affinities remained with the Aristocratic Age, her authenticity as a writer impelled her, in *Persuasion*, a long way toward the burgeoning Democratic Age, or Romanticism, as we used to call it. There is no civil war within Anne Elliot’s psyche, or within Austen’s; but there is the emergent sadness of a schism in the self, with memory taking the side of imagination in an alliance against the will. The almost Wordsworthian power of memory in both Anne and Wentworth has been noted by Gene Ruoff. Since Austen was anything but an accidental novelist, we might ask why she chose to found *Persuasion* upon a mutual nostalgia. After all, the rejected Wentworth is even less inclined to will a renewed affection than Anne is, and yet the fusion of memory and imagination triumphs over his will also. Was this a relaxation of the will in Jane Austen herself? Since she returns to her earlier mode in *Sanditon*, her unfinished novel begun after *Persuasion* was completed, it may be that the story of Anne Elliot was an excursion or indulgence for the novelist. The parallels between Wordsworth and *Persuasion* are limited but real. High Romantic novels in England, whether of the Byronic kind like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* or of a Wordsworthian sort like *Adam Bede*, are a distinctly later development. The ethos of the Austen heroine does not change in *Persuasion*, but she is certainly a more problematic being, tinged with a new sadness concerning life’s limits. It may be that the elegant pathos *Persuasion* sometimes courts has a connection to Jane Austen’s own ill health, her intimations of her early death.

Stuart Tave, comparing Wordsworth and Austen, shrewdly noted that
both were “poets of marriage” and both also possessed “a sense of duty understood and deeply felt by those who see the integrity and peace of their own lives as essentially bound to the lives of others and see the lives of all in a more than merely social order.” Expanding Tave’s insight, Susan Morgan pointed to the particular affinity between Austen’s *Emma* and Wordsworth’s great “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Earliest Childhood.” The growth of the individual consciousness, involving both gain and loss for Wordsworth but only gain for Austen, is the shared subject. Emma’s consciousness certainly does develop, and she undergoes a quasi-Wordsworthian transformation from the pleasures of near solipsism to the more difficult pleasures of sympathy for others. Anne Elliot, far more mature from the beginning, scarcely needs to grow in consciousness. Her long-lamented rejection of Wentworth insulates her against the destructiveness of hope, which we have seen to be the frightening emphasis of the earlier Wordsworth, particularly in the story of poor Margaret. Instead of hope, there is a complex of emotions, expressed by Austen with her customary skill:

> How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,—how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence!—She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning.

> Here learning romance is wholly retrospective; Anne no longer regards it as being available to her. And indeed Wentworth returns, still resentful after eight years, and reflects that Anne’s power with him is gone forever. The qualities of decision and confidence that make him a superb naval commander are precisely what he condemns her for lacking. With almost too meticulous a craft, Austen traces his gradual retreat from this position, as the power of memory increases its dominance over him and as he learns that his jilted sense of her as being unable to act is quite mistaken. It is a beautiful irony that he needs to undergo a process of self-persuasion while Anne waits, without even knowing that she is waiting or that there is anything that could rekindle her hope. The comedy of this is gently sad, as the reader waits also, reflecting upon how large a part contingency plays in the matter.

While the pre-Socratics and Freud agree that there are no accidents, Austen thinks differently. Character is fate for her also, but fate, once activated, tends to evade character in so overdetermined a social context as
Austen's world. In rereading *Persuasion*, though I remember the happy conclusion, I nevertheless feel anxiety as Wentworth and Anne circle away from each other in spite of themselves. The reader is not totally persuaded of a satisfactory interview until Anne reads Wentworth’s quite agonized letter to her:

“I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant. You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone I think and plan.—Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?—I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others.—Too good, too excellent creature! You do us justice indeed. You do believe that there is true attachment and constancy among men. Believe it to be most fervent, most undeviating in

“I must go, uncertain of my fate; but I shall return hither, or follow your party, as soon as possible. A word, a look will be enough to decide whether I enter your father’s house this evening or never.”

I cannot imagine such a letter in *Pride and Prejudice*, or even in *Emma* or *Mansfield Park*. The perceptive reader might have realized how passionate Anne was, almost from the start of the novel, but until this there was no indication of equal passion in Wentworth. His letter, as befits a naval commander, is badly written and not exactly Austenian, but it is all the more effective thereby. We come to realize that we have believed in him until now only because Anne’s love for him provokes our interest. Austen wisely has declined to make him interesting enough on his own. Yet part of the book’s effect is to persuade the reader of the reader’s own powers of discernment and self-persuasion; Anne Elliot is almost too good for the reader, as she is for Austen herself, but the attentive reader gains the
confidence to perceive Anne as she should be perceived. The subtlest element in this subtlest of novels is the call upon the reader’s own power of memory to match the persistence and intensity of the yearning that Anne Elliot is too stoical to express directly.

The yearning hovers throughout the book, coloring Anne’s perceptions and our own. Our sense of Anne’s existence becomes identified with our own consciousness of lost love, however fictive or idealized that may be. There is an improbability in the successful renewal of a relationship devastated eight years before which ought to work against the texture of this most “realistic” of Austen’s novels, but she is very careful to see that it does not. Like the author, the reader becomes persuaded to wish for Anne what she still wishes for herself. Ann Molan has the fine observation that Austen “is most satisfied with Anne when Anne is most dissatisfied with herself.” The reader is carried along with Austen, and gradually Anne is also persuaded and catches up with the reader, allowing her yearning a fuller expression.

Dr. Johnson, in *The Rambler* 29, on “The folly of anticipating misfortunes,” warned against anxious expectations of any kind, whether fearful or hopeful:

> because the objects both of fear and hope are yet uncertain, so we ought not to trust the representations of one more than the other, because they are both equally fallacious; as hope enlarges happiness, fear aggravates calamity. It is generally allowed, that no man ever found the happiness of possession proportionate to that expectation which incited his desire, and invigorated his pursuit; nor has any man found the evils of life so formidable in reality, as they were described to him by his own imagination.

This is one of a series of Johnsonian pronouncements against the dangerous prevalence of the imagination, some of which his disciple Austen had certainly read. If you excluded such representations, on the great critic’s advice, then Wordsworth could not have written at all, and Austen could not have written *Persuasion*. Yet it was a very strange book for her to write, this master of the highest art of exclusion that we have known in the Western novel. Any novel by Jane Austen could be called an achieved ellipsis, with everything omitted that could disturb her ironic though happy conclusions. *Persuasion* remains the least popular of her four canonical novels because it is the strangest, but all her work is increasingly strange as we approach the end of the Democratic Age that her contemporary Wordsworth did so much to inaugurate in literature. Poised as she is at the
final border of the Aristocratic Age, she shares with Wordsworth an art
dependent upon a split between a waning Protestant will and a newly
active sympathetic imagination, with memory assigned the labor of heal-
ing the divide. If the argument of my book has any validity, Austen will sur-
vive even the bad days ahead of us, because the strangeness of originality
and of an individual vision are our lasting needs, which only literature can
gratify in the Theocratic Age that slouches toward us.
Nietzsche saluted Stendhal as “this strange Epicurean and man of interrogation, the last great psychologist of France.” Yet Stendhal is both less and more than a psychologist, even in the sense of moral psychologist intended by Nietzsche. If we are unhappy because we are vain, which seems true enough, then the insight seems related to the conviction that our sorrows come to us because we are restless, and cannot sit at our desks. To assimilate Stendhal to Pascal would be tasteless, yet to determine the pragmatic difference between them is a complex labor. Pascal, to me, is the authentic nihilist; Stendhal is something else. Call that Julie Sorel, who attracts us without compelling our liking. Or do we like him? Robert M. Adams coolly concludes that:

Whether you like Julien Sorel, and for what parts of his behavior, depends, then, in some measure, on who you think you are and what conspiracies or complicities your imagination allows you to join, in the course of reading the book.

That may be giving Stendhal the best of it, since the reader’s fundamental right, as critic, is to ask the writer “who do you think you are, anyway?” The reversal is shrewd, whether Stendhal’s or Adams’s, since we do not expect the author to be quite as aggressive as ourselves. Stendhal brazenly excels us, and Julien is more his surrogate than many have allowed. We admire Julien for the range of his imagination, and are a little estranged by his extraordinary (if intermittent) ability to switch his affections by acts of will. He is, of course, designedly a little Napoleon, and if
one is not Hazlitt or Stendhal that may not move one to affection. But the Napoleonic is only one wave or movement in him, and Stendhal is one of that myriad of nineteenth-century writers of genius who fracture the self. A more crucial movement is the Byronic, and here Adams is very perceptive indeed, marvelously so:

Most of what we think about Julien depends, of course, on our judgment of his behavior with the two ladies; and here we come up against the central paradox of the novel, that (like the ladies) we don’t really think more highly of our hero the better he behaves. Quite the contrary. The worse he behaves, the more painful the sacrifices he requires of them, the more we are impressed by their determination to love him. Impervious to jealousy, untouched by his effort to murder her, Mme. de Rênal defies public scandal, leaves her husband and children, and comes to be with Julien in the hour of his anguish. Mathilde is in despair that he no longer loves her though she has sacrificed even more prodigally to her love of him. The revelation of Julien is not to be made directly, in the glare of open daylight, but only through the glow reflected on the faces of these devoted acolytes. As with Christ and Dionysus, the mystery of Julien is performed in the darkness of a prison-tomb, and his resurrection is celebrated in the presence of women. The cenacle of Julien allures its converts by withdrawing its mystery, etherealizing its cult: that is the work of the book’s last important section.

One could argue that Julien, like Lord Byron, has that cool passivity which provokes his women into a return to themselves, so that his function is to spur these remarkable (and very dissimilar) ladies on to the epiphanies of their own modes of heroism. This could account for what I myself find most unsatisfactory about The Red and the Black, which is the obscurity (perhaps even obscuratism?) of Julien’s final state of the soul:

The bad air of the prison cell was becoming insupportable to Julien. Fortunately on the day set for his execution a bright sun was shining upon the earth, and Julien was in the vein of courage. To walk in the open air was for him a delicious experience, as treading the solid ground is for a sailor who has been long at sea. There now, things are going very well, he told himself, I shall have no lack of courage.

Never had that head been so poetic as at the moment when it
was about to fall. The sweetest moments he had ever known in the woods at Vergy came crowding back into his mind, and with immense vividness.

Everything proceeded simply, decently, and without the slightest affectation on his part.

Two days before he had told Fouqué:

—As for emotion, I can’t quite answer; this dungeon is so ugly and damp it gives me Feverish moments in which I don’t recognize myself, but fear is another matter, I shall never be seen to grow pale.

He had made arrangements in advance that on the last day Fouqué should take away Mathilde and Mme. de Rênal.

—Put them in the same coach, he told him. Keep the post horses at a steady gallop. Either they will fall in one another’s arms or they will fall into mortal hatred. In either case, the poor women will be somewhat distracted from their terrible grief. Julien had forced from Mme. de Rênal an oath that she would live to look after Mathilde’s son.

—Who knows? Perhaps we retain some consciousness after death, he said one day to Fouqué. I should like to rest, since rest is the word, in that little cave atop the big mountain that overlooks Verrières. I’ve told how several times when I spent the night in that cave and looked out over the richest provinces of France, my heart was afire with ambition: that was my passion in those days.... Well, that cave is precious to me, and nobody can deny that it’s located in a spot that a philosopher’s heart might envy.... You know these good congregationists in Besançon can coin money out of anything; go about it the right way, and they’ll sell you my mortal remains....

Julien’s superb sense of humor, at the end, enchants us, but what precisely is Stendhal’s final attitude towards his hero? I take this sentence as not being ironic: “Never had that head been so poetic as at the moment when it was about to fall.” Julien is madly in love with Mme de Rênal; the sincerity of this madness cannot be doubted, but then the suicidal intensity or sustained drive beyond the pleasure principle of Julien’s last days cannot be doubted either. Several critics have remarked upon the supposed similarity between Julien and Don Quixote, but I cannot see it. The Don lives in the order of play until he is battered out of it; then he dies. What others call madness is simply the Don’s greatness. But Julien falls into pathology; it is an attractive craziness, because it makes him more likeable than before, yet it remains a kind of madness. Stendhal is poor at endings;
the conclusion of *The Charterhouse of Parma* is also weak and abrupt. But I feel a certain hesitancy in myself at these judgments. Perhaps I simply like both novels so much that I resent Stendhal’s own apparent loss of interest when he nears an end. The best defense of Julien’s demise was made by Stendhal’s subtle disciple, the Prince of Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*: “The author hastens to kill the character in order to be free of him. It is a dramatic and evocative conclusion unlike any other.” One wants to protest to the Prince that it isn’t dramatic enough, but he forestalls the complaint: “The impulsive, energetic handsome Julien spends his last words to tell his friend how he must go about buying back his body.” Evidently, this is dramatic in the mode of *The Leopard*, where death takes place in the soul, and the body alone remains living. A Stendhalian pathos, the Prince implies, belongs only to the happy few; it is a pathos more of sensibility than of emotion.

Mathilde and Julien, on the occasion of their first night together, are comic triumphs of sensibility over emotion. “Their transports,” Stendhal observes, “were a bit conscious,” which is a delicious understatement:

Mlle. de La Mole supposed she was fulfilling a duty to herself and to her lover. The poor boy, she thought to herself, he’s shown perfect bravery, he ought to be happy or else the fault lies in my want of character. But she would have been glad to ransom herself, at the cost of eternal misery, from the cruel necessity imposed upon her.

In spite of the frightful violence with which she repressed her feelings, she was in perfect command of her speech.

No regret, no reproach came from her lips to spoil this night, which seemed strange to Julien, rather than happy. What a difference, good God! from his last stay of twenty-four hours at Verrières! These fancy Paris fashions have found a way to spoil everything, even love, he said to himself, in an excess of injustice.

He was indulging in these reflections as he stood in one of the great mahogany wardrobes into which he had slipped at the first sounds coming from the next room, which was that of Mme. de La Mole. Mathilde went off with her mother to mass; the maids quickly left the room, and Julien easily escaped before they came back to finish their tasks.

He took a horse and sought out the loneliest parts of the forest of Meudon near Paris. He was far more surprised than happy. The happiness that came from time to time like a gleam of light in his soul was like that of a young second lieutenant who after
some astounding action has just been promoted full colonel by the
commanding general; he felt himself raised to an immense height.
Everything that had been far above him yesterday was now at his
level or even beneath him. Gradually Julien’s happiness increased
as it became more remote.

If there was nothing tender in his soul, the reason, however
strange it may seem, was that Mathilde in all her dealings with
him had been doing nothing but her duty. There was nothing
unexpected for her in all the events of the night, except the mis-
ery and shame she had discovered instead of those divine raptures
that novels talk about.

Was I mistaken, don’t I love him at all? she asked herself.

This hilarity of mutual coldness is the prelude to the novel’s most
delightful pages, as Stendhal surpasses himself in depicting the agon that
springs up between these two titanic vanities. What Hobbes was to the
principles of civil society, Stendhal was to the principles of eros. Neither
man should be called a cynic. Each is more than a psychologist, because
both saw the truth of the state of nature. Hobbes is to Stendhal what
Schopenhauer was to the Tolstoy of Anna Karenina, the philosopher who
confirms the insights so central to the novelist that they scarcely require
confirmation. I would prefer to put it more starkly; if you repeatedly read
The Red and the Black, then Leviathan becomes a fascinating redundancy,
just as a deep knowledge of Anna Karenina renders The World as Will and
Representation almost superfluous. Stendhal, and Tolstoy, are in their anti-
thetical ways the true philosophers of love between the sexes, the dark
metaphysicians of the unconscious verities of desire.
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

(1797–1851)

Frankenstein

there is a fire
And motion of the soul which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but aspire
Beyond the fitting medium of desire.
BYRON. Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto 3

Ere Babylon was dust,
The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden.
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
For know there are two worlds of life and death:
One that which thou beboldest; but the other
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
The shadows of all forms that think and live
Till death unite them and they part no more
SHELLEY. Prometheus Unbound, act 1

The motion-picture viewer who carries his obscure but still authentic taste for the sublime to the neighborhood theater, there to see the latest in an unending series of Franksteins, becomes a sharer in a romantic terror now nearly one hundred and fifty years old. Mary Shelley, barely nineteen years of age when she wrote the original Frankenstein, was the daughter of two great intellectual rebels, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and the second wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley, another great rebel and an unmatched lyrical poet. Had she written nothing, Mary
Shelley would be remembered today. She is remembered in her own right as the author of a novel valuable in itself but also prophetic of an intellectual world to come, a novel depicting a Prometheanism that is with us still.

“Frankenstein,” to most of us, is the name of a monster rather than of a monster’s creator, for the common reader and the common viewer have worked together, in their apparent confusion, to create a myth soundly based on a central duality in Mary Shelley’s novel. A critical discussion of *Frankenstein* needs to begin from an insight first recorded by Richard Church and Muriel Spark: the monster and his creator are the antithetical halves of a single being. Spark states the antithesis too cleanly; for her Victor Frankenstein represents the feelings, and his nameless creature the intellect. In her view the monster has no emotion, and “what passes for emotion ... are really intellectual passions arrived at through rational channels.” Spark carries this argument far enough to insist that the monster is asexual and that he demands a bride from Frankenstein only for companionship, a conclusion evidently at variance with the novel’s text.

The antithesis between the scientist and his creature in *Frankenstein* is a very complex one and can be described more fully in the larger context of Romantic literature and its characteristic mythology. The shadow or double of the self is a constant conceptual image in Blake and Shelley and a frequent image, more random and descriptive, in the other major Romantics, especially in Byron. In *Frankenstein* it is the dominant and recurrent image and accounts for much of the latent power the novel possesses.

Mary Shelley’s husband was a divided being, as man and as poet, just as his friend Byron was, though in Shelley the split was more radical. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is the full title of Mary Shelley’s novel, and while Victor Frankenstein is not Shelley (Clerval is rather more like the poet), the Modern Prometheus is a very apt term for Shelley or for Byron. Prometheus is the mythic figure who best suits the uses of Romantic poetry, for no other traditional being has in him the full range of Romantic moral sensibility and the full Romantic capacity for creation and destruction.

No Romantic writer employed the Prometheus archetype without a full awareness of its equivocal potentialities. The Prometheus of the ancients had been for the most part a spiritually reprehensible figure, though frequently a sympathetic one, in terms both of his dramatic situation and in his close alliance with mankind against the gods. But this alliance had been ruinous for man in most versions of the myth, and the Titan’s benevolence toward humanity was hardly sufficient recompense for the alienation of man from heaven that he had brought about. Both sides of Titanism are evident in earlier Christian references to the story. The
same Prometheus who is taken as an analogue of the crucified Christ is regarded also as a type of Lucifer, a son of light justly cast, out by an offended heaven.

In the Romantic readings of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (and Frankenstein is implicitly one such reading) this double identity of Prometheus is a vital element. Blake, whose mythic revolutionary named Orc is another version of Prometheus, saw Milton’s Satan as a Prometheus gone wrong, as desire restrained until it became only the shadow of desire, a diminished double of creative energy. Shelley went further in judging Milton’s Satan as an imperfect Prometheus, inadequate because his mixture of heroic and base qualities engendered in the reader’s mind a “pernicious casuistry” inimical to the spirit of art.

Blake, more systematic a poet than Shelley, worked out an antithesis between symbolic figures he named Spectre and Emanation, the shadow of desire and the total form of desire, respectively. A reader of *Frankenstein*, recalling the novel’s extraordinary conclusion, with its scenes of obsession-al pursuit through the Arctic wastes, can recognize the same imagery applied to a similar symbolic situation in Blake’s lyric on the strife of Spectre and Emanation:

My Spectre around me night and day
Like a Wild beast guards my way.
My Emanation far within
Weeps incessantly for my Sin.

A Fathomless and boundless deep,
There we wander, there we weep;
On the hungry craving wind
My Spectre follows thee behind.

He scents thy footsteps in the snow,
Wheresoever thou dost go
Thro’ the wintry hail and rain.

Frankenstein’s monster, tempting his revengeful creator on through a world of ice, is another Emanation pursued by a Spectre, with the enormous difference that he is an Emanation flawed, a nightmare of actuality, rather than dream of desire. Though abhorred rather than loved, the monster is the total form of Frankenstein’s creative power and is more imaginative than his creator. The monster is at once more intellectual and more emotional than his maker; indeed he excels Frankenstein as much (and in
the same ways) as Milton’s Adam excels Milton’s God in *Paradise Lost.* The greatest paradox and most astonishing achievement of Mary Shelley’s novel is that the monster is *more human* than his creator. This nameless being, as much a Modern Adam as his creator is a Modern Prometheus, is more lovable than his creator and more hateful, more to be pitied and more to be feared, and above all more able to give the attentive reader that shock of added consciousness in which aesthetic recognition compels a heightened realization of the self. For like Blake’s Spectre and Emanation or Shelley’s Alastor and Epipsyche, Frankenstein and his monster are the solipsistic and generous halves of the one self. Frankenstein is the mind and emotions turned in upon themselves, and his creature is the mind and emotions turned imaginatively outward, seeking a greater humanization through a confrontation of other selves.

I am suggesting that what makes *Frankenstein* an important book, though it is only a strong, flawed novel with frequent clumsiness in its narrative and characterization, is that it contains one of the most vivid versions we have of the Romantic mythology of the self, one that resembles Blake’s *Book of Urizen,* Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound,* and Byron’s *Manfred,* among other works. Because it lacks the sophistication and imaginative complexity of such works, *Frankenstein* affords a unique introduction to the archetypal world of the Romantics.

William Godwin, though a tendentious novelist, was a powerful one, and the prehistory of his daughter’s novel begins with his best work of fiction, *Caleb Williams* (1794). Godwin summarized the climactic (and harrowing) final third of his novel as a pattern of flight and pursuit, “the fugitive in perpetual apprehension of being overwhelmed with the worst calamities, and the pursuer, by his ingenuity and resources, keeping his victim in a state of the most fearful alarm.” Mary Shelley brilliantly reverses this pattern in the final sequence of her novel, and she takes from *Caleb Williams* also her destructive theme of the monster’s war against “the whole machinery of human society,” to quote the words of Caleb Williams while in prison. Muriel Spark argues that *Frankenstein* can be read as a reaction “against the rational-humanism of Godwin and Shelley,” and she points to the equivocal preface that Shelley wrote to his wife’s novel, in order to support this view. Certainly Shelley was worried lest the novel be taken as a warning against the inevitable moral consequences of an unchecked experimental Prometheanism and scientific materialism. The preface insists that:

The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing
always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be
drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical
doctrine of whatever kind.

Shelley had, throughout his own work, a constant reaction against
Godwin's rational humanism, but his reaction was systematically and con-
sciously one of heart against head. In the same summer in the Swiss Alps
that saw the conception of *Frankenstein*, Shelley composed two poems that
lift the thematic conflict of the novel to the level of the true sublime. In the
"Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" the poet's heart interprets an inconstant
grace and loveliness, always just beyond the range of the human senses, as
being the only beneficent force in life, and he prays to this force to be more
constant in its attendance upon him and all mankind. In a greater sister-
hymn, "Mont Blanc," an awesome meditation upon a frightening natural
scene, the poet's head issues an allied but essentially contrary report. The
force, or power, is there, behind or within the mountain, but its external
workings upon us are either indifferent or malevolent, and this power is
not to be prayed to. It can teach us, but what it teaches us is our own dan-
gerous freedom from nature, the necessity for our will to become a signif-
ificant part of materialistic necessity. Though "Mont Blanc" works its way
to an almost heroic conclusion, it is also a poem of horror and reminds us
that Frankenstein first confronts his conscious monster in the brooding
presence of Mont Blanc, and to the restless music of one of Shelley's lyrics
of Mutability.

In *Prometheus Unbound* the split between head and heart is not healed,
but the heart is allowed dominance. The hero, Prometheus, like
Frankenstein, has made a monster, but this monster is Jupiter, the God of
all institutional and historical religions, including organized Christianity.
Salvation from this conceptual error comes through love alone; but love in
this poem, as elsewhere in Shelley, is always closely shadowed by ruin.
Indeed, what choice spirits in Shelley perpetually encounter is ruin mas-
querading as love, pain presenting itself as pleasure. The tentative way out
of this situation in Shelley's poetry is through the quest for a feeling mind
and an understanding heart, which is symbolized by the sexual reunion of
Prometheus and his Emanation, Asia. Frederick A. Pottle sums up
*Prometheus Unbound* by observing its meaning to be that "the head must
sincerely forgive, must willingly eschew hatred on purely experimental
grounds," while "the affections must exorcize the demons of infancy,
whether personal or of the race." In the light cast by these profound and
precise summations, the reader can better understand both Shelley's lyri-
cal drama and his wife's narrative of the Modern Prometheus.
There are two paradoxes at the center of Mary Shelley’s novel, and each illuminates a dilemma of the Promethean imagination. The first is that Frankenstein was successful, in that he did create Natural Man, not as he was, but as the meliorists saw such a man; indeed, Frankenstein did better than this, since his creature was, as we have seen, more imaginative than himself. Frankenstein’s tragedy stems not from his Promethean excess but from his own moral error, his failure to love; he abhorred his creature, became terrified, and fled his responsibilities.

The second paradox is the more ironic. This either would not have happened or would not have mattered anyway, if Frankenstein had been an aesthetically successful maker; a beautiful “monster,” or even a passable one, would not have been a monster. As the creature bitterly observes in chapter 17,

Shall I respect man when he contemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be; the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union.

As the hideousness of his creature was no part of Victor Frankenstein’s intention, it is worth noticing how this disastrous matter came to be.

It would not be unjust to characterize Victor Frankenstein, in his act of creation, as being momentarily a moral idiot, like so many who have done his work after him. There is an indeliberate humor in the contrast between the enormity of the scientist’s discovery and the mundane emotions of the discoverer. Finding that “the minuteness of the parts” slows him down, he resolves to make his creature “about eight feet in height and proportionally large.” As he works on, he allows himself to dream that “a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.” Yet he knows his is a “workshop of filthy creation,” and he fails the fundamental test of his own creativity. When the “dull yellow eye” of his creature opens, this creator falls from the autonomy of a supreme artificer to the terror of a child of earth: “breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.” He flees his responsibility and sets in motion the events that will lead to his own Arctic immolation, a fit end for a being who has never achieved a full sense of another’s existence.

Haunting Mary Shelley’s novel is the demonic figure of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge’s major venture into Romantic mythology of the purgatorial self trapped in the isolation of a heightened self-consciousness. Walton, in Letter 2 introducing the novel, compares himself “to that
production of the most imaginative of modern poets.” As a seeker-out of an unknown passage, Walton is himself a Promethean quester, like Frankenstein, toward whom he is so compellingly drawn. Coleridge’s Mariner is of the line of Cain, and the irony of Frankenstein’s fate is that he too is a Cain, involuntarily murdering all his loved ones through the agency of his creature. The Ancient Mariner is punished by living under the curse of his consciousness of guilt, while the excruciating torment of Frankenstein is never to be able to forget his guilt in creating a lonely consciousness driven to crime by the rage of unwilling solitude.

It is part of Mary Shelley’s insight into her mythological theme that all the monster’s victims are innocents. The monster not only refuses actively to slay his guilty creator, he mourns for him, though with the equivocal tribute of terming the scientist a “generous and self-devoted being.” Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus who has violated nature, receives his epitaph from the ruined second nature he has made, the God-abandoned, who consciously echoes the ruined Satan of Paradise Lost and proclaims, “Evil thenceforth became my good.” It is imaginatively fitting that the greater and more interesting consciousness of the creature should survive his creator, for he alone in Mary Shelley’s novel possesses character. Frankenstein, like Coleridge’s Mariner, has no character in his own right; both figures win a claim to our attention only by their primordial crimes against original nature.

The monster is of course Mary Shelley’s finest invention, and his narrative (chaps. 11–16) forms the highest achievement of the novel, more absorbing even than the magnificent and almost surrealistic pursuit of the climax. In an age so given to remarkable depictions of the dignity of natural man, an age including the shepherds and beggars of Wordsworth and what W. J. Bate has termed Keats’s “polar ideal of disinterestedness”—even in such a literary time Frankenstein’s hapless creature stands out as a sublime embodiment of heroic pathos. Though Frankenstein lacks the moral imagination to understand him, the daemon’s appeal is to what is most compassionate in us:

Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.
The passage I have italicized is the imaginative kernel of the novel and is meant to remind the reader of the novel’s epigraph:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mold me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

That desperate plangency of the fallen Adam becomes the characteristic accent of the daemon’s lamentations, with the influence of Milton cunningly built into the novel’s narrative by the happy device of Frankenstein’s creature receiving his education through reading *Paradise Lost* as “a true history.” Already doomed because his standards are human, which makes him an outcast even to himself, his Miltonic education completes his fatal growth in self-consciousness. His story, as told to his maker, follows a familiar Romantic pattern “of the progress of my intellect,” as he puts it. His first pleasure after the dawn of consciousness comes through his wonder at seeing the moon rise. Caliban-like, he responds wonderfully to music, both natural and human, and his sensitivity to the natural world has the responsiveness of an incipient poet. His awakening to a first love for other beings, the inmates of the cottage he haunts, awakens him also to the great desolation of love rejected when he attempts to reveal himself. His own duality of situation and character, caught between the states of Adam and Satan, Natural Man and his thwarted desire, is related by him directly to his reading of Milton’s epic:

It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence, but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature; but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.

From a despair this profound, no release is possible. Driven forth into an existence upon which “the cold stars shone in mockery,” the daemon declares “everlasting war against the species” and enters upon a fallen exis-
tence more terrible than the expelled Adam's. Echoing Milton, he asks the ironic question “And now, with the world before me, whither should I bend my steps?” to which the only possible answer is, toward his wretched Promethean creator.

If we stand back from Mary Shelley's novel in order better to view its archetypal shape, we see it as the quest of a solitary and ravaged consciousness first for consolation, then for revenge, and finally for a self-destruction that will be apocalyptic, that will bring down the creator with his creature. Though Mary Shelley may not have intended it, her novel's prime theme is a necessary counterpoise to Prometheanism, for Prometheanism exalts the increase in consciousness despite all cost. Frankenstein breaks through the barrier that separates man from God and gives apparent life, but in doing so he gives only death-in-life. The profound dejection endemic in Mary Shelley's novel is fundamental to the Romantic mythology of the self, for all Romantic horrors are diseases of excessive consciousness, of the self unable to bear the self. Kierkegaard remarks that Satan's despair is absolute because Satan, as pure spirit, is pure consciousness, and for Satan (and all men in his predicament) every increase in consciousness is an increase in despair. Frankenstein's desperate creature attains the state of pure spirit through his extraordinary situation and is racked by a consciousness in which every thought is a fresh disease.

A Romantic poet fought against self-consciousness through the strength of what he called imagination, a more than rational energy by which thought could seek to heal itself. But Frankenstein's daemon, though he is in the archetypal situation of the Romantic Wanderer or Solitary, who sometimes was a poet, can win no release from his own story by telling it. His desperate desire for a mate is clearly an attempt to find a Shelleyan Epipsyche or Blakean Emanation for himself, a self within the self. But as he is the nightmare actualization of Frankenstein's desire, he is himself an emanation of Promethean yearnings, and his only double is his creator and denier.

When Coleridge's Ancient Mariner progressed from the purgatory of consciousness to his very minimal control of imagination, he failed to save himself, since he remained in a cycle of remorse, but he at least became a salutary warning to others and made of the Wedding Guest a wiser and a better man. Frankenstein's creature can help neither himself nor others, for he has no natural ground to which he can return. Romantic poets liked to return to the imagery of the ocean of life and immortality, for in the eddying to and fro of the healing waters they could picture a hoped-for process of restoration, of a survival of consciousness despite all its agonies. Mary Shelley, with marvelous appropriateness, brings her Romantic novel
to a demonic conclusion in a world of ice. The frozen sea is the inevitable emblem for both the wretched daemon and his obsessed creator, but the daemon is allowed a final image of reversed Prometheanism. There is a heroism fully earned in the being who cries farewell in a claim of sad triumph: “I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames.” Mary Shelley could not have known how dark a prophecy this consummation of consciousness would prove to be for the two great Promethean poets who were at her side during the summer of 1816, when her novel was conceived. Byron, writing his own epitaph at Missolonghi in 1824, and perhaps thinking back to having stood at Shelley’s funeral pile two years before, found an image similar to the demon’s to sum up an exhausted existence:

\[
\text{The fire that on my bosom preys} \\
\text{Is lone as some volcanic isle;} \\
\text{No torch is kindled at its blaze—} \\
\text{A funeral pile.}
\]

The fire of increased consciousness stolen from heaven ends as an isolated volcano cut off from other selves by an estranging sea. “The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds” is the exultant cry of Frankenstein’s creature. A blaze at which no torch is kindled is Byron’s self-image, but he ends his death poem on another note, the hope for a soldier’s grave, which he found. There is no Promethean release, but release is perhaps not the burden of the literature of Romantic aspiration. There is something both Godwinian and Shelleyan about the final utterance of Victor Frankenstein, which is properly made to Walton, the failed Promethean whose ship has just turned back. Though chastened, the Modern Prometheus ends with a last word true, not to his accomplishment, but to his desire:

\[
\text{Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed.}
\]

Shelley’s Prometheus, crucified on his icy precipice, found his ultimate torment in a Fury’s taunt: “And all best things are thus confused to ill.” It seems a fitting summation for all the work done by modern Prometheanism and might have served as an alternate epigraph for Mary Shelley’s disturbing novel.
Honoré de Balzac

(1799–1850)

Père Goriot

I love best about Balzac that he renews, for me, the romance of reading, as even Henry James and Flaubert do not. Like every other young reader who first comes to Balzac in adolescence, I was swept away by the marvelous Vautrin, first encountered by me in Père Goriot:

Vautrin, the forty-year-old with dyed side-whiskers, stood somewhere between these two and the rest of the lodgers. He was one of those about whom ordinary people say: “Now that’s really somebody!” He was broad-shouldered with a well-developed chest and bulging muscles, and thick, square hands, the knuckles decorated with great tufts of flaming red hair. His face, scored by premature wrinkles, showed signs of a toughness that belied his good-natured, easy-going manners. His booming bass voice, which matched his loud cheerfulness, was emphatically pleasant. He was obliging and full of laughter. If a lock stopped working, he’d quickly take it apart, figure out what was wrong, file it down, oil it, then put it back together again, observing, “I know all about such things.” There were a lot of other things he knew about—ships, the sea, France, foreign nations, business, psychology, current affairs, the law, hotels, and prisons. When anyone complained too much, he’d immediately offer his services. More than once, he’d lent money both to Madame Vauquer and to some of her lodgers, but his debtors would sooner have died than not repay him, because for all his friendliness he had a look about him, deep, determined, that made people afraid. The very way he spat showed
his unshakable composure; put in a difficult position, he’d obviously never hesitate to commit a crime, to get himself out of it. Like a stern judge, his glance seemed to pierce to the bottom of every issue, every conscience, every emotion.

Burton Raffel’s translation splendidly conveys Balzac’s fascination with Vautrin, the novelist’s own daemon or genius. Graham Robb, Balzac’s best biographer, tells us that the novelist’s friends called him “Vautrin.” Like Vautrin, Balzac divided the cosmos between deceivers and the deceived: the grand crimemaster exemplifies Balzac’s own cynical egomania. Again like Balzac, Vautrin is a monster of energy: a force of nature who also happens to be a man.

Vautrin is overtly homoerotic; Balzac, sublime womanizer, projected his own barely repressed sexual duality, reminiscent of Byron’s who, with Molière, Sir Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, Voltaire, and Rabelais, can be considered Balzac’s literary forerunners. There is something of Byron’s Manfred and Cain in Vautrin: the line of descent from Milton’s Satan is clear, since Vautrin has read *Paradise Lost*. There is a Byronic-Satanic aura surrounding Vautrin, at once sinister, compelling, and strangely genial, intermixed with the savagery.

“Vautrin” is one of the pseudonyms of Jacques Collin, known to all as “Death-Dodger.” The powerful scene of his arrest in Part Three of *Père Goriot* justifies his nickname:

“In the name of the law, and the name of the King,” announced one of the officers, though there was such a loud murmur of astonishment that no one could hear him.

But silence quickly descended once again, as the lodgers moved aside, making room for three of the men, who came forward, their hands in their pockets, and loaded pistols in their hands. Two uniformed policemen stepped into the doorway they’d left, and two others appeared in the other doorway, near the stairs. Soldiers’ footsteps, and the readying of their rifles, echoed from the pavement outside, in front of the house. Death-Dodger had no hope of escape; everyone stared at him, irresistibly drawn. Vidocq went directly to where he stood, and swiftly punched Collin in the head with such force that his wig flew off, revealing the stark horror of his skull. Brick-red, short-clipped hair gave him a look at once sly and powerful, and both head and face, blending perfectly, now, with his brutish chest, glowed with the fierce, burning light of a hellish mind. It was suddenly obvious to them all just who Vautrin
was, what he’d done, what he’d been doing, what he would go on to do; they suddenly understood at a glance his implacable ideas, his religion of self-indulgence, exactly the sort of royal sensibility which tinted all his thoughts with cynicism, as well as all his actions, and supported both by the strength of an organization prepared for anything. The blood rose into his face, his eyes gleamed like some savage cat’s. He seemed to explode into a gesture of such wild energy, and he roared with such ferocity that, one and all, the lodgers cried out in terror. His fierce, feral movement, and the general clamor he’d created, made the policemen draw their weapons. But seeing the gleam of the cocked pistols, Collin immediately understood his peril, and instantly proved himself possessor of the highest of all human powers. It was a horrible, majestic spectacle! His face could only be compared to some apparatus, full of billowing smoke capable of moving mountains, but dissolved in the twinkling of an eye by a single drop of cold water. The drop that doused his rage flickered as rapidly as a flash of light. Then he slowly smiled, and turned to look down at his wig.

“This isn’t one of your polite days, is it, old boy?” he said to Vidocq. And then he held out his hands to the policemen, beckoning them with a movement of his head. “Gentlemen, officers, I’m ready for your handcuffs or your chains, as you please. I ask those present to take due note of the fact that I offer no resistance.”

That prenatural transition from absolute rage to cunning composure is definitive of Vautrin. Is it not also definitive of the astonishing genius of Balzac? The best critical remark yet made about Balzac is Baudelaire’s: “even the janitors have some sort of genius.” The genius-of-geniuses, in Balzac, is Vautrin, though the novelist himself might have voted for his idealized visionary, Louis Lambert.

Zola, Balzac’s disciple, dared to compare the author of The Human Comedy to Shakespeare. Balzac cannot sustain the comparison: if somehow you fused Dante and Cervantes, you would have Shakespeare’s equal. Proust, the culmination of the French novel, charmingly said of Balzac: “He hides nothing, he says everything,” and yet indicated the “silence” also to be found amidst all that disclosure.

It seems odd to me that Henry James, who condemned the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as “loose, baggy monsters,” asserted that he had learned “the lesson of Balzac.” Though James does not say so explicitly, it
must have been the lesson of energy, of psychic force. Perhaps Balzac helped teach Henry James the fictive economy of energy, the transformation of instinctive vitality into art.

That returns me to Vautrin, the most vitalistic of all Balzac’s creatures. Toward the close of *Lost Illusions*, the young poet Lucien Chardon, determined upon suicide, encounters a supposed Spanish priest, Carlos Herrera, Canon of Toledo, another disguise of Death-Dodger. Herrera-Vautrin restores Lucien to life with a torrent of money, at the expense of a clear enough homoerotic bond between the criminal-priest and the poet.

That bond is the center of the great novel, *A Harlot High and Low (Splendors and Miseries of the Courtesans)*. Part Four of the novel is the extraordinary *The Last Incarnation of Vautrin*, in which Death Dodger becomes the head of the Sûreté, as titanic a police-chief as he had been King of the Underworld. It is as if Milton’s Satan had entered again into God’s favor and emerged as the Archangel Michael. Perhaps it is Balzac’s ultimate thrust at societal power, and also the expression of the novelist’s nostalgia for possession of and union with that power.
Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804–1864)

The Scarlet Letter

The lonely art of Nathaniel Hawthorne remains one of the cultural monuments of our nation. It continues to provide for the deepest imaginative needs of the solitary reader, of whatever country. Hawthorne's vision of reality remains unsurpassed, short of Shakespeare and Dante. The Scarlet Letter and The Marble Faun trouble the heart and stimulate the intellect. As Herman Melville and Henry James testified, Hawthorne is a marvelously subtle storyteller and revealer of the soul. Only James himself and William Faulkner ultimately challenge Hawthorne as the American novelist (despite some remarkable tales, Melville remains the author of the one prose-epic, Moby-Dick, rather than a novelist as such, and Mark Twain abides primarily as the genial sage of Huckleberry Finn, most American of all narratives.)

Rereading The Scarlet Letter always constitutes a lesson in how to read and why. A procession of extraordinary representations of women has followed after Hester Prynne in American literature, yet even the strongest—Isabel Archer in James’s The Portrait of a Lady and Antónia in Willa Cather’s My Ántonia—do not match Hester Prynne in her aesthetic and cultural reverberations. For Hester is, in many ways, the American Eve, the Emersonian vision that atones for our lack of any adequate representation of the American Adam. Like Milton’s own Eve, Hester is far superior to her fate, and imaginatively preferable to Adam’s (and Milton’s) God. Hawthorne subtly conveys Hester’s sexual power to us, with far less ambivalence than Milton manifests in celebrating Eve’s sexual strength. Sensual and tragic, Hester is larger than her book and her world, because her greatness of spirit, like her heroic sexuality, is ill-served by the terrible alternatives of the Satanic Chillingworth (Iago’s understudy) and the timid
Dimmesdale, an absurdly inadequate adulterous lover for the sublime Hester.

Hester’s Self-Reliance is her authentic religion, and enables her to survive the outrages of societal ostracism and erotic repression. As critics rightly point out, Hester is herself an artist, whose work as embroiderer parallels Hawthorne’s own art as romancer. Can we not call Hester Hawthorne’s Muse or Interior Paramour (to employ a fine phrase of Wallace Stevens)? As such Hester exerts a fierce pressure upon Hawthorne himself, compelling him to abandon romance for the psychological novel, almost despite his own preferences.

Even *The Marble Faun*, so much prophecy of the novel of Americans abroad, from Henry James and Edith Wharton through Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald, is not quite of the eminence of *The Scarlet Letter*. There are only a dozen or so of essential American literary classics, including *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, Emerson’s *Essays* and Thoreau’s *Walden*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Emily Dickinson’s poems, James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* and Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, the poems of Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*. That brief catalog would be achingly incomplete without *The Scarlet Letter*, a permanent center of our imaginative consciousness.
Courage would be the critical virtue most required if anyone were to attempt an essay that might be called “The Limitations of Shakespeare.” Tolstoy, in his most outrageous critical performance, more or less tried just that, with dismal results, and even Ben Jonson might not have done much better, had he sought to extend his ambivalent obiter dicta on his great friend and rival. Nearly as much courage, or foolhardiness, is involved in discoursing on the limitations of Dickens, but the young Henry James had a critical gusto that could carry him through every literary challenge. Reviewing Our Mutual Friend in 1865, James exuberantly proclaimed that “Bleak House was forced; Little Dorrit was labored; the present work is dug out as with a spade and pickaxe.” At about this time, reviewing Drum-Taps, James memorably dismissed Whitman as an essentially prosaic mind seeking to lift itself, by muscular exertion, into poetry. To reject some of the major works of the strongest English novelist and the greatest American poet, at about the same moment, is to set standards for critical audacity that no one since has been able to match, even as no novelist since has equalled Dickens, nor any poet, Walt Whitman.

James was at his rare worst in summing up Dickens’s supposedly principal inadequacy:

Such scenes as this are useful in fixing the limits of Mr. Dickens’s insight. Insight is, perhaps, too strong a word; for we are convinced that it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see beneath the surface of things. If we might hazard a definition of his literary character, we should, accordingly, call him the greatest of
superficial novelists. We are aware that this definition confines him to an inferior rank in the department of letters which he adorns; but we accept this consequence of our proposition. It were, in our opinion, an offence against humanity to place Mr. Dickens among the greatest novelists. For, to repeat what we have already intimated, he has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing to our understanding of human character. He is master of but two alternatives: he reconciles us to what is commonplace, and he reconciles us to what is odd. The value of the former service is questionable; and the manner in which Mr. Dickens performs it sometimes conveys a certain impression of charlatanism. The value of the latter service is incontestable, and here Mr. Dickens is an honest, an admirable artist.

This can be taken literally, and then transvalued: to see truly the surface of things, to reconcile us at once to the commonplace and the odd—these are not minor gifts. In 1860, John Ruskin, the great seer of the surface of things, the charismatic illuminator of the commonplace and the odd together, had reached a rather different conclusion from that of the young Henry James, five years before James’s brash rejection:

The essential value and truth of Dickens’s writings have been unwisely lost sight of by many thoughtful persons merely because he presents his truth with some colour of caricature. Unwisely, because Dickens’s caricature, though often gross, is never mistaken. Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true. I wish that he could think it right to limit his brilliant exaggeration to works written only for public amusement; and when he takes up a subject of high national importance, such as that which he handled in *Hard Times*, that he would use severer and more accurate analysis. The usefulness of that work (to my mind, in several respects, the greatest he has written) is with many persons seriously diminished because Mr. Bounderby is a dramatic monster, instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman. But let us not lose the use of Dickens’s wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions. They will find much that is partial,
and, because partial, apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told.

To say of Dickens that he chose “to speak in a circle of stage fire” is exactly right, since Dickens is the greatest actor among novelists, the finest master of dramatic projection. A superb stage performer, he never stops performing in his novels, which is not the least of his many Shakespearean characteristics. Martin Price usefully defines some of these as “his effortless invention, his brilliant play of language, the scope and density of his imagined world.” I like also Price’s general comparison of Dickens to the strongest satirist in the language, Swift, a comparison that Price shrewdly turns into a confrontation:

But the confrontation helps us to define differences as well: Dickens is more explicit, more overtly compassionate, insisting always upon the perversions of feeling as well as of thought. His outrage is of the same consistency as his generous celebration, the satirical wit of the same copious extravagance as the comic elaborations. Dickens’ world is alive with things that snatch, lurch, teeter, thrust, leer; it is the animate world of Netherlandish genre painting or of Hogarth’s prints, where all space is a field of force, where objects vie or intrigue with each other, where every human event spills over into the things that surround it. This may become the typically crowded scene of satire, where persons are reduced to things and things to matter in motion; or it may pulsate with fierce energy and noisy feeling. It is different from Swift; it is the distinctive Dickensian plenitude, which we find again in his verbal play, in his great array of vivid characters, in his massed scenes of feasts or public declamations. It creates rituals as compelling as the resuscitation of Rogue Riderhood, where strangers participate solemnly in the recovery of a spark of life, oblivious for the moment of the unlovely human form it will soon inhabit.

That animate, Hogarthian world, “where all space is a field of force,” indeed is a plenitude and it strikes me that Price’s vivid description suggests Rabelais rather than Swift as a true analogue. Dickens, like Shakespeare in one of many aspects and like Rabelais, is as much carnival as stage fire, a kind of endless festival. The reader of Dickens stands in the midst of a festival, which is too varied, too multiform, to be taken in even by innumer-
able readings. Something always escapes our ken; Ben Jonson’s sense of being “rammed with life” is exemplified more even by Dickens than by Rabelais, in that near-Shakespearean plenitude that is Dickens’s peculiar glory.

Is it possible to define that plenitude narrowly enough so as to conceptualize it for critical use, though by “conceptualize” one meant only a critical metaphor? Shakespearean representation is no touchstone for Dickens or for anyone else, since above all modes of representation it turns upon an inward changing brought about by characters listening to themselves speak. Dickens cannot do that. His villains are gorgeous, but there are no Iagos or Edmunds among them. The severer, more relevant test, which Dickens must fail, though hardly to his detriment, is Falstaff, who generates not only his own meaning, but meaning in so many others besides, both on and off the page. Probably the severest test is Shylock, most Dickensian of Shakespeare’s characters, since we cannot say of Dickens’s Shylock, Fagin, that there is much Shakespearean about him at all. Fagin is a wonderful grotesque, but the winds of will are not stirred in him, while they burn on hellishly forever in Shylock.

Carlyle’s injunction, to work in the will, seems to have little enough place in the cosmos of the Dickens characters. I do not say this to indicate a limitation, or even a limit, nor do I believe that the will to live or the will to power is ever relaxed in or by Dickens. But nothing is got for nothing, except perhaps in or by Shakespeare, and Dickens purchases his kind of plenitude at the expense of one aspect of the will. T.S. Eliot remarked that “Dickens’s characters are real because there is no one like them.” I would modify that to “They are real because they are not like one another, though sometimes they are a touch more like some of us than like each other.” Perhaps the will, in whatever aspect, can differ only in degree rather than in kind among us. The aesthetic secret of Dickens appears to be that his villains, heroes, heroines, victims, eccentrics, ornamental beings, do differ from one another in the kinds of will that they possess. Since that is hardly possible for us, as humans, it does bring about an absence in reality in and for Dickens. That is a high price to pay, but it is a good deal less than everything and Dickens got more than he paid for. We also receive a great deal more than we ever are asked to surrender when we read Dickens. That may indeed be his most Shakespearean quality, and may provide the critical trope I quest for in him. James and Proust hurt you more than Dickens does, and the hurt is the meaning, or much of it. What hurts in Dickens never has much to do with meaning, because there cannot be a poetics of pain where the will has ceased to be common or sadly uniform. Dickens really does offer a poetics of pleasure, which is surely
worth our secondary uneasiness at his refusal to offer us any accurately mimetic representations of the human will. He writes always the book of the drives, which is why supposedly Freudian readings of him always fail so tediously. The conceptual metaphor he suggests in his representations of character and personality is neither Shakespearean mirror nor Romantic lamp, neither Rabelaisian carnival nor Fieldingesque open country. “Stage fire” seems to me perfect, for “stage” removes something of the reality of the will, yet only as modifier. The substantive remains “fire.” Dickens is the poet of the fire of the drives, the true celebrant of Freud’s myth of frontier concepts, of that domain lying on the border between psyche and body, falling into matter, yet partaking of the reality of both.

*A Tale of Two Cities*

Except perhaps for *Pickwick Papers*, *A Tale of Two Cities* always has been the most popular of Dickens’s books, if we set aside also the annual phenomenon of *A Christmas Carol* and the other Christmas books. No critic however would rank it with such other later novels as *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend* or the unfinished *Edwin Drood*, or with the many earlier and middle period masterpieces. The harshest single judgment remains that of the now forgotten but formidably pungent reviewer Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, who left Dickens nothing:

The moral tone of the *Tale of Two Cities* is not more wholesome than that of its predecessors, nor does it display any nearer approach to a solid knowledge of the subject-matter to which it refers. Mr. Dickens observes in his preface—“It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle’s wonderful book.” The allusion to Mr. Carlyle confirms the presumption which the book itself raises, that Mr. Dickens happened to have read the *History of the French Revolution*, and, being on the look-out for a subject, determined off-hand to write a novel about it. Whether he has any other knowledge of the subject than a single reading of Mr. Carlyle’s work would supply does not appear, but certainly what he has written shows no more. It is exactly the sort of story which a man would write who had taken down Mr. Carlyle’s theory without any sort of inquiry or examination, but with a comfortable conviction that “nothing could be added to its philosophy.” The people, says Mr. Dickens, in effect, had been degraded
by long and gross misgovernment, and acted like wild beasts in consequence. There is, no doubt, a great deal of truth in this view of the matter, but it is such very elementary truth that, unless a man had something new to say about it, it is hardly worth mentioning; and Mr. Dickens supports it by specific assertions which, if not absolutely false, are at any rate so selected as to convey an entirely false impression. It is a shameful thing for a popular writer to exaggerate the faults of the French aristocracy in a book which will naturally find its way to readers who know very little of the subject except what he chooses to tell them; but it is impossible not to feel that the melodramatic story which Mr. Dickens tells about the wicked Marquis who violates one of his serfs and murders another, is a grossly unfair representation of the state of society in France in the middle of the eighteenth century. That the French noblesse had much to answer for in a thousand ways, is a lamentable truth; but it is by no means true that they could rob, murder, and ravish with impunity. When Count Horn thought proper to try the experiment under the Regency, he was broken on the wheel, notwithstanding his nobility; and the sort of atrocities which Mr. Dickens depicts as characteristic of the eighteenth century were neither safe nor common in the fourteenth.

The most palpable hit here is certainly Dickens's extraordinary reliance upon Carlyle's bizarre but effective French Revolution, which is not the history it purports to be but rather has the design, rhetoric, and vision of an apocalyptic fantasy. No one now would read either Carlyle or Dickens in order to learn anything about the French Revolution, and sadly enough no one now reads Carlyle anyway. Yet Stephen's dismay remains legitimate; countless thousands continue to receive the only impressions they ever will have of the French Revolution through the reading of A Tale of Two Cities. The book remains a great tale, a vivid instance of Dickens's preternatural gifts as a pure storyteller, though except for its depiction of the superbly ghastly Madame Defarge and her Jacobin associates it lacks the memorable grotesques and driven enthusiasts that we expect from Dickens.

The most palpable flaw in the novel is the weakness as representations of Lucie and Darnay, and the relative failure of the more crucial Carton, who simply lacks the aesthetic dignity that Dickens so desperately needed to give him. If Carton and Darnay, between them, really were meant to depict the spiritual form of Charles Dickens, then their mutual lack of gusto renders them even more inadequate. When Madame Defarge dies,
slain by her own bullet, we are very moved, particularly by relief that such an unrelenting version of the death drive will cease to menace us. When Carton, looking “sublime and prophetic,” goes to execution, Dickens attempts to move us: we receive the famous and unacceptable, “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.” Dickens owes us a far, far better rhetoric than that, and generally he delivers it.

The life of *A Tale of Two Cities* is elsewhere, centered upon the negative sublimity of Madame Defarge and her knitting, which is one of Dickens’s finest inventions, and is clearly a metaphor for the storytelling of the novel itself. Dickens hardly would have said: “I am Madame Defarge,” but she, like the author, remorselessly controls the narrative, until she loses her struggle with the epitome of a loving Englishwoman, Miss Pross. The book’s penultimate chapter, in which we are rid of Madame Defarge, is shrewdly called “The Knitting Done.”

Even Dickens rarely surpasses the nightmare intensity of Madame Defarge, her absolute command of stage fire, and his finest accomplishment in the book is to increase her already stark aura as the narrative knits onwards. Here is a superb early epiphany of the lady, putting heart into her formidable husband, who seems weak only in comparison to his wife, less a force of nature than of history:

The night was hot, and the shop, close shut and surrounded by so foul a neighbourhood, was ill-smelling. Monsieur Defarge’s olfactory sense was by no means delicate, but the stock of wine smelt much stronger than it ever tasted, and so did the stock of rum and brandy and aniseed. He whiffed the compound of scents away, as he put down his smoked-out pipe.

“You are fatigued,” said madame, raising her glance as she knotted the money. “There are only the usual odours.”

“I am a little tired,” her husband acknowledged.

“You are a little depressed, too,” said madame, whose quick eyes had never been so intent on the accounts, but they had had a ray or two for him. “Oh, the men, the men!”

“But my dear!” began Defarge.

“But my dear!” repeated madame, nodding firmly; “but my dear! You are faint of heart to-night, my dear!”

“Well, then,” said Defarge, as if a thought were wrung out of his breast, “it is a long time.”

“It is a long time,” repeated his wife; “and when is it not a long time? Vengeance and retribution require a long time; it is the rule.”
“It does not take a long time to strike a man with Lightning,” said Defarge.

“How long,” demanded madame, composurely, “does it take to make and store the lightning? Tell me.”

Defarge raised his head thoughtfully, as if there were something in that too.

“It does not take a long time,” said madame, “for an earthquake to swallow a town. Eh well! Tell me how long it takes to prepare the earthquake?”

“A long time, I suppose,” said Defarge.

“But when it is ready, it takes place, and grinds to pieces everything before it. In the meantime, it is always preparing, though it is not seen or heard. That is your consolation. Keep it.”

She tied a knot with flashing eyes, as if it throttled a foe.

“I tell thee,” said madame, extending her right hand, for emphasis, “that although it is a long time on the road, it is on the road and coming. I tell thee it never retreats, and never stops. I tell thee it is always advancing. Look around and consider the lives of all the world that we know, consider the faces of all the world that we know, consider the rage and discontent to which the Jacquerie addresses itself with more and more of certainty every hour. Can such things last? Bah! I mock you.”

“My brave wife,” returned Defarge, standing before her with his head a little bent, and his hands clasped at his back, like a docile and attentive pupil before his catechist, “I do not question all this. But it has lasted a long time, and it is possible—you know well, my wife, it is possible—that it may not come, during our lives.”

“Eh well! How then?” demanded madame, tying another knot, as if there were another enemy strangled.

“Well!” said Defarge, with a half-complaining and half-apologetic shrug. “We shall not see the triumph.”

“We shall have helped it,” returned madame, with her extended hand in strong action. “Nothing that we do, is done in vain. I believe, with all my soul, that we shall see the triumph. But even if not, even if I knew certainly not, show me the neck of an aristocrat and tyrant, and still I would—”

Then madame, with her teeth set, tied a very terrible knot indeed.

“Hold!” cried Defarge, reddening a little as if he felt charged with cowardice; “I too, my dear, will stop at nothing.”
“Yes! But it is your weakness that you sometimes need to see your victim and your opportunity, to sustain you. Sustain yourself without that. When the time comes, let loose a tiger and a devil; but wait for the time with the tiger and the devil chained—not shown—yet always ready.”

To be always preparing, unseen and unheard, is Madame Defarge’s one consolation. Dickens has made her childless, somewhat in the mysterious mode of Lady Macbeth, since somehow we believe that Madame Defarge too must have nursed an infant. Her dialogue with Defarge has overtones of Lady Macbeth heartening Macbeth, keying up his resolution to treason and a kind of parricide. What Dickens has learned from Shakespeare is the art of counterpointing degrees of terror, of excess, so as to suggest a dread that otherwise would reside beyond representation. Macbeth, early doubting, seems weak in contrast to his wife’s force, but we will see him at his bloody work, until he becomes an astonishing manifestation of tyranny. Similarly, Defarge seems little in juxtaposition to his implacable wife, but we will see him as a demon of courage, skill, and apocalyptic drive, leading the triumphant assault upon the Bastille.

In his final vision of Madame Defarge, Dickens brilliantly reveals his masochistic passion for her:

Madame Defarge slightly waved her hand, to imply that she heard, and might be relied upon to arrive in good time, and so went through the mud, and round the corner of the prison wall. The Vengeance and the Juryman, looking after her as she walked away, were highly appreciative of her fine figure, and her superb moral endowments.

There were many women at that time, upon whom the time laid a dreadfully disfiguring hand; but, there was not one among them more to be dreaded than this ruthless woman, now taking her way along the streets. Of a strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty which not only seems to impart to its possessor firmness and animosity, but to strike into others an instinctive recognition of those qualities; the troubled time would have heaved her up, under any circumstances. But, imbued from her childhood with a brooding sense of wrong, and an inveterate hatred of a class, opportunity had developed her into a tigress. She was absolutely without pity. If she had ever had the virtue in her, it had quite gone out of her.
It was nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers; she saw, not him, but them. It was nothing to her, that his wife was to be made a widow and his daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live. To appeal to her, was made hopeless by her having no sense of pity, even for herself. If she had been laid low in the streets, in any of the many encounters in which she had been engaged, she would not have pitied herself; nor, if she had been ordered to the axe tomorrow, would she have gone to it with any softer feeling than a fierce desire to change places with the man who sent her there.

Such a heart Madame Defarge carried under her rough robe. Carelessly worn, it was a becoming robe enough, in a certain weird way, and her dark hair looked rich under her coarse red cap. Lying hidden in her bosom, was a loaded pistol. Lying hidden at her waist, was a sharpened dagger. Thus accoutred, and walking with the confident tread of such a character, and with the supple freedom of a woman who had habitually walked in her girlhood, bare-foot and bare-legged, on the brown sea-sand, Madame Defarge took her way along the streets.

We can discount Dickens’s failed ironies here (“her superb moral endowments”) and his obvious and rather tiresome moral judgments upon his own creation. What comes through overwhelmingly is Dickens’s desire for this sadistic woman, which is the secret of our desire for her also, and so for her nightmare power over us. “Her fine figure,” “that kind of beauty ... firmness and animosity,” “a tigress ... absolutely without pity,” “a becoming robe enough, in a certain weird way,” “her dark hair looked rich,” “confident tread ... supple freedom ... bare-foot and bare-legged”—these are the stigmata of a dominatrix. Loaded pistol in her bosom, sharpened dagger at her waist, Madame Defarge is the ultimate phallic woman, a monument to fetishism, to what Freud would have called the splitting of Dickens’s ego in the defensive process.

That splitting attains a triumph in the grand wrestling match, where Miss Pross, a Jacob wrestling with the Angel of Death, holds off Madame Defarge in what is supposed to be an instance of Love stronger than Death, but which is all the more effective for its sexual overtones:

Madame Defarge made at the door. Miss Pross, on the instinct of the moment, seized her round the waist in both her arms, and held her tight. It was in vain for Madame Defarge to struggle and to
strike; Miss Pross, with the vigorous tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate, clasped her tight, and even lifted her from the floor in the struggle that they had. The two hands of Madame Defarge buffeted and tore her face; but, Miss Pross, with her head down, held her round the waist, and clung to her with more than the hold of a drowning woman.

Soon, Madame Defarge’s hands ceased to strike, and felt at her encircled waist. “It is under my arm,” said Miss Pross, in smothered tones, “you shall not draw it. I am stronger than you, I bless Heaven for it. I’ll hold you till one or other of us faints or dies!”

Madame Defarge’s hands were at her bosom. Miss Pross looked up, saw what it was, struck at it, struck out a flash and a crash, and stood alone—blinded with smoke.

The embrace of Miss Pross clearly has a repressed lesbian passion for Madame Defarge in it, so that more than a transcendent love for Lucie here endows the force of the good with its immovable tenacity. But for the pistol blast, Madame Defarge would have been held until one or the other lady fainted or died. Miss Pross had never struck a blow in her life, but then her father Jacob had been no warrior either. Dickens, master of stage fire, destroyed Madame Defarge in the grand manner, the only fate worthy of so vivid and so passionately desired a creation.

*Great Expectations*

Together with *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* is Dickens’s most personal novel. He reread *Copperfield* “to be quite sure I had fallen into no unconscious repetitions” in composing *Great Expectations*, and his wariness helped make Pip his most complex protagonist. We hear Dickens’s early traumas again in Pip’s voice, and yet the author maintains considerable distance from Pip, as he scarcely does from David Copperfield, whose destiny is to become a Dickensian novelist.

Pip, like Copperfield, is a superb narrator, but he is frequently unkind to himself, and the reader is not expected to share in the severity of Pip’s excessive self-condemnations, which partly ensue from his imaginative strength. Pip’s imagination always mixes love and guilt, which is very much the mode of Charles Dickens.

George Bernard Shaw, introducing a reprint of *Great Expectations*, remarked that “Pip, like his creator, has no culture and no religion.” We need to recall that Shaw told us also that he felt only pity for an even greater writer, whenever he compared the mind of Shakespeare with his
own! Shaw’s religion was a peculiar kind of Creative Evolution, and his culture compares poorly with his contemporary, Oscar Wilde’s. Dickens indeed was a Dickensian in religion, and was deeply grounded in popular culture, as well as in literary culture.

Whether Pip’s obsessive and unmerited guilt owes more to popular traditions of shame-culture, or emanates from literary guilt-culture, is very difficult to determine. One critic, Shuli Barzilai, wisely conjures that Pip’s guilt has a deep source in what Freud called “family romances,” so that his relationship with Estella is quasi-incestuous, she being (unknowingly) Magwitch’s daughter, while Pip becomes the escaped convict’s adopted son. What is clear enough is that both Pip and Estella seem doomed to expiate a guilt not at all their own, the guilt of the fathers and the mothers.

Dickens notoriously weakened *Great Expectations* by revising its ending, so that Pip and Estella might be viewed as living together happily ever after. This revision is manifestly at variance with the imaginative spirit of the novel, and is best ignored. Pip, properly read, remains a permanent emblem of something that Dickens could not forgive in himself.

*David Copperfield*

If the strong writer be defined as one who confronts his own contingency, his own dependent relation on a precursor, then we can discover only a few writers after Homer and the Yahwist who are strong without that sense of contingency. These are the Great Originals, and they are not many; Shakespeare and Freud are among them and so is Dickens. Dickens, like Shakespeare and Freud, had no true precursors, or perhaps it might be more accurate to say he swallowed up Tobias Smollett rather as Shakespeare devoured Christopher Marlowe. Originality, or an authentic freedom from contingency, is Dickens’s salient characteristic as an author. Since Dickens’s influence has been so immense, even upon writers so unlikely as Dostoyevski and Kafka, we find it a little difficult now to see at first how overwhelmingly original he is.

Dickens now constitutes a facticity or contingency that no subsequent novelist can transcend or evade without the risk of self-maiming. Consider the difference between two masters of modern fiction, Henry James and James Joyce. Is not Dickens the difference? *Ulysses* comes to terms with Dickens, and earns the exuberance it manifests. Poldy is larger, I think, than any single figure in Dickens, but he has recognizably Dickensian qualities. Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* has none, and is the poorer for it. Part of the excitement of *The Princess Casamassima* for us must be
that, for once, James achieves a Dickensian sense of the outward life, a sense that is lacking even in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and that we miss acutely (at least I do) amidst even the most inward splendors of *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*.

*The Personal History of David Copperfield*, indeed the most personal and autobiographical of all Dickens's novels, has been so influential upon all subsequent portraits of the artist as a young man that we have to make a conscious effort to recover our appreciation of the book's fierce originality. It is the first therapeutic novel, in part written to heal the author's self, or at least to solace permanent anxieties incurred in childhood and youth. Freud's esteem for *David Copperfield* seems inevitable, even if it has led to a number of unfortunate readings within that unlikely compound oddly called “Freudian literary criticism.”

Dickens's biographer Edgar Johnson has traced the evolution of *David Copperfield* from an abandoned fragment of autobiography, with its powerful but perhaps self-deceived declaration: “I do not write resentfully or angrily: for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am.” Instead of representing his own parents as being David Copperfield's, Dickens displaced them into the Micawbers, a change that purchased astonishing pathos and charm at the expense of avoiding a personal pain that might have produced greater meaningfulness. But *David Copperfield* was, as Dickens said, his “favourite child,” fulfilling his deep need to become his own father. Of no other book would he have said: “I seem to be sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World.”

Kierkegaard advised us that “he who is willing to do the work gives birth to his own father,” while Nietzsche even more ironically observed that “if one hasn’t had a good father, then it is necessary to invent one.” *David Copperfield* is more in the spirit of Kierkegaard’s adage, as Dickens more or less makes himself David’s father. David, an illustrious novelist, allows himself to narrate his story in the first person. A juxtaposition of the start and conclusion of the narrative may be instructive:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months
before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.

I need say nothing here, on the first head, because nothing can show better than my history whether that prediction was verified or falsified by the result. On the second branch of the question, I will only remark, that unless I ran through that part of my inheritance while I was still a baby, I have not come into it yet. But I do not at all complain of having been kept out of this property; and if anybody else should be in the present enjoyment of it, he is heartily welcome to keep it.

And now, as I close my task, subduing my desire to linger yet, these faces fade away. But one face, shining on me like a Heavenly light by which I see all other objects, is above them and beyond them all. And that remains.

I turn my head, and see it, in its beautiful serenity, beside me.

My lamp burns low, and I have written far into the night; but the dear presence, without which I were nothing, bears me company.

O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me, like the shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward!

No adroit reader could prefer the last four paragraphs of *David Copperfield* to the first three. The high humor of the beginning is fortunately more typical of the book than the sugary conclusion. Yet the juxtaposition does convey the single rhetorical flaw in Dickens that matters, by which I do not mean the wild pathos that marks the death of Steerforth, or the even more celebrated career of the endlessly unfortunate little Em’ly. If Dickens’s image of voice or mode of representation is “stage fire,” then his metaphors always will demand the possibility of being staged. Micawber, Uriah Heep, Steerforth in his life (not at the end) are all of them triumphs of stage fire, as are Peggotty, Murdstone, Betsey Trotwood, and even Dora Spenlow. But Agnes is a disaster, and that dreadful “pointing upward!” is not to be borne. You cannot stage Agnes, which would not matter except that she does represent the idealizing and self-mystifying side of David and so she raises the question, Can you, as a reader, stage David? How much stage fire got into him? Or, to be hopelessly reductive,
has he a will, as Uriah Heep and Steerforth in their very different ways are wills incarnate?

If there is an aesthetic puzzle in the novel, it is why David has and conveys so overwhelming a sense of disordered suffering and early sorrow in his Murdstone phase, as it were, and before. Certainly the intensity of the pathos involved is out of all proportion to the fictive experience that comes through to the reader. Dickens both invested himself in and withdrew from David, so that something is always missing in the self-representation. Yet the will—to live, to interpret, to repeat, to write—survives and burgeons perpetually. Dickens’s preternatural energy gets into David, and is at some considerable variance with the diffidence of David’s apparent refusal to explore his own inwardness. What does mark Dickens’s representation of David with stage fire is neither the excess of the early sufferings nor the tiresome idealization of the love for Agnes. It is rather the vocation of novelist, the drive to tell a story, particularly one’s own story, that appares David with the fire of what Freud called the drives.

Dickens’s greatness in *David Copperfield* has little to do with the much more extraordinary strength that was to manifest itself in *Bleak House*, which can compete with *Clarissa, Emma, Middlemarch, The Portrait of a Lady, Women in Love*, and *Ulysses* for the eminence of being the inescapable novel in the language. *David Copperfield* is of another order, but it is the origin of that order, the novelist’s account of how she or he burned through experience in order to achieve the Second Birth, into the will to narrate, the storyteller’s destiny.

*Hard Times*

*Hard Times* is, for Dickens, a strikingly condensed novel, being about one-third of the length of *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*, the two masterpieces that directly preceded it. Astonishing and aesthetically satisfying as it is, I believe it to be somewhat overpraised by modern criticism, or perhaps praised for some less than fully relevant reasons. Ruskin and Bernard Shaw after him admired the book as a testament to Dickens’s conversion away from a commercialized and industrialized England and back towards a supposed juster and more humane society. But to like *Hard Times* because of its anti-Utilitarian ideology is to confuse the book with Carlyle and William Morris, as well as with Ruskin and Shaw. The most balanced judgment of the novel is that of Monroe Engel, who observes that “the greatest virtues of *Hard Times* are Dickens’s characteristic virtues, but less richly present in the book than in many others.” Gradgrind is poor stuff, and is not even an effective parody of Jeremy Bentham. The strength of the
novel is indeed elsewhere, as we might expect in the theatrical Dickens.

And yet *Hard Times* is lacking in stage fire; compared to *Bleak House*, it possesses only a tiny component of the Sublime. Again, as an instance of the plain style, the mode of Esther Summerson's narrative, it is curiously weak, and has moreover such drab characterizations as Sissy Jupe and Stephen Blackpool. Indeed, the book's rhetoric is the most colorless in all of Dickens's work. Though, as Engel insisted, many of Dickens's authorial virtues are present, the book lacks the preternatural exuberance that makes Dickens unique among all novelists. Has it any qualities of its own to recommend our devotion?

I would suggest that the start of any critical wisdom about *Hard Times* is to dismiss every Marxist or other moral interpretation of the book. Yes, Dickens's heart was accurate, even if his notion of Benthamite social philosophy was not, and a great novelist's overt defense of imagination cannot fail to move us. Consider however the outrageous first chapter of *Hard Times*, “The One Thing Needful”:

> “Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!”

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellargage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders—nay, his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was—all helped the emphasis.
“In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!”

The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

Gradgrind is doubtless Dickens’s ultimate revenge upon his own school sufferings; Gradgrind might be called Murdstone run wild, except that Murdstone stays within the circle of caricature, whereas Gradgrind’s will is mad, is a drive towards death. And that is where, I now think, the peculiar aesthetic strength of Hard Times is to be located. The novel survives as phantasmagoria or nightmare, and hardly as a societal or conceptual bad dream. What goes wrong in it is what Freud called “family romances,” which become family horrors. Critics always have noted how really dreadful family relations are in Hard Times, as they so frequently are elsewhere in Dickens. A particular power is manifest if we analyze a passage near the conclusion of the penultimate chapter of the first book of the novel, chapter 15, “Father and Daughter”:

“Louisa,” returned her father, “it appears to me that nothing can be plainer. Confining yourself rigidly to Fact, the question of Fact you state to yourself is: Does Mr. Bounderby ask me to marry him? Yes, he does. The sole remaining question then is: Shall I marry him? I think nothing can be plainer than that?”

“Shall I marry him?” repeated Louisa, with great deliberation.

“Precisely. And it is satisfactory to me, as your father, my clear Louisa, to know that you do not come to the consideration of that question with the previous habits of mind, and habits of life, that belong to many young women.”

“No, father,” she returned, “I do not.”

“I now leave you to judge for yourself,” said Mr. Gradgrind. “I have stated the case, as such cases are usually stated among practical minds; I have stated it, as the case of your mother and myself was stated in its time. The rest, my dear Louisa, is for you to decide.”

From the beginning, she had sat looking at him fixedly. As he now leaned back in his chair, and bent his deep-set eyes upon her in his turn, perhaps he might have seen one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart. But, to see it, he must have overleaped at a bound the artificial barriers he had for
many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra until the last trumpet ever to be sounded shall blow even algebra to wreck. The barriers were too many and too high for such a leap. With his unbending, utilitarian, matter-of-fact face, he hardened her again; and the moment shot away into the plumbless depths of the past, to mingle with all the lost opportunities that are drowned there.

Removing her eyes from him, she sat so long looking silently towards the town, that he said, at length: “Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works, Louisa?”

“There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!” she answered, turning quickly.

“Of course I know that, Louisa. I do not see the application of the remark.” To do him justice he did not, at all.

She passed it away with a slight motion of her hand, and concentrating her attention upon him again, said, “Father, I have often thought that life is very short.”—This was so distinctly one of his subjects that he interposed.

“It is short, no doubt, my dear. Still, the average duration of human life is proved to have increased of late years. The calculations of various life assurance and annuity offices, among other figures which cannot go wrong, have established the fact.”

“I speak of my own life, father.”

“O indeed? Still,” said Mr. Gradgrind, “I need not point out to you, Louisa, that it is governed by the laws which govern lives in the aggregate.”

“While it lasts, I would wish to do the little I can, and the little I am fit for. What does it matter?”

Mr. Gradgrind seemed rather at a loss to understand the last four words; replying, “How, matter? What matter, my dear?”

“Mr. Bounderby,” she went on in a steady, straight way, without regarding this, “asks me to marry him. The question I have to ask myself is, shall I marry him? That is so, father, is it not? You have told me so, father. Have you not?”

“Certainly, my dear.”

“Let it be so. Since Mr. Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal. Tell him, father, as soon as you please, that this was my answer. Repeat it, word for word, if you can, because I should wish him to know what I said.”
“It is quite right, my dear,” retorted her father approvingly, “to be exact. I will observe your very proper request. Have you any wish in reference to the period of your marriage, my child?”

“None, father. What does it matter?”

Mr. Gradgrind had drawn his chair a little nearer to her, and taken her hand. But, her repetition of these words seemed to strike with some little discord on his ear. He paused to look at her, and, still holding her hand, said:

“Louisa, I have not considered it essential to ask you one question, because the possibility implied in it appeared to me to be too remote. But perhaps I ought to do so. You have never entertained in secret any other proposal?”

“Father,” she returned, almost scornfully, “what other proposal can have been made to me? Whom have I seen? Where have I been? What are my heart’s experiences?”

“My dear Louisa,” returned Mr. Gradgrind, reassured and satisfied. “You correct me justly. I merely wished to discharge my duty.”

“What do I know, father,” said Louisa in her quiet manner, “of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?” As she said it, she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash.

Caricature here has leaped into Ruskin’s “stage fire.” Gradgrind, quite mad, nevertheless achieves the wit of asking Louisa whether she is consulting the oracular vapors of the Coketown chimneys. Her magnificent, “Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!” is more than a prophecy of the return of the repressed. It prophesies also the exuberance of Dickens himself, which comes flooding forth in the obvious yet grand metaphor a page later, when poor Louisa closes her hand, as if upon a graspable reality, and slowly opens it to disclose that her heart, like that of Tennyson’s protagonist in *Maud*, is a handful of dust.

That is the true, dark power of *Hard Times*. Transcending Dickens’s social vision, or his polemic for imagination, is his naked return to the domain of the drives, Eros and Death. The novel ends with an address to the reader that necessarily is far more equivocal than Dickens can have intended:
Dear Reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.

Presumably, our imaginative escape from Gradgrindism into poetry will lighten our bosoms, even as we watch the reality principle overtake us. But the power of Dickens's rhetoric is in those gray and cold ashes, handfuls of dust that gather everywhere in the pages of *Hard Times*. Gradgrind, or the world without imagination, fails as a satire upon Utilitarianism, but triumphs frighteningly as a representation of the drive beyond the pleasure principle.

*Bleak House*

*Bleak House* may not be “the finest literary work the nineteenth century produced in England,” as Geoffrey Tillotson called it in 1946. A century that gave us *The Prelude* and Wordsworth’s major crisis lyrics, Blake’s *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, Byron’s *Don Juan*, the principal poems of Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and Browning, and novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Middlemarch*, and Dickens’s own *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend*, is an era of such literary plenitude that a single choice is necessarily highly problematic. Yet there is now something close to critical agreement that *Bleak House* is Dickens’s most complex and memorable single achievement. W. J. Harvey usefully sketches just how formidably the novel is patterned:

*Bleak House* is for Dickens a unique and elaborate experiment in narration and plot composition. It is divided into two intermingled and roughly concurrent stories; Esther Summerson’s first-person narrative and an omniscient narrative told consistently in the historic present. The latter takes up thirty-four chapters; Esther has one less. Her story, however, occupies a good deal more than half the novel. The reader who checks the distribution of these two narratives against the original part issues will hardly discern any significant pattern or correlation. Most parts contain a mixture of the two stories; one part is narrated entirely by Esther and five parts entirely by the omniscient author. Such a check does, however, support the view that Dickens did not, as is sometimes supposed, use serial publication in the interest of crude suspense. A sensational novelist, for example, might well have ended a part issue with chapter 31; Dickens subdues the drama by adding
another chapter to the number. The obvious exception to this only proves the rule; in the final double number the suspense of Bucket's search for Lady Dedlock is heightened by cutting back to the omniscient narrative and the stricken Sir Leicester. In general, however, Dickens's control of the double narrative is far richer and subtler than this.

I would add to Harvey the critical observation that Dickens’s own narrative will in “his” thirty-four chapters is a will again different in kind from the will to tell her story of the admirable Esther Summerson. Dickens’s (or the omniscient, historical present narrator’s) metaphor of representation is one of “stage fire”: wild, free, unconditioned, incessant with the force of Freud’s domain of those grandly indefinite frontier concepts, the drives. Esther’s mode of representation is certainly not flat or insipid; for all of her monumental repressions, Esther finally seems to me the most mysteriously complex and profound personage in *Bleak House*. Her narrative is not so much plain style as it is indeed repressed in the precise Freudian sense of “repression,” whose governing metaphor, in Esther’s prose as in Freud’s, is flight from, rather than a pushing down or pushing under. Esther frequently forgets, purposefully though “unconsciously,” what she cannot bear to remember, and much of her narrative is her strong defense against the force of the past. Esther may not appear to change as she goes from little girl to adult, but that is because the rhythm of her psyche, unlike Dickens’s own, is one of unfolding rather than development. She is Dickens’s Muse, what Whitman would have called his “Fancy,” as in the great death-lyric “Good-bye, my Fancy!” or what Stevens would have called Dickens’s “Interior Paramour.”

Contrast a passage of Esther’s story with one of Dickens’s own narrative, from the end of chapter 56, “Pursuit,” and toward the close of the next chapter, “Esther’s Narrative”:

Mr. Jarndyce, the only person up in the house, is just going to bed; rises from his book, on hearing the rapid ringing at the bell; and comes down to the door in his dressing-gown.

“Don’t be alarmed sir.” In a moment his visitor is confidential with him in the hall, has shut the door, and stands with his hand upon the lock. “I’ve had the pleasure of seeing you before. Inspector Bucket. Look at that handkerchief, sir, Miss Esther Summerson’s. Found it myself put away in a drawer of Lady Dedlock’s, quarter of an hour ago. Not a moment to lose. Matter of life or death. You know. Lady Dedlock?”
“Yes.”

“There has been a discovery there, to-day. Family affairs have come out. Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, has had a fit—apoplexy or paralysis—and couldn’t be brought to, and precious time has been lost. Lady Dedlock disappeared this afternoon, and left a letter for him that looks bad. Run your eye over it. Here it is!”

Mr. Jarndyce having read it, asks him what he thinks? “I don’t know. It looks like suicide. Anyways, there’s more and more danger, every minute, of its drawing to that. I’d give a hundred pound an hour to have got the start of the present time. Now, Mr. Jarndyce, I am employed by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, to follow her and find her—to save her, and take her his forgiveness. I have money and full power, but I want something else. I want Miss Summerson.”

Mr. Jarndyce, in a troubled voice, repeats “Miss Summerson?”

“Now, Mr. Jarndyce”; Mr. Bucket has read his face with the greatest attention all along: “I speak to you as a gentleman of a humane heart, and under such pressing circumstances as don’t often happen. If ever delay was dangerous, it’s dangerous now; and if ever you couldn’t afterwards forgive yourself for causing it, this is the time. Eight or ten hours, worth, as I tell you, a hundred pound apiece at least, have been lost since Lady Dedlock disappeared. I am charged to find her. I am Inspector Bucket. Besides all the rest that’s heavy on her, she has upon her, as she believes, suspicion of murder. If I follow her alone, she, being in ignorance of what Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, has communicated to me, may be driven to desperation. But if I follow her in company with a young lady, answering to the description of a young lady that she has a tenderness for—I ask no question, and I say no more than that—she will give me credit for being friendly. Let me come up with her, and be able to have the hold upon her of putting that young lady for’ard, and I’ll save her and prevail with her if she is alive. Let me come up with her alone—a harder matter—and I’ll do my best; but I don’t answer for what the best may be. Time flies; it’s getting on for one o’clock. When one strikes, there’s another hour gone; and it’s worth a thousand pound now, instead of a hundred.”

This is all true, and the pressing nature of the case cannot be questioned. Mr. Jarndyce begs him to remain there, while he speaks to Miss Summerson. Mr. Bucket says he will; but acting on his usual principle, does no such thing—following up-stairs
instead, and keeping his man in sight. So he remains, dodging and lurking about in the gloom of the staircase while they confer. In a very little time, Mr. Jarndyce comes down, and tells him that Miss Summerson will join him directly, and place herself under his protection, to accompany him where he pleases. Mr. Bucket, satisfied, expresses high approval; and awaits her coming, at the door.

There, he mounts a high tower in his mind, and looks out far and wide. Many solitary figures he perceives, creeping through the streets; many solitary figures out on heaths, and roads, and lying under haystacks. But the figure that he seeks is not among them. Other solitaries he perceives, in nooks of bridges, looking over; and in shadowed places down by the river's level; and a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention.

Where is she? Living or dead, where is she? If, as he folds the handkerchief and carefully puts it up, it were able, with an enchanted power, to bring before him the place where she found it, and the night landscape near the cottage where it covered the little child, would he descry her there? On the waste, where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare; where the straw-roofs of the wretched huts in which the bricks are made, are being scattered by the wind; where the clay and water are hard frozen, and the mill in which the gaunt blind horse goes round all day, looks like an instrument of human torture; traversing this deserted blighted spot, there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the wind, and cast out, it would seem, from all companionship. It is the figure of a woman, too; but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion.

The transparent windows with the fire and light, looking so bright and warm from the cold darkness out of doors, were soon gone, and again we were crushing and churning the loose snow. We went on with toil enough; but the dismal roads were not much worse than they had been, and the stage was only nine miles. My companion smoking on the box—I had thought at the last inn of begging him to do so, when I saw him standing at a great fire in a comfortable cloud of tobacco—was as vigilant as ever; and as quickly down and up again, when we came to any human abode or any human creature. He had lighted his little dark lantern, which seemed to be a favourite with him, for we had lamps to the car-
riage; and every now and then he turned it upon me, to see that I was doing well. There was a folding-window to the carriage-head, but I never closed it, for it seemed like shutting out hope.

We came to the end of the stage, and still the lost trace was not recovered. I looked at him anxiously when we stopped to change; but I knew by his yet graver face, as he stood watching the ostlers, that he had heard nothing. Almost in an instant afterwards, as I leaned back in my seat, he looked in, with his lighted lantern in his hand, an excited and quite different man.

“What is it?” said I, starting. “Is she here?”

“No, no. Don’t deceive yourself, my dear. Nobody’s here. But I’ve got it!”

The crystallised snow was in his eyelashes, in his hair, lying in ridges on his dress. He had to shake it from his face, and get his breath before he spoke to me.

“Now, Miss Summerson,” said he, beating his finger on the apron, “don’t you be disappointed at what I’m a going to do. You know me. I’m Inspector Bucket, and you can trust me. We’ve come a long way; never mind. Four horses out there for the next stage up! Quick!”

There was a commotion in the yard, and a man came running out of the stables to know “if he meant up or down?” “Up, I tell you! Up! Ain’t it English? Up!”


“Miss Summerson,” he answered, “back. Straight back as a die. You know me. Don’t be afraid. I’ll follow the other, by G—.”

“The other?” I repeated. “Who?”

“You called her Jenny, didn’t you? I’ll follow her. Bring those two pair out here, for a crown a man. Wake up, some of you!”

“You will not desert this lady we are in search of; you will not abandon her on such a night, and in such a state of mind as I know her to be in!” said I, in an agony, and grasping his hand.

“You are right, my dear, I won’t. But I’ll follow the other. Look alive here with them horses. Send a man for’ard in the saddle to the next stage, and let him send another for’ard again, and order four on, up, right through. My darling, don’t you be afraid!”

These orders, and the way in which he ran about the yard, urging them, caused a general excitement that was scarcely less bewildering to me than the sudden change. But in the height of the: confusion, a mounted man galloped away to order the relays, and our horses were put to with great speed.
“My dear,” said Mr. Bucket, jumping up to his seat, and looking in again—“you’ll excuse me if I’m too familiar—don’t you fret and worry yourself no more than you can help. I say nothing else at present; but you know me, my dear; now, don’t you?”

I endeavoured to say that I knew he was far more capable than I of deciding what we ought to do; but was he sure that this was right? Could I not go forward by myself in search of—I grasped his hand again in my distress, and whispered it to him—of my own mother.

“My dear,” he answered, “I know, I know, and would I put you wrong, do you think? Inspector Bucket. Now you know me, don’t you?”

What could I say but yes!

“Then you keep up as good a heart as you can, and you rely upon me for standing by you, no less than by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. Now, are you right there?”

“All right, sir!”
“Off she goes, then. And get on, my lads!”

We were again upon the melancholy road by which we had come; tearing up the miry sleet and thawing snow, as if they were torn up by a waterwheel.

Both passages are extraordinary, by any standards, and certainly “Pursuit” has far more stage fire than “Esther’s Narrative,” but this timelier repressive shield, in part, is broken through, and a fire leaps forth out of her. If we start with “Pursuit,” however, we are likelier to see what it is that returns from the repressed in Esther, returns under the sign of negation (as Freud prophesied), so that what comes back is primarily cognitive, while the affective aspect of the repression persists. We can remember the opening of *David Copperfield*, where Dickens in his *persona* as David disavows the gift of second sight attributed to him by the wise women and gossips. Inspector Bucket, at the conclusion of the “Pursuit” chapter, is granted a great vision, a preternatural second sight of Esther’s lost mother, Lady Dedlock. What Bucket *sees* is stage fire at its most intense, the novelist’s will to tell become an absolute vision of the will. Mounting a high tower in his mind, Bucket (who thus becomes Dickens’s authorial will) looks out, far and wide, and sees the truth: “a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all,” which “clings with a drowning hold on his attention.” That “drowning hold” leads to the further vision: “where the clay and water are hard frozen, and the mill in which the gaunt blind horse goes round all day.” I suspect that Dickens here has a
debt to Browning’s great romance, “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” where another apparent instrument of human torture in a deserted, blighted spot, is seen by a companionless figure as being in association with a starving blind horse, cast out from the Devil’s stud, who provokes in Browning’s narrator the terrible outcry that he never saw a beast he hated so, because: “He must be wicked to deserve such pain.”

The ensuing chapter of “Esther’s Narrative” brilliantly evokes the cognitive return of Esther’s acknowledgment of her mother, under the sign of a negation of past affect. Here the narrative vision proceeds, not in the sublime mode of Bucket’s extraordinary second sight, but in the grave, meditative lyricism that takes us first to a tentative return from unconscious flight through an image of pursuit of the fleeing, doomed mother: “The transparent windows with the fire and light, looking so bright and warm from the cold darkness out of doors, were soon gone, and again we were crushing and churning the loose snow.” That “crushing and churning” images the breaking of the repressive shield, and Dickens shrewdly ends the chapter with Esther’s counterpart to Bucket’s concluding vision of a Browningesque demonic water mill, torturing consciousness into a return from flight. Esther whispers to Bucket that she desires to go forward by herself in search of her own mother, and the dark pursuit goes on in the sinister metaphor of the sleet and thawing snow, shield of repression, being torn up by a waterwheel that recirculates the meaning of memory’s return, even as it buries part of the pains of abandonment by the mother once more: “We were again upon the melancholy road by which we had come; tearing up the miry sleet and thawing snow, as if they were torn up by a waterwheel.”

It is a terrifying triumph of Dickens’s art that, when “Esther’s Narrative” resumes, in chapter 59, we know inevitably that we are headed straight for an apocalyptic image of what Shakespeare, in King Lear, calls “the promised end” or “image of that horror,” here not the corpse of the daughter, but of the mother. Esther goes, as she must, to be the first to touch and to see, and with no affect whatsoever, unveils the truth:

I passed on to the gate, and stooped down. I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead.
Anthony Trollope

(1815–1882)

Barchester Towers and The Warden

*The Warden* and *Barchester Towers* are very different novels, but forever linked by continuities of composition, contest, and personages. Unlike *The Warden*, *Barchester Towers* essentially is a comic novel. Trollope is hardly a novelist whom we can characterize in simple terms, because there are wholly equivocal elements in his narrative art. He can be very funny indeed and I agree with Christopher Herbert’s contention that Trollope subtly dissented from his era’s overt deprecation of fleshly and worldly pleasures. But Trollope was scarcely a hedonist or a vitalist and his dissent was limited; not half-hearted, but rhetorically muted. You have to read him with an intense awareness of tone, as Herbert does, in order to hear his comic endorsement of desire and to apprehend that he is not a sentimentalist in the ostensible religion of married love that is generally imposed upon him. Herbert persuades me, as against the views of such critics as J. Hillis Miller and Walter M. Kendrick, who threaten unwittingly to drown Trollope in a bathos he himself had fought against. Yet there is a missing quality in Trollope, a zest or gusto that would recommend his more interesting immoralists to us unreservedly.

C.P. Snow remarked that Trollope was “both skeptical and secretive and it seems not unlikely that, alone with himself, he came to believe rattier little.” That is convincing to me, since neither the theology nor the national church politics of *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers* greatly concern Trollope, whose interest is rather in the agon of personalities. Novels, as everyone agrees, trade in morals and manners, but the puzzle of Trollope is that we never quite can establish his stance as a moralist, if only because it is more evasive and more personal than it presents itself as being. Snow
usefully reminds us that, a decade after *Barchester Towers*, Trollope stood as a Liberal candidate for Parliament, a venture consonant with lifelong Whiggish sympathies on Trollope’s part. In *Barchester Towers*, Trollope clearly favors the Tory, High Church group of the archdeacon and his friends over the Liberal Evangelicals: Bishop Proudie, the haughty Mrs. Proudie, the reprehensible chaplain Slope. Snow calls this a crossing of Trollope’s vote, but I suppose instead we might call this Trollope’s own version of comic realism, inherited by him from his master, Thackeray. More than Thackeray, Trollope seems to know implicitly that “comic realism” is a kind of oxymoron. Jacobean comedy, which Herbert demonstrates to be one of Trollope’s prime sources, can be quite phantasmagoric, if not as wildly so as Jacobean tragedy. Fletcher, Massinger, and Middleton at once excited Trollope’s overt moral disapproval and his deeper interest, since Fletcher in particular was a quarry for Trollope, as Herbert observes:

It is easy to extract from Trollope’s annotations a typical Victorian condemnation of the vein of sexual scandal that runs through comedy; Jeremy Collier himself was hardly more indignant than Trollope at the pervading immorality of the comic stage. Yet major qualifications must at once be made to such a comparison. For one thing, Trollope constantly declares that even the smuttiest and most “disgusting” comedies, such as Beaumont’s and Fletcher’s *The Knight of Malta* or Fletcher’s *A Wife for a Month*, are in fact highly entertaining in spite of themselves. He condemns the bawdy-tongued heroines of Fletcher’s *The Wild-Goose-Chase*, then praises this superlative comedy as “an excellent play, full of wit, with much language almost worthy of Shakespeare.” The various characters, he says, “are kept up with such infinite life that the piece is charming to read, and must have charmed when acted”—an equation of “charm” with “life,” incidentally, that goes to the heart of our theme. Divided judgments like these highlight the obvious paradox in the spectacle of a prudish Victorian moralist who endlessly describes himself as disgusted and repelled by Jacobean comedy, yet who reads it almost insatiably for decades, and shows, indeed, a special fascination for the very playwright he condemns most strongly for his lewdness (for Trollope read Fletcher’s huge body of work twice, first in the early 1850s—this being the only reading project recorded for these dates—then again from 1869 to 1874). One need not be a Freudian analyst to draw the conclusion that Trollope was keenly attracted to the “indecency” of comedy and to the enfranchisement it offered
from the straitjacket of the Victorian cult of sexual purity, particularly with reference to women. His fulminations against it, we may assume, are in direct proportion to his instinctive attraction toward it.

The oddest aspect of Trollope in this matter is that he himself augments the repression, beyond even the call of his society, and then the repressed returns in him, with necessarily greater force. I would revise Herbert only to that degree; Trollope is far more prudish than his predecessor Thackeray and subsequently he exceeds Thackeray in subverting societal expectations. Since Trollope, however, had internalized those expectations, he necessarily subverts himself. Such a narrative process is considerably more difficult to apprehend than is Thackeray’s ambivalent stance, which at once satirizes Vanity Fair yet also stays well within it. There is a repressed Jacobean vitalist in Trollope, but mostly he maintained the repression.

_Barchester Towers_ is a social comedy whose realism is consistent if a little uneasy. Kafka partly derived from Dickens, monumental fantasist; we could not envision Kafka reading, and being influenced by, Trollope. Yet Trollope’s most surprising talent is his inventiveness, which can be simultaneously outrageous and persuasive, like social reality itself. The glory of _Barchester Towers_, and my own favorite moment in Victorian fiction, is the superb apotheosis at Mrs. Proudie’s reception, when the astonishing Bertie Stanhope propels the sofa of his invalid sister, the grand vamp La Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni, on its epic voyage into the proud torso of Mrs. Proudie:

“They’ve got this sofa into the worst possible part of the room; suppose we move it. Take care, Madeline.”

The sofa had certainly been so placed that those who were behind it found great difficulty in getting out; there was but a narrow gangway, which one person could stop. This was a bad arrangement, and one which Bertie thought it might be well to improve.

“Take care, Madeline,” said he, and turning to the fat rector, added, “Just help me with a slight push.”

The rector’s weight was resting on the sofa and unwittingly lent all its impetus to accelerate and increase the motion which Bertie intentionally originated. The sofa rushed from its moorings and ran half-way into the middle of the room. Mrs. Proudie was standing with Mr. Slope in front of the signora, and had been trying to
be condescending and sociable; but she was not in the very best of tempers, for she found that, whenever she spoke to the lady, the lady replied by speaking to Mr. Slope. Mr. Slope was a favourite, no doubt, but Mrs. Proudie had no idea of being less thought of than the chaplain. She was beginning to be stately, stiff, and offended, when unfortunately the castor of the sofa caught itself in her lace train and carried away there is no saying how much of her garniture. Gathers were heard to go, stitches to crack, plaits to fly open, flounces were seen to fall, and breadths to expose themselves; a long ruin of rent lace disfigured the carpet and still clung to the vile wheel on which the sofa moved.

So, when a granite battery is raised, excellent to the eyes of war-faring men, is its strength and symmetry admired. It is the work of years. Its neat embrasures, its finished parapets, its casemated stories show all the skill of modern science. But, anon, a small spark is applied to the treacherous fusee—a cloud of dust arises to the heavens—and then nothing is to be seen but dirt and dust and ugly fragments.

We know what was the wrath of Juno when her beauty was despised. We know to what storms of passion even celestial minds can yield. As Juno may have looked at Paris on Mount Ida, so did Mrs. Proudie look on Ethelbert Stanhope when he pushed the leg of the sofa into her lace train.

“Oh, you idiot, Bertie!” said the signora, seeing what had been done and what were to be the consequences.

“Idiot!” re-echoed Mrs. Proudie, as though the word were not half strong enough to express the required meaning; “I’ll let him know—” and then looking round to learn, at a glance, the worst, she saw that at present it behoved her to collect the scattered débris of her dress.

Bertie, when he saw what he had done, rushed over the sofa and threw himself on one knee before the offended lady. His object, doubtless, was to liberate the torn lace from the castor, but he looked as though he were imploring pardon from a goddess.

“Unhand it, sir!” said Mrs. Proudie. From what scrap of dramatic poetry she had extracted the word cannot be said, but it must have rested on her memory and now seemed opportunely dignified for the occasion.

“I’ll fly to the looms of the fairies to repair the damage, if you’ll only forgive me,” said Ethelbert, still on his knees.

“Unhand it, sir!” said Mrs. Proudie with redoubled emphasis
and all but furious wrath. This allusion to the fairies was a direct mockery and intended to turn her into ridicule. So at least it seemed to her. “Unhand it, sir!” she almost screamed.

“It’s not me; it’s the cursed sofa,” said Bertie, looking imploringly in her face and holding up both his hands to show that he was not touching her belongings, but still remaining on his knees.

Hereupon the signora laughed; not loud, indeed, but yet audibly. And as the tigress bereft of her young will turn with equal anger on any within reach, so did Mrs. Proudie turn upon her female guest.

“Madam!” she said—and it is beyond the power of prose to tell of the fire which flashed from her eyes.

The signora stared her full in the face for a moment, and then turning to her brother said playfully, “Bertie, you idiot, get up.”

By this time the bishop, and Mr. Slope, and her three daughters were around her, and had collected together the wide ruins of her magnificence. The girls fell into circular rank behind their mother, and thus following her and carrying out the fragments, they left the reception-rooms in a manner not altogether devoid of dignity. Mrs. Proudie had to retire and re-array herself.

As soon as the constellation had swept by, Ethelbert rose from his knees and, turning with mock anger to the fat rector, said: “After all it was your doing, sir—not mine. But perhaps you are waiting for preferment, and so I bore it.”

Were I the New Longinus, composing Upon Strong Writing or On the Nov Sublime, I would employ this as one of the greatest comic scenes in literature, when read within its full contest in Barchester Towers. Trollope somewhere declares that “the sublime may be mingled with the realistic, if the writer has the power.” The creator of Bertie Stanhope—who cheerfully has failed at every possible and improbable career: the Anglican Church, the law, English and German universities, painter in Rome, the Jesuits, Jewish convert in Palestine, sculptor in Carrara, but who remains an absolute original—now gives that creation his finest moment, in the sofa debacle. The comparison of Mrs. Proudie’s dress to the granite battery is merely perfect, since dress and granite contain the same entity, aggressive and hostile. The threefold “Unhand it, sir!” will not be matched for forty years, until Wilde’s Lady Bracknell commands Jack: “Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture,” in one of the few literary works until the early Evelyn Waugh that might be worthy of accommodating Bertie Stanhope. But neither Wilde nor Waugh has anything like the military or naval
maneuver in which the Proudie girls “fell into circular rank behind their mother, and thus following her and carrying out the fragments, they left the reception-rooms in a manner not altogether devoid of dignity.” Trollope’s triumph, more original than we now can realize, has had many imitators since, but this mode of comic disaster remains very much his own.
THE three BRONTÉ sisters—CHARLOTTE, EMILY JANE, AND ANNE—are unique literary artists whose works resemble one another’s far more than they do the works of writers before or since. Charlotte’s compelling novel *Jane Eyre* and her three lesser yet strong narratives—*The Professor*, *Shirley*, *Villette*—form the most extensive achievement of the sisters, but critics and common readers alike set even higher the one novel of Emily Jane’s, *Wuthering Heights*, and a handful of her lyrical poems. Anne’s two novels—*Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—remain highly readable, although dwarfed by *Jane Eyre* and the authentically sublime *Wuthering Heights*.

Between them, the Brontës can be said to have invented a relatively new genre, a kind of northern romance, deeply influenced both by Byron’s poetry and by his myth and personality, but going back also, more remotely yet as definitely, to the Gothic novel and to the Elizabethan drama. In a definite, if difficult to establish sense, the heirs of the Brontës include Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence. There is a harsh vitalism in the Brontës that finds its match in the Lawrence of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, though the comparison is rendered problematic by Lawrence’s moral zeal, enchantingly absent from the Brontës’ literary cosmos.

The aesthetic puzzle of the Brontës has less to do with the mature transformations of their vision of Byron into Rochester and Heathcliff, than with their earlier fantasy-life and its literature, and the relation of that life and literature to its hero and precursor, George Gordon, Lord Byron. At his rare worst and silliest, Byron has nothing like this scene from
Charlotte Brontë’s “Caroline Vernon,” where Caroline confronts the Byronic Duke of Zamorna:

The Duke spoke again in a single blunt and almost coarse sentence, compressing what remained to be said, “If I were a bearded Turk, Caroline, I would take you to my harem.” His deep voice as he uttered this, his high featured face, and dark, large eye burning bright with a spark from the depths of Gehenna, struck Caroline Vernon with a thrill of nameless dread. Here he was, the man Montmorency had described to her. All at once she knew him. Her guardian was gone, something terrible sat in his place.

Byron died his more-or-less heroic death at Missolonghi in Greece on April 19, 1824, aged thirty-six years and three months, after having set an impossible paradigm for authors that has become what the late Nelson Algren called “Hemingway all the way,” in a mode still being exploited by Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, and some of their younger peers. Charlotte was eight, Emily Jane six, and Anne four when the Noble Lord died and when his cult gorgeously flowered, dominating their girlhood and their young womanhood. Byron’s passive-aggressive sexuality—at once sadomasochistic, homoerotic, incestuous, and ambivalently narcissistic—clearly sets the pattern for the ambiguously erotic universes of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. What Schopenhauer named (and deplored) as the Will to Live, and Freud subsequently posited as the domain of the drives, is the cosmos of the Brontës, as it would come to be of Hardy and Lawrence. Byron rather than Schopenhauer is the source of the Brontës’ vision of the Will to Live, but the Brontës add to Byron what his inverted Calvinism only partly accepted, the Protestant will proper, a heroic zest to assert one’s own election, one’s place in the hierarchy of souls.

Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw do not fit into the grand array of heroines of the Protestant will that commences with Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe and goes through Austen’s Emma Woodhouse and Fanny Price to triumph in George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke and Henry James’s Isabel Archer. They are simply too wild and Byronic, too High Romantic, to keep such company. But we can see them with Hardy’s Tess and, even more, his Eustacia Vye, and with Lawrence’s Gudrun and Ursula. Their version of the Protestant will stems from the Romantic reading of Milton, but largely in its Byronic dramatization, rather than its more dialectical and subtle analyses in Blake and Shelley, and its more normative condemnation in Coleridge and in the Wordsworth of *The Borderers*. 
The Byronism of Rochester in *Jane Eyre* is enhanced because the narrative is related in the first person by Jane Eyre herself, who is very much an overt surrogate for Charlotte Brontë. As Rochester remarks, Jane is indomitable; as Jane says, she is altogether “a free human being with an independent will.” That will is fiercest in its passion for Rochester, undoubtedly because the passion for her crucial precursor is doubly ambivalent; Byron is both the literary father to a strong daughter, and the idealized object of her erotic drive. To Jane, Rochester’s first appearance is associated not only with the animal intensities of his horse and dog, but with the first of his maimings. When Jane reclaims him at the novel’s conclusion, he is left partly blinded and partly crippled. I do not think that we are to apply the Freudian reduction that Rochester has been somehow castrated, even symbolically, nor need we think of him as a sacrificed Samson figure, despite the author’s allusions to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. But certainly he has been rendered dependent upon Jane, and he has been tamed into domestic virtue and pious sentiment, in what I am afraid must be regarded as Charlotte Brontë’s vengeance upon Byron. Even as Jane Eyre cannot countenance a sense of being in any way inferior to anyone whatsoever, Charlotte Brontë could not allow Byron to be forever beyond her. She could acknowledge, with fine generosity, “that I regard Mr. Thackeray as the first of modern masters, and as the legitimate high priest of Truth; I study him accordingly with reverence.” But *Vanity Fair* is hardly the seedbed of *Jane Eyre*, and the amiable and urbane Thackeray was not exactly a prototype for Rochester.

Charlotte Brontë, having properly disciplined Rochester, forgave him his Byronic past, as in some comments upon him in one of her letters (to W.S. Williams, August 14, 1848):

> Mr. Rochester has a thoughtful nature and a very feeling heart; he is neither selfish nor self-indulgent; he is ill-educated, misguided; errs, when he does err, through rashness and inexperience: he lives for a time as too many other men live, but being radically better than most men, he does not like that degraded life, and is never happy in it. He is taught the severe lessons of experience and has sense to learn wisdom from them. Years improve him; the effervescence of youth foamed away, what is really good in him still remains. His nature is
like wine of a good vintage, time cannot sour, but only mellows him. Such at least was the character I meant to portray.

Poor Rochester! If that constituted an accurate critical summary, then who would want to read the novel? It will hardly endear me to feminist critics if I observe that much of the literary power of *Jane Eyre* results from its authentic sadism in representing the very masculine Rochester as a victim of Charlotte Brontë’s will-to-power over the beautiful Lord Byron. I partly dissent, with respect, from the judgment in this regard of our best feminist critics, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar:

> It seems not to have been primarily the coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre* which shocked Victorian reviewers … but … its “anti-Christian” refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society—in short, its rebellious feminism. They were disturbed not so much by the proud Byronic sexual energy of Rochester as by the Byronic pride and passion of Jane herself.

Byronic passion, being an ambiguous entity, is legitimately present in Jane herself as a psychosexual aggressivity turned both against the self and against others. Charlotte Brontë, in a mode between those of Schopenhauer and Freud, knows implicitly that Jane Eyre’s drive to acknowledge no superior to herself is precisely on the frontier between the psychical and the physical. Rochester is the outward realm that must be internalized, and Jane’s introjection of him does not leave him wholly intact. Gilbert and Gubar shrewdly observe that Rochester’s extensive sexual experience is almost the final respect in which Jane is not his equal, but they doubtless would agree that Jane’s sexual imagination overmatches his, at least implicitly. After all, she has every advantage, because she tells the story, and very aggressively indeed. Few novels match this one in the author’s will-to-power over her reader. “Reader!” Jane keeps crying out, and then she exuberantly cudgels that reader into the way things are, as far as she is concerned. Is that battered reader a man or a woman?

I tend to agree with Sylvère Monod’s judgment that “Charlotte Brontë is thus led to bully her reader because she distrusts him … he is a vapid, conventional creature, clearly deserving no more than he is given.” Certainly he is less deserving than the charmingly wicked and Byronic Rochester, who is given a lot more punishment than he deserves. I venture upon saying that Charlotte Brontë exploits the masochism of her male readers, and I may as well say it, because much of *Jane Eyre*’s rather nasty
power as a novel depends upon its author’s attitude towards men, which is nobly sadistic as befits a disciple of Byron.

“But what about female readers?” someone might object, and they might add: “What about Rochester’s own rather nasty power? Surely he could not have gotten away with his behavior had he not been a man and well-financed to boot?” But is Rochester a man? Does he not share in the full ambiguity of Byron’s multivalent sexual identities? And is Jane Eyre a woman? Is Byron’s Don Juan a man? The nuances of gender, within literary representation, are more bewildering even than they are in the bedroom. If Freud was right when he reminded us that there are never two in a bed, but a motley crowd of forebears as well, how much truer this becomes in literary romance than in family romance.

Jane Eyre, like Wuthering Heights, is after all a romance, however northern, and not a novel, properly speaking. Its standards of representation have more to do with Jacobean melodrama and Gothic fiction than with George Eliot and Thackeray, and more even with Byron’s Lara and Manfred than with any other works. Rochester is no Heathcliff; he lives in a social reality in which Heathcliff would be an intruder even if Heathcliff cared for social realities except as fields in which to take revenge. Yet there is a daemon in Rochester. Heathcliff is almost nothing but daemonic, and Rochester has enough of the daemonic to call into question any current feminist reading of Jane Eyre. Consider the pragmatic close of the book, which is Jane’s extraordinary account of her wedded bliss:

I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am; ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

I know no weariness of my Edward’s society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result.

Mr. Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near—that knit us so very close! for I was then his vision, as I am still his right
hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. He saw nature—he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam—of the landscape before us; of the weather round us—and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye. Never did I weary of reading to him: never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go: of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad—because he claimed these services without painful shame or damping humiliation. He loved me so truly that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance: he felt I loved him so fondly that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes.

What are we to make of Charlotte Brontë’s strenuous literalization of Gen. 2:23, her astonishing “ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh”? Is that feminism? And what precisely is that “pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad”? In her “Farewell to Angria” (the world of her early fantasies), Charlotte Brontë asserted that “the mind would cease from excitement and turn now to a cooler region.” Perhaps that cooler region was found in Shirley or in Villette, but fortunately it was not discovered in Jane Eyre. In the romance of Jane and Rochester, or of Charlotte Brontë and George Gordon, Lord Byron, we are still in Angria, “that burning clime where we have sojourned too long—its skies flame—the glow of sunset is always upon it—.”
Emily Brontë
(1818–1848)

*Wuthering Heights*

*Wuthering Heights* is as unique and idiosyncratic a narrative as *Moby-Dick*, and like Melville’s masterwork breaks all the confines of genre. Its sources, like the writings of the other Brontës, are in the fantasy literature of a very young woman, in the poems that made up Emily Brontë’s Gondal saga or cycle. Many of those poems, while deeply felt, simply string together Byronic commonplaces. A few of them are extraordinarily strong and match *Wuthering Heights* in sublimity, as in the famous lyric dated January 2, 1846:

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven’s glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest
As I Undying Life, have power in Thee

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men’s hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

We could hardly envision Catherine Earnshaw, let alone Heathcliff, chanting these stanzas. The voice is that of Emily Jane Brontë addressing the God within her own breast, a God who certainly has nothing in common with the one worshipped by the Reverend Patrick Brontë. I do not hear in this poem, despite all its Protestant resonances, any nuance of Byron’s inverted Miltonisms. *Wuthering Heights* seems to me a triumphant revision of Byron’s *Manfred*, with the revisionary swerve taking Emily Brontë into what I would call an original gnosis, a kind of poetic faith, like Blake’s or Emerson’s, that resembles some aspects (but not others) of ancient Gnosticism without in any way actually deriving from Gnostic texts. “No coward soul is mine” also emerges from an original gnosis, from the poet’s knowing that her *pneuma* or breath-soul, as compared to her less ontological psyche, is no part of the created world, since that world fell even as it was created. Indeed the creation, whether heights or valley, appears in *Wuthering Heights* as what the ancient Gnostics called the *kenoma*, a cosmological emptiness into which *we have been thrown*, a trope that Catherine Earnshaw originates for herself. A more overt Victorian Gnostic, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, made the best (if anti-feminist) observation on the setting of *Wuthering Heights*, a book whose “power and sound style” he greatly admired:

It is a fiend of a book, an incredible monster, combining all the stronger female tendencies from Mrs. Browning to Mrs.
Brownrigg. The action is laid in Hell,—only it seems places and people have English names there.

Mrs. Brownrigg was a notorious eighteenth-century sadistic and murderous midwife, and Rossetti rather nastily imputed to *Wuthering Heights* a considerable female sadism. The book’s violence is astonishing but appropriate, and appealed darkly both to Rossetti and to his close friend, the even more sadomasochistic Swinburne. Certainly the psychodynamics of the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine go well beyond the domain of the pleasure principle. Gilbert and Gubar may stress too much that Heathcliff is Catherine’s whip, the answer to her most profound fantasies, but the suggestion was Emily Brontë’s before it became so fully developed by her best feminist critics.

Walter Pater remarked that the precise use of the term *romantic* did not apply to Sir Walter Scott, but rather:

Much later, in a Yorkshire village, the spirit of romanticism bore a more really characteristic fruit in the work of a young girl, Emily Brontë, the romance of *Wuthering Heights*; the figures of Hareton Earnshaw, of Catherine Linton, and of Heathcliff—tearing open Catherine’s grave, removing one side of her coffin, that he may really lie beside her in death—figures so passionate, yet woven on a background of delicately beautiful, moorland scenery, being typical examples of that spirit.

I always have wondered why Pater found the Romantic spirit more in Hareton and the younger Catherine than in Catherine Earnshaw, but I think now that Pater’s implicit judgment was characteristically shrewd. The elder Catherine is the problematical figure in the book; she alone belongs to both orders of representation, that of social reality and that of otherness, of the Romantic Sublime. After she and the Lintons, Edgar and Isabella, are dead, then we are wholly in Heathcliff’s world for the last half-year of his life, and it is in that world that Hareton and the younger Catherine are portrayed for us. They are—as Heathcliff obscurely senses—the true heirs to whatever societally possible relationship Heathcliff and the first Catherine could have had.

Emily Brontë died less than half a year after her thirtieth birthday, having finished *Wuthering Heights* when she was twenty-eight. Even Charlotte, the family survivor, died before she turned thirty-nine, and the world of *Wuthering Heights* reflects the Brontë reality: the first Catherine dies at eighteen, Hindley at twenty-seven, Heathcliff’s son Linton at sev-
enteen, Isabella at thirty-one, Edgar at thirty-nine, and Heathcliff at thirty-seven or thirty-eight. It is a world where you marry early, because you will not live long. Hindley is twenty when he marries Frances, while Catherine Earnshaw is seventeen when she marries the twenty-one-year-old Edgar Linton. Heathcliff is nineteen when he makes his hellish marriage to poor Isabella, who is eighteen at the time. The only happy lovers, Hareton and the second Catherine, are twenty-four and eighteen, respectively, when they marry. Both patterns—early marriage and early death—are thoroughly High Romantic, and emerge from the legacy of Shelley, dead at twenty-nine, and of Byron, martyred to the cause of Greek independence at thirty-six.

The passions of Gondal are scarcely moderated in *Wuthering Heights*, nor could they be; Emily Brontë’s religion is essentially erotic, and her vision of triumphant sexuality is so mingled with death that we can imagine no consummation for the love of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw except death. I find it difficult therefore to accept Gilbert and Gubar’s reading in which *Wuthering Heights* becomes a Romantic feminist critique of *Paradise Lost*, akin to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Emily Brontë is no more interested in refuting Milton than in sustaining him. What Gilbert and Gubar uncover in *Wuthering Heights* that is antithetical to *Paradise Lost* comes directly from Byron’s *Manfred*, which certainly is a Romantic critique of *Paradise Lost*. *Wuthering Heights* is *Manfred* converted to prose romance, and Heathcliff is more like Manfred, Lara, and Byron himself than is Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester.

Byronic incest—the crime of Manfred and Astarte—is no crime for Emily Brontë, since Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw are more truly brother and sister than are Hindley and Catherine. Whatever inverted morality—a curious blend of Catholicism and Calvinism—Byron enjoyed, Emily Brontë herself repudiates, so that *Wuthering Heights* becomes a critique of *Manfred*, though hardly from a conventional feminist perspective. The furious energy that is loosed in *Wuthering Heights* is precisely Gnostic; its aim is to get back to the original Abyss, before the creation-fall. Like Blake, Emily Brontë identifies her imagination with the Abyss, and her *pneuma* or breath-soul with the Alien God, who is antithetical to the God of the creeds. The heroic rhetoric of Catherine Earnshaw is beyond every ideology, every merely social formulation, beyond even the dream of justice or of a better life, because it is beyond this cosmos, “this shattered prison”:

“Oh, you see, Nelly! he would not relent a moment, to keep me out of the grave! *That* is how I’m loved! Well, never mind! That is
not my Heathcliff. I shall love mine yet; and take him with me—he’s in my soul. And,” added she, musingly, “the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I’m tired, tired of being enclosed here. I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart; but really with it, and in it. Nelly, you think you are better and more fortunate than I; in full health and strength. You are sorry for me—very soon that will be altered. I shall be sorry for you. I shall be incomparably beyond and above you all. I wonder he won’t be near me!” She went on to herself. “I thought he wished it. Heathcliff, dear! you should not be sullen now. Do come to me, Heathcliff.”

Whatever we are to call the mutual passion of Catherine and Heathcliff, it has no societal aspect and neither seeks nor needs societal sanction. Romantic love has no fiercer representation in all of literature. But “love” seems an inadequate term for the connection between Catherine and Heathcliff. There are no elements of transference in that relation, nor can we call the attachment involved either narcissistic or anaclitic. If Freud is not applicable, then neither is Plato. These extraordinary vitalists, Catherine and Heathcliff, do not desire in one another that which each does not possess, do not lean themselves against one another, and do not even find and thus augment their own selves. They are one another, which is neither sane nor possible, and which does not support any doctrine of liberation whatsoever. Only that most extreme of visions, Gnosticism, could accommodate them, for, like the Gnostic adepts, Catherine and Heathcliff can only enter the *pleroma* or fullness together, as presumably they have done after Heathcliff’s self-induced death by starvation.

Blake may have promised us the Bible of Hell; Emily Brontë seems to have disdained Heaven and Hell alike. Her finest poem (for which we have no manuscript, but it is inconceivable that it could have been written by Charlotte) rejects every feeling save her own inborn “first feelings” and every world except a vision of earth consonant with those inaugural emotions:

```
Often rebuked, yet always back returning
To those first feelings that were born with me,
And leaving busy chase of wealth and learning
For idle dreams of things which cannot be:

To-day, I will seek not the shadowy region;
Its unsustaining vastness waxes drear;
```
And visions rising, legion after legion,
    Bring the unreal world too strangely near.

I'll walk, but not in old heroic traces,
    And not in paths of high morality,
And not among the half-distinguished faces,
    The clouded forms of long-past history.

I'll walk where any own nature would be leading:
    It vexes me to choose another guide:
Where the gray flocks in ferny glens are feeding;
    Where the wild wind blows on the mountain side.

What have those lonely mountains worth revealing?
    More glory and more grief than I can tell:
The earth that wakes one human heart to feeling
    Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell.

Whatever that centering is, it is purely individual, and as beyond gender as it is beyond creed or “high morality.” It is the voice of Catherine Earnshaw, celebrating her awakening from the dream of heaven:

“I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy.”
George Eliot

(1819–1880)

Even taken in its derivative meaning of outline, what is form but the limit of that deference by which we discriminate one object from another?—a limit determined partly by the intrinsic relations or composition of the object, & partly by the extrinsic action of other bodies upon it. This is true whether the object is a rock or a man ...

—GEORGE ELIOT, “Notes on Forms in Art”

I

It was Freud, in our time, who taught us again what the pre-Socratics taught: _ethos_ is the _daimon_, character is fate. A generation before Freud, George Eliot taught the same unhappy truth to her contemporaries. If character is fate, then in a harsh sense there can be no accidents. Character presumably is less volatile than personality, and we tend to disdain anyone who would say: personality is fate. Personalities suffer accidents; characters endure fate. If we seek major personalities among the great novelists, we find many competitors: Balzac, Tolstoi, Dickens, Henry James, even the enigmatic Conrad. By general agreement, the grand instance of a moral character would be George Eliot. She has a nearly unique spiritual authority, best characterized by the English critic Walter Allen about twenty years ago:

George Eliot is the first novelist in the world in some things, and they are the things that come within the scope of her moral interpretation of life. Circumscribed though it was, it was certainly not narrow; nor did she ever forget the difficulty attendant upon the moral life and the complexity that goes to its making.
Her peculiar gift, almost unique despite her place in a tradition of displaced Protestantism that includes Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Wordsworth’s poetry, is to dramatize her interpretations in such a way as to abolish the demarcations between aesthetic pleasure and moral renunciation. Richardson’s heroine, Clarissa Harlowe, and Wordsworth in his best poems share in a compensatory formula: experiential loss can be transformed into imaginative gain. Eliot’s imagination, despite its Wordsworthian antecedents, and despite the ways in which Clarissa Harlowe is the authentic precursor of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, is too severe to accept the formula of compensation. The beauty of renunciation in Eliot’s fiction does not result from a transformation of loss, but rather from a strength that is in no way dependent upon exchange or gain. Eliot presents us with the puzzle of what might be called the Moral Sublime. To her contemporaries, this was no puzzle. F.W.H. Myers, remembered now as a “psychic researcher” (a marvelous metaphor that we oddly use as a title for those who quest after spooks) and as the father of L.H. Myers, author of the novel *The Near and the Far*, wrote a famous description of Eliot’s 1873 visit to Cambridge:

I remember how at Cambridge I walked with her once in the Fellows’ Garden of Trinity, on an evening of rainy May; and she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which had been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-call of men—the words God, Immortality, Duty—pronounced with terrible earnestness how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable was the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third. Never, perhaps, have sterner accents confirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrecompensing Law. I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned towards me like a sibyl’s in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise and left me the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates. And when we stood at length and parted, amid that columnar circuit of forest trees, beneath the last twilight of starless skies, I seemed to be gazing, like Titus at Jerusalem, on vacant seats and empty halls—on a sanctuary with no Presence to hallow it, and heaven left empty of God.

However this may sound now, Myers intended no ironies. As the sibyl of “unrecompensing Law,” Eliot joined the austere company of nineteenth-century prose prophets: Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman and Arnold.
in England; Emerson in America; Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and finally Freud on the Continent. But this ninefold, though storytellers of a sort, wrote no novels. Eliot’s deepest affinities were scarcely with Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, and yet her formal achievement requires us to read her as we read them. This causes difficulties, since Eliot was not a great stylist, and was far more immersed in philosophical than in narrative tradition. Yet her frequent clumsiness in authorial asides and her hesitations in storytelling matter not at all. We do not even regret her absolute lack of any sense of the comic, which never dares take revenge upon her anyway. Wordsworth at his strongest, as in “Resolution and Independence,” still can be unintentionally funny (which inspired the splendid parodies of the poem’s leech-gatherer and its solipsistic bard in Lewis Carroll’s “White Knight’s Ballad,” and Edward Lear’s “Incidents in the Life of my uncle Arly”). But I have seen no effective parodies of George Eliot, and doubt their possibility. It is usually unwise to be witty concerning our desperate need, not only to decide upon right action, but also to will such action, against pleasure and against what we take to be self-interest. Like Freud, Eliot ultimately is an inescapable moralist, precisely delineating our discomfort with culture, and remorselessly weighing the economics of the psyche’s civil wars.

II

George Eliot is not one of the great letter writers. Her letters matter because they are hers, and in some sense do tell part of her own story, but they do not yield to a continuous reading. On a scale of nineteenth-century letter-writing by important literary figures, in which Keats would rank first, and Walter Pater last (the Paterian prose style is never present in his letters), Eliot would find a place about dead center. She is always herself in her letters, too much herself perhaps, but that self is rugged, honest, and formidably inspiring. Our contemporary feminist critics seem to me a touch uncomfortable with Eliot. Here she is on extending the franchise to women, in a letter to John Morley (May 14, 1867):

Thank you for your kind remembrance. Your attitude in relation to Female Enfranchisement seems to be very nearly mine. If I were called on to act in the matter, I would certainly not oppose any plan which held out a reasonable promise of tending to establish as far as possible an equivalence of advantages for the two sexes, as to education and the possibilities of free development. I fear you may have misunderstood something I said the other
evening about nature. I never meant to urge the “intention of Nature” argument, which is to me a pitable fallacy. I mean that as a fact of mere zoological evolution, woman seems to me to have the worst share in existence. But for that very reason I would the more contend that in the moral evolution we have “an art which does mend nature”—an art which “itself is nature.” It is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities. And in the thorough recognition of that worse share, I think there is a basis for a sublimer resignation in woman and a more regenerating tenderness in man.

However, I repeat that I do not trust very confidently to my own impressions on this subject. The peculiarities of my own lot may have caused me to have idiosyncrasies rather than an average judgment. The one conviction on the matter which I hold with some tenacity is, that through all transitions the goal towards which we are proceeding is a more clearly discerned distinctness of function (allowing always for exceptional cases of individual organization) with as near an approach to equivalence of good for woman and for man as can be secured by the effort of growing moral force to lighten the pressure of hard non-moral outward conditions. It is rather superfluous, perhaps injudicious, to plunge into such deeps as these in a hasty note, but it is difficult to resist the desire to botch imperfect talk with a little imperfect writing.

This is a strong insistence upon form in life as in art, upon the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another. I have heard feminist critics decry it as defeatism, though Eliot speaks of “mere zoological evolution” as bringing about every woman’s “worse share in existence.” “A sublimer resignation in woman” is not exactly a popular goal these days, but Eliot never speaks of the sublime without profundity and an awareness of human loss. When she praises Ruskin as a teacher “with the inspiration of a Hebrew prophet,” she also judges him to be “strongly akin to the sublimest part of Wordsworth,” a judgment clearly based upon the Wordsworthian source of Ruskin’s tropes for the sense of loss that dominates the sublime experience. The harshness of being a woman, however mitigated by societal reform, will remain, Eliot reminds us, since we cannot mend nature and its unfairness. Her allusion to the Shakespearean “art which does mend nature,” and which “itself is nature” (*Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.88–96) subtly emends Shakespeare in the deliberately wistful hope for a moral evolution of love between the sexes. What dominates this letter to Morley is a harsh plangency, yet it is anything but defeatism. Perhaps Eliot
should have spoken of a “resigned sublimity” rather than a “sublime resi-
nation,” but her art, and life, give the lie to any contemporary feminist
demeaning of the author of Middlemarch, who shares with Jane Austen and
Emily Dickinson the eminence of being the strongest women writers in
the English language.

Daniel Deronda

All seven novels by Eliot were immensely popular in her own lifetime. Today
there is common consent that The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Middlemarch
(1871–72) are as vital as they were more than a century ago. Adam Bede
(1859) is respected but not widely read or studied, while Romola (1862–63) is
rightly forgotten. Felix Holt, the Radical (1866) retains some current interest,
but less perhaps than Adam Bede. Silas Marner (1861) remains an extraordi-
nary reading experience, and probably is undervalued by most critics.
Rereading it after decades away from it, I find astonishing mythological
power throughout its apparently serene pastoralism. The problematic novel
by Eliot is of course Daniel Deronda (1876), which has divided its readers and
will go on confusing them. Dr. Leavis and others proposed the radical solu-
tion of quarrying a new novel, Gwendolyn Harleth, out of the book, thus cre-
ating an achievement for Eliot not unlike the Emma or Persuasion of Jane
Austen. In this drastic operation, the hero, Daniel Deronda himself, was to
be all but discarded, primarily on the grounds that his endless nobility was
wearisome. Deronda is an incipient Zionist leader who is nine-tenths a prig
and only one-tenth a passionate idealist. He simply is not a male Dorothea
Brooke, as his scenes with Gwendolyn Harleth invariably show. She vaults
off the page; he lacks personality, or else possesses so much character that he
sinks with it, into a veritable bathos in a few places.

And yet, as many critics keep remarking, Deronda is not quite so eas-
ily discarded, because the remarkable Gwendolyn is convincingly in love
with him and also because the even more remarkable George Eliot is in
love with him also. Her portrait of George Henry Lewes, her common-law
husband, as Will Ladislaw in Middlemarch does not persuade us that he is
a wholly fit partner, whether for George Eliot or for Dorothea Brooke.
Deronda sometimes makes me think him a Jewish Caspar Goodwood, just
as Gwendolyn seems half-way between Elizabeth Bennet and Isabel
Archer. Henry James, in his equivocal “Daniel Deronda: A Conversation,“
neatly gives his “Theodora” a positive judgment of Deronda, “Pulcheria” a
rather more pungent negative one, and the judicious “Constantius” an
ambiguous balance between the two:
Theodora. And the advice he gives Gwendolyn, the things he says to her, they are the very essence of wisdom, of warm human wisdom, knowing life and feeling it. “Keep you fear as a safeguard, it may make consequences passionately present to you.” What can be better than that?

Pulcheria. Nothing, perhaps. But what can be drearier than a novel in which the function of the hero—young, handsome, and brilliant—is to give didactic advice, in a proverbial form, to the young, beautiful, and brilliant heroine?

Constantius. That is not putting it quite fairly. The function of Deronda is to have Gwendolyn fall in love with him ...

Constantius adds, rather mordantly: “Poor Gwendolyn’s falling in love with Deronda is part of her own luckless history, not of his.” The implied view of Deronda here is not too far from that of Robert Louis Stevenson, for whom the visionary Zionist was “the Prince of Prigs.” Against all this must be set the reaction of George Eliot herself, dismissing “the laudation of readers who cut the book into scraps and talk of nothing in it but Gwendolyn. I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there.” We can test this relatedness in one of the novel’s great moments, when Gwendolyn is compelled to recognize a rejection that she legitimately cannot be expected to understand:

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolyn’s small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving. All the troubles of her wifehood and widowhood had still left her with the implicit impression which had accompanied her from childhood, that whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her, and it was because of this that no personal jealousy had been roused in her in relation to Deronda: she could not spontaneously think of him as rightfully belonging to others more than to her. But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy—something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all anger into self-humiliation.
Perhaps this is Eliot’s greatest power: to represent the falling away of a solipsism, not ignoble as an involuntary movement, into the terror of a sublime solitude. Gwendolyn after all is losing not only her potential lover, but her virtual superego, though a superego very different from the Freudian model. The Freudian superego demands that the hapless ego surrender its aggressivities, and then continues to torment the ego for being too aggressive still. But Deronda is the gravest and most gentlemanly of consciences, perhaps because he mysteriously associates his own shrouded origins with Gwendolyn’s undeveloped self. This is the subtle surmise of Martin Price in his *Forms of Life*, a study of “Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel.” Price reads Gwendolyn as a character terrorized by her own empty strength of will, oppressed by the potential solitude to which her own will may convey her. Ironically, that fear of the sublime attracts its own doom in the sadistic Grandcourt, who marries Gwendolyn in certainly the most dreadful of all mismatches, even in Eliot. Her strength blocked, her will thwarted, Gwendolyn seems condemned to perpetual death-in-life, until George Eliot rescues her heroine by one of her characteristic drownings, thus relieving Gwendolyn of her error but depriving the reader of a splendidly hateful object in Grandcourt, who is one of Eliot’s negative triumphs.

Eliot is masterly in never quiet explaining precisely what draws Deronda to Gwendolyn. Absurd high-mindedness aside, it does seem that Deronda needs the lady’s well-developed sense of self, as Price suggests. Himself a kind of changeling, Deronda needs to enact rescue-fantasies, with Gwendolyn taking the place of the absent mother. If that seems too close to Freud’s essay “Family Romances,” and too far from Eliot’s fiction, then we ought to recall the yearnings of Dorothea Brooke and of Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, and Eliot’s own lifelong yearnings to “rescue” distinguished male intellectuals. Instilling a moral conscience in the charming Gwendolyn may seem a curious training for a future Zionist uplifter, but in Eliot’s universe it is perhaps an inevitable induction for someone determined to be a prophet of his people’s moral regeneration.

Price sums up Gwendolyn by associating her with Estella in *Great Expectations* and with Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. Like them, the even more charming and forceful Gwendolyn must be reduced in scope and intensity in order to become a better person, or perhaps only an imperfect solipsist. Price is very much in Eliot’s mode when he counts and accepts the cost of assigning sublimity to moral energy: “There is a loss of scale as one dwindles to a moral being; yet it is also the emergence of a self from the welter of assertion and impulse that has often provided an impressive substitute.” Something in the reader, something not necessari-
ly daemonic, wants to protest, wants to ask Eliot: “Must there always be a loss in scope? Must one dwindle to a moral being?”

* * *

Eliot herself, in her letters, gives one answer theoretically (and it is consistent with the burden of *Daniel Deronda*, and a very different one pragmatically), since she palpably gains scale even as she gorgeously augments her self as a moral being. Whatever her letters may lack as narrative, or in Ruskinian madness, they continuously teach us the necessity of confronting our own moral evasions and self-disenchantments. Here she is in full strength, writing to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe on October 29, 1876:

As to the Jewish element in “Deronda,” I expected from first to last in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance and even repulsion than it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is—I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called “educated” making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. And I find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek. To my feeling, this deadness to the history which has prepared half our world for us, this inability to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as our own lies very close to the worst kind of irreligion. The best that can be said of it is, that it is a sign of the intellectual narrowness—in plain English, the stupidity, which is still the average mark of our culture.
Yes, I expected more aversion than I have found ... I sum up with the writer of the Book of Maccabees “if I have done well, and as befits the subject, it is what I desired, but if I have done ill, it is what I could attain unto” ...

Confronted by that power of moral earnestness, the critic is properly disarmed. It hardly suffices to murmur that Deronda is the Prince of Prigs, or to lament that Gwendolyn's imaginative force and human charm deserved something better than a dwindling down into moral coherence. Eliot is too modest in summing up with the barely inspired writer of the Book of the Maccabees. She sums up with the author of Job, and with Tolstoi. Daniel Deronda may be a more vexed creation than The Mill on the Floss or Middlemarch, but it carries their moral authority, Biblical and Tolstoyan. No one after Eliot has achieved her peculiar and invaluable synthesis between the moral and aesthetic, and perhaps it never will be achieved again.

The Mill on the Floss

*The Mill on the Floss* (1860) is George Eliot's strongest achievement before *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and remains a vital novel by any standards. Rereading it confirms my earlier annoyance at its inadequate conclusion, the drowning of the heroine Maggie Tulliver, and her beloved brother Tom, by the Floss river in full flood. But this seems the only substantial blemish in one of the major autobiographical novels in the language, comparable to Dickens's *David Copperfield* and prophetic of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The splendor of *The Mill on the Floss* is almost entirely in Eliot's portrayal of her own earlier phases in the intensely sympathetic: Maggie, whose death most readers fiercely resent. There is no tragic necessity in Maggie's drowning, and I do not believe that literary criticism is capable of explaining why Eliot made so serious a blunder, though recently feminist critics have ventured upon correcting some of Eliot's perspectives. Moral criticism of George Eliot, in my judgment, does not work very well, since the critic, of whatever gender or ideological persuasion, presumes to enter upon a contest with the most formidable and imaginative moralist in the history of the British novel.

I myself can only speculate upon why Eliot decided to destroy her earlier self by drowning the humane and luminous Maggie. Certainly it was not because the novelist could not imagine a form of life for her surrogate self. Maggie moves us most because her yearning demand is for more life, for a sublime relationship to herself, to other selves and to the world. Dr.
F.R. Leavis, who made of an ill-defined “maturity” a critical shibboleth, decided that Maggie was immature and lacked self-knowledge, and so must have reflected a phase in Eliot’s development when she was not yet worthy of Leavisite endorsement. Rereading *The Mill on the Floss* is likelier to show the reader that Maggie has a healthy sexual nature and does the best she can for herself in a harsh society, while ultimately restrained by the considerable moral perplexities of her own passionately divided psyche. The center of Maggie’s dilemma is her erotic attachment to Stephen Guest, a whipping-boy for critics from Eliot’s contemporaries on to ours. Readers of *The Mill on the Floss* need to ask why George Eliot has Maggie renounce Stephen, before they can ask why the author concludes by Maggie’s gratuitous death.

“Renunciation,” as Emily Dickinson wrote with wit grand and grim, “is a piercing virtue,” and perhaps it killed Maggie Tulliver, which is a curious paradox at best, since George Eliot consciously cannot have intended some causal connection between her heroine’s abandonment of sexual happiness and subsequent drowning in her brother’s embrace. Yet there is an authentic link between the almost unmotivated renunciation and the arbitrarily imposed conclusion. We sense that if Maggie had married Stephen, the Floss would not have flooded. That is an outrageous sentence, I suppose, but not nearly so outrageous as the renunciation, which is a self-violation rather than a self-sacrifice on Maggie’s part. And the renunciation, though senseless, is far short of the sentimental outrageousness of the conclusion, with its veiled metaphor of incestuous passion:

Nothing else was said; a new danger was being carried towards them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along. The sun was rising now, and the wide area of watery desolation was spread out in dreadful clearness around them—in dreadful clearness floated onwards the hurrying, threatening masses. A large company in a boat that was working its way along under the Tofton houses, observed their danger, and shouted, “Get out of the current!”

But that could not be done at once, and Tom, looking before him, saw Death rushing on them. Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream.

“It is coming, Maggie!” Tom said, in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water—and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph.
But soon the keel of the boat reappeared, a black speck on the golden water.

The boat reappeared—but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted—living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together.

“Clinging together in fatal fellowship” is the darkly revelatory emphasis of this ending, which compels the reader to surmise that the repressed motive for the renunciation of Stephen was the attachment between sister and brother.

“One supreme moment,” since sexual union is barred, has to be mutual immolation. This may seem more like the Shelley of *The Revolt of Islam* than the Wordsworth of *The Excursion*, and certainly would have been rejected as an interpretation by George Eliot herself. But it may help explain so wayward and inadequate a culmination to a novel otherwise worthy of the intense and varied existence, tragically brief, of Maggie Tulliver.

*Silas Marner*

*Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* remains a beautiful and highly readable book, still immensely popular 130 years after its initial publication. It is not quite of the aesthetic eminence of George Eliot’s masterwork, *Middlemarch*, but only because it is much the less ambitious novel, far shorter and confined as it is to a small village in the Midlands. Its protagonists are simple people, seen against a background in which the common folk of the countryside and the natural world itself are so interpenetrated that we feel we might be reading a narrative poem by William Wordsworth, whose spirit hovers everywhere. Henry James, writing about *Silas Marner*, and the early *Adam Bede*, George Eliot’s first full-length novel, said “her perception was a perception of nature much more than of art,” by which he meant that both books thus displayed an artistic weakness. James was not much interested in country folk, and *Silas Marner* is very much a pastoral novel, prophesying Thomas Hardy. We learn to read *Silas Marner* as we read the Book of Ruth in the Bible, or as we mull over Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage* or Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*. A vision of nature and its processes is as much a part of such pastoral stories as the leading characters are, and Henry James’s distinction between a perception of nature and a perception of art fades away in great writings of this kind.
F.R. Leavis sensibly compares *Silas Marner* to Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, pointing out that both were “moral fables.” A moral fable presumably allows for somewhat different standards of probability than a wholly naturalistic fiction could sustain. Silas is truly a rather unlikely prospect, being a half-mad solitary, to have a deserted child deposited upon his hearth, but within the aesthetic borders of what is almost a fairy story (as Leavis observed) the substitution of the little Eppie for Silas’s stolen gold and dead sister is wonderfully persuasive:

When Marner’s sensibility returned, he continued the action Which had been arrested, and closed his door, unaware of the Chasm in his consciousness, unaware of any intermediate Change, except that the light had grown dim, and that he was Chilled and faint. He thought he had been too long standing at the door and looking out. Turning towards the hearth where the two logs had fallen apart, and sent forth only a red uncertain glimmer, he seat-ed himself on his fireside chair, and was stooping to push his logs together, when, to his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were on the floor in front of the hearth. Gold!—his own gold!—brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away! He felt his heart beginning to beat violently, and for a few moments he was unable to stretch out his hand and grasp the restored treasure. The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agi-tated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered oft warm curls. In utter amazement, Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child—a round, fair thing, with soft yellow rings all over its head. Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream—his little sister whom he carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy without shoes or stockings? That was the first thought that darted across Silas’s blank wonderment. *Was* it a dream? He rose to his feet again, pushed his logs together, and, throwing on some dried leaves and sticks, raised a flame; but the flame did not disperse the vision—it only lit up more distinctly the little round form of the child and its shabby clothing. It was very much like his little sister.

In a fable of regeneration, like Silas Marner, this epiphany has extraor-dinary plangency and force. George Eliot’s art, throughout the book, is almost flawless in its patience. The narrator’s stance is one of
Wordsworthian “wise passivity”; it is nature and community working slowly and silently together that regenerate Silas and that punish both the Cass brothers, each in proportion to his hardness of heart. It is the same spirit, of what might be called the natural, simple heart, that is manifested by Eppie when she chooses to stay with Silas rather than return to the wealthy father who abandoned her:

‘Thank you, ma’am—thank you, sir, for your offers—they’re very great, and far above my wish. For I should have no delight in my life any more if I was forced to go away from my father, and knew he was sitting at home, a-thinking of me and feeling lone. We’ve been used to be happy together every day, and I can’t Think o’ no happiness without him. And he says he’d nobody i’ The world till I was sent to him, and he’d have nothing when I Was gone. And he’s took care of me and loved me from the First, and I’ll cleave to him as long as he lives, and nobody shall Ever come between him and me.’

“Cleaving” is the Biblical metaphor there and throughout *Silas Marner*. Most moral fables in literature fall away into an Abstract harshness, and become rather bad books. George Eliot’s genius vitalizes he fairy story or fabulistic aspect of *Silas Marner*, because of her uncanny power of humanizing all concerns of morality. In a letter to her publisher, she remarked upon “the remedial influence of pure, natural human relations,” as she had sought to portray them, and then added a fine, afterthought: “The Nemesis is a very mild one.”

*Middlemarch*

What can we mean when we speak of the “moral authority” of a great novelist? To invoke the phrase, in English, is to intimate George Eliot, rather than Charles Dickens, Henry James, or Joseph Conrad. This is hardly to deny *Bleak House, The Bostonians*, or *The Secret Agent* their wealth of moral insight, but rather recognizes an uniqueness in George Eliot.

That there is something grave and majestic that informs *Middlemarch*, we scarcely can evade sensing. The protagonist, Dorothea Brooke, is more than a secular St. Theresa; she is a preternaturally strong soul capable of fighting through her own errors. The strong figures who go under—Bulstrode, the peculiar Casaubon, the self-ruined Lydgate (precursor of Dick Diver in Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*)—yield to flaws in their natures. Dorothea, like George Eliot, is a Wordsworthian. Projected sub-
limity, traditional heroism, is set aside, and a new sublimity shared by the self and nature takes its place.

Dorothea, in her moral intensity, is the ancestress of figures in Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, but her curious, inward strength has few analogues in other heroines. Henry James, subtly unnerved by *Middlemarch*, indulged in defensive fault-finding, much as he had done with *The Scarlet Letter*. What made James uncomfortable was a sublimity that his great characters, Isabel Archer in particular, were too evasive to sustain.

It has been too easy to confuse George Eliot’s moral vision, as even Nietzsche showed, when he scorned her for supposedly believing that you could retain Christian morality while discarding the Christian God. George Eliot’s advocacy of renunciation is not Christian, any more than Goethe’s was. The moral sublime in Eliot is allied to Goethe’s view that our virtues become our errors as we seek to expand life. Goethe, keenly ironical, is very different from George Eliot, who rarely allows herself irony. But then, no critic gets anywhere by bringing an ironic perspective to George Eliot.

Wisdom literature, in modern times, is very rare: who except George Eliot could write it? She surprises us by her affinities to the greatest poets—Shakespeare and Dante—affinities that are manifest in the dark individuality with which she endows the tragic Lydgate and the undefeated quester, Dorothea.

Moral authority in imaginative literature cannot be distinguished from clarity and power of intellect, and from the faculty of inventiveness. I cannot think of any novelist except for George Eliot who can be compared to Shakespeare and to Dante in these matters.
Gustave Flaubert

(1821–1880)

Madame Bovary

At six o’clock this evening, as I was writing the word “hysterics,” I was so swept away, was bellowing so loudly and feeling so deeply what my little Bovary was going through, that I was afraid of having hysterics myself. I got up from my table and opened the window to calm myself. My head was spinning. Now I have great pains in my knees, in my back, and in my head. I feel like a man who has ———ed too much (forgive me for the expression)—a kind of rapturous lassitude.

(Flaube to Louise Colet, letter of 23 December 1853)

I will not echo the Lycanthrope [Petrus Borel], remembered for a subversiveness which no longer prevails, when he said: “Confronted with all that is vulgar and inept in the present time, can we not take refuge in cigarettes and adultery?” But I assert that our world, even when it is weighed on precision scales, turns out to be exceedingly harsh considering it was engendered by Christ; it could hardly be entitled to throw the first stone at adultery. A few cuckolds more or less are not likely to increase the rotating speed of the spheres and to hasten by a second the final destruction of the universe.

(Baudelaire on Madame Bovary)

The societal scandal of Madame Bovary is as remote now as the asceticism of the spirit practised by Flaubert and Baudelaire, who seem almost self-indulgent in the era of Samuel Beckett. Rereading Madame
Bovary side-by-side with say Malone Dies is a sadly instructive experience. Emma seems as boisterous as Hogarth or Rabelais in the company of Malone and Macmann. And yet she is their grandmother, even as the personages of Proust, Joyce, and Kafka are among her children. With her the novel enters the realm of inactivity, where the protagonists are bored, but the reader is not. Poor Emma, destroyed by usury rather than love, is so vital that her stupidities do not matter. A much more than average sensual woman, her capacity for life and love is what moves us to admire her, and even to love her, since like Flaubert himself we find ourselves in her.

Why is Emma so unlucky? If it can go wrong, it will go wrong for her. Freud, like some of the ancients, believed there were no accidents. Ethos is the daimon, your character is your fate, and everything that happens to you starts by being you. Rereading, we suffer the anguish of beholding the phases that lead to Emma’s self-destruction. That anguish multiplies despite Flaubert’s celebrated detachment, partly because of his uncanny skill at suggesting how many different consciousnesses invade and impinge upon any single consciousness, even one as commonplace as Emma’s. Emma’s I is an other, and so much the worse for the sensual apprehensiveness that finds it has become Emma.

“Hysterics suffer mainly from reminscences” is a famous and eloquent formula that Freud outgrew. Like Flaubert before him, he came to see that the Emmas—meaning nearly all among us—were suffering from repressed drives. Still later, in his final phase, Freud arrived at a vision that achieves an ultimate clarity in the last section of Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, which reads to me as a crucial commentary on Emma Bovary. It is not repressed desire that ensues in anxiety, but a primal anxiety that issues in repression. As for the variety of neurosis involved, Freud speculated that hysteria results from fear of the loss of love. Emma kills herself in a hysteria brought on by a fairly trivial financial mess, but underlying the hysteria is the terrible fear that there will be no more lovers for her.

The most troubling critique of Madame Bovary that I know is by Henry James, who worried whether we could sustain our interest in a consciousness as narrow as Emma’s:

The book is a picture of the middling as much as they like, but does Emma attain even to that? Hers is a narrow middling even for a little imaginative person whose “social” significance is small. It is greater on the whole than her capacity of consciousness, taking this all round; and so in a word, we feel her less illustrational than she might have been not only if the world had offered her more points of contact, but if she had had more of these to give it.
That *sounds* right enough, yet rereading the novel does not make us desire a larger or brighter Emma. Until she yields to total hysteria, she incarnates the universal wish for sensual life, for a more sensual life. Keats would have liked her, and so do we, though she is not exactly an Isabel Archer or Millie Theale. A remarkable Emma might have developed the hardness and resourcefulness that would have made her a French Becky Sharp, and fitted her for survival even in mid-nineteenth century Paris. But James sublimely chose to miss the point, which Albert Thibaudet got permanently right:

She is more ardent than passionate. She loves life, pleasure, love itself much more than she loves a man; she is made to have lovers rather than a lover. It is true that she loves Rodolphe with all the fervor of her body, and with him she experiences the moment of her complete, perfect and brief fulfillment; her illness, however, after Rodolphe’s desertion, is sufficient to cure her of this love. She does not die from love, but from weakness and a total inability to look ahead, a naivete which makes her an easy prey to deceit in love as well as in business. She lives in the present and is unable to resist the slightest impulse.

I like best Thibaudet’s comparison between Flaubert’s attitude towards Emma and Milton’s towards his Eve: “Whenever Emma is seen in purely sensuous terms, he speaks of her with a delicate, almost religious feeling, the way Milton speaks of Eve.” One feels that Milton desires Eve; Flaubert indeed is so at one with Emma that his love for her is necessarily narcissistic. Cervantes, not Milton, was in some sense Flaubert’s true precursor, and Emma (as many critics have remarked) has elements of a female Quixote in her. Like the Don, she is murdered by reality. Milton’s Eve, tough despite her yielding beauty, transcends both the order of reality and the order of play. Emma, lacking a Sancho, finds her enchanted Dulcinea in the paltry Rodolphe. Flaubert punished himself harshly, in and through Emma, by grimly mixing in a poisonous order of provincial social reality, and an equally poisonous order of hallucinated play, Emma’s fantasies of an ideal passion. The mixing in is cruel, formidable, and of unmatched aesthetic dignity. Emma has no Sublime, but the inverted Romantic vision of Flaubert persuades us that the strongest writing can represent ennui with a life-enhancing power.

Sartre, very early in his endless meditations upon Flaubert, sensibly observed that: “Flaubert despised realism and said so over and over throughout his life; he loved only the absolute purity of art.” *Madame*
Bovary has little to do with realism, and something to do with a prophecy of impressionism, but in a most refracted fashion. All of poor Emma's moments are at once drab and privileged; one remembers Browning's Andrea del Sarto intoning: "A common grayness silvers everything." The critical impressionism of Walter Pater is implicit in Madame Bovary; imagery of hallucinatory intensity is always a step away from suddenly bursting forth as secularized epiphanies. The Impressionist painters and Proust lurk in the ironies of Flaubert's style, but the uncanny moral energy remains unique:

The priest rose to take the crucifix; then she stretched forward her neck like one suffering from thirst, and glueing her lips to the body of the Man-God, she pressed upon it with all her expiring strength the fullest kiss of love that she had ever given. Then he recited the Misericatur and the Indulgentiam, dipped his right thumb in the oil, and began to give extreme unction. First, upon the eyes, that had so coveted all worldly goods; then upon the nostrils, that had been so greedy of the warm breeze and the scents of love; then upon the mouth, that had spoken lies, moaned in pride and cried out in lust; then upon the hands that had taken delight in the texture of sensuality; and finally upon the soles of the feet, so swift when she had hastened to satisfy her desires, and that would now walk no more.

This is Flaubert's elegy for Emma, and ultimately transcends its apparent ironies, if only because we hear in it the novelist's deeper elegy for himself. He refuses to mourn for himself, as befits the high priest of a purer art than the novel knew before him, yet his lament for Emma's sensual splendor is an authentic song of loss, a loss in which he participates.
Rereading Crime and Punishment, I am haunted suddenly by a recollection of my worst experience as a teacher. Back in 1955, an outcast instructor in the then New Critical, Neo-Christian Yale English department dominated by acolytes of the churchwardenly T.S. Eliot, I was compelled to teach Crime and Punishment in a freshman course to a motley collection of Yale legacies masquerading as students. Wearied of their response to Dostoevsky as so much more Eliotic Original Sin, I endeavored to cheer myself up (if not them) by reading aloud in class S.J. Perelman's sublime parody “A Farewell to Omsk,” fragments of which are always with me, such as the highly Dostoevskian portrayal of the tobacconist Pyotr Pyotrvitch:

“Good afternoon, Afya Afyakievitch!” replied the shopkeeper warmly. He was the son of a former notary public attached to the household of Prince Grashkin and gave himself no few airs in consequence. Whilst speaking it was his habit to extract a greasy barometer from his waistcoat and consult it importantly, a trick he had learned from the Prince’s barber. On seeing Afya Afyakievitch he skipped about nimbly, dusted off the counter, gave one of his numerous offspring a box on the ear, drank a cup of tea, and on the whole behaved like a man of the world who has affairs of moment occupying him.

Unfortunately, my class did not think this funny and did not even enjoy the marvelous close of Perelman’s sketch:
“Don’t take any flannel kopecks,” said Afya gloomily. He dislodged a piece of horse-radish from his tie, shied it at a passing Nihilist, and slid forward into the fresh loam.

Dostoevsky had his own mode of humor, but he might not have appreciated Perelman either. *Crime and Punishment* is less apocalyptic than *The Brothers Karamazov*, but it is apocalyptic enough. It is also tendentious in the extreme, which is the point of Perelman’s parody, but Dostoevsky is so great a tragedian that this does not matter. Raskolnikov is a powerful representation of the will demonized by its own strength, while Svidrigailov is beyond that, and stands on the border of a convincing phantasmagoria. Until the unfortunate epilogue, no other narrative fiction drives itself onwards with the remorseless strength of *Crime and Punishment*, truly a shot out of hell and into hell again. To have written a naturalistic novel that reads like a continuous nightmare is Dostoevsky’s unique achievement.

Raskolnikov never does repent and change, unless we believe the epilogue, in which Dostoevsky himself scarcely believed. Despair causes his surrender to Porfiry, but even his despair never matches the fierce ecstasy he has achieved in violating all limits. He breaks what can be broken and yet does not break himself. He cannot be broken, not because he has found any truth, objective or psychological, but because he has known, however momentarily, the nihilistic abyss, a Gnostic freedom of what is beyond our sense of being creatures in God’s creation. Konstantin Mochulsky is surely right to emphasize that Raskolnikov never comes to believe in redemption, never rejects his theory of strength and power. His surrender, as Mochulsky says, “is not a sign of penitence but of pusillanimit.” We end up with a pre-Christian tragic hero ruined by blind fate, at least in his own vision. But this is about as unattractive as a tragic hero can be, because Raskolnikov comes too late in cultural history to seem a Prometheus rather than a bookish intellectual. In a Christian context, Prometheus assimilates to Satan, and Raskolnikov’s pride begins to seem too satanic for tragedy.

Raskolnikov hardly persuades us on the level of Dostoevsky’s Christian polemic, but psychologically he is fearfully persuasive. Power for Raskolnikov can be defined as the ability to kill someone else, anyone at all, rather than oneself. I meet Raskolnikov daily, though generally not in so extreme a form, in many young contemporaries who constitute what I would call the School of Resentment. Their wounded narcissism, turned against the self, might make them poets or critics; turned outward, against others, it makes them eminent unrest-inducers. Raskolnikov does not move our sympathy for him, but he impresses us with his uncompromising intensity.
Svidrigailov may have been intended as Raskolnikov’s foil, but he got away from Dostoevsky, and runs off with the book, even as old Karamazov nearly steals the greater work away from the extraordinary Dmitri. Raskolnikov is too pure a Promethean or devil to be interested in desire, unless the object of desire be metaphysical freedom and power. He is a kind of ascetic Gnostic, while Svidrigailov is a libertine Gnostic, attempting to liberate the sparks upward. If Raskolnikov portrays the madness of the Promethean will, then Svidrigailov is beyond the will, as he is beyond the still-religious affirmations of atheism. He lives (if that can be the right word) a negativity that Raskolnikov is too much himself to attain. Raskolnikov killed for his own sake, he tells Sonia, to test his own strength. Svidrigailov is light years beyond that, on the way downwards and outwards into the abyss, his foremother and forefather.

The best of all murder stories, *Crime and Punishment* seems to me beyond praise and beyond affection. Dostoevsky doubtless would impress me even more than he does already if I could read Russian, but I would not like him any better. A vicious obscurantism inheres in the four great narratives, including *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*, and it darkens *Crime and Punishment*. Only *The Brothers Karamazov* transcends Dostoevsky’s hateful ideology because the Karamazovs sweep past the truths that the novelist continues to shout at us. Tolstoy did not think that Dostoevsky’s final and apocalyptic novel was one of the summits of the genre, but then he liked to think of Dostoevsky as the Russian Harriet Beecher Stowe and would have wanted old Karamazov to have resembled Simon Legree.

What seems to me strongest in Dostoevsky is the control of visionary horror he shares with Blake, an imaginative prophet with whom he has absolutely nothing else in common. No one who has read *Crime and Punishment* ever can forget Raskolnikov’s murder of poor Lizaveta:

> There in the middle of the floor, with a big bundle in her arms, stood Lizaveta, as white as a sheet, gazing in frozen horror at her murdered sister and apparently without the strength to cry out. When she saw him run in, she trembled like a leaf and her face twitched spasmodically; she raised her hand as if to cover her mouth, but no scream came and she backed slowly away from him towards the corner, with her eyes on him in a fixed stare, but still without a sound, as though she had no breath left to cry out. He flung himself forward with the axe; her lips writhed pitifully, like those of a young child when it is just beginning to be frightened and stands ready to scream, with its eyes fixed on the object of its fear. The wretched Lizaveta was so simple, brow-beaten, and
utterly terrified that she did not even put up her arms to protect her face, natural and almost inevitable as the gesture would have been at this moment when the axe was brandished immediately above it. She only raised her free left hand a little and slowly stretched it out towards him as though she were trying to push him away. The blow fell on her skull, splitting it open from the top of the forehead almost to the crown of the head, and felling her instantly. Raskolnikov, completely beside himself, snatched up her bundle, threw it down again, and ran to the entrance.

Nothing could be more painfully effective than: “She only raised her free left hand a little and slowly stretched it out towards him as though she were trying to push him away.” We think of the horrible dream in which Raskolnikov sees a poor, lean, old mare beaten to death with a crowbar, and we may reflect upon Nietzsche’s darkest insights: that pain creates memory, so that the pain is the meaning, and meaning is therefore painful. Dostoevsky was a great visionary and an exuberant storyteller, but there is something paradoxically nihilistic in his narrative visions. The sublime mode asks us to give up easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures, which is altogether an aesthetic request. Dostoevsky belongs not to the sublime genre but to the harsher perspectives of the apocalyptic. He insists that we accept pains that transcend aesthetic limits. His authority at apocalypse is beyond question, but such authority also has its own aesthetic limits.

*Brothers Karamazov*

For a critic who cannot read Russian, *The Brothers Karamazov* needs considerable mediation, more perhaps than *War and Peace* or *Fathers and Sons*. Much of this mediation is provided by Victor Terras, in his admirable commentary *A Karamazov Companion*, to which I am indebted here.

Dostoevsky’s final novel, completed only two months before his death, when he was nine months short of sixty, *The Brothers Karamazov* was intended as Dostoevsky’s apocalypse. Its genre might best be called Scripture rather than novel or tragedy, saga or chronicle. Dostoevsky’s scope is from Genesis to Revelation, with the Book of Job and the Gospel of John as the centers. Old Karamazov is a kind of Adam, dreadfully vital and vitalistically dreadful. His four sons resist allegorical reduction, but William Blake would have interpreted them as being his Four Zoas or living principles of fallen man, with Ivan as Urizen, Dmitri as Luvah, Alyosha as Los, and the bastard Smerdyakov as a very debased Tharmas. On the model of this rather Hermetic mythology, Ivan is excessively dominated by
the anxieties of the skeptical and analytic intellect, while Dmitri is culpa-
ble for “reasoning from the loins in the unreal forms of Beulah’s night” and 
so is a victim of his own overly sensual affective nature. The image of 
imaginative and spiritual salvation, Alyosha, is thus seen as the true 
Christian visionary, while the natural—all too natural—Smerdyakov rep-
resents the drives or instincts turned murderously against the father and 
against the self.

That there may be affinities between English Blake and Great Russian 
Dostoevsky is itself surprising and ought not to be magnified, since the dif-
fences between the two seers are far more serious than any parallels in 
mythic projection. Despite his extraordinary powers of characterization 
and representation, the Dostoevsky of Karamazov is essentially an obscu-
rantist, and Blake would have judged him to have been a greatly exalted 
version of his own Smerdyakov. Tolstoy entertained outrageous moraliza-
tions about the proper modes and uses for literature, but, compared to the 
author of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Tolstoy will seem an Enlightened ratio-
nalist to a Western reader at the present time. Perhaps that is only to say 
that Dostoevsky is less universal than Tolstoy in spirit, less the Russian 
Homer and more the Russian Dante.

*The Brothers Karamazov* is frequently an outrageous narrative and evi-
dently has strong parodistic elements. Its narrator is faceless; John Jones 
calls him “a crowd in trousers.” His story is told with a sly artlessness, 
which suits a novel whose burden is that we are all sinful, for even holy 
Russia swarms with sin, with the universal desire, conscious and uncon-
scious, to murder the father. Old Karamazov is a monster, but a heroic 
vitalist, fierce in his drive for women and for drink. Dostoevsky evidently 
did not much care for Ivan either, and no one could care for Smerdyakov. 
Yet all the Karamazovs burn with psychic energy, all are true sons of that 
terrible but exuberant father. Freud’s essay “*Dostoyevski and Parricide*” 
(1928) should be supplemented by his *Totem and Taboo*, because the violent 
tyrant-father murdered by his sons in the Primal History Scene is akin to 
old Karamazov, who also wishes to appropriate all the women for himself.

Old Karamazov is actually just fifty-five, though ancient in debauch-
ery. He could be judged a Falstaffian figure, not as Shakespeare wrote 
Falstaff, but as moralizing critics too frequently view the fat knight, for-
getting his supreme wit, his joy in play, and his masterful insights into real-
ity. If Falstaff had continued the decline we observe in *Henry IV, Part 2*, 
then he might have achieved the rancid vitality of the father of the 
Karamazovs. Fyodor Pavlovich’s peculiar vice however is non-Falstaffian. 
Falstaff after all is not a father, despite his longing to make Hal his son. Old 
Karamazov is primarily a father, the parody indeed of a bad father, almost
the Freudian primitive father of *Totem and Taboo*. Still, this buffoon and insane sensualist is a fool in a complex way, almost a Shakespearean fool, seeing through all impostures, his own included. Fyodor Pavlovich lies to keep in practice, but his lies generally work to expose more truth. He lives to considerable purpose, doubtless despite himself. The largest purpose, in one of Dostoevsky’s terrible ironies, is to be the inevitable victim of patri-cide, of his four sons’ revenge for their abused mothers.

The image of the father, for the reactionary Dostoevsky, is ultimately also the image of the Czar and of God. Why then did Dostoevsky risk the ghastly Fyodor Pavlovich as his testament’s vision of the father? I can only surmise that Dostoevsky’s motivation was Jobean. If Old Karamazov is to be our universal father, then by identifying with Dmitri, or Ivan, or Alyosha (no one identifies with Smerdyakov!), we assume their Jobean situation. If your faith can survive the torment of seeing the image of paternal authority in Karamazov, then you are as justified as Job. Reversing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Dostoevsky persuades us that if we haven’t had a bad enough father, then it is necessary to invent one. Old Karamazov is an ancestor-demon rather than an ancestor-god, a darkness visible rather than a luminous shadow. You do not mourn his murder, but as a reader you certainly miss him when he is gone. Nor can you hate him the way you despise the hideous Rakitin. Again, I admire John Jones’s emphasis:

> The old man’s complicity in his own murder gets carried by the book’s master metaphor. His house stinks. His life stinks. Yet his mystic complicity never quite hardens into the judgment that he deserves to die. His nature is too broad to allow that.

By “broad” Jones means simply just too alive to deserve to die, which is what I myself would judge. So rammed with life is old Karamazov that his murder is a sin against life, life depraved and corrupt, yet fierce life, life refusing death. Even Dmitri falls short of his father’s force of desire. Strangely like Blake again, Dostoevsky proclaims that everything that lives is holy, though he does not share Blake’s conviction that nothing or no one is holier than anything or anyone else.

In his *Notebooks*, Dostoevsky insisted that “we are all, to the last man, Fyodor Pavloviches,” because in a new, original form “we are all nihilists.” A reader, but for the intercessions of his superego, might like to find himself in Falstaff, but hardly in Fyodor Pavlovich. Yet the honest reader should, and does, and no one wants to be murdered. As an apocalypse, *The Brothers Karamazov* forces identification upon one. The father in each male among us is compelled to some uncomfortable recognition in Old
Karamazov; the son in each can choose among the three attractive brothers (Zosima is hardly a possibility). It cannot be said that Dostoevsky does as well with women; Grushenka and Katerina Ivanovna may divide male fantasy between them, but that is all. Dostoevsky does not match Tolstoy as a portrayer of women, let alone Shakespeare.

Much of the permanent fascination of *The Brothers Karamazov* invests itself in the extraordinary differences between Dmitri and Ivan, and in Ivan's two phantasmagorias, his “poem” of the Grand Inquisitor and his mad confrontation with the Devil. Dmitri, though he yields us no phantasmagorias, is more endless to meditation than his half-brother, Ivan. Dostoevsky evidently saw Dmitri as the archetypal Great Russian: undisciplined, human—all too human, lustful, capable of all extremes, but a man of deep feeling and compassion, and an intuitive genius, a poet of action, an authentic comedian of the spirit, and potentially a Christian. Ivan is his father’s son in a darker sense; turned inward, his ravenging intellect destroys a sense of other selves, and his perpetually augmenting inner self threatens every value that Dostoevsky seeks to rescue. If Dmitri is the exemplary Russian, then Ivan is the Western intellectual consciousness uneasily inhabiting the Russian soul, with murderous consequences that work themselves through in his parody, Smerdyakov.

The legend of the Grand Inquisitor has achieved a fame that transcends *The Brothers Karamazov* as a whole, hardly a result Dostoevsky could have endured, partly because Ivan’s parable tells us nothing about Dmitri, who is the authentic center of the novel, and partly because, out of context, Ivan’s prose poem can be mistaken for Dostoevsky’s, which is *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan’s legend is one that Dostoevsky rejects, and yet Ivan also, like Old Karamazov, is Dostoevsky, even if Dmitri is more of Dostoevsky. The Grand Inquisitor stamps out human freedom because humans are too weak to endure their own freedom. If Dostoevsky really intended Zosima to be his answer to the Inquisitor, then he erred badly. Zosima, to an American ear anyway, is a muddle, and his interpretation of the Book of Job is the weakest failure in the history of theodicy. What is least acceptable about the Book of Job, its tacked-on conclusion in which God gives Job a perfect new set of sons and daughters, every bit as good as the old, is saluted by Zosima as the height of holy wisdom. It is difficult to answer the Grand Inquisitor with such sublime idiocy.

But then the Grand Inquisitor speaks a sublime idiocy, despite the grand reputation that the Legend has garnered as an excerpt. Dostoevsky is careful to distance himself and us, with the highest irony, from Ivan’s dubious rhetoric. The Inquisitor rants on for too long, and just does not frighten us enough; he is more Gothic than we can accept, just as Ivan's
Devil is too much a confused projection of Ivan. To be effective, the legend of the Inquisitor should have been composed and told by Dmitri, but then *The Brothers Karamazov* would have been a different and even stronger novel.

Freud, for polemical and tendentious reasons, overrated *The Brothers Karamazov*, ranking it first among all novels ever written, close to Shakespeare in eminence, and finding the rather lurid legend of the Grand Inquisitor to be a peak of world literature. That latter judgment is clearly mistaken; the status of the novel among all novels whatsoever is perhaps a touch problematic. The book’s enormous gusto is unquestionable; the Karamazov family, father and sons, sometimes seems less an image of life, a mimesis, and more a super-mimesis, an evocation of a more abundant life than representation ought to be able to portray. There cannot be a more intense consciousness than that of Dmitri in a novel; only a few figures elsewhere can match him. Doubtless he speaks for what Dostoevsky could not repress in himself: “If they drive God from the earth, we shall shelter Him underground.” If you wish to read “God” there as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and Jesus, you are justified; you follow Dostoevsky’s intention. I am willing to read “God,” here and elsewhere, as the desire for the transcendental and extraordinary, or Dmitri’s and Dostoevsky’s desire for the completion of what was already transcendental and extraordinary in themselves.
Anna Karenina

SCHOPENHAUER’S FIERCE VISION OF THE RAVENING WILL TO LIVE FOUND a receptive sharer in Tolstoy, whose ferocious drives hardly needed guidance from Schopenhauer. Anna Karenina can be called the novel of the drives, since no other narrative that I have read centers so fully upon its protagonist’s being so swept away by her will to live that almost nothing else matters to her. Anna’s love for Vronsky may have its few rivals in Western literature, but I can recall no similar representation of erotic passion quite so intense. Tolstoy, with enormous shrewdness, explains nothing about Anna’s object-choice to us, whether in idealizing or in reductive terms. What he does show us, with overwhelming persuasiveness, is that there is no choice involved. Anna, vital and attractive in every way, is someone with whom most male readers of the novel fall in love, and Tolstoy clearly loves her almost obsessively. He would not have said that he was Anna, but she resembles him rather more than Levin does, let alone Vronsky or Kitty.

Why does Anna kill herself? Would we find it as plausible if a contemporary Anna emulated her? Could there be a contemporary Anna? The questions may reduce to: Why did Tolstoy kill her? Did he mean to punish her? I think not. Anna’s suicide saddens us, but it also relieves us from shared suffering. Doubtless it relieved Tolstoy also, who was suffering with her. Other legitimate questions would be: How would Schopenhauer have received Anna’s death? Is it an heroic release, or a failure in endurance?

Tolstoy read Schopenhauer in the interval between War and Peace and Anna Karenina, an uneasy interregnum in which he was defeated by his attempt to write a novel about the era of Peter the Great. His enthusiasm for Schopenhauer was essentially a reaffirmation of his own darkest
convictions, since he had always been both an apocalyptic vitalist and a
dark moralist appalled by some of the consequences of his own vitalism.
Schopenhauer's Will to Live, with its metaphysical status as the true thing-
in-itself, is simply the Tolstoyan natural ethos turned into prose. The Will
to Live is unitary, active, rapacious, indifferent, universal desire; one of the
most extraordinary of nineteenth-century hyperboles:

Let us now add the consideration of the human race. The matter
indeed becomes more complicated, and assumes a certain serious-
ness of aspect; but the fundamental character remains unaltered.
Here also life presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment,
but as a task, a drudgery to be performed; and in accordance with
this we see, in great and small, universal need, ceaseless cares, con-
stant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme
exertion of all the powers of body and mind. Many millions, unit-
ed into nations, strive for the common good, each individual on
account of his own; but many thousands fall as a sacrifice for it.
Now senseless delusions, now intriguing politics, incite them to
wars with each other; then the sweat and the blood of the great
multitude must flow, to carry out the ideas of individuals, or to
expiate their faults. In peace industry and trade are active, inven-
tions work miracles, seas are navigated, delicacies are collected
from all ends of the world, the waves engulf thousands. All strive,
some planning, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But the
ultimate aim of it all, what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tor-
mented individuals through a short span of time in the most for-
tunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from
pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the
reproduction of this race and its striving. In this evident dispro-
portion between the trouble and the reward, the will to live
appears to us from this point of view, if taken objectively, as a fool,
or subjectively, as a delusion, seized by which everything living
works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that
is of no value. But when we consider it more closely, we shall find
here also that it is rather a blind pressure, a tendency entirely
without ground or motive.

If this is the characterization of the Will to Live, then the metaphysics
of the love of the sexes will reduce to a kind of treason:

In between, however, in the midst of the tumult, we see the
glances of two lovers meet longingly: yet why so secretly, fearfully, and stealthily? Because these lovers are the traitors who seek to perpetuate the whole want and drudgery, which would otherwise speedily reach an end; this they wish to frustrate, as others like them have frustrated it before.

Schopenhauer presumably would have found this exemplified as much by Levin and Kitty as by Vronsky and Anna, but there he and Tolstoy part, as even Tolstoy is a touch saner upon the metaphysics of sexual love. What matters most about Anna, at least to the reader, is her intensity, her will to live (I deliberately remove the Schopenhauerian capitalization). Anna’s aura renders her first meeting with Vronsky unforgettable for us:

Vronsky followed the guard to the Carriage, and had to stop at the entrance of the compartment to let a lady pass out.

The trained insight of a Society man enabled Vronsky with a single glance to decide that she belonged to the best Society. He apologized for being in her way and was about to enter the carriage, but felt compelled to have another look at her, not because she was very beautiful nor because of the elegance and modest grace of her whole figure, but because he saw in her sweet face as she passed him something specially tender and kind. When he looked round she too turned her head. Her bright grey eyes which seemed dark because of their black lashes rested for a moment on his face as if recognizing him, and then turned to the passing crowd evidently in search of some one. In that short look Vronsky had time to notice the subdued animation that enlivened her face and seemed to flutter between her bright eyes and a scarcely perceptible smile which curved her rosy lips. It was as if an excess of vitality so filled her whole being that it betrayed itself against her will, now in her smile, now in the light of her eyes. She deliberately tried to extinguish that light in her eyes, but it shone despite of her in her faint smile.

A benign vitality, however excessive, is what Tolstoy recognized in himself. What he teaches himself in this novel is that a vitality so exuberant transcends benignity as it does every other quality. The brief but overwhelming chapter 11 of part 2 is not only the novel in embryo, and the essence of Anna, but it is also, to me, the most revelatory scene that Tolstoy ever wrote:
That which for nearly a year had been Vronsky’s sole and exclusive desire, supplanting all his former desires: that which for Anna had been an impossible, dreadful, but all the more bewitching dream of happiness, had come to pass. Pale, with trembling lower jaw, he stood over her, entreating her to be calm, himself not knowing why or how.

“Anna, Anna,” he said in a trembling voice, “Anna, for God’s sake! ...”

But the louder he spoke the lower she drooped her once proud, bright, but now shame-stricken head, and she writhed, slipping down from the sofa on which she sat to the floor at his feet. She would have fallen on the carpet if he had not held her.

“My God! Forgive me!” she said, sobbing and pressing Vronsky’s hand to her breast.

She felt so guilty, so much to blame, that it only remained for her to humble herself and ask to be forgiven; but she had no one in the world now except him, so that even her prayer for forgiveness was addressed to him. Looking at him, she felt her humiliation physically, and could say nothing more. He felt what a murderer must feel when looking at the body he has deprived of life. The body he had deprived of life was their love, the first period of their love. There was something frightful and revolting in the recollection of what had been paid for with this terrible price of shame. The shame she felt at her spiritual nakedness communicated itself to him. But in spite of the murderer’s horror of the body of his victim, that body must be cut in pieces and hidden away, and he must make use of what he has obtained by the murder.

Then, as the murderer desperately throws himself on the body, as though with passion, and drags it and hacks it, so Vronsky covered her face and shoulders with kisses.

She held his hand and did not move. Yes! These kisses were what had been bought by that shame! “Yes, and this hand, which will always be mine, is the hand of my accomplice.” She lifted his hand and kissed it. He knelt down and tried to see her face, but she hid it and did not speak. At last, as though mastering herself, she sat up and pushed him away. Her face was as beautiful as ever, but all the more piteous.

“It’s all over,” she said. “I have nothing but you left. Remember that.”

“I cannot help remembering what is life itself to me! For one moment of that bliss ...”
“What bliss?” she said with disgust and horror, and the horror was involuntarily communicated to him. “For heaven’s sake, not another word.”

She rose quickly and moved away from him.

“Not another word!” she repeated, and with a look of cold despair, strange to him, she left him. She felt that at that moment she could not express in words her feeling of shame, joy, and horror at this entrance on a new life, and she did not wish to vulgarize that feeling by inadequate words. Later on, the next day and the next, she still could not even find words to describe all the complexity of those feelings, and could not even find thoughts with which to reflect on all that was in her soul.

She said to herself: “No, I can’t think about it now; later, when I am calmer.” But that calm, necessary for reflection, never came. Every time the thought of what she had done, and of what was to become of her and of what she should do, came to her mind, she was seized with horror and drove these thoughts away.

“Not now; later, when I am calmer!” she said to herself.

But in her dreams, when she had no control over her thoughts, her position appeared to her in all its shocking nakedness. One dream she had almost every night. She dreamt that both at once were her husbands, and lavished their caresses on her. Alexey Alexandrovich wept, kissing her hands, saying: “How beautiful it is now!” and Alexey Vronsky was there too, and he also was her husband. And she was surprised that formerly this had seemed impossible to her, and laughingly explained to them how much simpler it really was, and that they were both now contented and happy. But this dream weighed on her like a nightmare, and she woke from it filled with horror.

Abruptly, without even an overt hint of the nature of the consummation, Tolstoy places us after the event. Anna’s tragedy, and in some sense Tolstoy’s own, is implicit in this majestic scene. Poor Vronsky, at once victim and executioner, is hopelessly inadequate to Anna’s intensity. There is of course nothing he can say and nothing he can do, because he is the wrong man, and always will be. But who could have been the right man? Levin? Perhaps, but Tolstoy and life (the two are one) would not have it so. The calm, necessary for reflection, might have come to Anna with Levin, yet that is highly doubtful. Tolstoy himself, her double and brother, her psychic twin, would have been inadequate to Anna, and she to him. Anna’s dream, with both Alexeys happy as her joint husbands, is a peculiar horror.
to her, because it so horrified Tolstoy. The outrage expressed by D.H.
Lawrence at what he judged to be Tolstoy’s murder of Anna might have
been mitigated had Lawrence allowed himself to remember that Tolstoy,
nearly thirty-five years after Anna, also died in a railroad station.

“Characters like Anna are tragic figures because, for reasons that are
admirable, they cannot live divided lives or survive through repression.”
That sentence of Martin Price’s is the best I have read about Anna, but I
wonder if Anna can be called a tragic figure, any more than she can be what
Schopenhauer grimly would have called her, a traitor. Tragedy depends
upon division and repression, and Anna is betrayed by nature itself, which
does not create men as vital as herself, or, if it does, creates them as savage
moralists, like Tolstoy. Anna is too integral for tragedy, and too imbued
with reality to survive in any social malformed of reality whatsoever. She
dies because Tolstoy could not sustain the suffering it would have cost him
to imagine a life she could have borne to go on living.
Mark Twain

(1835–1910)

Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain’s greatness is centered in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and in the best of his shorter tales. By common consent, Huckleberry Finn belongs to a very select group of American novels: Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, Melville’s Moby-Dick, Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady, Willa Cather’s My Ántonia, Theodore Dreiser’s An American Tragedy, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, and William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying and Light in August. Later additions to that tenfold might well include Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Flannery O’Connor’s The Violent Bear It Away, Nabokov’s Pale Fire, Don DeLillo’s Underworld, Philip Roth’s Sabbath’s Theater, Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, and Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian. Taking the eighteen books together, if I could have just one on the proverbial desert island, it would have to be The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Its only true rival as the one, essential American book would be Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. Twain and Whitman between them best define what is uniquely American about American literature.

Huck Finn, like the “Walt Whitman” of Song of Myself, is an authentic American Original. As with Walt, Huck is Adam early in the morning, a fresh start in the Evening Land that is the United States. European man is fallen; Huck and Walt, each free of Original Sin, light out for the territory and stop somewhere up ahead of us, perhaps still waiting to see if we can catch up to them. We never will, but that only augments their value. They represent freedom (and loneliness), which according to Emerson is a kind of wildness. And they are undying; Huck in particular need never dwindle into the compromises of old age.
Walt Whitman (the poet, not so much the character) hymned the ultimate unity of night, death, the mother, and the sea. Huck is motherless, and rightly fears any return visits of his dreadful father. Twain hymns for him instead a unity of night, freedom, and the river, all as emblems of vitality. What we care for most in Huck is his comic decency and his vision of reality, in which fear yields to the pragmatic courage of always going on. Hemingway’s protagonists, cultivating their style of grace under pressure, seem to me only parodies of Huck Finn, whose inwardness transcends any question of style.

Mark Twain, like most great comic writers, is never far away from representing a fundamental savagery in human nature and human society. Huck, a grand survivor, is the representation of the opposite of savagery. Cruelty and hatred form no part of his vision. His self-reliance and self-esteem are Twain’s closest approach to transcendence. No other figure in our novelistic tradition is as likable or as influential as Huckleberry Finn.
Émile Zola
(1840–1902)

*Thérèse Raquin*

Time hallows Zola's greatness, as novelist and as person, though increasingly we see that he transcended his naturalistic aesthetic. Frederick Brown, his crucial scholar-critic, surmises that the novelist's death at sixty-two, by asphyxiation, may have been murder, a final revenge by the proto-Fascist anti-Dreyfusards against the leader of those who had exonered Dreyfus.

Zola, far more even than Balzac, needs to be read in bulk: no single novel carries his full greatness, not even the sequence of *L'Assommoir* (1877), *Nana* (1880), *Pot-Bouille* (1882), *Germinal* (1885), *La Terre* (1887), *Le Rêve* (1888), *La Bête humaine* (1890), *Le Débâcle* (1892), and *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893). Those nine carry through his “Master Plan”, as set forth by Frederick Brown in a chapter of his *Zola: A Life* (1995), which I have reprinted in this volume.

Here I wish to consider only *Thérèse Raquin*, the starting-point of his art, published in 1867, and written when he was just twenty-six, strongly influenced by Balzac, and perhaps also by Stendhal and by Victor Hugo. Defending his novel in a preface to the second edition (1868), Zola fiercely absolves himself of all charges of immorality and pornography:

In *Thérèse Raquin* my aim has been to study temperaments and not characters. That is the whole point of the book. I have chosen people completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will, drawn into each action of their lives by the inexorable laws of their physical nature. Thérèse and Laurent are human animals, nothing more. I have endeavoured to follow these animals through
the devious working of their passions, the compulsion of their instincts, and the mental unbalance resulting from a nervous crisis. The sexual adventures of my hero and heroine are the satisfaction of a need, the murder they commit a consequence of their adultery, a consequence they accept just as wolves accept the slaughter of sheep. And finally, what I have had to call their remorse really amounts to a simple organic disorder, a revolt of the nervous system when strained to breaking-point. There is a complete absence of soul, I freely admit, since that is how I meant it to be.

A disciple of Taine, Zola calls his enterprise “scientific”, or “sociological” in our current language. Hippolyte Taine himself, though he admired the novel, urged Zola to work on a more panoramic scale. It is true *Thérèse Raquin* is a closed-in nightmare; Brown usefully stresses that Zola’s own recurrent nightmare was to be buried alive, as in Poe’s dreadful fantasy.

The novel is the story of the half Algerian Thérèse, her sickly husband whom she does not love, and of Laurent, her lover, who murders the weak husband, Camille, by pushing him into the Seine. The result is the victim’s triumph over his murderers, who eventually share the same glass of poison.

The novel remains grimly memorable, and far more of a phantasmagoric than a realistic work. Though it failed to gain Zola a public, it is a presage of a greatness to come. Like so much of Nineteenth Century “realism” and “naturalism”, Zola seems now a visionary fantasist, akin to the sublime Balzac.
The Mayor of Casterbridge

I

For Arthur Schopenhauer, the Will to Live was the true thing-in-itself, not an interpretation but a rapacious, active, universal, and ultimately indifferent drive or desire. Schopenhauer’s great work, The World as Will and Representation, had the same relation to and influence upon many of the principal nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists that Freud’s writings have in regard to many of this century’s later, crucial masters of prose fiction. Zola, Maupassant, Turgenev, and Tolstoy join Thomas Hardy as Schopenhauer’s nineteenth-century heirs, in a tradition that goes on through Proust, Conrad, and Thomas Mann to culminate in aspects of Borges and of Beckett, the most eminent living writer of narrative. Since Schopenhauer (despite Freud’s denials) was one of Freud’s prime predecessors, one could argue that aspects of Freud’s influence upon writers simply carry on from Schopenhauer’s previous effect. Manifestly, the relation of Schopenhauer to Hardy is different in both kind and degree from the larger sense in which Schopenhauer was Freud’s forerunner or Wittgenstein’s. A poet-novelist like Hardy turns to a rhetorical speculator like Schopenhauer only because he finds something in his own temperament and sensibility confirmed and strengthened, and not at all as Lucretius turned to Epicurus, or as Whitman was inspired by Emerson.

The true precursor for Hardy was Shelley, whose visionary skepticism permeates the novels as well as the poems and The Dynasts. There is some technical debt to George Eliot in the early novels, but Hardy in his depths was little more moved by her than by Wilkie Collins, from whom he also
learned elements of craft. Shelley’s tragic sense of eros is pervasive throughout Hardy, and ultimately determines Hardy’s understanding of his strongest heroines: Bathsheba Everdene, Eustacia Vye, Marty South, Tess Durbeyfield, Sue Bridehead. Between desire and fulfillment in Shelley falls the shadow of the selfhood, a shadow that makes love and what might be called the means of love quite irreconcilable. What M.D. Zabel named as “the aesthetic of incongruity” in Hardy and ascribed to temperamental causes is in a profound way the result of attempting to transmute the procedures of *The Revolt of Islam* and *Epipsychidion* into the supposedly naturalistic novel.

J. Hillis Miller, when he worked more in the mode of a critic of consciousness like Georges Poulet than in the deconstruction of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, saw the fate of love in Hardy as being darkened always by a shadow cast by the lover’s consciousness itself. Hugh Kenner, with a distaste for Hardy akin to (and perhaps derived from) T.S. Eliot’s in *After Strange Gods*, suggested that Miller had created a kind of Proustian Hardy, who turns out to be a case rather than an artist. Hardy was certainly not an artist comparable to Henry James (who dismissed him as a mere imitator of George Eliot) or James Joyce, but the High Modernist shibboleths for testing the novel have now waned considerably, except for a few surviving high priests of Modernism like Kenner. A better guide to Hardy’s permanent strength as a novelist was his heir D.H. Lawrence, whose *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* marvelously brought Hardy’s legacy to an apotheosis. Lawrence, praising Hardy with a rebel son’s ambivalence, associated him with Tolstoy as a tragic writer:

And this is the quality Hardy shares with the great writers, Shakespeare or Sophocles or Tolstoi, this setting behind the small action of his protagonists the terrific action of unfathomed nature; setting a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by the human consciousness within the vast, incomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself, surpassing human consciousness. The difference is, that whereas in Shakespeare or Sophocles the greater, incomprehended morality, or fate, is actively transgressed and gives active punishment, in Hardy and Tolstoi the lesser, human morality, the mechanical system is actively transgressed, and holds, and punishes the protagonist, whilst the greater morality is only passively, negatively transgressed, it is represented merely as being present in background, in scenery, not taking any active part, having no direct connexion with the protagonist. Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth set themselves
up against, or find themselves set up against, the unfathomed moral forces of nature, and out of this unfathomed force comes their death. Whereas Anna Karenina, Eustacia, Tess, Sue, and Jude find themselves up against the established system of human government and morality, they cannot detach themselves, and are brought down. Their real tragedy is that they are unfaithful to the greater unwritten morality, which would have bidden Anna Karenina be patient and wait until she, by virtue of greater right, could take what she needed from society; would have bidden Vronsky detach himself from the system, become an individual, creating a new colony of morality with Anna; would have bidden Eustacia fight Clym for his own soul, and Tess take and claim her Angel, since she had the greater light; would have bidden Jude and Sue endure for very honour's sake, since one must bide by the best that one has known, and not succumb to the lesser good.  

(“Study of Thomas Hardy”)  

This seems to me powerful and just, because it catches what is most surprising and enduring in Hardy's novels—the sublime stature and aesthetic dignity of his crucial protagonists—while exposing also his great limitation, his denial of freedom to his best personages. Lawrence's prescription for what would have saved Eustacia and Clym, Tess and Angel, Sue and Jude, is perhaps not as persuasive. He speaks of them as though they were Gudrun and Gerald, and thus have failed to be Ursula and Birkin. It is Hardy's genius that they are what they had to be: as imperfect as their creator and his vision, as impure as his language and his plotting, and finally painful and memorable to us:  

Note that, in this bitterness, delight,  
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,  
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.  

II  

Of Hardy's major novels, The Mayor of Casterbridge is the least flawed and clearly the closest to tragic convention in Western literary tradition. If one hesitates to prefer it to The Return of the Native, Tess, or Jude, that may be because it is the least original and eccentric work of the four. Henchard is certainly the best articulated and most consistent of Hardy's male personages, but Lucetta is no Eustacia, and the amiable Elizabeth Jane does not compel much of the reader's interest. The book's glory, Henchard, is
so massive a self-punisher that he can be said to leap over the psychic cosmos of Schopenhauer directly into that of Freud’s great essay on the economics of masochism, with its grim new category of “moral masochism.” In a surprising way, Hardy reverses, through Henchard, one of the principal topoi of Western tragedy, as set forth acutely by Northrop Frye:

A strong element of demonic ritual in public punishments and similar mob amusements is exploited by tragic and ironic myth. Breaking on the wheel becomes Lear’s wheel of fire; bear-baiting is an image for Gloucester and Macbeth, and for the crucified Prometheus the humiliation of exposure, the horror of being watched, is a greater misery than the pain. Derkou theama (behold the spectacle; get your staring over with) is his bitterest cry. The inability of Milton’s blind Samson to stare back is his greatest torment, and one which forces him to scream at Delilah, in one of the most terrible passages of all tragic drama, that he will tear her to pieces if she touches him.

For Henchard “the humiliation of exposure” becomes a terrible passion, until at last he makes an exhibition of himself during a royal visit. Perhaps he can revert to what Frye calls “the horror of being watched” only when he knows that the gesture involved will be his last. Hence his Will, which may be the most powerful prose passage that Hardy ever wrote:

They stood in silence while he ran into the cottage; returning in a moment with a crumpled scrap of paper. On it there was pencilled as follows:—

“MICHAEL HENCHARD’S WILL

“That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.
“& that I be not bury’d in consecrated ground.
“& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.
“& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.
“& that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral.
“& that no flours be planted on my grave.
“& that no man remember me.
“To this I put my name.

“Michael Henchard.”

That dark testament is the essence of Henchard. It is notorious that
“tragedy” becomes a very problematical form in the European Enlightenment and afterwards. Romanticism, which has been our continuous Modernism from the mid-1740s to the present moment, did not return the tragic hero to us, though from Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe until now we have received many resurgences of the tragic heroine. Hardy and Ibsen can be judged to have come closest to reviving the tragic hero, in contradistinction to the hero-villain who, throughout Romantic tradition, limns his night-piece and judges it to have been his best. Henchard, despite his blind strength and his terrible errors, is no villain, and as readers we suffer with him, unrelievedly, because our sympathy for him is unimpeded.

Unfortunately, the suffering becomes altogether too unrelieved, as it does again with Jude Fawley. Rereading The Mayor of Casterbridge is less painful than rereading Jude the Obscure, since at least we do not have to contemplate little Father Time hanging the other urchins and himself, but it is still very painful indeed. Whether or not tragedy should possess some catharsis, we resent the imposition of too much pathos upon us, and we need some gesture of purification if only to keep us away from our own defensive ironies. Henchard, alas, accomplishes nothing, for himself or for others. Ahab, a great hero-villain, goes down fighting his implacable fate, the whiteness of the whale, but Henchard is a self-destroyer to no purpose. And yet we are vastly moved by him and know that we should be. Why?

The novel’s full title is The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character. As Robert Louis Stevenson said in a note to Hardy, “Henchard is a great fellow,” which implies that he is a great personality rather than a man of character. This is, in fact, how Hardy represents Henchard, and the critic R.H. Hutton was right to be puzzled by Hardy’s title, in a review published in The Spectator on June 5, 1886:

Mr. Hardy has not given us any more powerful study than that of Michael Henchard. Why he should especially term his hero in his title-page a “man of character,” we do not clearly understand. Properly speaking, character is the stamp graven on a man, and character therefore, like anything which can be graven, and which, when graven, remains, is a word much more applicable to that which has fixity and permanence, than to that which is fitful and changeful, and which impresses a totally different image of itself on the wax of plastic circumstance at one time, from that which it impresses on a similarly plastic surface at another time. To keep strictly to the associations from which the word “character” is derived, a man of character ought to suggest a man of steady and
unvarying character, a man who conveys very much the same con-
ception of his own qualities under one set of circumstances, which 
he conveys under another. This is true of many men, and they 
might be called men of character par excellence. But the essence of 
Michael Henchard is that he is a man of large nature and depth of 
passion, who is yet subject to the most fitful influences, who can 
do in one mood acts of which he will never cease to repent in 
almost all his other moods, whose temper of heart changes many 
times even during the execution of the same purpose, though the 
same ardour, the same pride, the same wrathful magnanimity, the 
same inability to carry out in cool blood the angry resolve of the 
mood of revenge or scorn, the same hasty unreasonableness, and 
the same disposition to swing back to an equally hasty reasonableness, distinguish him throughout. In one very good sense, the 
great deficiency of Michael Henchard might be said to be in 
“character.” It might well be said that with a little more character, 
with a little more fixity of mind, with a little more power of recov-
ering himself when he was losing his balance, his would have been 
a nature of gigantic mould; whereas, as Mr. Hardy’s novel is meant 
to show, it was a nature which ran mostly to waste. But, of course, 
in the larger and wider sense of the word “character,” that sense 
which has less reference to the permanent definition of the stamp, 
and more reference to the confidence with which the varying 
moods may be anticipated, it is not inadmissible to call Michael 
Henchard a “man of character.” Still, the words on the title-page 
rather mislead. One looks for the picture of a man of much more 
constancy of purpose, and much less tragic mobility of mood, than 
Michael Henchard. None the less, the picture is a very vivid one, 
and almost magnificent in its fullness of expression. The largeness 
of his nature, the unreasonable generosity and suddenness of his 
friendships, the depth of his self-humiliation for what was evil in 
him, the eagerness of his craving for sympathy, the vehemence of 
his impulses both for good and evil, the curious dash of stoicism 
in a nature so eager for sympathy, and of fortitude in one so 
moody and restless,—all these are lineaments which, mingled 
with each other as Mr. Hardy has mingled them, produce a curiously 
strong impression of reality, as well as of homely grandeur.

One can summarize Hutton’s point by saying that Henchard is 
stronger in pathos than in ethos, and yet ethos is the daimon, character is 
fate, and Hardy specifically sets out to show that Henchard’s character is
his fate. The strength of Hardy's irony is that it is also life's irony, and will become Sigmund Freud's irony: Henchard's destiny demonstrates that there are no accidents, meaning that nothing happens to one that is not already oneself. Henchard stares out at the night as though he were staring at an adversary, but there is nothing out there. There is only the self turned against the self, only the drive, beyond the pleasure principle, to death.

The pre-Socratic aphorism that character is fate seems to have been picked up by Hardy from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, where it is attributed to Novalis. But Hardy need not have gleaned it from anywhere in particular. Everyone in Hardy's novels is overdetermined by his or her past, because for Hardy, as for Freud, everything that is dreadful has already happened and there never can be anything absolutely new. Such a speculation belies the very word “novel,” and certainly was no aid to Hardy's inventiveness. Nothing that happens to Henchard surprises us. His fate is redeemed from dreariness only by its aesthetic dignity, which returns us to the problematical question of Hardy's relation to tragedy as a literary form.

Henchard is burdened neither with wisdom nor with knowledge; he is a man of will and of action, with little capacity for reflection, but with a spirit perpetually open and generous towards others. J. Hillis Miller sees him as being governed erotically by mediated desire, but since Miller sees this as the iron law in Hardy's erotic universe, it loses any particular force as an observation upon Henchard. I would prefer to say that Henchard, more even than most men and like all women in Hardy, is hungry for love, desperate for some company in the void of existence. D.H. Lawrence read the tragedy of Hardy’s figures not as the consequence of mediated desire, but as the fate of any desire that will not be bounded by convention and community.

This is the tragedy of Hardy, always the same: the tragedy of those who, more or less pioneers, have died in the wilderness, whither they had escaped for free action, after having left the walled security, and the comparative imprisonment, of the established convention. This is the theme of novel after novel: remain quite within the convention, and you are good, safe, and happy in the long run, though you never have the vivid pang of sympathy on your side: or, on the other hand, be passionate, individual, wilful, you will find the security of the convention a walled prison, you will escape, and you will die, either of your own lack of strength to bear the isolation and the exposure, or by direct revenge from the
community, or from both. This is the tragedy, and only this: it is nothing more metaphysical than the division of a man against himself in such a way: first, that he is a member of the community, and must, upon his honour, in no way move to disintegrate the community, either in its moral or its practical form; second, that the convention of the community is a prison to his natural, individual desire, a desire that compels him, whether he feel justified or not, to break the bounds of the community, lands him outside the pale, there to stand alone, and say: “I was right, my desire was real and inevitable; if I was to be myself I must fulfil it, convention or no convention,” or else, there to stand alone, doubting, and saying: “Was I right, was I wrong? If I was wrong, oh, let me die!”—in which case he courts death.

The growth and the development of this tragedy, the deeper and deeper realisation of this division and this problem, the coming towards some conclusion, is the one theme of the Wessex novels.

(“Study of Thomas Hardy”)

This is general enough to be just, but not quite specific enough for the self-destructive Henchard. Also not sufficiently specific is the sympathetic judgment of Irving Howe, who speaks of “Henchard’s personal struggle—the struggle of a splendid animal trying to escape a trap and thereby entangling itself all the more.” I find more precise the dark musings of Sigmund Freud, Hardy’s contemporary, who might be thinking of Michael Henchard when he meditates upon “The Economic Problem in Masochism”:

The third form of masochism, the moral type, is chiefly remarkable for having loosened its connection with what we recognize to be sexuality. To all other masochistic sufferings there still clings the condition that it should be administered by the loved person; it is endured at his command; in the moral type of masochism this limitation has been dropped. It is the suffering itself that matters; whether the sentence is cast by a loved or by an indifferent person is of no importance; it may even be caused by impersonal forces or circumstances, but the true masochist always holds out his cheek wherever he sees a chance of receiving a blow.

The origins of “moral masochism” are in an unconscious sense of guilt, a need for punishment that transcends actual culpability. Even
Henchard’s original and grotesque “crime,” his drunken exploit in wife-selling, does not so much engender in him remorse at the consciousness of wrongdoing, but rather helps engulf him in the “guilt” of the moral masochist. That means Henchard knows his guilt not as affect or emotion but as a negation, as the nullification of his desires and his ambitions. In a more than Freudian sense, Henchard’s primal ambivalence is directed against himself, against the authority principle in his own self.

If *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a less original book than *Tess* or *Jude*, it is also a more persuasive and universal vision than Hardy achieved elsewhere. Miguel de Unamuno, defining the tragic sense of life, remarked that: “The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which men go to weep in common. A *miserere* sung in common by a multitude tormented by destiny has as much value as a philosophy.” That is not tragedy as Aristotle defined it, but it is tragedy as Thomas Hardy wrote it.

*The Return of the Native*

I first read *The Return of the Native* when I was about fifteen, forty years ago, and had reread it in whole or in part several times through the years before rereading it now. What I had remembered most vividly then I am likely to remember again: Eustacia, Venn the red man, the Heath. I had almost forgotten Clym, and his mother, and Thomasin, and Wildeve, and probably will forget them again. Clym, in particular, is a weak failure in characterization, and nearly sinks the novel; indeed ought to capsize any novel whatsoever. Yet *The Return of the Native* survives him, even though its chief glory, the sexually enchanting Eustacia Vye, does not. Her suicide is so much the waste of a marvelous woman (or representation of a woman, if you insist upon being a formalist) that the reader finds Clym even more intolerable than he is, and is likely not to forgive Hardy, except that Hardy clearly suffers the loss quite as much as any reader does.

Eustacia underwent a singular transformation during the novel’s composition, from a daemonic sort of female Byron, or Byronic witch-like creature, to the grandly beautiful, discontented, and human—all too human but hardly blameworthy—heroine, who may be the most desirable woman in all of nineteenth-century British fiction. “A powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhampered by any ideas”—it would be a good description of Eustacia, but is actually Hardy himself through the eyes of T.S. Eliot in *After Strange Gods*, where Hardy is chastised for not believing in Original Sin and deplored also because “at times his style touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stage of being good.”
Here is Eustacia in the early “Queen of Night” chapter:

She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without rud-
diness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see
her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness
enough to form its shadow: it closed over her forehead like night-
fall extinguishing the western glow.

Her nerves extended into those tresses, and her temper could
always be softened by stroking them down. When her hair was
brushed she would instantly sink into stillness and look like the
Sphinx. If, in passing under one of the Egdon banks, any of its
thick skeins were caught, as they sometimes were, by a prickly tuft
of the large *Ulex Europaeus*—which will act as a sort of hair-
brush—she would go back a few steps, and pass against it a second
time.

She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries, and their light,
as it came and went, and came again, was partially hampered by
their oppressive lids and lashes; and of these the under lid was
much fuller than it usually is with English women. This enabled
her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so: she might have
been believed capable of sleeping without closing them up.
Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences,
you could fancy the colour of Eustacia’s soul to be flame-like. The
sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impres-
sion.

Hardy’s Eustacia may owe something to Walter Pater’s *The
Renaissance*, published five years before *The Return of the Native*, since in
some ways she makes a third with Pater’s evocations of the Botticelli Venus
and Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, visions of antithetical female sexuality.
Eustacia’s flame-like quality precisely recalls Pater’s ecstasy of passion in
the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, and the epigraph to *The Return of the
Native* could well have been:

This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concur-
rence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting soon-
er or later on their ways.

This at least of flame-like Eustacia’s life has, that the concurrence of
forces parts sooner rather than later. But then this most beautiful of
Hardy’s women is also the most doom-eager, the color of her soul being
flame-like. The Heath brings her only Wildeve and Clym, but Paris
doubtless would have brought her scarce better, since as Queen of Night
she attracts the constancy and the kindness of sorrow.

If Clym and Wildeve are bad actors, and they are, what about Egdon
Heath? On this, critics are perpetually divided, some finding the landscape
sublime, while others protest that its representation is bathetic. I myself am
divided, since clearly it is both, and sometimes simultaneously so! Though
Eustacia hates it fiercely, it is nearly as Shelleyan as she is, and rather less
natural than presumably it ought to be. That it is more overwritten than
overgrown is palpable:

To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon,
between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach
nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heath-
land which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to
know that everything around and underneath had been from pre-
historic times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the
mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.
The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the
sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old?
Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year,
in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the
rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.
Those surfaces were neither so steep as to be destructible by
weather, nor so flat as to be the victims of floods and deposits.
With the exception of an aged highway, and a still more aged bar-
row presently to be referred to—themselves almost crystallized to
natural products by long continuance—even the trifling irregular-
ities were not caused by pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained
as the very finger-touches of the last geological change.

Even Melville cannot always handle this heightened mode; Hardy
rarely can, although he attempts it often. And yet we do remember Egdon
Heath, years after reading the novel, possibly because something about it
wounds us even as it wounds Eustacia. We remember also Diggory Venn,
not as the prosperous burgher he becomes, but as we first encounter him,
permeated by the red ochre of his picturesque trade:

The decayed officer, by degrees, came up alongside his fellow-
wayfarer, and wished him good evening. The reddleman turned
his head and replied in sad and occupied tones. He was young, and
his face, if not exactly handsome, approached so near to handsome that nobody would have contradicted an assertion that it really was so in its natural colour. His eye, which glared so strangely through his stain, was in itself attractive—keen as that of a bird of prey, and blue as autumn mist. He had neither whisker nor moustache, which allowed the soft curves of the lower part of his face to be apparent. His lips were thin, and though, as it seemed, compressed by thought, there was a pleasant twitch at their corners now and then. He was clothed throughout in a tight-fitting suit of corduroy, excellent in quality, not much worn, and well-chosen for its purpose; but deprived of its original colour by his trade. It showed to advantage the good shape of his figure. A certain well-to-do air about the man suggested that he was not poor for his degree. The natural query of an observer would have been, Why should such a promising being as this have hidden his prepossessing exterior by adopting that singular occupation?

Hardy had intended Venn to disappear mysteriously forever from Egdon Heath, instead of marrying Thomasin, but yielded to the anxiety of giving the contemporary reader something cheerful and normative at the end of his austere and dark novel. He ought to have kept to his intent, but perhaps it does not matter. The Heath endures, the red man either vanishes or is transmogrified into a husband and a burgher. Though we see Clym rather uselessly preaching to all comers as the book closes, our spirits are elsewhere, with the wild image of longing that no longer haunts the Heath, Hardy’s lost Queen of Night.

_Tess of the D’Urbervilles_

Of all the novels of Hardy, _Tess of the D’Urbervilles_ now appeals to the widest audience. The book’s popularity with the common reader has displaced the earlier ascendancy of _The Return of the Native_. It can even be asserted that Hardy’s novel has proved to be prophetic of a sensibility by no means fully emergent in 1891. Nearly a century later, the book sometimes seems to have moments of vision that are contemporary with us. These tend to come from Hardy’s intimate sympathy with his heroine, a sympathy that verges upon paternal love. It is curious that Hardy is more involved with Tess than with Jude Fawley in _Jude the Obscure_, even though Jude is closer to being Hardy’s surrogate than any other male figure in the novels.

J. Hillis Miller, in the most advanced critical study yet attempted of less, reads it as “a story about repetition,” but by “repetition” Miller
appears to mean a linked chain of interpretations. A compulsion to inter-
pret may be the reader’s share, and may be Hardy’s own stance towards his
own novel (and perhaps even extends to Angel Clare’s role in the book),
but seems to me fairly irrelevant to Tess herself. Since the novel is a story
about Tess, I cannot regard it as being “about” repetition, or even one that
concerns a difference in repetitions. Hardy’s more profound ironies are
neither classical nor Romantic, but Biblical, as Miller himself discerns.
Classical irony turns upon contrasts between what is said and what is
meant, while Romantic irony inhabits the gap between expectation and
fulfillment. But Biblical irony appears whenever giant incongruities clash,
which happens when Yahweh, who is incommensurate, is closely juxta-
posed to men and women and their vain imaginings. When Yahweh
devours roast calf under the terebinths at Mamre, or when Jacob wrestles
with a nameless one among the Elohim at Penuel, then we are confronted
by an irony neither classical nor Romantic.

Hardy, like his master Shelley, is an unbeliever who remains within the
literary context of the Bible, and again like Shelley he derives his mode of
prophetic irony from the Bible. A striking instance (noted by Hillis Miller)
comes in chapter 11:

In the meantime Alec d’Urberville had pushed on up the slope to
clear his genuine doubt as to the quarter of The Chase they were
in. He had, in fact, ridden quite at random for over an hour, tak-
ing any turning that came to hand in order to prolong compan-
ionship with her, and giving far more attention to Tess’s moonlit
person than to any wayside object. A little rest for the jaded ani-
mal being desirable, he did not hasten his search for landmarks. A
clamber over the hill into the adjoining vale brought him to the
fence of a highway whose contours he recognized, which settled
the question of their whereabouts. D’Urberville thereupon turned
back; but by this time the moon had quite gone down, and partly
on account of the fog The Chase was wrapped in thick darkness,
although morning was not far off. He was obliged to advance with
outstretched hands to avoid contact with the boughs, and discov-
ered that to hit the exact spot from which he had started was at
first entirely beyond him. Roaming up and down, round and
round, he at length heard a slight movement of the horse close at
hand; and the sleeve of his overcoat unexpectedly caught his foot.

“Tess!” said d’Urberville.

There was no answer. The obscurity was now so great that he
could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet,
which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness alike. D'Urberville stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears.

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked.

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter.

As Tess's own people down in those retreats are never tired of saying among each other in their fatalistic way: “It was to be.” There lay the pity of it. An immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine’s personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her mother’s door to try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm.

The ironical Tishbite is the savage Elijah the prophet, who mocks the priests of Baal, urging them: “Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.” Elijah's irony depends upon the incommensurateness of Yahweh and the human—all too human—Baal. Hardy’s irony cannot be what Hillis Miller deconstructively wishes it to be when he rather remarkably suggests that Tess herself is “like the prophets of Baal,” nor
does it seem right to call Yahweh’s declaration that He is a jealous (or zealous) God “the divine lust for vengeance,” as Miller does. Yahweh, after all, has just given the Second Commandment against making graven images or idols, such as the Baal whom Elijah mocks. Hardy associates Alec’s “violation” of Tess with a destruction of pastoral innocence, which he scarcely sees as Baal-worship or idolatry. His emphasis is precisely that no mode of religion, revealed or natural, could defend Tess from an overdetermined system in which the only thing-in-itself is the rapacious Will to Live, a Will that itself is, as it were, the curse of Yahweh upon the hungry generations.

Repetition in Tess is repetition as Schopenhauer saw it, which is little different from how Hardy and Freud subsequently saw it. What is repeated, compulsively, is a unitary desire that is rapacious, indifferent, and universal. The pleasures of repetition in Hardy’s Tess are not interpretive and perspectival, and so engendered by difference, but are actually masochistic, in the erotogenic sense, and so ensue from the necessity of similarity. Hardy’s pragmatic version of the aesthetic vision in this novel is essentially sado-masochistic, and the sufferings of poor Tess give an equivocal pleasure of repetition to the reader. The book’s extraordinary popularity partly results from its exquisitely subtle and deeply sympathetic unfolding of the torments of Tess, a pure woman because a pure nature, and doomed to suffer merely because she is so much a natural woman. The poet Lionel Johnson, whose early book (1895) on Hardy still seems to me unsurpassed, brought to the reading of Tess a spirit that was antithetically both Shelleyan and Roman Catholic:

as a girl of generous thought and sentiment, rich in beauty, rich in the natural joys of life, she is brought into collision with the harshness of life.... The world was very strong; her conscience was blinded and bewildered; she did some things nobly, and some despairingly: but there is nothing, not even in studies of criminal anthropology or of morbid pathology, to suggest that she was wholly an irresponsible victim of her own temperament, and of adverse circumstances.... She went through fire and water, and made no true use of them: she is pitiable, but not admirable.

Johnson is very clear-sighted, but perhaps too much the Catholic moralist. To the common reader, Tess is both pitiable and admirable, as Hardy wanted her to be. Is it admirable, though, that, by identifying with her, the reader takes a masochistic pleasure in her suffering? Aesthetically, I would reply yes, but the question remains a disturbing one. When the
black flag goes slowly up the staff and we know that the beautiful Tess has been executed, do we reside in Hardy's final ironies, or do we experience a pleasure of repetition that leaves us void of interpretive zeal, yet replete with the gratification of a drive beyond the pleasure principle?

*Jude the Obscure*

Thomas Hardy lived to be eighty-seven and a half years old, and his long life (1840–1928) comprised two separate literary careers, as a late Victorian novelist (1871–1897), and as a poet who defies temporal placement (1898–1928). The critical reaction to his final novels, *The Well-Beloved* and *Jude the Obscure*, ostensibly motivated Hardy’s abandonment of prose fiction, but he always had thought of himself as a poet, and by 1897 was financially secure enough to center himself upon his poetry. He is—with Housman, Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Wilfred Owen, and Geoffrey Hill—one of the half-dozen or so major poets of the British Isles in the century just past. But this little volume concerns itself with several of his best novels, where again he can be judged to be one of the crucial novelists of the final three decades of the nineteenth century, the bridge connecting George Eliot and the Brontës to Lawrence’s novels in the earlier twentieth-century.

T.S. Eliot, who continues to enjoy a high critical reputation despite being almost always wrong, attacked Hardy in a dreadful polemic, *After Strange Gods*, where the novelist-poet is stigmatized as not believing in Original Sin, which turns out to be an aesthetic criterion, since Hardy’s style “touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stage of being good.” This inaccurate wisecrack is prompted by Eliot’s severe summary of the post-Protestant Hardy: “A powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhampered by any ideas.” Eliot’s institutional attachment was to the Anglo-Catholic Church: his “objective beliefs” were Christianity, royalism, and what he called “classicism” and his “ideas” excluded Freud and Marx.

Hardy, as High Romantic as Shelley and the Brontës, or as Lawrence and Yeats, cannot be judged by Neo-Christian ideology. The best books upon him remain, in my judgment, Lionel Johnson’s early *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, and D.H. Lawrence’s outrageous *A Study of Thomas Hardy*—which is mostly about Hardy’s impact on Lawrence. Michael Millgate’s remains the best biography, but since Hardy burned letters and concealed relationships, we still do not know enough to fully integrate the work and the life. Both of Hardy’s marriages evidently did not fulfill him,
and his lifelong attraction to women much younger than himself has an Ibsenite and Yeatsian aura to it. There is a dark intensity, in the novels and poems alike, that has marked sado-masochistic overtones.

Hardy’s personal greatness as a novelist is enhanced (and enabled) by his freedom from T.S. Eliot’s attachments and submissions. The agnostic Hardy was Schopenhauerian before he read Schopenhauer, and found a name for the Will to Live that destroys the protagonists of his novels. Hardy’s women and men are driven by the tragic forces that are incarnated in Sophocles’s Electra, Shakespeare’s Lear and Macbeth, and Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. Henry James, who regarded Hardy as a poor imitator of George Eliot, was as mistaken as T.S. Eliot was after him. D.H. Lawrence, in his Study of Thomas Hardy, was much more accurate:

And this is the quality Hardy shares with the great writers, Shakespeare or Sophocles or Tolstoi, this setting behind the small action of his protagonists the terrific action of unfathomed nature; setting a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by the human consciousness. The difference is, that whereas in Shakespeare or Sophocles the greater, uncomprehended morality, or fate, is actively transgressed, and holds, and punishes the protagonist, whilst the greater morality is only passively, negatively transgressed, it is represented merely as being present in background, in scenery, not taking any active part, having no direct connexion with the protagonist. Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth set themselves up against, or find themselves set up against, the unfathomed moral forces of nature, and out of this unfathomed force comes their death. Whereas Anna Karenina, Eustacia, Tess, Sue, and Jude find themselves up against the established system of human government and morality, they cannot detach themselves, and are brought down. Their real tragedy is that they are unfaithful to the greater unwritten morality, which would have bidden Anna Karenina be patient and wait until she, by virtue of greater right, could take what she needed from society; would have bidden Vronsky detach himself from the system, become an individual, creating a new colony of morality with Anna; would have bidden Eustacia fight Clym for his own soul, and Tess take and claim her Angel, since she had the greater light; would have bidden Jude and Sue endure for very honour’s sake, since one must bide by the best that one has known, and not succumb to the lesser good.
What matters most, in Hardy’s women and men, is their tragic dignity, though their author denies them the ultimate freedom of choice. Hardy’s chief limitation, as a novelist, is his sense that the will is over-determined, as it is in Schopenhauer. What saves Hardy’s novels is that pragmatically he cannot maintain the detachment he seeks in regard to his central personages. I recall, at fifteen, first reading *The Return of the Native*, and falling-in-love with a second Hardy heroine, thus becoming unfaithful to my love, Marty South in *The Woodlanders*. Hardy himself was ambivalent towards Eustacia Vye, and yet he invokes her as a goddess, Queen of Night, in a rhapsody not less than astonishing:

Eustacia Vye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have done well with a little preparation. She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman. Had it been possible for the earth and mankind to be entirely in her grasp for a while, had she handled the distaff, the spindle, and the shears at her own free will, few in the world would have noticed the change of government. There would have been the same inequality of lot, the same heaping up of favours here, of contumely there, the same generosity before justice, the same perpetual dilemmas, the same capacious alternation of caresses and blows that we endure now.

She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without ruddiness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow: it closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow.

Her nerves extended into those tresses, and her temper could always be softened by stroking them down. When her hair was brushed she would instantly sink into stillness and look like the Sphinx. If, in passing under one of the Egdon banks, any of its thick skeins were caught, as they sometimes were, by a prickly tuft of the large *Ulex Europaeus*—which will act as a sort of hairbrush—she would go back a few steps, and pass against it a second time.

She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries, and their light, as it came and went, and came again, was partially hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes; and of these the under lid was much fuller than it usually is with English women. This enabled her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so: she might have been believed capable of sleeping without closing them up. Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences, you could
fancy the colour of Eustacia’s soul to be flame-like. The sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impression.

_The Return of the Native_ was published in 1878, five years after Pater’s _Renaissance_, and Walter Pater’s visions of Botticelli’s Venus and of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa clearly influence Hardy’s description of his magnetic Eustacia, another fatal woman of the High Decadence, portrayed with a sado-masochistic flavoring. Hardy, perhaps involuntarily, alludes to a memorable sentence of the “Conclusion” to _The Renaissance_:

This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the confluence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.

A heroine with a flame-like soul is bound to destroy herself, and Hardy’s ambivalence seems to me purely defensive. Hardy rather liked the inscrutable Pater when they met, and their affinities—aside from temperament—were considerable. We do not ordinarily think of Hardy’s Wessex as an aesthetic realm, but what else is it? Pater’s conception of tragedy is close to Hardy’s: both indirectly descend from Hegel’s idea that the genre must feature a conflict between right and right. But Hegel was not an impressionist, and both Pater and Hardy tend to be, as is their common descendant Virginia Woolf.

Yeats, very much in Pater’s tradition, said that: “We begin to live when we conceive of life as tragedy.” Hardy would not have remarked that, but he believed it, and exemplifies it in his novels. _The Mayor of Casterbridge_, _Tess of the d’Urbervilles_, and _Jude the Obscure_ are novelistic tragedies, closer to Shakespeare than to George Eliot. _Tess_ in particular has something of the universal appeal of Shakespearean tragedy, though the sado-masochistic gratification of the audience/readership is again an equivocal element in Hardy’s aesthetic power. And yet who would have it otherwise? _Tess_ is the most beautiful of Hardy’s pastoral visions, and the tragic _Tess_ is the most disturbing of all his heroines, because the most desirable.
I

The intense critical admirers of Henry James go so far as to call him the major American writer, or even the most accomplished novelist in the English language. The first assertion neglects only Walt Whitman, while the second partly evades the marvelous sequence that moves from Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* through Jane Austen on to George Eliot, and the alternative tradition that goes from Fielding through Dickens to Joyce. James is certainly the crucial American novelist, and in his best works the true peer of Austen and George Eliot. His precursor, Hawthorne, is more than fulfilled in the splendors of *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, giant descendants of *The Marble Faun*, while the rival American novelists—Melville, Mark Twain, Dreiser, Faulkner—survive comparison with James only by being so totally unlike him. Unlikeness makes Faulkner—particularly in his great phase—a true if momentary rival, and perhaps if you are to find a non-Jamesian sense of sustained power in the American novel, you need to seek out our curious antithetical tradition that moves between *Moby-Dick* and its darker descendants: *As I Lay Dying*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Crying of Lot 49*. The normative consciousness of our prose fiction, first prophesied by *The Scarlet Letter*, was forged by Henry James, whose spirit lingers not only in palpable disciples like Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* and Willa Cather in her superb *A Lost Lady*, but more subtly (because merged with Joseph Conrad’s aura) in novelists as various as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Warren. It seems clear that the relation of James to American prose fiction is precisely analogous to Whitman’s relation to our poetry; each is, in his own sphere, what Emerson prophesied as the Central Man who would come and change all things forever, in a celebration of the American Newness.
The irony of James’s central position among our novelists is palpable, since, like the much smaller figure of T.S. Eliot later on, James abandoned his nation and eventually became a British subject, after having been born a citizen in Emerson’s America. But it is a useful commonplace of criticism that James remained the most American of novelists, not less peculiarly nationalistic in *The Ambassadors* than he had been in “Daisy Miller” and *The American*. James, a subtle if at times perverse literary critic, understood very well what we continue to learn and relearn; an American writer can be Emersonian or anti-Emersonian, but even a negative stance towards Emerson always leads back again to his formulation of the post-Christian American religion of Self-Reliance. Overt Emersonians like Thoreau, Whitman, and Frost are no more pervaded by the Sage of Concord than are anti-Emersonians like Hawthorne, Melville, and Eliot. Perhaps the most haunted are those writers who evade Emerson, yet never leave his dialectical ambiance, a group that includes Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and Wallace Stevens.

Emerson was for Henry James something of a family tradition, though that in itself hardly accounts for the plain failure of very nearly everything that the novelist wrote about the essayist. James invariably resorts to a tone of ironic indulgence on the subject of Emerson, which is hardly appropriate to the American prophet of Power, Fate, Illusion, and Wealth. I suggest that James unknowingly mixed Emerson up with the sage’s good friend Henry James Sr., whom we dismiss as a Swedenborgian, but who might better be characterized as an American Gnostic speculator, in Emerson’s mode, though closer in eminence to, say, Bronson Alcott than to the author of *The Conduct of Life*.

The sane and sacred Emerson was a master of evasions, particularly when disciples became too pressing, whether upon personal or spiritual matters. The senior Henry James is remembered now for having fathered Henry, William, and Alice, and also for his famous outburst against Emerson, whom he admired on the other side of idolatry: “O you man without a handle!” The junior Henry James, overtly celebrating Emerson, nevertheless remarked: “It is hardly too much, or too little, to say of Emerson’s writings in general that they were not composed at all.” “Composed” is the crucial word there, and makes me remember a beautiful moment in Stevens’s “The Poems of Our Climate”:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,  
So that one would want to escape, come back  
To what had been so long composed.
Emerson’s mind, never merely restless, indeed was never-resting, as was the mind of every member of the James family. The writings of Emerson, not composed at all, constantly come back to what had been so long composed, to what his admirer Nietzsche called the primordial poem of mankind, the fiction that we have knocked together and called our cosmos. James was far too subtle not to have known this. He chose not to know it, because he needed a provincial Emerson even as he needed a provincial Hawthorne, just as he needed a New England that never was: simple, gentle, and isolated, even a little childlike.

The days when T.S. Eliot could wonder why Henry James had not carved up R.W. Emerson seem safely past, but we ought to remember Eliot’s odd complaint about James as critic: “Even in handling men whom he could, one supposes, have carved joint from joint—Emerson or Norton—his touch is uncertain; there is a desire to be generous, a political motive, an admission (in dealing with American writers) that under the circumstances this was the best possible, or that it has fine qualities.” Aside from appearing to rank Emerson with Charles Eliot Norton (which is comparable to ranking Freud with Bernard Berenson), this unamiable judgment reduces Emerson, who was and is merely the mind of America, to the stature of a figure who might, at most, warrant the condescension of James (and of Eliot). The cultural polemic involved is obvious, and indeed obsessive, in Eliot, but though pleasanter in James is really no more acceptable:

Of the three periods into which his life divides itself, the first was (as in the case of most men) that of movement, experiment and selection—that of effort too and painful probation. Emerson had his message, but he was a good while looking for his form—the form which, as he himself would have said, he never completely found and of which it was rather characteristic of him that his later years (with their growing refusal to give him the word), wishing to attack him in his most vulnerable point, where his tenure was least complete, had in some degree the effect of despoiling him. It all sounds rather bare and stern, Mr. Cabot’s account of his youth and early manhood, and we get an impression of a terrible paucity of alternatives. If he would be neither a farmer nor a trader he could “teach school”; that was the main resource and a part of the general educative process of the young New Englander who proposed to devote himself to the things of the mind. There was an advantage in the nudity, however, which was that, in Emerson’s case at least, the things of the mind did get themselves admirably well
Novelists and Novels

considered. If it be his great distinction and his special sign that he had a more vivid conception of the moral life than any one else, it is probably not fanciful to say that he owed it in part to the limited way in which he saw our capacity for living illustrated. The plain, God-fearing, practical society which surrounded him was not fertile in variations: it had great intelligence and energy, but it moved altogether in the straightforward direction. On three occasions later—three journeys to Europe—he was introduced to a more complicated world; but his spirit, his moral taste, as it were, abode always within the undecorated walls of his youth. There he could dwell with that ripe unconsciousness of evil which is one of the most beautiful signs by which we know him. His early writings are full of quaint animadversion upon the vices of the place and time, but there is something charmingly vague, light and general in the arraignment. Almost the worst he can say is that these vices are negative and that his fellow-townsmen are not heroic. We feel that his first impressions were gathered in a community from which misery and extravagance, and either extreme, of any sort, were equally absent. What the life of New England fifty years ago offered to the observer was the common lot, in a kind of achromatic picture, without particular intensifications. It was from this table of the usual, the merely typical joys and sorrows that he proceeded to generalise—a fact that accounts in some degree for a certain inadequacy and thinness in his enumerations. But it helps to account also for his direct, intimate vision of the soul itself—not in its emotions, its contortions and perversions, but in its passive, exposed, yet healthy form. He knows the nature of man and the long tradition of its dangers; but we feel that whereas he can put his finger on the remedies, lying for the most part, as they do, in the deep recesses of virtue, of the spirit, he has only a kind of hearsay, uninformed acquaintance with the disorders. It would require some ingenuity, the reader may say too much, to trace closely this correspondence between his genius and the frugal, dutiful, happy but decidedly lean Boston of the past, where there was a great deal of will but very little fulcrum—like a ministry without an opposition.

The genius itself it seems to me impossible to contest—I mean the genius for seeing character as a real and supreme thing. Other writers have arrived at a more complete expression: Wordsworth and Goethe, for instance, give one a sense of having found their form, whereas with Emerson we never lose the sense that he is still
seeking it. But no one has had so steady and constant, and above all so natural, a vision of what we require and what we are capable of in the way of aspiration and independence. With Emerson it is ever the special capacity for moral experience—always that and only that. We have the impression, somehow, that life had never bribed him to look at anything but the soul; and indeed in the world in which he grew up and lived the bribes and lures, the beguilements and prizes, were few. He was in an admirable position for showing, what he constantly endeavoured to show, that the prize was within. Any one who in New England at that time could do that was sure of success, of listeners and sympathy: most of all, of course, when it was a question of doing it with such a divine persuasiveness. Moreover, the way in which Emerson did it added to the charm—by word of mouth, face to face, with a rare, irresistible voice and a beautiful mild, modest authority. If Mr. Arnold is struck with the limited degree in which he was a man of letters I suppose it is because he is more struck with his having been, as it were, a man of lectures. But the lecture surely was never more purged of its grossness—the quality in it that suggests a strong light and a big brush—than as it issued from Emerson’s lips; so far from being a vulgarisation, it was simply the esoteric made audible, and instead of treating the few as the many, after the usual fashion of gentlemen on platforms, he treated the many as the few. There was probably no other society at that time in which he would have got so many persons to understand that; for we think the better of his audience as we read him, and wonder where else people would have had so much moral attention to give. It is to be remembered however that during the winter of 1847–48, on the occasion of his second visit to England, he found many listeners in London and in provincial cities. Mr. Cabot’s volumes are full of evidence of the satisfactions he offered, the delights and revelations he may be said to have promised, to a race which had to seek its entertainment, its rewards and consolations, almost exclusively in the moral world. But his own writings are fuller still; we find an instance almost wherever we open them.

It is astonishing to me that James judged Emerson’s “great distinction” and “special sign” to be “that he had a more vivid conception of the moral life than any one else,” unless “the moral life” has an altogether Jamesian meaning. I would rather say that the great distinction and special sign of James’s fiction is that it represents a more vivid conception of the moral life
than even Jane Austen or George Eliot could convey to us. Emerson is not much more concerned with morals than he is with manners; his subjects are power, freedom, and fate. As for “that ripe unconsciousness of evil” that James found in Emerson, I have not been able to find it myself, after reading Emerson almost daily for the last twenty years, and I am reminded of Yeats’s late essay on Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Yeats declares that his skeptical and passionate precursor, great poet that he certainly was, necessarily lacked the Vision of Evil. The necessity in both strong misreadings, James’s and Yeats’s, was to clear more space for themselves.

Jealous as I am for Emerson, I can recognize that no critic has matched James in seeing and saying what Emerson’s strongest virtue is: “But no one has had so steady and constant, and above all so natural, a vision of what we require and what we are capable of in the way of aspiration and independence.” No one, that is, except Henry James, for that surely is the quest of Isabel Archer towards her own quite Emersonian vision of aspiration and independence. “The moral world” is James’s phrase and James’s emphasis. Emerson’s own emphasis, I suspect, was considerably more pragmatic than that of James. When James returned to America in 1904 on a visit, after twenty years of self-exile, he went back to Concord and recorded his impressions in *The American Scene*:

> It is odd, and it is also exquisite, that these witnessing ways should be the last ground on which we feel moved to ponderation of the “Concord school”—to use, I admit, a futile expression; or rather, I should doubtless say, it would be odd if there were not inevitably something absolute in the fact of Emerson’s all but lifelong connection with them. We may smile a little as we “drag in” Weimar, but I confess myself, for my part, much more satisfied than not by our happy equivalent, “in American money,” for Goethe and Schiller. The money is a potful in the second case as in the first, and if Goethe, in the one, represents the gold and Schiller the silver, I find (and quite putting aside any bimetallic prejudice) the same good relation in the other between Emerson and Thoreau. I open Emerson for the same benefit for which I open Goethe, the sense of moving in large intellectual space, and that of the gush, here and there, out of the rock, of the crystalline cupful, in wisdom and poetry, in Wahrheit and Dichtung; and whatever I open Thoreau for (I needn’t take space here for the good reasons) I open him oftener than I open Schiller. Which comes back to our feeling that the rarity of Emerson’s genius, which has made him
so, for the attentive peoples, the first, and the one really rare, American spirit in letters, couldn’t have spent his career in a charming woody, watery place, for so long socially and typically and, above all, interestingly homogeneous, without an effect as of the communication to it of something ineffaceable. It was during his long span his immediate concrete, sufficient world; it gave him his nearest vision of life, and he drew half his images, we recognize, from the revolution of its seasons and the play of its manners. I don’t speak of the other half, which he drew from elsewhere. It is admirably, to-day, as if we were still seeing these things in those images, which stir the air like birds, dim in the eventide, coming home to nest. If one had reached a “time of life” one had thereby at least heard him lecture; and not a russet leaf fell for me, while I was there, but fell with an Emersonian drop.

That is a beautiful study of the nostalgias and tells us, contra T.S. Eliot, what James’s relation to Emerson actually was. We know how much that is essential in William James was quarried out of Emerson, particularly from the essay “Experience,” which gave birth to Pragmatism. Henry James was not less indebted to Emerson than William James was. The Portrait of a Lady is hardly an Emersonian novel; perhaps The Scarlet Letter actually is closer to that. Yet Isabel Archer is Emerson’s daughter, just as Lambert Strether is Emerson’s heir. The Emersonian aura also lingers on even in the ghostly tales of Henry James.

*The Ambassadors*

James thought *The Ambassadors* was the best of all his novels. I myself prefer not only *The Portrait of A Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, but even *The Bostonians*, upon the simple test of rereading. All of the novelistic virtues that critics have found in *The Ambassadors* are certainly there, but they are rather too overtly there. The novel is a beautiful pattern and a model of artistic control, but is Strether of the company of Isabel Archer and Milly Theale? He is intended to be, in the best sense, James’s *Portrait of a Gentleman*. Every good reader admires him and finds him sympathetic, yet across the years he comes to seem less and less memorable. I suspect that is because he does not give us enough grief; his story is not painful to us, whereas Isabel’s is. Isabel, Emersonian and Paterian, nevertheless has in her the force of the Protestant will in its earlier intensity, almost the force of Dorothea Brooke, though not of their common ancestress, Clarissa Harlowe. But Lewis Lambert Strether is denied any field in which the will
might be exercised heroically, since James will not even let him fall in love, except perhaps with the rather too symbolic or idealized Madame de Vionnet.

Everything in the art of Henry James is sublimely deliberate, which means that the imbalance between the matter and the manner of *The Ambassadors* is James’s peculiar mode of taking those ultimate risks that alone allow him to make distinctions and achieve distinction. Strether’s mission is to rescue Chad from Madame de Vionnet, but is Chad worth rescuing? The best thing about Chad is that he becomes Horatio to Strether’s Hamlet, and so serves as the reader’s surrogate for appreciating Strether. However, Horatio floats about the court of Elsinore as a kind of privileged outsider, and his splendid destiny is to survive as the teller of Hamlet’s story. Chad will go back to Woollett and enthusiastically pioneer in the art of advertising so as to raise the Newsome domestic device to undreamed-of heights of use and profit. The irony of irony is all very well in high romance or in High Romanticism, but not even the comic sense of Henry James quite saves *The Ambassadors* from a certain readerly listlessness that follows Strether’s terminal “Then there we are!” to the endlessly receptive Maria Gostrey.

James is perfectly ruthless in his application of what has come to be the Formalist principle that subject matter in literary art is precisely what does not matter. The *Iliad* after all, from any ironic perspective, like that of Shakespeare’s more than mordant *Troilus and Cressida*, has as its matter the quarrels between brawny and vainglorious chieftains over the possession of the whore Helen, or of this or that despoiled captive woman. That is not Homer’s *Iliad*, nor is *The Ambassadors* the story of the education of Lambert Strether, until at last he can warn little Bilham (one wearies of the “little”!) that life’s meaning is that we must live. Seeing is living, for Strether, as for James, as for Carlyle, for Ruskin, for Emerson, for Pater.

“Impressionism,” as a literary term, is not very useful, since even Pater is not an Impressionist in a painterly sense. What Strether sees is simply what is there, and what is there would appear to be loss, very much in Pater’s sense of loss. James’s aesthetic has its differences from Pater’s, but I am not so certain that Strether’s vision and Pater’s are easily to be distinguished from one another. When Strether experiences his crisis (or epiphany) in Gloriani’s garden, we are in the cosmos of Pater and of Nietzsche, in which life can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Strether has just met Madame de Vionnet for the first time: “She was dressed in black, but in black that struck him as light and transparent; she was exceedingly fair, and, though she was as markedly slim, her face had a roundness, with eyes far apart and a little strange.” Perhaps that is love at
first sight, and certainly Madame de Vionnet is herself the epiphany. “In black that struck him as light and transparent” would have alerted any Emersonian or Paterian, and this is the prelude to the central paragraph of The Ambassadors, Strether’s famous address to little Bilham:

“It’s not too late for you, on any side, and you don’t strike me as in danger of missing the train; besides which people can be in general pretty well trusted, of course—with the clock of their freedom ticking as loud as it seems to do here—to keep an eye on the fleeting hour. All the same don’t forget that you’re young—blessedly young; be glad of it on the contrary and live up to it. Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that what have you had? This place and these impressions—mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I’ve seen at his place—well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped that into my mind. I see it now. I haven’t done so enough before—and now I’m old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I do see, at least; and more than you’d believe or I can express. It’s too late. And it’s as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me; for it’s at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one’s consciousness is poured—so that one ‘takes’ the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it: one lives in fine as one can. Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don’t be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don’t quite know which. Of course at present I’m a case of reaction against the mistake; and the voice of reaction should, no doubt, always be taken with an allowance. But that doesn’t affect the point that the right time is now yours. The right time is any time that one is still so lucky as to have. You’ve plenty; that’s the great thing; you’re, as I say, damn you, so happily and hatefully young. Don’t at any rate miss things out of stupidity. Of course I don’t take you for a fool, or I shouldn’t be addressing you thus awfully. Do what you like so long as you don’t make my mistake.
For it was a mistake. Live!” ... Slowly and sociably, with full pauses and straight dashes, Strether had so delivered himself; holding little Bilham from step to step deeply and gravely attentive. The end of all was that the young man had turned quite solemn, and that this was a contradiction of the innocent gaiety the speaker had wished to promote. He watched for a moment the consequence of his words, and then, laying a hand on his listener’s knee and as if to end with the proper joke: “And now for the eye I shall keep on you!”

The loud ticking of the clock of freedom is Strether’s version of Pater’s “We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more,” itself a Paterian commentary upon Victor Hugo’s “We are all condemned men, with a kind of indefinite reprieve.” Pater’s question is how are we to spend that interval, and his answer is in perception and sensation as memorialized by art. Strether is not a questioner because Pater is a theoretician of seeing, but Strether does see, indeed always has seen, but was too morally intelligent to have had the illusion of freedom at the right time. And yet: “The right time is any time that one is still so lucky as to have.” James calls Strether elderly, at fifty-five, but even in 1903 that was not necessarily elderly. Strether, like Pater’s Mona Lisa, is older than the rocks among which he sits, or he is like Nietzsche’s Emerson: “He does not know how old he is already, or how young he is still going to be.” James’s way of expressing that Nietzschean paradox has less wit but more American pragmatism. Strether, like Emerson, is a man of imagination who achieves “an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures.” There truly is no past for Strether; he is an intuitive Emersonian who knows that there is no history, only biography. Strether has seen in Madame de Vionnet what Pater saw in Leonardo’s Lady Lisa (I owe this insight to F.O. Matthiessen): a goddess, a nymph, a woman-of-women, infinitely nuanced, endlessly varied.

But if Strether has fallen in love with his vision, his love is like the love of Pater or of Henry James himself, a wholly aesthetic phenomenon. We do not expect to see Strether replace Chad as the lady’s lover any more than we could expect him to settle down with the accommodating Maria Gostrey, let alone attempt to marry Mrs. Newsome upon his return to Woollett. The sad truth is that none of these ladies, not even the superbly unreal Madame de Vionnet, would be adequate to Lewis Lambert Strether, anymore than Touchett, Warburton, Goodwood would be adequate to Isabel Archer. Strether at least does not suffer a female version of Osmond, but then Strether is hardly the heir of all the ages. He is the
surrogate for Henry James, novelist, who inevitably preferred his own spiritual self-portrait to all his other novels.

*The Portrait of a Lady*

Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* permanently usurped the role of the American Eve. Henry James, in his little book on Hawthorne, allowed himself to be both condescending and evasive towards his authentic American predecessor, a pattern he repeated in writing about George Eliot. Both were too close for comfort, so much so that I risk that cliché with high deliberation. James’s deprecation of *The Scarlet Letter* is notorious, and has not prevented several critics from noting the parallel between Hester’s ultimate return to Boston, and Isabel’s decision to go back to Osmond, her horrible choice of a husband.

Hester and Isabel are fascinating to compare, because they remain the major representations of an American woman anywhere in our imaginative literature, and yet their divergences ultimately transcend their resemblances. Hester necessarily is the grander figure, because she is the more audacious and heroic, but also her situation is more extreme and dramatic. By refusing to identify Dimmesdale as her partner in “sin,” she defies Puritan Boston and its theocracy. More important, she never yields to them inwardly, and her self-affirmation is majestic. Aesthetically, she has other advantages over Isabel Archer. Though Isabel is beautiful, and inspires love, she experiences it only in a sisterly mode for Ralph Touchett and as a foster-mother for Pansy, Osmond’s daughter by Madame Merle. Inadequate as Dimmesdale be, he has aroused a superb passion in Hester, whose every appearance in the novel radiates sexual power, whereas Isabel flees from Goodwood’s fierce desire. And the wretched Osmond—hypocrite, pseudo-aesthete, fortune-hunter—dwindles away next to Hester’s husband, the Satanic Chillingworth. If you add Hester’s indubitable status as an artist in her embroidery, contrasted to Isabel’s lack of all vocation or occupation, then Hawthorne’s Eve far outshines James’s.

And yet Isabel Archer more than sustains a comparison with her forerunner. Hawthorne, like many readers, is in love with Hester: one might even speak of his desiring her, since he has created her as the image of desire. But Hawthorne maintains a distance from her, whereas James could have said (though he would not) of his heroine what Flaubert had said of Emma Bovary: “I am Isabel Archer.” Flaubert lovingly murders Emma, even as Tolstoy amorously murdered his Anna Karenina. James, preserving Isabel as he would himself, merely ruins her life, which is not his judgment, and which Isabel herself reversed as a possible judgment. She goes back to
Osmond in order to proclaim her self-reliance, indeed to establish a continuity in her self-identity. It intrigues me that I do not resist Hester’s return to Boston and her scarlet letter, whereas I both aesthetically approve yet humanly resent and am saddened by Isabel’s return to Osmond. James has implied clearly enough that, by mutual consent, sexual relations have long since ceased for Osmond and Isabel, so that one does not regard Isabel as a sexual sacrifice. Nor does one regard either Goodwood or Warburton as worthy of Isabel: James has provided no alternative to Osmond, Ralph Touchett being frail and soon to die. The great enigma remains: however well we understand the aesthetic and spiritual inevitability of Isabel’s decision, how can we accept it emotionally? Her initial choice of Osmond is appalling enough; her return violates our sense of fairness and increases our distance from her, despite our intense caring.

*The Scarlet Letter* is a romance, a genre it shares with Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. *The Portrait of a Lady* is a Balzacman novel, in which Osmond and Madame Merle are motivated by financial considerations, which would be absurd in the realm of Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Freedom in a novel is very different from independence in a romance. Both Hester and Isabel are Ralph Waldo Emerson’s daughters, as it were, but Isabel is by far the more socialized figure. James certainly would have argued that Isabel, particularly at the book’s conclusion, represents a significant advance in consciousness over Hester. Isabel has to be more advanced in worldly sophistication, but one wonders if her emphasis upon her own identity, and her insistence upon accepting the contract with life she has made, is not achieved at the cost of otherness, since the wretched Osmond scarcely is her concern, and Ralph Touchett is dead. Hester, befriending outcast women and brooding deeply upon the nature of human love, is at least as rich a consciousness.

Perhaps Isabel is closer to us not just because of history, but because Hester has a tragic grandeur. Isabel is vastly superior to most of us, in fineness of sensibility and of aspiration, and yet she is one of us, poor in judgment and unlucky where she had seemed luckiest. That may be why *The Portrait of a Lady* seems more relevant each passing day, in a society where American women of education and beauty are more free than ever before to choose, and to fall.
Kate Chopin

(1851–1904)

I

The Complete Works of Kate Chopin (1969) comprise only two volumes. In her own lifetime (1851–1904), she published two novels, At Fault (1890), which I have not read, and the now celebrated The Awakening (1899), as well as two volumes of short stories, Bayou Folk (1894) and A Night in Acadie (1897). The short stories—out of Maupassant—are very mixed in quality, but even the best are fairly slight. The Awakening, a flawed but strong novel, now enjoys an eminent status among feminist critics, but I believe that many of them weakly misread the book, which is anything but feminist in its stance. It is a Whitmanian book, profoundly so, not only in its echoes of his poetry, which are manifold, but more crucially in its erotic perspective, which is narcissistic and even autoerotic, very much in Whitman’s true mode. The sexual awakening that centers the novel involves a narcissistic self-investment that constitutes a new ego for the heroine. Unfortunately, she fails to see that her passion is for herself, and this error perhaps destroys her.

Lest I seem ironic, here at the start, I protest that irony is hardly my trope; that Walt Whitman, in my judgment, remains the greatest American writer; and that I continue to admire The Awakening, though a bit less at the second reading than at the first. Its faults are mostly in its diction; Chopin had no mastery of style. As narrative, it is simplistic rather than simple, and its characters have nothing memorable about them. Chopin’s exuberance as a writer was expended where we would expect a daughter of Whitman to locate her concern: the ecstatic rebirth of the self. Since Chopin was not writing either American epic or American elegy, but rather an everyday domestic novel, more naturalistic than Romantic, fissures were bound to appear in her work. The form of Flaubert does not accommodate what
Emerson—who may be called Chopin’s literary grandfather—named as the great and crescive self. Nevertheless, as a belated American Transcendentalist, Chopin risked the experiment, and what Emerson called the Newness breaks the vessels of Chopin’s chosen form. I would call this the novel’s largest strength, though it is also its formal weakness.

The Awakening

Walt Whitman the man doubtless lusted after what he termed the love of comrades, but Walt Whitman the poet persuades us rhetorically only when he lusts after himself. To state this more precisely, Walt Whitman, one of the roughs, an American, the self of Song of Myself, lusts after “the real me” or “me myself” of Walt Whitman. Chopin’s heroine, Edna, becomes, as it were, one of the roughs, an American, when she allows herself to lust after her real me, her me myself. That is why Chopin’s The Awakening gave offense to reviewers in 1899, precisely as Leaves of Grass gave offense from its first appearance in 1855, onwards to Whitman’s death, and would still give offense, if we read it as the Pindaric celebration of masturbation that it truly constitutes. Edna, like Walt, falls in love with her own body, and her infatuation with the inadequate Robert is merely a screen for her overwhelming obsession, which is to nurse and mother herself. Chopin, on some level, must have known how sublimely outrageous she was being, but the level was not overt, and part of her novel’s power is in its negation of its own deepest knowledge. Her reviewers were not stupid, and it is shallow to condemn them, as some feminist critics now tend to do. Here is the crucial paragraph in a review by one Frances Porcher (in The Mirror 9, May 4, 1899), who senses obscurely but accurately that Edna’s desire is for herself:

It is not a pleasant picture of soul-dissection, take it anyway you like; and so, though she finally kills herself, or rather lets herself drown to death, one feels that it is not in the desperation born of an over-burdened heart, torn by complicating duties but rather because she realizes that something is due to her children, that she cannot get away from, and she is too weak to face the issue. Besides which, and this is the stronger feeling, she has offered herself wholly to the man, who loves her too well to take her at her word; “she realizes that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him, would melt out of her existence,” she has awakened to know the shifting, treacherous, fickle deeps of her own soul in which lies, alert and strong and cruel, the fiend called
Passion that is all animal and all of the earth, earthy. It is better to lie down in green waves and sink down in close embraces of old ocean, and so she does.

The metaphor of “shifting, treacherous, fickle deeps” here, however unoriginal, clearly pertains more to Edna’s body than to her soul, and what is most “alert and strong and cruel” in Edna is manifestly a passion for herself. The love-death that Edna dies has its Wagnerian element, but again is more Whitmanian, suggesting the song of death sung by the hermit thrush or solitary singer in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Edna moves in the heavy, sensual and sensuous atmosphere of Whitman’s “The Sleepers,” and she dies only perhaps as Whitman’s real me or me myself dies, awash in a body indistinguishable from her own, the body of the mother, death, the ocean, and the night of a narcissistic dream of love that perfectly restitutes the self for all its losses, that heals fully the original, narcissistic scar.

Sandra M. Gilbert, who seems to me our most accomplished feminist critic, reads the novel as a female revision of the male aesthetic reveries of Aphrodite’s rebirth. I would revise Gilbert only by suggesting that the major instances of such reverie—in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde—are not less female than Chopin’s vision is, and paradoxically are more feminist than her version of the myth. The autoerotic seems to be a realm where, metaphorically anyway, there are no major differences between male and female seers, so that Chopin’s representation of Edna’s psychic self-gratification is not essentially altered from Whitman’s solitary bliss:

Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed. How luxurious it felt to rest thus in a strange, quaint bed, with its sweet country odor of laurel lingering about the sheets and mattress! She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep.
Edna observing, as a discovery, “the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh,” is the heir of Whitman proclaiming: “If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it.” Chopin seems to have understood, better than most readers in 1899, what Whitman meant by his crucial image of the tally: “My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all things.” As the erotic image of the poet’s voice, the tally obeys Emerson’s dark law of Compensation: “Nothing is got for nothing.” If Edna awakens to her own passion for her own body and its erotic potential, then she must come also to the tally’s measurement of her own death.

II

Some aspects of Whitman’s influence upon The Awakening have been traced by Lewis Leary and others, but since the influence is not always overt but frequently repressed, there is more to be noticed about it. Edna first responds to “the everlasting voice of the sea” in chapter 4, where its maternal contrast to her husband’s not unkind inadequacy causes her to weep copiously. At the close of chapter 6, the voice of the Whitmanian ocean is directly associated with Edna’s awakening to self:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

This is a palpable and overt influence; far subtler, because repressed, is the Whitmanian aura with which Kate Chopin associates the ambivalence of motherhood. Whitman himself both fathered and mothered all of his mostly tormented siblings, as soon as he was able, but his own ambivalences toward both fatherhood and motherhood inform much of his best poetry. Something of the ambiguous strength of The Awakening’s conclusion hovers in its repressed relation to Whitman. Edna leaves Robert, after their mutual declaration of love, in order to attend her close friend Adèle in her labor pains:

Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread. Her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of
chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awak-
ening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to
the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go.

She began to wish she had not come; her presence was not nec-
essary. She might have invented a pretext for staying away; she
might even invent a pretext now for going. But Edna did not go. 
With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against
the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene [of] torture.

She was still stunned and speechless with emotion when later
she leaned over her friend to kiss her and softly say good-by. 
Adèle, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice:
“Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! 
Remember them!”

The protest against nature here is hardly equivocal, yet it has the pecu-
liar numbness of “the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and
go.” Schopenhauer’s influence joins Whitman’s as Chopin shows us Edna
awakening to the realization of lost individuality, of not wanting “anything
but my own way,” while knowing that the will to live insists always upon
its own way, at the individual’s expense:

Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and
had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she
desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her
except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come
when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her exis-
tence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like
antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and
sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days.
But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these
things when she walked down to the beach.

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with
the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive,
ever ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the
soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach,
up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a bro-
ken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling
disabled down, down to the water.

The soul’s slavery, in Schopenhauer, is to be eluded through philo-
sophical contemplation of a very particular kind, but in Whitman only
through a dangerous liaison with night, death, the mother, and the sea. Chopin is closer again to Whitman, and the image of the disabled bird circling downward to darkness stations itself between Whitman and Wallace Stevens, as it were, and constitutes another American approach to the Emersonian abyss of the self. Edna, stripped naked, enters the mothering sea with another recall of Whitman: “The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles.” In the hermit thrush’s great song of death that is the apotheosis of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” death arrives coiled and curled like a serpent, undulating round the world. Whitman’s “dark mother always gliding near with soft feet” has come to deliver Edna from the burden of being a mother, and indeed from all burden of otherness, forever.
Joseph Conrad

(1857–1924)

IN CONRAD’S “YOUTH” (1898), MARLOW GIVES US A BRILLIANT DESCRIPTION of the sinking of the Judea:

“Between the darkness of earth and heaven she was burning fiercely upon a disc of purple sea shot by the blood-red play of gleams; upon a disc of water glittering and sinister. A high, clear flame, an immense and lonely flame, ascended from the ocean, and from its summit the black smoke poured continuously at the sky. She burned furiously; mournful and imposing like a funeral pile kindled in the night, surrounded by the sea, watched over by the stars. A magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward to that old ship at the end of her laborious day. The surrender of her weary ghost to the keeper of the stars and sea was stirring like the sight of a glorious triumph. The masts fell just before daybreak, and for a moment there was a burst and turmoil of sparks that seemed to fill with flying fire the night patient and watchful, the vast night lying silent upon the sea. At daylight she was only a charred shell, floating still under a cloud of smoke and bearing a glowing mass of coal within.

“Then the oars were got out, and the boats forming in a line moved around her remains as if in procession—the longboat leading. As we pulled across her stern a slim dart of fire shot out viciously at us, and suddenly she went down, head first, in a great hiss of steam. The unconsumed stern was the last to sink; but the paint had gone, had cracked, had peeled off, and there were no letters, there was no word, no stubborn device that was like her soul, to flash at the rising sun her creed and her name.
The apocalyptic vividness is enhanced by the visual namelessness of the “unconsumed stern,” as though the creed of Christ’s people maintained both its traditional refusal to violate the Second Commandment, and its traditional affirmation of its not-to-be-named God. With the *Judea*, Conrad sinks the romance of youth’s illusions, but like all losses in Conrad this submersion in the destructive element is curiously dialectical, since only experiential loss allows for the compensation of an imaginative gain in the representation of artistic truth. Originally the ephebe of Flaubert and of Flaubert’s “son,” Maupassant, Conrad was reborn as the narrative disciple of Henry James, the James of *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew*, rather than the James of the final phase.

Ian Watt convincingly traces the genesis of Marlow to the way that “James developed the indirect narrative approach through the sensitive central intelligence of one of the characters.” Marlow, whom James derided as “that preposterous magic mariner,” actually represents Conrad’s swerve away from the excessive strength of James’s influence upon him. By always “mixing himself up with the narrative,” in James’s words, Marlow guarantees an enigmatic reserve that increases the distance between the impressionistic techniques of Conrad and James. Though there is little valid comparison that can be made between Conrad’s greatest achievements and the hesitant, barely fictional status of Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, Conrad’s impressionism is as extreme and solipsistic as Pater’s. There is a definite parallel between the fates of Sebastian Van Storck (in Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*) and Decoud in *Nostromo*.

In his 1897 “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* Conrad famously insisted that his creative task was “before all to make you see.” He presumably was aware that he thus joined himself to a line of prose seers whose latest representatives were Carlyle, Ruskin, and Pater. There is a movement in that group from Carlyle’s exuberant “Natural Supernaturalism” through Ruskin’s paganization of Evangelical fervor to Pater’s evasive and skeptical Epicurean materialism, with its eloquent suggestion that all we can see is the flux of sensations. Conrad exceeds Pater in the reduction of impressionism to a state of consciousness where the seeing narrator is hopelessly mixed up with the seen narrative. James may seem an impressionist when compared to Flaubert, but alongside of Conrad he is clearly shown to be a kind of Platonist, imposing forms and resolutions upon the flux of human relations by an exquisite formal geometry altogether his own.

To observe that Conrad is metaphysically less of an Idealist is hardly to argue that he is necessarily a stronger novelist than his master, James. It may suggest though that Conrad’s originality is more disturbing than that of James, and may help explain why Conrad, rather than James, became
the dominant influence upon the generation of American novelists that included Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. The cosmos of *The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby*, and *As I Lay Dying* derives from *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* rather than from *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. Darl Bundren is the extreme inheritor of Conrad’s quest to carry impressionism into its heart of darkness in the human awareness that we are only a flux of sensations gazing outwards upon a flux of impressions.

*Heart of Darkness*

*Heart of Darkness* may always be a critical battleground between readers who regard it as an aesthetic triumph, and those like myself who doubt its ability to rescue us from its own hopeless obscurantism. That Marlow seems, at moments, not to know what he is talking about, is almost certainly one of the narrative’s deliberate strengths, but if Conrad also seems finally not to know, then he necessarily loses some of his authority as a storyteller. Perhaps he loses it to death our death, or our anxiety that he will not sustain the illusion of his fiction’s duration long enough for us to sublimate the frustrations it brings us.

These frustrations need not be deprecated. Conrad’s diction, normally flawless, is notoriously vague throughout *Heart of Darkness*. E.M. Forster’s wicked comment on Conrad’s entire work is justified perhaps only when applied to *Heart of Darkness*:

Misty in the middle as well as at the edges, the secret cask of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel.... No creed, in fact.

Forster’s misty vapor seems to inhabit such Conradian recurrent modifiers as “monstrous,” “unspeakable,” “atrocious,” and many more, but these are minor defects compared to the involuntary self-parody that Conrad inflicts upon himself. There are moments that sound more like James Thurber lovingly satirizing Conrad than like Conrad:

“We had carried Kurtz into the pilot house: there was more air there. Lying on the couch, he stared through the open shutter. There was an eddy in the mass of human bodies, and the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks rushed out to the very brink of the stream. She put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance.

“‘Do you understand this?’ I asked.
“He kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate. He made no answer, but I saw a smile, a smile of indefinable meaning, appear on his colorless lips that a moment after twitched convulsively. ‘Do I not?’ he said slowly, gasping, as if the words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power.

This cannot be defended as an instance of what Frank Kermode calls a language “needed when Marlow is not equal to the experience described.” Has the experience been described here? Smiles of “indefinable meaning” are smiled once too often in a literary text if they are smiled even once. Heart of Darkness has taken on some of the power of myth, even if the book is limited by its involuntary obscurantism. It has haunted American literature from T.S. Eliot’s poetry through our major novelists of the era 1920 to 1940, on to a line of movies that go from the Citizen Kane of Orson Welles (a substitute for an abandoned Welles project to film Heart of Darkness) on to Coppola’s Apocalypse Now. In this instance, Conrad’s formlessness seems to have worked as an aid, so diffusing his conception as to have made it available to an almost universal audience.

Nostromo

An admirer of Conrad is happiest with his five great novels: Lord Jim (1900), Nostromo (1904), The Secret Agent (1906), Under Western Eyes (1910), and Victory (1914). Subtle and tormented narratives, they form an extraordinarily varied achievement, and despite their common features they can make a reader wonder that they all should have been composed by the same artist. Endlessly enigmatic as a personality and as a formidable moral character, Conrad pervades his own books, a presence not to be put by, an elusive storyteller who yet seems to write a continuous spiritual autobiography. By the general consent of advanced critics and of common readers, Conrad’s masterwork is Nostromo, where his perspectives are largest, and where his essential originality in the representation of human blindnesses and consequent human affections is at its strongest. Like all overwhelming originalities, Conrad’s ensues in an authentic difficulty, which can be assimilated only very slowly, if at all. Repeated rereadings gradually convince me that Nostromo is anything but a Conradian litany to the virtue he liked to call “fidelity.” The book is tragedy, of a post-Nietzschean sort, despite Conrad’s strong contempt for Nietzsche. Decoud, void of all illusions, is self-destroyed because he cannot sustain solitude. Nostromo, perhaps the only persuasive instance of the natural
sublime in a twentieth-century hero of fiction, dies “betrayed he hardly
knows by what or by whom,” as Conrad says. But this is Conrad at his most
knowing, and the novel shows us precisely how Nostromo is betrayed, by
himself, and by what in himself.

It is a mystery of an overwhelming fiction why it can sustain virtually
endless rereadings. *Nostromo,* to me, rewards frequent rereadings in some-
thing of the way that *Othello* does; there is always surprise waiting for me.
Brilliant as every aspect of the novel is, Nostromo himself is the imagina-
tive center of the book, and yet Nostromo is unique among Conrad’s per-
sonae, and not a Conradian man whom we could have expected. His cre-
ator’s description of this central figure as “the Magnificent Capataz, the
Man of the People,” breathes a writer’s love for his most surprising act of
the imagination. So does a crucial paragraph from the same source, the
“Author’s Note” that Conrad added as a preface thirteen years after the ini-
tial publication:

In his firm grip on the earth he inherits, in his improvidence and
generosity, in his lavishness with his gifts, in his manly vanity, in
the obscure sense of his greatness and in his faithful devotion with
something despairing as well as desperate in its impulses, he is a
Man of the People, their very own unenvious force, disdaining to
lead but ruling from within. Years afterwards, grown older as the
famous Captain Fidanza, with a stake in the country, going about
his many affairs followed by respectful glances in the modernized
streets of Sulaco, calling on the widow of the cargador, attending
the Lodge, listening in unmoved silence to anarchist speeches at
the meeting, the enigmatical patron of the new revolutionary agi-
tation, the trusted, the wealthy comrade Fidanza with the knowl-
edge of his moral ruin locked up in his breast, he remains essen-
tially a man of the People. In his mingled love and scorn of life
and in the bewildered conviction of having been betrayed, of
dying betrayed he hardly knows by what or by whom, he is still of
the People, their undoubted Great Man—with a private history of
his own.

Despite this “moral ruin,” and not because of it, Conrad and his read-
ers share the conviction of Nostromo’s greatness, share in his sublime self-
recognition. How many persuasive images of greatness, of a natural sub-
limity, exist in modern fiction? Conrad’s may be the last enhanced vision
of Natural Man, of the Man of the People, in which anyone has found it
possible to believe. Yet Conrad himself characteristically qualifies his own
belief in Nostromo, and critics too easily seduced by ironies have weakly misread the only apparent irony of Conrad’s repeated references to Nostromo as “the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores.” Magnificent, beyond the reach of all irony, Nostromo manifestly is. It is the magnificence of the natural leader who disdains leadership, yet who loves reputation. Though he is of the People, Nostromo serves no ideal, unlike old Viola the Garibaldino. With the natural genius for command, the charismatic endowment that could make him another Garibaldi, Nostromo nevertheless scorns any such role, in the name of any cause whatsoever. He is a pure Homeric throwback, not wholly unlike Tolstoi’s Hadji Murad, except that he acknowledges neither enemies nor friends, except for his displaced father, Viola. And he enchants us even as he enchants the populace of Sulaco, though most of all he enchants the skeptical and enigmatic Conrad, who barely defends himself against the enchantment with some merely rhetorical ironies.

Ethos is the daimon, character is fate, in Conrad as in Heracleitus, and Nostromo’s tragic fate is the inevitable fulfillment of his desperate grandeur, which Conrad cannot dismiss as mere vanity, despite all his own skepticism. Only Nostromo saves the novel, and Conrad, from nihilism, the nihilism of Decoud’s waste in suicide. Nostromo is betrayed partly by Decoud’s act of self-destruction, with its use of four ingots of silver to send his body down, but largely by his own refusal to maintain the careless preference for glory over gain which is more than a gesture or a style, which indeed is the authentic mode of being that marks the hero. Nostromo is only himself when he can say, with perfect truth: “My name is known from one end of Sulaco to the other. What more can you do for me?”

II

Towards the end of Chapter Ten of Part Third, “The Lighthouse,” Conrad renders his own supposed verdict upon both Decoud and Nostromo, in a single page, in two parallel sentences a paragraph apart:

A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity, the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted by the bars of San Tomé silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things.

The magnificent Capataz de Cargadores, victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action, sat in the weary pose of a hunted outcast through a night of sleeplessness as tormenting as
any known to Decoud, his companion in the most desperate affair of his life. And he wondered how Decoud had died.

Decoud’s last thought, after shooting himself was: “I wonder how that Capataz died.” Conrad seems to leave little to choose between being “a victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity” or a “victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action.” The brilliant intellectual and the magnificent man of action are victimized alike for their audacity, and it is a fine irony that “retribution” and “reward” become assimilated to one another. Yet the book is Nostromo’s and not Decoud’s, and a “disenchanted vanity” is a higher fate than a “disillusioned weariness,” if only because an initial enchantment is a nobler state than an initial illusion. True that Nostromo’s enchantment was only of and with himself, but that is proper for an Achilles or a Hadji Murad. Decoud dies because he cannot bear solitude, and so cannot bear himself. Nostromo finds death-in-life and then death because he has lost the truth of his vanity, its enchanted insouciance, the sprezzatura which he, a plebian, nevertheless had made his authentic self.

Nostromo’s triumph, though he cannot know it, is that an image of this authenticity survives him, an image so powerful as to persuade both Conrad and the perceptive reader that even the self-betrayed hero retains an aesthetic dignity that renders his death tragic rather than sordid. Poor Decoud, for all his brilliance, dies a nihilistic death, disappearing “without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things.” Nostromo, after his death, receives an aesthetic tribute beyond all irony, in the superb closing paragraph of the novel:

Dr. Monygham, pulling round in the police-galley, heard the name pass over his head. It was another of Nostromo’s triumphs, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all. In that true cry of undying passion that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love.

*Lord Jim*

*Lord Jim* (1900) is the first of Conrad’s five great novels, followed by what seems to me the finest, *Nostromo* (1904), and then by the marvelous sequence of *The Secret Agent* (1906), *Under Western Eyes* (1910), and finally
Victory (1914). Of these, it seems clear that Lord Jim has the closest to universal appeal; I have rarely met a reader who was not fascinated by it. Martin Price, the subtlest of Conrad's moral critics, prefers Lord Jim to Nostromo because he finds that both the author's skepticism and the author's romanticism are given their full scope in Lord Jim rather than in Nostromo. Doubtless this is true, but Jim himself lacks the high romantic appeal of the magnificent Nostromo, and I prefer also the corrosive skepticism of Decoud to the skeptical wisdom of Marlow and Stein. Not that I would deprecate Lord Jim; had Conrad written nothing else, this single novel would have guaranteed his literary survival.

Aaron Fogel, writing on Nostromo, sees it as marking Conrad's transition from an Oedipal emphasis (as in Lord Jim) to a representation of the self's struggle against more outward influences. Certainly Jim's struggle does suit Fogel's formulation of the earlier mode in Conrad: "the denial, by internalization, of the Oedipal order of forced dialogue in the outside world—the translation of inquisition into an inner feeling of compulsion to quarrel with a forebear or with oneself." Though there is much of Conrad in Marlow, and a little of him in Stein, his true surrogate is surely Jim, whose dialectics of defeat are in some sense a late version of Polish romanticism, of the perpetual defeat of Polish heroism. This is only to intimate that Jim's Byronism is rather more Polish than British. Jim rarely demands anything, and he never demands victory. One way of understanding the novel is to see how incomprehensible it would be if Conrad had chosen to make his hero an American.

Marlow, our narrator, becomes something like a father to Jim, in an implicit movement that has been shrewdly traced by Ian Watt. There is an impressive irony in the clear contrast between the eloquent father, Marlow, and the painfully inarticulate son, Jim. The relation between the two poignantly enhances our sense of just how vulnerable Jim is and cannot cease to be. Marlow is a survivor, capable of withstanding nearly the full range of human experience, while Jim is doom-eager, as much a victim of the romantic imagination as he is a belated instance of its intense appeal to us.

Albert J. Guerard associated Lord Jim with Absalom, Absalom! (a not un-Conradian work) as novels that become different with each attentive reading. Jim's "simplicity" takes the place of the charismatic quality we expect of the romantic protagonist, and Guerard sees Jim as marked by a conflict between personality and will. But Jim's personality remains a mystery to us, almost despite Marlow, and Jim's will is rarely operative, so far as I can see. What we can know about Jim is the enormous strength and prevalence of his fantasy-making powers, which we need not confuse with a romantic imagination, since that hardly excludes self-knowledge. Indeed,
the deepest puzzle of Jim is why should he fascinate anyone at all, let alone Marlow, Stein, Conrad, and ourselves? Why is he endless to meditation?

Everyone who has read *Lord Jim* (and many who have not) remember its most famous statement, which is Stein’s:

A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—*nicht wahr?* ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.

That describes Stein’s romanticism, but hardly Jim’s, since Jim cannot swim in the dream-world. When he seems to make the destructive element keep him up, as in Patusan, there would always have to be a Gentleman Brown waiting for him. An imagination like Jim’s, which has little sense of otherness, falls into identification as the truly destructive element, and the error of identifying with the outrageous Brown is what kills Jim. Tony Tanner deftly compares Brown to Iago, if only because Brown’s hatred for Jim approximates Iago’s hatred for Othello, but Brown has a kind of rough justice in denying Jim’s moral superiority. That returns us to the enigma of Jim: why does he make such a difference for Marlow—and for us?

We know the difference between Jim and Brown, even if Jim cannot, even as we know that Jim never will mature into Stein. Is Jim merely the spirit of illusion, or does there linger in him something of the legitimate spirit of romance? Marlow cannot answer the question, and we cannot either, no matter how often we read *Lord Jim*. Is that a strength or a weakness in this novel? That Conrad falls into obscurantism, particularly in *Heart of Darkness*, is beyond denial. Is *Lord Jim* simply an instance of such obscurantism on a larger scale?

Impressionist fiction necessarily forsakes the Idealist metaphysics of the earlier romantic novel, a metaphysics that culminated in George Eliot. Marlow beholding Jim is a concourse of sensations recording a flood of impressions; how can a sensation distinguish whether an impression is authentic or not? Yet Marlow is haunted by the image of heroism, and finds an authentic realization of the image in Stein. The famous close of Marlow’s narrative invokes Jim as an overwhelming force of real existence, and also as a disembodied spirit among the shades:

“And that's the end. He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic. Not in the
wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! For it may very well be that in the short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side.

“But we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied—quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know. He is one of us—and have I not stood up once, like an evoked ghost, to answer for his eternal constancy? Was I so very wrong after all? Now he is no more, there are days when the reality of his existence comes to me with an immense, with an overwhelming force; and yet upon my honour there are moments, too, when he passes from my eyes like a disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of his earth, ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades.

“Who knows? He is gone, inscrutable at heart, and the poor girl is leading a sort of soundless, inert life in Stein's house. Stein has aged greatly of late. He feels it himself, and says often that he is ‘preparing to leave all this; preparing to leave ...’ while he waves his hand sadly at his butterflies.”

Stein’s sadness is that he had hoped to find a successor in Jim and now wanes into the sense that he is at the end of a tradition. Enigmatic as always, Marlow cannot resolve his own attitude towards Jim. I do not suppose that we can either and I wonder if that is necessarily an aesthetic strength in Conrad’s novel. Perhaps it is enough that we are left pondering our own inability to reconcile the authentic and the heroic.
Edith Wharton

(1862–1937)

Age of Innocence

A profound study of Edith Wharton’s own nostalgias, The Age of Innocence (1920) achieved a large discerning audience immediately and has retained it since. For Wharton herself, the novel was a prelude to her autobiography, A Backward Glance, published 14 years later and three years before her death. Wharton, who was 57 in 1919 when The Age of Innocence was in most part composed, associated herself with both her protagonists, Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. The Age of Innocence is a historical novel set in socially prominent Old New York of the early 1870s, a vanished world indeed when seen from a post–World War I perspective. Wrongly regarded by many critics as a novel derived from Henry James, The Age of Innocence is rather a deliberate complement to The Portrait of a Lady, seeking and finding a perspective that James was conscious of having excluded from his masterpiece. Wharton might well have called her novel The Portrait of a Gentleman, since Newland Archer’s very name is an allusion to Isabel Archer, a far more attractive and fascinating character than Wharton’s unheroic gentleman of Old New York.

Not that Newland is anything but a very decent and good man who will become a useful philanthropist and civic figure. Unfortunately, however, he has no insight whatsoever as to the differences between men and women, and his passion is of poor quality compared to Ellen’s. R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton’s biographer, regards The Age of Innocence as a minor masterpiece. Time so far has confirmed Lewis’s judgment, but we now suffer through an age of ideology, and I am uncertain as to whether The Age of Innocence will be strong enough to endure. I have no doubts about Wharton’s The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country, but I wonder
whether Newland Archer may yet sink his own book. The best historical novel of Old New York, *The Age of Innocence* retains great interest both as social history and as social anthropology. One is always startled by the farewell dinner of Ellen Olenska, where Newland realizes that he is attending “the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe.” Wharton’s own judgment, as narrator, sums up this tribal expulsion.

It was the Old New York way of taking life “without effusion of blood”: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than “scenes,” except the behavior of those who gave rise to them.

That seems a condemnation of Old New York, and yet it is not. Throughout the novel, Wharton acknowledges that Newland’s world centers upon an idea of order, a convention that stifles passion and yet liberates from chaos. The old order at least was an order; Wharton was horrified at the post–World War I United States. Newland Archer is flawed in perception: of his world, of his wife, most of all of Ellen. And yet Wharton subtly makes it clear that even a more courageous and perceptive Newland would not have made a successful match with Ellen. Their relationship in time must have dissolved, with Newland returning to the only tribe that could sustain him. Henry James’s Isabel Archer, returning to her dreadful husband Osmond, also accepts an idea of order, but one in which her renunciation has a transcendental element. Wharton, shrewder if less sublime than her friend James, gives us a more realistic yet a less consequential Archer.

*The Custom of the Country*

Edith Wharton’s three principal women characters—Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, Ellen Olenska—are remarkably varied, though Lily and Ellen both are motherless members of Old New York society, and Undine is an outsider who conquers and destroys that society, on her own egregious terms. Lily, though she struggles tenaciously, is finally too weak to survive the contradictions between her upbringing and her situation. It is Ellen, superbly self-reliant, who reconciles her heritage and her dilemmas, and who evokes our admiration. Lily dies of a sleeping-drug overdose; Undine, the American answer to Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, holds on unpleasantly in our memory; while Ellen, who has affinities to Henry James’s Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, declines Isabel’s example, and flourishes
(so far as we know) apart from the dying society of Old New York, in which Edith Wharton had been raised.

I once was outrageous enough to ask a group of students whom they would choose—either to love or to be—among Lily, Undine, and Ellen, and was startled by their consensus, which was Undine, since sensibly I had expected Ellen to be their answer. Since I knew that they also had read *Vanity Fair*, I protested that Becky Sharp was charming if unsettling, but that Undine frightened me. She did not dismay them, whereas Lily’s ill luck depressed them, and Ellen they felt was rather too good to be true. Perhaps Wharton, a powerful ironist, would have appreciated their choice, but to an archaic Romantic like myself, it came as a considerable surprise, or as another instance of what my mentor, Frederick A. Pottle, had called shifts of sensibility.

Undine, I protested lamely, was bad news, but they forgave her vulgarity (as Wharton could not) and one of them accurately indicated that the novel’s famous conclusion was now seriously outdated:

“Oh, that reminds me—” instead of obeying her he unfolded the paper. “I brought it in to show you something. Jim Driscoll’s been appointed Ambassador to England.”

“Jim Driscoll—!” She caught up the paper and stared at the paragraph he pointed to. Jim Driscoll—that pitiful nonentity, with his stout mistrustful commonplace wife! It seemed extraordinary that the government should have hunted up such insignificant people. And immediately she had a great vague vision of the splendours they were going to—all the banquets and ceremonies and precedences...

“I shouldn’t say she’d want to, with so few jewels—” She dropped the paper and turned to her husband. “If you had a spark of ambition, that’s the kind of thing you’d try for. You could have got it just as easily as not!”

He laughed and thrust his thumbs in his waistcoat armholes with the gesture she disliked. “As it happens, it’s about the one thing I couldn’t.”

“You couldn’t? Why not?”

“Because you’re divorced. They won’t have divorced Ambassadresses.”

“They won’t? Why not, I’d like to know?”

“Well, I guess the court ladies are afraid there’d be too many pretty women in the Embassies,” he answered jocularly.

She burst into an angry laugh, and the blood flamed up into
her face. “I never heard of anything so insulting!” she cried, as if the rule had been invented to humiliate her.

There was a noise of motors backing and advancing in the court, and she heard the first voices on the stairs. She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of rubies, the glitter of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list.

But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador’s wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for.

In our current political climate, Undine could well be appointed an ambassador, and thus transcend being an Ambassador’s wife. It is eighty-eight years since the publication of *The Custom of the Country*, and I have met Undine many times, here and abroad, in the universities, the media, and among diplomats. Wharton may have rendered Undine Spragg with a vividness beyond authorial intention. One remembers Lily Bart for her brave pathos, and Ellen Olenska for her decency and vitality. But Undine Spragg is one of the great white sharks of literature: dangerous, distasteful, and yet permanently valid as a representation of reality.

*Ethan Frome*

In 1911, two years before *The Custom of the Country* was published, Wharton brought out the short novel that seems her most American story, the New England tragedy *Ethan Frome*. I would guess that it is now her most widely read book, and is likely to remain so. Certainly *Ethan Frome* is Wharton’s only fiction to have become part of the American mythology, though it is hardly an early-twentieth-century *Scarlet Letter*. Relentless and stripped, *Ethan Frome* is tragedy not as Hawthorne wrote it, but in the mode of pain and of a reductive moral sadism, akin perhaps to Robert Penn Warren’s harshness toward his protagonists, particularly in *World Enough and Time*. The book’s aesthetic fascination, for me, centers in Wharton’s audacity in touching the limits of a reader’s capacity at absorbing really extreme suffering, when that suffering is bleak, intolerable, and in a clear sense unnecessary. Wharton’s astonishing authority here is to render such pain with purity and economy, while making it seem inevitable, as much in the nature of things and of psyches as in the social customs of its place and time.
R.W.B. Lewis praises *Ethan Frome* as “a classic of the realistic genre”; doubtless it is, and yet literary “realism” is itself intensely metaphorical, as Lewis keenly knows. *Ethan Frome* is so charged in its representation of reality as to be frequently phantasmagoric in effect. Its terrible vividness estranges it subtly from mere naturalism, and makes its pain just bearable. Presumably Edith Wharton would not have said: “Ethan Frome—that is myself,” and yet he is more his author than Undine Spragg was to be. Like Wharton, Ethan has an immense capacity for suffering, and an overwhelming sense of reality; indeed like Edith Wharton, he has too strong a sense of what was to be the Freudian reality principle.

Though an exact contemporary of Freud, Edith Wharton showed no interest in him, but she became an emphatic Nietzschean, and *Ethan Frome* manifests both a Nietzschean perspectivism, and an ascetic intensity that I suspect goes back to a reading of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche’s precursor. What fails in Ethan, and in his beloved Mattie, is precisely what Schopenhauer urged us to overcome: the Will to Live, though suicide was hardly a Schopenhauerian solution. In her introduction to *Ethan Frome*, Wharton states a narrative principle that sounds more like Balzac, Browning, or James, but that actually reflects the Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morals*:

> Each of my chroniclers contributes to the narrative just so much as he or she is capable of understanding of what, to them, is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger categories.

But does Wharton’s narrator have scope enough to see all of the tale that is *Ethan Frome*? Why is the narrator’s view more than only another view, and a simplifying one at that? Wharton’s introduction memorably calls her protagonists “these figures, my granite outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate.” Yet her narrator (whatever her intentions) lacks the imagination to empathize with granite outcroppings who are also men and women:

> Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps. But one phrase stuck in my memory and served as the nucleus about which I grouped my subsequent inferences: “Guess he’s been in Starkfield too many winters.”
Before my own time there was up I had learned to know what that meant. Yet I had come in the degenerate day of trolley, bicycle and rural delivery, when communication was easy between the scattered mountain villages, and the bigger towns in the valleys, such as Bettsbridge and Shadd's Falls, had libraries, theatres and Y.M.C.A. halls to which the youth of the hills could descend for recreation. But when winter shut down on Starkfield, and the village lay under a sheet of snow perpetually renewed from the pale skies, I began to see what life there—or rather its negation—must have been in Ethan Frome's young manhood.

I had been sent up by my employers on a job connected with the big power-house at Corbury Junction, and a long-drawn carpenters' strike had so delayed the work that I found myself anchored at Starkfield—the nearest habitable spot—for the best part of the winter. I chafed at first, and then, under the hypnotising effect of routine, gradually began to find a grim satisfaction in the life. During the early part of my stay I had been struck by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community. Day by day, after the December snows were over, a blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, which gave them back in an intenser glitter. One would have supposed that such an atmosphere must quicken the emotions as well as the blood; but it seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of Starkfield. When I had been there a little longer, and had seen this phase of crystal clearness followed by long stretches of sunless cold; when the storms of February had pitched their white tents about the devoted village and the wild cavalry of March winds had charged down to their support; I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter. Twenty years earlier the means of resistance must have been far fewer, and the enemy in command of almost all the lines of access between the beleaguered villages; and, considering these things, I felt the sinister force of Harmon's phrase: “Most of the smart ones get away.” But if that were the case, how could any combination of obstacles have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?

The narrator's “mental and moral reach” is not in question, but his vision has acute limitations. Winter indeed is the cultural issue, but Ethan Frome is not exactly Ursula K. Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness. It is
not a “combination of obstacles” that hindered the flight of Ethan Frome, but a terrible fatalism which is a crucial part of Edith Wharton’s Emersonian heritage. Certainly the narrator is right to express the contrast between the winter sublimity of: “a blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, which gave them back in an intenser glitter,” and the inability of the local population to give back more than sunken apathy. But Frome, as the narrator says on the novel’s first page, is himself a ruined version of the American Sublime: “the most striking figure in Starkfield ... his great height ... the careless powerful look he had ... something bleak and unapproachable in his face.” Ethan Frome is an Ahab who lacks Moby-Dick, self-lamed rather than wounded by the white whale, and by the whiteness of the whale. Not the whiteness of Starkfield but an inner whiteness or blankness has crippled Ethan Frome, perhaps the whiteness that goes through American tradition “from Edwards to Emerson” and on through Wharton to Wallace Stevens contemplating the beach world lit by the glare of the Northern Lights in “The Auroras of Autumn”:

Here, being visible is being white,  
Is being of the solid of white, the accomplishment  
Of an extremist in an exercise ...

The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.  
The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,  
A darkness gathers though it does not fall

And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.  
The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.  
He observes how the north is always enlarging the change,

With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps  
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,  
The color of ice and fire and solitude.

That, though with a more sublime eloquence, is the visionary world of Ethan Frome, a world where the will is impotent, and tragedy is always circumstantial. The experiential puzzle of Ethan Frome is ultimately also its aesthetic strength: we do not question the joint decision of Ethan and Mattie to immolate themselves, even though it is pragmatically outrageous and psychologically quite impossible. But the novel’s apparent realism is a mask for its actual fatalistic mode, and truly it is a northern romance, akin
even to *Wuthering Heights*. A visionary ethos dominates Ethan and Mattie, and would have dominated Edith Wharton herself, had she not battled against it with her powerful gift for social reductiveness. We can wonder whether even *The Age of Innocence*, with its Jamesian renunciations in the mode of *The Portrait of a Lady*, compensates us for what Wharton might have written, had she gone on with her own version of the American romance tradition of Hawthorne and Melville.
Twenty years after writing his essay of 1943 on Kipling (reprinted in *The Liberal Imagination*, 1951), Lionel Trilling remarked that if he could write the critique again, he would do it “less censoriously and with more affectionate admiration.” Trilling, always the representative critic of his era, reflected a movement in the evaluation of Kipling that still continues in 1987. I suspect that this movement will coexist with its dialectical counter-movement, of recoil against Kipling, as long as our literary tradition lasts. Kipling is an authentically popular writer, in every sense of the word. Stories like “The Man Who Would Be King”; children’s tales from *The Jungle Books* and the *Just So Stories*; the novel *Kim*, which is clearly Kipling’s masterpiece; certain late stories and dozens of ballads—these survive both as high literature and as perpetual entertainment. It is as though Kipling had set out to refute the Sublime function of literature, which is to make us forsake easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures.

In his speech on “Literature,” given in 1906, Kipling sketched a dark tale of the storyteller’s destiny:

There is an ancient legend which tells us that when a man first achieved a most notable deed he wished to explain to his Tribe what he had done. As soon as he began to speak, however, he was smitten with dumbness, he lacked words, and sat down. Then there arose—according to the story—a masterless man, one who had taken no part in the action of his fellow, who had no special virtues, but who was afflicted—that is the phrase—with the magic of the necessary word. He saw; he told; he described the merits of the
notable deed in such a fashion, we are assured, that the words “became alive and walked up and down in the hearts of all his hearers.” Thereupon, the Tribe seeing that the words were certainly alive, and fearing lest the man with the words would hand down untrue tales about them to their children, took and killed him. But, later, they saw that the magic was in the words, not in the man.

Seven years later, in the ghastly Primal History Scene of *Totem and Taboo*’s fourth chapter, Freud depicted a curiously parallel scene, where a violent primal father is murdered and devoured by his sons, who thus bring to an end the patriarchal horde. Kipling’s Primal Storytelling Scene features “a masterless man” whose only virtue is “the necessary word.” But he too is slain by the Tribe or primal horde, lest he transmit fictions about the Tribe to its children. Only later, in Freud, do the sons of the primal father experience remorse, and so “the dead father became stronger than the living one had been.” Only later, in Kipling, does the Tribe see “that the magic was in the words, not in the man.”

Freud’s true subject, in his Primal History Scene, was the transference, the carrying-over from earlier to later attachments of an over-determined affect. The true subject of Kipling’s Primal Storytelling Scene is not so much the Tale of the Tribe, or the magic that was in the words, but the storyteller’s freedom, the masterless man’s vocation that no longer leads to death, but that can lead to a death-in-life. What Kipling denies is his great fear, which is that the magic indeed is just as much in the masterless man as it is in the words.

Kipling, with his burly imperialism and his indulgences in anti-intellectualism, would seem at first out of place in the company of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and William Butler Yeats. Nevertheless, Kipling writes in the rhetorical stance of an aesthete, and is very much a Paterian in the metaphysical sense. The “Conclusion” to Pater’s *Renaissance* is precisely the credo of Kipling’s protagonists:

Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions.
Frank Kermode observed that Kipling was a writer “who steadfastly preferred action and machinery to the prevalent Art for Art’s Sake,” but that is to misread weakly what Pater meant by ending the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* with what soon became a notorious formula:

We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of this world,” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.

Like Pater, like Nietzsche, Kipling sensed that we possess and cherish fictions because the reductive truth would destroy us. “The love of art for art’s sake” simply means that we choose to believe in a fiction, while knowing that it is not true, to adopt Wallace Stevens’s version of the Paterian credo. And fiction, according to Kipling, was written by daemonic forces within us, by “some tragic dividing of forces on their ways.” Those forces are no more meaningful than the tales and ballads they produce. What Kipling shares finally with Pater is a deep conviction that we are caught always in a vortex of sensations, a solipsistic concourse of impressions piling upon one another, with great vividness but little consequence.

*Kim*

Kipling’s authentic precursor and literary hero was Mark Twain, whose *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* are reflected inescapably in *Kim*, certainly Kipling’s finest achievement. “An Interview with Mark Twain” records Kipling’s vision of the two hours of genial audience granted him, starting with Twain’s:

“Well, you think you owe me something, and you’ve come to tell me so. That’s what I call squaring a debt handsomely.”
Kim, permanent work as it is, does not square the debt, partly because Kim is, as David Bromwich notes, both Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, which is to confuse essentially opposed personalities. Since Kim is founded upon Huckleberry Finn, and not on Don Quixote, the mixing of Huck and Tom in Kim’s nature brings about a softening of focus that malforms the novel. We cannot find Sancho Panza in Kim, though there is a touch of the Don, as well as of Nigger Jim, in the lama. Insofar as he is free but lonely, Kim is Huck; insofar as he serves the worldly powers, he is Tom. It is striking that in his “Interview with Mark Twain,” Kipling expresses interest only in Tom Sawyer, asking Twain “whether we were ever going to hear of Tom Sawyer as a man.” I suspect that some anxiety of influence was involved, since Kim is the son of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and not of the lesser novel.

Kim is one of the great instances in the language of a popular adventure story that is also exalted literature. Huckleberry Finn is too astonishing a book, too nearly the epic of the American consciousness, together with Leaves of Grass and Moby-Dick, to be regarded as what it only pretends to be: a good yarn. Kim stations itself partly in that mode which ranges from Rider Haggard, at its nadir, to Robert Louis Stevenson, at its zenith: the boy’s romance crossing over into the ancient form of romance proper.

There are many splendors in Kim, but the greatest is surely the relation between Kim and his master, the lovable, half-mad Tibetan lama, who proves to be Kim’s true father, and to whom Kim becomes the best of sons. It is a triumph of the exact representation of profound human affection, rather than a sentimentality of any kind, that can move us to tears as the book ends:

“Hear me! I bring news! The Search is finished. Comes now the Reward: ... Thus. When we were among the Hills, I lived on thy strength till the young branch bowed and nigh broke. When we came out of the Hills, I was troubled for thee and for other matters which I held in my heart. The boat of my soul lacked direction; I could not see into the Cause of Things. So I gave thee over to the virtuous woman altogether. I took no food. I drank no water. Still I saw not the Way. They pressed food upon me and cried at my shut door. So I removed myself to a hollow under a tree. I took no food. I took no water. I sat in meditation two days and two nights, abstracting my mind; inbreathing and outbreathing in the required manner... Upon the second night—so great was my reward—the wise Soul loosed itself from the silly Body and went free. This I have never before attained, though I have stood on the threshold of it. Consider, for it is a marvel!”
“A marvel indeed. Two days and two nights without food! Where was the Sahiba?” said Kim under his breath.

“Yea, my Soul went free, and, wheeling like an eagle, saw indeed that there was no Teshoo Lama nor any other soul. As a drop draws to water, so my soul drew near to the Great Soul which is beyond all things. At that point, exalted in contemplation, I saw all Hind, from Ceylon in the sea to the Hills, and my own Painted Rocks at Such-zen; I saw every camp and village, to the least, where we have ever rested. I saw them at one time and in one place; for they were within the Soul. By this I knew the Soul had passed beyond the illusion of Time and Space and of Things. By this I knew that I was free. I saw thee lying in thy cot, and I saw thee falling down hill under the idolater—at one time, in one place, in my Soul, which, as I say, had touched the Great Soul. Also I saw the stupid body of Teshoo Lama lying down, and the bakim from Dacca kneeled beside, shouting in its ear. Then my Soul was all alone, and I saw nothing, for I was all things, having reached the Great Soul. And I meditated a thousand years, passionless, well aware of the Causes of all Things. Then a voice cried: ‘What shall come to the boy if thou art dead?’ and I was shaken back and forth in myself with pity for thee; and I said: ‘I will return to my chela, lest he miss the Way.’ Upon this my Soul, which is the soul of Teshoo Lama, withdrew itself from the Great Soul with strivings and yearnings and retchings and agonies not to be told. As the egg from the fish, as the fish from the water, as the water from the cloud, as the cloud from the thick air, so put forth, so leaped out, so drew away, so fumed up the soul of Teshoo Lama from the Great Soul. Then a voice cried: ‘The River! Take heed to the River!’ and I looked down upon all the world, which was as I had seen it before—one in time, one in place—and I saw plainly the River of the Arrow at my feet. At that hour my Soul was hampered by some evil or other whereof I was not wholly cleansed, and it lay upon my arms and coiled round my waist; but I put it aside, and I cast forth as an eagle in my flight for the very place of the River. I pushed aside world upon world for thy sake. I saw the River below me—the River of the Arrow—and, descending, the waters of it closed over me; and behold I was again in the body of Teshoo Lama, but free from sin, and the bakim from Dacca bore up my head in the waters of the River. It is here! It is behind the mango-tope here—even here!”

“Allah Kerim! Oh, well that the Babu was by! Wast thou very wet?”
“Why should I regard? I remember the *bakim* was concerned for the body of Teshoo Lama. He haled it out of the holy water in his hands, and there came afterwards thy horse-seller from the North with a cot and men, and they put the body on the cot and bore it up to the Sahiba’s house.”

“What said the Sahiba?”

“I was meditating in that body, and did not hear. So thus the Search is ended. For the merit that I have acquired, the River of the Arrow is here. It broke forth at our feet, as I have said. I have found it. Son of my Soul, I have wrenched my Soul back from the Threshold of Freedom to free thee from all sin—as I am free, and sinless. Just is the Wheel! Certain is our deliverance. Come!”

He crossed his hands on his lap and smiled, as a man may who has won Salvation for himself and his beloved.

This long passage builds, through radiant apprehensions, to an extraordinarily controlled and calm epiphany of parental love. The vision of the lama, though it presents itself as the wise soul’s freed om from the silly body, is clearly not dualistic, but is caused by the lama’s honest declaration: “I was troubled for thee.” Caught up in the freedom from illusion, and free therefore supposedly of any concern for other souls, since, like one’s own, they are not, the lama is close to the final freedom: “for I was all things.” The voice that cries him back to life is the voice of his fatherly love for Kim, and the reward for his return to existence, negating mystical transport, is his true vision of the River, goal of his quest. It breaks forth at his feet, and is better than freedom, because it is not merely solitary, but is Salvation for his beloved adopted son, as well as for himself.

Certainly this is Kipling’s most humane and hopeful moment, normative and positive. *Kim* is, like its more masterly precursor work, *Huckleberry Finn*, a book that returns us to the central values, avoiding those shadows of the abyss that hover uneasily elsewhere in Kipling. Yet even here the darker and truer Kipling lingers, in the sudden vision of nothingness that Kim experiences, only a few pages before his final reunion with the lama:

At first his legs bent like bad pipe-stems, and the flood and rush of the sunlit air dazzled him. He squatted by the white wall, the mind rummaging among the incidents of the long *dooli* journey, the lama’s weaknesses, and, now that the stimulus of talk was removed, his own self-pity, of which, like the sick, he had great store. The unnerved brain edged away from all the outside, as a raw horse, once rowelled, sidles from the spur. It was enough,
amply enough, that the spoil of the *kicta* was away—off his hands—out of his possession. He tried to think of the lama,—to wonder why he had tumbled into a brook,—but the bigness of the world, seen between the forecourt gates, swept linked thought aside. Then he looked upon the trees and the broad fields, with the thatched huts hidden among crops—looked with strange eyes unable to take up the size and proportion and use of things—stared for a still half-hour. All that while he felt, though he could not put it into words, that his soul was out of gear with its surroundings—a cog-wheel unconnected with any machinery, just like the idle cog-wheel of a cheap Beheea sugar-crusher laid by in a corner. The breezes fanned over him, the parrots shrieked at him, the noises of the populated house behind—squabbles, orders, and reproofs—hit on dead ears.

“I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?” His soul repeated it again and again.

Despite the Indian imagery and the characteristic obsession of Kipling with machinery, the mark of Walter Pater’s aesthetic impressionism, with its sensations beckoning us to the abyss, is clearly set upon this passage. Identity flees with the flux of impressions, and the dazzlement of “the flood and rush of the sunlit air” returns us to the cosmos of the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. Kipling’s art, in *Kim*, is after all art for art’s sake, in the dark predicate that there is nothing else. The extravagant fiction of the great love between an Irish boy gone native in India, half a Huck Finn enthralled with freedom and half a Tom Sawyer playing games with authority, and a quixotic, aged Tibetan lama is Kipling’s finest invention, and moves us endlessly. But how extravagant a fiction it is, and had to be! Kipling refused to profess the faith of those who live and die for and by art, yet in the end he had no other faith.
Willa Cather

(1873–1947)

Willa Cather, though now somewhat neglected, has few rivals among the American novelists of this century. Critics and readers frequently regard her as belonging to an earlier time, though she died in 1947. Her best novels were published in the years 1918–31, so that truly she was a novelist of the 1920’s, an older contemporary and peer of Hemingway and of Scott Fitzgerald. Unlike them, she did not excel at the short story, though there are some memorable exceptions scattered through her four volumes of tales. Her strength is her novels and particularly, in my judgment, *My Ántonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor’s House* (1925); fictions worthy of a disciple of Flaubert and Henry James. Equally beautiful and achieved, but rather less central, are the subsequent historical novels, the very popular *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). Her second novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), is only just short of the eminence of this grand sequence. Six permanent novels is a remarkable number for a modern American writer; I can think only of Faulkner as Cather’s match in this respect, since he wrote six truly enduring novels, all published during his great decade, 1929–39.

Cather’s remoteness from the fictive universe of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner is palpable, though all of them shared her nostalgia for an older America. She appears, at first, to have no aesthetic affinities with her younger contemporaries. We associate her instead with Sarah Orne Jewett, about whom she wrote a loving essay, or even with Edith Wharton, whom she scarcely resembles. Cather’s mode of engaging with the psychic realities of post–World War I America is more oblique than Fitzgerald’s or Hemingway’s, but it is just as apposite a representation of the era’s malaise. The short novel *A Lost Lady* (1923) is not out of its aesthetic context when we read it in the company of *The Waste Land*, *The
Comedian as the Letter C, The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby and An American Tragedy. Subtler and gentler than any of these, A Lost Lady eulogizes just as profoundly a lost radiance or harmony, a defeat of a peculiarly American dream of innocence, grace, hope.

My Ántonia and A Lost Lady

Henry James, Cather’s guide both as critic and novelist, died in England early in 1916. The year before, replying to H.G. Wells after being satirized by him, James wrote a famous credo: “Art makes life, makes interest, makes importance.” This is Cather’s faith also. One hears the voice of James when, in her essay “On the Art of Fiction,” she writes: “Any first-rate novel or story must have in it the strength of a dozen fairly good stories that have been sacrificed to it.” Those sacrifices of possibility upon the altar of form were the ritual acts of Cather’s quite Paterian religion of art, too easily misread as a growing religiosity by many critics commenting upon Death Comes for the Archbishop. Herself a belated Aesthete, Cather emulated a familiar pattern of being attracted by the aura and not the substance of Roman Catholicism. New Mexico, and not Rome, is her place of the spirit, a spirit of the archaic and not of the supernatural.

Cather’s social attitudes were altogether archaic. She shared a kind of Populist anti-Semitism with many American writers of her own generation and the next: Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Ezra Pound, Thomas Wolfe, even Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Her own version of anti-Semitism is curiously marked by her related aversion to heterosexuality. She had lost her first companion, Isabelle McClung, to a Jewish violinist, Jan Hambourg, and the Jewish figures in her fiction clearly represent the aggressivity of male sexuality. The Professor’s House is marred by the gratuitous identification of the commercial exploitation of Cather’s beloved West with Marcellus, the Professor’s Jewish son-in-law. Doubtless, Cather’s most unfortunate piece of writing was her notorious essay in 1914, “Potash and Perlmutter,” in which she lamented, mock-heroically, that New York City was becoming too Jewish. Perhaps she was learning the lesson of the master again, since she is repeating, in a lighter tone, the complaint of Henry James in The American Scene (1907). She repeated her own distaste for “Jewish critics,” tainted as they were by Freud, in the essay on Sarah Orne Jewett written quite late in her career, provoking Lionel Trilling to the just accusation that she had become a mere defender of gentility, mystically concerned with pots and pans.

This dark side of Cather, though hardly a value in itself, would not much matter except that it seeped into her fiction as a systemic resentment
of her own era. Nietzsche, analyzing resentment, might be writing of Cather. Freud, analyzing the relation between paranoia and homosexuality, might be writing of her also. I am wary of being reductive in such observations, and someone perpetually mugged by Feminist critics as “the Patriarchal critic” is too battered to desire any further polemic. Cather, in my judgment, is aesthetically strongest and most persuasive in her loving depiction of her heroines and of Ántonia and the lost lady Mrs. Forrester in particular. She resembles Thomas Hardy in absolutely nothing, except in the remarkable ability to seduce the reader into joining the novelist at falling in love with the heroine. I am haunted by memories of having fallen in love with Marty South in *The Woodlanders*, and with Ántonia and Mrs. Forrester when I was a boy of fifteen. Rereading *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady* now at fifty-four, I find that the love renews itself. I doubt that I am falling again into what my late and honored teacher William K. Wimsatt named as the Affective Fallacy, since love for a woman made up out of words is necessarily a cognitive affair.

Cather’s strength at representation gives us Jim Burden and Niel Herbert as her clear surrogates, unrealized perhaps as figures of sexual life, but forcefully conveyed as figures of capable imagination, capable above all of apprehending and transmitting the extraordinary actuality and visionary intensity of Ántonia and Mrs. Forrester. Like her masters, James and Pater, Cather had made her supposed deficiency into her strength, fulfilling the overt program of Emersonian self-reliance. But nothing is got for nothing, Emerson also indicated, and Cather, again like James and Pater, suffered the reverse side of the law of Compensation. The flaws, aesthetic and human, are there, even in *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor’s House*, but they scarcely diminish the beauty and dignity of three profound studies of American nostalgias.

II

Cather is hardly the only vital American novelist to have misread creatively the spirit of his or her own work. Her essential imaginative knowledge was of loss, which she interpreted temporally, though her loss was aboriginal, in the Romantic mode of Wordsworth, Emerson and all their varied descendants. The glory that had passed away belonged not to the pioneers but to her own transparent eyeball, her own original relation to the universe. Rhetorically, she manifests this knowledge, which frequently is at odds with her overt thematicism. Here is Jim Burden’s first shared moment with Ántonia, when they both were little children:
We sat down and made a nest in the long red grass. Yulka curled up like a baby rabbit and played with a grasshopper. Ántonia pointed up to the sky and questioned me with her glance. I gave her the word, but she was not satisfied and pointed to my eyes. I told her, and she repeated the word, making it sound like “ice.” She pointed up to the sky, then to my eyes, then back to the sky, with movements so quick and impulsive that she distracted me, and I had no idea what she wanted. She got up on her knees and wrung her hands. She pointed to her own eyes and shook her head, then to mine and to the sky, nodding violently.

“Oh,” I exclaimed, “blue; blue sky.”

She clapped her hands and murmured, “Blue sky, blue eyes,” as if it amused her. While we snuggled down there out of the wind, she learned a score of words. She was quick, and very eager. We were so deep in the grass that we could see nothing but the blue sky over us and the gold tree in front of us. It was wonderfully pleasant. After Ántonia had said the new words over and over, she wanted to give me a little chased silver ring she wore on her middle finger. When she coaxed and insisted, I repulsed her quite sternly. I didn’t want her ring, and I felt there was something reckless and extravagant about her wishing to give it away to a boy she had never seen before. No wonder Krajiek got the better of these people, if this was how they behaved.

One imagines that Turgenev would have admired this, and it would not be out of place inserted in his *A Sportman’s Sketchbook*. Its naturalistic simplicity is deceptive. Wallace Stevens, in a letter of 1940, observed of Cather: “you may think she is more or less formless. Nevertheless, we have nothing better than she is. She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality.” The quality here is partly manifested by an exuberance of trope and a precision of diction, both in the service of a fresh American myth of origin. Nesting and curling up in an embowered world of baby rabbits and grasshoppers, the children are at home in a universe of “blue sky, blue eyes.” Heaven and earth come together, where vision confronts only the gold of trees. Ántonia, offering the fullness of a symbolic union to him, is rebuffed partly by the boy’s shyness, and partly by Cather’s own proleptic fear that the reckless generosity of the pioneer is doomed to exploitation. Yet the passage’s deepest intimation is that Jim, though falling in love with Ántonia, is constrained by an inner recalcitrance, which the reader is free to interpret in several ways, none of which need exclude the others.
This is Cather in the springtide of her imagination. In her vision’s early fall, we find ourselves regarding her lost lady Mrs. Forrester and we are comforted, as the boy Niel Herbert is, “in the quick recognition of her eyes, in the living quality of her voice itself.” The book’s splendor is that, like Mrs. Forrester’s laughter, “it often told you a great deal that was both too direct and too elusive for words.” As John Hollander shrewdly notes, Mrs. Forrester does not become a lost lady in any social or moral sense, but imaginatively she is transformed into Niel’s “long-lost lady.” Lost or refound, she is “his” always, even as Ántonia always remains Jim Burden’s “my Ántonia.” In her ability to suggest a love that is permanent, life-enhancing, and in no way possessive, Cather touches the farthest limit of her own strength as a novelist. If one could choose a single passage from all her work, it would be the Paterian epiphany or privileged moment in which Mrs. Forrester’s image returned to Niel as “a bright, impersonal memory.” Pater ought to have lived to have read this marvelous instance of the art he had celebrated and helped to stimulate in Cather:

Her eyes; when they laughed for a moment into one’s own, seemed to provide a wild delight that he had not found in life. “I know where it is,” they seemed to say, “I could show you!” He would like to call up the shade of the young Mrs. Forrester, as the witch of Endor called up Samuel’s, and challenge it, demand the secret of that ardour; ask her whether she had really found some ever-blooming, ever-burning, ever-piercing joy, or whether it was all fine play-acting. Probably she had found no more than another; but she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring.

It is the perfection of Cather’s difficult art, when that art was most balanced and paced, and Mrs. Forrester here is the emblem of that perfection. Cather’s fiction, at its frequent best, also suggests things much lovelier than itself. The reader, demanding the secret of Cather’s ardour, learns not to challenge what may be remarkably fine play-acting, since Cather’s feigning sometimes does persuade him that really she had found some perpetual joy.
Herman Hesse
(1877–1962)

Magister Ludi (The Glass Bead Game) and Steppenwolf

When I was young, both Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947) and Hermann Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* (1943) were accepted as the two indubitable post–World War II German classics. Hesse, on the strength of *The Glass Bead Game*, his final novel, joined Mann as a Nobel laureate. The two novels seemed the last words of an older, Liberal Germany upon the dreadful debasement of the German spirit under the Nazis.

Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* each attracts more readers today than *Doctor Faustus* and *The Glass Bead Game*, at least in the United States, if not also in Germany. The ironies of both Mann and Hesse have obscured their comedic aspects: Thomas von der Trave in *The Glass Bead Game* is a parodistic portrait of Thomas Mann, while Hesse’s Fritz Tegularius plainly parodies Friedrich Nietzsche, and his Father Jacobus is an ironical version of Jakob Burckhardt.

Hesse had a posthumous revival in the Counter-Cultural American Seventies, when *Demian*, *Siddhartha*, and *Steppenwolf* suited the Zeitgeist. The complex allegory of *The Glass Bead Game* attracted far fewer readers, though for a time *Doctor Faustus* had a substantial audience. Today both books, though admirably composed, are rather neglected, and rereading demonstrates that each remains considerably more than a Period Piece. The dumbing-down of high culture makes the survival of either book somewhat problematical, alas.

In some ways the Glass Bead Game, the game rather than the book, can now be regarded as a synthesis of Western literary and musical culture akin to the Western Canons of literature and of “classical” music. The imaginary province of Castalia (the fountain of the Muses) is a science-fiction
projection into a nonexistent cultural future. Joseph Knecht (whose name means “servant”) is both the fulfillment and the reduction of the Castalian aesthetic ideal.

I find myself, in 2002, regarding Hesse’s Castalia with a certain nostalgia, for its equivalents in literary criticism—such as the work of E.R. Curtius, Northrop Frye, Kenneth Burke—largely have been replaced by the curious entity now called Cultural Studies in most Anglo-American universities. As a strenuous opponent of Cultural Studies, I myself have just published a vast book that is a kind of Kabbalistic Glass Bead Game, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds*. Hesse is not among those minds (though Mann is) but I find myself ironically wondering if my book is not, after all, another vision of Castalia, another metaphor for a waning, soon perhaps to be lost high culture.

Aestheticism, in the face of the Nazi horror, seemed not a pragmatic possibility for Hesse and for Mann. Without necessarily regarding both *The Glass Bead Game* and *Doctor Faustus* as more than great but flawed fictions, Aestheticism in 2002 hardly seems a useless alternative to the Age of Information, Corporate corruption, and Bushian bellicose sanctimoniousness. Bach, Mozart, Shakespeare and Dante seem absolute goods in themselves, even when cut off from our dwindling cultural possibilities.

Castalia, rejected by Knecht, looks very different to me in 2002 than it did in the 1940s. The American equivalent of the musical aspect of the Glass Bead Game is the jazz of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Bud Powell, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk. An American Castalia might counterpoint classic jazz with the superb American poetical tradition: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, Hart Crane and Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill and John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons. Our Glass Bead Game might fuse Charlie Parker and Wallace Stevens, thus synthesizing an art of nuance that transcends the concerns and the capacities of Cultural Criticism.

In 2002, the sacrifice of Joseph Knecht seems to me a spiritual mistake. The cultural commissars of Resentment regard Knecht’s demise as another proof of their polemic that all art must be political. Hesse, a sensitive lyric novelist, was not an adequate prophet of the cultural malaise we all need to combine to defeat.
The Jungle

My introduction reluctantly admits that The Jungle (1906) is a period piece: to read it, one puts one's uphill shoulder to the wheel, and feels proper gratitude to Upton Sinclair's book, which helped give us the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

Jon A. Yoder sadly comments that the public received The Jungle as muckraking, rather than as an indictment of capitalism, while Michael Brewster Folsom accurately indicts Upton Sinclair for racism, and for spoiling his novel's conclusion.

A poignant defense of the book is offered by the scholarly and brilliant Morris Dickstein, who tries to save The Jungle by citing our New Age of the nonfiction novel and the New Journalism.

Timothy Cook usefully traces the influence of Upton Sinclair's novel upon George Orwell's Animal Farm, after which Carl S. Smith recounts Sinclair's description of the stockyards as a "combination of Babel, bedlam, and hell."

In R.N. Mookerjee's reading, the novel comes apart when Sinclair moves from a vision of human suffering to a sermon for socialism, while Emory Elliott, though acknowledging Sinclair's racism, praised him for showing the destructive effect upon poor people when they live without hope for the future.

The analogue between Jack London's The Call of the Wild and The Jungle is worked through by Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, after which Scott Derrick meditates upon Sinclair's bondage to masculine myths of gender-rules.

In this volume's final essay, Matthew J. Morris interestingly analyzes
Sinclair’s unsuccessful struggle to find a narrative mode that could show the killing power of capitalism without adding just one more representation of that power that involuntarily helps to prolong it.

In his ninety years Upton Sinclair wrote ninety books, almost got elected Governor of California (1934), and died knowing that he had helped pass the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, and had lived to be Lyndon Johnson’s guest observer of the signing of the Wholesome Meat Act (1967). That is hardly a wasted life, though *The Jungle* is now only a rather drab period piece, and the other books are totally unreadable.

Morris Dickstein and Emory Elliott between them have done as much as can be done for *The Jungle*, which I have just reread, with curiosity and revulsion, more than half a century after my first encounter with the book. I dimly recall having found it both somber and harrowing, but I was very young, and both experiential and literary sorrows have made me more impatient with it now. American naturalistic writing can survive a certain crudity in style and procedure; Dreiser in particular transcends such limitations in *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. But Sinclair has nothing of Dreiser’s preternatural powers of empathy. What Sinclair tries to do is simply beyond his gifts: his people are names on the page, and his inability to represent social reality makes me long for Balzac and Zola, or even Tom Wolfe.

Time is cruel to inadequate literature, though it can be slow in its remorselessness. The young have a remarkable taste for period pieces; I note that my paperback copy of *The Jungle*, published in 1981, is in its thirty-third printing, and I suspect that most of it has been sold to younger people, in or out of class. I meditate incessantly on the phenomenon of period pieces, surrounded as I am by so many bad books proclaimed as instant classics, while John Crowley’s *Little, Big* (1981), a fantasy novel I have read through scores of times, is usually out-of-print, as it is at the moment. Patience, patience. The Harry Potter books will be on the rubbish piles, though after I myself are gone, and *Little, Big* will join the *Alice* books of Lewis Carroll and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*.

As a literary critic who has covered the waterfront, for a while now, I find the mountain of mail that comes to me instructive, even though I cannot answer it, or even acknowledge it, if I myself am to go on reading, writing, teaching, and living. The two constant piles of vituperative missives come from Oxfordians, poor souls desperate to prove that Edward De Vere wrote all of Shakespeare, and Harry Potterites, of all ages and nationalities. The rage of the partisans of the Earl of Oxford, though crazy and unpleasant, baffles me less than the outrage of the legions of Potterites. Why are they so vulnerable to having their taste and judgment questioned?
No matter how fiercely we dumb down, led in this by *The New York Times Book Review* and the once-elite universities, period pieces seem to induce uneasy sensations in their contemporary enthusiasts. On tour in Turin, a year ago, I found myself talking about my *How to Read and Why* (Italian version) at an academy for writers called the Holden School, in honor of Salinger’s hero. When the school’s head, my host, a novelist, asked me why my book said nothing about *The Catcher in the Rye*, I gently intimated that I considered it a period piece, that would go on, perhaps for quite a while, but then would perish. Honest judgment has its costs, and I was shown out rather coldly when I departed. All critics, I know, are subject to error: my hero, Dr. Samuel Johnson, nodded in the terrible sentence: “*Tristram Shandy* did not last.” And yet I wonder, as I age onwards, what it is in us that makes us so bitter when period pieces expire, if we are one of the survivors of a dead vogue?
Stephen Crane
(1879–1900)

Stephen Crane’s contribution to the canon of American literature is fairly slight in bulk: one classic short novel, three vivid stories, and two or three ironic lyrics. *The Red Badge of Courage*, “The Open Boat,” “The Blue Hotel,” and “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”; “War is Kind” and “A Man Adrift on a Slim Spar”—a single small volume can hold them all. Crane was dead at twenty-eight, after a frantic life, but a longer existence probably would not have enhanced his achievement. He was an exemplary American writer, flaring in the forehead of the morning sky and vanishing in the high noon of our evening land. An original, if not quite a Great Original, he prophesied Hemingway and our other journalist-novelists and still seems a forerunner of much to come.

The Red Badge of Courage

Rereading *The Red Badge of Courage*, it is difficult to believe that it was written by a young man not yet twenty-four, who had never seen battle. Dead of tuberculosis at twenty-eight, Stephen Crane nevertheless had written a canonical novel, three remarkable stories, and a handful of permanent poems. He was a singular phenomenon: his father, grandfather and great-uncle all were evangelical Methodists, intensely puritanical. Crane, precocious both as man-of-letters and as journalist, kept living out what Freud called “rescue of fantasies,” frequently with prostitutes. His common-law marriage, which sustained him until his early death, was with Cora Taylor, whom he first met when she was madame of a Florida bordello. Incongruously, Crane—who was *persona non-grata* to the New York City police—lived a brief, exalted final phase in England, where he became close to the great novelists Joseph Conrad and Henry James, both of whom greatly admired Crane’s writing.
Had Crane lived, he doubtless would have continued his epic impressions of war, and confirmed his status as a crucial forerunner of Ernest Hemingway. And yet his actual observations of battle, of Americans against Spaniards in Cuba, and of Greeks against Turks, led to war-writing greatly inferior to his imaginings in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Perhaps Crane would have developed in other directions, had he survived. It is difficult to envision Crane improving upon *The Red Badge of Courage*, which is better battle-writing than Hemingway and Norman Mailer could accomplish. The great visionaries of warfare—Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Tolstoy—necessarily are beyond Crane’s art, but in American literature he is surpassed in this mode only by the Cormac McCarthy of *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy writes in the baroque, high rhetorical manner of Melville and Faulkner. Crane, a very original impressionist, was a Conradian before he read Conrad. I sometimes hear Kipling’s prose style in Crane, but the echoes are indistinct and fleeting, almost as though the battlefield visionary had just read *The Jungle Book*. Kipling, though also a great journalist, could not provide Crane with a paradigm to assist in the recreation of the bloody battle of Chancellorsville (May 2–4, 1863). Harold Beaver suggests that Stendhal and Tolstoy did that labor for Crane, which is highly feasible, and Beaver is also interesting in suggesting that Crane invented a kind of expressionism in his hallucinatory, camera-eye visions, as here in Chapter 7 of the *Red Badge*:

Once he found himself almost into a swamp. He was obliged to walk upon bog tufts and watch his feet to keep from the oily mire. Pausing at one time to look about him he saw, out at some black water, a small animal pounce in and emerge directly with a gleaming fish.

The youth went again into the deep thickets. The brushed branches made a noise that drowned the sound of cannon. He walked on, going from obscurity into promises of a greater obscurity.

At length he reached a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. He softly pushed the green doors aside and entered. Pine needles were a gentle brown carpet. There was a religious half light.

Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing.

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the
dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip.

This is a kind of pure, visual irony, nihilistic and parodistic, beyond meaning, or with meanings beyond control. On a grander scale, here is the famous account of the color sergeant’s death in Chapter 19:

Over the field went the scurrying mass. It was a handful of men splattered into the faces of the enemy. Toward it instantly sprang the yellow tongues. A vast quantity of blue smoke hung before them. A mighty banging made ears valueless.

The youth ran like a madman to reach the woods before a bullet could discover him. He ducked his head low, like a football player. In his haste his eyes almost closed, and the scene was a wild blur. Pulsating saliva stood at the corners of his mouth.

Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him. It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes. Because no harm could come to it he endowed it with power. He kept near, as if it could be a saver of lives, and an imploring cry went from his mind.

In the mad scramble he was aware that the color sergeant flinched suddenly, as if struck by a bludgeon. He faltered, and then became motionless, save for his quivery knees.

He made a spring and a clutch at the pole. At the same instant his friend grabbed it from the other side. They jerked at it, stout and furious, but the color sergeant was dead, and the corpse would not relinquish its trust. For a moment there was a grim encounter. The dead man, swinging with bended back, seemed to be obstinately tugging, in ludicrous and awful ways, for the possession of the flag.

It was past in an instant of time. They wrenched the flag furiously from the dead man, and, as they turned again, the corpse swayed forward with bowed head. One arm swung high, and the curved hand fell with heavy protest on the friend’s unheeding shoulder.
The flag and the color sergeant's corpse become assimilated to one another, and the phantasmagoria of the flag-as-woman is highly ambivalent, being both an object of desire, and potentially destructive: “hating and loving.” Crane’s vision again is nihilistic, and reminds us that even his title is an irony, since the ultimate red badge of courage would be a death-wound.

**Maggie**

As in his masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Stephen Crane relies upon pure imagination in composing his first narrative fiction, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Crane had never seen a battle when he wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*, and he scarcely had encountered the low life of the Bowery before he produced *Maggie*. Ironically, he was to have all too much of slum life after *Maggie* was printed, and to see more than enough bloodshed as a war correspondent, after *The Red Badge of Courage* had made him famous.

*Maggie* is a curious book to reread, partly because of its corrosive irony, but also it hurts to encounter again the over-determined ruin of poor Maggie. Her ghastly family, dreadful lover, and incessant poverty all drive her into prostitution and the ambiguous death by drowning, which may be suicide or victimage by murder.

The minimal but authentic aesthetic dignity of *Maggie* results from the strangeness so frequently characteristic of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism. Zola, whose influence seems strong in *Maggie*, actually created a visionary naturalism, more phantasmagoric than realistic. Crane, impressionist and ironist, goes even further in *Maggie*, a laconic experiment in word-painting. Crane’s imagery is Hogarthian yet modified by an original perspectivism, irrealistic and verging upon surrealism. Maggie herself is an uncanny prophecy of what was to be the central relationship of Crane’s brief life, his affair with Cora Taylor, who ran a bordello in Jacksonville, Florida. She accompanied him to England, where their friends included Joseph Conrad and Henry James, and she sustained him through the agony of his early death.
E.M. Forster

(1879–1970)

Howards End and A Passage to India

E.M. Forster's canonical critic was Lionel Trilling, who might have written Forster's novels had Forster not written them and had Trilling been English. Trilling ended his book on Forster (1924) with the tribute that forever exalts the author of Howards End and A Passage to India as one of those storytellers whose efforts “work without man's consciousness of them, and even against his conscious will.” In Trilling's sympathetic interpretation (or identification), Forster was the true antithesis to the world of telegrams and anger:

A world at war is necessarily a world of will; in a world at war Forster reminds us of a world where the will is not everything, of a world of true order, of the necessary connection of passion and prose, and of the strange paradoxes of being human. He is one of those who raise the shield of Achilles, which is the moral intelligence of art, against the panic and emptiness which make their onset when the will is tired from its own excess.

Trilling subtly echoed Forster's own response to World War I, a response which Forster recalled as an immersion in Blake, William Morris, the early T.S. Eliot, J.K. Huysmans, Yeats: “They took me into a country where the will was not everything.” Yet one can wonder whether Forster and Trilling, prophets of the liberal imagination, did not yield to a vision where there was not quite enough conscious will. A Passage to India, Forster's most famous work, can sustain many rereadings, so intricate is its orchestration. It is one of only a few novels of this century that is written-through, in the musical sense of thorough composition. But reading it yet again, after
twenty years away from it, I find it to be a narrative all of whose principal figures—Aziz, Fielding, Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore, Godbole—lack conscious will. Doubtless, this is Forster’s deliberate art, but the consequence is curious; the characters do not sustain rereading so well as the novel does, because none is larger than the book. Poldy holds my imagination quite apart from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, as Isabel Archer does in James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, or indeed as Mrs. Wilcox does in Forster’s *Howards End*, at least while she is represented as being alive. The aesthetic puzzle of *A Passage to India* is why Aziz and Fielding could not have been stronger and more vivid beings than they are.

What matters most in *A Passage to India* is India, and not any Indians nor any English. But this assertion requires amendment, since Forster’s India is not so much a social or cultural reality as it is an enigmatic vision of the Hindu religion, or rather of the Hindu religion as it is reimagined by the English liberal mind at its most sensitive and scrupulous. The largest surprise of a careful rereading of *A Passage to India* after so many years is that, in some aspects, it now seems a strikingly religious book. Forster shows us what we never ought to have forgotten, which is that any distinction between religious and secular literature is finally a mere political or societal polemic, but is neither a spiritual nor an aesthetic judgment. There is no sacred literature and no post-sacred literature, great or good. *A Passage to India* falls perhaps just short of greatness, in a strict aesthetic judgment, but spiritually it is an extraordinary achievement.

T.S. Eliot consciously strove to be a devotional poet, and certainly did become a Christian polemicist as a cultural and literary critic. Forster, an amiable freethinker and secular humanist, in his *Commonplace Book* admirably compared himself to Eliot:

With Eliot? I feel now to be as far ahead of him as I was once behind. Always a distance—and a respectful one. How I dislike his homage to pain! What a mind except the human could have excogitated it? Of course there’s pain on and off through each individual’s life, and pain at the end of most lives. You can’t shirk it and so on. But why should it be endorsed by the schoolmaster and sanctified by the priest

until the fire and the rose are

one when so much of it is caused by disease or by bullies? It is here that Eliot becomes unsatisfactory as a seer.
One could add: it is here that Forster becomes most satisfactorily as a seer, for that is the peculiar excellence of *A Passage to India*. We are reminded that Forster is another of John Ruskin’s heirs, together with Proust, whom Forster rightly admired above all other modern novelists. Forster too wishes to make us see, in the hope that by seeing we will learn to connect, with ourselves and with others, and like Ruskin, Forster knows that seeing in this strong sense is religious, but in a mode beyond dogmatism.

II

*A Passage to India*, published in 1924, reflects Forster’s service as private secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior in 1921–22, which in turn issued from his Indian visit of 1912–13 with G. Lowes Dickinson. It was not until 1953 that Forster published *The Hill of Devi*, utilizing letters he had written home from India, both forty and thirty years before. *The Hill of Devi* celebrates Forster’s Maharajah as a kind of saint, indeed as a religious genius, though Forster is anything but persuasive when he attempts to sustain his judgment of his friend and employer. What does come through is Forster’s appreciation of certain elements in Hinduism, an appreciation that achieves its apotheosis in *A Passage to India*, and particularly in “Temple,” the novel’s foreshortened final part. Forster’s ultimate tribute to his Maharajah, a muddler in practical matters and so one who died in disgrace, is a singular testimony for a freethinker. *The Hill of Devi* concludes with what must be called a mystical apprehension:

His religion was the deepest thing in him. It ought to be studied—neither by the psychologist nor by the mythologist but by the individual who has experienced similar promptings. He penetrated in to rare regions and he was always hoping that others would follow him there.

What are those promptings? Where are those regions? Are these the questions fleshed out by *A Passage to India*? After observing the mystical Maharajah dance before the altar of the God Krishna, Forster quotes from a letter by the Maharajah describing the festival, and then attempts what replies seem possible:

Such was his account. But what did he feel when he danced like King David before the altar? What were his religious opinions?

The first question is easier to answer than the second. He felt as King David and other mystics have felt when they are in the
mystic state. He presented well-known characteristics. He was convinced that he was in touch with the reality he called Krishna. And he was unconscious of the world around him. “You can come in during my observances tomorrow and see me if you like, but I shall not know that you are there,” he once told Malcolm. And he didn’t know. He was in an abnormal but recognisable state; psychologists have studied it.

More interesting, and more elusive, are his religious opinions. The unseen was always close to him, even when he was joking or intriguing. Red paint on a stone could evoke it. Like most people, he implied beliefs and formulated rules for behaviour, and since he had a lively mind, he was often inconsistent. It was difficult to be sure what he did believe (outside the great mystic moments) or what he thought right or wrong. Indians are even more puzzling than Westerners here. Mr. Shastri, a spiritual and subtle Brahmin, once uttered a puzzler: “If the Gods do a thing, it is a reason for men not to do it.” No doubt he was in a particular religious mood. In another mood he would have urged us to imitate the Gods. And the Maharajah was all moods. They played over his face, they agitated his delicate feet and hands. To get any pronouncement from so mercurial a creature on the subject, say, of asceticism, was impossible. As a boy, he had thought of retiring from the world, and it was an ideal which he cherished throughout his life, and which, at the end, he would have done well to practise. Yet he would condemn asceticism, declare that salvation could not be reached through it, that it might be Vedantic but it was not Vedic, and matter and spirit must both be given their due. Nothing too much! In such a mood he seemed Greek.

He believed in the heart, and here we reach firmer ground. “I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head,” cries Herman Melville, and he would have agreed. Affection, or the possibility of it, quivered through everything, from Gokul Ashtami down to daily human relationships. When I returned to England and he heard that I was worried because the post-war world of the ‘20’s would not add up into sense, he sent me a message. “Tell him,” it ran, “tell him from me to follow his heart, and his mind will see everything clear.” The message as phrased is too facile: doors open into silliness at once. But to remember and respect and prefer the heart, to have the instinct which follows it wherever possible—what surer help than that could one have through life? What better hope of clarification? Melville goes on: “The reason that
the mass of men fear God and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart.” With that too he would have agreed.

With all respect for Forster, neither he nor his prince is coherent here, and I suspect that Forster is weakly misreading Melville, who is both more ironic and more Gnostic than Forster chooses to realize. Melville, too, distrusts the heart of Jehovah, and consigns the head to the dogs precisely because he associates the head with Jehovah and identifies Jehovah with the Demiurge, the god of this world. More vital would be the question: what does Professor Godbole in \textit{A Passage to India} believe? Is he more coherent than the Maharajah, and does Forster himself achieve a more unified vision there than he does in \textit{The Hill of Devi}?

Criticism from Lionel Trilling on has evaded these questions, but such evasion is inevitable because Forster may be vulnerable to the indictment that he himself made against Joseph Conrad, to the effect that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret cas- ket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write. No creed, in fact. Only opinions, and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd. Opinions held under the semblance of eternity, girt with the sea, crowned with the stars, and therefore easily mistaken for a creed.

\textit{Heart of Darkness} sustains Forster’s gentle wit, but \textit{Nostromo} does not. Is there a vapor rather than a jewel in Forster’s consciousness of Hinduism, at least as represented in \textit{A Passage to India}? “Hinduism” may be the wrong word in that question; “religion” would be better, and “spirituality” better yet. For I do not read Forster as being either hungry for belief or skeptical of it. Rather, he seems to me an Alexandrian, of the third century before the common era, an age celebrated in his \textit{Alexandria: A History and a Guide} (1922), a book that goes back to his happy years in Alexandria (1915–19). In some curious sense, Forster’s India is Alexandrian, and his vision of Hinduism is Plotinean. \textit{A Passage to India} is a narrative of Neo-Platonic spirituality, and the true heroine of that narrative, Mrs. Moore, is the Alexandrian figure of Wisdom, the Sophia, as set forth in the Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom of Solomon. Of Wisdom, or Sophia, Forster says: “She is a messenger who bridges the gulf and makes us friends of God,” which is a useful description of the narrative function of Mrs. Moore. And after
quoting Plotinus (in a passage that includes one of his book’s epigraphs):
“To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen,”
Forster comments:

This sublime passage suggests three comments, with which our glance at Plotinus must close. In the first place its tone is religious, and in this it is typical of all Alexandrian philosophy. In the second place it lays stress on behaviour and training; the Supreme Vision cannot be acquired by magic tricks—only those will see it who are fit to see. And in the third place the vision of oneself and the vision of God are really the same, because each individual is God, if only he knew it. And here is the great difference between Plotinus and Christianity. The Christian promise is that a man shall see God, the Neo-Platonic—like the Indian—that he shall be God. Perhaps, on the quays of Alexandria, Plotinus talked with Hindu merchants who came to the town. At all events his system can be paralleled in the religious writings of India. He comes nearer than any other Greek philosopher to the thought of the East.

Forster’s Alexandria is in the first place personal; he associated the city always with his sexual maturation as a homosexual. But, as the book Alexandria shrewdly shows, Forster finds his precursor culture in ancient Alexandria; indeed he helps to teach us that we are all Alexandrians, insofar as we now live in a literary culture. Forster’s insight is massively supported by the historian F.E. Peters in the great study The Harvest of Hellenism, when he catalogs our debts to the Eastern Hellenism of Alexandria:

Its monuments are gnosticism, the university, the catechetical school, pastoral poetry, monasticism, the romance, grammar, lexicography, city planning, theology, canon law, heresy, and scholasticism.

Forster would have added, thinking of the Ptolemaic Alexandria of 331–30 B.C.E., that the most relevant legacy was an eclectic and tolerant liberal humanism, scientific and scholarly, exalting the values of affection over those of belief. That is already the vision of A Passage to India, and it opens to the novel’s central spiritual question: how are the divine and the human linked? In Alexandria, Forster presents us with a clue by his account of the Arian heresy:
Christ is the Son of God. Then is he not younger than God? Arius held that he was and that there was a period before time began when the First Person of the Trinity existed and the Second did not. A typical Alexandrian theologian, occupied with the favourite problem of linking human and divine, Arius thought to solve the problem by making the link predominately human. He did not deny the Godhead of Christ, but he did make him inferior to the Father—of like substance, not of the same substance, which was the view held by Athanasius, and stamped as orthodox by the Council of Nicaea. Moreover the Arian Christ, like the Gnostic Demiurge, made the world;—creation, an inferior activity, being entrusted to him by the Father, who had Himself created nothing but Christ.

It is easy to see why Arianism became popular. By making Christ younger and lower than God it brought him nearer to us—indeed it tended to level him into a mere good man and to forestall Unitarianism. It appealed to the untheologically minded, to emperors and even more to empresses. But St. Athanasius, who viewed the innovation with an expert eye, saw that while it popularised Christ it isolated God, and he fought it with vigour and venom. His success has been described. It was condemned as heretical in 325, and by the end of the century had been expelled from orthodox Christendom. Of the theatre of this ancient strife no trace remains at Alexandria; the church of St. Mark where Arius was presbyter has vanished: so have the churches where Athanasius thundered—St. Theonas and the Caesareum. Nor do we know in which street Arius died of epilepsy. But the strife still continues in the hearts of men, who always tend to magnify the human in the divine, and it is probable that many an individual Christian to-day is an Arian without knowing it.

To magnify the human in the divine is certainly Forster’s quest, and appears to be his interpretation of Hinduism in *A Passage to India*:

Down in the sacred corridors, joy had seethed to jollity. It was their duty to play various games to amuse the newly born God, and to simulate his sports with the wanton dairymaids of Brindaban. Butter played a prominent part in these. When the cradle had been removed, the principal nobles of the state gathered together for an innocent frolic. They removed their turbans, and one put a lump of butter on his forehead, and waited for it to
slide down his nose into his mouth. Before it could arrive, another stole up behind him, snatched the melting morsel, and swallowed it himself. All laughed exultantly at discovering that the divine sense of humour coincided with their own. “God is love!” There is fun in heaven. God can play practical jokes upon Himself, draw chairs away from beneath His own posteriors, set His own turbans on fire, and steal His own petticoats when He bathes. By sacrificing good taste, this worship achieved what Christianity has shirked: the inclusion of merriment. All spirit as well as all matter must participate in salvation, and if practical jokes are banned, the circle is incomplete. Having swallowed the butter, they played another game which chanced to be graceful: the fondling of Shri Krishna under the similitude of a child. A pretty red and gold ball is thrown, and he who catches it chooses a child from the crowd, raises it in his arms, and carries it round to be caressed. All stroke the darling creature for the Creator’s sake, and murmur happy words. The child is restored to his parents, the ball thrown on, and another child becomes for a moment the World’s desire. And the Lord bounds hither and thither through the aisles, chance, and the sport of chance, irradiating little mortals with His immortality.... When they had played this long enough—and being exempt from boredom, they played it again and again, they played it again and again—they took many sticks and hit them together, whack smack, as though they fought the Pandava wars, and threshed and churned with them, and later on they hung from the roof of the temple, in a net, a great black earthenware jar, which was painted here and there with red, and wreathed with dried figs. Now came a rousing sport. Springing up, they struck at the jar with their sticks. It cracked, broke, and a mass of greasy rice and milk poured on to their faces. They ate and smeared one another’s mouths and dived between each other’s legs for what had been pashed upon the carpet. This way and that spread the divine mess, until the line of schoolboys, who had somewhat fended off the crowd, broke for their share. The corridors, the courtyard, were filled with benign confusion. Also the flies awoke and claimed their share of God’s bounty. There was no quarrelling, owing to the nature of the gift, for blessed is the man who confers it on another, he imitates God. And those “imitations,” those “substitutions,” continued to flicker through the assembly for many hours, awaking in each man, according to his capacity, an emotion that he would not have had otherwise. No
definite image survived; at the Birth it was questionable whether a silver doll or a mud village, or a silk napkin, or an intangible spirit, or a pious resolution, had been born. Perhaps all these things! Perhaps none! Perhaps all birth is an allegory! Still, it was the main event of the religious year. It caused strange thoughts. Covered with grease and dust, Professor Godbole had once more developed the life of his spirit. He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs. Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, “Come, come, come.” This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. “One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp,” he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. “It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself.”

Professor Godbole’s epiphany, his linkage of Mrs. Moore’s receptivity toward the wasp with his own receptivity toward Mrs. Moore, has been much admired by critics, deservedly so. In this moment-of-moments, Godbole receives Mrs. Moore into Forster’s own faithless faith: a religion of love between equals, as opposed to Christianity, a religion of love between the incommensurate Jehovah and his creatures. But though beautifully executed, Forster’s vision of Godbole and Mrs. Moore is spiritually a little too easy. Forster knew that, and the finest moment in A Passage to India encompasses this knowing. It comes in a sublime juxtaposition, in the crossing between the conclusion of part 2, “Caves,” and the beginning of part 3, “Temple,” where Godbole is seen standing in the presence of God. The brief and beautiful chapter 32 that concludes “Caves” returns Fielding to a Western and Ruskinian vision of form in Venice:

Egypt was charming—a green strip of carpet and walking up and down it four sorts of animals and one sort of man. Fielding’s business took him there for a few days. He re-embarked at Alexandria—bright blue sky, constant wind, clean low coastline, as against the intricacies of Bombay. Crete welcomed him next with the long snowy ridge of its mountains, and then came Venice. As he landed on the piazzetta a cup of beauty was lifted to his lips,
and he drank with a sense of disloyalty. The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh these Italian churches! San Giorgio standing on the island which could scarcely have risen from the waves without it, the Salute holding the entrance of a canal which, but for it, would not be the Grand Canal! In the old undergraduate days he had wrapped himself up in the many-coloured blanket of St. Mark's, but something more precious than mosaics and marbles was offered to him now: the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form, with flesh and blood subsisting. Writing picture post-cards to his Indian friends, he felt that all of them would miss the joys he experienced now, the joys of form, and that this constituted a serious barrier. They would see the sumptuousness of Venice, not its shape, and though Venice was not Europe, it was part of the Mediterranean harmony. The Mediterranean is the human norm. When men leave that exquisite lake, whether through the Bosphorus or the Pillars of Hercules, they approach the monstrous and extraordinary; and the southern exit leads to the strangest experience of all. Turning his back on it yet again, he took the train northward, and tender romantic fancies that he thought were dead for ever, flowered when he saw the buttercups and daisies of June.

After the muddle of India, where “everything was placed wrong,” Fielding learns again “the beauty of form.” Alexandria, like Venice, is part of the Mediterranean harmony, the human norm, but India is the cosmos of “the monstrous and extraordinary.” Fielding confronting the Venetian churches has absolutely nothing in common with Professor Godbole confronting the God Krishna at the opposite end of the same strip of carpet upon which Godbole stands. Forster is too wise not to know that the passage to India is only a passage. A passage is a journey, or an occurrence between two persons. Fielding and Aziz do not quite make the passage together, do not exchange vows that bind. Perhaps that recognition of limits is the ultimate beauty of form in A Passage to India.
Robert Musil
(1880–1942)

The Man Without Qualities

Robert Musil’s literary eminence is beyond doubt. Because of the unfinished (and unfinishable) nature of his masterwork, *The Man Without Qualities*, he cannot quite be placed in the company of Joyce and Proust and Kafka, or even of Thomas Mann and William Faulkner, among the High Modernists. His aesthetic splendor rivals that of Broch and Hofmannsthal, hardly a second order except in comparison to Joyce and Proust, Kafka and Beckett.

Proust and Kafka each loses by translation, rather more than Mann and Broch do, but Musil loses most, despite the distinguished and devoted efforts of Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike. Musil’s language is as unique as Paul Celan’s, and Musil’s styles (there are several, beautifully modulated) never stay fixed. Burton Pike contributes an eloquent “Translator’s Afterword” (pp. 1771–1774) to the 1995 American edition, in which he aptly remarks that there is no author in English who could provide a model for Musil’s fusion of sound and sense. It is unnerving that Musil is both essayistic and a curious blend of Taoist-Sufi in his procedures. He also combines an inward voicing with an outward panoply that verges upon prose-poetry.

Musil’s actual precursor was the Shakespeare of *Hamlet*, where the representation of thinking-in-language touches a limit in the Prince of Denmark’s seven soliloquies that even Musil cannot attain. Ulrich is a descendant of Hamlet, who haunts German literature as pervasively as he does the Anglo-American tradition. Incest, termed by Shelley the most poetical of circumstances, is deferred throughout Part III of the novel, and evidently continues to be deferred in the sixty hundred and fifty pages from
the Posthumous Papers that Pike translates. The consummation of Ulrich’s and Agathe’s mutual passion would have been a kind of suicide, probably followed by a literal double-suicide, the only way in which this unfinishable novel could have been finished. Musil’s own death became the circumstance that concluded what could not reach conclusion, the full union of Agathe and Ulrich, a cosmological metaphor for the end of Musil’s cultural would.

And yet the word “incest” is grossly imprecise for the love between these extraordinary siblings. What after all is incest in a fictive work? In Musil, the long-impending but unrealizable total relationship between Agathe and Ulrich is the ultimate trope for the new kind of secular transcendence that is the endless quest of *The Man Without Qualities*. Perhaps it might have been an atonement or sacrifice to avert the death of European culture, had the actual intercourse between brother and sister taken place. Throughout Part III of the novel, and in the Posthumous Papers, Musil manifests an uncanny precision in the dangerous conversations between brother and sister:

“And it’s not at all against nature for a child to be the object of such feelings?” Agathe asked.

“What would be against nature would be a straight-out lustful desire,” Ulrich replied. “But a person like that also drags the innocent or, in any event, unready and helpless creature into actions for which it is not destined. He must ignore the immaturity of the developing mind and body, and play the game of his passion with a mute and veiled opponent; no, he not only ignores whatever would get in his way, but brutally sweeps it aside! That’s something quite different, with different consequences!”

“But perhaps a touch of the perniciousness of this ‘sweeping aside’ is already contained in the ‘ignoring’?” Agathe objected. She might have been jealous of her brother’s tissue of thoughts; at any rate, she resisted. “I don’t see any great distinction in whether one pays no attention to what might restrain one, or doesn’t feel it!”

Ulrich countered: “You’re right and you’re not right. I really just told the story because it’s a preliminary state of the love between brother and sister.”

“Love between brother and sister?” Agathe asked, and pretended to be astonished, as if she were hearing the term for the first time; but she was digging her nails into Ulrich’s arm again, and perhaps she did so too strongly, and her fingers trembled.
Ulrich, feeling as if five small warm wounds had opened side by side in his arm, suddenly said: “The person whose strongest stimulation is associated with experiences each of which is, in some way or other, impossible, isn’t interested in possible experiences. It may be that imagination is a way of fleeing from life, a refuge and a den of iniquity, as many maintain; I think that the story of the little girl, as well as all the other examples we’ve talked about, point not to an abnormality or a weakness but to a revulsion against the world and a strong recalcitrance, an excessive and overpassionate desire for love!” He forgot that Agathe could know nothing of the other examples and equivocal comparisons with which his thoughts had previously associated this kind of love; for he now felt himself in the clear again and had overcome, for the time being, the anesthetizing taste, the transformation into the will-less and lifeless, that was part of his experience, so that the automatic reference slipped inadvertently through a gap in his thoughts.

From the *Posthumous Papers*, pp. 1399–1400, translated by Burton Pike

As an instance of what is most original in Musil, this is both altogether typical yet also totally unique, the paradox that makes for what is greatest but sometimes maddening about *The Man Without Qualities*. Some of the details in this passage I myself find unforgettable: Ulrich’s brilliant evasion of “against nature,” Agathe’s “digging her nails into Ulrich’s arm” so as to intimate “five small warm wounds,” and Ulrich’s subtle equation of revulsion against “the world” and a totalizing “desires for love.” Is that world nature, history, society or immemorial morality? Musil insists that his reader decide that for herself.
IN MAY 1940, LESS THAN A YEAR BEFORE SHE DROWNED HERSELF, VIRGINIA Woolf read a paper to the Worker’s Educational Association in Brighton. We know it as the essay entitled “The Leaning Tower,” in which the Shelleyan emblem of the lonely tower takes on more of a social than an imaginative meaning. It is no longer the point of survey from which the poet Athanase gazes down in pity at the dark estate of mankind, and so is not an image of contemplative wisdom isolated from the mundane. Instead, it is “the tower of middle-class birth and expensive education,” from which the poetic generation of W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice stare sidelong at society. Woolf does not say so, but we can surmise that she preferred Shelley to Auden, while realizing that she herself dwelt in the leaning tower, unlike Yeats, to whom the lonely tower remained an inevitable metaphor for poetic stance.

It is proper that “The Leaning Tower,” as a speculation upon the decline of a Romantic image into belatedness, should concern itself also with the peculiarities of poetic influence:

Theories then are dangerous things. All the same we must risk making one this afternoon since we are going to discuss modern tendencies. Directly we speak of tendencies or movements we commit ourselves to the belief that there is some force, influence, outer pressure which is strong enough to stamp itself upon a whole group of different writers so that all their writing has a certain common likeness. We must then have a theory as to what this influence is. But let us always remember—influences are infinitely numerous; writers are infinitely sensitive; each writer has a different sensibility. That is why literature is always changing, like the
weather, like clouds in the sky. Read a page of Scott; then of Henry James; try to work out the influences that have transformed the one page into the other. It is beyond our skill. We can only hope therefore to single out the most obvious influences that have formed writers into groups. Yet there are groups. Books descend from books as families descend from families. Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens. They resemble their parents, as human children resemble their parents; yet they differ as children differ, and revolt as children revolt. Perhaps it will be easier to understand living writers as we take a quick look at some of their forbears.

A critic of literary influence learns to be both enchanted and wary when such a passage is encountered. Sensibility is indeed the issue, since without “a different sensibility” no writer truly is a writer. Woolf’s sensibility essentially is Paterian, as Perry Meisel accurately demonstrated. She is hardly unique among the great Modernist writers in owing much to Pater. That group includes Wilde, Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, as well as Pound and Eliot. Among the novelists, the Paterians, however involuntary, include Scott Fitzgerald, the early Joyce, and in strange ways both Conrad and Lawrence, as well as Woolf. Of all these, Woolf is most authentically Pater’s child. Her central tropes, like his, are personality and death, and her ways of representing consciousness are very close to his. The literary ancestor of those curious twin sensibilities—Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway—is Pater’s Sebastian Van Storck, except that Woolf relents, and they do not go into Sebastian’s “formless and nameless infinite world, quite evenly grey.”

Mrs. Dalloway

*Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the fourth of Woolf’s nine novels, is her first extraordinary achievement. Perhaps she should have called it *The Hours*, its original working title. To speak of measuring one’s time by days or months, rather than years, has urgency, and this urgency increases when the fiction of duration embraces only hours, as *Mrs. Dalloway* does. The novel’s peculiar virtue is the enigmatic doubling between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, who do not know one another. We are persuaded that the book is not disjointed because Clarissa and Septimus uncannily share what seem a single consciousness, intense and vulnerable, each fearing to be consumed by a fire perpetually about to break forth. Woolf seems to cause Septimus to die instead of Clarissa, almost as though the novel is a single
apotropaic gesture on its author’s part. One thinks of the death died for Marius by Cornelius in Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, but that is one friend atoning for another. However unified, does *Mrs. Dalloway* cogently link Clarissa and Septimus?

Clearly the book does, but only through its manipulation of Parer’s evasions of the figure or trope of the self as the center of a flux of sensations. In a book review written when she was only twenty-five, Woolf made a rough statement of the stance towards the self she would take throughout her work-to-come, in the form of a Paterian rhetorical question: “Are we not each in truth the centre of innumerable rays which so strike upon one figure only, and is it not our business to flash them straight and completely back again, and never suffer a single shaft to blunt itself on the far side of us?” Here is Clarissa Dalloway, at the novel’s crucial epiphany, not suffering the rays to blunt themselves on the far side of her:

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

The evasiveness of the center is defied by the act of suicide, which in Woolf is a communication and not, as it is in Freud, a murder. Earlier, Septimus had been terrified by a “gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes.” The doubling of Clarissa and Septimus
implies that there is only a difference in degree, not in kind, between Clarissa's sensibility and the naked consciousness or “madness” of Septimus. Neither needs the encouragement of “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,” because each knows that consciousness is isolation and so untruth, and that the right worship of life is to defy that isolation by dying. J. Hillis Miller remarks that: “A novel, for Woolf, is the place of death made visible.” It seems to me difficult to defend *Mrs. Dalloway* from moral judgments that call Woolf’s stance wholly nihilistic. But then, *Mrs. Dalloway*, remarkable as it is, is truly Woolf’s starting-point as a strong writer, and not her conclusion.

*To the Lighthouse*

Critics tend to agree that Woolf’s finest novel is *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which is certainly one of the central works of the modern imagination, comparable to Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* or Conrad’s *Victory*, if not quite of the range of *Women in Love* or *Nostromo*. Perhaps it is the only novel in which Woolf displays all of her gifts at once. Erich Auerbach, in his *Mimesis*, lucidly summing up Woolf’s achievement in her book, could be expounding Pater’s trope of the privileged moment:

> What takes place here in Virginia Woolf’s novel is ... to put the emphasis on the random occurrence, to exploit it not in the service of a planned continuity of action but in itself. And in the process something new and elemental appeared: nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice. To be sure, what happens in that moment—be it outer or inner processes—concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but it also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common. It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life. The more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light. The more numerous, varied, and simple the people are who appear as subjects of such random moments, the more effectively must what they have in common shine forth.

> The shining forth is precisely Pater’s secularization of the epiphany, in which random moments are transformed: “A sudden light transfigures a
trivial thing, a weathervane, a windmill, a winnowing flail, the dust in the barn door; a moment—and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect.” Woolf, like Pater sets herself “to realize this situation, to define, in a chill and empty atmosphere, the focus where rays, in themselves pale and impotent, unite and begin to burn ...” To realize such a situation is to set oneself against the vision of Mr. Ramsay (Woolf’s father, the philosopher Leslie Stephen), which expresses itself in the grimly empiricist maxim that: “The very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare.” Against this can be set Lily Briscoe’s vision, which concludes the novel:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.

“An attempt at something” postulates, for Woolf, a center, however evasive. The apotheosis of aesthetic or perceptive principle here is Woolf’s beautifully poised and precarious approach to an affirmation of the difficult possibility of meaning. *The Waves* (1931) is a large-scale equivalent of Lily Briscoe’s painting. Bernard, the most comprehensive of the novel’s six first-person narrators, ends the book with a restrained exultation, profoundly representative of Woolf’s feminization of the Paterian aesthetic stance:

“Again I see before me the usual street. The canopy of civilisation is burnt out. The sky is dark as polished whale-bone. But there is a kindling in the sky whether of lamplight or of dawn. There is a stir of some sort—sparrows on plain trees somewhere chirping. There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn. What is dawn in the city to an elderly man standing in the street looking up rather dizzily at the sky? Dawn is some sort of whitening of the sky; some sort of renewal. Another day; another Friday; another twentieth of March, January, or September. Another general awakening. The stars draw back and are extinguished. The bars deepen themselves between the waves. The film of mist
thickens on the field. A redness gathers on the roses, even on the pale rose that hangs by the bedroom window. A bird chirps. Cottagers light their early candles. Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again.

“And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!”

*The waves broke on the shore.*

“It incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again,” though ascribed to Bernard, has in it the fine pathos of a recognition of natural harshness that does not come often to a male consciousness. And for all the warlike imagery, the ride against death transcends aggressivity, whether against the self or against others. Pater had insisted that our one choice lies in packing as many pulsations of the artery, or Blakean visions of the poet’s work, into our interval as possible. Woolf subtly hints that even Pater succumbs to a male illusion of experiential quantity, rather than to a female recognition of gradations in the quality of possible experience. A male critic might want to murmur, in defense of Pater, that male blindness of the void within experience is very difficult to overcome, and that Pater’s exquisite sensibility is hardly male, whatever the accident of his gender.

*Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf’s final novel, can be read as a covert and witty subversion of late Shakespeare, whose romances Woolf attempts to expose as being perhaps more male than universal in some of their implications. Parodying Shakespeare is a dangerous mode; the flat-out farce of Max Beerbohm and Nigel Dennis works more easily than Woolf’s allusive deftness, but Woolf is not interested in the crudities of farce. *Between the Acts* is her deferred fulfillment of the polemical program set forth in her marvelous polemic *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), which is still the most persuasive of all feminist literary manifestos. To me the most powerful and unnerving stroke in that book is in its trope for the enclosure that men have forced upon women:

For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by
this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of man ....

That last assertion is becoming a kind of shibboleth in contemporary feminist literary criticism. Whether George Eliot and Henry James ought to be read as instances of a gender-based difference in creative power is not beyond all critical dispute. Is Dorothea Brooke more clearly the product of a woman’s creative power than Isabel Archer would be? Could we necessarily know that Clarissa Harlowe ensues from a male imagination? Woolf, at the least, lent her authority to provoking such questions. That authority, earned by novels of the splendour of To the Lighthouse and Between the Acts, becomes more formidable as the years pass.
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

THE LATE SIR WILLIAM EMPSON, IN AN ESSAY ON “JOYCE’S INTENTIONS,” sought to rescue Ulysses and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man from the school of Christianizing critics, called for short by Empson “the Kenner Smear.” Though the Kenner Smear essentially baptizes Joyce’s writings (following the lead of T.S. Eliot, who found Joyce eminently orthodox), it also deprecates the representation of Stephen, particularly in the Portrait, as Empson protested:

One or two minor points need fitting in here. It is part of Kenner’s argument, to prove that Stephen is already damned, that he is made to expound the wrong aesthetic philosophy. Joyce was letting him get the theory right in Stephen Hero, but when he rewrote and concentrated the material as the Portrait Stephen was turned into a sentimental neo-Platonist; that is, he considered the artist superior to earthly details, instead of letting the artist deduce realism from Aquinas. If we actually did find this alteration, I agree that the argument would carry some weight, though the evidence would need to be very strong. But, so far as I can see, there is only one definite bit of evidence offered, that Joyce in rewriting left out the technical term ‘epiphany’, invented by himself to describe the moment of insight which sums up a whole situation. I can tell you why he left it out; because he was not always too egotistical to write well. Even he, during revision, could observe that it was tiresome to have Stephen spouting to his young friends about this invented term. But I find no change in doctrine; he still firmly
rejects “Idealism, the supreme quality of beauty being a light from some other world, the idea of which the matter was but the shadow,” and explains that the ‘claritas’ of Aquinas comes when the image “is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony.” This is surely the doctrine which Kenner approves, and we next have as clear a pointer from the novelist as he ever allows us: “Stephen paused and, though his companion did not speak, felt that his words had called up around them a thought enchanted silence.” A critic who can believe that Joyce wrote this whole passage in order to jeer at it has, I submit, himself taken some fatal turning, or slipped unawares over the edge of some vast drop.

I am happy to agree with Empson against Hugh Kenner on this, but I myself find Aquinas a surrogate here for Joyce’s ghostly aesthetic father, Walter Pater, actual inventor of Stephen Hero’s “epiphanies” and so of a mode of intellectual vision that dominates the Portrait, remains crucial in Ulysses, but largely subsides in Finnegans Wake.

Pater founded his criticism upon perception and sensation, the perception of privileged moments of vision, and the sensation of the intensity and brevity of those epiphanies, sudden manifestations or shinings forth of power, order, beauty or of a transcendental or sublime experience fading into the continuum of the commonplace. Like Joyce after him, Pater asked very little of these epiphanies, far less than Wordsworth or Ruskin had asked, let alone the eminently orthodox, from Gerard Manley Hopkins (Pater’s student at Oxford) through T.S. Eliot and his New Critical followers, against whom Empson fought his anticlerical campaigns. The essential formula for Stephen’s epiphanies in the Portrait is set forth in Pater’s study of the Renaissance:

A sudden light transfigures a trivial thing, a weathervane, a windmill, a winnowing flail, the dust in the barn door; a moment—and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect; but it leaves a relish behind it, a longing that the accident may happen again.

Himself an Epicurean and so a metaphysical materialist, Pater’s achievement was to remove from the epiphany its theological and idealistic colorings. Joyce, certainly not a Catholic believer, accepts the epiphany from Pater as a secular and naturalistic phenomenon, purged of its Wordsworthian and Ruskinian moralizings. The Joycean epiphany is still “a sudden spiritual manifestation” in which an object’s “whatness” or
“soul” can be seen as leaping “to us from the vestment of its appearance.” But that is spiritual only in the Epicurean sense, in which the “what” is unknowable anyway, and Joyce is no more Christian than Whitman is in Song of Myself when the child asks him what the grass is, or than Stevens is in his apprehension of sudden radiances.

Just before the close of the Portrait, Stephen records a vision that is an epitome of epiphanies in a passage both Ovidian and Paterian:

The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone. Come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsman, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth.

The flight of Icarus and his fall are assimilated to the Paterian sense of belatedness, of coming at the end of a long and high tradition of Romantic vision. Joyce, like Pater, longs for a renaissance, for a rebirth into the company of exiles to worldliness who found another country in the strongest imaginative literature. Ovid, who knew the bitterness of exile, prefigured Dante in at least that regard, and there is a Dantesque quality to Stephen’s epiphany here. That hovering company of visionaries is pervaded with the auras of solitude and of departure, and their exultant youth may yield to the terrible fate of Icarus. If this epiphany’s eroticism is palpable and plangent, its darker reverberations intimate deathliness as the price of the freedom of art. Echoes of Ibsen and Blake combine in Stephen’s famous penultimate declaration:

Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the untreated conscience of my race.

“Forge” is a blacksmith’s term in this context, and not a penman’s. The very name of Ibsen’s Brand suggests the heat that can forge what Ibsen’s protagonist calls “the untreated soul of man,” and we can remember also Blake’s Los at the smithy, hammering out the engraved plates of his vision. Again one votes for Empson, against Kenner, as to the high seriousness of Stephen’s aspirations and the aesthetic dignity with which Joyce chose to invest them.
I

In her obituary for her lover, Franz Kafka, Milena Jesenská sketched a modern Gnostic, a writer whose vision was of the *kenoma*, the cosmic emptiness into which we have been thrown:

He was a hermit, a man of insight who was frightened by life.... He saw the world as being full of invisible demons which assail and destroy defenseless man.... All his works describe the terror of mysterious misconceptions and guiltless guilt in human beings.

Milena—brilliant, fearless, and loving—may have subtly distorted Kafka’s beautifully evasive slidings between normative Jewish and Jewish Gnostic stances. Max Brod, responding to Kafka’s now-famous remark—“We are nihilistic thoughts that came into God’s head”—explained to his friend the Gnostic notion that the Demiurge had made this world both sinful and evil. “No,” Kafka replied, “I believe we are not such a radical relapse of God’s, only one of His bad moods. He had a bad day.” Playing straight man, the faithful Brod asked if this meant there was hope outside our cosmos. Kafka smiled, and charmingly said: “Plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us.”

Kafka, despite Gershom Scholem’s authoritative attempts to claim him for Jewish Gnosticism, is both more and less than a Gnostic, as we might expect. Yahweh can be saved, and the divine degradation that is fundamental to Gnosticism is not an element in Kafka’s world. But we were fashioned out of the clay during one of Yahweh’s bad moods; perhaps there was divine dyspepsia, or sultry weather in the garden that Yahweh had planted in the
East. Yahweh is hope, and we are hopeless. We are the jackdaws or crows, the kafkas (since that is what the name means, in Czech) whose impossibility is what the heavens signify: “The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy the heavens. Doubtless that is so, but it proves nothing against the heavens, for the heavens signify simply: the impossibility of crows.”

In Gnosticism, there is an alien, wholly transcendent God, and the adept, after considerable difficulties, can find the way back to presence and fullness. Gnosticism therefore is a religion of salvation, though the most negative of all such saving visions. Kafkan spirituality offers no hope of salvation, and so is not Gnostic. But Milena Jesenská certainly was right to emphasize the Kafkan terror that is akin to Gnosticism’s dread of the keno-ma, which is the world governed by the Archons. Kafka takes the impossible step beyond Gnosticism, by denying that there is hope for us anywhere at all.

In the aphorisms that Brod rather misleadingly entitled “Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope and The True Way,” Kafka wrote: “What is laid upon us is to accomplish the negative; the positive is already given.” How much Kabbalah Kafka knew is not clear. Since he wrote a new Kabbalah, the question of Jewish Gnostic sources can be set aside. Indeed, by what seems a charming oddity (but I would call it yet another instance of Blake’s insistence that forms of worship are chosen from poetic tales), our understanding of Kabbalah is Kafkan anyway, since Kafka profoundly influenced Gershom Scholem, and no one will be able to get beyond Scholem’s creative or strong misreading of Kabbalah for decades to come. I repeat this point to emphasize its shock value: we read Kabbalah, via Scholem, from a Kafkan perspective, even as we read human personality and its mimetic possibilities by way of Shakespeare’s perspectives, since essentially Freud mediates Shakespeare for us, yet relies upon him nevertheless. A Kafkan facticity or contingency now governs our awareness of whatever in Jewish cultural tradition is other than normative.

In his diaries for 1922, Kafka meditated, on January 16, upon “something very like a breakdown,” in which it was “impossible to sleep, impossible to stay awake, impossible to endure life, or, more exactly, the course of life.” The vessels were breaking for him as his demoniac, writerly inner world and the outer life “split apart, and they do split apart, or at least clash in a fearful manner.” Late in the evening, K. arrives at the village, which is deep in snow. The Castle is in front of him, but even the hill upon which it stands is veiled in mist and darkness, and there is not a single light visible to show that the Castle was there. K. stands a long time on a wooden bridge that leads from the main road to the village, while gazing, not at the
village, but “into the illusory emptiness above him,” where the Castle should be. He does not know what he will always refuse to learn, which is that the emptiness is “illusory” in every possible sense, since he does gaze at the kenoma, which resulted initially from the breaking of the vessels, the splitting apart of every world, inner and outer.

Writing the vision of K., Kafka counts the costs of his confirmation, in a passage prophetic of Scholem, but with a difference that Scholem sought to negate by combining Zionism and Kabbalah for himself. Kafka knew better, perhaps only for himself, but perhaps for others as well:

Second: This pursuit, originating in the midst of men, carries one in a direction away from them. The solitude that for the most part has been forced on me, in part voluntarily sought by me—but what was this if not compulsion too?—is now losing all its ambiguity and approaches its denouement. Where is it leading? The strongest likelihood is that it may lead to madness; there is nothing more to say, the pursuit goes right through me and rends me asunder. Or I can—can I?—manage to keep my feet somewhat and be carried along in the wild pursuit. Where, then, shall I be brought? “Pursuit,” indeed, is only a metaphor. I can also say, “assault on the last earthly frontier,” an assault, moreover, launched from below, from mankind, and since this too is a metaphor, I can replace it by the metaphor of an assault from above, aimed at me from above.

All such writing is an assault on the frontiers; if Zionism had not intervened, it might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah. There are intimations of this. Though of course it would require genius of an unimaginable kind to strike root again in the old centuries, or create the old centuries anew and not spend itself withal, but only then begin to flower forth.

Consider Kafka’s three metaphors, which he so knowingly substitutes for one another. The pursuit is of ideas, in that mode of introspection which is Kafka’s writing. Yet this metaphor of pursuit is also a piercing “right through me” and a breaking apart of the self. For “pursuit,” Kafka then substitutes mankind’s assault, from below, on the last earthly frontier. What is that frontier? It must lie between us and the heavens. Kafka, the crow or jackdaw, by writing, transgresses the frontier and implicitly maintains that he could destroy the heavens. By another substitution, the metaphor changes to “an assault from above, aimed at me from above,” the aim simply being the signifying function of the heavens, which is to mean
the impossibility of Kafkas or crows. The heavens assault Kafka through his writing; “all such writing is an assault on the frontiers,” and these must now be Kafka’s own frontiers. One thinks of Freud’s most complex “frontier concept,” more complex even than the drive: the bodily ego. The heavens assault Kafka’s bodily ego, but only through his own writing. Certainly such an assault is not un-Jewish, and has as much to do with normative as with esoteric Jewish tradition.

Yet, according to Kafka, his own writing, were it not for the intervention of Zionism, might easily have developed into a new Kabbalah. How are we to understand that curious statement about Zionism as the blocking agent that prevents Franz Kafka from becoming another Isaac Luria? Kafka darkly and immodestly writes: “There are intimations of this.” Our teacher Gershom Scholem governs our interpretation here, of necessity. Those intimations belong to Kafka alone, or perhaps to a select few in his immediate circle. They cannot be conveyed to Jewry, even to its elite, because Zionism has taken the place of messianic Kabbalah, including presumably the heretical Kabbalah of Nathan of Gaza, prophet of Sabbatai Zvi and of all his followers down to the blasphemous Jacob Frank. Kafka’s influence upon Scholem is decisive here, for Kafka already has arrived at Scholem’s central thesis of the link between the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, the messianism of the Sabbatarians and Frankists, and the political Zionism that gave rebirth to Israel.

Kafka goes on, most remarkably, to disown the idea that he possesses “genius of an unimaginable kind,” one that either would strike root again in archaic Judaism, presumably of the esoteric sort, or more astonishingly “create the old centuries anew,” which Scholem insisted Kafka had done. But can we speak, as Scholem tried to speak, of the Kabbalah of Franz Kafka? Is there a new secret doctrine in the superb stories and the extraordinary parables and paradoxes, or did not Kafka spend his genius in the act of new creation of the old Jewish centuries? Kafka certainly would have judged himself harshly as one spent withal, rather than as a writer who “only then began to flower forth.” Kafka died only two and a half years after this meditative moment, died, alas, just before his forty-first birthday. Yet as the propounder of a new Kabbalah, he had gone very probably as far as he (or anyone else) could go. No Kabbalah, be it that of Moses de Leon, Isaac Luria, Moses Cordovero, Nathan of Gaza or Gershom Scholem, is exactly easy to interpret, but Kafka’s secret doctrine, if it exists at all, is designedly uninterpretable. My working principle in reading Kafka is to observe that he did everything possible to evade interpretation, which only means that what most needs and demands interpretation in Kafka’s writing is its perversely deliberate evasion of interpretation. Erich Heller’s
formula for getting at this evasion is: “Ambiguity has never been consid-
ered an elemental force; it is precisely this in the stories of Franz Kafka.” Perhaps, but evasiveness is not the same literary quality as ambiguity.

Evasiveness is purposive; it writes between the lines, to borrow a fine trope from Leo Strauss. What does it mean when a quester for a new Negative, or perhaps rather a revisionist of an old Negative, resorts to the evasion of every possible interpretation as his central topic or theme? Kafka does not doubt guilt, but wishes to make it “possible for men to enjoy sin without guilt, almost without guilt,” by reading Kafka. To enjoy sin almost without guilt is to evade interpretation, in exactly the dominant Jewish sense of interpretation. Jewish tradition, whether normative or esoteric, never teaches you to ask Nietzsche’s question: “Who is the interpreter, and what power does he seek to gain over the text?” Instead, Jewish tradition asks: “Is the interpreter in the line of those who seek to build a hedge about the Torah in every age?” Kafka’s power of evasiveness is not a power over his own text, and it does build a hedge about the Torah in our age. Yet no one before Kafka built up that hedge wholly out of evasiveness, not even Maimonides or Judah Halevi or even Spinoza. Subtlest and most evasive of all writers, Kafka remains the severest and most harassing of the belated sages of what will yet become the Jewish cultural tradition of the future.

II

The jackdaw or crow or Kafka is also the weird figure of the great hunter Gracchus (whose Latin name also means a crow), who is not alive but dead, yet who floats, like one living, on his death-bark forever. When the fussy Burgomaster of Riva knits his brow, asking: “And you have no part in the other world (das Jenseits)?”, the Hunter replies, with grand defensive irony:

I am forever on the great stair that leads up to it. On that infinitely wide and spacious stair I clamber about, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, always in motion. The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do not laugh.

Like the Burgomaster, we do not laugh. Being a single crow, Gracchus would be enough to destroy the heavens, but he will never get there. Instead, the heavens signify his impossibility, the absence of crows or hunters, and so he has been turned into another butterfly, which is all we can be, from the perspective of the heavens. And we bear no blame for that:
“I had been glad to live and I was glad to die. Before I stepped aboard, I joyfully flung away my wretched load of ammunition, my knapsack, my hunting rifle that I had always been proud to carry, and I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress. I lay and waited. Then came the mishap.”

“A terrible fate,” said the Burgomaster, raising his hand defensively. “And you bear no blame for it?”

“None,” said the hunter. “I was a hunter; was there any sin in that? I followed my calling as a hunter in the Black Forest, where there were still wolves in those days. I lay in ambush, shot, hit my mark, flayed the skin from my victims: was there any sin in that? My labors were blessed. ‘The Great Hunter of Black Forest’ was the name I was given. Was there any sin in that?”

“I am not called upon to decide that,” said the Burgomaster, “but to me also there seems to be no sin in such things. But then, whose is the guilt?”

“The boatman’s,” said the Hunter. “Nobody will read what I say here, no one will come to help me; even if all the people were commanded to help me, every door and window would remain shut, everybody would take to bed and draw the bedclothes over his head, the whole earth would become an inn for the night. And there is sense in that, for nobody knows of me, and if anyone knew he would not know where I could be found, and if he knew where I could be found, he would not know how to deal with me, he would not know how to help me. The thought of helping me is an illness that has to be cured by taking to one’s bed.”

How admirable Gracchus is, even when compared to the Homeric heroes! They know, or think they know, that to be alive, however miserable, is preferable to being the foremost among the dead. But Gracchus wished only to be himself, happy to be a hunter when alive, joyful to be a corpse when dead: “I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress.” So long as everything happened in good order, Gracchus was more than content. The guilt must be the boatman’s, and may not exceed mere incompetence. Being dead and yet still articulate, Gracchus is beyond help: “The thought of helping me is an illness that has to be cured by taking to one’s bed.”

When he gives the striking trope of the whole earth closing down like an inn for the night, with the bedclothes drawn over everybody’s head, Gracchus renders the judgment: “And there is sense in that.” There is sense in that only because in Kafka’s world as in Freud’s, or in Scholem’s,
or in any world deeply informed by Jewish memory, there is necessarily sense in everything, total sense, even though Kafka refuses to aid you in getting at or close to it.

But what kind of a world is that, where there is sense in everything, where everything seems to demand interpretation? There can be sense in everything, as J.H. Van den Berg once wrote against Freud's theory of repression, only if everything is already in the past and there never again can be anything wholly new. That is certainly the world of the great normative rabbis of the second century of the Common Era, and consequently it has been the world of most Jews ever since. Torah has been given, Talmud has risen to complement and interpret it, other interpretations in the chain of tradition are freshly forged in each generation, but the limits of Creation and of Revelation are fixed in Jewish memory. There is sense in everything because all sense is present already in the Hebrew Bible, which by definition must be totally intelligible, even if its fullest intelligibility will not shine forth until the Messiah comes.

Gracchus, hunter and jackdaw, is Kafka, pursuer of ideas and jackdaw, and the endless, hopeless voyage of Gracchus is Kafka's passage, only partly through a language not his own, and largely through a life not much his own. Kafka was studying Hebrew intensively while he wrote "The Hunter Gracchus," early in 1917, and I think we may call the voyages of the dead but never-buried Gracchus a trope for Kafka's belated study of his ancestral language. He was still studying Hebrew in the spring of 1923, with his tuberculosis well advanced, and down to nearly the end he longed for Zion, dreaming of recovering his health and firmly grounding his identity by journeying to Palestine. Like Gracchus, he experienced life-in-death, though unlike Gracchus he achieved the release of total death.

"The Hunter Gracchus" as a story or extended parable is not the narrative of a Wandering Jew or Flying Dutchman, because Kafka's trope for his writing activity is not so much a wandering or even a wavering, but rather a repetition, labyrinthine and burrow-building. His writing repeats, not itself, but a Jewish esoteric interpretation of Torah that Kafka himself scarcely knows, or even needs to know. What this interpretation tells Kafka is that there is no written Torah but only an oral one. However, Kafka has no one to tell him what this Oral Torah is. He substitutes his own writing therefore for the Oral Torah not made available to him. He is precisely in the stance of the Hunter Gracchus, who concludes by saying, "'I am here, more than that I do not know, further than that I cannot go. My ship has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death.'"
“What is the Talmud if not a message from the distance?”, Kafka wrote to Robert Klopstock, on December 19, 1932. What was all of Jewish tradition, to Kafka, except a message from an endless distance? That is surely part of the burden of the famous parable, “An Imperial Message,” which concludes with you, the reader, sitting at your window when evening falls and dreaming to yourself the parable—that God, in his act of dying, has sent you an individual message. Heinz Politzer read this as a Nietzschean parable, and so fell into the trap set by the Kafkan evasiveness:

Describing the fate of the parable in a time depleted of metaphysical truths, the imperial message has turned into the subjective fantasy of a dreamer who sits at a window with a view on a darkening world. The only real information imported by this story is the news of the Emperor's death. This news Kafka took over from Nietzsche.

No, for even though you dream the parable, the parable conveys truth. The Talmud does exist; it really is an Imperial message from the distance. The distance is too great; it cannot reach you; there is hope, but not for you. Nor is it so clear that God is dead. He is always dying, yet always whispers a message into the angel’s ear. It is said to you that: “Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man,” but the Emperor actually does not die in the text of the parable.

Distance is part of Kafka’s crucial notion of the Negative, which is not a Hegelian nor a Heideggerian Negative, but is very close to Freud’s Negation and also to the Negative imaging carried out by Scholem’s Kabbalists. But I want to postpone Kafka’s Jewish version of the Negative until later. “The Hunter Gracchus” is an extraordinary text, but it is not wholly characteristic of Kafka at his strongest, at his uncanniest or most sublime.

When he is most himself, Kafka gives us a continuous inventiveness and originality that rivals Dante, and truly challenges Proust and Joyce as that of the dominant Western author of our century, setting Freud aside, since Freud ostensibly is science and not narrative or mythmaking, though if you believe that, then you can be persuaded of anything. Kafka’s beast fables are rightly celebrated, but his most remarkable fabulistic being is neither animal nor human, but is little Odradek, in the curious sketch, less than a page and a half long, “The Cares of a Family Man,” where the title might have been translated: “The Sorrows of a Paterfamilias.” The family
man narrates these five paragraphs, each a dialectical lyric in itself, begin-
ning with one that worries the meaning of the name:

Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.

This evasiveness was overcome by the scholar Wilhelm Emrich, who traced the name Odradek to the Czech word *odraditi*, meaning to dissuade anyone from doing anything. Like Edward Gorey’s Doubtful Guest, Odradek is uninvited yet will not leave, since implicitly he dissuades you from doing anything about his presence, or rather something about his very uncanniness advises you to let him alone:

No one, of course, would occupy himself with such studies if there were not a creature called Odradek. At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs.

Is Odradek a “thing,” as the bemused family man begins by calling him, or is he not a childlike creature, a daemon at home in the world of children? Odradek clearly was made by an inventive and humorous child, rather in the spirit of the making of Adam out of the moistened red clay by the J writer’s Yahweh. It is difficult not to read Odradek’s creation as a deliberate parody when we are told that “the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs,” and again when the suggestion is ventured that Odradek, like Adam, “once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant.” If Odradek is fallen, he is still quite jaunty, and cannot be closely scrutinized, since he “is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of,” like the story in which he appears. Odradek not only advises you not to do anything about him, but in some clear sense he is yet another figure by means of whom Kafka advises you against interpreting Kafka.
One of the loveliest moments in all of Kafka comes when you, the *paterfamilias*, encounter Odradek leaning directly beneath you against the banisters. Being inclined to speak to him, as you would to a child, you receive a surprise: “Well, what’s your name?” you ask him. ‘Odradek,’ he says. ‘And where do you live?’ ‘No fixed abode,’ he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves.”

“The ‘I’ is another,” Rimbaud once wrote, adding: “So much the worse for the wood that finds it is a violin.” So much the worse for the wood that finds it is Odradek. He laughs at being a vagrant, if only by the bourgeois definition of having “no fixed abode,” but the laughter, not being human, is uncanny. And so he provokes the family man to an uncanny reflection, which may be a Kafkan parody of Freud’s death drive beyond the pleasure principle:

I ask myself, to no purpose, what is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children? He does no harm to anyone that I can see, but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.

The aim of life, Freud says, is death, is the return of the organic to the inorganic, supposedly our earlier state of being. Our activity wears out, and so we die because, in an uncanny sense, we wish to die. But Odradek, harmless and charming, is a child’s creation, aimless, and so not subject to the death drive. Odradek is immortal, being daemonic, and he represents also a Freudian return of the repressed, of something repressed in the *paterfamilias*, something from which the family man is in perpetual flight. Little Odradek is precisely what Freud calls a cognitive return of the repressed, while (even as) a complete affective repression is maintained. The family man introjects Odradek intellectually, but totally projects him affectively. Odradek, I now suggest, is best understood as Kafka’s synecdoche for *Verneinung*; Kafka’s version (not altogether un-Freudian) of Jewish Negation, a version I hope to adumbrate in what follows.

IV

Why does Kafka have so unique a spiritual authority? Perhaps the question should be rephrased. What kind of spiritual authority does Kafka have
for us or why are we moved or compelled to read him as one who has such authority? Why invoke the question of authority at all? Literary authority, however we define it, has no necessary relation to spiritual authority, and to speak of a spiritual authority in Jewish writing anyway always has been to speak rather dubiously. Authority is not a Jewish concept but a Roman one, and so makes perfect contemporary sense in the context of the Roman Catholic Church, but little sense in Jewish matters, despite the squalors of Israeli politics and the flaccid pieties of American Jewish nostalgias. There is no authority without hierarchy, and hierarchy is not a very Jewish concept either. We do not want the rabbis, or anyone else, to tell us what or who is or is not Jewish. The masks of the normative conceal not only the eclecticism of Judaism and of Jewish culture, but also the nature of the J writer’s Yahweh himself. It is absurd to think of Yahweh as having mere authority. He is no Roman godling who augments human activities, nor a Homeric god helping to constitute an audience for human heroism.

Yahweh is neither a founder nor an onlooker, though sometimes he can be mistaken for either or both. His essential trope is fatherhood rather than foundation, and his interventions are those of a covenanter rather than of a spectator. You cannot found an authority upon him, because his benignity is manifested not through augmentation but through creation. He does not write; he speaks, and he is heard, in time, and what he continues to create by his speaking is *olam*, time without boundaries, which is more than just an augmentation. More of anything else can come through authority, but more life is the blessing itself, and comes, beyond authority, to Abraham, to Jacob, and to David. No more than Yahweh, do any of them have mere authority. Yet Kafka certainly does have literary authority, and in a troubled way his literary authority is now spiritual also, particularly in Jewish contexts. I do not think that this is a post-Holocaust phenomenon, though Jewish Gnosticism, oxymoronic as it may or may not be, certainly seems appropriate to our time, to many among us. Literary Gnosticism does not seem to me a time-bound phenomenon, anyway. Kafka’s *The Castle*, as Erich Heller has argued, is clearly more Gnostic than normative in is spiritual temper, but then so is Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and Blake’s *The Four Zoas*, and Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. We sense a Jewish element in Kafka’s apparent Gnosticism, even if we are less prepared than Scholem was to name it as a new Kabbalah. In his 1922 Diaries, Kafka subtly insinuated that even his espousal of the Negative was dialectical:

The Negative alone, however strong it may be, cannot suffice, as in my unhappiest moments I believe it can. For if I have gone the tiniest step upward, won any, be it the most dubious kind of security for
myself, I then stretch out on my step and wait for the Negative, not to climb up to me, indeed, but to drag me down from it. Hence it is a defensive instinct in me that won’t tolerate my having the slightest degree of lasting ease and smashes the marriage bed, for example, even before it has been set up.

What is the Kafkan Negative, whether in this passage or elsewhere? Let us begin by dismissing the Gallic notion that there is anything Hegelian about it, any more than there is anything Hegelian about the Freudian Verneinung. Kafka’s Negative, unlike Freud’s, is uneasily and remotely descended from the ancient tradition of negative theology, and perhaps even from that most negative of ancient theologies, Gnosticism, and yet Kafka, despite his yearnings for transcendence, joins Freud in accepting the ultimate authority of the fact. The given suffers no destruction in Kafka or in Freud, and this given essentially is the way things are, for everyone, and for the Jews in particular. If fact is supreme, then the mediation of the Hegelian Negative becomes an absurdity, and no destructive use of such a Negative is possible, which is to say that Heidegger becomes impossible, and Derrida, who is a strong misreading of Heidegger, becomes quite unnecessary.

The Kafkan Negative most simply is his Judaism, which is to say the spiritual form of Kafka’s self-conscious Jewishness, as exemplified in that extraordinary aphorism: “What is laid upon us is to accomplish the negative; the positive is already given.” The positive here is the Law or normative Judaism; the negative is not so much Kafka’s new Kabbalah, as it is that which is still laid upon us: the Judaism of the Negative, of the future as it is always rushing towards us.

His best biographer to date, Ernst Pawel, emphasizes Kafka’s consciousness “of his identity as a Jew, not in the religious, but in the national sense.” Still, Kafka was not a Zionist, and perhaps he longed not so much for Zion as for a Jewish language, be it Yiddish or Hebrew. He could not see that his astonishing stylistic purity in German was precisely his way of not betraying his self-identity as a Jew. In his final phase, Kafka thought of going to Jerusalem, and again intensified his study of Hebrew. Had he lived, he would probably have gone to Zion, perfected a vernacular Hebrew, and given us the bewilderment of Kafkan parables and stories in the language of the Jewish writer and of Judah Halevi.

What calls out for interpretation in Kafka is his refusal to be interpreted, his evasiveness even in the realm of his own Negative. Two of his
most beautifully enigmatical performances, both late, are the parable, “The Problem of Our Laws,” and the story or testament “Josephine the Singer and the Mouse Folk.” Each allows a cognitive return of Jewish cultural memory, while refusing the affective identification that would make either parable or tale specifically Jewish in either historical or contemporary identification. “The Problem of Our Laws” is set as a problem in the parable’s first paragraph:

Our laws are not generally known; they are kept secret by the small group of nobles who rule us. We are convinced that these ancient laws are scrupulously administered; nevertheless it is an extremely painful thing to be ruled by laws that one does not know. I am not thinking of possible discrepancies that may arise in the interpretation of the laws, or of the disadvantages involved when only a few and not the whole people are allowed to have a say in their interpretation. These disadvantages are perhaps of no great importance. For the laws are very ancient; their interpretation has been the work of centuries, and has itself doubtless acquired the status of law; and though there is still a possible freedom of interpretation left, it has now become very restricted. Moreover the nobles have obviously no cause to be influenced in their interpretation by personal interests inimical to us, for the laws were made to the advantage of the nobles from the very beginning, they themselves stand above the laws, and that seems to be why the laws were entrusted exclusively into their hands. Of course, there is wisdom in that— who doubts the wisdom of the ancient laws?—but also hardship for us; probably that is unavoidable.

In Judaism, the Law is precisely what is generally known, proclaimed, and taught by the normative sages. The Kabbalah was secret doctrine, but increasingly was guarded not by the normative rabbis, but by Gnostic sectaries, Sabbatarians, and Frankists, all of them ideologically descended from Nathan of Gaza, Sabbatai Zvi’s prophet. Kafka twists askew the relations between normative and esoteric Judaism, again making a synecdochal representation impossible. It is not the rabbis or normative sages who stand above the Torah but the minim, the heretics from Elisha ben Abuyah through to Jacob Frank, and in some sense, Gershom Scholem as well. To these Jewish Gnostics, as the parable goes on to insinuate: “The Law is whatever the nobles do.” So radical a definition tells us “that the tradition is far from complete,” and that a kind of messianic expectation is therefore necessary. This view, so comfortless as far as the present is concerned, is
lightened only by the belief that a time will eventually come when the tra-
dition and our research into it will jointly reach their conclusion, and as it
were gain a breathing space, when everything will have become clear, the
law will belong to the people, and the nobility will vanish.

If the parable at this point were to be translated into early Christian
terms, then “the nobility” would be the Pharisees, and “the people” would
be the Christian believers. But Kafka moves rapidly to stop such a transla-
tion: “This is not maintained in any spirit of hatred against the nobility;
not at all, and by no one. We are more inclined to hate ourselves, because
we have not yet shown ourselves worthy of being entrusted with the laws.”

“We” here cannot be either Christians or Jews. Who then are those
who “have not yet shown ourselves worthy of being entrusted with the
laws”? They would appear to be the crows or jackdaws again, a Kafka or a
Hunter Gracchus, wandering about in a state perhaps vulnerable to self-
hatred or self-distrust, waiting for a Torah that will not be revealed.
Audaciously, Kafka then concludes with overt paradox:

Actually one can express the problem only in a sort of paradox:
Any party that would repudiate not only all belief in the laws, but
the nobility as well, would have the whole people behind it; yet no
such party can come into existence, for nobody would dare to
repudiate the nobility. We live on this razor’s edge. A writer once
summed the matter up in this way: The sole visible and indubi-
table law that is imposed upon us is the nobility, and must we
ourselves deprive ourselves of that one law?

Why would no one dare to repudiate the nobility, whether we read them
as normative Pharisees, Jewish Gnostic heresiarchs, or whatever? Though
imposed upon us, the sages or the minim are the only visible evidence of law
that we have. Who are we then? How is the parable’s final question, whether
open or rhetorical, to be answered? “Must we ourselves deprive ourselves of
that one law?” Blake’s answer, in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, was: “One
Law for the Lion and the Ox is Oppression.” But what is one law for the
crows? Kafka will not tell us whether it is oppression or not.

Josephine the singer also is a crow or Kafka, rather than a mouse, and
the folk may be interpreted as an entire nation of jackdaws. The spirit of
the Negative, dominant if uneasy in “The Problem of Our Laws,” is loosed
into a terrible freedom in Kafka’s testamentary story. That is to say: in the
parable, the laws could not be Torah, though that analogue flickered near.
But in Josephine’s story, the mouse folk simultaneously are and are not the
Jewish people, and Franz Kafka both is and is not their curious singer.
Cognitively the identifications are possible, as though returned from forgetfulness, but affectively they certainly are not, unless we can assume that crucial aspects making up the identifications have been purposefully, if other than consciously, forgotten. Josephine’s piping is Kafka’s story, and yet Kafka’s story is hardly Josephine’s piping.

Can there be a mode of negation neither conscious nor unconscious, neither Hegelian nor Freudian? Kafka’s genius provides one, exposing many shades between consciousness and the work of repression, many demarcations far ghostlier than we could have imagined without him. Perhaps the ghostliest come at the end of the story:

Josephine’s road, however, must go downhill. The time will soon come when her last notes sound and die into silence. She is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will get over the loss of her. Not that it will be easy for us; how can our gatherings take place in utter silence? Still, were they not silent even when Josephine was present? Was her actual piping notably louder and more alive than the memory of it will be? Was it even in her lifetime more than a simply memory? Was it not rather because Josephine’s singing was already past losing in this way that our people in their wisdom prized it so highly?

So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all, while Josephine, redeemed from the earthly sorrows which to her thinking lay in wait for all chosen spirits, will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people, and soon, since we are no historians, will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like all her brothers.

“I am a Memory come alive,” Kafka wrote in the Diaries. Whether or not he intended it, he was Jewish memory come alive. “Was it even in her lifetime more than a simple memory?” Kafka asks, knowing that he too was past losing. The Jews are no historians, in some sense, because Jewish memory, as Yosef Yerushalmi has demonstrated, is a normative mode and not a historical one. Kafka, if he could have prayed, might have prayed to rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like most of his brothers and sisters. But his prayer would not have been answered. When we think of the Catholic writer, we think of Dante, who nevertheless had the audacity to enshrine his Beatrice in the hierarchy of Paradise. If we think of the Protestant writer, we think of Milton, a party or sect of one, who believed that the soul was mortal, and would be resurrected only in conjunction with the body. Think of the Jewish writer, and you must think of
Kafka, who evaded his own audacity, and believed nothing, and trusted only in the Covenant of being a writer.

*The Castle*

The full-scale instance of Kafka’s new Negative or new Kabbalah is *The Castle*, an unfinished and unfinishable autobiographical novel which is the story of K., the land-surveyor. What is written between its lines? Assaulting the last earthly frontier, K. is necessarily audacious, but if what lies beyond the frontier is represented ultimately by Klamm, an imprisoning silence, lord of the *kenoma* or cosmic emptiness, then no audacity can suffice. You cannot redraw the frontiers, even if the authorities desired this, when you arrive at the administrative center of a catastrophe creation, where the demarcations hold fast against a supposed chaos or abyss, which is actually the negative emblem of the truth that the false or marred creation refuses. *The Castle* is the tale of how Kafka cannot write his way back to the abyss, of how K. cannot do his work as land-surveyor.

Part of K.’s burden is that he is not audacious enough, even though audacity could not be enough anyway. Here is the interpretive audacity of Erich Heller, rightly rejecting all those who identify the Castle with spirituality and authentic grace, but himself missing the ineluctable evasiveness of Kafka’s new Kabbalah:

The Castle of Kafka’s novel is, as it were, the heavily fortified garrison of a company of Gnostic demons, successfully holding an advanced position against the maneuvers of an impatient soul. There is no conceivable idea of divinity which could justify those interpreters who see in the Castle the residence of “divine law and divine grace.” Its officers are totally indifferent to good if they are not positively wicked. Neither in their decrees nor in their activities is there any trace of love, mercy, charity, or majesty. In their icy detachment they inspire certainly no awe, but fear and revulsion. Their servants are a plague to the village, “a wild, unmanageable lot, ruled by their insatiable impulses ... their scandalous behavior knows no limits,” an anticipation of the blackguards who were to become the footmen of European dictators rather than the office boys of a divine ministry. Compared to the petty and apparently calculated torture of this tyranny, the gods of Shakespeare’s indignation who “kill us for their sport” are at least majestic in their wantonness.
On such a reading, Klamm would be the Demiurge, leader of a company of Archons, gods of this world. Kafka is too evasive and too negative to give us so positive and simplistic an account of triumphant evil, or at least of reigning indifference to the good. Such Gnostic symbolism would make Klamm and his cohorts representatives of ignorance, and K. in contrast a knower, but K. knows almost nothing, particularly about his own self, and from the start overestimates his own strength even as he deceives himself into the belief that the Castle underestimates him. The Castle is there primarily because K. is ignorant, though K.’s deepest drive is for knowledge. K.’s largest error throughout is his desire for a personal confrontation with Klamm, which necessarily is impossible. K., the single crow or jackdaw, would be sufficient to destroy the authority of Klamm, but Klamm and the Castle of Westwest signify simply the absence of crows, the inability of K. to achieve knowledge and therefore the impossibility of K. himself, the failure of land-surveying or of assaulting the frontiers, of writing a new Kabbalah.

Klamm is named by Wilhelm Emrich as the interpersonal element in the erotic, which seems to me just as subtle an error as judging Klamm to be the Demiurge, leader of a company of Gnostic demons. It might be more accurate to call Klamm the impersonal element in the erotic, the drive, as Martin Greenberg does, yet even that identification is evaded by Kafka’s text. Closer to Klamm, as should be expected, is the negative aspect of the drive, its entropy, whose effect upon consciousness is nihilistic. Freud, in his posthumous *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) says of the drives that “they represent the somatic demands upon mental life.” That approximates Klamm, but only if you give priority to Thanatos over Eros, to the death drive over sexuality. Emrich, a touch humorlessly, even identifies Klamm with Eros, which would give us a weird Eros indeed:

Accordingly, then, Klamm is the “power” that brings the lovers together as well as the power which, bestowing happiness and bliss, is present within love itself. K. seeks contact with this power, sensing its proximity in love, a proximity great enough for communicating in whispers; but he must “manifest” such communication and contact with this power itself through a spiritual-intellectual expression of his own; this means that, as an independent spiritual-intellectual being, he must confront this power eye to eye, as it were; he must “manifest” to this superpersonal power his own understanding, his own relation with it, a relation “known” only to him at the present time; that means, he must make this relation known to the power as well.
Emrich seems to found this equation on the love affair between K. and Frieda, which begins, in famous squalor, on the floor of a bar:

Fortunately Frieda soon came back; she did not mention K., she only complained about the peasants, and in the course of looking round for K. went behind the counter, so that he was able to touch her foot. From that moment he felt safe. Since Frieda made no reference to K., however, the landlord was compelled to do it. “And where is the Land-Surveyor?” he asked. He was probably courteous by nature, refined by constant and relatively free intercourse with men who were much his superior, but there was remarkable consideration in his tone to Frieda, which was all the more striking because in his conversation he did not cease to be an employer addressing a servant, and a saucy servant at that.

“The Land-Surveyor—I forgot all about him,” said Frieda, setting her small foot on K.’s chest. “He must have gone out long ago.” “But I haven’t seen him,” said the landlord, “and I was in the hall nearly the whole time.” “Well, he isn’t in here,” said Frieda coolly. “Perhaps he’s hidden somewhere,” said the landlord. “From the impression I had of him, he’s capable of a good deal.” “He would hardly dare to do that,” said Frieda, pressing her foot down on K. There was a certain mirth and freedom about her which K. had not previously noticed, and quite unexpectedly it took the upper hand, for suddenly laughing she bent down to K. with the words: “Perhaps he’s hidden underneath here,” kissed him lightly, and sprang up again saying with a troubled air: “No, he’s not there.” Then the landlord, too, surprised K. when he said: “It bothers me not to know for certain that he’s gone. Not only because of Herr Klamm, but because of the rule of the house. And the rule applies to you, Fräulein Frieda, just as much as to me. Well, if you answer for the bar, I’ll go through the rest of the rooms. Good night! Sleep well!” He could hardly have left the room before Frieda had turned out the electric light and was under the counter beside K.

“My darling! My darling!” she whispered, but she did not touch him. As if swooning with love, she lay on her back and stretched out her arms; time must have seemed endless to her in the prospect of her happiness, and she sighed rather than sang some little song or other. Then as K. still lay absorbed in thought, she started up and began to tug at him like a child. “Come on, it’s too close down here,” and they embraced each other, her little body burned in K.’s hands, in a state of unconsciousness which K. tried
again and again but in vain to master they rolled a little way, landing with a thud on Klamm’s door, where they lay among the small puddles of beer and other refuse scattered on the floor.

“Landing with a thud on Klamm’s door” is Kafka’s outrageously rancid trope for a successful completion to copulation, but that hardly makes Klamm into a benign Eros, with his devotees lying “among the small puddles of beer and other refuse scattered on the floor.” One could recall the libertines among the Gnostics, ancient and modern, who seek to redeem the sparks upwards by a redemption through sin. Frieda, faithful disciple and former mistress of Klamm, tells K. that she believes it is Klamm’s, “doing that we came together there under the counter; blessed, not cursed, be the hour.” Emrich gives full credence to Frieda, a rather dangerous act for an exegete, and certainly K. desperately believes Frieda, but then, as Heller remarks, “K. loves Frieda—if he loves her at all—entirely for Klamm’s sake.” That K., despite his drive for freedom, may be deceived as to Klamm’s nature is understandable, but I do not think that Kafka was deceived or wished to be deceived. If Klamm is to be identified, it ought to be with what is silent, imprisoned, and unavailable in copulation, something that partakes of the final Negative, the drive towards death.

Whether The Castle is of the aesthetic eminence of Kafka’s finest stories, parables, and fragments is open to considerable doubt, but The Castle is certainly the best text for studying Kafka’s Negative, his hidden and subversive New Kabbalah. It abides as the most enigmatic major novel of our century, and one sees why Kafka himself thought it a failure. But all Kabbalah—old and new—has to fail when it offers itself openly to more than a handful. Perhaps The Castle fails as the Zohar fails, but like the Zohar, Kafka’s Castle will go on failing from one era to another.

The Trial

“Guilt” generally seems more a Christian than a Jewish category, even if the guilt of Joseph K. is primarily ignorance of the Law. Certainly Kafka could be judged closer to Freud in The Trial than he usually is, since Freudian “guilt” is also hardly distinct from ignorance, not of the Law but of the Reality Principle. Freud insisted that all authority, communal or personal, induced guilt in us, since we share in the murder of the totemic father. Guilt therefore is never to be doubted, but only because we are all of us more or less ill, all plagued by our discomfort with culture. Freudian and Kafkan guilt alike is known only under the sign of negation, rather than as emotion. Joseph K. has no consciousness of having done wrong,
but just as Freudian man nurtures the desire to destroy authority or the father, so even Joseph K. has his own unfulfilled wishes against the image of the Law.

The process that Joseph K. undergoes is hopeless, since the Law is essentially a closed Kabbalah; its books are not available to the accused. If traditional questers suffered an ordeal by landscape, Joseph K.’s ordeal is by nearly everything and everyone he encounters. The representatives of the Law, and their camp followers, are so unsavory that Joseph K. seems sympathetic by contrast, yet he is actually a poor fellow in himself, and would be as nasty as the keepers of the Law, if only he could. *The Trial* is a very unpleasant book, and Kafka’s own judgment of it may have been spiritually wiser than anything its critics have enunciated. Would there be any process for us to undergo if we were not both lazy and frightened? Nietzsche’s motive for metaphor was the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere, but Kafka’s sense of our motive is that we want to rest, even if just for a moment. The world is our Gnostic catastrophe creation, being broken into existence by the guilt of our repose. Yet this is creation, and can be visibly beautiful, even as the accused are beautiful in the gaze of the camp followers of the Law.

I do not think that the process Joseph K. undergoes can be called “interpretation,” which is the judgment of Ernst Pawel, who follows Jewish tradition in supposing that the Law is language. *The Trial*, like the rest of Kafka’s writings, is a parable not of interpretation, but of the necessary failure of interpretation. I would surmise that the Law is not all of language, since the language of *The Trial* is ironic enough to suggest that it is not altogether bound to the Law. If *The Trial* has a center, it is in what Kafka thought worthy of publishing: the famous parable “Before the Law.” The dialogue concerning the parable between Joseph K. and the prison chaplain who tells it is remarkable, but less crucial than the parable itself:

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country who begs for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot admit the man at the moment. The man, on reflection, asks if he will be allowed, then, to enter later. “It is possible,” answers the doorkeeper, “but not at this moment.” Since the door leading into the Law stands open as usual and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man bends down to peer through the entrance. When the doorkeeper sees that; he laughs and says: “If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall keepers stand at
every door, one more powerful than the other. Even the third of these has an aspect that even I cannot bear to look at.” These are difficulties which the man from the country has not expected to meet; the Law, he thinks, should be accessible to every man and at all times, but when he looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his furred robe, with his huge pointed nose and long, thin, Tartar beard, he decides that he had better wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. There he sits waiting for days and years. He makes many attempts to be allowed in and wearies the doorkeeper with his importunity. The doorkeeper often engages him in brief conversation, asking him about his home and about other matters, but the questions are put quite impersonally, as great men put questions, and always conclude with the statement that the man cannot be allowed to enter yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, parts with all he has, however valuable, in the hope of bribing the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts it all, saying, however, as he takes each gift: “I take this only to keep you from feeling that you have left something undone.” During all these long years the man watches the doorkeeper almost incessantly. He forgets about the other doorkeepers, and this one seems to him the only barrier between himself and the Law. In the first years he curses his evil fate aloud; later, as he grows old, he only mutters to himself. He grows childish, and since in his prolonged watch he has learned to know even the fleas in the doorkeeper’s fur collar, he begs the very fleas to help him and to persuade the doorkeeper to change his mind. Finally his eyes grow dim and he does not know whether the world is really darkening around him or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. But in the darkness he can now perceive a radiance that streams immortally from the door of the Law. Now his life is drawing to a close. Before he dies, all that he has experienced during the whole time of his sojourn condenses in his mind into one question, which he has never yet put to the doorkeeper. He beckons the doorkeeper, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend far down to hear him, for the difference in size between them has increased very much to the man’s disadvantage. “What do you want to know now?” asks the doorkeeper, “you are insatiable.” “Everyone strives to attain the Law,” answers the man, “how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?” The
doorkeeper perceives that the man is at the end of his strength and that his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it.”

Does he actually perceive a radiance, or are his eyes perhaps still deceiving him? What would admittance to the radiance mean? The Law, I take it, has the same status it has in the later parable “The Problem of Our Laws,” where it cannot be Torah, or the Jewish Law, yet Torah flickers uneasily near as a positive analogue to the negation that is playing itself out. Joseph K. then is another jackdaw, another Kafkan crow in a cosmos of crows, waiting for that new Torah that will not be revealed. Does such a waiting allow itself to be represented in or by a novel? No one could judge The Trial to be grander as a whole than in its parts, and “Before the Law” bursts out of its narrative shell in the novel. The terrible greatness of Kafka is absolute in the parable but wavering in the novel, too impure a casing for such a fire.

That there should be nothing but a spiritual world, Kafka once wrote, denies us hope but gives us certainty. The certainty would seem to be not so much that a radiance exists, but that all access to it will be barred by petty officials at least countenanced, if not encouraged, by what passes for the radiance itself. This is not paradox, any more than is the Kafkan principle propounded by the priest who narrates “Before the Law”: accurate interpretation and misreading cannot altogether exclude one another. Kafka’s aesthetic compulsion (can there be such?) in The Trial as elsewhere is to write so as to create a necessity, yet also so as to make interpretation impossible, rather than merely difficult.

Kafka’s permanent centrality to the post-normative Jewish dilemma achieves one of its monuments in The Trial. Gershom Scholem found in Kafka not only the true continuator of the Gnostic Kabbalah of Moses Cordovero, but also the central representative for our time of an even more archaic splendor, the broken radiance of Hebraic revelation. Perhaps Scholem was right, for no other modern Jewish author troubles us with so strong an impression that we are in the presence of what Scholem called “the strong light of the canonical, of the perfection that destroys.”
LAWRENCE, hardly a libertine, had the radically Protestant sensibility of Milton, Shelley, Browning, Hardy—none of them Eliotic favorites. To say that Lawrence was more a Puritan than Milton is only to state what is now finely obvious. What Lawrence shares with Milton is an intense exaltation of unfallen human sexuality. With Blake, Lawrence shares the conviction that touch, the sexual sense proper, is the least fallen of the senses, which implies that redemption is most readily a sexual process. Freud and Lawrence, according to Lawrence, share little or nothing, which accounts for Lawrence’s ill-informed but wonderfully vigorous polemic against Freud:

This is the moral dilemma of psychoanalysis. The analyst sets out to core neurotic humanity by removing the cause of the neurosis. He finds that the cause of neurosis lies in some unadmitted sex desire. After all he has said about inhibition of normal sex, he is brought at last to realize that at the root of almost every neurosis lies some incest-craving, and that this incest-craving is not the result of inhibition and normal sex-craving. Now see the dilemma—it is a fearful one. If the incest-craving is not the outcome of any inhibition of normal desire, if it actually exists and refuses to give way before any criticism, what then? What remains but to accept it as part of the normal sex-manifestation?

Here is an issue which analysis is perfectly willing to face. Among themselves the analysts are bound to accept the incest-craving as part of the normal sexuality of man, normal, but suppressed, because of moral and perhaps biological fear. Once, however, you accept the incest-craving as part of the normal sexuality
of man, you must remove all repression of incest itself. In fact, you must admit incest as you now admit sexual marriage, as a duty even. Since at last it works out that neurosis is not the result of inhibition of so-called normal sex, but of inhibition of incest-craving. Any inhibition must be wrong, since inevitably in the end it causes neurosis and insanity. Therefore the inhibition of incest-craving is wrong, and this wrong is the cause of practically all modern neurosis and insanity.

To believe that Freud thought that “any inhibition must be wrong” is merely outrageous. Philip Rieff subtly defends Lawrence's weird accusation by remarking that: “As a concept, the incest taboo, like any other Freudian hypothesis, represents a scientific projection of the false standards governing erotic relations within the family.” Lawrence surely sensed this, but chose to misunderstand Freud for some of the same reasons he chose to misunderstand Walt Whitman. Whitman provoked in Lawrence an anxiety of influence in regard to stance and form. Freud, also too authentic a precursor, threatened Lawrence's therapeutic originality. Like Freud's, Lawrence's ideas of drive or will stem from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Again like Freud, Lawrence derived considerable stimulus from later nineteenth-century materialistic thought. It is difficult to remember that so flamboyant a mythmaker as Lawrence was also a deidealizer with a reductionist aspect, but then we do not see that Freud was a great mythmaker only because we tend to believe in Freud's myths. When I was young, I knew many young women and young men who believed in Lawrence's myths, but they all have weathered the belief, and I do not encounter any Lawrentian believers among the young today.

*Sons and Lovers*

Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), his third novel, was begun in 1910 as *Paul Morel*, and in some sense was finished by Edward Garnett, who made severe cuts in the final manuscript. The change of title from *Paul Morel* to *Sons and Lovers* may have been Lawrence's gesture towards Freud, as mediated by Frieda Weekley, with whom Lawrence eloped in the spring of 1912 and under whose early influence the novel was completed. Lawrence attempted to fight off Freud later on, in two very odd books on the unconscious, but *Sons and Lovers* is so available to Freudian reduction as to make a Freudian reading of the novel quite uninteresting.

Though *Sons and Lovers* is clearly the work of the author of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, it retains many of the characteristics of the fiction of
Thomas Hardy and has little of the visionary intensity that the mature Lawrence shares with *Moby-Dick*, *Wuthering Heights*, and only a few other novels. Rereading *Sons and Lovers* is a somber and impressive experience, if a rather mixed one aesthetically. It is difficult to know if we are reading an autobiographical novel rather than a novelistic autobiography. The aesthetic puzzle is in deciding how to receive Lawrence’s self-portrait as Paul Morel. If the reader simply decides that the identification of the writer and his hero is complete, then the experience of reading necessarily is vexed by the identification of Gertrude Morel with Lydia Lawrence, the novelist’s mother, and so also by the parody of Arthur Lawrence in the novel’s Walter Morel. Even more troublesome is the identification of Jessie Chambers, the novelist’s first love, with Miriam. By the time one has read *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* by Jessie Chambers and studied such standard biographies of Lawrence as those by Nehls, Moore, and Sagar, it becomes very difficult to know whether the novel is the appropriate genre for Lawrence’s story. Miriam and Walter Morel seem abused in *Sons and Lovers*, and Paul Morel seems quite blind to his mother’s real culpability in malformed his psychosexual development.

A curious reader or student of D.H. Lawrence will search out the appropriate material in the composite biography of Nehls, but I am dubious as to whether *Sons and Lovers* gains aesthetically by such an enrichment of personal context. Louis L. Martz has argued that a close reading will show that the novel depicts Miriam as life-enhancing and Gertrude Morel as an agent of repression, but the book’s actual narrative voice tends to give an impression much closer to that of Paul, who ends by leaving Miriam and then confronting a motherless Sublime that has no place for him:

He shook hands and left her at the door of her cousin’s house. When he turned away he felt the last hold for him had gone. The town, as he sat upon the car, stretched away over the bay of railway, a level fume of lights. Beyond the town the country, little smouldering spots for more towns—the sea—the night—on and on! And he had no place in it! Whatever spot he stood on, there he stood alone. From his breast, from his mouth, sprang the endless space, and it was there behind him, everywhere. The people hurrying along the streets offered no obstruction to the void in which he found himself. They were small shadows whose footsteps and voices could be heard, but in each of them the same night, the same silence. He got off the car. In the country all was dead still. Little stars shone high up; little stars spread far away in the flood-waters, a firmament below. Everywhere the vastness and
terror of the immense night which is roused and stirred for a brief while by the day, but which returns, and will remain at last eternal, holding everything in its silence and its living gloom. There was no Time, only Space. Who could say his mother had lived and did not live? She had been in one place, and was in another; that was all. And his soul could not leave her, wherever she was. Now she was gone abroad into the night, and he was with her still. They were together. But yet there was his body, his chest, that leaned against the stile, his hands on the wooden bar. They seemed something. Where was he?—one tiny upright speck of flesh, less than an ear of wheat lost in the field. He could not bear it. On every side the immense dark silence seemed pressing him, so tiny a spark, into extinction, and yet, almost nothing, he could not be extinct. Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun. Stars and sun, a few bright grains, went spinning round for terror, and holding each other in embrace, there in a darkness that outpassed them all, and left than tiny and daunted. So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing.

“Mother!” he whimpered—“mother!”

She was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him, have him alongside with her.

But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly.

We understand, after reading this conclusion to Sons and Lovers, why Walt Whitman came to have so powerful an influence upon Lawrence's later poetry, since the elegiac Whitman identified night, death, the mother, and the sea, and only the sea is absent from the fusion here. Nothing else in Sons and Lovers is quite as strong as this closing vision, which does prophesy the greater harmonies and discords of The Rainbow and Women in Love.

Aside from the troublesome strains of unassimilated autobiography, the principal defect of Sons and Lovers is that Paul Morel does not always seem energetic or sympathetic enough to sustain our interest. At moments we might be reading A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Prig, and we then want to congratulate Miriam for not ending up with the hero.
The novel has force of narrative despite lack of plot, and deserves all the praise it has received as an unmatched account of English working-class life. But the sincerity or veracity of Lawrence’s story of his own origins is more of a social than an aesthetic virtue in *Sons and Lovers*. What redeems the book aesthetically is a series of passages and incidents that presage the massive excursions into the Sublime made in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. The concluding passage is one of these; others include such fatuous moments as Paul and Miriam taking turns on the swing, and the fight between Paul and Baxter Dawes (who is oddly the most convincing character in the novel). These are early forms of what might be called Lawrence’s epiphanies, times when elemental forces break through the surfaces of existence. Lawrence hardly knows what to do with them in *Sons and Lovers*; they do not reverberate with enormous possibilities as do such moments in *Women in Love* as Birkin stoning the moon’s reflection in the water, or Birkin and Gerald caught up in their wrestling match. Yet the shadowy epiphanies of *Sons and Lovers* have the value of preparatory exercises for those fragments of a giant art that Lawrence later scattered so generously in his work.

*The Rainbow and Women in Love*

Lawrence’s greatest achievement is his double-novel, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920). Together with his short stories and the best of his poems, these represent his absolute literary permanence, obscured as that currently may be by the virulence of much Feminist criticism.

I recall, many years ago, writing that, “In the endless war between men and women, Lawrence fights on both sides.” The twenty-third chapter of *Women in Love*, “Excurse,” is an eminient instance:

“I jealous! I—jealous! You are mistaken if you think that. I’m not jealous in the least of Hermione, she is nothing to me, not that!” And Ursula snapped her fingers. “No, it’s you who are a liar. It’s you who must return, like a dog to his vomit. It is what Hermione stands for that I hate. I hate it. It is lies, it is false, it is death. But you want to, you can’t help it, you can’t help yourself. You belong to that old, deathly way of living—then go back to it. But don’t come to me, for I’ve nothing to do with it.”

And in the stress of her violent emotion, she got down from the car and went to the hedgerow, picking unconsciously some flesh-pink spindleberries, some of which were burst, showing their orange seeds.
“Ah, you are a fool,” he cried bitterly, with some contempt. “Yes, I am. I am a fool. And thank God for it. I’m too big a fool to swallow your cleverness. God be praised. You go to your women—go to them—they are your sort—you’ve always had a string of them trailing after you—and you always will. Go to your spiritual brides—but don’t come to me as well, because I’m not having any, thank you. You’re not satisfied, are you? Your spiritual brides can’t give you what you want, they aren’t common and fleshy enough for you, aren’t they? So you come to me, and keep them in the background! You will marry me for daily use. But you’ll keep yourself well provided with spiritual brides in the background. I know your dirty little game.” Suddenly a flame ran over her, and she stamped her foot madly on the road, and he winced, afraid she would strike him. “And I, I’m not spiritual enough. I’m not as spiritual as that Hermione—!” Her brows knitted, her eyes blazed like a tiger’s. “Then go to her, that’s all I say, go to her, go. Ha, she spiritual—spiritual, she! A dirty materialist as she is. She’s spiritual? What does she care for, what is her spirituality? What is it?” Her fury seemed to blaze out and burn his face. He shrank a little. “I tell you, it’s dirt, dirt, and nothing but dirt. And it’s dirt you want, you crave for it. Spiritual! Is that spiritual, her bullying, her conceit, her sordid materialism? She’s a fishwife, a fishwife, she is such a materialist. And all so sordid. What does she work out to, in the end, with all her social passion, as you call it. Social passion—what social passion has she?—show it me!—where is it? She wants petty, immediate power, she wants the illusion that she is a great woman, that is all. In her soul she’s a devilish unbeliever, common as dirt. That’s what she is, at the bottom. And all the rest is pretence—but you love it. You love the sham spiritually, it’s your food. And why? Because of the dirt underneath. Do you think I don’t know the foulness of your sex life—and hers?—I do. And it’s that foulness you want, you liar. Then have it, have it. You’re such a liar.”

She turned away, spasmodically tearing the twigs of spindleberry from the hedge, and fastening them, with vibrating fingers, in the bosom of her coat.

He stood watching in silence. A wonderful tenderness burned in him at the sight of her quivering, so sensitive fingers: and at the same time he was full of rage and callousness.

The ambivalence of the lovers, so memorably rendered, reflects not
only Lawrence’s stormy marriage with Frieda, but his own repressed bisexuality as well. And yet the passage matters aesthetically because of the marvelous detail, at once literal and metaphoric, or Ursula’s tearing of the spindleberries, flesh-like and bursting with life. Lawrence had the rare gift, inherited from Charlotte Brontë and Thomas Hardy, of portraying a woman’s anger with total sympathy and virtual identification. Since Birkin is a deliberate parody of the prophetic Lawrence, fiercely exalting yet also recoiling from sexual love, Ursula’s fury is accurate and precise.

After Shakespeare and Tolstoy, no writer expresses more vividly than Lawrence the perpetually prevalent male ambivalence towards female superiority in natural sexuality. A powerful example in Lawrence is the farewell love-making between Ursula and Skrebensky near the close of *The Rainbow*:

Then there in the great flare of light, she clinched hold of him, hard, as if suddenly she had the strength of destruction, she fastened her arms round him and tightened him in her grip, whilst her mouth sought his in a hard, rending, ever-increasing kiss, till his body was powerless in her grip, his heart melted in fear from the fierce, beaked, harpy’s kiss. The water washed again over their feet, but she took no notice. She seemed unaware, she seemed to be pressing in her beaked mouth till she had the heart of him. Then, at last, she drew away and looked at him—looked at him. He knew what she wanted. He took her by the hand and led her across the foreshore, back to the sandhills. She went silently. He felt as if the ordeal of proof was upon him, for life or death. He led her to a dark hollow.

“No, here,” she said, going out to the slope full under the moonshine. She lay motionless, with wide-open eyes looking at the moon. He came direct to her, without preliminaries. She held him pinned down at the chest, awful. The fight, the struggle for consummation was terrible. It lasted till it was agony to his soul, till he succumbed, till he gave way as if dead, lay with his face buried, partly in her hair, partly in the sand, motionless now for ever, hidden away in the dark, buried, only buried, he only wanted to be buried in the goodly darkness, only that, and no more.

He seemed to swoon. It was a long time before he came to himself. He was unaware of an unusual motion of her breast. He looked up. Her face lay like an image in the moonlight, the eyes wide open, rigid. But out of her eyes, slowly, there rolled a tear, that glittered in the moonlight as it ran down her cheek.
He felt as if the knife were being pushed into his already dead body. With head strained back, he watched, drawn tense, for some minutes, watched the unaltering, rigid face like metal in the moonlight, the fixed, unseeing eye, in which slowly the water gathered, shook with glittering moonlight, then surcharged, brimmed over and ran trickling, a tear with its burden of moonlight, into the darkness, to fall in the sand.

In his great poem, “Tortoise Shout,” Lawrence epitomized the *gnosis* of Skrebensky’s “bitterness of ecstasy”:

Why were we crucified into sex?
Why were we not left rounded off, and finished in ourselves,
As we began,
As he certainly began, so perfectly alone?

Lawrence’s unique power, as a prophetic novelist, tends now to make even his admirers a touch uneasy. In his later novels, such as *Kangaroo* (1923) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), as well as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), the literary artist is overcome by the prophet, and Lawrence bruises the limits of narrative, making it difficult to reread him with sustained attention. But in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* we trust the tales, and not their teller.
Sinclair Lewis

(1885–1951)

Arrowsmith and Babbitt

I

It cannot be said, thirty-five years after his death, that Sinclair Lewis is forgotten or ignored, yet clearly his reputation has declined considerably. Arrowsmith (1925) is still a widely read novel, particularly, among the young, but Main Street (1920) and Babbitt (1922) seem to be best known for their titles, while Elmer Gantry (1927) and Dodsworth (1929) are remembered in their movie versions. Rereading Main Street and Elmer Gantry has disappointed me, but Babbitt and Dodsworth, both good novels, deserve more readers than they now seem to have. Lewis is of very nearly no interest whatsoever to American literary critics of my own generation and younger, so that it seems likely his decline in renown will continue.

A Nobel prizewinner, like John Steinbeck, Lewis resembles Steinbeck only in that regard, and is now being eclipsed by Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and such older contemporaries as Cather and Dreiser. Lewis venerated Dickens, but the critical age when Lewis’s achievement could be compared to that of Dickens or of Balzac is long ago over. Hamlin Garland, an actual precursor, is necessarily far more comparable to Lewis than Dickens or Balzac are. If, as Baudelaire may have remarked, every janitor in Balzac is a genius, then every genius in Lewis is something of a janitor. Essentially a satirist with a camera-eye, Lewis was a master neither of narrative nor of characterization. And his satire, curiously affectionate at its base (quite loving towards Babbitt), has no edge in the contemporary United States, where reality is frequently too outrageous for any literary satire to be possible.
Lewis has considerable historical interest, aside from the winning qualities of *Babbitt* and the surprising *Dodsworth*, but he is likely to survive because of his least characteristic, most idealistic novel, *Arrowsmith*. A morality tale, with a medical research scientist as hero, *Arrowsmith* has enough mythic force to compel a young reader to an idealism of her or his own. Critics have found in *Arrowsmith* Lewis’s version of the idealism of Emerson and Thoreau, pitched lower in Lewis, who had no transcendental yearnings. The native strain in our literature that emanated out from Emerson into Whitman and Thoreau appears also in *Arrowsmith*, and helps account for the novel’s continued relevance as American myth.

II

H.L. Mencken, who greatly admired *Arrowsmith*, upon expectedly ideological grounds, still caught the flaw in the hero, and the aesthetic virtue in the splendid villain, Pickerbaugh:

Pickerbaugh exists everywhere, in almost every American town. He is the quack who flings himself melodramatically upon measles, chicken pox, whooping cough—the organizer of Health Weeks and author of prophylactic, Kiwanian slogans—the hero of clean-up campaigns—the scientific beau ideal of newspaper reporters, Y.M.C.A. secretaries, and the pastors of suburban churches. He has been leering at the novelists of America for years, and yet Lewis and De Kruif were the first to see and hail him. They have made an almost epic figure of him. He is the Babbitt of this book—far more charming than Arrowsmith himself, and far more real. Arrowsmith fails in one important particular: he is not typical, he is not a good American. I daresay that many a reader, following his struggles with the seekers for “practical” results, will sympathize frankly with the latter. After all, it is not American to prefer honor to honors; no man, pursuing that folly, could ever hope to be president of the United States. Pickerbaugh will cause no such lifting of eyebrows. Like Babbitt, he will be recognized instantly and enjoyed innocently. Within six weeks, I suspect, every health officer in America will be receiving letters denouncing him as a Pickerbaugh. Thus nature imitates art.

Mencken’s irony has been denuded by time; Arrowsmith is indeed not typical, not a good American, not a persuasive representation of a person.
Neither is anyone else in the novel a convincing mimesis of actuality; that was hardly Lewis’s strength, which resided in satiric caricature. *Arrowsmith* ought to be more a satire than a novel, but unfortunately its hero is an idealized self-portrait of Sinclair Lewis. Idealization of science, and of the pure scientist—Arrowsmith and his mentor, Gottlieb—is what most dates the novel. I myself first read it in 1945, when I was a student at the Bronx High School of Science, then an abominable institution of the highest and most narrow academic standards. As a nonscientist, I found myself surrounded by a swarm of hostile and aggressive fellow-students, most of whom have become successful Babbitts of medicine, physics, and related disciplines. *Arrowsmith*, with its naive exaltation of science as a pure quest for truth, had a kind of biblical status in that high school, and so I read it with subdued loathing. Rereading it now, I find a puzzled affection to be my principal reaction, but I doubt the aesthetic basis for my current attitude.

Though sadly dated, *Arrowsmith* is too eccentric a work to be judged a period piece. It is a romance, with allegorical overtones, but a romance in which everything is literalized, a romance of science, as it were, rather than a science fiction. Its hero, much battered, does not learn much; he simply becomes increasingly more abrupt and stubborn, and votes with his feet whenever marriages, institutions, and other societal forms begin to menace his pure quest for scientific research. In the romance’s pastoral conclusion, Arrowsmith retreats to the woods, a Thoreau pursuing the exact mechanism of the action of quinine derivatives. Romance depends upon a curious blend of wholeheartedness and sophistication in its author, and Sinclair Lewis was not Edmund Spenser:

His mathematics and physical chemistry were now as sound as Terry’s, his indifference to publicity and to flowery hangings as great, his industry as fanatical, his ingenuity in devising new apparatus at least comparable, and his imagination far more swift. He had less ease but more passion. He hurled out hypotheses like sparks. He began, incredulously, to comprehend his freedom. He would yet determine the essential nature of phage; and as he became stronger and surer—and no doubt less human—he saw ahead of him innumerable inquiries into chemotherapy and immunity; enough adventures to keep him busy for decades.

It seemed to him that this was the first spring he had ever seen and tasted. He learned to dive into the lake, though the first plunge was an agony of fiery cold. They fished before breakfast, they supped at a table under the oaks, they tramped twenty miles
on end, they had bluejays and squirrels for interested neighbors; and when they had worked all night, they came out to find serene dawn lifting across the sleeping lake.

Martin felt sun-soaked and deep of chest, and always he hummed.

I do not believe that this could sustain commentary, of any kind. It is competent romance writing, of the Boy's Own Book variety, but cries out for the corrected American version, as carried through by Nathanael West in *A Cool Million*, and in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. West's Shrike would be capable of annihilating salvation through back to nature and pure research, by promising: “You feel sun-soaked, and deep of chest, and always you hum.”

*Arrowsmith* was published in the same year as *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Tragedy*, which was hardly Lewis's fault, but now seems his lasting misfortune. *Babbitt* came out the same year as *Ulysses*, while *Dodsworth* confronted *The Sound and the Fury*. None of this is fair, but the agonistic element in literature is immemorial. *Arrowsmith* is memorable now because it is a monument to another American lost illusion, the idealism of pure science, or the search for a truth that could transcend the pragmatics of American existence. It is a fitting irony that the satirist Sinclair Lewis should be remembered now for this idealizing romance.
Their Eyes Were Watching God

I

Extra-literary factors have entered into the process of even secular canonization from Hellenistic Alexandria into the High Modernist Era of Eliot and Pound, so that it need not much dismay us if contemporary work by women and by minority writers becomes esteemed on grounds other than aesthetic. When the High Modernist critic Hugh Kenner assures us of the permanent eminence of the novelist and polemicist Wyndham Lewis, we can be persuaded, unless of course we actually read books like Tarr and Hitler. Reading Lewis is a rather painful experience, and makes me skeptical of Kenner’s canonical assertions. In the matter of Zora Neale Hurston, I have had a contrary experience, starting with skepticism when I first encountered essays by her admirers, let alone by her idolators. Reading Their Eyes Were Watching God dispels all skepticism. Moses: Man of the Mountain is an impressive book in its mode and ambitions, but a mixed achievement, unable to resolve problems of diction and of rhetorical stance. Essentially, Hurston is the author of one superb and moving novel, unique not in its kind but in its isolated excellence among other stories of the kind.

The wistful opening of Their Eyes Were Watching God pragmatically affirms greater repression in women as opposed to men, by which I mean “repression” only in Freud’s sense: unconscious yet purposeful forgetting:

Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.
Hurston’s Janie is now necessarily a paradigm for women, of whatever race, heroically attempting to assert their own individuality in contexts that continue to resent and fear any consciousness that is not male. In a larger perspective, should the contexts modify, the representation of Janie will take its significant place in a long tradition of such representations in English and American fiction. This tradition extends from Samuel Richardson to Doris Lessing and other contemporaries, but only rarely has been able to visualize authentically strong women who begin with all the deprivations that circumstance assigns to Janie. It is a crucial aspect of Hurston’s subtle sense of limits that the largest limitation is that imposed upon Janie by her grandmother, who loves her best, yet fears for her the most.

As a former slave, the grandmother, Nanny, is haunted by the compensatory dream of making first her daughter, and then her granddaughter, something other than “the mule of the world,” customary fate of the black woman. The dream is both powerful enough, and sufficiently unitary, to have driven Janie’s mother away, and to condemn Janie herself to a double disaster of marriages, before the tragic happiness of her third match completes as much of her story as Hurston desires to give us. As readers, we carry away with us what Janie never quite loses, the vivid pathos of her grandmother’s superb and desperate displacement of hope:

“And, Janie, maybe it wasn’t much, but Ah done de best Ah kin by you. Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn’t have to stay in de white folks’ yard and tuck yo’ head befo’ other chillun at school. Dat was all right when you was lit-tle. But when you got big enough to understand things, Ah want-ed you to look upon yo’self. Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled by folks throwin’ up things in yo’ face. And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate.”

II

Hurston’s rhetorical strength, even in Their Eyes Were Watching God, is frequently too overt, and threatens an excess, when contrasted with the painful simplicity of her narrative line and the reductive tendency at work in all her characters except for Janie and Nanny. Yet the excess works, partly because Hurston is so considerable and knowing a mythologist. Hovering in Their Eyes Were Watching God is the Mosaic myth of
deliverance, the pattern of revolution and exodus that Hurston reimagines as her prime trope of power:

But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world. Asia and all the Near East are sown with legends of this character. They are so numerous and so varied that some students have come to doubt if the Moses of the Christian concept is real. Then Africa has her mouth on Moses. All across the continent there are the legends of the greatness of Moses, but not because of his beard nor because he brought the laws down from Sinai. No, he is revered because he had the power to go up the mountain and to bring them down. Many men could climb mountains. Anyone could bring down laws that had been handed to them. But who can talk with God face to face? Who has the power to command God to go to a peak of a mountain and there demand of Him laws with which to govern a nation? What other man has ever commanded the wind and the hail? The light and darkness? That calls for power, and that is what Africa sees in Moses to worship. For he is worshipped as a god.

Power in Hurston is always potentia, the demand for life, for more life. Despite the differences in temperament, Hurston has affinities both with Dreiser and with Lawrence, heroic vitalists. Her art, like theirs, exalts an exuberance that is beauty, a difficult beauty because it participates in reality-testing. What is strongest in Janie is a persistence akin to Dreiser’s Carrie and Lawrence’s Ursula and Gudrun, a drive to survive in one’s own fashion. Nietzsche’s vitalistic injunction, that we must try to live as though it were morning, is the implicit basis of Hurston’s true religion, which in its American formulation (Thoreau’s), reminds us that only that day dawns to which we are alive. Something of Lawrence’s incessant sense of the sun is paralleled by Hurston’s trope of the solar trajectory, in a cosmos where: “They sat on the boarding house porch and saw the sun plunge into the same crack in the earth from which the night emerged” and where: “Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the town to the sun.”

Janie’s perpetual sense of the possibilities of another day propels her from Nanny’s vision of safety first to the catastrophe of Joe Starks and then to the love of Tea Cake, her true husband. But to live in a way that starts with the sun is to become pragmatically doom-eager, since mere life is deprecated in contrast to the possibility of glory, of life more abundant, rather than Nanny’s dream of a refuge from exploitation. Hurston’s most effective irony is that Janie’s drive toward her own erotic potential should transcend
her grandmother’s categories, since the marriage with Tea Cake is also Janie’s pragmatic liberation from bondage toward men. When he tells her, in all truth, that she has the keys to the kingdom, he frees her from living in her grandmother’s way.

A more pungent irony drove Hurston to end Janie’s idyll with Tea Cake’s illness and the ferocity of his subsequent madness. The impulse of her own vitalism compels Janie to kill him in self-defense, thus ending necessarily life and love in the name of the possibility of more life again. The novel’s conclusion is at once an elegy and a vision of achieved peace, an intense realization that indeed we are all asleep in the outer life:

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.

Hurston herself was refreshingly free of all the ideologies that currently obscure the reception of her best book. Her sense of power has nothing in common with politics of any persuasion, with contemporary modes of feminism, or even with those questers who search for a black aesthetic. As a vitalist, she was of the line of the Wife of Bath and Sir John Falstaff and Mynheer Peeperkorn. Like them, she was outrageous, heroically larger than life, witty in herself and the cause of wit in others. She belongs now to literary legend, which is as it should be. Her famous remark in response to Carl Van Vechten’s photographs is truly the epigraph to her life and work: “I love myself when I am laughing. And then again when I am looking mean and impressive.” Walt Whitman would have delighted in that as in her assertion: “When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue ... the cosmic Zora emerges.... How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond
me.” With Whitman, Hurston herself is now an image of American literary vitality, and a part also of the American mythology of exodus, of the power to choose the party of Eros, of more life.
F. Scott Fitzgerald  
(1896–1940)

_Tender Is the Night_, with its Keatsian title, was intended by Fitzgerald to be his masterwork. Though the novel is at least partly a failure, it is a fascinating debacle, intensely readable though somewhat diffuse. Dick Diver is a pale figure when compared to Gatsby; the reader cannot help like
Diver, but he lacks Gatsby’s obsessive force. Is Diver defeated by the rich, who fascinate him, or by his own inner weakness? Rather clearly, Diver is Fitzgerald’s own surrogate, as Gatsby never was. Diver fails and dwindles away because of a weakness in the will, in profound contrast to Gatsby. Perhaps all that could have saved Tender Is the Night would have been Jay Gatsby’s resurrection from the dead, since the gangster-poet’s vitality never possesses Dick Diver.
William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

I

No critic need invent William Faulkner’s obsessions with what Nietzsche might have called the genealogy of the imagination. Recent critics of Faulkner, including David Minter, John T. Irwin, David M. Wyatt and Richard H. King, have emphasized the novelist’s profound need to believe himself to have been his own father, in order to escape not only the Freudian family romance and literary anxieties of influence, but also the cultural dilemmas of what King terms “the Southern family romance.” From The Sound and the Fury through the debacle of A Fable, Faulkner centers upon the sorrows of fathers and sons, to the disadvantage of mothers and daughters. No feminist critic ever will be happy with Faulkner. His brooding conviction that female sexuality is closely allied with death seems essential to all of his strongest fictions. It may even be that Faulkner’s rhetorical economy, his wounded need to get his cosmos into a single sentence, is related to his fear that origin and end might prove to be one. Nietzsche prophetically had warned that origin and end were separate entities, and for the sake of life had to be kept apart, but Faulkner (strangely like Freud) seems to have known that the only Western trope participating neither in origin nor end is the image of the father.

By universal consent of critics and common readers, Faulkner now is recognized as the strongest American novelist of this century, clearly surpassing Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and standing as an equal in the sequence that includes Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain and Henry James. Some critics might add Dreiser to this group; Faulkner himself curiously would have insisted upon Thomas Wolfe, a generous though dubious judgment. The American precursor for Faulkner was Sherwood Anderson,
but perhaps only as an impetus; the true American forerunner is the poetry of T.S. Eliot, as Judith L. Sensibar demonstrates. But the truer precursor for Faulkner’s fiction is Conrad, inescapable for the American novelists of Faulkner’s generation, including Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Comparison to Conrad is dangerous for any novelist, and clearly Faulkner did not achieve a *Nostromo*. But his work of the decade 1929–39 does include four permanent books: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* If one adds *Sanctuary* and *The Wild Palms*, and *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses* in the early forties, then the combined effect is extraordinary.

From Malcolm Cowley on, critics have explained this effect as the consequence of the force of mythmaking, at once personal and local. Cleanth Brooks, the rugged final champion of the New Criticism, essentially reads Faulkner as he does Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, finding the hidden God of the normative Christian tradition to be the basis for Faulkner’s attitude towards nature. Since Brooks calls Faulkner’s stance Wordsworthian, and finds Wordsworthian nature a Christian vision also, the judgment involved necessarily has its problematical elements. Walter Pater, a critic in a very different tradition, portrayed a very different Wordsworth in terms that seem to me not inapplicable to Faulkner:

Religious sentiment, consecrating the affections and natural regrets of the human heart, above all, that pitiful awe and care for the perishing human clay, of which relic-worship is but the corruption, has always had much to do with localities, with the thoughts which attach themselves to actual scenes and places. Now what is true of it everywhere, is truest of it in those secluded valleys where one generation after another maintains the same abiding place; and it was on this side, that Wordsworth apprehended religion most strongly. Consisting, as it did so much, in the recognition of local sanctities, in the habit of connecting the stones and trees of a particular spot of earth with the great events of life, till the low walls, the green mounds, the half-obliterated epitaphs seemed full of voices, and a sort of natural oracle, the very religion of those people of the dales, appeared but as another link between them and the earth, and was literally a religion of nature.

A kind of stoic natural religion pervades this description, something close to the implicit faith of old Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*. It seems unhelpful to speak of “residual Christianity” in Faulkner, as Cleanth
Brooks does. Hemingway and Fitzgerald, in their nostalgias, perhaps were closer to a Christian ethos than Faulkner was in his great phase. Against current critical judgment, I prefer *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* to *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* partly because the first two are more primordial in their vision, closer to the stoic intensities of their author’s kind of natural piety. There is an *otherness* in Lena Grove and the Bundrens that would have moved Wordsworth, that is, the Wordsworth of *The Tale of Margaret, Michael, and The Old Cumberland Beggar*. A curious movement that is also a stasis becomes Faulkner’s pervasive trope for Lena. Though he invokes the imagery of Keats’s urn, Faulkner seems to have had the harvest-girl of Keats’s *To Autumn* more in mind, or even the stately figures of the *Ode to Indolence*. We remember Lena Grove as stately, calm, a person yet a process, a serene and patient consciousness, full of wonder, too much a unitary being to need even her author’s variety of stoic courage.

The uncanniness of this representation is exceeded by the Bundrens, whose plangency testifies to Faulkner’s finest rhetorical achievement. *As I Lay Dying* may be the most original novel ever written by an American. Obviously it is not free of the deepest influence Faulkner knew as a novelist. The language is never Conradian, and yet the sense of the reality principle is. But there is nothing in Conrad like Darl Bundren, not even in *The Secret Agent*. *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner’s strongest protest against the facticity of literary convention, against the force of the familial past, which tropes itself in fiction as the repetitive form of narrative imitating prior narrative. The book is a sustained nightmare, insofar as it is Darl’s book, which is to say, Faulkner’s book, or the book of his daemon.

Canonization is a process of enshrining creative misinterpretations, and no one need lament this. Still, one element that ensues from this process all too frequently is the not very creative misinterpretation in which the idiosyncratic is distorted into the normative. Churchwardenly critics who assimilate the Faulkner of the Thirties to spiritual, social, and moral orthodoxy can and do assert Faulkner himself as their preceptor. But this is the Faulkner of the Fifties, Nobel laureate, State Department envoy and author of *A Fable*, a book of badness simply astonishing for Faulkner. The best of the normative critics, Cleanth Brooks, reads even *As I Lay Dying* as a quest for community, an exaltation of the family, an affirmation of Christian values. The Bundrens manifestly constitute one of the most terrifying visions of the family romance in the history of literature. But their extremism is not eccentric in the 1929–39 world of Faulkner’s fiction.
That world is founded upon a horror of families, a limbo of outcasts, an evasion of all values other than stoic endurance. It is a world in which what is silent in the other Bundrens speaks in Darl, what is veiled in the Compsons is uncovered in Quentin. So tangled are these returns of the repressed with what continues to be estranged that phrases like “the violation of the natural” and “the denial of the human” become quite meaningless when applied to Faulkner’s greater fictions. In that world, the natural is itself a violation and the human already a denial. Is the weird quest of the Bundrens a violation of the natural, or is it what Blake would have called a terrible triumph for the selfish virtues of the natural heart? Darl judges it to be the latter, but Darl luminously denies the sufficiency of the human, at the cost of what seems schizophrenia.

Marxist criticism of imaginative literature, if it had not regressed abominably in our country, so that now it is a travesty of the dialectical suppleness of Adorno and Benjamin, would find a proper subject in the difficult relationship between the 1929 business panic and *As I Lay Dying*. Perhaps the self-destruction of our delusive political economy helped free Faulkner from whatever inhibitions, communal and personal, had kept him earlier from a saga like that of the Bundrens. Only an authentic seer can give permanent form to a prophecy like *As I Lay Dying*, which puts severely into question every received notion we have of the natural and the human. Darl asserts he has no mother, while taunting his enemy brother, Jewel, with the insistence that Jewel’s mother was a horse. Their little brother, Vardaman, says: “My mother is a fish.” The mother, dead and undead, is uncannier even than these children, when she confesses the truth of her existence, her rejecting vision of her children:

I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time. And when I would have to look at them day after day, each with his and her single and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine, and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me. I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.

This veritable apocalypse of any sense of otherness is no mere “denial
of community.” Nor are the Bundrens any “mimesis of essential nature.” They are a super-mimesis, an over-representation mocking nature while shadowing it. What matters in major Faulkner is that the people have gone back, not to nature but to some abyss before the Creation-Fall. Eliot insisted that Joyce’s imagination was eminently orthodox. This can be doubted, but in Faulkner’s case there is little sense in baptizing his imagination. One sees why he preferred reading the Old Testament to the New, remarking that the former was stories and the latter, ideas. The remark is inadequate except insofar as it opposes Hebraic to Hellenistic representation of character. There is little that is Homeric about the Bundrens, or Sophoclean about the Compsons. Faulkner’s irony is neither classical nor romantic, neither Greek nor German. It does not say one thing while meaning another, nor trade in contrasts between expectation and fulfillment. Instead, it juxtaposes incommensurable realities: of self and other, of parent and child, of past and future. When Gide maintained that Faulkner’s people lacked souls, he simply failed to observe that Faulkner’s ironies were Biblical. To which an amendment must be added. In Faulkner, only the ironies are Biblical. What Faulkner’s people lack is the blessing; they cannot contend for a time without boundaries. Yahweh will make no covenant with them. Their agon therefore is neither the Greek one for the foremost place nor the Hebrew one for the blessing, which honors the father and the mother. Their agon is the hopeless one of waiting for their doom to lift.

*The Sound and the Fury*

*The Sound and the Fury* always moved Faulkner to tenderness, far more than his other novels. It was for him a kind of Keatsian artifact, vase or urn invested with a permanent aesthetic dignity. His judgment has prevailed with his critics, though some doubts and reservations have been voiced. Like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and the Fury* seems to me a lesser work than *Light in August*, or than *As I Lay Dying*, which is Faulkner’s masterpiece. The mark of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a little too immediate on *The Sound and the Fury*, which does not always sustain its intense rhetoricity, its anguished word-consciousness. There is something repressed almost throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, some autobiographical link between Quentin’s passion for his sister Caddy and a nameless passion of Faulkner’s, perhaps (as David Minter surmises) for the sister he never had, perhaps his desire for Estelle Oldham, later to be his wife, but only after being married to another. Jealousy, intimately allied to the fear of mortality, is a central element in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Hugh Kenner, comparing Faulkner’s novel to its precursors by Conrad
and Joyce, dismisses the Compson family saga as excessively arty. The judgment is cruel, yet cogent if Joyce and Conrad are brought too close, and Faulkner does not distance himself enough from them. This makes for an unhappy paradox; *The Sound and the Fury* is a little too elaborately wrought to sustain its rather homely substance, its plot of family disasters. But that substance, those familial disorders, are entirely too available to Freudian and allied reductions; such repetitions and doublings are prevalent patterns, vicissitudes of drives too dismaly universal truly to serve novelistic ends. Only Jason, of all the Compsons, is individual enough to abide as an image in the reader’s memory. His Dickensian nastiness makes Jason an admirable caricature, while Quentin, Caddy, and Benjy blend into the continuum, figures of thought for whom Faulkner has failed to find the inevitable figures of speech.

Faulkner’s Appendix for *The Sound and the Fury*, written for Malcolm Cowley’s *The Portable Faulkner*, not only has become part of the novel, but famously constitutes the definitive interpretation of the novel, or Faulkner’s will-to-power over his own text. The Appendix is very much Faulkner the yarn-spinner of 1946, soon to write such feeble works as *Intruder in the Dust*, *Knight’s Gambit*, and *Requiem for a Nun*, before collapsing into the disaster of *A Fable*. It is not the Faulkner of 1928, commencing his major phase, and yet the Appendix does have a curious rhetorical authority, culminating in Faulkner’s tribute to the blacks (after simply listing Dilsey’s name, since she is beyond praise): “They endured.” Sadly, this is an authority mostly lacking in the actual text of *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin’s voice makes me start when it is too clearly the voice of Stephen Daedalus, and Joyce’s medley of narrative voices fades in and out of Faulkner’s story with no clear relation to Faulkner’s purposes. Only Poldy, fortunately, is kept away, for his sublime presence would be sublimey irrelevant and so would sink the book.

I emphasize the limitations of *The Sound and the Fury* only because we are in danger of overlooking them, now that Faulkner has become, rightly, our canonical novelist in this century, clearly our strongest author of prose fiction since the death of Henry James. *As I Lay Dying* was a radical experiment that worked magnificently; its forms and voices are apposite metaphors for the fierce and terrifying individualities of the Bundrens. *The Sound and the Fury* was also a remarkable experiment, but too derivative from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and perhaps too dark for Faulkner’s own comfort.

What saves the Compson saga is that it is a saga; and finds a redeeming context in the reader’s sense of larger significances that always seem to pervade Faulkner’s major writings. We read *The Sound and the Fury* and we hear a tale signifying a great deal, because Faulkner constitutes for us a
literary cosmos of continual reverberations. Like Dilsey, we too are persuaded that we have seen the first and the last, the beginning and the ending of a story that transcends the four Compson children, and the squalors of their family romance.

Sanctuary

In *Sanctuary*, no one even bothers to wait for doom to lift; the novel is as nihilistic as John Webster’s *The White Devil* or Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy*. Malraux asserted that Greek tragedy entered the detective story in *Sanctuary*. Had Malraux spoken of Jacobean tragedy, his remarks would have been to some purpose. Though directly influenced by Conrad and Dostoevsky, *Sanctuary* comes closer to Webster and Tourneur than T.S. Eliot does, even when he explicitly imitates them. Robert Penn Warren, much under Faulkner’s influence (and Eliot’s), is the other modern writer who unmistakably reminds us of the Jacobians. Tragic farce is the true Jacobean mode, and the mixed genre of *Sanctuary*—Gothic thriller, detective and gangster story, shocker, entertainment—quite accurately can be termed tragic farce.

*Sanctuary* is the enigma among Faulkner’s novels; intended as a potboiler and moneymaker, it very nearly achieves major status and can sustain many rereadings. Its protagonists, like Webster’s, designedly resist psychologizing. *Sanctuary*’s extraordinary humor and what might be called a grotesque assortment of eloquences in Faulkner’s rhetoric, high and low, combine to keep the book alive in the memory of the reader. Famous passages at its start and its conclusion remain remarkable as epiphanies—Paterian, Conradian, Joycean—in which spiritual realities flare forth against mundane backgrounds. Here is the novel’s opening:

From beyond the screen of bushes which surrounded the spring, Popeye watched the man drinking. A faint path led from the road to the spring. Popeye watched the man—a tall, thin man, hatless, in worn gray flannel trousers and carrying a tweed coat over his arm—emerge from the path and kneel to drink from the spring.

The spring welled up at the root of a beech tree and flowed away upon a bottom of whorled and waved sand. It was surrounded by a thick growth of cane and brier, of cypress and gum in which broken sunlight lay sourceless. Somewhere, hidden and secret yet nearby, a bird sang three notes and ceased.

In the spring the drinking man leaned his face to the broken and myriad reflection of his own drinking. When he rose up he
saw among them the shattered reflection of Popeye’s straw hat, though he had heard no sound.

He saw, facing him across the spring, a man of under size, his hands in his coat pockets, a cigarette slanted from his chin. His suit was black, with a tight, high-waisted coat. His trousers were rolled once and caked with mud above mud-caked shoes. His face had a queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light; against the sunny silence, in his slanted straw hat and his slightly akimbo arms, he had that vicious depthless quality of stamped tin.

Behind him the bird sang again, three bars in monotonous repetition: a sound meaningless and profound out of a suspirant and peaceful following silence which seemed to isolate the spot, and out of which a moment later came the sound of an automobile passing along a road and dying away.

No reader is going to become at ease with Popeye (Faulkner thought him a monster, but sympathized with him anyway) and no reader forgets him either. I recall Faulkner’s observation somewhere that his Popeye, in the movies, ought to be played by Mickey Mouse, a rather more amiable cartoon than Popeye constitutes. Popeye is nightmare, as this opening passage conveys; he is a phantasmagoria of flesh illuminated by electric light, a two-dimensional figure stamped out of tin. We are not surprised that his sexual organ pragmatically should be a corncob, or that he passively allows himself to be executed at the book’s close. He represents not a dualism, whether Platonic or Freudian, but a monistic nihilism, a machine uninhabited by a ghost. The bird, singing from its hidden and secret recess nearby, is part of that nihilism, “in monotonous repetition: a sound meaningless and profound.” Perhaps by way of Eliot’s The Waste Land, Faulkner returns us to the great American trope of a hidden bird singing from a dark and secret place in a swamp, Whitman’s hermit thrush in When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d. Whitman’s bird sang a song of sane and sacred death; the bird of Popeye’s epiphany might as well be a clock, sounding the repetitions for death in Sanctuary, insane and obscene death.

The impressionism of Sanctuary derives from Conrad, almost as though Sanctuary is Conrad’s Chance gone mad. Sanctuary will not sustain aesthetic comparison with Conrad’s The Secret Agent, but there are spiritual and structural affinities between the two novels. Faulkner’s detachment in Sanctuary is astonishing and empties out the book with high deliberate-ness. Against Cleanth Brooks, I must assert that there is no Vision of Evil in Sanctuary. A narrative whose central protagonists are Popeye and Temple Drake, not Horace Benbow and Ruby Lamar, knows itself too well
to desire any pandering to moral judgments. Popeye is a mechanical jack-in-the-box; Temple ends as a mechanical figurine in *Sanctuary*’s concluding passage:

It had been a gray day, a gray summer, a gray year. On the street old men wore overcoats, and in the Luxembourg Gardens as Temple and her father passed the women sat knitting in shawls and even the men playing croquet played in coats and capes, and in the sad gloom of the chestnut trees the dry click of balls, the random shouts of children, had that quality of autumn, gallant and evanescent and forlorn. From beyond the circle with its spurious Greek balustrade, clotted with movement, filled with a gray light of the same color and texture as the water which the fountain played into the pool, came a steady crash of music. They went on, passed the pool where the children and an old man in a shabby brown overcoat sailed toy boats, and entered the trees again and found seats. Immediately an old woman came with decrepit promptitude and collected four sous.

In the pavilion a band in the horizon blue of the army played Massenet and Scriabine, and Berlioz like a thin coating of tortured Tschaikovsky on a slice of stale bread, while the twilight dissolved in wet gleams from the branches, onto the pavilion and the sombre toadstools of umbrellas. Rich and resonant the brasses crashed and died in the thick green twilight, rolling over them in rich sad waves. Temple yawned behind her hand, then she took out a compact and opened it upon a face in miniature sullen and discontented and sad. Beside her her father sat, his hands crossed on the head of his stick, the rigid bar of his moustache beaded with moisture like frosted silver. She closed the compact and from beneath her smart new hat she seemed to follow with her eyes the waves of music, to dissolve into the dying brasses, across the pool and the opposite semicircle of trees where at sombre intervals the dead tranquil queens in stained marble mused, and on into the sky lying prone and vanquished in the embrace of the season of rain and death.

This high rhetoric is as much a failure as the book’s opening passage was a success. Faulkner, self-consciously invading the ambiance of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, is anxious and over-writes. He ought to have ended *Sanctuary* with the hanging of Popeye, affectless and economical. We are embarrassed by that “sky lying prone and vanquished in the
embrace of the season of rain and death,” partly because the sky there is a
trope substituting for the violated sanctuary of Temple’s body. Sanctuary
does not share the strength of Faulkner’s best work, As I Lay Dying and
Light in August, but I perversely prefer it to The Sound and the Fury and
Absalom, Absalom! It lacks their aspirations and their pretensions, and may
in time seem a more original work than either. Its uneven and conflicting
rhetorics wound it, but it survives as narrative and as fearsome image, still
representative of American realities after more than a half-century.

Light in August

There are exceptions to the ironic laws of tragic farce even in Faulkner, by
which I mean major Faulkner, 1928–1942. The Faulkner of the later for-
ties and the fifties, author of A Fable and other inadequate narratives, had
been abandoned by the vision of the abyss that had given him As I Lay
Dying and Sanctuary. But even in his fourteen years of nihilistic splendor,
he had invented a few beings whose mythic sense of persistence conveys a
sense of the biblical blessing. I have already remarked on Lena Grove’s
stately role as a version of the harvest-girl in Keats’s To Autumn. Rather
than discuss Joe Christmas or Joanna Burden or Hightower, I will center
only upon Lena, a vision Wordsworthian and Keatsian, and more satisfy-
ing as such than anything akin to her since George Eliot and Thomas
Hardy.

One way of seeing the particular strength of Light in August as against
Faulkner’s other major novels is to speculate as to which could contain
Lena. Her massively persuasive innocence hardly could be introduced into
The Sound and the Fury or Absalom, Absalom!, and would destroy utterly As
I Lay Dying or Sanctuary. Natural sublimity, Wordsworthian and almost
Tolstoyan, requires a large cosmos if it is to be sustained. As I Lay Dying is
Faulkner’s most original fiction and my own favorite among all modern
American narratives, yet Light in August must be Faulkner’s grandest
achievement. The book’s ability to hold Lena as well as Joe, Joanna, and
Hightower, makes it the American novel of this century, fit heir of
Melville, Hawthorne, Mark Twain. Difficult as it is to imagine Henry
James getting through Light in August (after all, he had trouble with
Dickens!), the book might have shown James again some possibilities that
he had excluded.

Albert J. Guerard, perhaps too absorbed in tracing Faulkner’s indub-
itable misogyny, assimilated Lena to “the softer menace of the fecund and
the bovine,” but offered as evidence only that “she is, at her best, a serene-
ly comic creation.” Fecund certainly, bovine certainly not, and to “serene-
ly” add the further modifier “loving.” Judith Bryant Wittenberg, in her feminist consideration of Faulkner, startles me by linking Lena Grove to Joe Christmas, because they “are both products of an exploited childhood now restlessly on the move and aggressive in different ways.” Rather, Lena is never-resting; Joe is restless; Joe is aggressive, but Lena moves on, a natural force, innocent and direct but free of the death drive, which is incarnated in Joe, Joanna, and so many others in the novel.

John T. Irwin, keen seer of repetition and revenge in Faulkner, intimates that the association of Lena with Keats’s Grecian Urn necessarily links her also to Faulkner’s consciousness of his own mortality and to his acceptance of his own writing as a form of dying. Nevertheless, Lena is certainly one of the most benign visions of a reality principle imaginable, and I return to my own Paterian conviction that she resembles the creations of Pater’s Wordsworth more than the figures of Keats’s tragic naturalism. Lena may be a projection of comic pastoral, but she seems to me more pastoral than comic, and an image of natural goodness invested by Faulkner’s genius with considerable aesthetic dignity.

What would *Light in August* be like without her? The story of Joe Christmas and Joanna is almost unrelievedly bitter, though redeemed by its extraordinary social poignance. Hightower is a superb representation of Southern Romanticism destroying itself, while generating a great music from the destruction. What was strongest and clearest in Faulkner’s narrative imagination prompted him to place Lena, who gives us a sense of time without boundaries, at the visionary center of the novel. She hardly unifies the book, but *Light in August* has an exuberant abundance that can dispense with an overt unity. Lena will be “light in August,” when her child is born, but she is most of the light that the novel possesses throughout. Perhaps she is the answer, in Faulkner, to the poet’s old prayer: “make my dark poem light.”

*Absalom, Absalom!*

In a cosmos where only the ironies are biblical, the self, like the father and the past, becomes what Nietzsche called a “numinous shadow,” an ancestor rather than a personal possession. Where the self is so estranged, we are not on Shakespeare’s stage but on John Webster’s, so that the Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* is in some respects another Jacobean hero-villain who would end by saying (if he could), “I limned this night-piece, and it was my best.” *Absalom, Absalom!* is a tragic farce, like *The White Devil*, and shares in some of the formal difficulties that are endemic in tragic farce. Rather than add to the distinguished discourse on the narrative
perplexities that figure so richly in *Absalom, Absalom!*, I wish to address the question of comparative value. Does the novel have the aesthetic dignity that justifies its problematic form, or have we canonized it prematurely?

For reasons that I do not altogether comprehend, *Absalom, Absalom!* seems to me a less original book than the three great novels by Faulkner that preceded it: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*. The precursors—Conrad profoundly, Joyce, Eliot, and even Tennyson more superficially—manifest themselves in Faulkner’s text more overtly than they do in the three earlier works. One misses also the intensely sympathetic figures—Dilsey, Darl Bundren, Lena Grove—and their dreadful obverses Jason Compson, Addie Bundren, Percy Grimm—who help make the three earlier masterpieces so memorable. A shadow falls upon Faulkner’s originality, both of style and of representation, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Can that shadow be named?

There seems to be an element of obscurantism in *Absalom, Absalom!*, even as there is in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. I do not find any obscurantism in *As I Lay Dying* or *Light in August*, even as *Nostromo* and *Victory* seem to be free of it. It hovers uneasily in *The Sound and the Fury* as it does in *Lord Jim*, yet it scarcely mars those books. Sometimes in *Absalom*, as in *Heart of Darkness*, I lose confidence that the author knows precisely what he is talking about. The consequence is a certain bathos which necessarily diminishes the aesthetic dignity of the work:

“‘You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate. I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man. I even risked my life at one time, as I told you, though as I also told you I did not undertake this risk purely and simply to gain a wife, though it did have that result. But that is beside the point also: suffice that I had the wife, accepted her in good faith, with no reservations about myself, and I expected as much from them. I did not even demand, mind, as one of my obscure origin might have been expected to do (or at least be condoned in the doing) out of ignorance of gentility in dealing with gentleborn people. I did not demand; I accepted them at their own valuation while insisting on my own part upon explaining fully about myself and my progenitors: yet they deliberately withheld from me the one fact which I have reason to know they
were aware would have caused me to decline the entire matter, otherwise they would not have withheld it from me—a fact which I did not learn until after my son was born. And even then I did not act hastily. I could have reminded them of these wasted years, these years which would now leave me behind with my schedule not only the amount of elapsed time which their number represented, but that compensatory amount of time represented by their number which I should now have to spend to advance myself once more to the point I had reached and lost. But I did not. I merely explained how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design, and following which, as I told you, I made no attempt to keep not only that which I might consider myself to have earned at the risk of my life but which had been given to me by signed testimonials, but on the contrary I declined and resigned all right and claim to this in order that I might repair whatever injustice I might be considered to have done by so providing for the two persons whom I might be considered to have deprived of anything I might later possess: and this was agreed to, mind; agreed to between the two parties. And yet, and after more than thirty years, more than thirty years after my conscience had finally assured me that if I had done an injustice, I had done what I could to rectify it—’ and Grandfather not saying ‘Wait’ now but saying, hollering maybe even: ‘Conscience? Conscience? Good God, man, what else did you expect? Didn’t the very affinity and instinct for misfortune of a man who had spent that much time in a monastery even, let alone one who had lived that many years as you lived them, tell you better than that? didn’t the dread and fear of females which you must have drawn in with the primary mammalian milk teach you better? What kind of abysmal and purblind innocence could that have been which someone told you to call virginity? what conscience to trade with which would have warranted you in the belief that you could have bought immunity from her for no other coin but justice?’—”

This is Sutpen, as reported by Quentin’s Grandfather, and ends with the latter admonishing Sutpen. For the rhetoric here of both men not to seem excessive, Sutpen must be of some eminence and his “design” of some consequence. But nothing in the novel persuades one of Sutpen’s stature or of his design’s meaningfulness. Like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Sutpen is a blind will in a cognitive vacuum; both figures seem to represent nothing more than a Nietzschean spirit of mere resentment, rather than
the will’s deep revenge against time, and time’s “It was.” Faulkner evidently was persuaded of Sutpen’s importance, if only as a vital synecdoche for southern history. More a process than a man, Sutpen has drive without personality. One can remember a few of his acts, but none of his words, let alone his thoughts—if he has thoughts. He is simply too abrupt a mythic representation, rather than a man who becomes a myth. Only the scope of his failure interests Faulkner, rather than anything he is or means as a person.

Good critics confronting *Absalom, Absalom!* are fascinated by its intricate and enormous narrative procedures and by its genealogical patterns: doubling, incest, repetition, revenge—as John Irwin catalogs them. But narrative complications and structures of human desire, however titanic, are not necessarily aesthetic achievements. The Johnsonian questions, decisive for the common reader, always remain: how significant is the action that is represented, and how persuasive is the representation of the actors? Abstractly, the founding of a house and clan ought to outweigh the lunatic quest to bury a bad mother in the face of appalling obstacles, and yet Faulkner fails to make the former project as vital as the latter. Sutpen’s design does not in itself move me, while the Bundrens’ journey never loses its capacity to shock me into a negative Sublime. As a minority of one (so far as I can tell), I would yield to other critics on the greatness of *Absalom, Absalom!*, except that the best of them simply assume the eminence and mythic splendor of the book.

Time may reveal such assumptions to be accurate and thus justify readings that take delight in aspects of the book that make it more problematic than nearly any other comparable novel. Still, Faulkner’s *A Fable*, surely his worst book by any critical standards, will sustain post-Structuralist readings almost as well as *Absalom, Absalom!* does. Perhaps Faulkner’s most comprehensive and ambitious novel justifies its vast inclusiveness that is so uneasily allied to its deliberately unfinished quality. But Sutpen is indeed more like Conrad’s Kurtz than like Melville’s Ahab, in that his obsessions are not sufficiently metaphysical. Sutpen’s Hundred is too much Kurtz’s Africa, and too little the whiteness of the whale.
Ernest Hemingway

(1899–1961)

I

Hemingway freely proclaimed his relationship to *Huckleberry Finn*, and there is some basis for the assertion, except that there is little in common between the rhetorical stances of Twain and Hemingway. Kipling’s *Kim*, in style and mode, is far closer to *Huckleberry Finn* than anything Hemingway wrote. The true accent of Hemingway’s admirable style is to be found in an even greater and more surprising precursor:

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

Or again:

I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore drips, thinn’d with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks.
Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

Hemingway is scarcely unique in not acknowledging the paternity of
Walt Whitman; T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens are far closer to Whitman than William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane were, but literary influence is a paradoxical and antithetical process, about which we continue to know all too little. The profound affinities between Hemingway, Eliot, and Stevens are not accidental, but are family resemblances due to the repressed but crucial relation each had to Whitman’s work. Hemingway characteristically boasted (in a letter to Sara Murphy, February 72, 1936) that he had knocked Stevens down quite handily: “... for statistics sake Mr. Stevens is 6 feet 2 weighs 522 lbs. and ... when he hits the ground it is highly spectaculous.” Since this match between the two writers took place in Key West on February 19, 1936, I am moved, as a loyal Stevensian, for statistics’ sake to point out that the victorious Hemingway was born in 1899, and the defeated Stevens in 1879, so that the novelist was then going on thirty-seven, and the poet verging on fifty-seven. The two men doubtless despised one another, but in the letter celebrating his victory Hemingway calls Stevens “a damned fine poet” and Stevens always affirmed that Hemingway was essentially a poet, a judgment concurred in by Robert Penn Warren when he wrote that Hemingway “is essentially a lyric rather than a dramatic writer.” Warren compared Hemingway to Wordsworth, which is feasible, but the resemblance to Whitman is far closer. Wordsworth would not have written, “I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there,” but Hemingway almost persuades us he would have achieved that line had not Whitman set it down first.

II

It is now more than twenty years since Hemingway’s suicide, and some aspects of his permanent canonical status seem beyond doubt. Only a few modern American novels seem certain to endure: The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby, Miss Lonelyhearts, The Crying of Lot 49, and at least several by Faulkner, including As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary, Light in August, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom! Two dozen stories by Hemingway could be added to the group, indeed perhaps all of The First Forty-Nine Stories. Faulkner is an eminence apart, but critics agree that Hemingway and Fitzgerald are his nearest rivals, largely on the strength of their shorter fiction. What seems unique is that Hemingway is the only American writer of prose fiction in this century who, as a stylist, rivals the principal poets: Stevens, Eliot, Frost, Hart Crane, aspects of Pound, W.C. Williams, Robert Penn Warren, and Elizabeth Bishop. This is hardly to say that Hemingway, at his best, fails at narrative or the representation of character. Rather, his peculiar excellence is closer to Whitman than to Twain,
closer to Stevens than to Faulkner, and even closer to Eliot than to Fitzgerald, who was his friend and rival. He is an elegiac poet who mourns the self, who celebrates the self (rather less effectively) and who suffers divisions in the self. In the broadest tradition of American literature, he stems ultimately from the Emersonian reliance on the god within, which is the line of Whitman, Thoreau, and Dickinson. He arrives late and dark in this tradition, and is one of its negative theologians, as it were, but as in Stevens the negations, the cancellings, are never final. Even the most ferocious of his stories, say “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen” or “A Natural History of the Dead,” can be said to celebrate what we might call the Real Absence. Doc Fischer, in “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,” is a precursor of Nathanael West’s Shrike in Miss Lonelyhearts, and his savage, implicit religiosity prophesies not only Shrike’s Satanic stance but the entire demonic world of Pynchon’s explicitly paranoid or Luddite visions. Perhaps there was a nostalgia for a Catholic order always abiding in Hemingway’s consciousness, but the cosmos of his fiction, early and late, is American Gnostic, as it was in Melville, who first developed so strongly the negative side of the Emersonian religion of self-reliance.

III

Hemingway notoriously and splendidly was given to overtly agonistic images whenever he described his relationship to canonical writers, including Melville, a habit of description in which he has been followed by his true ephebe, Norman Mailer. In a grand letter (September 6–7, 1949) to his publisher, Charles Scribner, he charmingly confessed, “Am a man without any ambition, except to be champion of the world, I wouldn’t fight Dr. Tolstoi in a 20 round bout because I know he would knock my ears off.” This modesty passed quickly, to be followed by, “If I can live to 60 I can beat him. (MAYBE).” Since the rest of the letter counts Turgenev, de Maupassant, Henry James, even Cervantes, as well as Melville and Dostoyevski, among the defeated, we can join Hemingway, himself, in admiring his extraordinary self-confidence. How justified was it, in terms of his ambitions?

It could be argued persuasively that Hemingway is the best short-story writer in the English language from Joyce’s Dubliners until the present. The aesthetic dignity of the short story need not be questioned, and yet we seem to ask more of a canonical writer. Hemingway wrote The Sun Also Rises and not Ulysses, which is only to say that his true genius was for very short stories, and hardly at all for extended narrative. Had he been primarily a poet, his lyrical gifts would have sufficed: we do not hold it against
Yeats that his poems, not his plays, are his principal glory. Alas, neither Turgenev nor Henry James, neither Melville nor Mark Twain provide true agonists for Hemingway. Instead, de Maupassant is the apter rival. Of Hemingway’s intensity of style in the briefer compass, there is no question, but even *The Sun Also Rises* reads now as a series of epiphanies, of brilliant and memorable vignettes.

Much that has been harshly criticized in Hemingway, particularly in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, results from his difficulty in adjusting his gifts to the demands of the novel. Robert Penn Warren suggests that Hemingway is successful when his “system of ironies and understatements is coherent.” When incoherent, then, Hemingway’s rhetoric fails as persuasion, which is to say, we read *To Have and Have Not* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and we are all too aware that the system of tropes is primarily what we are offered. Warren believes this not to be true of *A Farewell to Arms*, yet even the celebrated close of the novel seems now a worn understatement:

But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn’t any good. It was like saying good-by to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.

Contrast this to the close of “Old Man at the Bridge,” a story only two and a half pages long:

There was nothing to do about him. It was Easter Sunday and the Fascists were advancing toward the Ebro. It was a gray overcast day with a low ceiling so their planes were not up. That and the fact that cats know how to look after themselves was all the good luck that old man would ever have.

The understatement continues to persuade here because the stoicism remains coherent, and is admirably fitted by the rhetoric. A very short story concludes itself by permanently troping the mood of a particular moment in history. Vignette is Hemingway’s natural mode, or call it hard-edged vignette: a literary sketch that somehow seems to be the beginning or end of something longer, yet truly is complete in itself. Hemingway’s style encloses what ought to be unenclosed, so that the genre remains subtle yet trades its charm for punch. But a novel of three hundred and forty pages (*A Farewell to Arms*) which I have just finished reading again (after twenty years away from it) cannot sustain itself upon the rhetoric of vignette. After many understatements, too many, the reader begins to
believe that he is reading a Hemingway imitator, like the accomplished John O’Hara, rather than the master himself. Hemingway’s notorious fault is the monotony of repetition, which becomes a dulling litany in a somewhat less accomplished imitator like Nelson Algren, and sometimes seems self-parody when we must confront it in Hemingway.

Nothing is got for nothing, and a great style generates defenses in us, particularly when it sets the style of an age, as the Byronic Hemingway did. As with Byron, the color and variety of the artist’s life becomes something of a veil between the work and our aesthetic apprehension of it. Hemingway’s career included four marriages (and three divorces); service as an ambulance driver for the Italians in World War I (with an honorable wound); activity as a war correspondent in the Greek–Turkish War (1922), the Spanish Civil War (1937–39), the Chinese-Japanese War (1941) and the War against Hitler in Europe (1944–45). Add big-game hunting and fishing, safaris, expatriation in France and Cuba, bullfighting, the Nobel prize, and ultimate suicide in Idaho, and you have an absurdly implausible life, apparently lived in imitation of Hemingway’s own fiction. The final effect of the work and the life together is not less than mythological, as it was with Byron and with Whitman and with Oscar Wilde. Hemingway now is myth, and so is permanent as an image of American heroism, or perhaps more ruefully the American illusion of heroism. The best of Hemingway’s work, the stories and *The Sun Also Rises*, are also a permanent part of the American mythology. Faulkner, Stevens, Frost, perhaps Eliot, and Hart Crane were stronger writers than Hemingway, but he alone in this American century has achieved the enduring status of myth.

*The Sun Also Rises*

Rereading *The Sun Also Rises* provides a few annoyances, particularly if one is a Jewish literary critic and somewhat skeptical of Hemingway’s vision of the matador as messiah. Romero seems to me about as convincing a representation as Robert Cohn; they are archetypes for Hemingway in 1926, but hardly for us sixty years after. Brett and Mike are period pieces also; Scott Fitzgerald did them better. But these are annoyances only; the novel is as fresh now as when I first read it in 1946 when I was sixteen. Like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises* ages beautifully. Why? What are the qualities that save this novel from its own mystique, its self-intoxication with its own rhetorical stance? What does it share with Hemingway’s best stories, like those in the fine collection *Winner Take Nothing*?

A great style is itself necessarily a trope, a metaphor for a particular attitude towards reality. Hemingway’s is an art of evocation, hardly a
singular or original mode, except that Hemingway evokes by parataxis, in
the manner of Whitman, or of much in the English Bible. This is parataxis
with a difference, a way of utterance that plays at a withdrawal from all
affect, while actually investing affect in the constancy of the withdrawal, a
willing choice of the void as object, rather than be void of object, in
Nietzschean terms. Not that Hemingway is spurred by Nietzsche, since
Conrad is clearly the largest precursor of the author of *The Sun Also Rises.*
The stance of Marlow in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* is the closest ana-
logue to Hemingway’s own rhetorical stance in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A
Farewell to Arms.*

Erich Auerbach and Angus Fletcher are among the notable modern
critics who have illuminated the literary uses of parataxis. Fletcher lucidly
summarizes parataxis as a syntactic parallel to the symbolic action of liter-

ature:

This term implies a structuring of sentences such that they do not
convey any distinctions of higher or lower order. “Order” here
means intensity of interest, since what is more important usually
gets the greater share of attention.

Fletcher, without implying childlike or primitive behavior, indicates
the psychological meaning of parataxis as being related to “the piecemeal
behavior of young children or primitive peoples.” As Fletcher notes, this
need not involve the defense Freud named as regression, because a parat-
actic syntax “displays ambiguity, suggesting that there is a rhythmic order
even deeper in its organizing force than the syntactic order.”

Hemingway’s parataxis is worthy of the full-length studies it has not
yet received. Clearly it is akin to certain moments in Huck Finn’s narra-
tion, Walt Whitman’s reveries, and even Wallace Stevens’s most sustained
late meditations, such as *The Auroras of Autumn.* John Hollander usefully
compares it also to “an Antonioni shooting script in the relation of dia-
logue and shots of landscape cut away to as a move in the dialogue itself,
rather than as mere punctuation, and ultimately in the way in which dia-
logue and uninterpreted glimpse of scene interpret each other.” I take it
that the refusal of emphasis, the maintaining of an even tonality of appar-
et understatement, is the crucial manifestation of parataxis in
Hemingway’s prose style. Consider the celebrated conclusion of *The Sun
Also Rises*:

Down-stairs we came out through the first-floor dining-room to
the street. A waiter went for a taxi. It was hot and bright. Up the
street was a little square with trees and grass where there were taxis parked. A taxi came up the street, the waiter hanging out at the side. I tipped him and told the driver where to drive, and got in beside Brett. The driver started up the street. I settled back. Brett moved close to me. We sat close against each other. I put my arm around her and she rested against me comfortably. It was very hot and bright, and the houses looked sharply white. We turned out onto the Gran Via.

“Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.”

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

“Yes,” I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

The question of Jake’s impotence is more than relevant here. It is well to remember Hemingway’s description of authorial intention, given in the interview with George Plimpton:

Actually he had been wounded in quite a different way and his testicles were intact and not damaged. Thus he was capable of all normal feelings as a man but incapable of consummating them. The important distinction is that his wound was physical and not psychological and that he was not emasculated.

The even, understated tone at the end of The Sun Also Rises depends upon a syntax that carries parataxis to what might have been parodistic excess, if Hemingway’s art were less deliberate. Sentences such as “It was hot and bright” and the sly “He raised his baton” are psychic images of lost consummation, but they testify also to Jake’s estrangement from the earlier intensities of his love for Brett. Reduced by his betrayal of the matador-messiah to Brett’s rapacity, Jake is last heard in transition towards a less childlike, less primitive mode of reality-testing: “‘Yes.’ I said. ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so?’” One remembers Nietzsche’s reflection that what we find words for is something we already despise in our hearts, so that there is always a sort of contempt in the act of speaking. Kenneth Burke, in Counter-Statement, rejoined that the contempt might be in the act, but not contempt for speaking. Jake, as the novel ends, is in transition towards Burke’s position.

Hemingway possessed both a great style and an important sensibility. He was not an original moralist, a major speculative intellect, a master of
narrative, or superbly gifted in the representation of persons. That is to say, he was not Tolstoy, whom he hoped to defeat he said, if only he could live long enough. But style and sensibility can be more than enough, as The Sun Also Rises demonstrates. Style alone will not do it; consider Updike or Cheever. We go back to The Sun Also Rises to learn a sensibility and to modify our own in the process of learning.

_A Farewell to Arms_

If _A Farewell to Arms_ fails to sustain itself as a unified novel, it does remain Hemingway’s strongest work after the frequent best of the short stories and _The Sun Also Rises_. It also participates in the aura of Hemingway’s mode of myth, embodying as it does not only Hemingway’s own romance with Europe but the permanent vestiges of our national romance with the Old World. The death of Catherine represents not the end of that affair, but its perpetual recurrence. I assign classic status in the interpretation of that death to Leslie Fiedler, with his precise knowledge of the limits of literary myth: “Only the dead woman becomes neither a bore nor a mother; and before Catherine can quite become either she must die, killed not by Hemingway, of course, but by childbirth!” Fiedler finds a touch of Poe in this, but Hemingway seems to me far healthier. Death, to Poe, is after all less a metaphor for sexual fulfillment than it is an improvement over mere coition, since Poe longs for a union in essence and not just in act.

Any feminist critic who resents that too-lovely Hemingwayesque ending, in which Frederic Henry gets to walk away in the rain while poor Catherine takes the death for both of them, has my sympathy, if only because this sentimentality that mars the aesthetic effect is certainly the mask for a male resentment and fear of women. Hemingway’s symbolic rain is read by Louis L. Martz as the inevitable trope for pity, and by Malcolm Cowley as a conscious symbol for disaster. A darker interpretation might associate it with Whitman’s very American confounding of night, death, the mother, and the sea, a fourfold mingling that Whitman bequeathed to Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane, among many others. The death of the beloved woman in Hemingway is part of that tropological cosmos, in which the moist element dominates because death the mother is the true image of desire. For Hemingway, the rain replaces the sea, and is as much the image of longing as the sea is in Whitman or Hart Crane.

Robert Penn Warren, defending a higher estimate of _A Farewell to Arms_ than I can achieve, interprets the death of Catherine as the discovery
that “the attempt to find a substitute for universal meaning in the limited meaning of the personal relationship is doomed to failure.” Such a reading, though distinguished, seems to me to belong more to the literary cosmos of T.S. Eliot than to that of Hemingway. Whatever nostalgia for transcendental verities Hemingway may have possessed, his best fiction invests its energies in the representation of personal relationships, and hardly with the tendentious design of exposing their inevitable inadequacies. If your personal religion quests for the matador as messiah, then you are likely to seek in personal relationships something of the same values enshrined in the ritual of bull and bullfighter: courage, dignity, the aesthetic exaltation of the moment, and an all but suicidal intensity of being—the sense of life gathered to a crowded perception and graciously open to the suddenness of extinction. That is a vivid but an unlikely scenario for an erotic association, at least for any that might endure beyond a few weeks.

Wyndham Lewis categorized Hemingway by citing Walter Pater on Prosper Merimée: “There is the formula ... the enthusiastic amateur of rude, crude, naked force in men and women.... Painfully distinct in outline, inevitable to sight, unrelieved, there they stand.” Around them, Pater added, what Merimée gave you was “neither more nor less than empty space.” I believe that Pater would have found more than that in Hemingway’s formula, more in the men and women, and something other than empty space in their ambiance. Perhaps by way of Joseph Conrad’s influence upon him, Hemingway had absorbed part at least of what is most meaningful in Pater’s aesthetic impressionism. Hemingway’s women and men know, with Pater, that we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Our one chance is to pack that interval with the multiplied fruit of consciousness, with the solipsistic truths of perception and sensation. What survives time’s ravages in *A Farewell to Arms* is precisely Hemingway’s textually embodied knowledge that art alone apprehends the moments of perception and sensation, and so bestows upon them their privileged status. Consider the opening paragraph of chapter 16:

That night a bat flew into the room through the open door that led onto the balcony and through which we watched the night over the roofs of the town. It was dark in our room except for the small light of the night over the town and the bat was not frightened but hunted in the room as though he had been outside. We lay and watched him and I do not think he saw us because we lay so still. After he went out we saw a searchlight come on and watched the beam
move across the sky and then go off and it was dark again. A breeze came in the night and we heard the men of the anti-aircraft gun on the next roof talking. It was cool and they were putting on their capes. I worried in the night about some one coming up but Catherine said they were all asleep. Once in the night we went to sleep and when I woke she was not there but I heard her coming along the hall and the door opened and she came back to the bed and said it was all right she had been downstairs and they were all asleep. She had been outside Miss Van Campen’s door and heard her breathing in her sleep. She brought crackers and we ate them and drank some vermouth. We were very hungry but she said that would all have to be gotten out of me in the morning. I went to sleep again in the morning when it was light and when I was awake I found she was gone again. She came in looking fresh and lovely and sat on the bed and the sun rose while I had the thermometer in my mouth and we smelled the dew on the roofs and then the coffee of the men at the gun on the next roof.

The flight of the bat, the movement of the searchlight’s beam and of the breeze, the overtones of the antiaircraft gunners blend into the light of the morning, to form a composite epiphany of what it is that Frederic Henry has lost when he finally walks back to the hotel in the rain. Can we define that loss? As befits the aesthetic impressionism of Pater, Conrad, Stephen Crane, and Hemingway, it is in the first place a loss of vividness and intensity in the world as experienced by the senses. In the aura of his love for Catherine, Frederic Henry knows the fullness of “It was dark” and “It was cool,” and the smell of the dew on the roofs, and the aroma of the coffee being enjoyed by the anti-aircraft gunners. We are reminded that Pater’s crucial literary ancestors were the unacknowledged Ruskin and the hedonistic visionary Keats, the Keats of the “Ode on Melancholy.” Hemingway too, particularly in *A Farewell to Arms*, is an heir of Keats, with the poet’s passion for sensuous immediacy, in all of its ultimate implications. Is not Catherine Barkley a belated and beautiful version of the goddess Melancholy, incarnating Keats’s “Beauty that must die”? Hemingway too exalts that quester after the Melancholy,

...whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.
Hemingway's greatness is in his short stories, which rival any other master of the form, be it Joyce or Chekhov or Isaak Babel. Of his novels, one is constrained to suggest reservations, even of the very best: *The Sun Also Rises*. *The Old Man and the Sea* is the most popular of Hemingway's later works, but this short novel alas is an indeliberate self-parody, though less distressingly so than *Across the River and Into the Trees*, composed just before it. There is a gentleness, a nuanced tenderness, that saves *The Old Man and the Sea* from the self-indulgences of *Across the River and Into the Trees*. In an interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway stated his pride in what he considered to be the aesthetic economy of *The Old Man and the Sea*:

*The Old Man and the Sea* could have been over a thousand pages long and had every character in the village in it and all the processes of the way they made their living, were born, educated, bore children, etc. That is done excellently and well by other writers. In writing you are limited by what has already been done satisfactorily. So I have tried to learn to do something else. First I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened. This is very hard to do and I've worked at it very hard.

Anyway, to skip how it is done, I had unbelievable luck this time and could convey the experience completely and have it be one that no one had ever conveyed. The luck was that I had a good man and a good boy and lately writers have forgotten there still are such things. Then the ocean is worth writing about just as a man is. So I was lucky there. I've seen the marlin mate and known about that. So I leave that out. I've seen a school (or pod) of more than fifty sperm whales in that same stretch of water and once harpooned one nearly sixty feet in length and lost him. So I left that out. But the knowledge is what makes the underwater part of the iceberg.

*The Old Man and the Sea* unfortunately is too long, rather than exquisitely curtailed, as Hemingway believed. The art of ellipsis, or leaving things out, indeed is the great virtue of Hemingway's best short stories. But *The Old Man and the Sea* is tiresomely repetitive, and Santiago the old fish-
erman is too clearly an idealization of Hemingway himself, who thinks in the style of the novelist attempting to land a great work:

Only I have no luck anymore. But who knows? Maybe today. Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready.

Contemplating the big fish, Santiago is even closer to Hemingway the literary artist, alone with his writerly quest:

His choice had been to stay in the deep dark water far out beyond all snares and traps and treacheries. My choice was to go there to find him beyond all people. Beyond all people in the world. Now we are joined together and have been since noon. And no one to help either one of us.

Santiago’s ordeal, first in his struggle with the big fish, and then in fighting against the sharks, is associated by Hemingway with Christ’s agony and triumph. Since it is so difficult to disentangle Santiago and Hemingway, this additional identification is rather unfortunate in its aesthetic consequences, because it can render a reader rather uncomfortable. There is a longing or nostalgia for faith in Hemingway, at least from *The Sun Also Rises* until the end of his career. But if *The Old Man and the Sea* is a Christian allegory, then the book carries more intended significance than it can bear. The big fish is no Moby-Dick or Jobean adversary; Santiago loves the fish and sees it as his double. What can we do with Santiago-as-Christ when we attempt to interpret the huge marlin?

William Faulkner praised *The Old Man and the Sea* as being Hemingway’s best work, but then Faulkner also considered Thomas Wolfe to be the greatest American novelist of the century. The story, far from Hemingway’s best, cannot be both a parable of Christian redemption and of a novelist’s triumph, not so much because these are incompatible, but because so repetitive and self-indulgent a narrative cannot bear that double burden. Sentimentality, or emotion in excess of the object, floods *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway himself is so moved by Hemingway that his famous, laconic style yields to uncharacteristic overwriting. We are not shown “grace under pressure,” but something closer to Narcissus observing himself in the mirror of the sea.
Lolita

I

LOLITA, BAROQUE AND SUBTLE, IS A BOOK WRITTEN TO BE REREAD, BUT whether its continued force matches the intricacy of its design seems to me problematic. Little is gained for Nabokov by comparing him to Sterne or to Joyce. Borges, who was essentially a parodist, is an apter parallel to Nabokov. Perhaps parodists are fated to resent Sigmund Freud; certainly Borges and Nabokov are the modern writers who most consistently and ignorantly abuse Freud.

Where Nabokov hardly can be overpraised is in his achievement as a stylist. This is one of the endlessly dazzling paragraphs of Lolita:

So Humbert the Cubus schemed and dreamed—and the red sun of desire and decision (the two things that create a live world) rose higher and higher, while upon a succession of balconies a succession of libertines, sparkling glass in hand, toasted the bliss of past and future nights. Then, figuratively speaking, I shattered the glass, and boldly imagined (for I was drunk on those visions by then and underrated the gentleness of my nature) how eventually I might blackmail—no, that is too strong a word—mauvemail big Haze into letting me consort with little Haze by gently threatening the poor doting Big Dove with desertion if she tried to bar me from playing with my legal stepdaughter. In a word, before such an Amazing Offer, before such a vastness and variety of vistas, I was as helpless as Adam at the preview of early oriental history, miraged in his apple orchard.
It is a grand prose-poem, and the entire book in little. Reading it aloud is a shocking pleasure, and analyzing it yet another pleasure, more inward and enduring. Humbert, more "cubus" than "incubus," casts the red sun of his lustful will over the aptly named Haze females, yet avoids incurring our moral resentment by the exuberance of his language, with its zest for excess. What could be more captivating and memorable than: “while upon a succession of balconies a succession of libertines, sparkling glass in hand, toasted the bliss of past and future nights?” That delicious double “succession” achieves a kind of higher innocence, insouciant and stylized, delighting more in the language than in the actual possibility of sensual bliss. Shattering the sparkling glass, Humbert breaks the vessels of reverie in order to achieve a totally drunken vision of sexual exploitation, indeed like a new Adam overcome by the fumes of the fruit.

What Nabokov offers, in Ada as well as Lolita, is an almost pure revel in language, by no means necessarily allied with insight. His loathing of Freud reduces, I think, to a fear of meaning, to a need to defend against overdetermined sense, a sense that would extend to everything. Memory, in Nabokov, fears not so much Oedipal intensities as it does more-than-Oedipal genealogies. Here, Nabokov compares weakly to Proust, his most daunting precursor. Lolita gives us Marcel as Humbert and Albertine as Lolita, which is to replace a sublime temporal pathos by a parodic cunning that unfortunately keeps reminding us how much we have lost when we turn from Proust to Nabokov.

II

Early defenses of Lolita by John Hollander and Lionel Trilling centered upon the insistence that it was an authentic love story. Rereading Lolita now, when no one would accuse the book of being pornography, I marvel that acute readers could take it as a portrayal of human love, since Humbert and Lolita are hardly representations of human beings. They are deliberate caricatures, as fabulistic as Charlotte Haze and Clare Quilty. Solipsistic nightmares, they wander in the America of highways and motels, but would be more at home in Through the Looking-Glass or The Hunting of the Snark. Poor Lolita indeed is a Snark, who precisely does not turn out to be a Boojum.

Nabokov, like Borges, is the most literary of fantasists, and takes from reality only what is already Nabokovian. Jane Austen, a powerful Protestant will, was as interested in social reality as the compulsive Dreiser was, but Nabokov’s social reality died forever with the Bolshevik Revolution. Admirers who defend Nabokov’s writing as mimesis do him
violence. His genius was for distorted self-representation. Whether the Proustian intensities of sexual jealousy lend themselves to the phantasmagoric mode of Gogol is a considerable question, but Nabokov intrepidly did not wait for an answer.

“So what is that queer world, glimpses of which we keep catching through the gaps of the harmless looking sentences. It is in a way the real one but it looks wildly absurd to us, accustomed as we are to the stage setting that screens it.” That is Nabokov on Gogol, or Nabokov on Nabokov. It is not Humbert on Humbert. Nabokov’s uncanny art refuses identification with his protagonist, yet lends the author’s voice to the comically desperate pursuer of nymphets. “The science of nympholepsy is a precise science,” says Humbert and we reflect that Nabokov is the scientist, rather than poor Humbert, a reflection that is proved by an even more famous declaration:

I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets.

Humbert perhaps knows that “the perilous magic” of eroticism crosses animality with death; Nabokov certainly knows, though he rejects so crassly the greatest of modern knowers, Freud. Rejecting Freud however is not a possible option in our time, and the whole of Part Two of *Lolita* is an involuntary repetition of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The death drive, fueled by that negative libido Freud once toyed with calling “destrudo,” takes over poor Humbert completely, through the agency of his dark double and despoiler, Clare Quilty. Refusing to compound with Freud, who is the greatest and most pervasive of modern imaginations, Nabokov is doomed merely to repeat the Freudian mythology of the dual drives, Eros-Humbert and Thanatos-Quilty. All of Part Two of *Lolita* becomes, not a parody, but a Freudian allegory, considerably less splendid than the joyous Part One.

Humbert’s murder of Quilty is at once the most curious and the least persuasive episode in *Lolita*. Each figure is the “familiar and innocuous hallucination” of the other, and Humbert’s bungling execution of his double lifts the book momentarily into the category of nightmare. It is no accident that Humbert returns to the slain Quilty (C.Q.) in the novel’s closing sentences:

And do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer,
so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.

That doesn't sound to me like Humbert, and rather clearly Nabokov has usurped these closing tonalities, explaining why he did not have Quilty murder Humbert, which I suspect would have made a better end. I don't hear remoteness in this final tone, but rather an attempt to recover something of the aura of Part One, so sadly lost in the frenzies of Humbert's later sorrows.
La Condition humaine (1933, known in English as Man’s Fate) is judged universally to have been André Malraux’s major novel. Rereading it in 1987, sixty years after the Shanghai insurrection of 1927, which it commemorates, is a rather ambiguous experience. One need not have feared that it would seem a mere period piece; it is an achieved tragedy, with the aesthetic dignity that the genre demands. What renders it a little disappointing is its excessive abstractness. Malraux may have known a touch too clearly exactly what he was doing. Rereading Faulkner always surprises; there is frequently a grace beyond the reach of art. Malraux’s fictive economy is admirable, but the results are somewhat schematic. Clarity can be a novelistic virtue; transparency grieves us with the impression of a certain thin quality.

The idealistic revolutionaries are persuasive enough in Man’s Fate; they are even exemplary. But, like all of Malraux’s protagonists, they are diminished by their sense of coming after their inspirers; they are not forerunners, but belated imitators of the Revolution. Malraux’s protagonists designedly quest for strength by confronting death, thus achieving different degrees either of communion or of solitude. Their models in fiction are the obsessed beings of Dostoevsky or of Conrad. Man’s Fate cannot sustain comparison with Nostromo, let alone with the anguished narratives of Dostoevsky. There are no originals in Malraux, no strong revolutionaries who are the equivalents of strong poets, rather than of philosophers. Geoffrey Hartman, defending Malraux’s stature as tragedian, sees the heroes of Man’s Fate as understanding and humanizing the Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence:
The tragic sentiment is evoked most purely not by multiplying lives ... but by repeating the chances of death, of unique, fatal acts. A hero like Tchen, or his fellow conspirators Kyo and Katov, dies more than once.

But is that the Nietzschean issue, the Nietzschean test for strength? Do Malraux’s heroes take on what Richard Rorty, following Nietzsche, has called “the contingency of selfhood”? Do they fully appreciate their own contingency? Here is Rorty’s summary of this crucial aspect of Nietzsche’s perspectivism:

His perspectivism amounted to the claim that the universe had no lading-list to be known, of determinate length. He hoped that, once we realized that Plato’s “true world” was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself.

Nietzsche understood that political revolutionaries are more like philosophers than like poets, since revolutionaries also insist that the human condition bears only one true analysis. Malraux’s heroes attempt to escape from contingency rather than, like the strong poets, accepting and then appropriating contingency. Though the heroes of Man’s Fate, and of Malraux’s other novels, meditate endlessly upon death, if only in order to achieve a sense of being, they never succeed in describing themselves entirely in their own terms. This is a clue to Malraux’s ultimate inadequacy as a novelist, his failure to join himself to the great masters of French fiction: Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust, or to the international novelists he most admired: Dostoevsky, Conrad, Faulkner. Would we say of the protagonists of Stendhal and Balzac that the death which overcomes them “is no more than the symbol of an ultimate self-estrangement”? Hartman’s remark is valid for Malraux’s heroes, but not for Stendhal’s or Balzac’s.

Malraux, a superb and wary critic, defended himself against Gaëtan Picon’s shrewd observation that: “Malraux, unlike Balzac or Proust, in no way seeks to give each character a personal voice, to free each character from its creator.” His response was: “The autonomy of characters, the particular vocabulary given to each of them are powerful techniques of fictional action; they are not necessities ... I do not believe that the novelist must create characters; he must create a particular and coherent world.” Man’s Fate certainly does create such a world; is it a liability or not that
Kyo, Katov, Gisors and the others fall short as characters, since they do not stride out of the novel, breaking loose from Malraux, and they all of them do sound rather alike. I finish rereading *Nostromo*, and I brood on the flamboyant Capataz, or I put down *As I Lay Dying*, and Darl Bundren’s very individual voice haunts me. But Kyo and Katov give me nothing to meditate upon, and Gisors and Ferral speak with the same inflection and vocabulary. Fate or contingency resists appropriation by Malraux’s heroes, none of whom defies, or breaks free of, his creator.

Despite Malraux’s defense, the sameness of his protagonists constitutes a definite aesthetic limitation. It would be one thing to create varied individuals with unique voices and then to show that they cannot communicate with one another. It is quite another thing to represent so many aspects of the author as so many characters, all speaking with his voice, and then demonstrate the deathliness of their inability to speak truly to another. Malraux confused death with contingency, which is a philosopher’s error, rather than a strong novelist’s.

This may be why the women throughout Malraux’s novels are so dismal a failure in representation. Unamuno ironically jested that “all women are one woman,” which is just the way things are in Malraux’s fictions. A novelist so intent upon Man rather than men is unlikely to give us an infinite variety of women.

What redeems *Man’s Fate* from a reader’s frustration with the sameness of its characters is the novel’s indubitable capture of a tragic sense of life. Tragedy is not individual in Malraux, but societal and cultural, particularly the latter. Malraux’s Marxism was always superficial, and his aestheticism fortunately profound. The tragedy of the heroes in *Man’s Fate* is necessarily belated tragedy, which is fitting for idealists whose place in revolutionary history is so late. That is why Gisors is shown teaching his students that: “Marxism is not a doctrine, it is a will ... it is the will to know themselves ... to conquer without betraying yourselves.” Just as the imagination cannot be distinguished from the will as an artistic tradition grows older and longer, so ideology blends into the will as revolutionary tradition enters a very late phase. Tragedy is an affair of the will, and not of doctrine. Kyo and Katov die in the will, and so achieve tragic dignity. Gisors, the best mind in the novel, sums up for Malraux, just a few pages from the end:

She was silent for a moment:

“They are dead, now,” she said finally.

“I still think so, May. It’s something else.... Kyo’s death is not only grief, not only change—it is ... a metamorphosis. I have never loved the world over-much: it was Kyo who attached me to men,
it was through him that they existed for me.... I don’t want to go to Moscow. I would teach wretchedly there. Marxism has ceased to live in me. In Kyo’s eyes it was a will, wasn’t it? But in mine, it is a fatality, and I found myself in harmony with it because my fear of death was in harmony with fatality. There is hardly any fear left in me, May; since Kyo died, I am indifferent to death. I am freed (freed! ...) both from death and from life. What would I do over there?”

“Change anew, perhaps.”

“I have no other son to lose.”

The distinction between a will and a fatality is the difference between son and father, activist and theoretician, latecomer and forerunner. For Malraux, it is an aesthetic distinction, rather than a psychological or spiritual difference. As novelist, Malraux takes no side in this dichotomy, an impartiality at once his narrative strength and his representational weakness. He gives us forces and events, where we hope for more, for access to consciousnesses other than our own, or even his. As a theorist of art, Malraux brilliantly grasped contingency, but as a novelist he suffered it. He saw that the creator had to create his own language out of the language of precursors, but he could not enact what he saw. *Man’s Fate* is a memorable tragedy without memorable persons. Perhaps it survives as a testament of Malraux’s own tragedy, as a creator.
It is eighteen years since John Steinbeck died, and while his popularity as a novelist still endures, his critical reputation has suffered a considerable decline. His honors were many and varied, and included the Nobel Prize and the United States Medal of Freedom. His best novels came early in his career: *In Dubious Battle* (1936); *Of Mice and Men* (1937); *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Nothing after that, including *East of Eden* (1952), bears rereading. It would be good to record that rereading his three major novels is a valuable experience, from an aesthetic as well as an historical perspective.

*Of Mice and Men*, an economical work, really a novella, retains considerable power, marred by an intense sentimentality. But *In Dubious Battle* is now quite certainly a period piece, and is of more interest to social historians than to literary critics. *The Grapes of Wrath*, still Steinbeck’s most famous and popular novel, is a very problematical work, and very difficult to judge. As story, or rather, chronicle, it lacks invention, and its characters are not persuasive representations of human inwardness. The book’s waver- ing strength is located elsewhere, in a curious American transformation of biblical substance and style that worked splendidly in Whitman and Hemingway, but seems to work only fitfully in Steinbeck.

*The Grapes of Wrath*

Steinbeck suffers from too close a comparison with Hemingway, his authentic precursor though born only three years before his follower. I think that Steinbeck’s aesthetic problem was Hemingway, whose shadow always hovered too near. Consider the opening of *The Grapes of Wrath*:

---

John Steinbeck

(1902–1968)
To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread any more. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.

In the water-cut gullies the earth dusted down in dry little streams. Gophers and ant lions started small avalanches. And as the sharp sun struck day after day, the leaves of the young corn became less stiff and erect; they bent in a curve at first, and then, as the central ribs of strength grew weak, each leaf tilted downward. Then it was June, and the sun shone more fiercely. The brown lines on the corn leaves widened and moved in on the central ribs. The weeds frayed and edged back toward their roots. The air was thin and the sky more pale; and every day the earth paled.

This is not so much biblical style as mediated by Ernest Hemingway, as it is Hemingway assimilated to Steinbeck’s sense of biblical style. The monosyllabic diction is hardly the mode of the King James Version, but certainly is Hemingway’s. I give, very nearly at random, passages from *The Sun Also Rises*:

We passed through a town and stopped in front of the posada, and the driver took on several packages. Then we started on again, and outside the town the road commenced to mount. We were going through farming country with rocky hills that sloped down into the fields. The grain-fields went up the hillsides. Now as we went higher there was a wind blowing the grain. The road was white and dusty, and the dust rose under the wheels and hung in the air behind us. The road climbed up into the hills and left the rich grain-fields below. Now there were only patches of grain on the
bare hillsides and on each side of the water-courses. We turned sharply out to the side of the road to give room to pass to a long string of six mules, following one after the other, hauling a high-hooded wagon loaded with freight. The wagon and the mules were covered with dust. Close behind was another string of mules and another wagon. This was loaded with lumber, and the arriero driving the mules leaned back and put on the thick wooden brakes as we passed. Up here the country was quite barren and the hills were rocky and hard-baked clay furrowed by the rain.

The bus climbed steadily up the road. The country was barren and rocks stuck up through the clay. There was no grass beside the road. Looking back we could see the country spread out below. Far back the fields were squares of green and brown on the hillsides. Making the horizon were the brown mountains. They were strangely shaped. As we climbed higher the horizon kept changing. As the bus ground slowly up the road we could see other mountains coming up in the south. Then the road came over the crest, flattened out, and went into a forest. It was a forest of cork oaks, and the sun came through the trees in patches, and there were cattle grazing back in the trees. We went through the forest and the road came out and turned along a rise of land, and out ahead of us was a rolling green plain, with dark mountains beyond it. These were not like the brown, heat-baked mountains we had left behind. These were wooded and there were clouds coming down from them. The green plain stretched off. It was cut by fences and the white of the road showed through the trunks of a double line of trees that crossed the plain toward the north. As we came to the edge of the rise we saw the red roofs and white houses of Burguete ahead strung out on the plain, and away off on the shoulder of the first dark mountain was the gray metal-sheathed roof of the monastery of Roncevalles.

Hemingway’s Basque landscapes are described with an apparent literalness and in what seems at first a curiously dry tone, almost flat in its evident lack of significant emotion. But a closer reading suggests that the style here is itself a metaphor for a passion and a nostalgia that is both defensive and meticulous. The contrast between rich soil and barren ground, between wooded hills and heat-baked mountains, is a figure for the lost potency of Jake Barnes, but also for a larger sense of the lost possibilities of life. Steinbeck, following after Hemingway, cannot learn the lesson. He
gives us a vision of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, and it is effective enough, but it is merely a landscape where a process of entropy has been enacted. It has a social and economic meaning, but as a vision of loss lacks spiritual and personal intensity. Steinbeck is more overtly biblical than Hemingway, but too obviously so. We feel that the Bible’s sense of meaning in landscape has returned from the dead in Hemingway’s own colors, but hardly in Steinbeck’s.

If Steinbeck is not an original or even an adequate stylist, if he lacks skill in plot, and power in the mimesis of character, what then remains in his work, except its fairly constant popularity with an immense number of liberal middlebrows, both in his own country and abroad? Certainly, he aspired beyond his aesthetic means. If the literary Sublime, or contest for the highest place, involves persuading the reader to yield up easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures, and it does, then Steinbeck modestly should have avoided Emerson’s American Sublime, but he did not. Desiring it both ways, he fell into bathos in everything he wrote, even in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Yet Steinbeck had many of the legitimate impulses of the Sublime writer, and of his precursors Whitman and Hemingway in particular. Like them, he studied the nostalgias, the aboriginal sources that were never available for Americans, and like them he retained a profound hope for the American as natural man and natural woman. Unlike Whitman and Hemingway and the origin of this American tradition, Emerson, Steinbeck had no capacity for the nuances of literary irony. He had read Emerson’s essay “The Over-Soul” as his precursors had, but Steinbeck literalized it. Emerson, canniest where he is most the Idealist, barbs his doctrine of “that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.” In Emerson, that does not involve the sacrifice of particular being, and is hardly a program for social action:

> We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole...
> The soul knows only the soul; all else is idle weeds for her wearing.

There always have been Emersonians of the Left, like Whitman and Steinbeck, and Emersonians of the Right, like Henry James and Wallace Stevens. Emerson himself, rather gingerly planted on the moderate Left, evaded all positions. Social action is also an affair of succession, division, parts, particles; if “the soul knows only the soul,” then the soul cannot know doctrines, or even human suffering. Steinbeck, socially generous, a
writer on the left, structured the doctrine of *The Grapes of Wrath* on Jim Casy's literalization of Emerson's vision: “Maybe all men got one big soul and everybody's a part of it.” Casy, invested by Steinbeck with a rough eloquence that would have moved Emerson, speaks his orator's epitaph just before he is martyred: “They figger I'm a leader 'cause I talk so much.” He is a leader, an Okie Moses, and he dies a fitting death for the visionary of an Exodus.

I remain uneasy about my own experience of rereading *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck is not one of the inescapable American novelists of our century; he cannot be judged in close relation to Cather, Dreiser, and Faulkner, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Ralph Ellison, and Thomas Pynchon. Yet there are no canonical standards worthy of human respect that could exclude *The Grapes of Wrath* from a serious reader's esteem. Compassionate narrative that addresses itself so directly to the great social questions of its era is simply too substantial a human achievement to be dismissed. Whether a human strength, however generously worked through, is also an aesthetic value, in a literary narrative, is one of those larger issues that literary criticism scarcely knows how to decide. One might desire *The Grapes of Wrath* to be composed differently, whether as plot or as characterization, but wisdom compels one to he grateful for the novel's continued existence.

*Of Mice and Men*

The late Anthony Burgess, in a touching salute from one professional writer to another, commended *Of Mice and Men* as “a fine novella (or play with extended stage directions) which succeeds because it dares sentimentality.” Rereading *Of Mice and Men*, I remain impressed by its economical intensity, which has authentic literary power, though the sentimentality sometimes seems to me excessive. The book has been called Darwinian and naturalistic; it does share in the kind of dramatic pathos featured also in the plays of Eugene O'Neill and the novels of Theodore Dreiser. Reality is harsh and ultimately scarcely to be borne; dreams and delusions alone allow men to keep going. George and Lennie share the hopeless dream of a little ranch of their own, where George could keep the well-meaning but disaster-prone Lennie out of trouble and sorrow. As several critics have noted, this is one of Steinbeck's recurrent dreams of a lost Eden, sadly illusory yet forever beckoning.

As in the works of O'Neill and of Dreiser, the anxiety that afflicts all of Steinbeck's male protagonists is a desperate solitude. Despite his frequent use of Biblical style, more marked in *The Grapes of Wrath* than in *Of
Steinbeck was anything but a religious writer, by temperament and by belief. His heavy naturalism is very close to fatalism: Lennie is doomed by his nature, which crave affection, softness, the childlike, yet which is overwhelmingly violent and pragmatically brutal because of childish bafflement and defensiveness. What could anyone have done to save Lennie? Since George is truly responsible and caring and still fails to keep Lennie safe, it seems clear that even institutionalization could not have saved Steinbeck’s most pathetic version of natural man. That returns the burden of Steinbeck’s sad fable to Steinbeck himself: What has the author done for himself as a novelist by telling us this overdetermined story, and what do we gain as readers by attending to it? Though there are dramatic values in *Of Mice and Men*, they are inadequate compared to O’Neill at his best. There is an authentic dignity in the brotherhood of George and Lennie, but it too seems stunted compared to the massive humanity of the major figures in Dreiser’s strongest narratives, *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. Clearly there is something that endures in *Of Mice and Men* as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, though the novella lacks the social force of Steinbeck’s major novel. Is it the stoic minimalism of George and Lennie and their fellow wandering ranch hands that somehow achieves a memorable image of human value?

Steinbeck resented Hemingway because he owed Hemingway too much, both in style and in the perception of the aesthetic dignity of natural men, at once unable to bear either society or solitude. The counterinfluence in *Of Mice and Men* seems to be the Faulkner of *The Sound and the Fury*, particularly in the representation of poor Lennie, who may have in him a trace of the benign idiot, Benjy. Any comparison of Faulkner and Steinbeck will tend to lessen Steinbeck, who is overmatched by Faulkner’s mythic inventiveness and consistent strength of characterization. Yet there is a mythic quality to *Of Mice and Men*, a clear sense that Lennie and George ultimately represent something larger than either their selves or their relationship. They touch a permanence because their mutual care enhances both of them. That care cannot save Lennie, and it forces George to execute his friend to save him from the hideous violence of a mob. But the care survives Lennie’s death; Slim’s recognition of the dignity and the value of the care is the novel’s final gesture, and is richly shared by the reader.
Nathanael West

(1903–1940)

Miss Lonelyhearts

Nathanael West, who died in an automobile accident in 1940 at the age of thirty-seven, wrote one remorseless masterpiece, Miss Lonelyhearts (1933). Despite some astonishing sequences, The Day of the Locust (1939) is an overpraised work, a waste of West’s genius. Of the two lesser fictions, The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931) is squalid and dreadful, with occasional passages of a rancid power, while A Cool Million (1934), though an outrageous parody of American picaresque, is a permanent work of American satire and seems to me underpraised. To call West uneven is therefore a litotes; he is a wild medley of magnificent writing and inadequate writing, except in Miss Lonelyhearts which excels The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby, and even Sanctuary as the perfected instance of a negative vision in modern American fiction. The greatest Faulkner, of The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom! and Light in August, is the only American writer of prose fiction in this century who can be said to have surpassed Miss Lonelyhearts. West’s spirit lives again in The Crying of Lot 49 and some sequences in Gravity’s Rainbow, but the negative sublimity of Miss Lonelyhearts proves to be beyond Pynchon’s reach, or perhaps his ambition.

West, born Nathan Weinstein, is a significant episode in the long and tormented history of Jewish Gnosticism. The late Gershom Scholem’s superb essay, “Redemption Through Sin,” in his The Messianic Idea in Judaism, is the best commentary I know upon Miss Lonelyhearts. I once attempted to convey this to Scholem, who shrugged West off, quite properly from Scholem’s viewpoint, when I remarked to him that West was manifestly a Jewish anti-Semite, and admitted that there were no allusions to Jewish esotericism or Kabbalah in his works. Nevertheless, for the stance
of literary criticism, Jewish Gnosticism, as defined by Scholem, is the most illuminating context in which to study West’s novels. It is a melancholy paradox that West, who did not wish to be Jewish in any way at all, remains the most indisputably Jewish writer yet to appear in America, a judgment at once aesthetic and moral. Nothing by Bellow, Malamud, Philip Roth, Mailer, or Ozick can compare to Miss Lonelyhearts as an achievement. West’s Jewish heir, if he has one, may be Harold Brodkey, whose recent Women and Angels, excerpted from his immense novel-in-progress, can be regarded as another powerful instance of Jewish Gnosis, free of West’s hatred of his own Jewishness.

Stanley Edgar Hyman, in his pamphlet on West (1962), concluded that, “His strength lay in his vulgarity and bad taste, his pessimism, his nastiness.” Hyman remains West’s most useful critic, but I would amend this by observing that these qualities in West’s writing emanate from a negative theology, spiritually authentic, and given aesthetic dignity by the force of West’s eloquent negations. West, like his grandest creation, Shrike, is a rhetorician of the abyss, in the tradition of Sabbatian nihilism that Scholem has expounded so masterfully. One thinks of ideas such as “the violation of the Torah has become its fulfillment, just as a grain of wheat must rot in the earth” or such as Jacob Frank’s: “We are all now under the obligation to enter the abyss.” The messianic intensity of the Sabbatians and Frankists results in a desperately hysterical and savage tonality which prophesies West’s authentically religious book, Miss Lonelyhearts, a work profoundly Jewish but only in its negations, particularly the negation of the normative Judaic assumption of total sense in everything, life and text alike. Miss Lonelyhearts takes place in the world of Freud, where the fundamental assumption is that everything already has happened, and that nothing can be made new because total sense has been achieved, but then repressed or negated. Negatively Jewish, the book is also negatively American. Miss Lonelyhearts is a failed Walt Whitman (hence the naming of the cripple as Peter Doyle, Whitman’s pathetic friend) and a fallen American Adam to Shrike’s very American Satan. Despite the opinions of later critics, I continue to find Hyman’s argument persuasive, and agree with him that the book’s psychosexuality is marked by a repressed homosexual relation between Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts. Hyman’s Freudian observation that all the suffering in the book is essentially female seems valid, reminding us that Freud’s “feminine masochism” is mostly encountered among men, according to Freud himself. Shrike, the butcherbird impaling his victim, Miss Lonelyhearts, upon the thorns of Christ, is himself as much an instance of “feminine masochism” as his victim. If Miss Lonelyhearts is close to pathological frenzy, Shrike is also consumed by religious hysteria, by a terrible nostalgia for God.
The book’s bitter stylistic negation results in a spectacular verbal economy, in which literally every sentence is made to count, in more than one sense of “count.” Freud’s “negation” involves a cognitive return of the repressed, here through West’s self-projection as Shrike, spit out but not disavowed. The same Freudian process depends upon an affective continuance of repression, here by West’s self-introjection as Miss Lonelyhearts, at once West’s inability to believe and his disavowed failure to love. Poor Miss Lonelyhearts, who receives no other name throughout the book, has been destroyed by Shrike’s power of Satanic rhetoric before the book even opens. But then Shrike has destroyed himself first, for no one could withstand the sustained horror of Shrike’s impaling rhetoric, which truly can be called West’s horror:

“I am a great saint,” Shrike cried, “I can walk on my own water. Haven’t you ever heard of Shrike’s Passion in the Luncheonette, or the Agony in the Soda Fountain? Then I compared the wounds in Christ’s body to the mouths of a miraculous purse in which we deposit the small change of our sins. It is indeed an excellent conceit. But now let us consider the holes in our own bodies and into what these congenital wounds open. Under the skin of man is a wondrous jungle where veins like lush tropical growths hang along overripe organs and weed-like entrails writhe in squirming tangles of red and yellow. In this jungle, flitting from rock-gray lungs to golden intestines, from liver to lights and back to liver again, lives a bird called the soul. The Catholic hunts this bird with bread and wine, the Hebrew with a golden ruler, the Protestant on leaden feet with leaden words, the Buddhist with gestures, the Negro with blood. I spit on them all. Phooh! And I call upon you to spit. Phooh! Do you stuff birds? No, my dears, taxidermy is not religion. No! A thousand times no. Better, I say unto you, better a live bird in the jungle of the body than two stuffed birds on the library table.”

I have always associated this great passage with what is central to West: the messianic longing for redemption, through sin if necessary. West’s humor is almost always apocalyptic, in a mode quite original with him, though so influential since his death that we have difficulty seeing how strong the originality was. Originality, even in comic writing, becomes a difficulty. How are we to read the most outrageous of the letters sent to Miss Lonelyhearts, the one written by the sixteen-year-old girl without a nose?
I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she cries terrible when she looks at me.

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesn't know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I don't believe that because he is a very nice man.

Ought I commit suicide?

Sincerely yours,

Desperate

Defensive laughter is a complex reaction to grotesque suffering. In his 1928 essay on humor, Freud concluded that the above-the-I, the superego, speaks kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, and this speaking is humor, which Freud calls “the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability.” Clearly, Freud’s “humor” does not include the Westian mode. Reading Desperate’s “What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate?,” our ego knows that it is defeated all the time, or at least is vulnerable to undeserved horror. West’s humor has no liberating element whatsoever, but is the humor of a vertigo ill-balanced on the edge of what ancient Gnosticism called the kenoma, the cosmological emptiness.

II

Shrike, West’s superb Satanic tempter, achieves his apotheosis at the novel’s midpoint, the eighth of its fifteen tableaux, accurately titled “Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp.” As Miss Lonelyhearts, sick with despair, lies in bed, the drunken Shrike bursts in, shouting his greatest rhetorical set piece, certainly the finest tirade in modern American fiction. Cataloging the methods that Miss Lonelyhearts might employ to escape out of the Dismal Swamp, Shrike begins with a grand parody of the later D.H. Lawrence, in which the vitalism of The Plumed Serpent and The Man Who Died is carried into a gorgeous absurdity, a heavy sexuality that masks Shrike’s Satanic fears of impotence:

“You are fed up with the city and its teeming millions. The ways and means of men, as getting and lending and spending, you lay waste your inner world, are too much with you. The bus takes too long, while the subway is always crowded. So what do you do? So
you buy a farm and walk behind your horse’s moist behind, no collar or tie, plowing your broad swift acres. As you turn up the rich black soil, the wind carries the smell of pine and dung across the fields and the rhythm of an old, old work enters your soul. To this rhythm, you sow and weep and chivy your kine, not kin or kind, between the pregnant rows of corn and taters. Your step becomes the heavy sexual step of a dance-drunk Indian and you tread the seed down into the female earth. You plant, not dragon’s teeth, but beans and greens.”

Confronting only silence, Shrike proceeds to parody the Melville of *Typee* and *Omoo*, and also Somerset Maugham’s version of Gauguin in *The Moon and Sixpence*:

“You live in a thatch but with the daughter of a king, a slim young maiden in whose eyes is an ancient wisdom. Her breasts are golden speckled pears, her belly a melon, and her odor is like nothing so much as a jungle fern. In the evening, on the blue lagoon, under the silvery moon, to your love you croon in the soft sylabelew and vocabelew of her langorour tongorour. Your body is golden brown like hers, and tourists have need of the indignant finger of the missionary to point you out. They envy you your breech clout and carefree laugh and little brown bride and fingers instead of forks. But you don’t return their envy, and when a beautiful society girl comes to your but in the night, seeking to learn the secret of your happiness, you send her back to her yacht that hangs on the horizon like a nervous racehorse. And so you dream away the days, fishing, hunting, dancing, kissing, and picking flowers to twine in your hair.”

As Shrike says, this is a played-out mode, but his savage gusto in rendering it betrays his hatred of the religion of art, of the vision that sought a salvation in imaginative literature. What Shrike goes on to chant is an even more effective parody of the literary stances West rejected. Though Shrike calls it “Hedonism,” the curious amalgam here of Hemingway and Ronald Firbank, with touches of Fitzgerald and the earlier Aldous Huxley, might better be named an aesthetic stoicism:

“You dedicate your life to the pursuit of pleasure. No overindulgence, mind you, but knowing that your body is a pleasure machine, you treat it carefully in order to get the most out of it.
Golf as well as booze, Philadelphia Jack O’Brien and his chest-weights as well as Spanish dancers. Nor do you neglect the pleasures of the mind. You fornicate under pictures by Matisse and Picasso, you drink from Renaissance glassware, and often you spend an evening beside the fireplace with Proust and an apple. Alas, after much good fun, the day comes when you realize that soon you must die. You keep a stiff upper lip and decide to give a last party. You invite all your old mistresses, trainers, artists and boon companions. The guests are dressed in black, the waiters are coons, the table is a coffin carved for you by Eric Gill. You serve caviar and blackberries and licorice candy and coffee without cream. After the dancing girls have finished, you get to your feet and call for silence in order to explain your philosophy of life. ‘Life,’ you say, ‘is a club where they won’t stand for squawks, where they deal you only one hand and you must sit in. So even if the cards are cold and marked by the hand of fate, play up, play up like a gentleman and a sport. Get tanked, grab what’s on the buffet, use the girls upstairs, but remember, when you throw box cars, take the curtain like a dead game sport, don’t squawk.’"

Even this is only preparatory to Shrike’s bitterest phase in his tirade, an extraordinary send-up of High Aestheticism proper, of Pater, George Moore, Wilde and the earlier W.B. Yeats:

“Art! Be an artist or a writer. When you are cold, warm yourself before the flaming tints of Titian, when you are hungry, nourish yourself with great spiritual foods by listening to the noble periods of Bach, the harmonies of Brahms and the thunder of Beethoven. Do you think there is anything in the fact that their names all begin with a B? But don’t take a chance, smoke a 3 B pipe, and remember these immortal lines: *When to the suddenness of melody the echo parting falls the failing day.* What a rhythm! Tell them to keep their society whores and pressed duck with oranges. For you *l’art vivant*, the living art, as you call it. Tell them that you know that your shoes are broken and that there are pimples on your face, yes, and that you have buck teeth and a club foot, but that you don’t care, for to-morrow they are playing Beethoven’s last quartets in Carnegie Hall and at home you have Shakespeare’s plays in one volume.”
That last sentence, truly and deliciously Satanic, is one of West’s greatest triumphs, but he surpasses it in the ultimate Shrikean rhapsody, after Shrike’s candid avowal: “God alone is our escape.” With marvelous appropriateness, West makes this at once the ultimate Miss Lonelyhearts letter, and also Shrike’s most Satanic self-identification, in the form of a letter to Christ dictated for Miss Lonelyhearts by Shrike, who speaks absolutely for both of them:

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts—

I am twenty-six years old and in the newspaper game. Life for me is a desert empty of comfort. I cannot find pleasure in food, drink, or women—nor do the arts give me joy any longer. The Leopard of Discontent walks the streets of my city; the Lion of Discouragement crouches outside the walls of my citadel. All is desolation and a vexation of spirit. I feel like hell. How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age? Is it true that the greatest scientists believe again in you?

I read your column and like it very much. There you once wrote: ‘When the salt has lost its savour, who shall savour it again?’ Is the answer: ‘None but the Saviour?’

Thanking you very much for a quick reply, I remain yours truly,

A Regular Subscriber

“I feel like hell,” the Miltonic “Myself am Hell,” is Shrike’s credo, and West’s.

III

What is the relation of Shrike to West’s rejected Jewishness? The question may seem illegitimate to many admirers of West, but it acquires considerable force in the context of the novel’s sophisticated yet unhistorical Gnosticism. The way of nihilism means, according to Scholem, “to free oneself of all laws, conventions, and religions, to adopt every conceivable attitude and to reject it, and to follow one’s leader step for step into the abyss.” Scholem is paraphrasing the demonic Jacob Frank, an eighteenth-century Jewish Shrike who brought the Sabbatian messianic movement to its final degradation. Frank would have recognized something of his own negations and nihilistic fervor in the closing passages that form a pattern in West’s four novels:

His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.
The army that a moment before had been thundering in his body retreated slowly—victorious, relieved.
(*The Dream Life of Balso Snell*)

While they were struggling, Betty came in through the street door. She called to them to stop and started up the stairs. The cripple saw her cutting off his escape and tried to get rid of the package. He pulled his hand out. The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way down the stairs.
(*Miss Lonelyhearts*)

“Alas, Lemuel Pitkin himself did not have this chance, but instead was dismantled by the enemy. His teeth were pulled out. His eye was gouged from his head. His thumb was removed. His scalp was torn away. His leg was cut off. And, finally, he was shot through the heart.

“But he did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American.”

“All hail the martyrdom in the Bijou Theater!” roar Shagpoke’s youthful hearers when he is finished.

“All hail, Lemuel Pitkin!”

“All hail, the American Boy!”
(*A Cool Million*)

He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could.
(*The Day of the Locust*)

All four passages mutilate the human image, the image of God that normative Jewish tradition associates with our origins. “Our forefathers were always talking, only what good did it do them and what did they accomplish? But we are under the burden of silence,” Jacob Frank said.
What Frank’s and West’s forefathers always talked about was the ultimate forefather, Adam, who would have enjoyed the era of the Messiah, had he not sinned. West retains of tradition only the emptiness of the fallen image, the scattered spark of creation. The screaming and falling body, torn apart and maddened into a siren-like laughter, belongs at once to the American Surrealist poet, Balso Snell; the American Horst Wessel, poor Lemuel Pitkin; to Miss Lonelyhearts, the Whitmanian American Christ; and to Tod Hackett, painter of the American apocalypse. All are nihilistic versions of the mutilated image of God, or of what the Jewish Gnostic visionary, Nathan of Gaza, called the “thought-less” or nihilizing light.

IV

West was a prophet of American violence, which he saw as augmenting progressively throughout our history. His satirical genius, for all its authentic and desperate range, has been defeated by American reality. Shagpoke Whipple, the Calvin Coolidge-like ex-President who becomes the American Hitler in A Cool Million, talks in terms that West intended as extravagant, but that now can be read all but daily in our newspapers. Here is Shagpoke at his best, urging us to hear what the dead Lemuel Pitkin has to tell us:

“Of what is it that he speaks? Of the right of every American boy to go into the world and there receive fair play and a chance to make his fortune by industry and probity without being laughed at or conspired against by sophisticated aliens.”

I turn to today’s New York Times (March 29, 1985) and find there the text of a speech given by our President:

But may I just pause here for a second and tell you about a couple of fellows who came to see me the other day, young men. In 1981, just four years ago, they started a business with only a thousand dollars between them and everyone told them they were crazy. Last year their business did a million and a half dollars and they expect to do two and a half million this year. And part of it was because they had the wit to use their names productively. Their business is using their names, the Cain and Abell electric business.

Reality may have triumphed over poor West, but only because he, doubtless as a ghost, inspired or wrote these Presidential remarks. The
Times reports, sounding as deadpan as Shrike, on the same page (B4), that the young entrepreneurs brought a present to Mr. Reagan. “‘We gave him a company jacket with Cain and Abell, Inc. on it,’ Mr. Cain said.” Perhaps West’s ghost now writes not only Shagpokian speeches, but the very text of reality in our America.
George Orwell

(1903–1950)

There is an equivocal irony to reading, and writing, about George Orwell in 1986. I have just reread 1984, Animal Farm, and many of the essays for the first time in some years, and I find myself lost in an interplay of many contending reactions, moral and aesthetic. Orwell, aesthetically considered, is a far better essayist than a novelist. Lionel Trilling, reviewing 1984, in 1949, praised the book, with a singular moral authority:

The whole effort of the culture of the last hundred years has been directed toward teaching us to understand the economic motive as the irrational road to death, and to seek salvation in the rational and the planned. Orwell marks a turn in thought; he asks us to consider whether the triumph of certain forces of the mind, in their naked pride and excess, may not produce a state of things far worse than any we have ever known. He is not the first to raise the question, but he is the first to raise it on truly liberal or radical grounds, with no intention of abating the demand for a just society, and with an overwhelming intensity and passion. This priority makes his book a momentous one.

The book remains momentous; perhaps it always will be so. But there is nothing intrinsic to the book that will determine its future importance. Its very genre will be established by political, social, economic events. Is it satire or science fiction or dystopia or countermanifesto? Last week I read newspaper accounts of two recent speeches, perorations delivered by President Reagan and by Norman Podhoretz, each favorably citing Orwell.
The President, awarding medals to Senator Barry Goldwater and Helen Hayes, among others, saw them as exemplars of Orwell’s belief in freedom and individual dignity, while the sage Podhoretz allowed himself to observe that Orwell would have become a neoconservative had he but survived until this moment. Perhaps irony, however equivocal, is inadequate to represent so curious a posthumous fate as has come to the author of *Homage to Catalonia*, a man who went to Barcelona to fight for the Party of Marxist Unity and the Anarcho-Syndicalists.

V.S. Pritchett and others were correct in describing Orwell as the best of modern pamphleteers. A pamphlet certainly can achieve aesthetic eminence; “tracts and pamphlets” is a major genre, particularly in Great Britain, where its masters include Milton, Defoe, Swift, Dr. Johnson, Burke, Blake, Shelley, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Newman. Despite his celebrated mastery of the plain style, it is rather uncertain that Orwell has joined himself to that company. I suspect that he is closer to the category that he once described as “good bad books,” giving Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a supreme instance. Aesthetically considered, 1984 is very much the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of our time, with poor Winston Smith as Uncle Tom, the unhappy Julia as little Eva, and the more-than-sadistic O’Brien as Simon Legree. I do not find O’Brien to be as memorable as Simon Legree, but then that is part of Orwell’s point. We have moved into a world in which our torturers also have suffered a significant loss of personality.

**II**

Orwell’s success as a prophet is necessarily a mixed one, since his relative crudity as a creator of character obliges us to read *1984* rather literally. What works best in the novel is its contextualization of all the phrases it has bequeathed to our contemporary language, though whether to the language is not yet certain. Newspeak and doublethink, “War Is Peace,” “Freedom Is Slavery,” “Ignorance Is Strength,” “Big Brother Is Watching You,” the Thought Police, the Two Minutes Hate, the Ministry of Truth, and all the other Orwellian inventions that are now wearisome clichés, are restored to some force, though little freshness, when we encounter them where they first arose.

Unfortunately, in itself that does not suffice. Even a prophetic pamphlet requires eloquence if we are to return to it and find ourselves affected at least as much as we were before. *1984* can hurt you a single time, and most likely when you are young. After that, defensive laughter becomes the aesthetic problem. Rereading *1984* can be too much like watching a really
persuasive horror movie; humor acquires the validity of health. Contemporary reviewers, even Trilling, were too overwhelmed by the book's relevance to apprehend its plain badness as narrative or Orwell's total inability to represent even a curtailed human personality or moral character. Mark Schorer's response in the *New York Times Book Review* may have seemed appropriate on June 12, 1949, but its hyperboles now provoke polite puzzlement:

No real reader can neglect this experience with impunity. He will be moved by Smith's wistful attempts to remember a different kind of life from his. He will make a whole new discovery of the beauty of love between man and woman, and of the strange beauty of landscape in a totally mechanized world. He will be asked to read through pages of sustained physical and psychological pain that have seldom been equaled and never in such quiet, sober prose. And he will return to his own life from Smith's escape into living death with a resolution to resist power wherever it means to deny him his individuality, and to resist for himself the poisonous lures of power.

Would it make a difference now if Orwell had given his book the title "1994"? Our edge of foreboding has vanished when we contemplate the book, if indeed we ought to regard it as a failed apocalypse. Yet all apocalypses, in the literary sense, are failed apocalypses, so that if they fade, the phenomenon of literary survival or demise clearly takes precedence over whatever status social prophecy affords. The limits of Orwell's achievement are clarified if we juxtapose it directly to the authentic American apocalypses of our time: Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Why do they go on wounding us, reading after reading, while *1984* threatens to become a period piece, however nightmarish? It would be absurdly unfair to look at *1984* side by side with Kafka and Beckett; Orwell was in no way an aspirant after the sublime, however demonic or diminished. But he was a satirist, and in *1984* a kind of phantasmagoric realist. If his O'Brien is not of the stature of the unamiable Simon Legree, he is altogether nonexistent as a Satanic rhetorician if we attempt to bring him into the company of West's Shrike.

Can a novel survive praise that endlessly centers upon its author's humane disposition, his indubitable idealism, his personal honesty, his political courage, his moral nature? Orwell may well have been the exemplary and representative Socialist intellectual of our time (though Raymond Williams, the crucial Marxist literary critic in Great Britain,
definitely does not think so). But very bad men and women have written superb novels, and great moralists have written unreadable ones. *1984* is neither superb nor unreadable. If it resembles the work of a precursor figure, that figure is surely H.G. Wells, as Wyndham Lewis shrewdly realized. Wells surpasses Orwell in storytelling vigor, in pungency of characterization, and in imaginative invention, yet Wells now seems remote and Orwell remains very close. We are driven back to what makes *1984* a good bad book: relevance. The book substitutes for a real and universal fear: that in the political and economic area, the dreadful is still about to happen. Yet the book again lacks a defense against its own blunderings into the ridiculous. As social prophecy, it is closer to Sinclair Lewis’s now forgotten *It Can’t Happen Here* than to Nathanael West’s still hilarious *A Cool Million*, where Big Brother, under the name of Shagpoke Whipple, speaks uncannily in the accents shared by Calvin Coolidge and Ronald Reagan. Why could not Orwell have rescued his book by some last touch of irony or by a valid invocation of the satiric Muse?

III

What Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno grimly called the Culture Industry has absorbed Orwell, and his *1984* in particular. Is this because Orwell retains such sentimentalities or soft idealisms as the poignance of true love? After all, Winston and Julia are terrorized out of love by brute pain and unendurable fear; no one could regard them as having been culpable in their forced abandonment of one another. This is akin to Orwell’s fantastic and wholly unconvincing hope that the proles might yet offer salvation, a hope presumably founded upon the odd notion that Oceania lets eighty-five percent of its population go back to nature in the slums of London and other cities. Love and the working class are therefore pretty much undamaged in Orwell’s vision. Contrast Pynchon’s imaginative “paranoia” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where all of us, of whatever social class, live in the Zone which is dominated by the truly paranoid System, and where authentic love can be represented only as sado-masochism. There is a Counterforce in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that fights the System, but it is inefficient, farcical, and can be animated only by the peculiar ideology that Pynchon calls sado-anarchism, an ideology that the Culture Industry cannot absorb, and that I suspect Adorno gladly would have embraced.

I don’t intend this introduction as a drubbing or trashing of Orwell and *1984*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, being an encyclopedic prose epic, is hardly a fair agonist against which *1984* should be matched. But the aesthetic badness of *1984* is palpable enough, and I am a good enough disciple of the
divine Oscar Wilde to wonder if an aesthetic inadequacy really can be a moral splendor? Simon Legree beats poor old Uncle Tom to death, and O’Brien pretty well wrecks Winston Smith’s body and then reduces him to supposed ruin by threatening him with some particularly nasty and hungry rats. Is Uncle Tom’s Cabin actually a moral achievement, even if Harriet Beecher Stowe hastened both the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation? Is 1984 a moral triumph, even if it hastens a multiplication of neoconservatives?

The defense of a literary period piece cannot differ much from a defense of period pieces in clothes, household objects, popular music, movies, and the lower reaches of the visual arts. A period piece that is a political and social polemic, like Uncle Tom’s Cabin and 1984, acquires a curious charm of its own. What partly saves 1984 from Orwell’s overliteralness and failures in irony is the strange archaism of its psychology and rhetoric:

He paused for a few moments, as though to allow what he had been saying to sink in.

“Do you remember,” he went on, “writing in your diary, ‘Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four’?”

“Yes,” said Winston.

O’Brien held up his left hand, its back toward Winston, with the thumb hidden and the four fingers extended.

“How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?”

“Four.”

“And if the Party says that it is not four but five—then how many?”

“Four.”

The word ended in a gasp of pain. The needle of the dial had shot up to fifty-five. The sweat had sprung out all over Winston’s body. The air tore into his lungs and issued again in deep groans which even by clenching his teeth he could not stop. O’Brien watched him, the four fingers still extended. He drew back the lever. This time the pain was only slightly eased.

“How many fingers, Winston?”

“Four.”

The needle went up to sixty.

“How many fingers, Winston?”

“Four! Four! What else can I say? Four!”

The needle must have risen again, but he did not look at it. The heavy, stern face and the four fingers filled his vision. The fingers
stood up before his eyes like pillars, enormous, blurry, and seeming to vibrate, but unmistakably four.

“How many fingers, Winston?”
“Four! Stop it, stop it! How can you go on? Four! Four!”
“How many fingers, Winston?”
“Five! Five! Five!”
“No, Winston, that is no use. You are lying. You still think there are four. How many fingers, please?”
“Four! Five! Four! Anything you like. Only stop it, stop the pain!”

Abruptly he was sitting up with O’Brien’s arm round his shoulders. He had perhaps lost consciousness for a few seconds. The bonds that had held his body down were loosened. He felt very cold, he was shaking uncontrollably. His teeth were chattering, the tears were rolling down his cheeks. For a moment he clung to O’Brien like a baby, curiously comforted by the heavy arm round his shoulders. He had the feeling that O’Brien was his protector, that the pain was something that came from outside, from some other source, and that it was O’Brien who would save him from it.

“You are a slow learner, Winston,” said O’Brien gently.
“How can I help it?” he blubered. “How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four.”

“Sometimes. Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once. You must try harder. It is not easy to become sane.”

He laid Winston down on the bed. The grip on his limbs tightened again, but the pain had ebbed away and the trembling had stopped, leaving him merely weak and cold. O’Brien motioned with his head to the man in the white coat, who had stood immobile throughout the proceedings. The man in the white coat bent down and looked closely into Winston’s eyes, felt his pulse, laid an ear against his chest, tapped here and there; then he nodded to O’Brien.

“Again,” said O’Brien.

The pain flowed into Winston’s body. The needle must be at seventy, seventy-five. He had shut his eyes this time. He knew that the fingers were still there, and still four. All that mattered was somehow to stay alive until the spasm was over. He had ceased to notice whether he was crying out or not. The pain lessened again. He opened his eyes. O’Brien had drawn back the lever.

“How many fingers, Winston?”
“Four. I suppose there are four. I would see five if I could. I am trying to see five.”

“Which do you wish: to persuade me that you see five, or really to see them?”

“Really to see them.”

“Again,” said O’Brien.

If we took this with high seriousness, then its offense against any persuasive mode of representation would make us uneasy. But it is a grand period piece, parodying not only Stalin’s famous trials, but many theologically inspired ordeals before the advent of the belated Christian heresy that Russian Marxism actually constitutes. Orwell was a passionate moralist, and an accomplished essayist. The age drove him to the composition of political romance, though he lacked nearly all of the gifts necessary for the writer of narrative fiction. *1984* is an honorable aesthetic failure, and perhaps time will render its crudities into so many odd period graces, remnants of a vanished era. Yet the imagination, as Wallace Stevens once wrote, is always at the end of an era. Lionel Trilling thought that O’Brien’s torture of Winston Smith was “a hideous parody on psychotherapy and the Platonic dialogues.” Thirty-seven years after Trilling’s review, the scene I have quoted above seems more like self-parody, as though Orwell’s narrative desperately sought its own reduction, its own outrageous descent into the fallacy of believing that only the worst truth about us can be the truth.

Orwell was a dying man as he wrote the book, suffering the wasting away of his body in consumption. D.H. Lawrence, dying the same way, remained a heroic vitalist, as his last poems and stories demonstrate. But Lawrence belonged to literary culture, to the old, high line of transcendental seers. What wanes and dies in *1984* is not the best of George Orwell, not the pamphleteer of *The Lion and the Unicorn* nor the autobiographer of *Homage to Catalonia* nor the essayist of *Shooting an Elephant*. That Orwell lived and died an independent Socialist, hardly Marxist but really a Spanish Anarchist, or an English dissenter and rebel of the line of Cromwell and of Cromwell’s celebrators, Milton and Carlyle. *1984* has the singular power, not aesthetic but social, of being the product of an age, and not just of the man who set it down.

*Animal Farm*

*Animal Farm* is a beast fable, more in the mode of Jonathan Swift’s savage indignation than in Chaucer’s gentler irony. George Orwell was startled when the book became children’s literature, rather like *Gulliver’s Travels* before it. And yet that is what saves the book aesthetically; *Nineteen
*Eighty-Four* is very thin when compared to *Animal Farm*. Boxer the cart-horse, Clover the mare, and Benjamin the donkey all have considerably more personality than does Winston Smith, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Fable necessarily suited Orwell better than the novel, because he was essentially an essayist and a satirist, and not a storyteller. *Animal Farm* is best regarded as a fusion of satirical political pamphlet and beast fable, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the historical aspect of the book necessarily has faded. The end of Stalinism removed the immediacy of *Animal Farm*, which now survives only by its pathos. Children are the book’s best audience because of its simplicity and directness. Something in Orwell entertained a great nostalgia for an older, rural England, one that preceded industrial blight. The vision of Old Major, the boar who prophesies the transformation of Manor Farm into *Animal Farm*, is essentially Orwell’s own ideal, and has a childlike quality that is very poignant.

It is very difficult to understand the psychology of any of the animals in Orwell’s fantasy. How does Snowball (Trotsky) differ from Napoleon (Stalin) in his motivations? We cannot say; either Orwell does not know or he does not care. We are moved by poor Boxer, who works himself to death for the supposed common good, but we could not describe Boxer’s personality. Even as a fabulist, Orwell has acute limitations; he could not create distincts. He was a considerable moralist, who passionately championed individuality, but he had no ability to translate that passion into imagining separate individuals. The creatures of *Animal Farm* compare poorly to those of Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*. Toad of Toad Hall and Badger are sustained literary characters; Boxer and Benjamin are not. Whether *Animal Farm* truly can survive as children’s literature seems to me rather doubtful, in the longest perspective.

Still, the narrative of *Animal Farm* is ingenious, and its twists retain a certain charm. The plain decency of Orwell’s outlook still comes through clearly, and his fable’s force is benign. Like his hero, the sublime Charles Dickens, Orwell was a “free intelligence,” and his liberal passion against ideology is now his best legacy. Our era is again ideological, and *Animal Farm* now would make most sense if it satirized not the Soviet tyranny but the political correctness that blights our universities. Those resenters of individuality, for whom “social energies” are everything and personal genius is nothing, are now our Napoleons and Snowballs. Orwell’s liberalism finds no home in Departments of Resentment. He should have lived to revise *Animal Farm* into a satire upon the way we teach now; and upon the way most fail to learn Orwell’s longing for “free intelligence,” which would find little to encourage it in English-speaking higher education as we approach the Millennium. Liberal humanism and individualist
anarchism are condemned by our current gender-and-power dogmatists in the name of a new conformism. Its motto might well be: “All animals are resentful but some are more resentful than others.”
THOUGH HE IS MUCH HONORED AS AN EMINENT CONTEMPORARY NOVELIST, it is not yet clear that Graham Greene will survive among the greater masters of fiction, rather than among the masterful writers of adventure stories. Henry James and Joseph Conrad seem less relevant to their disciple’s achievement than do Rider Haggard, John Buchan, and even perhaps Edgar Wallace. The true comparison may he to Robert Louis Stevenson, since neither author is demeaned by such an association, though I myself prefer Stevenson. Greene, always generous and candid, paid tribute to what he called “Rider Haggard’s Secret.”

How seldom in the literary life do we pause to pay a debt of gratitude except to the great or the fashionable, who are like those friends that we feel do us credit. Conrad, Dostoevsky, James, yes, but we are too ready to forget such figures as A.E.W. Mason, Stanley Weyman, and Rider Haggard, perhaps the greatest of all who enchanted us when we were young. Enchantment is just what this writer exercised; he fixed pictures in our minds that thirty years have been unable to wear away: the witch Gagool screaming as the rock-door closed and crushed her; Eric Bright-eyes fighting his doomed battle; the death of the tyrant Chaka; Umslopagaas holding the queen’s stairway in Milosis. It is odd how many violent images remain like a prophecy of the future; the love passages were quickly read and discarded from the mind, though now they seem oddly moving (as when Queen Nyleptha declares her love to Sir Henry Curtis in the midnight hall), a little awkward and stilted perhaps, but free from ambiguities and doubts, and with the worn rhetoric of honesty.
To be “free from ambiguities and doubts and, with the worn rhetoric of honesty,” to express love—that is the hopeless nostalgia of Greene’s protagonists, and of Greene himself. Greene tells us that he had a happy childhood, and a sad adolescence, and what he finds in Rider Haggard is a childhood vision, rather than an adolescent fantasy. Of Haggard’s life, Greene observed that it “does not belong to the unhappy world of letters; there are no rivalries, jealousies, nerve storms, no toiling miserably against the grain, no ignoble ambivalent vision which finds a kind of copy even in personal grief.” I would observe, rather sadly, that what Greene describes so negatively here is indeed an inescapable aspect of the creative lives of strong writers. Inescapable because they have chosen to overcome mortality through, in, and by their work, and such an overcoming requires rivalries—with figures of the past, the present, the future.

“Rider Haggard’s Secret” turns out to be, according to Greene, what Greene least led us to expect: an obsessive fear of mortality, expressed in an anecdote concerning Haggard and the much stronger Kipling:

There are some revealing passages in his friendship with Rudyard Kipling. Fishing together for trout at Bateman’s, these two elderly men—in some ways the most successful writers of their time, linked together to their honour even by their enemies (“the prose that knows no reason, and the unmelodious verse,” “When the Rudyards cease from Kipling, and the Haggards ride no more”), suddenly let out the secret. “I happened to remark,” Haggard wrote, “that I thought this world was one of the hells. He replied he did not think—he was certain of it. He went on to show that it had every attribute of hell; doubt, fear, pain, struggle, bereavement, almost irresistible temptations springing from the nature with which we are clothed, physical and mental suffering, etc., ending in the worst fate man can devise for man, Execution.”

Kipling’s nihilism, akin to Walter Pater’s, was partly assuaged by Kipling’s surprisingly Paterian devotion to stories for stories’ sake, poems for poems’ sake. Greene’s novels and entertainments have one pervasive fault: tendentiousness. We are never given a narrative for the narrative’s sake, or the representation of a person for that person’s sake. I have read no stranger criticism of Henry James than that ventured by Graham Greene, who has contrived to persuade himself that James was essentially a religious novelist. The Portrait of a Lady is scarcely The Heart of the Matter, or The Wings of the Dove a version of The End of the Affair, yet Greene seems not to know the difference. His Henry James is hardly the son of
Henry James, Senior, disciple of Emerson and of Swedenborg, but rather someone “near in spirit ... to the Roman Catholic Church.” This is too high-handed to be funny, and too inaccurate to be excusable. As a critic, Greene remains a minor ephebe of T.S. Eliot, the “Are you worthy to be damned?” man, author of such tractates as *After Strange Gods* and *The Idea of a Christian Society*. In his egregious essay, “Henry James: The Religious Aspect,” Greene approvingly quotes Eliot on our glorious capacity for damnation, in order to suggest that James shared Eliot’s enthusiasm for so sublime a human possibility:

human nature is not despicable in Osmond or Densher, for they are both capable of damnation. “It is true to say,” Mr. Eliot has written in an essay on Baudelaire, “that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of most male-factors, from statesmen to thieves, is that they are not men enough to be damned.” This worst cannot be said of James’s characters: both Densher and the prince have on their faces the flush of the flames.

That is rather severe, and leads me to an apprehension that in Greene’s hell there are many mansions. It leads Greene to the exuberant conclusion that Henry James “is only just prevented from being as explicitly religious as Dostoevsky by the fact that neither a philosophy nor a creed ever emerged from his religious sense.” James and Dostoyevski? Why not James and G.K. Chesterton? Or James and Evelyn Waugh? My questions are extravagant, but not so extravagant as Greene’s, since he really means to ask the question: James and Graham Greene? There is a ready answer which is the critical truth about Greene, despite his journalistic idolators. *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Quiet American*, and Greene’s other ambitious novels cannot sustain a close rereading, and are destroyed by being compared to the major novels of Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Greens is most himself only in the company of Anthony Hope’s *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Rider Haggard’s *She* and *King Solomon’s Mines*, John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Edgar Wallace’s *The Four Just Men*, and more lastingly, Stevenson’s *Weir of Hermiston*, *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*. Of Greene’s “entertainments,” the most famous are *The Third Man* and *Our Man in Havana*, but the best seem to me the early group that includes *This Gun for Hire*, *The Confidential Agent*, and *The Ministry of Fear*. These are finer achievements than anything by John Le Carré, Greene’s haunted disciple, and they have retained a curious
freshness that might turn out to be as permanent as the quality of Stevenson’s romances.

Greene’s most vital “entertainments” have a Jacobean quality, reminding us of his intense admiration for the tragedies of John Webster, the thrillers of their age, together with the plays of Marston, Ford, and Tourneur. The motto for Greene’s thrillers could be Webster’s: “I hunted this night-piece, and it was my best.” This could also he the epigraph to what seems to me Greene’s most enduring novel, *Brighton Rock* (1938), which is on the border between an entertainment like *This Gun for Hire* and his “Catholic novels,” such as *The Power and the Glory* and its companions. Crudely worked out as the book is, *Brighton Rock* has a Websterian intensity that is displaced by piety and moralizing, however inverted, in Greene’s most ambitious attempts to be the Catholic Henry James or Joseph Conrad of his own time.

*Brighton Rock*

*Brighton Rock*’s protagonist, the seventeen-year-old thug Pinkie, is at once the most memorable and the most vicious representation of a person in Greene’s fiction. He may be regarded, ironically, as a considerable advance in malevolence over his immediate forerunner, the killer Raven in *This Gun for Hire*. Contrast the deaths of Raven and Pinkie, and you see that the essential Graham Greene came into full existence during 1936–38:

Raven watched him with bemused eyes, trying to take aim. It wasn’t a difficult shot, but it was almost as if he had lost interest in killing. He was only aware of a pain and despair which was more like a complete weariness than anything else. He couldn’t work up any sourness, any bitterness, at his betrayal. The dark Weevil under the storm of frozen rain flowed between him and any human enemy. “Ah, Christ that it were possible,” but he had been marked from his birth for this end, to be betrayed in turn by everyone until every avenue into life was safely closed: by his mother bleeding in the basement, by the chaplain at the home, by the soft kids who had left it with him, by the shady doctor off Charlotte Street. How could he have expected to escape the commonest betrayal of all, to go soft on a skirt? Even Kite would have been alive now if it hadn’t been for a skirt. They all went soft at some time or another: Penrith and Carter, Jossy and Ballard, Barker and the Great Dane. He took aim slowly, absently, with a curious humility, with almost a sense of companionship in
his loneliness: the trooper and Mayhew. They had all thought at one time or another that their skirt was better than other men’s skirts, that there was something exalted in their relation. The only problem when you were once born was to get out of life more neatly and expeditiously than you had entered it. For the first time the idea of his mother’s suicide came to him without bitterness, as he fixed his aim at the long reluctant last and Saunders shot him in the back through the opening door. Death came to him in the form of unbearable pain. It was as if he had to deliver this pain as a woman delivers a child, and he sobbed and moaned in the effort. At last it came out of him, and he followed his only child into a vast desolation.

A voice called sharply “Pinkie” and she heard somebody splashing in the puddles. Footsteps ran ... she couldn’t tell where. It seemed to her that this must be news, that this must make a difference. She couldn’t kill herself when this might mean good news. It was as if somewhere in the darkness the will which had governed her hand relaxed, and all the hideous forces of self-preservation came flooding back. It didn’t seem real that she had really intended to sit there and press the trigger. “Pinkie,” the voice called again, and the splashing steps came nearer. She pulled the car door open and flung the revolver far away from her towards the damp scrub.

In the light from the stained glass she saw Dallow and the woman—and a policeman who looked confused as if he didn’t quite know what was happening. Somebody came softly round the car behind her and said, “Where’s that gun? Why don’t you shoot? Give it me.”

She said, “I threw it away.”

The others approached cautiously like a deputation. Pinkie called out suddenly in a breaking childish voice, “You bloody squealer, Dallow.”

“Pinkie,” Dallow said, “it’s no use. They got Prewitt.” The policeman looked ill-at-ease like a stranger at a party.

“Where’s that gun?” Pinkie said again. He screamed with hate and fear, “My God, have I got to have a massacre?”

She said, “I threw it away.”

She could see his face indistinctly as it leant in over the little dashboard light. It was like a child’s, badgered, confused, betrayed: fake years slipped away—he was whisked back towards the unhappy
playground. He said, "You little ..." he didn't finish—the deputation approached, he left her, diving into his pocket for something. "Come on, Dallow," he said, "you bloody squealer," and put his hand up. Then she couldn't tell what happened: glass— somewhere—broke, he screamed and she saw his face—steam. He screamed and screamed, with his hands up to his eyes; he turned and ran; she saw a police baton at his feet and broken glass. He looked half his size, doubled up in appalling agony: it was as if the flames had literally got him and he shrank—shrank into a school-boy flying in panic and pain, scrambling over a fence, running on.

"Stop him," Dallow cried: it wasn't any good: he was at the edge, he was over: they couldn't even hear a splash. It was as if he'd been withdrawn suddenly by a hand out of any existence—past or present, whipped away into zero—nothing.

Both scenes are Jacobean, and very much in the mode of Webster, but the second, from *Brighton Rock*, has learned better the aesthetic lesson that the poet of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* teaches so superbly. Webster's hero-villains—Bosola, Flamineo, Ludovico—flare out sublimely as they die. They are indeed the best night-pieces that they have limned, and they know it, which is a peculiarly negative glory, to them and to us, but a glory nevertheless. Raven dies badly; the Jacobean groundlings would have shrugged him off as a weak wastrel. If your only issue is your death, if your only mark is "to get out of life more neatly and expeditiously than you had entered it," why then you have no greatness, no bad eminence that might be called the stuff of tragedy in which someone high, however hollow, falls downward and outward into the dark backward and abyss of time.

But Pinkie, unlike Raven, dies in the mode of Webster's sublime Bosola. Pinkie has the true Jacobean hero-villain's inverted Puritanism: disgust for human sexuality, hatred of mere life, "his virginity straightened in him like sex." Born a Catholic, Pinkie is somewhere between a repressed Jansenist and a crazed Manichaean, always ready for one death after another, a more than Eliotic believer in the glory of his own damnation. Quite literally, Pinkie dies a flaming death as he falls into nothingness, his face on fire as he goes off the cliff, memorably consumed by his own hatred of every existence, his own most of all.

The strength of *Brighton Rock*, which is likely to assure its permanence, is that it is all one thing, Greene's shot out of hell, as it were. Pinkie persuades us as I believe that the nameless whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory* and Scobie the colonial policeman in *The Heart of the Matter* cannot. The problem is hardly what several critics have asserted it to be:
the difficulty of representing vexed goodness or flawed sainthood as contrasted with the absolute moral depravity of the young devil Pinkie. Rather, it is the aesthetic question of just what Greene’s creative exuberance is, and just how such gusto contrives to manifest itself in the representation of human qualities. Scobie and the whiskey priest move Greene, but they do not enchant him. His imagination is moved by Pinkie, because only Pinkie sustains the vision of evil that kindled Greene into narrative art in his most vital years as a story-teller.

However out of sympathy one is with the Eliotic mode of neo-Christianity, and I cannot imagine a critic who cares less for its aesthetic embodiment than my sad self, *Brighton Rock* has the strength of pathos that overcomes the critic’s resentment of theological tendentiousness. I think always, in this regard, of the end of part six of *Brighton Rock*, where Pinkie has “such a vision of the street / as the street hardly understands,” a vision deeply indebted to Eliot’s superb “preludes,” with their “notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing,” and their phantasmagoria in which “the worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots.” Pinkie sees what can be seen, and experiences the “horrified fascination” of the damned, as they contemplate the saved:

He was taken by a craving for air, walked softly to the door. In the passage he could see nothing: it was full of the low sound of breathing—from the room he had left, from Dallow’s room. He felt like a blind man watched by people he couldn’t see. He felt his way to the stair-head and on down to the hall, step by step, creakingly. He put out his hand and touched the telephone, then with his arm outstretched made for the door. In the street the lamps were out, but the darkness no longer enclosed between four walls seemed to thin out across the vast expanse of a city. He could see basement railings, a cat moving, and, reflected on the dark sky, the phosphorescent glow of the sea. It was a strange world: he had never been alone in it before. He had a deceptive sense of freedom as he walked softly down towards the Channel.

The lights were on in Montpellier Road. Nobody was about, and an empty milk bottle stood outside a gramophone shop; far down were the illuminated clock tower and the public lavatories. The air was fresh like country air. He could imagine he had escaped. He put his hands for warmth into his trouser-pockets and felt a scrap of paper which should not have been there. He drew it out—a scrap torn from a notebook—big, unformed, stranger’s writing. He held it up into the grey light and read—with difficulty. “I love you,
Pinkie. I don’t care what you do. I love you for ever. You’ve been good to me. Wherever you go, I’ll go too.” She must have written it while he talked to Cubitt and slipped it into his pocket while he slept. He crumpled it in his fist: a dustbin stood outside a fishmonger’s—then he held his hand. An obscure sense told him you never knew—it might prove useful one day.

He heard a whisper, looked sharply round, and thrust the paper back. In an alley between two shops, an old woman sat upon the ground; he could just see the rotting and discoloured face: it was like the sight of damnation. Then he heard the whisper, “Blessed art thou among women,” saw the grey fingers fumbling at the beads. This was not one of the damned: he watched with horrified fascination: this was one of the saved.

This was Greene’s true sense of the heart of the matter, and his abiding vision of what could touch him, with full authenticity, as the power and the glory. His more celebrated novels fade already into the continuum of literary tradition. *Brighton Rock*, a terrible crystal of a book, may well be *The White Devil* of our era.
Robert Penn Warren

(1905-1989)

I

Robert Penn Warren, born April 24, 1905, in Guthrie, Kentucky, at the age of eighty our most eminent man of letters. That truism is vitalized by his extraordinary persistence of development into a great poet. A reader thinks of the handful of poets triumphant in their later or last phases: Browning, Hardy, Yeats, Stevens, Warren. Indeed, “Myth of Mountain Sunrise,” the final poem among the new work in this fifth Warren Selected Poems, will remind some readers of Browning’s marvelous “Prologue” to Asolando, written when the poet was seventy-seven. Thinking back fifty years to the first time he saw Asolo, a village near Venice, Browning burns through every sense of loss to a final transcendence:

How many a year, my Asolo,
Since—one step just from sea to land—
I found you, loved yet feared you so—
For natural objects seemed to stand
Palpably fire-clothed! No—

“God is it who transcend,” Browning ends by asserting. Warren, older even than Browning was, also ruggedly remains a poet of immanence, of something indwelling and pervasive, though not necessarily sustaining, that can be sensed in, for example, a mountain sunrise:

The curdling agony of interred dark strives dayward, in stone
strives though
No light here enters, has ever entered but
In ageless age of primal flame. But look! All mountains want slowly to bulge outward extremely. The leaf, whetted on light, will cut Air like butter. Leaf cries: “I feel my deepest filament in dark rejoice.
I know the density of basalt has a voice.”

Two primal flames, Browning’s and Warren’s, but at the close of “Myth of Mountain Sunrise” we read not “God is it who transcends” but “The sun blazes over the peak. That will be the old tale told.” The epigraph to the new section of this Selected Poems is from Warren’s favorite theologian, St. Augustine: “Will ye not now after that life is descended down to you, will not you ascend up to it and live?” One remembers another epigraph Warren took from the Confessions, for the book of poems Being Here (1980): “I thirst to know the power and nature of time.” Warren now has that knowledge, and his recent poems show him ascending up to living in the present, in the presence of time’s cumulative power. Perhaps no single new poem here quite matches the extraordinary group of visions and meditations in his previous work that includes “Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth,” “Heart of Autumn,” “Evening Hawk,” “Birth of Love,” “The Leaf,” “Mortmain,” “To a Little Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress,” and so many more. But the combined strength of the eighty-five pages of new poems that Warren aptly calls Altitudes and Extensions is remarkable, and extends the altitudes at which our last poet of the Sublime continues to live, move and have his being.

II

Warren’s first book was John Brown: The Making of a Martyr (1929). I have just read it, for the first time, and discovered, without surprise, that it made me very unhappy. The book purports to be history, but is Southern fiction of Allen Tate’s ideology, and portrays Brown as a murderous nihilist, fit hero for the equally repellent Ralph Waldo Emerson. Indeed I find it difficult to decide, after suffering the book, whether the young Warren loathed Brown or Emerson more. Evidently both Brown and his intellectual supporter seemed to represent for Warren an emptiness making ruthless and passionate attempts to prove itself fullness. But John Brown, if read as a first work of fiction, does presage the Warren of Night Rider (1939), his first published novel, which I have just re-read with great pleasure.

Night Rider is an exciting and remorseless narrative, wholly characteristic of what were to be Warren’s prime virtues as a novelist: good story-
telling and intensely dramatic unfolding of the moral character of his
doom-eager men and women. Mr. Munn, upon whom Night Rider centers,
is as splendidly unsympathetic as the true Warren heroes continued to be:
Jerry Calhoun and Slim Sarrett in At Heaven’s Gate (1943), Jack Burden
and Willie Stark in All the King’s Men (1946), Jeremiah Beaumont and
Cassius Fort in World Enough and Time (1950). When Warren’s central per-
sonages turned more amiable, starting with poor Amantha Starr in Band of
Angels (1955), the books alas turned much less interesting. This unfortu-
nate phenomenon culminated in Warren’s last novel (so far), A Place to
Come To (1977), which Warren himself ranks with All the King’s Men and
World Enough and Time. I wish I could agree, but re-reading A Place to Come
To confirms an earlier impression that Warren likes his hero, Jed
Tewksbury, rather too much. Without some real moral distaste to goad
him, Warren tends to lose his narrative drive. I find myself wishing that
Tewksbury had in him a touch of what might be called Original John
Brown.

Warren’s true precursor, as a novelist, is not Faulkner but Conrad, the
dominant influence upon so many American novelists of Warren’s genera-
tion. In one of his best critical essays, written in 1951 on Conrad’s
Nostromo, Warren gave an unwitting clue to why all his own best work, as
a novelist, already was over:

There is another discrepancy, or apparent discrepancy, that we
must confront in any serious consideration of Conrad—that
between his professions of skepticism and his professions of
faith....

Cold unconcern, an “attitude of perfect indifference” is, as he
says in the letter to Galsworthy, “the part of creative power.” But
this is the same Conrad who speaks of Fidelity and the human
communion, and who makes Kurtz cry out in the last horror and
Heyst come to his vision of meaning in life. And this is the same
Conrad who makes Marlow of “Heart of Darkness” say that what
redeems is the “idea only” ....

It is not some, but all, men who must serve the “idea.” The low-
est and the most vile creature must, in some way, idealize his exis-
tence in order to exist, and must find sanctions outside himself ....

Warren calls this a reading of Conrad’s dual temperament, skepticism
struggling with a last-ditch idealism, and remarks, much in T.S. Eliot’s
spirit:
We must sometimes force ourselves to remember that the act of creation is not simply a projection of temperament, but a criticism and a purging of temperament.

This New Critical shibboleth becomes wholly Eliotic if we substitute the word “personality” for the word “temperament.” As an analysis of the moral drama in Conrad’s best novels, and in 

*Nostromo* in particular, this is valuable, but Warren is not Conrad, and like his poetic and critical precursor, Eliot, Warren creates by projecting temperament, not by purging it. There is no “cold unconcern,” no “attitude of perfect indifference,” no escape from personality in Eliot, and even more nakedly Warren’s novels and poems continually reveal his passions, prejudices, convictions. Conrad is majestically enigmatic, beyond ideology; Warren, like Eliot, is an ideologue, and his temperament is far more ferocious than Eliot’s.

What Warren rightly praises in Conrad is not to be found in Warren’s own novels, with the single exception of *All the King’s Men*, which does balance skepticism against belief just adroitly enough to ward off Warren’s moralism. *World Enough and Time*, Warren’s last stand as a major novelist, is an exuberant work marred finally by the author’s singular fury at his own creatures. As a person who forgives himself nothing, Warren abandons Conradian skepticism and proceeds to forgive his hero and heroine nothing. Re-reading *World Enough and Time*, I wince repeatedly at what the novelist inflicts upon Jeremiah Beaumont and Rachel Jordan. Warren, rather like the Gnostics’ parody of Jehovah, punishes his Adam and Eve by denying them honorable or romantic deaths. Their joint suicide drug turns into an emetic, and every kind of degradation subsequently is heaped upon them. Warren, who can be a superb ironist in his novels as well as in his poetry, nevertheless so loves the world that he will forgive it nothing; and a poet can make more of such a position than a novelist.

*I first read* *All the King’s Men* as a Cornell undergraduate in the late 1940s, under the tutelage of a great teacher, William M. Sale, who remarked of the book that it had nearly every possible flaw, but that it was also unmistakably part of the permanent tradition or canon of the American novel. Sale’s canonical judgment, uttered only two or three years after the novel’s first publication (1946) has been confirmed. Rereading the book now, nearly forty years after first studying it, I marvel at its triumph over the author’s restless temperament. Too passionate a moralist, perhaps too great a visionary, to cultivate the patience of a novelist, Warren instead became
a major poet, probably our finest since the death of Wallace Stevens. *All
the King’s Men* is likely to be his principal legacy after the extraordinary
poetry he has written in the two decades since 1966.

Remembering *All the King’s Men*, I had thought of it as Willie Stark’s
story; rereading it, I see that it is far more Jack Burden’s than it is Stark’s.
Warren is ambivalent enough towards Stark; in regard to Burden,
“ambivalence” seems almost too weak a term for Warren’s stance. The
author nearly identifies himself with his narrator, yet that identification is
dialectical in the mode of what Freud called “negation.” Burden is
Warren’s burden: a cognitive return of the repressed while the affective
aspect of repression continues. The mind of Robert Penn Warren at
meridian is introjected as Jack Burden, while the passional life of Warren,
domain of the drives, is projected and so spit out as Burden, morally reject-
ed by his creator, in a way that Willie Stark is not, if only because Stark is
stark—strong and active—where Burden is weak and passive, a burden to
himself and to others.

Yet he remains, to me, Warren’s most interesting fictive person, per-
haps because he is and is not Warren, the portrait of the artist as a failed
(momentarily) youngish man. One of the hidden splendors, tawdry yet fas-
cinating, of the novel is Burden’s failed first marriage (as it will prove to be,
since at the end, he does marry Anne Stanton). The truth of the first mar-
riage emerges with a fine clarity in the famous sentence that ends Burden’s
account of it: “Good-bye, Lois, and I forgive you for everything I did to
you.” The bitterness is only towards the self, for only the self existed.
When he cannot bring the past alive into the present, then Burden
becomes a pure solipsist, aware neither of neighbors nor of the sun.

It is the peculiar strength of Willie Stark that he breaks through
Burden’s defenses sufficiently so that the novel’s narrator becomes at most
an imperfect solipsist, brilliantly capable of telling an intensely dramatic
story. *All the King’s Men*’s prime literary virtue is the wonderfully old-fash-
ioned one of being compulsively readable. That this is wholly due to Willie
Stark is unquestionable. He is one of the last authentic hero-villains of the
high Jacobean mode, worthy of a twentieth-century John Webster, or of
Faulkner, or even of Conrad. Burden’s relation to Stark is not that of
Conrad’s Marlow to Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, or of Faulkner’s Quentin
to Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but rather is that of Warren himself to the
historical figure of the Kingfish, Huey Long of Louisiana. This necessari-
ly has caused some confusions in the critical apprehension of *All the King’s
Men*. Burden’s barely repressed love for Stark, essentially filial in nature,
does not represent Warren’s hidden fondness for the most persuasive of
our country’s native Fascists, our Franco or Mussolini, as it were. Rather,
Stark's fascination for Warren is dramatic, and aesthetic, even as it is for us as Warren's readers.

The movement from the factual, historical Huey Long to the fictive Willie Stark is epitomized by the difference between Long's “I know the hearts of the people because I have not colored my own” and Stark's “My study is the heart of the people.” Willie is pithier than Huey, and even more persuasive. He is the answer to a universal Oedipus complex, an answer conveyed most poignantly in the novel's central moment, the final meeting between Jack Burden and his crucial father-substitute, Willie Stark, dying but still the Boss:

He lifted the forefinger and the next finger of his right hand, which lay prone on the sheet, in an incipient salute, then let them drop. The strength of the muscles which held his mouth twisted gave out, too, and the grin slid off his face and the weight of flesh sagged back.

I stood up close to the bed and looked down at him, and tried to think of something to say. But my brain felt as juiceless as an old sponge left out in the sun a long time.

Then he said, in something a little better than a whisper, “I wanted to see you, Jack.”

“I wanted to see you, too, Boss.”

For a minute he didn't speak, but his eyes looked up at me, with the light still flickering in them. Then he spoke: “Why did he do it to me?”

“Oh, God damn it,” I burst out, very loud, “I don’t know. “

The nurse looked warningly at me.

“I never did anything to him,” he said.

“No, you never did.”

He was silent again, and the flicker went down in his eyes. Then, “He was all right. The Doc.”

I nodded.

I waited, but it began to seem that he wasn't going to say any more. His eyes were on the ceiling and I could scarcely tell that he was breathing. Finally, the eyes turned toward me again, very slowly, and I almost thought that I could hear the tiny painful creak of the balls in their sockets. But the light flickered up again. He said, “It might have been all different, Jack.”

I nodded again.

He roused himself more. He even seemed to be straining to lift his head from the pillow. “You got to believe that,” he said hoarsely.
The nurse stepped forward and looked significantly at me.
“Yeah,” I said to the man on the bed.
“You got to,” he said again. “You got to believe that.”
“All right.”
He looked at me, and for a moment it was the old strong, probing, demanding glance. But when the words came this time, they were very weak. “And it might even been different yet,” he whispered. “If it hadn’t happened, it might—have been different—even yet.”
He barely got the last words out, he was so weak.
The nurse was making signals to me.
I reached down and took the hand on the sheet. It felt like a piece of jelly.
“So long, Boss,” I said. “I’ll be seeing you.”
He didn’t answer, and I wasn’t even sure that there was recognition in the eyes now. I turned away and went out.

It is the father as man-of-action saying farewell to his true son as intellectual or spiritual discerner, and trying, somewhat heroically, to give a final blessing by way of expiation. For Willie Stark has been a castrating father, and in ways that transcended his taking Anne Stanton away from Jack Burden. “It might have—been different—even yet” is more than a political reference or ruined social prophecy. As a reference to the buried relationship between Stark and Burden, it implies a belated recognition of the burden of a better fatherhood, and better filial vision, than either figure has known before. That seems the profoundest meaning of Burden’s final rumination that concludes the novel:

We shall come back, no doubt, to walk down the Row and watch young people on the tennis courts by the clump of mimosas and walk down the beach by the bay, where the diving floats lift gently in the sun, and on out to the pine grove, where the needles thick on the ground will deaden the footfall so that we shall move among trees as soundlessly as smoke. But that will be a long time from now, and soon now we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time. To go out of history into history is to take up Time’s awful responsibility of the agon between fathers and sons, never confronted by Stark and Burden, who evaded their mutual recognition until it was too late.
Samuel Beckett

(1906–1989)

Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable

Jonathan Swift, so much the strongest ironist in the language as to have no rivals, wrote the prose masterpiece of the language in *A Tale of a Tub*. Samuel Beckett, as much the legitimate descendant of Swift as he is of his friend, James Joyce, has written the prose masterpieces of the language in this century, sometimes as translations from his own French originals. Such an assertion does not discount the baroque splendors of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, but prefers to them the purity of *Murphy* and *Watt*, and of Beckett’s renderings into English of *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* and *How It Is*. Unlike Swift and Joyce, Beckett is only secondarily an ironist and, despite his brilliance at tragicomedy, is something other than a comic writer. His Cartesian dualism seems to me less fundamental than his profoundly Schopenhauerian vision. Perhaps Swift, had he read and tolerated Schopenhauer, might have turned into Beckett.

A remarkable number of the greatest novelists have found Schopenhauer more than congenial: one thinks of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Zola, Hardy, Conrad, Thomas Mann, even of Proust. As those seven novelists have in common only the activity of writing novels, we may suspect that Schopenhauer’s really horrifying system helps a novelist to do his work. This is not to discount the intellectual and spiritual persuasiveness of Schopenhauer. A philosopher who so deeply affected Wagner, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and (despite his denials) Freud, hardly can be regarded only as a convenient aid to story-tellers and story-telling. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer evidently stimulated the arts of fiction, but why? Certain it is that we cannot read *The World As Will and Representation* as a work of
Bloom’s Literary Criticism 20th Anniversary Collection

fiction. Who could bear it as fiction? Supplementing his book, Schopenhauer characterizes the Will to live:

Here also life presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment, but as a task, a drudgery to be performed; and in accordance with this we see, in great and small, universal need, ceaseless cares, constant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme exertion of all the powers of body and mind ... All strive, some planning, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But the ultimate aim of it all, what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tormented individuals through a short span of time in the most fortunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the reproduction of this race and its striving. In this evident disproportion between the trouble and the reward, the will to live appears to us from this point of view, if taken objectively, as a fool, or subjectively, as a delusion, seized by which everything living works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that is of no value. But when we consider it more closely, we shall find here also that it is rather a blind pressure, a tendency entirely without ground or motive.

Hugh Kenner suggests that Beckett reads Descartes as fiction. Beckett’s fiction suggests that Beckett reads Schopenhauer as truth. Descartes as a precursor is safely distant; Joyce was much too close, and Murphy and even Watt are Joycean books. Doubtless, Beckett turned to French in Molloy so as to exorcise Joyce, and certainly, from Malone Dies on, the prose when translated back into English has ceased to be Joycean. Joyce is to Beckett as Milton was to Wordsworth. Finnegans Wake, like Paradise Lost, is a triumph demanding study; Beckett’s trilogy, like The Prelude, internalizes the triumph by way of the compensatory imagination, in which experience and loss become one. Study does little to uniddle Beckett or Wordsworth. The Old Cumberland Beggar, Michael, Margaret of The Ruined Cottage; these resist analysis as do Molloy, Malone, and the Unnamable. Place my namesake, the sublime Poldy, in Murphy and he might fit, though he would explode the book. Place him in Watt? It cannot be done, and Poldy (or even Earwicker) in the trilogy would be like Milton (or Satan) perambulating about in The Prelude.

The fashion (largely derived from French misreaders of German thought) of denying a fixed, stable ego is a shibboleth of current criticism. But such a denial is precisely like each literary generation’s assertion that it truly writes the common language rather than a poetic diction. Both
stances define modernism, and modernism is as old as Hellenistic Alexandria. Callimachus is as modernist as Joyce, and Aristarchus, like Hugh Kenner, is an antiquarian modernist or modernist antiquarian. Schopenhauer dismissed the ego as an illusion, life as torment, and the universe as nothing, and he rightly credited these insights to that great modernist, the Buddha. Beckett too is as modernist as the Buddha, or as Schopenhauer, who disputes with Hume the position of the best writer among philosophers since Plato. I laugh sometimes in reading Schopenhauer, but the laughter is defensive. Beckett provokes laughter, as Falstaff does, or in the mode of Shakespeare’s clowns.

II

In his early monograph, Proust, Beckett cites Schopenhauer’s definition of the artistic procedure as “the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason.” Such more-than-rational contemplation gives Proust those Ruskinian or Paterian privileged moments that are “epiphanies” in Joyce but which Beckett mordantly calls “fetishes” in Proust. Transcendental bursts of radiance necessarily are no part of Beckett’s cosmos, which resembles, if anything at all, the Demiurge’s creation in ancient Gnosticism. Basilides or Valentinus, Alexandrian here-siarchs, would have recognized instantly the world of the trilogy and of the major plays: Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp’s Last Tape. It is the world ruled by the Archons, the kenoma, non-place of emptiness. Beckett’s enigmatic spirituality quests, though sporadically, for a void that is a fulness, the Abyss or pleroma that the Gnostics called both forefather and foremother. Call this a natural rather than a revealed Gnosticism in Beckett’s case, but Gnosticism it is nevertheless. Schopenhauer’s quietism is at last not Beckett’s, which is to say that for Beckett, as for Blake and for the Gnostics, the Creation and the Fall were the same event.

The young Beckett, bitterly reviewing a translation of Rilke into English, memorably rejected Rilke’s transcendental self-deceptions, where the poet mistook his own tropes as spiritual evidences:

Such a turmoil of self-deception and naif discontent gains nothing in dignity from that prime article of the Rilkean faith, which provides for the interchangeability of Rilke and God... He has the fidgets, a disorder which may very well give rise, as it did with Rilke on occasion, to poetry of a high order. But why call the fidgets God, Ego, Orpheus and the rest?
In 1938, the year that *Murphy* was belatedly published, Beckett declared his double impatience with the language of transcendence and with the transcendence of language, while intimating also the imminence of the swerve away from Joyce in the composition of *Watt* (1942–44):

At first it can only be a matter of somehow finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the word, through words. In this dissonance between the means and their use it will perhaps become possible to feel a whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All.

With such a program, in my opinion, the latest work of Joyce has nothing whatever to do. There it seems rather to be a matter of an apotheosis of the word. Unless perhaps Ascension to Heaven and Descent to Hell are somehow one and the same.

As a Gnostic imagination, Beckett’s way is Descent, in what cannot be called a hope to liberate the sparks imprisoned in words. Hope is alien to Beckett’s mature fiction, so that we can say its images are Gnostic but not its program, since it lacks all program. A Gnosticism without potential transcendence is the most negative of all possible negative stances, and doubtless accounts for the sympathetic reader’s sense that every crucial work by Beckett necessarily must be his last. Yet the grand paradox is that lessness never ends in Beckett.

III

“Nothing is got for nothing.” That is the later version of Emerson’s law of Compensation, in the essay “Power” of *The Conduct of Life*. Nothing is got for nothing even in Beckett, this greatest master of nothing. In the progression from *Murphy* through *Watt* and the trilogy on to *How It Is* and the briefer fictions of recent years, there is loss for the reader as well as gain. The same is true of the movement from *Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* down to the short plays of Beckett’s current and perhaps final phase. A wild humor abandons Beckett, or is transformed into a comedy for which we seem not to be ready. Even an uncommon reader can long for those marvelous Pythagoreans, Wylie and Neary, who are the delight of *Murphy*, or for the sense of the picturesque that makes a last stand in *Molloy*. Though the mode was Joyce’s, the music of Wylie and Neary is Beckett’s alone:

“That these are dark sayings,” said Wylie.

Neary turned his cup upside down.
“Needle,” he said, “as it is with the love of the body, so with the friendship of the mind, the full is only reached by admittance to the most retired places. Here are the pudenda of my psyche.”

“Cathleen,” cried Wylie.

“But betray me,” said Neary; “and you go the way of Hippasos.”


“Drowned in a puddle,” said Neary, “for having divulged the incommensurability of side and diagonal.”

“So perish all babblers,” said Wylie....


“I greatly fear,” said Wylie, “that the syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech’s daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary.”

“Very prettily put,” said Neary.

One can be forgiven for missing this, even as one surrenders these easier pleasures for the more difficult pleasures of *How It Is*:

my life above what I did in my life above a little of everything tried everything then gave up no worse always a hole a ruin always a crust never any good at anything not made for that farrago too complicated crawl about in comers and sleep all I wanted I got it nothing left but go to heaven

The Sublime mode, according to a great theorist, Angus Fletcher, has “the direct and serious function of destroying the slavery of pleasure.” Beckett is certainly the strongest Western author living in the year 1985, the last survivor of the sequence that includes Proust, Kafka and Joyce. It seems odd to name Beckett, most astonishing of minimalists, as a representative of the Sublime mode, but the isolation and terror of the High Sublime return in the catastrophe creations of Beckett, in that vision Fletcher calls “catastrophe as a gradual grinding down and slowing to a dead stop.” A Sublime that moves towards silence necessarily relies upon a rhetoric of waning lyricism, in which the entire scale of effects is transformed, as John Hollander notes:

Sentences, phrases, images even, are the veritable arias in the plays and the later fiction. The magnificent rising of the kite at the end
of *Murphy* occurs in a guarded but positive surge of ceremonial song, to which he will never return.

Kafka’s Hunter Gracchus, who had been glad to live and was glad to die, tells us that: “I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress. I lay and waited. Then came the mishap.” The mishap, a moment’s error on the part of the death-ship’s pilot, moves Gracchus from the heroic world of romance to the world of Kafka and of Beckett, where one is neither alive nor dead. It is Beckett’s peculiar triumph that he disputes with Kafka the dark eminence of being the Dante of that world. Only Kafka, or Beckett, could have written the sentence in which Gracchus sums up the dreadfulness of his condition: “The thought of helping me is an illness that has to be cured by taking to one’s bed.” Murphy might have said that; Malone is beyond saying anything so merely expressionistic. The “beyond” is where Beckett’s later fictions and plays reside. Call it the silence, or the abyss, or the reality beyond the pleasure principle, or the metaphysical or spiritual reality of our existence at last exposed, beyond further illusion. Beckett cannot or will not name it, but he has worked through to the art of representing it more persuasively than anyone else.
WHAT REMAINS OF RICHARD WRIGHT’S WORK IF WE APPLY TO IT ONLY aesthetic standards of judgment? This is to assume that strictly aesthetic standards exist, and that we know what they are. Wright, in Native Son, essentially the son of Theodore Dreiser, could not rise always even to Dreiser’s customarily bad level of writing. Here is Bigger Thomas, condemned to execution, at the start of his death vigil:

In self-defense he shut out the night and day from his mind, for if he had thought of the sun’s rising and setting, of the moon or the stars, of clouds or rain, he would have died a thousand deaths before they took him to the chair. To accustom his mind to death as much as possible, he made all the world beyond his cell a vast gray land where neither night nor day was, peopled by strange men and women whom he could not understand, but with those lives he longed to mingle once before he went.

He did not eat now; he simply forced food down his throat without tasting it, to keep the gnawing pain of hunger away, to keep from feeling dizzy. And he did not sleep; at intervals he closed his eyes for a while, no matter what the hour, then opened them at some later time to resume his brooding. He wanted to be free of everything that stood between him and his end, him and the full and terrible realization that life was over without meaning, without anything being settled, without conflicting impulses being resolved.
If we isolate these paragraphs, then we do not know the color or background of the man awaiting execution. The intense sociological pathos of Wright’s narrative vanishes, and we are left in the first paragraph with an inadequate rhetoric: “shut out the night and day,” “died a thousand deaths,” “a vast gray land,” “strange men and women,” “with those lives he longed to mingle.” Yet the second paragraph is even more unsatisfactory, as the exact word is nowhere: “gnawing pain of hunger,” “resume his brooding,” “full and terrible realization,” “conflicting impulses being resolved.” Wright’s narrative requires from him at this point some mode of language that would individuate Bigger’s dread, that would catch and fix the ordeal of a particular black man condemned by a white society. Unfortunately, Wright’s diction does not allow us even to distinguish Bigger’s horror from any other person’s apprehension of judicial murder. Nor does Bigger’s own perspective enter into Wright’s rhetorical stance. The problem is not so much Wright’s heritage from Dreiser’s reductive naturalism as it is, plainly stated, a bad authorial ear.

It is rather too late to make so apparently irrelevant an observation, since Wright has become a canonical author, for wholesome societal purposes, with which I am happy to concur. Rereading Native Son or Black Boy cannot be other than an overdetermined activity, since Wright is a universally acknowledged starting point for black literature in contemporary America. Canonical critics of Wright speak of him as a pioneer, a man of rare courage, as a teacher and forerunner. None of this can or should be denied. I myself would praise him for will, force, and drive, human attributes that he carried just over the border of aesthetic achievement, without alas getting very far once he had crossed over. His importance transcends the concerns of a strictly literary criticism, and reminds the critic of the claims of history, society, political economy, and the longer records of oppression and injustice that history continues to scant.

II

Bigger Thomas can be said to have become a myth without first having been a convincing representation of human character and personality. Wright listed five “Biggers” he had encountered in actuality, five violent youths called “bad Niggers” by the whites. The most impressive, Bigger No. 5, was a knife-wielding, prideful figure “who always rode the Jim Crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased.” For this group of precursors of his own protagonist in Native Son, Wright gave us a moving valediction:
The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken.

Wright concluded this same “Introduction” to *Native Son* with his own vision of the United States as of March 7, 1940:

I feel that I’m lucky to be alive to write novels today, when the whole world is caught in the pangs of war and change. Early American writers, Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne, complained bitterly about the bleakness and flatness of the American scene. But I think that if they were alive, they’d feel at home in modern America. True, we have no great church in America; our national traditions are still of such a sort that we are not wont to brag of them; and we have no army that’s above the level of mercenary fighters; we have no group acceptable to the whole of our country upholding certain humane values; we have no rich symbols, no colorful rituals. We have only a money-grubbing, industrial civilization. But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.

The citation of James, Hawthorne, and Poe is gratuitous, and the perspective upon the United States in the months preceding the fall of France lacks authority and precision, even in its diction. But the dense and heavy shadow athwart our national life indubitably was there, always had been there, and for many is there still. That shadow is Richard Wright’s mythology, and his embryonic strength. He was not found by Henry James, or by Hawthorne, or by Poe, and scarcely would have benefitted by such a finding. A legitimate son of Theodore Dreiser, he nevertheless failed to write in *Native Son* a *Sister Carrie* or a new version of *An American Tragedy*. The reality of being a gifted young black in the United States of the thirties and forties proved too oppressive for the limited purposes of a narrative fiction. Rereading *Native Son* is an experience of renewing the dialectical awareness of history and society, but is not in itself an aesthetic experience.
And yet, I do not think that *Native Son*, and its reception, present us with a merely aesthetic dilemma. In the “afterword” to the current paperback reprint of *Native Son*, one of Wright’s followers, John Reilly, defends Bigger Thomas by asserting that: “The description of Mary’s murder makes clear that the white world is the cause of the violent desires and reactions” that led Bigger to smother poor Mary. I would think that what the description makes clear enough is that Bigger is indeed somewhat overdetermined, but to ascribe the violence of his desires and reactions to any context whatsoever is to reduce him to the status of a replicant or of a psychopathic child. The critical defenders of *Native Son* must choose. Either Bigger Thomas is a responsible consciousness, and so profoundly culpable, or else only the white world is responsible and culpable, which means however that Bigger ceases to be of fictive interest and becomes an ideogram, rather than a persuasive representation of a possible human being. Wright, coming tragically early in what was only later to become his own tradition, was not able to choose, and so left us with something between an ideological image, and the mimesis of an actuality.

III

I remember reading *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* when Wright’s autobiographical book first appeared, in 1945. A boy of fifteen, I was frightened and impressed by the book. Reading it again after more than forty years, the old reactions do not return. Instead, I am compelled to ask the Nietzschean question: who is the interpreter, and what power does he seek to gain over the text, whether it be his own text or the text of his life? Wright, an anguished and angry interpreter, wrote a far more political work in *Black Boy* than in *Native Son*. What passes for a Marxist analysis of the relation between society and Bigger Thomas seems to me always a kind of authorial afterthought in *Native Son*. In *Black Boy*, this pseudo-Marxism usurps the narrator’s function, and the will-to-power over interpretation becomes the incessant undersong of the entire book. Contrast the opening and closing paragraphs of *Black Boy*:

One winter morning in the long-ago, four-year-old days of my life I found myself standing before a fireplace, warming my hands over a mound of glowing coals, listening to the wind whistle past the house outside. All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient. In the next room Granny lay ill and under the day and night care of a doctor and I knew that
I would be punished if I did not obey. I crossed restlessly to the window and pushed back the long fluffy white curtains—which I had been forbidden to touch—and looked yearningly out into the empty street. I was dreaming of running and playing and shouting, but the vivid image of Granny’s old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid.

With ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars.

The young man going North, scarred and watchful, in search of redemption by meaning, has remarkably little connection with the four-year-old boy, impatient for the dream of running, playing, and shouting. Wright’s purpose is to explain his fall from impulse into care, and his inevitable explanation will be social and historical. Yet much that he loses is to his version of the family romance, as he himself describes it, and some of what vanishes from him can be ascribed, retrospectively, to a purely personal failure; in him the child was not the father of the man.

What survives best in Black Boy, for me, is Wright’s gentle account of his human rebirth, as a writer. At eighteen, reading Mencken, he learns audacity, the agonistic use of language, and an aggressive passion for study comes upon him. After reading the Main Street of Sinclair Lewis, he is found by the inevitable precursor in Theodore Dreiser:

“That’s deep stuff you’re reading, boy.”
“I’m just killing time, sir.”
“You’ll addle your brains if you don’t watch out.”

I read Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie and they revived in me a vivid sense of my mother’s suffering; I was overwhelmed. I grew silent, wondering about the life around me. It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them.

Steeped in new moods and ideas, I bought a ream of paper and
tried to write; but nothing would come, or what did come was flat beyond telling. I discovered that more than desire and feeling were necessary to write and I dropped the idea. Yet I still wondered how it was possible to know people sufficiently to write about them? Could I ever learn about life and people? To me, with my vast ignorance, my Jim Crow station in life, it seemed a task impossible of achievement. I now knew what being a Negro meant. I could endure the hunger. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me. I had a new hunger.

Dreiser's taut visions of suffering women renew in Wright his own memories of his mother's travails, and make him one of those authors for whom the purpose of the poem (to cite Wallace Stevens) is the mother's face. There is an Oedipal violence in Wright that sorts strangely with his attempt to persuade us, and himself, that all violence is socially overdetermined. Black Boy, even now, performs an ethical function for us by serving as a social testament, as Wright intended it to do. We can hope that, some day, the book will be available to us as a purely individual testament, and then, may read very differently.
Lord of the Flies

Popular as it continues to be, Lord of the Flies essentially is a period piece. Published in 1954, it is haunted by William Golding’s service in the Royal Navy (1940–45), during the Second World War. The hazards of the endless battles of the North Atlantic against German submarines culminated in Golding’s participation in D-Day, the Normandy invasion of June 6, 1944. Though Lord of the Flies is a moral parable in the form of a boys’ adventure story, in a deeper sense it is a war story. The book’s central emblem is the dead parachutist, mistaken by the boys for the Beast Beelzebub, diabolic Lord of the Flies. For Golding, the true shape of Beelzebub is a pig’s head on a stick, and the horror of war is transmuted into the moral brutality implicit (in his view) in most of us. The dead parachutist, in Golding’s own interpretation, represents History, one war after another, the dreadful gift adults keep presenting to children. Golding’s overt intention has some authority, but not perhaps enough to warrant our acceptance of so simplistic a symbol.

Judging Lord of the Flies a period piece means that one doubts its long-range survival, if only because it is scarcely a profound vision of evil. Golding’s first novel, Lord of the Flies does not sustain a critical comparison with his best narratives: The Inheritors, Pincher Martin (his masterpiece), Free Fall, and the much later Darkness Visible. All these books rely upon nuance, irony, intelligence, and do not reduce to a trite moral allegory. Golding acknowledged the triteness, yet insisted upon his fable’s truth:

Man is a fallen being. He is gripped by original sin. His nature is sinful and his state perilous. I accept the theology and admit the
triteness; but what is trite is true; and a truism can become more
than a truism when it is a belief passionately held.

Passion is hardly a standard of measurement in regard to truth. Lord of the Flies aspires to be a universal fable, but its appeal to American school-children partly inheres in its curious exoticism. Its characters are implausible because they are humorless; even one ironist among them would explode the book. The Christ-like Simon is particularly unconvincing; Golding does not know how to portray the psychology of a saint. Whether indeed, in his first novel, he knew how to render anyone’s psychology is disputable. His boys are indeed British private school boys: regimented, subjected to vicious discipline, and indoctrinated with narrow, restrictive views of human nature. Golding’s long career as a teacher at Bishop Wordsworth’s School in Salisbury was a kind of extension of his Naval service: a passage from one mode of indoctrination and strict discipline to another. The regression to savagery that marks Lord of the Flies is a peculiarly British scholastic phenomenon, and not a universal allegory of moral depravity.

By indicating the severe limitations of Golding’s first novel, I do not intend to deny its continued cultural value. Any well-told tale of a reversion to barbarism is a warning against tendencies in many groups that may become violent, and such a warning remains sadly relevant as we approach Millennium. Though in itself a non-event, the year 2000 will arouse some odd expectations among extremists, particularly in the United States, most millennial of nations. Golding’s allegorical fable is no Gulliver’s Travels; the formidable Swiftian irony and savage intellectualism are well beyond Golding’s powers. Literary value has little sway in Lord of the Flies. Ralph, Piggy, Simon, and Jack are ideograms, rather than achieved fictive characters. Compare them to Kipling’s Kim, and they are sadly diminished; invoke Huck Finn, and they are reduced to names on a page. Lord of the Flies matters, not in or for itself, but because of its popularity in an era that continues to find it a useful admonition.
Albert Camus

(1913–1960)

The Stranger

Sartre remains the classic commentator upon Camus, whom he assimilated to Pascal, to Rousseau, and to other French moralists, “the precursors of Nietzsche.” To Sartre, Camus was “very much at peace within disorder,” and so The Stranger was “a classical work, an orderly work, composed about the absurd and against the absurd.” Shrewdly, Sartre finally assigned The Stranger not to the company of Heidegger or Hemingway, but to that of Zadig and Candide, the tales of Voltaire. Rereading Camus’s short novel after forty years, I marvel at Sartre’s keen judgment, and find it very difficult to connect my present impression of the book with my memory of how it seemed then. What Germaine Brée termed its heroic and humanistic hedonism seems, with the years, to have dwindled into an evasive hedonism, uncertain of its own gestures. The bleak narrative retains its Hemingwayesque aura, but the narrator, Meursault, seems even smaller now than he did four decades ago, when his dry disengagement had a certain novelty. Time, merciless critic, has worn The Stranger rather smooth, without however quite obliterating the tale.

René Girard, the most Jansenist of contemporary critics, “retried” The Stranger, and dissented from the verdict of “innocent” pronounced by Camus upon Meursault:

If supernatural necessity is present in L’Étranger, why should Meursault alone come under its power? Why should the various characters in the same novel be judged by different yardsticks? If the murderer is not held responsible for his actions, why should the judges be held responsible for theirs?
Girard is reacting to an unfortunate comment by Camus himself: “A man who does not cry at the funeral of his mother is likely to be sentenced to death.” In Girard’s judgment, the quest of Camus was to convince us that judgment of guilt is always wrong. Girard calls this an “egotistical Manichaeism” and convicts Camus of “literary solipsism,” particularly in one devastating sentence: “Camus betrays solipsism when he writes *L’Étranger* just as Meursault betrays it when he murders the Arab.” On this reading, the “innocent murder” is a metaphor for the creative process. Meursault is a bad child and Camus becomes as a child again when he writes Meursault’s novel. Girard considers the novel an aesthetic success, but a morally immature work, since Meursault himself is guilty of judgment, though Camus wishes his protagonist not to be judged. “The world in which we live is one of perpetual judgment,” Girard reminds us, in Pascalian vein. For Girard, the figures comparable to Meursault are Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov and Dimitri Karamazov. For Camus, those figures presumably were Kafka’s Joseph K, and K the land surveyor. Either comparison destroys *The Stranger*, which has trouble enough competing with Malraux and Hemingway. Against Girard, I enter my own dissent. *The Stranger* is barely able to sustain an aesthetic dignity and certainly is much slighter than we thought it to be. But it is not morally flawed or inconsistent. In its cosmos, guilt and innocence are indistinguishable, and Jewish or Christian judgments are hopelessly irrelevant. Meursault is not, as Girard says, a juvenile delinquent, but an inadequate consciousness dazed by the sun, overwhelmed by a context that is too strong for him:

On seeing me, the Arab raised himself a little, and his hand went to his pocket. Naturally, I gripped Raymond’s revolver in the pocket of my coat. Then the Arab let himself sink back again, but without taking his hand from his pocket. I was some distance off, at least ten yards, and most of the time I saw him as a blurred dark form wobbling in the heat haze. Sometimes, however, I had glimpses of his eyes glowing between the half-closed lids. The sound of the waves was even lazier, feebler, than at noon. But the light hadn’t changed; it was pounding as fiercely as ever on the long stretch of sand that ended at the rock. For two hours the sun seemed to have made no progress; becalmed in a sea of molten steel. Far out on the horizon a steamer was passing; I could just make out from the corner of an eye the small black moving patch, while I kept my gaze fixed on the Arab.

It struck me that all I had to do was to turn, walk away, and think no more about it. But the whole beach, pulsing with heat,
was pressing on my back. I took some steps toward the stream. The Arab didn’t move. After all, there was still some distance between us. Perhaps because of the shadow on his face, he seemed to be grinning at me.

I waited. The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother’s funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations—especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin. I couldn’t stand it any longer, and took another step forward. I knew it was a fool thing to do; I wouldn’t get out of the sun by moving on a yard or so. But I took that step, just one step, forward. And then the Arab drew his knife and held it up toward me, athwart the sunlight.

A shaft of light shot upward from the steel, and I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. At the same moment all the sweat that had accumulated in my eyebrows splashed down on my eyelids, covering them with a warm film of moisture. Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded; I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs.

Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. I shook off my sweat and the clinging veil of light. I knew I’d shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.

The “absurd” and the “gratuitous” seem wrong categories to apply here. We have a vision of possession by the sun, an inferno that fuses consciousness and will into a single negation, and burns through it to purposes that may exist, but are not human. Gide’s Lafcadio, a true absurdist, said he was not curious about events but about himself, while Meursault is not curious about either. What Meursault at the end calls “the benign indifference of the universe” is belied by the pragmatic malevolence of the sun.
The true influence upon *The Stranger* seems to me Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and for the whiteness of the whale Camus substitutes the whiteness of the sun. Meursault is no quester, no Ahab, and Ahab would not have allowed him aboard the *Pequod*. But the cosmos of *The Stranger* is essentially the cosmos of *Moby-Dick*; though in many of its visible aspects Meursault’s world might seem to have been formed in love, its invisible spheres were formed in fright. The Jansenist Girard is accurate in finding Gnostic hints in the world of Camus, but not so accurate in judging Camus to possess only a bad child’s sense of innocence. Judging Meursault is as wasteful as judging his judges; that blinding light of the sun burns away all judgment.

*The Plague*

Forty years after its initial publication, Camus’s *The Plague* (1947) has taken on a peculiar poignance in the era of our new plague, the ambiguously named AIDS. *The Plague* is a tendentious novel, more so even than *The Stranger*. A novelist requires enormous exuberance to sustain tendentiousness; Dostoevsky had such exuberance, Camus did not. Or a master of evasions, like Kafka, can evade his own compulsions, but Camus is all too interpretable. The darkest comparison would be to Beckett, whose trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* conveys a sense of menace and anguish, metaphysical and psychological, that dwarfs *The Plague*.

Oran, spiritually rejecting the healthy air of the Mediterranean, in some sense brings the Plague upon itself; indeed Oran is the Plague, before the actual infection arrives. That may sound impressive, but constitutes a novelistic blunder, because Camus wants it both ways and cannot make it work either way. Either the relatively innocent suffer an affliction from outside, or the at least somewhat culpable are compelled to suffer the outward sign of their inward lack of grace. Truth doubtless lies in between, in our lives, but to represent so mixed a truth in your novel you must be an accomplished novelist, and not an essayist, or writer of quasi-philosophical tales. Dostoevsky dramatized the inwound textures of transcendence and material decay in nearly every event and every personage, while *The Plague* is curiously bland whenever it confronts the necessity of dramatizing anything.

I am unfair in comparing Camus to Beckett, Kafka, Dostoevsky, titanic authors, and it is even more unfair to contrast *The Plague* with Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, since Dickens is very nearly the Shakespeare of novelists. Yet the two books are surprisingly close in vision, structure, theme, and in the relation of language to a reality of overwhelming menace. Camus’s Plague is a version of Dickens’s Terror, and Dr. Rieux, Rambert,
Novelists and Novels

Father Paneloux, Tarrou, and the volunteer sanitary workers all follow in the path of the noble Carton, since all could proclaim: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done.” One can think of the Plague as AIDS, Revolutionary Terror, the Nazi occupation, or what one will, but one still requires persuasive representations of persons, whether in the aggregate or in single individuals.

“Indifference,” properly cultivated, can be a stoic virtue, even a mode of heroism, but it is very difficult to represent. Here also Camus fails the contest with Melville or Dostoevsky. Consider a crucial dialogue between Tarrou and Dr. Rieux, both of them authentic heroes, by the standards of measurement of any morality, religion, or societal culture:

“My question’s this,” said Tarrou. “Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don’t believe in God? I suspect your answer may help me to mine.”

His face still in shadow, Rieux said that he’d already answered: that if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God. And this was proved by the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely. Anyhow, in this respect Rieux believed himself to be on the right road—in fighting against creation as he found it.

“Ah,” Tarrou remarked. “So that’s the idea you have of your profession?”

“More or less.” The doctor came back into the light.

Tarrou made a faint whistling noise with his lips, and the doctor gazed at him.

“Yes, you’re thinking it calls for pride to feel that way. But I assure you I’ve no more than the pride that’s needed to keep me going. I have no idea what’s awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they’ll think things over; and so shall I. But what’s wanted now is to make them well. I defend them as best I can, that’s all.”

“Against whom?”

Rieux turned to the window. A shadow-line on the horizon told of the presence of the sea. He was conscious only of his exhaustion, and at the same time was struggling against a sudden, irrational impulse to unburden himself a little more to his companion; an eccentric, perhaps, but who, he guessed, was one of his own kind.
“I haven’t a notion, Tarrou; I assure you I haven’t a notion. When I entered this profession, I did it ‘abstractedly,’ so to speak; because I had a desire for it, because it meant a career like another, one that young men often aspire to. Perhaps, too, because it was particularly difficult for a workman’s son, like myself. And then I had to see people die. Do you know that there are some who refuse to die? Have you ever heard a woman scream ‘Never!’ with her last gasp? Well, I have. And then I saw that I could never get hardened to it. I was young then, and I was outraged by the whole scheme of things, or so I thought. Subsequently I grew more modest. Only, I’ve never managed to get used to seeing people die. That’s all I know. Yet after all—”

Rieux fell silent and sat down. He felt his mouth dry.

“After all—?” Tarrou prompted softly.

“After all,” the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on Tarrou, “it’s something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?”

Tarrou nodded.

“Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that’s all.” Rieux’s face darkened.

“Yes, I know that. But it’s no reason for giving up the struggle.”

“No reason, I agree. Only, I now can picture what this plague must mean for you.”

“Yes. A never ending defeat”

Tarrou stared at the doctor for a moment, then turned and tramped heavily toward the door. Rieux followed him and was almost at his side when Tarrou, who was staring at the floor, suddenly said:

“Who taught you all this, Doctor?”

The reply came promptly:

“Suffering”

“Indifference” to transcendence here is a humanistic protest “in fighting against creation as he found it,” a defense of the dying against death. It is a stoicism because Rieux is no longer “outraged by the whole scheme of things,” even though he continues to know that “the order of the world is shaped by death.” The best aesthetic touch here is the moment when Tarrou and Rieux come to understand one another, each finding the
meaning of the Plague to be “a never ending defeat.” But this is wasted when, at the conclusion of the passage I have quoted, Rieux utters the banality that “suffering” has taught him his pragmatic wisdom. Repeated rereadings will dim the passage further. “A shadow-line on the horizon told of the presence of the sea.” Conrad would have known how to integrate that into his complex Impressionism, but in Camus it constitutes another mechanical manifestation of symbolism, reminding us that Oran opened itself to the Plague by turning its back upon the sea.

Camus was an admirable if confused moralist and the legitimate heir of a long tradition of rational lucidity. He did not write a Candide or even a Zadig; I cannot recall one humorous moment anywhere in his fiction. The Stranger and The Plague, like his other fictions, are grand period pieces, crucial reflectors of the morale and concerns of France and the Western world in the 1940s, both before and after the Liberation from the Nazis. Powerful representations of an era have their own use and justification and offer values not in themselves aesthetic.
Malamud is perhaps the purest storyteller since Leskov. I read on always to team what will come next, and usually in at least faint dread of what may happen. The dreadful in Malamud is not what already has happened, not at least until the horrible final page of The Tenants. Perhaps the sense of impending dread, even in the comic mode, is one of the genuinely negative Jewish qualities that Malamud’s work possesses. “Every Jew is a meteorologist” says the Israeli humorist Kishon, and certainly Malamud’s creatures live in their sense that lightning bolts will need to be dodged.

The Jewishness of Malamud’s fiction has been a puzzle from the start, as his better critics always indicated. Malamud’s vision is personal, original, and almost wholly unrelated to the most characteristic or normative Jewish thought and tradition. As for Malamud’s style, it too is a peculiar (and dazzling) invention. It may give off the aura of Yiddish to readers who do not know the language, but to anyone who spoke and studied Yiddish as a child, the accents of memory emerge from the pages of Herzog but not of The Fixer. Malamud’s idiom, like his stance, is a beautiful and usurping achievement of the imagination. His triumph is to have given us Malamud, and somehow then compelled us to think, as we read, how Jewish it all seems. I can summon up no contemporary writer who suffers less from the anxiety-of-influence, whose books are less concerned to answer the self-crippling question: “Is there anything left to be done?” Like his own first hero, he is a Natural.

Yet having said this, I become uneasy, for the truth here must be more complex. When I think back over Malamud, I remember first stories like “The Jewbird” and “The Magic Barrel,” and it seems ridiculous to call such
Novelists and Novels

409

stories anything but Jewish. Malamud’s most impressive novel remains *The Fixer*, which is essentially a premonitory vision of a time that the Russian Jews might all too easily enter again. Perhaps in reading Malamud as an extravagantly vivid expressionist whose art seduces us into a redefinition of Jewishness, we in fact are misreading him. A pure enough storyteller, in Jewish tradition, ultimately tells not a story but the truth, and the burden of *The Fixer* and *The Tenants* may yet prove to be the burden of the valley of vision. It may be time to read Malamud as a modest but genuine version of prophecy.

Critical accounts of Malamud tend to diverge widely. Thus Harold Fisch, in his *The Dual Image*, a brief but packed survey on the figure of the Jew as both noble and ignoble in English and American literature, sees the theme of *The Fixer* as “the experience of victimization in general.” But to Allen Guttmann the theme is the very different one of “the responsibilities of peoplehood.” Robert Alter finds the probable balance: “Though to be a Jew in this novel does involve a general moral stance, it also means being involved in the fate of a particular people, actively identifying with its history.” The most hopeful view is that of Ruth R. Wisse, in a fine monograph on *The Schlemiel As Modern Hero*, which sees Bok’s acceptance of his imprisonment as “the crucial moment of initiation” and can even speak of “the liberating effects of imprisonment.”

But Yakov Bok is recalcitrant to all these views, which might be summed up best in Alter’s notion that in Malamud the fundamental metaphor for Jewishness is imprisonment, imprisonment being “a general image for the moral life with all its imponderable obstacles to spontaneous self-fulfillment.” If I understand Alter, imprisonment in this wide sense equals civilization and its discontents, and all sublimation thus becomes a kind of incarceration. This is ingenious, but threatens a diffusion of meaning that few storytellers could survive.

Malamud-on-Malamud has been more than a touch misleading, and his critics have suffered by following him. If being Jewish were simply the right combination of suffering and moralism, and nothing more, then all people indeed would be Jews, when their lives were considered under those aspects alone. *The Assistant* encourages such a reading, but is a very unformed book compared to *The Fixer* and *The Tenants*. Though Yakov Bok’s covenant is ostensibly only with himself, it is with himself as representative of all other Jews, and so might as well be with God. And where there is covenant, and trust in covenant, which is what sustains Bok at the end, there is the Jewish as opposed to any Christian idea of faith. Bok is, as all the critics have seen, a terribly ordinary man, yet his endurance becomes extraordinary in his refusal to implicate all Jews in the “crime” of
ritual murder. Though the process of hardening his will is what makes Bok a Jew, and only initially despite himself, I cannot agree with Alter that Bok becomes a Jew in Malamud’s special sense, rather than in the traditional sense. Alter may be right in discerning Malamud’s intentions, but the storyteller’s power breaks through those intentions and joins Bok to a strength greater than his own simplicity could hope to give him. If part of Bok’s birthright as a Jew is being vulnerable to history’s worst errors, there is another part, a tempering of the will that turns Bok against time’s injustices, and makes of this simple man a rebel against history, like so many of his people:

As for history, Yakov thought, there are ways to reverse it. What the Tsar deserves is a bullet in the gut. Better him than us.... Death to the anti-Semites! Long live revolution! Long live liberty!

In context, as the end of Bok’s evolution from a solitary fixer, scarcely Jewish, wholly without a sense of community, this has considerable force, of a kind previously unsuspected in Malamud. With the grim strength of *The Tenants* now known to us, it is possible to see retrospectively that Malamud underwent a change in *The Fixer*. His private vision of Jewishness was absorbed by a more historical understanding of a phenomenon too large to be affected by individual invention. Added to this, I suspect, came a more historicized dread than had been operative in the earlier Malamud.

Coming together in *The Tenants* are elements from the story “Black is My Favorite Color” and a number of themes from the Fidelman saga, including the destroyed manuscript. Lesser, the obsessed Jewish writer, desperate to finish his book, which is about love, is swept up into a dance of death with the black writer Willie Spearmint. The dance takes place in a tenement ready for demolition, from which Lesser declines to move. For Lesser writes only by rewriting, a revisionary constantly swerving away from himself, and he cannot bear to leave the scene of his book’s birth until he is willing to call it complete. But an end is more than he can stand. It will be, if ever done, his third novel, but Lesser has worked on it for nine and a half years, and is now thirty-six and still unmarried. Lesser’s deepest obsession is that he has never really told the truth, but in fact he is addicted to truth-telling.

Spearmint, archetypal Black Writer, wishing to be “the best Soul Writer,” but balked in creation, persuades Lesser to read his manuscript. The rest is disaster, or as Lesser says towards the end: “Who’s hiring Willie Spearmint to be my dybbuk?” But each becomes the other’s dybbuk.
Intending only the truth of art, Lesser destroys Spearmint’s self-confidence in his writing, and compounds the destruction by falling in love with Spearmint’s Jewish girl friend, and taking her away from her black lover. Spearmint retaliates by destroying the manuscript of Lesser’s nearly complete novel. Tied to one another by a hatred transcending everything else, the two writers stalk one another in the ruined tenement, Spearmint with a saber, Lesser with an ax, like the hideous death-duel in the Hall of Spiders between Swelter and Flay in Mervyn Peake’s *Titus Groan*. The title of Lesser’s destroyed novel about love was *The Promised End*, with the epigraph, also from *King Lear*: “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” The Fool’s reply to Lear’s bitter question is: “Lear’s shadow,” and Spearmint is Lesser’s shadow, his cabalistic Other Side. When Lear, at the close, enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms, Kent says: “Is this the promised end?” and Edgar adds: “Or image of that horror?” I suppose Malamud wants us to ask the same as his novel ends:

Neither of them could see the other but sensed where he stood. Each heard himself scarcely breathing.

“Bloodsuckin Jew Niggerhater.”

“Anti-Semitic Ape.”

Their metal glinted in hidden light.... They aimed at each other accurate blows. Lesser felt his jagged ax sink through bone and brain as the groaning black’s razor-sharp saber, in a single boiling stabbing slash, cut the white’s balls from the rest of him.

Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other.

Whether as parable or as prophecy, *The Tenants* holds together, all one thing, a unity dependent upon Lesser’s love of the truth (which for him is the novelist’s art) over love itself. Ultimately, Lesser loves only the Book, and when Levenspiel, the landlord who wants him out, sarcastically asks, “... what are you writing, the Holy Bible?” Lesser comes back with, “Who can say? Who really knows?” In the parallel obsession of Spearmint, which the black writer is at last unable to sustain, a troubling reflection of Lesser’s zeal is meant to haunt us. *The Tenants*, like Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, is Jewish wisdom literature, and perhaps both books lose as fictions what they gain as parables.
The Invisible Man

More than a third of a century after its original publication (1952), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is fully confirmed as an American Classic. I remember reading *Invisible Man* when it first appeared, and joining in the enthusiastic reception of the book. A number of readings since have caused the novel to seem richer, and rereading it now brings no temptation to dissent from the general verdict. One can prophesy that *Invisible Man* will be judged, some day, as the principal work of American fiction between Faulkner’s major phase and *Gravity’s Rainbow* by Pynchon. Only West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, of all the novels between Faulkner and Pynchon, rivals *Invisible Man* as an eminent instance of the American imagination in narrative, and West’s scope is specialized and narrow, however intense in its superbly negative exuberance.

Rereading *Invisible Man*, the exuberance of the tale and the strength of its nameless narrator seem to me far less negative than they did back in 1952. I agree with Douglas Robinson that Ellison gave us a Book of Jonah in descent from *Moby-Dick*, and so I agree also with Robinson’s argument against R.W.B. Lewis’s distinguished and influential contention that *Invisible Man* is an apocalyptic work. Ellison’s novel is the narrator’s book, and not the book of Rinehart or of Ras the Exhorter, and the narrator goes underground only as Jonah does, to come up again, in order to live as a narrator. Like Jonah, like the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge, like Melville’s Ishmael, and even like Job, the narrator escapes apocalypse and returns to tell us his story.

When we first meet the narrator, he is living an underground existence that seems to have suggested to Pynchon the grand invention of the story
of Byron the Light Bulb in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (I owe this allusive link to Pamela Schirmeister). Byron the Bulb’s war against the System which insists that he burn out is a precisely apocalyptic transumption of the Invisible Man’s struggle against Monopolated Light & Power:

That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. I also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself. In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I’ve wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. I’ve already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets. Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I’ll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don’t know. Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity. I’ll solve the problem. And maybe I’ll invent a gadget to place my coffee pot on the fire while I lie in bed, and even invent a gadget to warm my bed—like the fellow I saw in one of the picture magazines who made himself a gadget to warm his shoes! Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a “thinker-tinker.” Yes, I’ll warm my shoes; they need it, they’re usually full of holes. I’ll do that and more.

Even Pynchon must have envied those 1,369 lights, all of them old-fashioned filaments if none of them an immortal Byron the Bulb. Ellison’s Invisible Man is another ancestor of all those heroic schlemiels who constitute Pynchon’s hopeless preterites, the Counterforce of Tyrone Slothrop, Roger Mexico, poor Byron the Bulb, and the other Gnostic sparks of light who flash on amidst the broken vessels of the Zone. As befits his great namesake Emerson, Ellison is both pragmatist and transcendentalist, a combination that in Pynchon falls downwards and outwards into entropy and paranoia. It is a perplexing irony that Ellison’s narrator ends with a prophecy that Ellison himself has been unable to fulfill (*Invisible Man* being his first and last novel) but that Pynchon has inherited:

Yes, but what is the next phase? How often have I tried to find it!
Over and over again I’ve gone up above to seek it out. For, like almost everyone else in our country, I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being “for” society and then “against” it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities. What a phrase—still it’s a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn’t accept any other; that much I’ve learned underground. Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait-jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he’s a master of it—or imagination. That too I’ve learned in the cellar, and not by deadening my sense of perception; I’m invisible, not blind.

Pynchon has stepped, of course, into both chaos and imagination, but his chaos is the apocalyptic Zone where we may yet live again (if we live), and his imagination is his Kabbalistic vision that he calls “sado-anarchism.” The step beyond *Invisible Man* is one that Ellison is too humane and too humanistic to have taken. Pynchon, chronicler of the Counterforce but hardly its prophet, gives us the Invisible Man a generation later in the image of Rocketman, the sublimely inane Slothrop, who is literally scattered into more than invisibility in the Zone, and who may have been sighted for a final time as a fleeting photograph on the record jacket of a rock band.

II

The antinomies between which Ellison’s narrator moves are Rinehart (more an image than a man) and the poignant figure of Ras the Exhorter, very much a man, indeed the most sympathetic personality in the novel, more so even than the martyred Tod Clifton. Driven mad by white oppression and brutality, Ras becomes Ras the Destroyer, at once Ahab and Moby-Dick, and is silenced by his own spear, slung back at him by the narrator, an Ishmael turned avenger in self-defense. But Ras, though he suffers Ahab’s fate, is no Ahab, and his remains an uncanny prophecy to blacks and whites alike. Clifton speaks the truth when he observes: “But it’s on the inside that Ras is strong. On the inside he’s dangerous.” Ras speaks the dangerous eloquence of justified indignation and despair:

Ras struck his thighs with his fists. “Me crazy, mahn? You call me crazy? Look at you two and look at me—is this sanity? Standing
here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? Is that the modern black mahn of the twentieth century? Hell, mahn! Is it self-respect—black against black? What they give you to betray—their women? You fall for that?"

“Let’s go,” I said, listening and remembering and suddenly alive in the dark with the horror of the battle royal, but Clifton looked at Ras with a tight, fascinated expression, pulling away from me.

“Let’s go,” I repeated. He stood there, looking.

“Sure, you go,” Ras said, “but not him. You contaminated but he the real black mahn. In Africa this mahn be a chief, a black king! Here they say he rape them godahm women with no blood in their veins. I bet this mahn can’t beat them off with baseball bat-shit! What kind of foolishness is it? Kick him ass from cradle to grave then call him brother? Does it make mathematics? Is it logic? Look at him, mahn; open your eyes,” he said to me. “I look like that I rock the blahsted world! They know about me in Japan, India—all the colored countries. Youth! Intelligence! The mahn’s a natural prince! Where is your eyes? Where your self-respect? Working for them dahm people? Their days is numbered, the time is almost here and you fooling ’round like this was the nineteenth century. I don’t understand you. Am I ignorant? Answer me, mahn!”

If Ras is the imagination ruined by apocalyptic expansiveness, verging upon Pynchonean paranoia, then the image of Rinehart is chaos come again, but chaos verging upon an entropy that negates any new origin out of which a fresh creation might come. Rinehart is visibility personified, a moving shadow identified by and identical with what he wears: dark glasses, in particular, interpreted by the narrator as the Pauline “through a glass, darkly,” and a white hat. If Ras is both Exhorter and Destroyer, Rinehart is both numbers runner and the Reverend B.P. Rinehart, Spiritual Technologist, who makes the Seen Unseen and tells us to Behold the Invisible. The narrator, gazing into Rinehart’s church, experiences a true defeat, subtler than any Ras could hope to inflict:

Then the door opened and I looked past their heads into a small crowded room of men and women sitting in folding chairs, to the front where a slender woman in a rusty black robe played passionate boogie-woogie on an upright piano along with a young
man wearing a skull cap who struck righteous riffs from an electric guitar which was connected to an amplifier that hung from the ceiling above a gleaming white and gold pulpit. A man in an elegant red cardinal’s robe and a high lace collar stood resting against an enormous Bible and now began to lead a hard-driving hymn which the congregation shouted in the unknown tongue. And back and high on the wall above him there arched the words in letters of gold:

LET THERE BE LIGHT!

The whole scene quivered vague and mysterious in the green light, then the door closed and the sound muted down.

It was too much for me. I removed my glasses and tucked the white hat carefully beneath my arm and walked away. Can it be, I thought, can it actually be? And I knew that it was. I had heard of it before but I’d never come so close. Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie.

In some sense, Rinehart’s truth which was always a lie becomes the dominant influence upon the narrator. It not only drives him underground, but it confirms his obsession with illumination, his parodistic reliance upon 1,369 lights. Rinehart is the authentic dweller in possibility, which Emily Dickinson called a fairer house than prose, being as it is superior of windows, more numerous of doors. Harlem or black existence is again either chaos or imagination, the possibility of Rinehart or the increasingly furious possibility of Ras the Destroyer.

The narrator, though, is finally the only authentic American, black or white, because he follows the American Religion, which is Emersonian Self-Reliance. He insists upon himself, refuses to go on imitating his false fathers, and evades both Rinehart and Ras. True, he is the Emersonian
driven underground, but he will emerge more Emersonian than ever, insisting that he has become Representative Man:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

The Invisible Man says that he is frightened by this truth, and so are we. What is more frightening, for us and for him, is truer now than it was a third of a century ago, and is even more Emersonian. We have learned that, on the higher frequencies, Ellison speaks for us.
Saul Bellow

(1915–)

Herzog

I

By general critical agreement, Saul Bellow is the strongest American novelist of his generation, presumably with Norman Mailer as his nearest rival. What makes this canonical judgment a touch problematic is that the indisputable achievement does not appear to reside in any single book. Bellow’s principal works are: *The Adventures of Augie March, Herzog, Humboldt’s Gift*, and in a briefer compass, *Seize the Day*. The earlier novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, seem now to be period pieces, while *Henderson the Rain King* and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* share the curious quality of not being quite worthy of two figures so memorable as Henderson and Mr. Sammler. *The Dean’s December* is a drab book, its dreariness unredeemed by Bellow’s nearly absent comic genius.

*Herzog*, still possessing the exuberance of *Augie March*, while anticipating the tragicomic sophistication of *Humboldt’s Gift*, as of now seems to be Bellow’s best and most representative novel. And yet its central figure remains a wavering representation, compared to some of the subsidiary male characters, and its women seem the wish-fulfillments, negative as well as positive, of Herzog and his creator. This seems true of almost all of Bellow’s fiction: a Dickensian gusto animates a fabulous array of secondary and minor personalities, while at the center a colorful but shadowy consciousness is hedged in by women who do not persuade us, though evidently once they persuaded him.

In some sense, the canonical status of Bellow is already assured, even if the indubitable book is still to come. Bellow’s strengths may not have come
together to form a masterwork, but he is hardly the first novelist of real
eminence whose books may be weaker as aggregates than in their compo-
nent parts or aspects. His stylistic achievement is beyond dispute, as are his
humor, his narrative inventiveness, and his astonishing inner car, whether
for monologue or dialogue. Perhaps his greatest gift is for creating sub-
sidiary and minor characters of grotesque splendor, sublime in their vivac-
ity, intensity, and capacity to surprise. They may be caricatures, yet their
vitality seems permanent: Einhorn, Clem Tembow, Bateshaw, Valentine
Gersbach, Sandor Himmelstein, Von Humboldt Fleisher, Cantabile, Alec
Szathmar. Alas, compared to them, the narrator-heroes, Augie, Herzog,
and Citrine, are diffuse beings, possibly because Bellow cannot disengage
from them, despite heroic efforts and revisions. I remember Augie March
for Einhorn, Herzog for Gersbach, Humboldt’s Gift for Humboldt, and even
that last preference tends to throw off-center an apprehension of the novel.
Augie March and Herzog narrate and speak with tang and eloquence, yet
they themselves are less memorable than what they say. Citrine, more sub-
dued in his language, fades yet more quickly into the continuum of
Bellow’s urban cosmos. This helps compound the aesthetic mystery of
Bellow’s achievement. His heroes are superb observers, worthy of their
Whitmanian heritage. What they lack is Whitman’s Real Me or Me
Myself, or else they are blocked from expressing it.

II

Few novelists have ever surpassed Bellow at openings and closings:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—
and go at things’ as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make
the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; some-
times an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a
man’s character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there
isn’t any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical
work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of
those near-at-hand and believe you come to them in this immedi-
ate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a
flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop,
probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn’t prove
there was no America.
The end and the start cunningly interlace, very much in the mode of *Song of Myself*, or of the first and last chapters of Emerson’s *Nature*. Augie too is an American Transcendentalist, a picaresque quester for the god within the self. *Ethos* is the *Daimon*, both passages say, with Augie as ethos and Columbus as the daimon. One remembers the aged Whitman’s self-identification in his “Prayer of Columbus,” and it seems right to rejoice, as Whitman would have rejoiced, when Augie comes full circle from going at things, self-taught and free-style, to discovering those near-at-hand, upon the shores of America. That is Bellow at his most exuberant. When weathered, the exuberance remains, but lies in shadow:

If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.

Some people thought he was cracked and for a time he himself had doubted that he was all there. But now, though he still behaved oddly, he felt confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong. He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun.... Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead.

Perhaps he’d stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. He set down his hat, with the roses and day lilies, off the half-painted piano, and went into his study, carrying the wine bottles in one hand like a pair of Indian clubs. Walking over notes and papers, he lay down on his Récamier couch. As he stretched out, he took a long breath, and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Mrs. Tuttle’s broom. He wanted to tell her to sprinkle the floor. She was raising too much dust. In a few minutes he would call down to her, “Damp it down, Mrs. Tuttle. There’s water in the sink.” But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.

Another *ritorno*, but this time the cycle has been broken. Augie March, like Emerson and Whitman, knows that there is no history, only biography. Moses Herzog has been a long time discovering this truth, which ends his profession, and Charlie Citrine also goes full-circle:
The book of ballads published by Von Humboldt Fleisher in the Thirties was an immediate hit. Humboldt was just what everyone had been waiting for. Out in the Midwest I had certainly been waiting eagerly, I can tell you that. An avant-garde writer, the first of a new generation, he was handsome, fair, large, serious, witty, he was learned. The guy had it all. All the papers reviewed his book. His picture appeared in *Time* without insult and in *Newsweek* with praise. I read *Harlequin Ballads* enthusiastically. I was a student at the University of Wisconsin and thought about nothing but literature day and night. Humboldt revealed to me new ways of doing things. I was ecstatic. I envied his luck, his talent, and his fame, and I went cast in May to have a look at him—perhaps to get next to him. The Greyhound bus, taking the Scranton route, made the trip in about fifty hours. That didn’t matter. The bus windows were open. I had never seen real mountains before. Trees were budding. It was like Beethoven’s *Pastorale*. I felt showered by the green, within ... Humboldt was very kind. He introduced me to people in the Village and got me books to review. I always loved him.

Within the grave was an open concrete case. The coffins went down and then the yellow machine moved forward and the little crane, making a throaty whir, picked up a concrete slab and laid it atop the concrete case. So the coffin was enclosed and the soil did not cone directly upon it. But then, how did one get out? One didn’t, didn’t, didn’t! You stayed, you stayed! There was a dry light grating as of crockery when contact was made, a sort of sugarbowl sound. Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet....

Menasha and I went toward the limousine. The side of his foot brushed away some of last autumn’s leaves and he said, looking through his goggles, “What this, Charlie, a spring flower?”

“It is. I guess it’s going to happen after all. On a warm day like this everything looks ten times deader.”

“So it’s a little flower,” Menasha said. “They used to tell one about a kid asking his grumpy old man when they were walking in the park, ‘What’s the name of this flower, Papa?’ and the old guy is peevish and he yells, ‘How should I know? Am I in the millinery business?’ Here’s another, but what do you suppose they’re called, Charlie?”
“Search me,” I said. “I’m a city boy myself. They must be crocus es.”

The cycle is from Citrine’s early: “I felt showered by the green, within” to his late, toneless, “They must be crocuses,” removed from all affect not because he has stopped loving Humboldt, but because he is chilled preternaturally by the effective if unfair trope Bellow has found for the workings of canonical criticism: “Thus, the condensation of collective intelligences and combined ingenuities, its cables silently spinning, dealt with the individual poet.” There is no history, and now there is also no biography, but only the terrible dehumanizing machine of a technocratic intelligentsia, destroying individuality and poetry, and stealing from the spring of the year the green that no longer is to be internalized.

III

Bellow’s endless war against each fresh wave of literary and intellectual modernism is both an aesthetic resource and all aesthetic liability in his fiction. As resource, it becomes a drive for an older freedom, all energy of humane protest against over-determination. As liability, it threatens to become repetition, or a merely personal bitterness, even blending into Bellow’s acerbic judgments upon the psychology of women. When it is most adroitly balanced, in Herzog, the polemic against modernism embraces the subtle infiltrations of dubious ideologies into the protesting Moses Herzog himself. When it is least balanced, we receive the narrative rant that intrudes into Mr. Sammler’s cosmos, or the dankness that pervades both Chicago and Bucharest in The Dean’s December. Like Ruskin lamenting that the water in Lake Como was no longer blue, Bellow’s Alexander Corde tells us that “Chicago wasn’t Chicago anymore.” What The Dean’s December truly tells us is that “Bellow wasn’t Bellow anymore,” in this book anyway. The creator of Einhorn and Gersbach and Von Humboldt Fleisher gives us no such figure this time around, almost as though momentarily he resents his own genius for the high comedy of the grotesque.

Yet Bellow’s lifelong polemic against the aestheticism of Flaubert and his followers is itself the exuberant myth that made Augie March, Herzog, and Humboldt’s Gift possible. In an act of critical shrewdness, Bellow once associated his mode of anti-modernist comedy with Svevo’s Confessions of Zeno and Nabokov’s Lolita, two masterpieces of ironic parody that actually surpass Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King in portraying the modernist consciousness as stand-up comic. Parody tends to negate outrage, and Bellow
is too vigorous to be comfortable at masking his own outrage. When restrained, Bellow is too visibly restrained, unlike the mordant Svevo or the Nabokov who excels at deadpan mockery. Henderson may be more of a self-portrait, but Herzog, scholar of High Romanticism, better conveys Bellow’s vitalistic version of an anti-modernistic comic stance. Bellow is closest to Svevo and to Nabokov in the grand parody of Herzog-Hamlet declining to shoot Gersbach-Claudius when he finds the outrageous adulterer scouring the bathtub after bathing Herzog’s little daughter. Daniel Fuchs, certainly Bellow’s most careful and informed scholar, reads this scene rather too idealistically by evading the parodic implications of “Moses might have killed him now.” Bathing a child is our sentimental version of prayer, and poor Herzog, unlike Hamlet, is a sentimentalist, rather than a triumphant rejecter of nihilism, as Fuchs insists.

Bellow, though carefully distanced from Herzog, is himself something of a sentimentalist, which in itself need not be an aesthetic disability for a novelist. Witness Samuel Richardson and Dickens, but their sentimentalism is so titanic as to become something different in kind, a sensibility of excess larger than even Bellow can hope to display. In seeking to oppose an earlier Romanticism (Blake, Wordsworth, Whitman) to the belated Romanticism of literary modernism (Gide, Eliot, Hemingway), Bellow had the peculiar difficulty of needing to avoid the heroic vitalism that he regards as an involuntary parody of High Romanticism (Rimbaud, D. H. Lawrence, and, in a lesser register, Norman Mailer). Henderson, Bellow’s Gentile surrogate, is representative of just how that difficulty constricts Bellow’s imagination. The Blakean dialectic of Innocence and Experience, clearly overt in the scheme of the novel, is at odds with Henderson’s characteristically Bellovian need for punishment or unconscious sense of guilt, which prevails in spite of Bellow’s attempts to evade Freudian overdetermination. Though he wants and indeed needs a psychology of the will, Bellow is much more Freudian than he can bear to know. Henderson is a superbly regressive personality, very much at one with the orphan child he holds at the end of the novel. Dahfu, of whom Norman Mailer strongly approved, is about as persuasive a representation as are his opposites in Bellow, all of those sadistic and compelling fatal ladies, pipe dreams of a male vision of otherness as a castrating force. Bellow disdains apocalypse as a mode, but perhaps the Bellovian apocalypse would be one in which all of the darkly attractive women of these novels converged upon poor Dahfu, Blakean vitalist, and divested him of the emblem of his therapeutic vitalism.

Without his polemic, Bellow never seems able to get started, even in Humboldt’s Gift, where the comedy is purest. Unfortunately, Bellow cannot
match the modernist masters of the novel. In American fiction, his chronological location between, say, Faulkner and Pynchon exposes him to comparisons he does not seek yet also cannot sustain. Literary polemic within a novel is dangerous because it directs the critical reader into the areas where canonical judgments must be made, as part of the legitimate activity of reading. Bellow’s polemic is normative, almost Judaic in its moral emphases, its passions for justice and for more life. The polemic sometimes becomes more attractive than its aesthetic embodiments. Would we be so charmed by Herzog if he did not speak for so many of us? I become wary when someone tells me that she or he “loves” *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The grand Pynchonian doctrine of sado-anarchism scarcely should evoke affection in anyone, as opposed to the shudder of recognition that the book’s extraordinary aesthetic dignity demands from us. It is the aesthetic failure of Bellow’s polemic, oddly combined with its moral success, that increasingly drives Bellow’s central figures into dubious mysticisms. Citrine’s devotion to Rudolf Steiner is rather less impressive, intellectually and aesthetically, than the obsessive Kabbalism of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. If Steiner is the ultimate answer to literary modernism, then Flaubert may rest easy in his tomb.

IV

And yet Bellow remains a humane comic novelist of superb gifts, almost unique in American fiction since Mark Twain. I give the last words here to what moves me as the most beautiful sequence in Bellow, Herzog’s final week of letters, starting with his triumphant overcoming of his obsession with Madeleine and Gersbach. On his betraying wife, Herzog is content to end with a celebration now at last beyond masochism: “To put on lipstick, after dinner in a restaurant, she would look at her reflection in a knife blade. He recalled this with delight.” On Gersbach, with his indubitable, latently homosexual need to cuckold his best friend, Herzog is just and definitive: “Enjoy her—rejoice in her. You will not reach me through her; however, I know you sought me in her flesh. But I am no longer there.” The unmailed messages go on, generously assuring Nietzsche of Herzog’s admiration while telling the philosopher: “Your immoralists also eat meat. They ride the bus. They are only the most bus-sick travelers.” The sequence magnificently includes an epistle to Dr. Morgenfruh, doubtless a Yiddish version of the Nietzschean Dawn of Day, of whom Herzog wisely remarks: “He was a splendid old man, only partly fraudulent, and what more can you ask of anyone?” Addressing Dr. Morgenfruh, Herzog speculates darkly “that the territorial instinct is stronger than the sexual.” But then, with
exquisite grace, Herzog signs off. “Abide in light, Morgenfruh. I will keep you posted from time to time.” This benign farewell is made not by an overdetermined bundle of territorial and sexual instincts, but by a persuasive representative of the oldest ongoing Western tradition of moral wisdom and familial compassion.
Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

_The Moviegoer_

I

With many other readers, I discovered _The Moviegoer_ in 1961, and was delighted. Rereading it a quarter-century later, the delight returns, but perhaps somewhat darkened by intimations in the novel of the moral and religious obsessions that have made each subsequent fiction by Walker Percy rather more problematic than the one before. As a storyteller, Percy chooses to follow the downward path to wisdom, perhaps at the expense of his stories. _The Last Gentleman_ (1966) had not abandoned all the narrative concerns of _The Moviegoer_; but _Love in the Ruins_ (1971) resorts to apocalyptic yearnings, and _Lancelot_ (1977) seems to address a saving remnant. _The Second Coming_ (1980) is a wholly tendentious narrative and hardly seems to be by the author of _The Moviegoer_. Acclaimed as a Southern prophet, Percy may have become precisely that. There is a curious progression in his novels’ closing passages that is revelatory of a metamorphosis from the language of story to the urgencies that transcend art:

I watch her walk toward St. Charles, cape jasmine held against her cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me.

_The Moviegoer_

“Wait,” he shouted in a dead run. The Edsel paused, sighed, and stopped. Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds. The Edsel waited for him.

_The Last Gentleman_
To bed we go for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but at home in bed where all good folk belong.

*(Love in the Ruins)*

Do you know her well?
Yes.
Will she join me in Virginia and will she and I and Siobhan begin a new life there?
Yes.
Very well. I've finished. Is there anything you wish to tell me before Heave?
Yes.

*(Lancelot)*

His heart leapt with a secret joy. What is it I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have.

*(The Second Coming)*

Even out of context, Percy’s conclusions move him and his readers from a narrative poignance to a theocentric anxiety. It cannot be gratuitous that both *Lancelot* and *The Second Coming* end with the hero conversing with a kindly priest. “The past peculiar years of Christendom” craze Percy’s protagonists, and by implication Percy thinks the worse of us for not being so crazed. Despite the manifest humor of his *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983), Percy intends its conclusion as what can only be called a low seriousness:

Repeat. Do you read? Do you read? Are you in trouble? How did you get in trouble? If you are in trouble, have you sought help? If you did, did help come? If it did, did you accept it? Are you out of trouble? What is the character of your consciousness? Are you conscious? Do you have a self? Do you know who you are? Do you know what you are doing? Do you love? Do you know how to love? Are you loved? Do you hate? Do you read me? Come back. Repeat. Come back. Come back. Come back.

*(CHECK ONE)*
II

A rereading of *The Moviegoer* after a first reading of *Lancelot* and *The Second Coming* must confront a critic with a bemused sense of loss. Binx Bolling is more than the most amiable of Percy’s surrogates; his freedom from the drive to moralize has about it now the aura of his author’s lost freedom. Aunt Emily, the book’s moralizer, is a presage of many a Percyan denunciation to come, and yet her highly individual style allows us to absorb her condemnations as we cannot quite sustain the scoldings that come in Percy’s later novels:

Our civilization has achieved a distinction of sorts. It will be remembered not for its technology nor even its wars but for its novel ethos. Ours is the only civilization in history which has enshrined mediocrity as its national ideal. Others have been corrupt, but leave it to us to invent the most undistinguished of corruptions. No orgies, no blood running in the street, no babies thrown off cliffs. No, we’re sentimental people and we horrify easily. True, our moral fiber is rotten. Our national character stinks to high heaven. But we are kinder than ever. No prostitute ever responded with a quicker spasm of sentiment when our hearts are touched. Nor is there anything new about thievery, lewdness, lying, adultery. What is new is that in our time liars and thieves and whores and adulterers wish also to be congratulated and are congratulated by the great public, if their confession is sufficiently psychological or strikes a sufficiently heartfelt and authentic note of sincerity.

However much we admire the formidable Aunt Emily and rightly find this rhetoric to be suitable to her, none among us could regard this as what is best or most enduring in *The Moviegoer*. Binx is just that; he is a kind of grown-up, ruefully respectable New Orleans version of Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. Like Huck, Binx longs for freedom while fearing solitude. But an Existentialist Huck Finn is a sublime joke, and this joke still seems to me Percy’s authentic and very considerable achievement. *The Moviegoer* alone of Percy’s fictions, to date, is a permanent American book. If that judgment is right, then the waste of Percy’s authentic talents is a lamentable instance of art yielding to moralism, of storytelling subverted by religious nostalgias.

I remember how much I initially liked *The Moviegoer*’s first paragraph, and am very fond of it still:
This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what this means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can mean only one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks. It will be extremely grave, either a piece of bad news about her stepdaughter Kate or else a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do. It is enough to scare the wits out of anyone, yet I confess I do not find the prospect altogether unpleasant.

The whole of the book is subtly present in this beginning, since Kate's suicidal despairs are the dark center of the moviegoer's life as a man, to borrow Philip Roth's foreboding phrase. Present also is the antithetical strain in Binx Bolling, who finds reality in his aunt's moral stance, without however being able to erase the distance that divides him from it, and from every other conceivable position. Yet Binx, as he reveals to us very early, is nothing but a quester, who seeks what everyone else asserts they have found:

What do you seek—God? you ask with a smile.

I hesitate to answer, since all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves and to give such an answer would amount to setting myself a goal which everyone else has reached—and therefore raising a question in which no one has the slightest interest. Who wants to be dead last among one hundred and eighty million Americans? For, as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics—which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker. For myself, I enjoy answering polls as much as anyone and take pleasure in giving intelligent replies to all questions.

Truthfully, it is the fear of exposing my own ignorance which constrains me from mentioning the object of my search. For, to begin with, I cannot even answer this, the simplest and most basic of all questions: Am I, in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?

On my honor, I do not know the answer.

Binx clearly would not have written *Lancelot, The Second Coming,* and
Lost in the Cosmos, but then neither would Kate, nor even Aunt Emily, whose realistic sense of cultural and societal crisis eschews violence, even rhetorical violence, as a response. When she impressively observes that “it should be quite a sight, the going under of the evening land,” Binx thinks, “For her too the fabric is dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense.” That may be the difference between Aunt Emily and the later Percy; if for you even the dissolving makes sense, then your response will be wholly coherent, and you will be saved from responding to violence with violence.

Binx, as the moviegoer, has become a quietist, who neither judges nor can be judged. His bond with Kate is that both seek “certification” in his special sense:

Afterwards in the street, she looks around the neighborhood.
““Yes, it is certified now.”

She refers to a phenomenon of moviegoing which I have called certification. Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere.

This, in a touchingly minimal way, is somehow to be provisionally redeemed by representation, which no longer augments the self, as it did for Walt Whitman, but at least keeps one’s context from becoming totally emptied out. Binx and Kate win our affection, as no one subsequently in Percy can. Doubtless, Percy did not care to give us such charming protagonists in his later novels, precisely because they subvert his prophetic concerns. Still, it seems not wrong to hope that the novelist might yet return to his gentler and more qualified visions.

III

Walker Percy is scarcely alone in attempting to employ the novel as a spiritual weapon against the malaise of the age. He is not even unique in combining an apocalyptic temperament with Roman Catholicism, though Lancelot does not match Flannery O’Connor in that odd blend. Yet he does have a singular predilection for moral theology, and at times achieves a curious authority in his uncanny mode. With a stance very different from
that of Protestant Fundamentalists, he regards the Jews as the eternal evidence for the reality of Yahweh, and the historical authenticity of the Roman Catholic Church. Like most of the Jewish people, I am normally rather wary of such a search for evidences, but Percy handles it with tact and humane wit, benign if a little unnerving. In *The Moviegoer*, Binx identifies his own, internal exile with that of the Jews:

An odd thing. Ever since Wednesday I have become acutely aware of Jews. There is a clue here, but of what I cannot say. How do I know? Because whenever I approach a Jew, the Geiger counter in my head starts rattling away like a machine gun; and as I go past with the utmost circumspection and with every sense alert—the Geiger counter subsides.

There is nothing new in my Jewish vibrations. During the years when I had friends my Aunt Edna, who is a theosophist, noticed that all my friends were Jews. She knew why moreover: I had been a Jew in a previous incarnation. Perhaps that is it. Anyhow it is true that I am Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile. The fact is, however, I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my exile.

Another evidence of my Jewishness: the other day a sociologist reported that a significantly large percentage of solitary moviegoers are Jews.

Jews are my first real clue.

When a man is in despair and does not in his heart of hearts allow that a search is possible and when such a man passes a Jew in the street, he notices nothing.

When a man becomes a scientist or an artist, he is open to a different kind of despair. When such a man passes a Jew in the street, he may notice something but it is not a remarkable encounter. To him the Jew can only appear as a scientist or artist like himself or as a specimen to be studied.

But when a man awakes to the possibility of a search and when such a man passes a Jew in the street for the first time, he is like Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprint on the beach.

The wit of assimilating the Jewish Sabbath, which begins at sundown on Friday, to the trace of Defoe’s Friday, conceals the moral intensity of the passage. Miraculously surviving, the Jews are the searcher’s prime mark or sign of the promise of God that cannot be voided. The culmination of this sign in Percy is Will Barrett’s humorous but obsessive concern with the
supposed absence or flight of Jews from North Carolina in *The Second Coming*. Barrett’s equivocal madness keeps returning him to the Jews as a sign, particularly in an extraordinary letter that he writes:

> To be specific: I wish you to monitor the demographic movement of Jews not only from North Carolina but from other states and other countries as well, to take note of any extraordinary changes which go contrary to established demographic patterns—such as the emigration of blacks from the South (and their present return). If, for example, there has occurred or should occur a massive exodus of Jews from the U.S. to Israel, I request that you establish an observation post in the village of Megiddo in the narrow waist of Israel (the site, as you may know, of ancient Armageddon), where a foe from the east would logically attempt to cut Israel in two. From this point you can monitor any unusual events in the Arab countries to the east, particularly the emergence of a leader of extraordinary abilities—another putative sign of the last days.

The saving difference between this madness, and the somber stuff I hear from television evangelists every night, is that Barrett is only mad north-northwest, and Percy’s apocalyptic wind is blowing at us from the south. Still in midcareer, the author of *The Moviegoer* may yet cease searching for signs, and instead return to his gift for ruefully comic narrative. As a critic, I want to approach Walker Percy while waving a banner before me: “Bring back Binx Bolling!”
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and The Ballad of the Sad Café

I

“I BECOME THE CHARACTERS I WRITE ABOUT AND I BLESS THE LATIN POET Terence who said ‘Nothing human is alien to me.’” That was the aesthetic credo of Carson McCullers, and was her program for a limited yet astonishingly intense art of fiction. Rereading her after nearly twenty years away from her novels and stories, I discover that time has enhanced The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and The Ballad of the Sad Café, and perhaps rendered less problematic Reflections in a Golden Eye. What time cannot do is alter the burden for critics that McCullers represents. Her fiction, like her person, risked that perpetual crisis of Eros of which D.H. Lawrence was the poet and Freud the theoretician. Call it the tendency to make false connections, as set forth by Freud with mordant accuracy in the second paragraph of his crucial paper of 1912, “The Dynamics of the Transference”:

Let us bear clearly in mind that every human being has acquired, by the combined operation of inherent disposition and of external influences in childhood, a special individuality in the exercise of his capacity to love—that is, in the conditions which he sets up for loving, in the impulses he gratifies by it, and in the aims he sets out to achieve in it. This forms a cliché or stereotype in him, so to speak (or even several), which perpetually repeats and reproduces itself as life goes on, in so far as external circumstances and the nature of the accessible love-objects permit, and is indeed itself to some extent modifiable by later impressions. Now our experience has
shown that of these feelings which determine the capacity to love only a part has undergone full psychical development; this part is directed towards reality, and can be made use of by the conscious personality, of which it forms part. The other part of these libidinal impulses has been held up in development, withheld from the conscious personality and from reality, and may either expend itself only in phantasy, or may remain completely buried in the unconscious so that the conscious personality is unaware of its existence. Expectant libidinal impulses will inevitably be roused, in anyone whose need for love is not being satisfactorily gratified in reality, by each new person coming upon the scene, and it is more than probable that both parts of the libido, the conscious and the unconscious, will participate in this attitude.

All of McCullers’s characters share a particular quirk in the exercise of their capacity to love—they exist, and eventually expire, by falling in love with a hopeless hope. Their authentic literary ancestor is Wordsworth’s poignant Margaret, in *The Ruined Cottage*, and like his Margaret they are destroyed, not by despair, but by the extravagance of erotic hope. It is no accident that McCullers’s first and best book should bear, as title, her most impressive, indeed unforgettable metaphor: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

McCullers’s few ventures into literary criticism, whether of Gogol, Faulkner, or herself, were not very illuminating, except in their obsession with loneliness. Her notes on writing, “The Flowering Dream,” record her violent, physical response to reading Anne Frank’s diary, which caused a rash to break out on her hands and feet. The fear of insulation clearly was the enabling power of McCullers’s imagination. When she cited Faulkner and Eugene O’Neill as her major influences, she surprisingly added the Flaubert of *Madame Bovary*, where we might have expected the Lawrence of *The Rainbow* and “The Prussian Officer.” But it was Emma’s situation rather than Flaubert’s stance or style that engrossed her.

Mick Kelly, McCullers’s surrogate in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, remains her absolute achievement at representing a personality, presumably a vision of her own personality at the age of twelve. Vivid as the other lonely hunters are—the deaf mute John Singer; Biff Brannon, the café proprietor; Jake Blount, alcoholic revolutionary; Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, black liberal and reformer—the book still lives in the tormented intensity of Mick Kelly, who knows early to be “grieved to think how power and will / In opposition rule our mortal day, / And why God made irreconcilable / Good and the means of Good.” That is the dark wisdom of Shelley in *The Triumph of Life*, but it is also a wisdom realized perfectly
and independently by Mick Kelly, who rightly fears the triumph of life over her own integrity, her own hope, her own sense of potential for achievement or for love. The Shelleyan passage becomes pure McCullers if we transpose it to: “And why God made irreconcilable / Love and the means of Love.”

II

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* would not maintain its force if its only final vision were to be the triumph of life, in Shelley’s ironic sense. McCullers gives us a tough-grained, last sense of Mick Kelly, bereaved, thrown back into an absolute loneliness, but ongoing nevertheless:

But now no music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside room. Sometimes a quick little tune would come and go—but she never went into the inside room with music like she used to do. It was like she was too tense. Or maybe because it was like the store took all her energy and time. Woolworth’s wasn’t the same as school. When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music. But now she was always tired. At home she just ate supper and slept and then ate breakfast and went off to the store again. A song she had started in her private notebook two months before was still not finished. And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn’t know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her. A very hard thing to understand.

Mick pushed her broken front tooth with her thumb. But she did have Mister Singer’s radio. All the installments hadn’t been paid and she took on the responsibility. It was good to have something that had belonged to him. And maybe one of these days she might be able to set aside a little for a second-hand piano. Say two bucks a week. And she wouldn’t let anybody touch this private piano but her—only she might teach George little pieces. She would keep it in the back room and play on it every night. And all day Sunday. But then suppose some week she couldn’t make a payment. So then would they come to take it away like the little red bicycle? And suppose like she wouldn’t let them. Suppose she hid the piano under the house. Or else she would meet them at the front door. And fight. She would knock down both the two men so they would have shiners and broke noses and would be passed out on the hall floor.
Mick frowned and rubbed her fist hard across her forehead. That was the way things were. It was like she was mad all the time. Not how a kid gets mad quick so that soon it is all over—but in another way. Only there was nothing to be mad at. Unless the store. But the store hadn’t asked her to take the job. So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on. However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated.

But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.

All right!
O.K.!
Some good.

One can call this “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl,” and see Mick as a visionary of “the way things were.” She has the strength of McCullers’s endings that are not wholly negations:

Biff wet his handkerchief beneath the water tap and patted his drawn, tense face. Somehow he remembered that the awning had not yet been raised. As he went to the door his walk gained steadiness. And when at last he was inside again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun.

(The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter)

Even in death the body of the soldier still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave face was unchanged, and his sun-browned hands lay palm upwards on the carpet as though in sleep.

(Reflections in a Golden Eye)

The most remarkable of these conclusions is the vignette called “The Twelve Mortal Men” that serves as epilogue or coda to The Ballad of the Sad Café:

THE TWELVE MORTAL MEN

The Forks Falls highway is three miles from the town, and it is here the chain gang has been working. The road is of macadam,
and the county decided to patch up the rough places and widen it at a certain dangerous place. The gang is made up of twelve men, all wearing black and white striped prison suits, and chained at the ankles. There is a guard, with a gun, his eyes drawn to red slits by the glare. The gang works all the day long, arriving huddled in the prison cart soon after daybreak, and being driven off again in the gray August twilight. All day there is the sound of the picks striking into the clay earth, hard sunlight, the smell of sweat. And every day there is music. One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence.

And what kind of gang is this that can make such music? Just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together.

The rhetorical stance or tone of this is wholly McCullers’s, and is rather difficult to characterize. In context, its reverberation is extraordinary, working as it does against our incapacity to judge or even comprehend the grotesque tragedy of the doomed love between Miss Amelia Evans and Cousin Lymon, with its consequence in the curious flowering and subsequent demise of the sad café. We, as readers, also would rather love than be loved, a preference that, in the aesthetic register, becomes the defense of reading more intensely lest we ourselves be read, whether by ourselves or by others. The emotion released by the juxtaposition between the music and its origin in the chain gang is precisely akin to the affect arising from McCullers’s vision of the tragic dignity of the death of love arising so incongruously from the story of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and the hideous Marvin Macy.
Anthony Burgess

(1917–1993)

The Enderby Cycle and Nothing Like the Sun

I

Anthony Burgess has the same relationship to James Joyce that Samuel Beckett has; dangerous as this comparison is (and Burgess has too much sense to welcome it), we can utilize it to define the nature and limits of Burgess’s considerable achievement as a novelist and man-of-letters. Though Burgess has no Murphy (Beckett’s genial, early comic masterpiece) he has the marvelous Enderby saga (Inside Mr. Enderby; Enderby Outside; The Clockwork Testament; or, Enderby’s End; Enderby’s Dark Lady; or, No End to Enderby) and the even grander Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare’s Love-life. Whether writing about Enderby (a vision of Burgess himself as uncompromising poet) or Shakespeare, Burgess truly writes about Joyce’s Poldy Bloom, and so about Joyce himself.

Murphy is as much an interpretation of Ulysses as the Enderby cycle or Nothing Like the Sun is, but Murphy already manifests a revisionary swerve away from the master, “a clinamen to the ideal,” as Coleridge once called it. Beckett revised Joyce more cunningly still in Watt and the great trilogy of Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable, and that sly misprision of the only twentieth-century novelist to rival Proust is the foundation of Beckett’s eminence as the strongest living writer in English or French today. Burgess has a more limited ambition, and enters into no agon with Joyce, however loving. Towards Joyce, he is the thankful receiver or good son, a humanly heartening stance but perhaps also one that balks the full freedom of creation.

Reviewing a biography of Beckett, Burgess shrewdly caught the subtle
relationship between Joyce and Beckett, strong father and strong, so neccessarily cast-out, son:

Beckett’s books and plays posit a Cartesian division between mind and body. (His fast published work, the poem *Whoroscope*, is a kind of gorblimied life of Descartes.) Those heroes and heroines on their last, or nonexistent, legs, assert a powerful identity in spite of the wreck of the flesh. It is the kind of work one might expect from a lifelong invalid. His biography shows that Beckett was always an athlete, a well-coordinated car driver and motorbike rider who could smash the machine but emerge whole, an excellent swimmer and fine cricketer—the only Nobel Prizeman to be mentioned in *Wisden*. His body has always been spare and tough, able to take any amount of punishment from drink and cigarettes. But one notes a kind of self-flagellancy. A worshipper of Joyce, he took to pretending he had Joyce’s feet, which were small and dainty and pleased their owner: he crippled himself with unsuitable shoes. But the body’s main pains, and its Oblomov lethargy, seem to have most to do with Beckett’s complicated relationship with his mother....

It is somewhat eerie to find that the ancient *faible* of Lucia Joyce continued, long after her father’s death and the end of Ellmann’s record. Time stopped for her, and Beckett remained the young hawklike man who shared the masters silences and, after his rejection of the demented girl’s advances, was icily told not to call again. Beckett’s devotion to Joyce continues, and his own artistic perfectionism, in the study and theatre alike, is its best expression. He works himself and his actors to the limit. The account of Billie Whitelaw’s creative ordeal with him is one of the most remarkable chapters of this book.

The Muse his mother reclaims Beckett from Joyce here in the first paragraph, moving us from the cheerful, curious, active Poldy to the sublimely lethargic Murphy, and all the nearly inanimate Beckett protagonists who came after him. Icily rejected after refusing Lucia’s schizophrenic advances, Beckett is seen by Burgess as carrying the father’s aesthetic perfectionism to new limits. This is legitimate enough, but chooses to evade the dwindling of Joyce’s idiom in Beckett, from its palpable presence in *Murphy* to its total absence in the later, astonishingly laconic narratives, if narratives they be.

Contrast Burgess on his “favorite novel,” *Ulysses*:
And yet it is not quite a novel. I have lived long enough with *Ulysses* to be fully aware of its faults, and its major fault is that it evades the excruciating problem that most novelists set themselves: how, without blatant contrivance, to show character in the process of change, so that the reader, saying goodbye to Mr X or Miss Y, realizes that these are not quite the people he met at the beginning. There is, in every non-Joycean novel, a psychological watershed hardly discernible to the reader; without the imposition of a journey to this watershed fictional character can hardly be said to exist. In *Ulysses*, whose action covers less than twenty-four hours, there is no time for change. Indeed, nothing happens of sufficient gravity to induce change. The ordinary man Bloom meets the extraordinary youth Stephen and then says a goodnight which is probably a goodbye. Molly Bloom dreams of Stephen as a kind of messianic son-lover. Whatever happens in the novel, it does not happen today. It ends on the brink of tomorrow, when something may possibly happen, but tomorrow never comes. That is the novel’s major fault.

It is a fault so massive that it can only be compensated for by exceptional virtues, and these virtues I have already hinted at—the epic vitality of the scheme, the candour of the presentation of human life as it really is, the awe-inspiring virtuosity of the language. Add to these the comprehensiveness of the urban vision it provides. When we visit Dublin we carry that vision with us; it is more real than the flesh-and-blood or stone-and-mortar reality. We cannot, I suppose, finally judge *Ulysses* as a work of fiction at all. It is a kind of magical codex, of the carne order as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (in which hell, heaven and purgatory go on forever and nothing changes). But, in the practical terms in which writers are forced to think, it is a terrible literary challenge. To call it my favourite novel is, I see, shamefully inept. It is the work I have to measure myself hopelessly against each time I sit down to write fiction.

Has Burgess found, in the manner of the strong novelist, the fault that is not there in his precursor’s masterwork? I suspect that he is asking Joyce to be Shakespeare, whose greatest originality came in representing how his characters changed through the process of listening to what they themselves had said. Burgess’s Shakespeare is overtly Joyce’s Shakespeare, so that *Nothing Like the Sun* is not less overtly Joycean than is the Enderby cycle. Joyce’s own originality, even as a parodist, is rightly celebrated as
being extraordinary. Even as Proust was found by his true precursor in the not-very-novelistic Ruskin (who nevertheless fused with Flaubert in the influence process), so Joyce owed less to Flaubert than he did to Shakespeare. *Ulysses* is not so much an interpretation of Homer, or even of Dante, as it is of *Hamlet*.

Joyce's *Hamlet* is an act of strong misreading, in which the poetic father, Shakespeare, is diminished so that the vital son, Joyce, can mature. This creation by interpretation, marked by zest, verve, saturnine wit, must be the most striking account of *Hamlet* ever given to us. Shakespeare is not Hamlet, but the ghost of Hamlet's father, a role that he actually played on stage (doubling as the Player King), according to tradition. Hamlet is Stephen, or the portrait of the artist as a young man. Poor Shakespeare has been cuckolded not just by one brother, as Hamlet senior was by Claudius, but by two, both of whom have had their way with Anne Hathaway. If this were not sexual defeat enough, Shakespeare in addition has lost the dark lady of the sonnets, presumably to an honorary third brother, or best friend. Stephen's theory proposes that Shakespeare's dead son, Hamnet, enters the play as Hamlet, to recover his father's honor through an act of revenge. This resurrected son of Shakespeare does not last after Anne Hathaway, or Gertrude, and can be regarded as a proleptic representation of Anthony Burgess, who did not refuse the gift.

In the Circe episode of *Ulysses*, Poldy and Stephen, each a representative of Shakespeare/Joyce, stare into a mirror and confront a transmogrified Shakespeare, beardless and "rigid in facial paralysis." Joyce is a beardless Shakespeare, lacking the Bard's virility, and frozen-faced where the precursor is mobile and expressive. Again, Burgess took the hint, even if he did not quite join in Joyce's ironic self-judgment. Stephen cites the Sabellian heresy, which holds that the Father was Himself His Own Son, a view that makes Shakespeare into Joyce, and Joyce into Burgess. Burgess, a good Freudian (Joyce evaded Freud, properly), believes rather that the Son was Himself His Own Father, a faith that makes Joyce into Shakespeare, and Burgess, rather wistfully, almost into Joyce.

II

Burgess, by need and conviction, exuberantly exemplifies the Johnsonian apothegm that only a blockhead would write for anything except money. The consequence is an immense output, not much of which bears rereading. His most famous novel, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), owes its notoriety more to Stanley Kubrick's film version than to its own text, and his overtly religious narratives (the book-length poem *Moses* and such
excursions as *Man of Nazareth*) are interesting primarily as instances of the writer’s Manichean dualism, which has replaced Burgess’s lapsed Catholicism. But two of the novels I reread annually: *Inside Mr. Enderby* (1963) and *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964). Enderby triumphantly returned in *Enderby Outside* (1968), only to be killed off by his ungrateful creator in *The Clockwork Testament; or, Enderby’s End* (1975), which provoked a fierce outcry by devoted Enderbyans, among whom I number myself. In response to our laments and protests, Burgess gave us *Enderby’s Dark Lady; or, No End to Enderby*, a superb amalgam of *Inside Mr. Enderby* and *Nothing Like the Sun*. It is now to be hoped that Enderby, and “William Shakespeare,” will last as long as Burgess does, may it be forever.

*Inside Mr. Enderby* is one of my own candidates for the most undervalued English novel of our era, since the raffish narrative clearly has immortality in it. Enderby himself is at once Leopold Bloom, James Joyce, William Shakespeare, and Anthony Burgess, which is merely outrageous, and totally successful. As a true poet, Enderby is also Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, John Keats, Walt Whitman, and perhaps such modern roisterers as Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan, which only means that Enderby is a universal representation of the fate of the poet in a world necessarily and simultaneously too good for him and not quite good enough for anyone of imagination.

Everything that is conceivable happens to Enderby, or perhaps rather Enderby is what happens to everyone else in his world. Like Poldy, Enderby is the complete man or the compassionate man, except that Poldy is a Jewish respecter of learning and art and a bit of an artist himself, but no poet, which is Stephen’s vocation—and Enderby’s. Enderby is also obsessed by guilt, quite unmerited, whereas Poldy is beyond guilt, being a kind of Messiah, a text that is an answer, though obscure. The Enderby books, never obscure, refuse all answers. Amidst so much tawdry splendor, which never ceases to proliferate, I cite as a favorite passage the sublime moment when Enderby graciously declines the Goodby gold medal for poetry at a luncheon in London, a paradigm of all the literary luncheons where, like Enderby, the critic Bloom has gotten quite drunk:

“And it is for this reason that it gives me pleasure to bestow on our fellow singing-bird here, er er Enderby, the Goodby gold medal.” Enderby rose to applause loud enough to drown three cracking intestinal reports. “And a cheque,” said Sir George, with nostalgia of poet’s poverty, “that is very very small but, one trusts, will stave off pangs for a month or two.” Enderby took his trophies, shook hands, simpered, then sat down again. “Speech,” said somebody.
Enderby rose again, with a more subdued report, then realised that he was unsure of the exordial protocol. Did he say, “Mr. Chairman”? Was there a chairman? If Sir George was the chairman should he say something other than “Mr. Chairman”? Should he just say, “Sir George, ladies and gentlemen”? But, he noticed, there seemed to be somebody with a chain of office gleaming on his chest, hovering in the dusk, a mayor or lord mayor. What should he say—“Your Worship”? In time he saw that this was some sort of menial in charge of wine. Holding in wind, a nervously smiling Aeolus, Enderby said, loud and clear:

“St George.” There was a new stir of tittering. “And the dragon,” Enderby now had to add. “A British cymbal,” he continued, seeing with horror that orthographical howler in a sort of neon lights before him. “A cymbal that tinkles in unsound brass if we are without clarity.” There were appreciative easings of buttocks and shoulders: Enderby was going to make it brief and humorous. Desperately Enderby said, “As most of us are or are not, as the case may be. Myself included.” Sir George, he saw, was throwing up wide face-holes at him, as though he, Enderby, were on a gird-er above the street. “Clarity,” said Enderby, almost in tears, “is red wine for yodelers. And so,” he gaped aghast at himself, “I am overjoyed to hand back this cheque to St George for charitable disposal. The gold medal he knows what he can do with.” He could have died with shock and embarrassment at what he was saying; he was hurled on to the end in killing momentum, howev-er. “Dross of the workaday world,” he said “as our fellow-singer Goodby so adequately disproves. And so,” he said, back in the Army giving a talk on the British Way and Purpose, “we look forward to a time when the world shall be free of the shadow of oppression, the iron heel with its swastika spur no longer grinding into the face of supine freedom, democracy a reality, a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work, adequate health services and a bit of peace hovering dovelike in the declining days of the aged. And in that belief and aspiration we move forward.” He found that he could not stop. “Forward,” he insisted, “to a time when the world shall be free of the shadow of oppression.” Sir George had risen and was tottering out. “A fair day’s work,” said Enderby feebly, “for a fair day’s pay. Fair play for all,” he mumbled doubtfully. Sir George had gone. “And thereto,” ended Enderby wretchedly,

“I plight thee my truth.”
The model for Enderby’s peroration is Poldy’s proclamations of the New Bloomusalem in the Nova Hibernia of the future, in the Nighttown episode of *Ulysses*, except that Poldy, as always, is sober, while Enderby, as always, is drunk. In some ways Enderby combines the traits of a Buck Mulligan emptied out of all malice, with the lovable amiability of Poldy, gentlest of all representations in fiction. This may be too much of a problem in depiction for Burgess and may account for the gradual evolution of Enderby away from Poldy and Joyce and towards Burgess’s “William Shakespeare,” as the cycle takes its labyrinthine pratfalls on to *Enderby’s Dark Lady*. What is certain is that no single Enderby book is quite as effective as *Nothing Like the Sun*, not even *Inside Mr. Enderby*, though finally I might set that highest in the Burgess canon. For sustained command of language, Shakespearean and Joycean, *Nothing Like the Sun* is Burgess’s most accomplished performance, as here in a vision of Elizabethan London as the demonic context of the great love affair between Shakespeare and the dark lady of the *Sonnets*:

London, the defiled city, became a sweet bower for their lover’s wandering, even in the August heat. The kites that hovered or, perched, picked at the flesh of traitors’ skulls became good cleansing birds, bright of eye and feather, part of the bestiary of myth that enthralled them as they made it. The torn and screaming bears and dogs and apes in the pits of Paris Garden were martyrs who rose at once into gold heraldic zoomorphs to support the scutcheon of their static and sempiternal love. The wretches that lolled in chains on the lapping edges of the Thames, third tide washed over, noseless, lipless, eye-eaten, joined the swinging hanged at Tyburn and the rotting in the jails to be made heroes of a classical hell that, turned into music by Vergil, was sweet and pretty schoolday innocence. But it was she who shook her head often in sadness, smiling beneath her diaphanous veil as they took the evening air in passion’s convalescence, saying that autumn would soon be on them, that love’s fire burned flesh and then itself—out, gone for ever.

This is the only apocalypse acceptable to Burgess, heroic vitalist and celebrator of the things of this world: “Love’s fire burned flesh and then itself—out, gone for ever.” That is a burden hardly unique to Burgess, and the accent remains Joycean, yet the music of this mortality verges upon being Burgess’s alone.
Iris Murdoch

(1919–1999)

The Good Apprentice

At the end of her first book, an enduring study of Sartre published in 1953, Iris Murdoch prophetically lamented that Sartre’s “inability to write a great novel is a tragic symptom of a situation which afflicts us all.” Her own inability has extended now through twenty-two novels, of which the best seem to me Bruno’s Dream (1969), The Black Prince (1973), A Word Child (1975), and her latest, The Good Apprentice. So fecund and exuberant is Murdoch’s talent that many more novels may be expected from her. If The Good Apprentice marks the start of her strongest phase, and it may, then a great novel could yet come, rather surprisingly in the incongruous form of the nineteenth-century realistic novel. The age of Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon, post-Joycean and post-Faulknerian, is set aside by Murdoch’s novelistic procedures, almost as though she thus chose to assert her own direct continuity with the major nineteenth-century Russian and British masters of fiction.

Murdoch’s anachronistic style and outmoded narrative devices are not, in my experience of reading her, the principal flaws in her work. Like Gabriel García Márquez, she favors a realism that can be more phantasмагoric than naturalistic, but she tends not to be able to sustain this mixed mode, whereas he can. Consistency of stance is one of Murdoch’s problems. She is both fantasist and realist, each on principle, but her abrupt modulations between the two visions sometimes seem less than fully controlled. Her novels rush by us, each a successful entertainment, but none perhaps fully distinct from the others in our memories.

Yet her fictions fuse into a social cosmos, one that is reasonably recognizable as contemporary British upper-middle-class. Of all her talents,
the gift of plotting is the most formidable, including a near-Shakespearean faculty for intricate double plots. Again her strength seems sometimes uncontrolled, and even the most responsive reader can feel harried and at last indifferent as labyrinthine developments work themselves through. Yet that is how Murdoch tends to manifest her considerable exuberance as a writer, rather than in the creation of endless otherness in her characters, which nevertheless (and rather sadly) seems to constitute her largest ambition. She does not excel at fresh invention of personalities. We learn to expect certain basic types to repeat themselves in her novels: fierce, very young women, compulsive and cunning, violent in their pursuit of much older men, are omnipresent. Their quarry, those older men, are narcissistic charmers but weak, self-indulgent, hesitant skeptics, fearful of reality. Then there are the power figures whom Murdoch once called “alien gods.” These are frequently male, Middle European, Jewish charismatics, who may be presumed to have some allegorical or ironic link to the writer Elias Canetti, a friend of Murdoch in her youth. Unfulfilled older women abound also; they are marked by resentment, identity anxieties, and by a tendency to fall in love drastically, absurdly, and abruptly.

Murdoch’s particular mastery is in representing the maelstrom of falling in love, which is the characteristic activity of nearly all her men and women, who somehow have time for busy professional careers in London while obsessively suffering convulsive love relationships. Somewhere in one of her early novels, Murdoch cannily observes that falling out of love is one of the great human experiences, a kind of rebirth in which we see the world with freshly awakened eyes. Though an academic philosopher earlier in her career, Murdoch’s actual philosophical achievement is located where she clearly wishes it to be, in her novels, which demonstrate her to be a major student of Eros, not of the stature of Freud or Proust, but still an original and endlessly provocative theorist of the tragicomedy of sexual love, with its peculiar hell of jealousy and self-hatred. Her nearest American equivalent in this dark area is Saul Bellow, a novelist whom otherwise she does not much resemble.

Indeed, she resembles no other contemporary novelist, in part because she is essentially a religious fabulist, of an original and unorthodox sort, and therefore very unlike Graham Greene or John Updike or Walker Percy or Cynthia Ozick, whose varied religious outlooks are located in more definite normative traditions. Murdoch thinks for herself theologically as well as philosophically, and her conceptual originality is difficult for readers to apprehend, particularly when it is veiled by her conventional forms of storytelling and her rather mixed success in the representation
of original characters. There is a perpetual incongruity between Murdoch’s formulaic procedures and her spiritual insights, an incongruity that continues in *The Good Apprentice*.

The good apprentice is twenty-year-old Edward Baltram, a university student who begins the novel by slyly feeding a drug-laden sandwich to his best friend and fellow-student Mark Wilsden. While Edward goes off to make love to a girl in the neighborhood, Mark wakes up and falls or jumps out of the window to his death. Edward’s grief and guilt dominate the book, which is his quest for a secular absolution at the hands of his actual father, Jesse Bahrain, an insane vitalist and reclusive painter who begat Edward upon one of his models and subsequently has not seen his son apart from a childhood meeting or two. Murdoch’s ironic opening sentence is the novel’s spiritual signature:

> I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

In a narrative that chronicles Edward’s journey from hell to purgatory, we might expect that Edward would encounter at least one figure who unequivocally embodies love, wisdom, or at least power. But that underestimates Murdoch’s authentic spiritual originality which has now matured to the point that all such figures are negated. Though Edward regards himself as a dead soul, he is nevertheless the book’s only legitimate representative of the good, in however apprentice a guise. His elders all fail him, and themselves are exposed as souls deader than he is. Jesse Baltram, his mad father, is a magician but a perpetually dying one until his mysterious death by water. Mother May, Jesse’s wife, seems at first as charming and innocent as her daughters, Bettina and Ilona, Edward’s half-sisters, and the long middle section of the book set at Seegard, Jesse’s estate, begins as the most beautiful of all Murdoch’s pastoral idylls. But May is revealed to be scheming, resentful, and jealous, Bettina scarcely less so, and the ineffable Ilona is transmogrified into a Soho stripper. The book’s wisdom figure, Thomas McCaskerville, Edward’s uncle by marriage, is at once a subtle Scottish-Jewish psychoanalyst, uttering a parodistic version of R.D. Laing’s madness-as-spiritual-journey ideology, and also a bemused cuckold, preaching about the reality principle of death while understanding very little of life as it touches him most closely.

With her alien gods and charismatics so discredited, Murdoch boldly steps into their place herself, editorializing directly about her characters’ psychological and spiritual miseries. Here she analyzes the meditative
stance of Stuart, Edward’s step-brother and foil, who also has rejected life in favor of a death that might precede a more abundant life:

A disinterested observer might have wondered why Stuart so ardently rejected God, since he did not simply sit and meditate, he also knelt down, sometimes even prostrated himself. Once again, Stuart, recognising no problem, instinctively resolved apparent contradictions. Meditation was refuge, quietness, purification, replenishing, return to whiteness. Prayer was struggle, reflection, self-examination, it was more particular, involving concern about other people and naming of names. Harry had said that Stuart wanted to be like Job, always guilty before God, an exalted form of sadomasochism. Stuart’s rejection of God was, in effect, his rejection of that “old story,” to use Ursula’s words, as alien to his being. His mind refused it, spewed it out, not as a dangerous temptation, but as alien tissue. Of course he wanted to be “good”; and so he wanted to avoid guilt and remorse, but those states did not interest him. Towards his sins and failures he felt cold, no warmth was generated there. So little did he feel himself menaced from that quarter that in prayer he would even say (for he used words) *dominus et deus*, without attaching the old meaning to those dread sounds. (Perhaps it was important that the words were Latin, not English.) He knew there was no supernatural being and did not design to try to attach the concept in any way to his absolutes. If something, “good” or something, was his “master,” it was in no personal or reciprocal relation. His language was thus indeed odd as when he sometimes said “forgive me,” or “help me,” or when he commended others, Edward for instance, to the possibility of being helped. Stuart understood the phrase “love is only of God”; his love went out into the cosmos as a lonely signal, but also miraculously could return to earth. His belief that his supplication for Edward, his concern for Edward, could help Edward was not a hypothesis about actions which he might, as a result of well-intentioned thoughts, later perform for his brother (though this aspect of the matter was not excluded); nor of course was he resorting to some paranormal telepathic form of healing. He simply felt sure that the purer his love the more efficacious it would be in some “immediate” sense which put in question the ordinary pit-pat of time.

Admirers of Murdoch are fond of defending such authorial
interpolations by citing their prevalence in the nineteenth-century novel. It is certainly true that George Eliot is never more impressive than in such interventions, and Murdoch indeed is recognizably in Eliot’s explicitly moral tradition. Unfortunately, what worked sublimely for Eliot cannot work so well for Murdoch, despite her engaging refusal to be self-conscious about her belatedness. As speculation, this paragraph is impressive, but as fiction it makes us wonder why Murdoch tells us what we expect her to show us. Her gifts for dramatic action are considerable, but her own narrative voice lacks George Eliot’s authority, being too qualified and fussy when a rugged simplicity is required. She is no less acute a moral analyst than Eliot, but she does not persuade us that her judgments are a necessary part of the story she has made for us.

Yet I do not wish to slight her conceptual strength as a religious writer, which is her particular excellence, since she has taught herself how subtly story and tragic, narrative art and the questing spirit, can fuse in a novel, even if the fusion is incomplete so far in her work. Starting as an existentialist writer in Under the Net, she has evolved into that curious oxymoron, a Platonist novelist, perpetually in pursuit of the Good, a quest that she herself parodies in the hilarious and painful couplings of her erotomaniac protagonists. Her obsessive symbol for this sadomasochistic pattern is the myth of Apollo and Marsyas, which was exploited in The Black Prince and several other novels, and which is repeated in The Good Apprentice. Marsyas the musician, having challenged Apollo to a music contest, loses and suffers the penalty of being flayed to death. Murdoch reads the myth so that the agony of Marsyas is our agony now in seeking to know God in an age when God is dead. So, in The Good Apprentice:

Thomas recalled Edward’s weird exalted stare, his uncanny smile. A (lemon who had nothing to do with the well-being of the ordinary “real” Edward had for a moment looked out. How ambiguous such conditions were. The entranced face of the tortured Marsyas, as Apollo kneels lovingly to tear his skin off, prefigures the death and resurrection of the soul.

Our shudder here is not shared by Murdoch, whose version of a post-Christian religion is marked by violence and deathliness. Whatever Socrates meant by saying we should study dying, Murdoch harshly means that death is the truth, since it destroys every image and every story. Her savage Platonism in the novels is consistent with her stance in The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists (1977):
Escape from the Cave and approach to the Good is a progressive discarding of relative false goods, of hypotheses, images, and shadows, eventually seen as such.

These are the accents not just of a Platonic exegesis, but of Murdoch’s firmest beliefs, expressed overtly in the closing paragraph of *The Fire and the Sun*:

Plato feared the consolations of art. He did not offer a consoling theology. His psychological realism depicted God as subjecting mankind to a judgment as relentless as that of the old Zeus, although more just. A finely meshed moral causality determines the fate of the soul. That the movement of the saving of Eros is toward an impersonal pictureless void is one of the paradoxes of a complete religion. To present the idea of God at all, even as myth, is a consolation, since it is impossible to defend this image against the prettifying attentions of art. Art will mediate and adorn, and develop magical structures to conceal the absence of God or his distance. We live now amid the collapse of many such structures, and as religion and metaphysics in the West withdraw from the embraces of art, we are it might seem being forced to become mystics through the lack of any imagery which could satisfy the mind. Sophistry and magic break down at intervals, but they never go away and there is no end to their collusion with art and to the consolations which, perhaps fortunately for the human race, they can provide; and art, like writing and like Eros, goes on existing for better and for worse.

This bitter Platonism resembles that of Simone Weil, a powerful early influence upon Murdoch. Whatever one thinks of the spiritual stance of Weil and Murdoch (I personally find it repellant), it seems at once antithetical to the interests of art yet also a powerful goad to Murdoch’s development as a novelist who exploits magic while endlessly disowning it.

*The Good Apprentice* seems to me an advance upon all of Murdoch’s previous novels, even *The Black Prince*, because the morally ferocious Platonist finally has allowed herself a wholly sympathetic protagonist in the self purging Edward. His progress out of an inner hell has no false consolations or illusory images haunting it. In some sense, Edward’s achievement and torment is wholly Freudian in its spirit, resembling as it does the later Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* through *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud’s last vestige of Platonism, his only transcendentalism,
was his worship of reality testing or the reality principle, which was his way of naming the conditions imposed by the outwardsness of the world, whose final form is death. Murdoch’s only consistent transcendentalism is grimly parallel to Freud’s, since her novels insist that religious consciousness, in our post-religious era, must begin with the conviction that only death centers life, that death is the only valid representation of a life better than the life-in-death we all suffer daily.

This is the impressive if rather stark structure that Murdoch imposes upon *The Good Apprentice*, where the first section is called “The Prodigal Son,” and depicts Edward’s descent into a private hell, and the second, “Seegard,” recounts his purgatorial search for his enigmatic magician of a father. The third and last part Murdoch names “Life After Death,” implying that the still anguished Edward has begun an ascent into the upper reaches of his personal purgatory.

Like nearly all of her twenty-two novels, Murdoch’s *The Good Apprentice* has a surface that constitutes a brilliant entertainment, a social comedy of and for the highly literate. Beneath that surface an astringent post-Christian Platonism has evolved into a negative theology that pragmatically offers only the Gnostic alternatives of either total libertinism or total puritanism in the moral life. The aesthetic puzzle is whether the comic story and the Platonic kernel can be held together by Murdoch’s archaic stance as an authorial will. And yet no other contemporary British novelist seems to me of Murdoch’s eminence. Her formidable combination of intellectual drive and storytelling exuberance may never fuse into a great novel, but she has earned now the tribute she made to Jean Paul Sartre more than thirty years ago. She too has the style of the age.
MY ONE PERSONAL MEMORY OF WILLIAM GADDIS GOES BACK TO A MEETING of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, sometime in the later 1990s. We had been introduced perhaps a year before, and he approached me, expressing gratification that I had included *The Recognitions* in a canonical catalog published in 1994. Not knowing him, yet apprehending that his grave and courteous manner did not seem ironic, I stammered that I had admired the novel since 1955, when it was first published, and had reread it several times since, always with a sense of gratitude. Gaddis graciously nodded his head, and walked away. Returning to New Haven that night, I rather weirdly found a copy of the Penguin paperback of *The Recognitions* in my briefcase, where I had not placed it.

This oddity (and I still do not know how the book got there) reflects for me the uncanniness of *The Recognitions*, where the inexplicable is marvelously omnipresent, in an almost Dickensian way. Jonathan Raban sensibly notes that Gaddis, the first so-called Post-Modernist of the American novel, actually is Victorian in sensibility, and might well have pleased Trollope. I wish I could share Raban’s admiration for *A Frolic of His Own*, or my close friend the novelist Walter Abish’s high regard for *JR*, but alas I don’t. *Carpenter’s Gothic* also continues to evade me, though it has a legitimate place in a tradition that moves from Brockden Brown through Hawthorne on to Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Cormac McCarthy.

*The Recognitions* is so rich a work that Gaddis could have rested on his oars forever. It has an authentic literary lineage that begins with the Third Century *Clementine Recognitions*, an early Christian romance. Simon Magus, supposed by some to be the inventor of Gnosticism, is the villain of
this curious tale, and this Simon of Samaria, known as the Magus, is the
first manifestation of Faustus, the Favored one. Gaddis also draws upon St.
Augustine and St. John of the Cross, but is closer in spirit to Melville’s
Moby-Dick, to Goethe’s Faust, and very overtly to T.S. Eliot, whose “The
Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” The Waste Land and Four Quartets are
echoed throughout. In a rather disturbing way, The Recognitions parodies
Joyce’s Ulysses, which Gaddis insisted he never had read.

The influence of The Recognitions upon novelists from Thomas
Pynchon to Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections is palpable, and not always
fortunate, but Gaddis’s outrageous first fiction bridges the long morass in
the American novel from Faulkner’s major phase to the full maturing of
Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy, and to Pynchon’s tri-
umphant resurrection in Mason and Dixon. Doubtless the death of
Nathanael West, in a car crash, removed an extraordinary imagination far
too early, and yet it cleared a visionary space for Gaddis, who was thirty-
three, the Chistological age, when The Recognitions appeared.

Like Joyce’s Ulysses, Gaddis’s masterwork is less a narrative fiction than
it is an epic of consciousness. But whose consciousness? Hamlet has his own
consciousness, different from what we may infer was Shakespeare’s, yet we
are not persuaded that Wyatt Gwyon has a mind all his own. Willie the
writer (see pp. 272–3 and 478 of The Recognitions) is the endless conscious-
ness of his book, and the implicit protagonist of its quest for transcen-
dence.

The Recognitions goes on for fifty-six pages after we behold the last of
Wyatt on page 900:

He had left his windows opened, and the bird was sitting on one
of the framed pictures when he came in, and closed the door
behind him.

But he had already paused to make his notation, “What mean?”
before he saw it, when it fluttered across the room to the other
picture, and though he tried frantically to chase it toward the
front, toward the windows and out, it fluttered the more franti-
cally from one picture to the other, and back across the room and
back, as he passed the mirror himself in both directions, where he
might have glimpsed the face of a man having, or about to have,
or at the very least valiantly fighting off, a religious experience.

The religious experience, conveyed by gentle irony, is the descent of
the dove, the Pentecost of the Paraclete, Christ-as-comforter. Here
Gaddis affects the ambiguous undulations of the end of Pynchon’s The
Crying of Lot 49, and the more overt intimations of a possible transcendence that culminate Don DeLillo’s major works, from White Noise through Underworld. The sequence of Gaddis, Pynchon, and DeLillo constitutes an ambivalent opening to glory in ongoing American fiction.
Rereading Saramago, I always feel like Ulysses trying to keep my hold on Proteus, the metamorphic god of ocean; he keeps slipping away. From Baltasar and Blimunda on through The Cave, Saramago is in constant change, not merely from fiction to fiction, but within each work. I don’t know the genre of any of his books, except his masterpiece (in my view), The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, as that I suppose has to be called a gospel, though it brings very bad news indeed: a Jesus betrayed by God the Father; a Satan who is a mild bystander, really a good shepherd, and so named Pastor; a God so self-indulgent that he sacrifices Jesus solely in order to extend his worshippers from the small elite of the Jews, to a myriad of Christians. There is also this God’s evident, sadistic relish in sacrificing not only Jesus but a vast array of subsequent martyrs, all tortured to death or executed by an exuberant panoply of ingenious devices.

But I have considered Saramago’s Gospel elsewhere, and shall revisit it later only in passing. Here I begin with the outrageous and delicious Baltasar and Blimunda (1987), though to characterize any single narrative by Saramago as being more deliciously outrageous than the others is a disputable judgment.

T.S. Eliot was fond of describing himself as Anglo-Catholic, Royalist, and classicist. He could have added anti-Semite, and I have always wondered how he would have reacted had Great Britain been successfully invaded and occupied by the Nazis? I don’t know that Saramago needs to describe himself at all: he is certainly neither Catholic nor Royalist, and he is too diverse and inventive for any stance like classicist to subsume him. Like Jorge Luis Borges, Saramago is a free man, and his books exalt freedom, generally by depicting its dreadful alternatives. Baltasar and Blimunda is Saramago’s historical romance, set in the frightening Portugal of the
early eighteenth century, a country where the Enlightenment had not yet arrived. Public entertainment still was constituted by acts of faith, in which heretics, Jews, and everyone else who offended either Church or King were burned alive, to the edification of the true believers.

These fires burn throughout the book, but most dreadfully at the close, when Baltasar is consumed. He is an admirable soul, as is his beloved seeress Blimunda, but I defer consideration of them until further on, when I can compare their tragic love to other erotic splendors in Saramago. The other visionary center of this turbulent book is the inventive and heretical Padre Bartholomew Lorenzo, an actual personage, who arrived in Portugal from Brazil in 1708. Known to his enemies as “the Flying Man,” he invented a bird-like flying machine, called “La passarola,” which figures crucially in Saramago’s story. I assume Saramago invented the magnificent notion that Domenico Scarlatti himself serenades Baltasar as the one-handed former soldier builds the “Passarola” designed by Padre Lourenço.

It is pure Saramago that the fuel for the flying bird should be provided by Blimunda, who has the unique power to bottle human wills. No surprise here; we are in a romance where the seagulls are “anxious to know if God has aged much.” It is however a romance that crosses over into scabrous realism:

People are saying that the realm is badly governed, and that there is no justice. They fail to understand that this is how the realm ought to be, with its eyes blindfolded and bearing its scales and sword. What more could we wish for, when that is all that has been required: that we should be the weavers of bandages, the inspectors of the weights, the armorers of the sword, constantly mending the holes, adjusting the balance, sharpening the edge of the blade, and then asking the defendant if he is satisfied with the sentence passed on him once he has won or lost his case. We are not referring here to sentences passed by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, which is very astute and prefers an olive branch to scales and a keen blade to one that is jagged and blunt. Some mistake the olive branch as a gesture of peace when it is all too clear that it is kindling wood for the funeral pyre. Either I stab you or I burn you. Therefore, in the absence of any law, it is preferable to stab a woman suspected of infidelity than to honor the faithful who have passed on. It is a question of having protectors who are likely to forgive homicide, and a thousand cruzados to put on the scales, which explains why justice holds the latter in her hand. Let blacks and hoodlums be punished so that the importance of good
example may be upheld. Let people of rank and wealth be honored, without demanding that they pay their debts, that they renounce vengeance or mitigate their hatred. And while the lawsuits are being fought, since certain little irregularities cannot be totally avoided, let there be chicanery, swindling, appeals, formalities, and evasions, so that those likely to gain a just decision will not gain it too readily, and those likely to lose their appeal will not lose it too soon. In the meantime teats are milked for that delicious milk, money, those rich curds, prime cheese, and a tasty morsel for the bailiff and the solicitor, for the witness and the judge;

Saramago’s Swiftian irony will become subtler in later books, but one is dazzled by its pungency here, with that marvelous, pragmatic motto for the Inquisition: “Either I stab you or I burn you.” We are not quite in the United States of the second George Bush or in contemporary Portugal, but the implications are there. A great moment comes when the lovers and Padre Lourenço take off together in the Passarolo. As they descend, Saramago invokes the image of Camões, the heroic one-eyed national warrior-epic poet:

Who knows what dangers await them, what Adamastor they will encounter, what Saint Elmo’s fires they will see rise from the sea, what columns of water will suck in the air only to expel it once it has been settled? Then Blimunda asks where are we going. And the priest replies: where the arm of the Inquisition cannot reach us if such a place exists.

They come down in the mountains, and Lourenço disappears. Baltasar and Blimunda make their way to his parents’ home, where eventually Scarlatti will come to tell them that Padre Bartholomew, pursued by the Inquisition, escaped to Spain and then died in Toledo. Poor Baltasar is impressed into a work crew to build a great Franciscan convent. When he gets free again, he finds and flies in the Passarolo. Meanwhile, poor Blimunda, who is being raped by a properly pious friar, kills him with the detachable spike that Baltasar usually wears. For nine long years, Blimunda searches for her Baltasar, and finds him already burning in a glorious act-of-faith involving the usual collection of Jews, playwrights, and similar riff-raff.

Then Blimunda said: Come. The will of Baltasar Sete-Sóis broke free from his body, but did not ascend to the stars, for it belonged to the earth
and to Blimunda. Though this is a marvelous aesthetic conclusion, it leaves us a little sad. What can happen next? Perhaps Blimunda will find the Passarola and use Baltasar’s will for a final flight, but she will be alone in a melancholy freedom, wherever she lands, if ever she lands. Portugal in the early 18th century has yielded us the following. The country is Hell, governed by a viciously stupid royal family, and tortured incessantly by a Church indistinguishable from the Inquisition. What saves it from hellishness? Only four beings: the partly Jewish witch Blimunda; the heroic, Cervantes-like one-armed soldier, Baltasar; the inventor of the Passarolo, Padre Lourenço, who converts to the unitive God of Judaism, and then goes off to die in Spain; and the survivor, Domenico Scarlatti, who will go on playing his ethereal melodies that alone redeem such a world. Saramago prophetically consigns Portugal, the Catholic Church and the monarchy to the hell of history. The Passarola, image of illusory freedom, saves no one, and its great inventor exiles himself to die in Toledo. Our lovers never totally lose one another and what redeems the book is Saramago’s real love for them, that transcends all his ironies. I pass to the wonderful unreality of The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis (1984). We are in Hell again, that is to say historical Portugal in December 1935, with Salazar come to power, and Spain about to endure the Fascist usurpation. Acts of faith will be performed by machine guns and rifles, less pleasant to God than the aroma of burning flesh. Our hero is the amiable poet, Dr. Ricardo Reis, one of Pessoa’s heteronyms: a mild, Horatian Epicurean, who has returned from Brazil to Lisbon. He checks into his hotel, and then goes out to read a newspaper that reports the death of Fernando Pessoa, and naturally pays a visit of respect to his creator’s tomb. Already we have had allusions to Eça and to Borges: we are in the reality of the fabulists and poets.

Ricardo Reis pursues two erotic quests, an idealized one for Marcenda, paralyzed in her left hand, and a fleshly one with Lydia, the hotel chambermaid. But first he returns from dinner, to find the ghostly Pessoa waiting for him in his hotel room, and they converse like the old friends they are. They will go on meeting, since ghosts have eight months of freedom, and in the meantime Lydia enters the bed of Ricardo Reis.

Though Salazar’s Portugal is always in the background, we essentially are in a pleasant realm: literary, erotic, nostalgic. I pause to note that I know no other novelistic atmosphere at all like the ambiance of The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis. It is an utterly new mode of aestheticism: both visionary and realistic, the cosmos of the great poet Pessoa and of the Fascist dictator Salazar and yet it presents us also with an original literary enigma: how long can Ricardo Reis survive the death of Fernando Pessoa? For three hundred and fifty pages we have experienced the life and loves
of a heteronym. What a triumph for Pessoa, and for Saramago. The novel’s beautifully modulated closing passage has an utterly unprecedented tonality:

As they left the apartment, Fernando Pessoa told him, you forgot your hat. You know better than I do that hats aren’t worn where we’re going. On the sidewalk opposite the park, they watched the pale lights flicker on the river, the ominous shadows of the mountains. Let’s go then, said Fernando Pessoa. Let’s go, agreed Ricardo Reis. Adamastor did not turn around to look, perhaps afraid that if he did, he might let out finally his mighty howl. Here, where the sea ends and the earth awaits.

The will of Baltasar belonged to Blimunda and the earth, and the earth awaits both poets, Pessoa and Reis. The earth is always waiting for us in Saramago; at the close of his magnificent fantasy, *The Stone Raft* (1986), we are gently assured: “The elm branch is green. Perhaps it will flower again next year.” The book’s epigraph quotes the great Cuban fabulist, Alejo Carpentier, who is of Saramago’s school: “Every future is fabulous.” In Carpentier, yes, but in Saramago, these things are ordered differently. That elm branch starts all the trouble anyway, and converts Iberia into a stone raft, after Joana Carda scratches the ground with it, having no idea it was a magic wand. The genius of Saramago is off and running, fulfilling its destiny of disturbing us into a fuller realization of what it means to read and to write.

It would madden me, and all of us, if I attempted to summarize this sublimely zany narrative. Its given is summary enough; the entire slab of Spain and Portugal has spun loose from Europe, and heads out into the Atlantic. Saramago’s aesthetic burden therefore is immense; if you start your story with *that*, how are you to catch up to yourself? I retract; there is no aesthetic burden for the cunning Saramago. We never get at all far from that original outrage. It is almost halfway through the novel, on page 127, that Joanna Carda explains why and how the catastrophe happened? She required a symbolic act to indicate that she was separating from her husband: They are standing on the edge of the clearing, Joana Carda detains the men a bit longer, these are her final words, I picked up the stick from the ground, the wood seemed to be living as if it were the whole tree from which it had been cut, or rather this is what I now feel as it comes back to me, and at that moment, with a gesture more like a child’s than an adult’s, I drew a line that separated me forever from Coimbra and the man with whom I lived, a line that divided the world into two halves, as you can see from here.
They advanced to the middle of the clearing, drew close, there was the line, as clear as if it had just been drawn, the earth piled up on either side, the bottom layer still damp despite the warmth of the sun. They remain silent, the men are at a loss for words, Joana Carda has nothing more to say, this is the moment for a daring gesture that could make a mockery of her wonderful tale. She drags one foot over the ground, smooths the soil as if she were using a level, stamps on it and presses down, as if committing an act of sacrilege. The next moment, before the astonished gaze of all the onlookers, the line reappears, it looks exactly as it was before, the tiny particles of soil, the grains of sand resume their previous shape and form, return to where they were before, and the line is back. Between the part that was obliterated and the rest, between one side and the other, there is no visible difference. Her nerves on edge, Joana Carda says in a shrill voice, I've already swept away the entire line, I've covered it with water, yet it keeps reappearing, try for yourselves if you wish, I even put stones on top, and when I removed them the line was still there, why don't you try if you still need convincing.

Nothing works; she is accurate. When then is to be done? Saramago, who is the Devil, is not so much making fun of Europe, or even of Nato or the European Community, but of the ultimate ideas of the geopolitical, the geological, and of all related fantasies that pass as realities. By page 139, he is in a hilarious ecstasy:

Let us wage that we will ultimately be reduced to a single nation, the quintessence of the European spirit, a single and perfect sublimation, Europe, namely, Switzerland.

The joke, once started cannot be stopped. The late J.F.K. is permanently repaid for his “Ich bin ein Berliner” when all Europe is swept by the slogan: We also are Iberians. Anarchist outrages follow, as millions of youths repeat the Great Awakening of the late 1960’s, smashing TV stations and shop-fronts, turning Europe into Seattle: For the catalogs of memoirs and reminiscences there remained those dying words of the handsome young Dutchman hit by a rubber bullet ... At last, I’m Iberian, and with these words he expired ...

Except for Joana Carda, I have not mentioned the three other early protagonists, and don’t really want to, because they are mere males and they do not seem as important as the curious dog who tags along throughout. Or rather, they tag along, as only the dog seems to know where they are going. One of them, José Anaíco, is taken, by Joana Carda. Another, Joaquim Sassa, will be selected by Maire Guavaira, to whose house the dog
leads them. That leaves Pedro Orce, who is closest to the wise dog, whose name sometimes in Pilot. Now that everyone has a home, the peninsula’s dilemma remains: Portugal is rushing towards the Azores. In a general time of anxiety and exodus, we now see that Saramago has constructed an oasis, where two women, three men, a dog, and now also a horse, live in perfect harmony. Fortunately, Iberia alters course, and there is no disaster, and the little group (the dog now named Constant) waits to see whether they will surge on to join Canada or the United States.

Sadly, our little community falls out, for a time, even as Portugal and Spain drift towards North America. But the peninsula begins to move away, and rotate, and Pedro Orce dies, and everyone weeps, the dog included. He is buried, the dog Ardent departs, the peninsula has stopped, and the two couples will continue on their wanderings, carrying the elm branch with them.

This rugged narrative does not want to be interpreted, nor should we be tactless, but I will hover round it, as Werner Herzog keeps our eyes circling his raft in *Aguirre the Wrath of God* (my favorite movie, with Klaus Kinski as Aguirre as Kinski). We don’t ever see why Joana should want José Anaíço, whose only salient quality is that he activates starlings, or again why Maria takes Sassa, whose role as stone-thrower into oceans hardly seems enough to individuate him. Pedro Orce has the Hemingwaysque ability to kick up earth-tremblings, but all it gets him is the dog. The book-long hegira of the group cannot sustain interpretation or rather interprets itself as a sustained irony. At least these men and women are not going to become the unctuous Portuguese prime-minister, who drones on exhorting the noble Portuguese to be steadfast while he secretly entreats Galicia to come over to Portugal. The Church, after being obliterated in *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, is largely ignored in *The Stone Raft*, presumably because Saramago was preserving his firepower for the Christian God in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991).

*The Gospel*, as I’ve said already, seems to me Saramago upon his heights, but as I’ve written about it elsewhere at some length I want here only to admire its sexual love affair between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene, which is the most poignant and persuasive of all Saramago’s High Romantic couplings. It breathes authentic ardour; read it side-by-side with the roughly similar matter in D.H. Lawrence’s *The Man Who Died*, and Saramago will win the palm.

I have passed over my personal favorite in Saramago, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989), because I want to dwell awhile in this magnificent demonstration that there is no history, only biography, as Emerson polemically assured us. Saramago, more pugnaciously, tells us that there
is no history, only fiction, but Emerson hardly would have been bothered, since for him fiction was only another mask for biography. I add the assertion of the divine Oscar Wilde, which is that the highest criticism is the only form of autobiography that avoids vulgarity. Fusing Emerson, Saramago, and Wilde I joyously join in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*.

In 1147 the King of Portugal took Lisbon back from the Moors with significant aid from Crusaders, European knights battling at the Church’s summons. Raimundo Silva, a proofreader, audaciously revises this history, so that only the Portuguese King retakes his own capital. Though I regard *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* as Saramago’s masterwork to date, I love *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* best among his books because it is the most light-hearted. *The Stone Raft* is crossed by the irony of Europe’s hypocrisies, and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* is a parable of the triumph of Iberian Fascism. *Baltasar and Blimunda* is properly full of scorn of Church and Kingdom, but that also curbs exuberance. The later books—*Blindness* and *All the Names*—are dark works, though to very different degrees. For me the heart of Saramago is *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, possibly because it communicates so freely Saramago’s own pleasure in his work. But, going on seventy-one, I am willing to be sentimental. The love-story of Raimundo Silva and Maria Sara is sweet, not bittersweet. It breathes wholeheartedness, and is gentler, easier to linger with than the sublime embrace of Mary Magdalene and God’s victimized son, Jesus Christ. Both Raimundo and Maria Sara are weather-beaten, and the mutual love that comes to them is an enchantment for the reader, whoever she or he is.

But I digress to Saramago’s *Journey to Portugal* (1990), which arrived in the midst of this meditation, and gives me a more personal insight into someone whom I regard as our planet’s strongest living novelist, beyond any contemporary European or any of the Americans, whether they write in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. *Journey to Portugal* pursues the nation’s culture and history, but as only the living eminence of that culture could seek it. The traveller is like William Blake’s Mental Traveller, who makes the observations of a visionary. An American reviewer, long resident in Portugal, deprecated Saramago’s *Journey*, saying it was not useful, but it does not take a great imaginer to compose a guide-book. Like Blake, Saramago sees through the eye, not with it. The traveler gives us the spiritual form of Portugal: a compound of culture and history with what only the inner eye can behold. Sometimes, in reading *Journey to Portugal*, I am haunted by subtly complex intimations of the dark novel of 1995, the disturbing fantasy called *Blindness*. Only so comprehensive and searching a seer would turn, years later, to such a fantasy. To see so much, and so well, is to anticipate the terrors and yet also the dignity of loss.
The concept of dignity returns me to the love of Maria Sara and Raimundo, and to the humane comedy of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*. This is the most charming of Saramago’s books; the novelist himself is so moved by the love of Raimundo and Maria Sara that he all but abdicates social satire, though his genius for irony manifests itself incessantly. Whenever I seek to introduce friends or students to Saramago, I suggest they begin with *The Siege of Lisbon*, surely a fiction that every sensitive reader of good will would embrace.

*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) changed these notes to that of cosmological tragedy. Saramago’s Jesus, his God, his devil: all are open to interpretation, including Saramago’s own, with which I do not always agree. Myself a Jewish Gnostic by persuasion, I am delighted by the hangman God of Saramago’s *Gospel*, but I suspect that Saramago may agree with his own Christ’s benign farewell to the heavenly father: “Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done.” If that is not irony, what is it?

The *Gospel*, in my reading, stands apart among Saramago’s fictions, partly because of its aesthetic eminence, yet also because I cannot locate Saramago in it. He has always, as narrator, been his own best character: both in and out of his work, and watching and wondering at it. But where he stands in his *Gospel* seems disputable. “He stands with his Jesus Christ” might be the answer, but only extends the question. The *Gospel*’s God is certainly worthy of denial: he is the unpleasantest person in all of Saramago. But here I am perhaps at odds with Saramago and would prefer that anyone interested consult my extended essay on the *Gospel*.

*Blindness* (1995) reminds us again of Saramago’s uncanny power as a fabulist, but also as an imaginative moralist. Nothing in contemporary fiction reveals so clearly the contingent nature of our social realities. Saramago’s deepest insight is that our mundane existence is profoundly fragile, dependent upon givens that may be withdrawn any instant. If I compare *Blindness* with *The Plague* by Camus, I find I favor Saramago. Whether or not intentional, the open nature of the allegory in *Blindness* allows the reader to wonder if this is not another parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of Fascism, or of its first advent. As with the *Gospel*, this austere masterpiece is too complex for simple summary, and I hope to write of it elsewhere.

Saramago’s Portuguese is still too difficult for me, and so I eagerly await the English translation of his *Caverno*. I close here with a brief coda on *All the Names* (1997), his closest approach to Kafka, though light years from Kafka’s “Plenty of hope, for God, but not for us.” Senhor José, clerkiest of clerks, quests for an unknown woman, who alas is dead. And that is all. And that is far from all, for since you only can love what you cannot
ever know, completely, Senhor José cannot abandon the quest. Perhaps not Kafka, but a curious blend of Robert Louis Stevenson and Melville, might be the paradigm, but the vision of Saramago has Borgesian elements in it, and these precursors are folded in a single flame.

The Registrar, for whom Senhor José works, seems to me less God than he is Saramago himself, teaching men and women of letters that: “we who write and manipulate the papers of life and death should reunite the dead and living in one single archive.” As a literary critic, I take heart from the wisdom of Saramago. For what am I but one of the last Defenders of the Old Aesthetic Faith, the trust in the Covenant between the writers of genius and the discerning reader?

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ

José Saramago published *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* in 1991, when he approached his seventieth year. As Saramago’s fierce critical admirer, I am reluctant to choose it over all his other novels, but it is an awesome work, imaginatively superior to any other life of Jesus, including the four canonical Gospels. It loses some aspects of irony in Giovanni Pontiero’s fine translation, but more than enough survives to overcome the aware reader.

Saramago’s audacity is triumphant in his *Gospel* (the short title that I will employ). God, in Saramago’s *Gospel*, has some affinities to the J Writer’s Yahweh and some to Blake’s Nobodaddy, but it is important to see that Saramago resists giving us the Gnostics’ Ialdaboth. Kierkegaard in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* ironically observed that “to give thinking supremacy over everything else is gnosticism” (341). Yet Saramago’s God scandalizes us in ways that transcend the intellect, since a God who is both truth and time is the worst possible bad news. Saramago’s devil, delightfully named Pastor, is mildness itself compared to Saramago’s God, who refuses Pastor’s attempt to be reconciled, and who manifests neither love nor compassion for Jesus or for any other human being.

That must make the book seem sublimely outrageous, yet it is not, and I think that only a bigot or a fool would judge Saramago’s *Gospel* to be blasphemous. Saramago’s God can be both wily and bland, and he has a capacity for savage humor. No one is going to love this god, but then he doesn’t ask or expect love. Worship and obedience are his requirements, and sacred violence is his endless resource. Baruch Spinoza insisted that it was necessary for us to love God without ever expecting that God would love us in return. No one could love Saramago’s God, unless the lover were so deep in sado-masochism as to be helpless before its drive.
God tells us in the Gospel that he is dissatisfied with the small constituency provided him by his chosen people, the Jews:

For the last four thousand and four years I have been the God of the Jews, a quarrelsome and difficult race by nature, but on the whole I have got along fairly well with them, they now take Me seriously and are likely to go on doing so for the foreseeable future. So, You are satisfied, said Jesus. I am and I am not, or rather, I would be were it not for this restless heart of Mine, which is forever telling Me, Well now, a fine destiny you’ve arranged after four thousand years of trial and tribulation that no amount of sacrifice on altars will ever be able to repay, for You continue to be the god of a tiny population that occupies a minute part of this world You created with everything that’s on it, so tell Me, My son, if I should be satisfied with this depressing situation. Never having created a world, I’m in no position to judge, replied Jesus. True, you cannot judge, but you could help. Help in what way. To spread My word, to help Me become the god of more people. I don’t understand. If you play your part, that is to say, the part I have reserved for you in My plan, I have every confidence that within the next six centuries or so, despite all the struggles and obstacles ahead of us, I will pass from being God of the Jews to being God of those whom we will call Catholics, from the Greek. And what is this part You have reserved for me in Your plan. That of martyr, My son, that of victim, which is the best role of all for propagating any faith and stirring up fervor. God made the words martyr and victim seem like milk and honey on his tongue, but Jesus felt a sudden chill in his limbs, as if the mist had closed over him, while the devil regarded him with an enigmatic expression which combined scientific curiosity with grudging compassion. (311–12)

God is restless and does not wish to be depressed; those are his motives for victimizing Jesus, and subsequently for torturing to death the millions who will die as sacrifices to Jesus, whether they affirm him or deny him. That God is the greatest of comedians we learn from his chant of the martyrs: “a litany, in alphabetical order so as not to hurt any feelings about precedence and importance” (321). The litany is quite marvelous, from Adalbert of Prague, executed with a seven-pronged pikestaff, on to “Wolgefortis or Livrade or Eutropia the bearded virgin crucified” (325). Four long pages in length, the catalogue of sacred violence has such
delights as Blandina of Lyons, gored by a savage bull, and the unfortunate Januaris of Naples, first thrown to wild beasts, then into a furnace, and finally decapitated. The gusto of Saramago’s God recalls Edward Gibbon’s in Chapter XVI of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, except that Gibbon, maintaining decorum, avoids detailing the many varieties of martyrdom by torture. But Gibbon again anticipates Saramago by observing that Christians “have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels” (452–53).

Saramago’s God, his voice a little tired, speaks of the Inquisition as a necessary evil, and defends the burning of thousands because the cause of Jesus demands it. One blinks at the dustjacket of the American edition of Saramago’s *Gospel*, where we are assured that defying the authority of God the Father “is still not denial of Him.”

Though necessarily a secondary character in comparison to Saramago’s Jesus, God demands scrutiny beyond his menacingly comic aspects. Primarily, the *Gospel’s* God is time, and not truth, the other attribute he asserts. Saramago, a Marxist (an eccentric one), and not a Christian, subverts St. Augustine on the theodicy of time. If time is God, then God can be forgiven nothing, and who would desire to forgive him anyway? But then, the Gospel’s God is not the least interested in forgiveness: he forgives no one, not even Jesus, and he declines to forgive Pastor, when the devil makes an honest offer of obedience. Power is God’s only interest, and the sacrifice of Jesus employs the prospect of forgiveness of our sins only as an advertisement. God makes clear that all of us are guilty, and that he prefers to keep it that way. Jesus is no atonement: his crucifixion is merely a device by which God ceases to be Jewish, and becomes Catholic, a *converso* rather than a *marrano*. That is superb irony, and Saramago makes it high art, though to thus reduce it critically is to invite a Catholic onslaught. Of all fictive representations of God since the Yahwist’s, I vote for Saramago’s: he is at once the funniest and the most chilling, in the mode of the Shakespearean hero-villains: Richard III, Iago, Edmund in *King Lear*.

II

Pastor, or the devil, has his own charm, as befits a very original representation of Satan. A giant of a man, with a huge head, Pastor allows Jesus to become his assistant shepherd for a large flock of sheep and goats. In response to Jesus’ Pious exclamation—“The Lord alone is God”—the non-Jewish Pastor replies with grand pungency:
Certainly if God exists, He must be only one, but it would be better if He were two, then there would be a god for the wolf and one for the sheep, a god for the victim and one for the assassin, a god for the condemned man and one for the executioner. (192–93)

This sensible dualism is not exactly Satanic, and Pastor remains considerably more likeable than God throughout the novel. In the dialogues between the devil and the younger Jesus, the devil’s part clearly prevails, though honorably, unlike God’s dominance of Jesus when father and son first meet in the desert. God demands a sheep dear to Jesus as a sacrifice, and Jesus reluctantly assents. Pastor, on hearing of this, gives up on Jesus: “You’ve learned nothing, begone with you” (222). And Pastor, so far, is right: Jesus’ education as to God’s nature will be completed only upon the cross.

What then are we to make of Pastor? Saramago’s devil is humane yet scarcely a skeptic: he knows too much about God. If Saramago’s God is a Portuguese converso, then Saramago’s devil was never Jewish, and seems curiously unrelated both to God and to Jesus Christ. Why is Pastor in the book? Evidently, only as a witness, I think one has to conclude. Saramago seems to take us back to the unfallen Satan of the Book of Job, who goes to-and-fro on the earth, and walks up and down on it. And yet Job's Satan was an Accuser; Pastor is not. Why does Jesus sojourn four years with Pastor, as an apprentice shepherd? The angel, who comes belatedly to tell Mary that Jesus is God’s son tells us that “the devil only denies himself” (263), which is extravagantly ambiguous, and could mean that Pastor resists playing the role that God has assigned him. Mary’s angel, after telling us that Pastor was his schoolfellow, says that Pastor prospers because “the harmony of the universe requires it” (264). There is then a secret relationship between Pastor and God, a truth that dismays Jesus’ disciples (302).

When God, dressed like a wealthy Jew, appears to Jesus in the boat, Saramago imagines a magnificent re-entry for Pastor:

The boat swayed, the swimmer’s head emerged from the water, then his torso, splashing water everywhere, then his legs, a leviathan rising from the depths, and it turned out to be Pastor, reappearing after all these years. I’ve come to join you, he said, settling himself on the side of the boat, equidistant between Jesus and God, and yet oddly enough this time the boat did not tip to his side, as if Pastor had no weight or he was levitating and not really sitting, I’ve come to join you, he repeated, and hope I’m in
time to take part in the conversation. We’ve been talking but still haven’t got to the heart of the matter, replied God, and turning to Jesus, He told him, This is the devil whom we have just been discussing. Jesus looked from one to the other, and saw that without God’s beard they could have passed for twins, although the devil was younger and less wrinkled. Jesus said, I know very well who he is, I lived with him for four years when he was known as pastor, and God replied, You had to live with someone, it couldn’t be with Me, and you didn’t wish to be with your family, so that left only the devil. Did he come looking for me or did You send him. Neither one nor the other, let’s say we agreed that this was the best solution. So that’s why, when he spoke through the possessed man from Gadara, he called me Your son. Precisely. Which means that both of you kept me in the dark. As happens to all humans. But You said I was not human. And that is true, but you have been what might technically be called incarnated. And now what do you two want of me. I’m the one who wants something, not he. But both of you are here, I noticed that Pastor’s appearance came as no surprise, You must have been expecting him. Not exactly, although in principle one should always expect the devil. But if the matter You and I have to resolve affects only us, what is he doing here and why don’t You send him away. One can dismiss the rabble in the devil’s service if they become troublesome in word or deed, but not Satan himself. Then he’s here because this conversation concerns him too. My son, never forget what I’m about to tell you, everything that concerns God also concerns the devil. (309–10)

As God and the devil are twins (we have suspected this), it is a delight to be told that we cannot live with God, and so must choose between our families and the devil. God speaks of his desire to be God of the Catholics, but this ambition I have glanced at already, and wish here only to ask: why is Pastor in the boat? His expression combines “scientific curiosity with grudging compassion” (312), but he is there because, as Jesus accurately surmises, extending God’s domain also extends the devil’s. And yet poor Pastor has his perplexities:

I’m staying, said Pastor, and these were the first words he spoke since revealing his identity. I’m staying, he said a second time, and added, I myself can see things in the future, but I’m not always certain if what I see there is true or false, in other words, I can see
my lies for what they are, that is, my truths, but I don’t know to what extent the truths of others are their lies. (318)

Saramago dryly calls this a “torturous statement,” but he means that it clearly indicts God, whose truths indeed are his lies. God’s account of the Catholic Church that will be founded upon Jesus is true only insofar as it is historically horrible, and the zest God manifests as he itemizes martyrs and sums up the Inquisition has unmistakable sadistic overtones. Most alarmingly, God (a good Augustinian, before Augustine) deprecates all human joys as being false, since all of them emanate from original sin: “lust and fear are weapons the demon uses to torment wretched mankind” (325). When Jesus asks Pastor whether this is true, the devil’s reply is eloquently illuminating:

More or less, I simply took what God didn’t want, the flesh with all its joys and sorrows, youth and senility, bloom and decay, but it isn’t true that fear is one of my weapons, I don’t recall having invented sin and punishment or the terror they inspire. (325–26)

We tend to believe this when God snaps in response: “Be quiet ... sin and the devil are one and the same thing.” Does it need God to say that? Wouldn’t the Cardinal-Archbishop of Lisbon do as well? Saramago’s reply is uncanny. God describes the Crusades, to be waged against the unnamed Allah, whom Pastor disowns creating:

Who, then, will create this hostile god, asked Pastor. Jesus was at a loss for an answer, and God, who had been silent, remained silent, but a voice came down from the mist and said, Perhaps this god and the one to come are the same god. Jesus, God, and the devil pretended not to hear but could not help looking at one another in alarm, mutual fear is like that, it readily unites enemies. (328–29)

Only here, in Saramago’s Gospel, do we hear a voice beyond God’s. Whose is it? Who could proclaim what God does not wish to say, which is that he and Allah are one? With a God as sly and unlovable as Saramago’s, both we and Saramago long for a God beyond God, perhaps the Alien or Stranger God of the Gnostics. But whoever that God is, he does not speak again in this novel. Very deftly, Saramago has just told us explicitly what he tells us implicitly throughout: God and Jesus pragmatically are enemies, even as Pastor is the unwilling enemy of both. Yet in what does that enmity
Reacting to God's account of the Inquisition, Pastor remarks: "One has to be God to countenance so much blood" (330).

Pastor's great moment—and it is one of the handful of key passages in the book—comes in his vain attempt at reconciliation with God:

Pastor searched for the right words before explaining, I've been listening to all that has been said here in this boat, and although I myself have caught glimpses of the light and darkness ahead, I never realized the light came from the burning stakes and the darkness from great piles of bodies. Does this trouble you. It shouldn't trouble me, for I am the devil, and the devil profits from death even more than You do, it goes without saying that hell is more crowded than heaven. Then why do you complain. I'm not complaining, I'm making a proposal. Go ahead, but be quick, I cannot loiter here for all eternity. No one knows better than You that the devil too has a heart. Yes, but you make poor use of it. Today I use it by acknowledging Your power and wishing that it spread to the ends of the earth without the need of so much death, and since You insist that whatever thwarts and denies You comes from the evil I represent and govern in this world, I propose that You receive me into Your heavenly kingdom, my past offenses redeemed by those I will not commit in future, that You accept my obedience as in those happy days when I was one of Your chosen angels, Lucifer You called me, bearer of light, before my ambition to become Your equal consumed my soul and made me rebel against You. And would you care to tell Me why I should pardon you and receive you into My Kingdom. Because if You grant me that same pardon You will one day promise left and right, then evil will cease, Your son will not have to die, and Your kingdom will extend beyond the land of the Hebrews to embrace the whole globe, good will prevail everywhere, and I shall stand among the lowliest of the angels who have remained faithful, more faithful than all of them now that I have repented, and I shall sing Your praises, everything will end as if it had never been, everything will become what it should always have been. (330–31)

The irony of the humane Pastor and the inhumane God could not be better juxtaposed. God makes clear that he would prefer an even worse devil, if that were possible, and that without the devil, God cannot be God. Pastor, who has been persuasively sincere, shrugs and goes off, after
collecting from Jesus the old black bowl from Nazareth into which the blood of Jesus will drip in the novel’s closing words.

It is not sufficient to praise Saramago’s originality in limning his wholly undiabolic devil. One must go further. The enigmatic Pastor is the only devil who could be aesthetically and intellectually appropriate as we conclude the Second Millennium. Except that he cannot be crucified, this fallen angel has far more in common with Saramago’s Jesus than with Saramago’s God. They both are God’s victims, suffering the tyranny of time, which God calls truth. Pastor is resigned, and less rebellious than Jesus, yet that is because Pastor knows all there is to know. As readers, we remain more akin to Saramago’s uncanny devil than we are to his malevolent ironist of a God.

III

The glory of Saramago’s *Gospel* is Saramago’s Jesus, who seems to me humanly and aesthetically more admirable than any other version of Jesus in the literature of the century now ending. Perhaps D.H. Lawrence’s *The Man Who Died* is a near-rival, but Lawrence’s Jesus is a grand Lawrencian vitalist, rather than a possible human being. Saramago’s Jesus paradoxically is the novelist’s warmest and most memorable character of any of his books. W.H. Auden, Christian poet-critic, oddly found in Shakespeare’s Falstaff a type of Christ. I cite a paragraph of Auden to emphasize how far both Saramago’s God and Saramago’s Jesus are from even a generous, undogmatic Christian view:

> The Christian God is not a self-sufficient being like Aristotle’s First Cause, but a God who creates a world which he continues to love although it refuses to love him in return. He appears in this world, not as Apollo or Aphrodite might appear, disguised as man so that no mortal should recognize his divinity, but as a real man who openly claims to be God. And the consequence is inevitable. The highest religious and temporal authorities condemn Him as a blasphemer and a Lord of Misrule, as a bad Companion for mankind. Inevitable because, as Richelieu said, “The salvation of State is in this world,” and history has not as yet provided us with any evidence that the Prince of this world has changed his character. (207–08)

Saramago’s God, as I have said, neither loves the world nor does he expect it to love him in return. He wishes power, as widely extended as
possible. And Saramago’s Jesus is anything but an appearance of God “dis-
guised as man”; rather his Jesus has been shanghaied by God, for God’s
own purposes of power. As for Satan, “the Prince of this world,” we know
that Saramago has changed his character.

The title of the novel is _The Gospel According to Jesus_ Christ, where
“according” matters most. Saramago’s Jesus is an ironist, an amazingly
mild one considering his victimization by God. Before meeting John the
Baptist, Jesus is told that John is taller, heavier, more bearded, is hardly
clothed, and subsists on locust and wild honey. “He sounds more like the
Messiah than I do, Jesus said, rising from the circle” (354).

Saramago’s novel begins and ends with the Crucifixion, presented at the
start with considerable irony, but at the close with a terrible pathos:

Jesus is dying slowly, life ebbing from him, ebbing, when suddenly
the heavens overhead open wide and God appears in the same
attire He wore in the boat, and His words resound throughout the
earth, This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Jesus
realized then that he had been tricked, as the lamb led to sacrifice
is tricked, and that his life had been planned for death from the
very beginning. Remembering the river of blood and suffering
that would flow from his side and flood the globe, he called out to
the open sky, where God could be seen smiling, Men, forgive
Him, for He knows nor what He has done. Then he began expir-
ing in the midst of a dream. He found himself back in Nazareth
and saw his father shrugging his shoulders and smiling as he told
him, just as I cannot ask you all the questions, neither can you give
me all the answers. There was still some life in him when he felt a
sponge soaked in water and vinegar moisten his lips, and lookin
g down, he saw a man walking away with a bucket, a staff over his
shoulder. But what Jesus did not see, on the ground, was the black
bowl into which his blood was dripping. (376–77)

“Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done” testifies
both to Jesus’ _sweetness_ and to Saramago’s aesthetically controlled fury. No
disinterested reader, free of ideology and of creed, is going to forgive
Saramago’s God for the murder of Jesus and the subsequent torrents of
human blood that will result. Joyce’s Stephen speaks of the “hangman
God,” as some Italians still call him, and that precisely is Saramago’s God.
This would be appalling enough in itself but is augmented by the long and
loving portrait that Saramago gives of his Jesus.

The story of this Jesus begins and ends with an earthenware bowl, first
presented to Mary the mother of Jesus by a beggar, an apparent angel. That bowl overflows with luminous earth, presumably unfallen; at the close it catches the blood of the dying Jesus. The beggar is God, rather than Pastor, and appears again to Mary in a dream-vision that is also a tryst. When Jesus is born, God manifests again as the third of three passing shepherds, bringing bread of an occult kind. One supposes that this is subtly akin to God's seed resulting in the flesh of Jesus, but so nuanced is Saramago that supposition sometimes needs to be evaded, in this mysterious book.

The thirteen-year-old Jesus leaves home because the Romans have crucified his father Joseph, an invention entirely Saramago's own, just as Joseph's partial complicity in Herod's massacre of the innocents is also Saramago's rather startling suggestion, and is another trouble for Jesus that sends him forth on his road. But why does Saramago so alter the story? Perhaps this most humane of all versions of Jesus has to suffer the darkness of two fathers, the loving, unlucky, and guilty Joseph, and the unloving, fortunate, and even guiltier God.

When the boy Jesus disputes with the doctors of the Law in the Temple, I am reminded again of how Augustinian Saramago has made both God and the Law. One doesn't quarrel with this anachronism, because Saramago's God is himself so anxious to forsake Judaism (to call it that) for Catholicism. And besides, one grants Saramago his anachronisms in this marvelous book just as one grants them endlessly to Shakespeare. Still, guilt is not a concern of the only traditional Jesus who moves me, the Gnostic Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas. Yet I am a Jewish Gnostic explicating a beautiful book by a Portuguese who is no Catholic, anymore than Fernando Pessoa was. At just this point in his narrative, Saramago brings Jesus and Pastor together, and that curious sojourn I have examined already.

And yet Jesus’ principal relationship in his life, as Saramago sees it and tells it, is to neither of his fathers, nor to the devil, nor to Mary his mother, but to the whore Mary Magdalene. Of all the splendors of Saramago's Gospel, the love between Jesus and the Magdalene is the greatest, and their meeting and union (231–43) is for me the summit of Saramago's achievement, up to the present time. Echoing the Song of Songs, Saramago is most the artist when he intertwines a reply to Pastor with Jesus’ awakening to sexual life:

Jesus breathed so fast, for one moment he thought he would faint when her hands, the left hand on his forehead, the right hand on his ankles, began caressing him, slowly coming together, meeting
in the middle, then starting all over again. You’ve learned nothing, begone with you, Pastor had told him, and who knows, perhaps he meant to say that Jesus had not learned to cherish life. Now Mary Magdalene instructed him.... (236)

We can void the “perhaps,” and Mary Magdalene is Jesus’ best teacher, eclipsing Joseph, God, Pastor, and Mary the mother. In what may be the book’s greatest irony she teaches him freedom, which God will not permit any man, but in particular not to God’s only son.

I myself have just turned seventy, and ask more urgently than before: where shall wisdom be found? The wisdom of Saramago’s Gospel is very harsh: we can emulate Jesus only by forgiving God, but we do not believe, with Jesus, that God does not know what God has done.

I find the epilogue to Saramago’s Gospel not in Blindness, a parable as dark as any could be, but in the charming The Tale of the Unknown Island, a brief fable composed in 1998, the year of his Nobel Prize, and translated a year later by Margaret Jull Costa. In the wonderful comic vein of The Siege of Lisbon, Saramago’s tale begins with a man asking a king for a boat which can sail in quest of the unknown island. The boat granted, the man goes off to the harbor, followed by the king’s cleaning woman, who will constitute the rest of the crew.

The cleaning woman, with superb resolution, vows that she and the man will be sufficient to sail the caravel to the unknown island, thus heartening the man, whose will cannot match hers. They go to bed in separate bunks, port and starboard, and he dreams bad dreams, until he finds her shadow beside his shadow:

He woke up with his arms about the cleaning woman, and her arms about him, their bodies and their bunks fused into one, so that no one can tell any more if this is port or starboard. Then, as soon as the sun had risen, the man and the woman went to paint in white letters on both sides of the prow the name that the caravel still lacked. Around midday, with the tide, The Unknown Island finally set to sea, in search of itself. (51)

Saramago names no one: I am critically outrageous enough to venture upon some experimental namings, as an antithesis to Saramago’s Gospel. Let us call the man Jesus Christ, try the cleaning woman as Mary Magdalene, and the king, who exists to receive favors, will do for God. Doubtless, Saramago would shake his head, but so audacious a narrative genius inspires audacity in his critic. No one will be crucified upon the
masts of the Unknown Island, and the bad dreams of this Jesus will not be realized. Saramago's happy tale is a momentary antidote to the most tragic of his works. Beware a God who is at once truth and time, Saramago warns us, and abandon such a God to sail out in search of yourself.

Works Cited


Ancient Evenings

Mailer is the most visible of contemporary novelists, just as Thomas Pynchon is surely the most invisible. As the inheritor of the not exactly unfulfilled journalistic renown of Hemingway, Mailer courts danger, disaster, even scandal. Thinking of Mailer, Pynchon, and Doctorow among others, Geoffrey Hartman remarks that:

The prose of our best novelists is as fast, embracing, and abrasive as John Donne’s *Sermons*. It is polyphonic despite or within its monologue, its confessional stream of words....

Think of Mailer, who always puts himself on the line, sparring, taunting, as macho as Hemingway but deliberately renouncing taciturnity. Mailer places himself too near events, as science fiction or other forms of romance place themselves too far....

Elizabeth Hardwick, a touch less generous than the theoretical Hartman, turns Gertrude Stein against Mailer’s oral polyphony:

We have here a “literature” of remarks, a fast-moving confounding of Gertrude Stein’s confident assertion that “remarks are not literature.” Sometimes remarks are called a novel, sometimes a biography, sometimes history.

Hardwick’s Mailer is “a spectacular mound of images” or “anecdotal pile.” He lacks only an achieved work, in her view, and therefore is a delight to biographers, who resent finished work as a “sharp intrusion,” beyond
their ken. Her observations have their justice, yet the phenomenon is older than Mailer, or even Hemingway. The truly spectacular mound of images and anecdotal pile was George Gordon, Lord Byron, but he wrote *Don Juan*, considered by Shelley to be the great poem of the age. Yet even *Don Juan* is curiously less than Byron was, or seemed, or still seems. Mailer hardly purports to be the Byron of our day (the Hemingway will do), but he might fall back upon Byron as an earlier instance of the literary use of celebrity, or of the mastery of polyphonic remarks.

Is Mailer a novelist? His best book almost certainly is *The Executioner’s Song*, which Ms. Hardwick calls “the apotheosis of our flowering ‘oral literature’—thus far,” a triumph of the tape recorder. My judgment of its strength may be much too fast, as Ms. Hardwick warms, and yet I would not call *The Executioner’s Song* a novel. *Ancient Evenings* rather crazily is a novel, Mailer’s *Salammbô* as it were, but clearly more engrossing as visionary speculation than as narrative or as the representation of moral character. Richard Poirier, Mailer’s best critic, prefers *An American Dream* and *Why Are We In Vietnam?*, neither of which I can reread with aesthetic pleasure. Clearly, Mailer is a problematical writer; he has written no indisputable book, nothing on the order of *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, let alone *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* His formidable literary energies have not found their inevitable mode. When I think of him, *Advertisements for Myself* comes into my memory more readily than any other work, perhaps because truly he is his own supreme fiction. He is the author of “Norman Mailer,” a lengthy, discontinuous, and perhaps canonical fiction.

II

*Advertisements for Myself* (1960) sums up Mailer’s ambitions and accomplishments through the age of thirty-six. After a quarter-century, I have just reread it, with an inevitable mixture of pleasure and a little sadness. Unquestionably, Mailer has not fulfilled its many complex promises, and yet the book is much more than a miscellany. If not exactly a “Song of Myself,” nevertheless *Advertisements* remains Mailer at his most Whitmanian, as when he celebrates his novel-in-progress:

> If it is to have any effect, and I can hardly look forward to exhausting the next ten years without hope of a deep explosion of effect, the book will be fired to its fuse by the rumor that once I pointed to the farthest fence and said that within ten years I would try to
hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters. For if I have one ambition above all others, it is to write a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even old moldering Hemingway might have come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way.

Hemingway in 1959 reached the age of sixty, but was neither old nor moldering. He was to kill himself on July 2, 1961, but Mailer could hardly have anticipated that tragic release. In a letter to George Plimpton (January 17, 1961) Hemingway characterized *Advertisements for Myself* as the sort of ragtag assembly of his rewrites, second thoughts and ramblings shot through with occasional brilliance.” As precursor, Hemingway would have recognized Mailer’s vision of himself as Babe Ruth, hitting out farther than Stendhal, Tolstoy, *et al.*, except that the agonistic trope in the master is more agile than in the disciple, because ironized:

Am a man without any ambition, except to be champion of the world, I wouldn’t fight Dr. Tolstoy in a 20 round bout because I know he would knock my ears off. The Dr. had terrific wind and could go on forever and then some....

But these Brooklyn jerks are so ignorant that they start off fighting Mr. Tolstoy. And they announce they have beaten him before the fight starts.

That is from a letter to Charles Scribner (September 6–7, 1949), and “these Brooklyn jerks” indubitably refers to the highly singular author of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), who had proclaimed his victory over Hemingway as a tune-up for the Tolstoy match. Hemingway’s irony, directed as much towards himself as against Mailer, shrewdly indicates Mailer’s prime aesthetic flaw: a virtually total absence of irony. Irony may or may not be what the late Paul de Man called it, “the condition of literary language itself,” but Mailer certainly could use a healthy injection of it. If Thomas Mann is at one extreme—the modern too abounding in irony—then Mailer clearly hugs the opposite pole. The point against Mailer is made best by Max Apple in his splendid boxing tale, “Inside Norman Mailer” (*The Oranging of America*, 1976), where Mailer is handled with loving irony, and Hemingway’s trope touches its ultimate limits as Apple challenges Mailer in the ring:

“Concentrate,” says Mailer, “so the experience will not be wasted on you.
“It’s hard,” I say, “amid the color and distraction.”
“I know,” says my gentle master, “but think about one big thing.”

I concentrate on the new edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. It works. My mind is less a palimpsest, more a blank page.

“You may be too young to remember,” he says, “James Jones and James T. Farrell and James Gould Cozzens and dozens like them. I took them all on, absorbed all they had and went on my way, just like Shakespeare ate up Tottel’s Miscellany.”

There are no such passages in Mailer himself. One cannot require a novelist to cultivate irony, but its absolute absence causes difficulties, particularly when the writer is a passionate and heterodox moralist. Mailer’s speculations upon time, sex, death, cancer, digestion, courage, and God are all properly notorious, and probably will not earn him a place as one of the major sages. The strongest aesthetic defense of Mailer as speculator belongs to Richard Poirier, in his book of 1972:

Mailer insists on living at the divide, living on the divide, between the world of recorded reality and a world of omens, spirits, and powers, only that his presence there may blur the distinction. He seals and obliterates the gap he finds, like a sacrificial warrior or, as he would probably prefer, like a Christ who brings not peace but a sword, not forgiveness for past sins but an example of the pains necessary to secure a future.

This has force and some persuasiveness, but Poirier is too good a critic not to add the shadow side of Mailer’s “willingness not to foreclose on his material in the interests of merely formal resolutions.” Can there be any resolutions then for his books? Poirier goes on to say that: “There is no satisfactory form for his imagination when it is most alive. There are only exercises for it.” But this appears to imply that Mailer cannot shape his fictions, since without a sacrifice of possibility upon the altar of form, narrative becomes incoherent, frequently through redundance (as in Ancient Evenings). Mailer’s alternative has been to forsake Hemingway for Dreiser, as in the exhaustive narrative of The Executioner’s Song. In either mode, finally, we are confronted by the paradox that Mailer’s importance seems to transcend any of his individual works. The power of The Executioner’s Song finally is that of “reality in America,” to appropriate Lionel Trilling’s phrase for Dreiser’s appropriation of the material of An American Tragedy. Are we also justified in saying that An American Dream
essentially is Mailer’s comic-strip appropriation of what might be called “irreality in America”? Evidently there will never be a mature book by Mailer that is not problematical in its form. To Poirier, this is Mailer’s strength. Poirier’s generous overpraise of *An American Dream* and *Why Are We In Vietnam?* perhaps can be justified by Mailer’s peculiarly American aesthetic, which has its Emersonian affinities. Mailer’s too is an aesthetic of use, a pragmatic application of the American difference from the European past. *The Armies of the Night* (1968), rightly praised by Poirier, may seem someday Mailer’s best and most permanent book. It is certainly not only a very American book, but today is one of the handful of works that vividly represent an already lost and legendary time, the era of the so-called Counterculture that surged up in the later 1960’s, largely in protest against our war in Vietnam. Mailer, more than any other figure, has broken down the distinction between fiction and journalism. This sometimes is praised in itself. I judge it an aesthetic misfortune, in everyone else, but on Mailer himself I tend to reserve judgment, since the mode now seems his own.

III

Mailer’s validity as a cultural critic is always qualified by his own immersion in what he censures. Well known for being well known, he is himself inevitably part of what he deplores. As a representation, he at least rivals all of his fictive creations. *Ancient Evenings*, his most inventive and exuberant work, is essentially a self-portrait of the author as ancient Egyptian magician, courtier, lover and anachronistic speculator. Despite Poirier’s eloquent insistences, the book leaves Mailer as he was judged to be by Poirier in 1972, “like Melville without *Moby Dick*, George Eliot without *Middlemarch*, Mark Twain without *Huckleberry Finn*. Indeed, the book is Mailer’s *Pierre*, his *Romola*, his *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. At sixty-two, Mailer remains the author of *Advertisements for Myself*, *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner’s Song*.

Is he then a superb accident of personality, wholly adequate to the spirit of the age? Though a rather bad critic of novelists, he is one of the better critics of Norman Mailer. His one critical blindness, in regard to himself, involves the destructive nature of Hemingway’s influence upon him. Hemingway was a superb storyteller and an uncanny prose poet; Mailer is neither. Essentially, Mailer is a phantasmagoric visionary who was found by the wrong literary father, Hemingway. Hemingway’s verbal economy is not possible for Mailer. There are profound affinities between Hemingway and Wallace Stevens, but none between Mailer and the best
poetry of his age. This is the curious sadness with which the “First Advertisements for Myself” reverberates after twenty-five years:

So, mark you. Every American writer who takes himself to be both major and macho must sooner or later give a *faena* which borrows from the self-love of a Hemingway style ...

For you see I have come to have a great sympathy for the Master’s irrepresible tantrum that he is the champion writer of this time, and of all time, and that if anyone can pin Tolstoy, it is Ernest H.

By taking on Hemingway, Mailer condemned himself to a similar agon, which harmed Hemingway, except in *The Sun Also Rises* and in *The First Forty-Nine Stories*. It has more than harmed Mailer’s work. *The Deer Park* defies rereading, and *An American Dream* and *Why Are We In Vietnam?* have now lost the immediacy of their occasions, and are scarcely less unreadable. In what now is the Age of Pynchon, Mailer has been eclipsed as a writer of fictions, though hardly at all as a performing self. He may be remembered more as a prose prophet than as a novelist, more as Carlyle than as Hemingway. There are worse literary fates. Carlyle, long neglected, doubtless will return. Mailer, now celebrated, doubtless will vanish into neglect, and yet always will return, as a historian of the moral consciousness of his era, and as the representative writer of his generation.
James Baldwin
(1924–1987)

I

Whatever the ultimate canonical judgment upon James Baldwin’s fiction may prove to be, his nonfictional work clearly has permanent status in American literature. Baldwin seems to me the most considerable moral essayist now writing in the United States, and is comparable to George Orwell as a prose Protestant in stance. The evangelical heritage never has abandoned the author of Go Tell It on the Mountain, and Baldwin, like so many American essayists since Emerson, possesses the fervor of a preacher. Unlike Emerson, Baldwin lacks the luxury of detachment, since he speaks, not for a displaced Yankee majority, but for a sexual minority within a racial minority, indeed for an aesthetic minority among black homosexuals.

Ultimately, Baldwin’s dilemma as a writer compelled to address social torments and injustices is that he is a minority of one, a solitary voice breaking forth against himself (and all others) from within himself. Like Carlyle (and a single aspect of the perspectivizing Nietzsche), Baldwin is of the authentic lineage of Jeremiah, most inward of prophets. What Baldwin opposes is what might be called, in Jeremiah’s language, the injustice of outwardness, which means that Baldwin always must protest, even in the rather unlikely event that his country ever were to turn from selfishness and cruelty to justice and compassion in confronting its underclass of the exploited poor, whether blacks, Hispanics, or others cast out by the Reagan Revolution.

It seems accurate to observe that we remember Jeremiah, unlike Amos or Micah, for his individuation of his own suffering, rather than for his social vision, such as it was. Baldwin might prefer to have been an Amos or
a Micah, forerunners of Isaiah, rather than a Jeremiah, but like Jeremiah he is vivid as a rhetorician of his own psychic anguish and perplexities, and most memorable as a visionary of a certain involuntary isolation, an election that requires a dreadful cost of confirmation. As Baldwin puts it, the price of the ticket is to accept the real reasons for the human journey:

The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white—: and, in the main, nothing more than that, or, as he was to insist, nothing less. This incredibly limited not to say dimwitted ambition has choked many a human being to death here: and this, I contend, is because the white American has never accepted the real reasons for his journey. I know very well that my ancestors had no desire to come to this place: but neither did the ancestors of the people who became white and who require of my captivity a song. They require of me a song less to celebrate my captivity than to justify their own.

The Biblical text that Baldwin alludes to here, Psalm 137, does begin with the song of the exiles from Zion (“and they that wasted us required of us mirth”) but ends with a ferocious prophecy against the wasters, ourselves. No writer—black or white—warns us so urgently of “the fire next time” as Baldwin and Jeremiah do, but I hear always in both prophets the terrible pathos of origins:

Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.
Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

We: my family, the living and the dead, and the children coming along behind us. This was a complex matter, for I was not living with my family in Harlem, after all, but “down-town,” in the “white world,” in alien and mainly hostile territory. On the other hand, for me, then, Harlem was almost as alien and in a yet more intimidating way and risked being equally hostile, although for very different reasons. This truth cost me something in guilt and confusion, but it was the truth. It had something to do with my being the son of an evangelist and having been a child evangelist, but this is not all there was to it—that is, guilt is not all there was to it.

The fact that this particular child had been born when and
where he was born had dictated certain expectations. The child
does not really know what these expectations are—does not know
how real they are—until he begins to fail, challenge, or defeat
them. When it was clear, for example, that the pulpit, where I had
made so promising a beginning, would not be my career, it was
hoped that I would go on to college. This was never a very realis-
tic hope and—perhaps because I knew this—I don’t seem to have
felt very strongly about it. In any case, this hope was dashed by the
death of my father.

Once I had left the pulpit, I had abandoned or betrayed my role
in the community—indeed, my departure from the pulpit and my
leaving home were almost simultaneous. (I had abandoned the
ministry in order not to betray myself by betraying the ministry.)

Reluctant prophets are in the position of Jonah; they provide texts for
the Day of Atonement. Baldwin is always at work reexamining everything,
doing his first works over; as he says: “Sing or shout or testify or keep it to
yourself: but know whence you came.” We came crying hither because we
came to this great stage of fools, but Baldwin, like Jeremiah and unlike
Shakespeare, demands a theology of origins. He finds it in self-hatred,
which he rightly insists is universal, though he seems to reject or just not
be interested in the Freudian account of our moral masochism, our need
for punishment. The evangelical sense of conscious sin remains strong in
Baldwin. Yet, as a moral essayist, he is post-Christian, and persuades us
that his prophetic stance is not so much religious as aesthetic. A kind of
aesthetic of the moral life governs his vision, even in the turbulence of The
Fire Next Time and No Name in the Street, and helps make them his finest
achievements so far.

*The Fire Next Time*

The center of Baldwin’s prophecy can be located in one long, powerful
paragraph of *The Fire Next Time*:

“The white man’s Heaven,” sings a Black Muslim minister, “is the
black man’s Hell.” One may object—possibly—that this puts the
matter somewhat too simply, but the song is true, and it has been
ture for as long as white men have ruled the world. The Africans put
it another way: When the white man came to Africa, the white man
had the Bible and the African had the land, but now it is the white
man who is being, reluctantly and bloodily, separated from the land,
and the African who is still attempting to digest or to vomit up the Bible. The struggle, therefore, that now begins in the world is extremely complex, involving the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power—that is, politics—and in the realm of morals. In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith, the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels. This particular true faith, moreover, is more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels bears witness. It goes without saying, then, that whoever questions the authority of the true faith also contests the right of the nations that hold this faith to rule over him—contests, in short, their title to his land. The spreading of the Gospel, regardless of the motives or the integrity or the heroism of some of the missionaries, was an absolutely indispensable justification for the planting of the flag. Priests and nuns and schoolteachers helped to protect and sanctify the power that was so ruthlessly being used by people who were indeed seeking a city, but not one in the heavens, and one to be made, very definitely, by captive hands. The Christian church itself—again, as distinguished from some of its ministers—sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God. God had come a long way from the desert—but then so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, and on the dark side of Heaven, had become—for all practical purposes, anyway—black. Thus, in the realm of morals the role of Christianity has been, at best, ambivalent. Even leaving out of account the remarkable arrogance that assumed that the ways and morals of others were inferior to those of Christians, and that they therefore had every right, and could use any means, to change them, the collision between cultures—and the schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom—had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was, and as treacherous as the sea still is. It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only
be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.

This superb instance of Baldwin’s stance and style as a moral essayist depends for its rhetorical power upon a judicious blend of excess and restraint. Its crucial sentence achieves prophetic authority:

It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church.

The parenthesis, nobly skeptical, is the trope of a master rhetorician, and placing “believe” in italics nicely puts into question the problematics of faith. “Divorce,” denounced by St. Paul as having been introduced because of our hardness of hearts, acquires the antithetical aura of the Church itself, while Christian prohibitions are assimilated (rather wickedly) to Christian crimes and hypocrisies. This is, rhetorically considered, good, unclean fun, but the burden is savage, and steeped in moral high seriousness. The strength of The Fire Next Time comes to rest in its final paragraph, with the interplay between two italicized rhetorical questions, an interplay kindled when “then” is added to the second question:

When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, What will happen to all that beauty? For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah’s table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God’s—or Allah’s—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, What will happen to all that beauty then? I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable—a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, “Whatever goes up must come down.” And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has
ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!”

The shrewd rhetorical movement here is from the waterwheel to the ambivalent divine promise of no second flood, the promise of covenant with its dialectical countersong of the conflagration ensuing from our violation of covenant. That vision of impending fire re-illuminates the poignant question: “What will happen to all that beauty then?” All that beauty that is in jeopardy transcends even the beauty of black people, and extends to everything human, and to bird, beast, and flower.

*No Name in the Street* takes its fierce title from Job 18:16–19, where it is spoken to Job by Bildad the Shuhite, concerning the fate of the wicked:

His roots shall be dried up beneath, and above shall his branch be cut off.

His remembrance shall perish from the earth, and he shall have no name in the street.

He shall be driven from light into darkness, and chased out of the world.

He shall neither have son nor nephew among his people, nor any remaining in his dwellings.

They that come after him shall be astonished at his day, as they that went before were affrighted.

I have to admit, having just read (and re-read) my way through the 690 pages of *The Price of the Ticket*, that frequently I am tempted to reply to Baldwin with Job’s response to Bildad:

How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?

These ten times have ye reproached me: ye are not ashamed that ye make yourselves strange to me. And be it indeed that I have erred, mine error remaineth with myself.
If indeed ye will magnify yourselves against me, and plead against me my reproach.

Baldwin’s rhetorical authority as prophet would be seriously impaired if he were merely a job’s comforter, Bildad rather than Jeremiah. *No Name in the Street* cunningly evades the risk that Baldwin will magnify himself against the reader, partly by the book’s adroitness at stationing the author himself in the vulnerable contexts of his own existence, both in New York and in Paris. By not allowing himself (or his readers) to forget how perpetually a black homosexual aesthete and moralist, writer and preacher, must fight for his life, Baldwin earns the pathos of the prophetic predicament:

I made such motions as I could to understand what was happening, and to keep myself afloat. But I had been away too long. It was not only that I could not readjust myself to life in New York—it was also that I would not: I was never going to be anybody’s nigger again. But I was now to discover that the world has more than one way of keeping you a nigger, has evolved more than one way of skinning the cat; if the hand slips here, it tightens there, and now I was offered, gracefully indeed: membership in the club. I had lunch at some elegant bistros, dinner at some exclusive clubs. I tried to be understanding about my countrymen’s concern for difficult me, and unruly mine—and I really was trying to be understanding, though not without some bewilderment, and, eventually, some malice. I began to be profoundly uncomfortable. It was a strange kind of discomfort, a terrified apprehension that I had lost my bearings. I did not altogether understand what I was hearing. I did not trust what I heard myself saying. In very little that I heard did I hear anything that reflected anything which I knew, or had endured, of life. My mother and my father, my brothers and my sisters were not present at the tables at which I sat down, and no one in the company had ever heard of them. My own beginnings, or instincts, began to shift as nervously as the cigarette smoke that wavered around my head. I was not trying to hold on to my wretchedness. On the contrary, if my poverty was coming, at last, to an end, so much the better, and it wasn’t happening a moment too soon—and yet, I felt an increasing chill, as though the rest of my life would have to be lived in silence.
The discomfort of having lost bearings is itself a prophetic trope, and comes to its fruition in the book’s searing final paragraph:

To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend—which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn—and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life. Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it, and some of the people in it. A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one’s compatriots than be mocked and detested by them. And there is a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind: it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction. I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come.

Not to be at home among one’s compatriots is to avoid the catastrophe of being at ease in the new Zion that is America. A reader, however moved by Baldwin’s rhetorical authority, can be disturbed here by the implication that all blacks are prophets, at least in our society. Would to God indeed that all the Lord’s people were prophets, but they are not, and cannot be. Fourteen years after the original publication of *No Name in the Street*, I am confronted by polls indicating that the President of the United States, currently enjoying a sixty-eight percent approval rating among all his constituents, also possesses a rather surprising fifty percent endorsement from my black fellow citizens. Whatever the President’s place in history may prove to be, time has darkened Baldwin’s temporal prophecy that his own people could remain an undivided witness against our civilization.

*The Price of the Ticket*

Like every true prophet, Baldwin passionately would prefer the fate of Jonah to that of Jeremiah, but I do not doubt that his authentic descent from Jeremiah will continue to be valid until the end of his life (and mine). The final utterance in *The Price of the Ticket* seems to me Baldwin’s most poignant, ever:
Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.

Most of us, however, do not appear to be freaks—though we are rarely what we appear to be. We are, for the most part, visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our sexual equipment.

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it.

Baldwin is most prophetic, and most persuasive, when his voice is as subdued as it is here. What gives the rhetorical effect of self-subdual is the precise use of plural pronouns throughout. Moving from his own predicament to the universal, the prophet achieves an effect directly counter to Jeremiah’s pervasive trope of individualizing the prophetic alternative. The ultimate tribute that Baldwin has earned is his authentic share in Jeremiah’s most terrible utterance:

O Lord, thou has deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me.

For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the Lord was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily.

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay,
A professedly Roman Catholic prose romance begins with the death of an eighty-four-year-old Southern American Protestant, self-called prophet, and professional moonshiner, as set forth in this splendidly comprehensive sentence:

Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up.

Flannery O'Connor's masterwork, *The Violent Bear It Away*, ends with the fourteen-year-old Tarwater marching towards the city of destruction, where his own career as prophet is to be suffered:

Intermittently the boy's jagged shadow slanted across the road ahead of him as if it cleared a rough path toward his goal. His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.
In Flannery O'Connor's fierce vision, the children of God, all of us, always are asleep in the outward life. Young Tarwater, clearly O'Connor's surrogate, is in clinical terms a borderline schizophrenic, subject to auditory hallucinations in which he hears the advice of an imaginary friend who is overtly the Christian Devil. But clinical terms are utterly alien to O'Connor, who accepts only theological namings and unnamings. This is necessarily a spiritual strength in O'Connor, yet it can be an aesthetic distraction also, since *The Violent Bear It Away* is a fiction of preternatural power, and not a religious tract. Rayber, the protagonist of both prophets, old and young Tarwater, is an aesthetic disaster, whose defects in representation alone keep the book from making a strong third with Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. O'Connor despises Rayber, and cannot bother to make him even minimally persuasive. We wince at his unlikely verbal mixture of popular sociology and confused psychology, as even Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's partisan, is compelled to admit:

Her weaknesses—a lack of perfect familiarity with the terminology of the secular sociologists, psychologists, and rationalists she often casts as adversary figures, and an evident weighting of the scales against them all—are present in the character of Rayber (who combines all three categories).

One hardly believes that a perfect familiarity with the writings say of David Riesman, Erik Erikson, and Karl Popper would have enabled O'Connor to make poor Rayber a more plausible caricature of what she despised. We remember *The Violent Bear It Away* for its two prophets, and particularly young Tarwater, who might be called a Gnostic version of Huckleberry Finn. What makes us free is the Gnosis, according to the most ancient of heresies. O'Connor, who insisted upon her Catholic orthodoxy, necessarily believed that what makes us free is baptism in Christ, and for her the title of her novel was its most important aspect, since the words are spoken by Jesus himself:

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

I have quoted the King James Version of Matt. 11:9–12, where “and the violent take it by force” is a touch more revealing than O'Connor's Catholic version, “and the violent bear it away.” For O'Connor, we are back in or rather never have left Christ's time of urgency, and her heart is with those like the Tarwaters who know that the kingdom of heaven will suffer them to take it by force:

The lack of realism would be crucial if this were a realistic novel or if the novel demanded the kind of realism you demand. I don't believe it does. The old man is very obviously not a Southern Baptist, but an independent, a prophet in the true sense. The true prophet is inspired by the Holy Ghost, not necessarily by the dominant religion of his region. Further, the traditional Protestant bodies of the South are evaporating into secularism and respectability and are being replaced on the grass roots level by all sorts of strange sects that bear not much resemblance to traditional Protestantism—Jehovah's Witnesses, snake-handlers, Free Thinking Christians, Independent Prophets, the swindlers, the mad, and sometimes the genuinely inspired. A character has to be true to his own nature and I think the old man is that. He was a prophet, not a church-member. As a prophet, he has to be a natural Catholic. Hawthorne said he didn't write novels, he wrote romances; I am one of his descendants.

O'Connor's only disputable remark in this splendid defense of her book is the naming of old Tarwater as “a natural Catholic.” Hawthorne's descendant she certainly was, by way of Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Nathanael West, but though Hawthorne would have approved her mode, he would have been shocked by her matter. To ignore what is authentically shocking about O'Connor is to misread her weakly. It is not her incessant violence that is troublesome but rather her passionate endorsement of that violence as the only way to startle her secular readers into a spiritual awareness. As a visionary writer, she is determined to take us by force, to bear us away so that we may be open to the possibility of grace. Her unbelieving reader is represented by the grandmother in the famous story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”:

She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going
to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

That murmur of recognition is what matters for O’Connor. The Misfit speaks for her in his mordant observation: “She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” Secular critic as I am, I need to murmur: “Surely that does make goodness a touch too strenuous?” But O’Connor anticipates our wounded outcries of nature against grace, since we understandably prefer a vision that corrects nature without abolishing it. Young Tarwater himself, as finely recalcitrant a youth as Huckleberry Finn, resists not only Rayber but the tuition of old Tarwater. A kind of swamp fox, like the Revolutionary hero for whom he was named, the boy Tarwater waits for his own call, and accepts his own prophetic election only after he has baptized his idiot cousin Bishop by drowning him, and even then only in consequence of having suffered a homosexual rape by the Devil himself. O’Connor’s audacity reminds us of the Faulkner of *Sanctuary* and the West of *A Cool Million*. Her theology purports to be Roman Catholicism, but her sensibility is Southern Gothic, Jacobean in the mode of the early T. S. Eliot, and even Gnostic, in the rough manner of Carlyle, a writer she is likely never to have read.

I myself find it a critical puzzle to read her two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, and her two books of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and then to turn from her fiction to her occasional prose in *Mystery and Manners*, and her letters in *The Habit of Being*. The essayist and letter-writer denounces Manichaeanism, Jansenism, and all other deviations from normative Roman Catholicism, while the storyteller seems a curious blend of the ideologies of Simone Weil reading the New Testament into the *Iliad*’s “poem of force” and of René Girard assuring us that there can be no return of the sacred without violence. Yet the actual O’Connor, in her letters, found Weil “comic and terrible,” portraying the perpetual waiter for grace as an “angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth,” and I suspect she would have been as funny about the violent thematicism of Girard.

To find something of a gap between O’Connor as lay theologian and O’Connor as a storyteller verging upon greatness may or may not be
accurate but in any case intends to undervalue neither the belief nor the fiction. I suspect though that the fiction’s implicit theology is very different from what O’Connor thought it to be, a difference that actually enhances the power of the novels and stories. It is not accidental that *As I Lay Dying* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* were the only works of fiction that O’Connor urged upon Robert Fitzgerald, or that her own prose cadences were haunted always by the earlier rather than the later Eliot. *The Waste Land, As I Lay Dying, and Miss Lonelyhearts* are not works of the Catholic imagination but rather of that Gnostic pattern Gershom Scholem termed “redemption through sin.” *Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away,* and stories like “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and the merciless “Parker’s Back,” take place in the same cosmos as *The Waste Land, As I Lay Dying,* and *Miss Lonelyhearts.* This world is the American version of the cosmological emptiness that the ancient Gnostics called the *kenoma,* a sphere ruled by a demiurge who has usurped the alien God, and who has exiled God out of history and beyond the reach of our prayers.

II

In recognizing O’Connor’s fictive universe as being essentially Gnostic, I dissent not only from her own repudiation of heresy but from the sensitive reading of Jefferson Humphries, who links O’Connor to Proust in an “aesthetic of violence”:

For O’Connor, man has been his own demiurge, the author of his own fall, the keeper of his own cell....

The chief consequence of this partly willful, partly inherited alienation from the sacred is that the sacred can only intrude upon human perception as a violence, a rending of the fabric of daily life.

On this account, which remains normative, whether Hebraic or Catholic, we are fallen into the *kenoma* through our own culpability. In the Gnostic formulation, creation and fall were one and the same event, and all that can save us is a certain spark within us, a spark that is no part of the creation but rather goes back to the original abyss. The grandeur or sublimity that shines through the ruined creation is a kind of abyss-radiance, whether in Blake or Carlyle or the early Eliot or in such novelistic masters of the grotesque as Faulkner, West, and O’Connor.

The ugliest of O’Connor’s stories, yet one of the strongest, is “A View of the Woods” in *Everything That Rises Must Converge.* Its central characters
are the seventy-nine-year-old Mr. Fortune, and his nine-year-old granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts. I am uncertain which of the two is the more abominable moral character or hideous human personality, partly because they resemble one another so closely in selfishness, obduracy, false pride, sullenness, and just plain meanness. At the story’s close, a physical battle between the two leaves the little girl a corpse, throttled and with her head smashed upon a rock, while her grandfather suffers a heart attack, during which he has his final “view of the woods,” in one of O’Connor’s typically devastating final paragraphs:

Then he fell on his back and looked up helplessly along the bare trunks into the tops of the pines and his heart expanded once more with a convulsive motion. It expanded so fast that the old man felt as if he were being pulled after it through the woods, felt as if he were running as fast as he could with the ugly pines toward the lake. He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him. He could see it in the distance already, a little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water. It grew as he ran toward it until suddenly the whole lake opened up before him, riding majestically in little corrugated folds toward his feet. He realized suddenly that he could not swim and that he had not bought the boat. On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance. He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay.

The huge yellow monster is a bulldozer, and so is the dying Mr. Fortune, and so was the dead Mary Fortune Pitts. What sustains our interest in such antipathetic figures in so grossly unsympathetic a world? O’Connor’s own commentary does not help answer the question, and introduces a bafflement quite its own:

The woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol. They walk across the water, they are bathed in a red light, and they in the end escape the old man’s vision and march off over the hills. The name of the story is a view of the woods and the woods alone are pure enough to be a Christ symbol if anything is. Part of the tension of the story is created by Mary Fortune and the old man being images of
each other but opposite in the end. One is saved and the other is dammed [sic] and there is no way out of it, it must be pointed out and underlined. Their fates are different. One has to die first because one kills the other, but you have read it wrong if you think they die in different places. The old man dies by her side; he only thinks he runs to the edge of the lake, that is his vision.

What divine morality it can be that saves Mary Fortune and damns her wretched grandfather is beyond my ken, but the peculiarities of O’Connor’s sense of the four last things transcend me at all times, anyway. What is more interesting is O’Connor’s own final view of the woods. Her sacramental vision enables her to see Christ in “the gaunt trees [that] had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance.” Presumably their marching away is emblematic of Mr. Fortune’s damnation, so far as O’Connor is concerned. As a reader of herself, I cannot rank O’Connor very high here. Surely Mary Fortune is as damnable and damned as her grandfather, and the woods are damnable and damned also. They resemble not the normative Christ but the Jesus of the Gnostic texts, whose phantom only suffers upon the cross while the true Christ laughs far off in the alien heavens, in the ultimate abyss.

O’Connor’s final visions are more equivocal than she evidently intended. Here is the conclusion of “Revelation”:

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were
marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

This is meant to burn away false or apparent virtues, and yet consumes not less than everything. In O'Connor's mixed realm, which is neither nature nor grace, Southern reality nor private phantasmagoria, all are necessarily damned, not by an aesthetic of violence but by a Gnostic aesthetic in which there is no knowing unless the knower becomes one with the known. Her Catholic moralism masked from O'Connor something of her own aesthetic of the grotesque. Certainly her essay on "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" evades what is central in her own praxis:

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. That is a large statement, and it is dangerous to make it, for almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety. But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature. In any case, it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.
The freakish displacement here is from “wholeness,” which is then described as the state of having been made in the image or likeness of God. But that mode, displacement, is not what is operative in O’Connor’s fiction. Her own favorite, among her people, is young Tarwater, who is not a freak, and who is so likeable because he values his own freedom above everything and anyone, even his call as a prophet. We are moved by Tarwater because of his recalcitrance, because he is the Huck Finn of visionaries. But he moves O’Connor, even to identification, because of his inescapable prophetic vocation. It is the interplay between Tarwater fighting to be humanly free, and Tarwater besieged by his great-uncle’s training, by the internalized Devil, and most of all by O’Connor’s own ferocious religious zeal, that constitutes O’Connor’s extraordinary artistry. Her pious admirers to the contrary, O’Connor would have bequeathed us even stronger novels and stories, of the eminence of Faulkner’s, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness.
Gabriel García Márquez
(1928–)

One Hundred Years of Solitude

Macondo, according to Carlos Fuentes, “begins to proliferate with the richness of a Columbian Yoknapatawpha.” Faulkner, crossed by Kafka, is the literary origins of Gabriel García Márquez. So pervasive is the Faulknerian influence that at times one hears Joyce and Conrad, Faulkner’s masters, echoed in García Márquez, yet almost always as mediated by Faulkner. The Autumn of the Patriarch may be too pervaded by Faulkner, but One Hundred Years of Solitude absorbs Faulkner, as it does all other influences, into a phantasmagoria so powerful and self-consistent that the reader never questions the authority of García Márquez. Perhaps, as Reinard Argas suggested, Faulkner is replaced by Carpentier and Kafka by Borges in One Hundred Years of Solitude, so that the imagination of García Márquez domesticates itself within its own language. Macondo, visionary realm, is an Indian and Hispanic act of consciousness, very remote from Oxford, Mississippi, and from the Jewish cemetery in Prague. In his subsequent work, García Márquez went back to Faulkner and Kafka, but then One Hundred Years of Solitude is a miracle and could only happen once, if only because it is less a novel than it is a Scripture, the Bible of Macondo; Melquíades the Magus, who writes in Sanskrit, may be more a mask for Borges than for the author himself, and yet the Gypsy storyteller also connects García Márquez to the archaic Hebrew storyteller, the Yahwist, at once the greatest of realists and the greatest of fantasists but above all the only true rival of Homer and Tolstoy as a storyteller.

My primary impression, in the act of rereading One Hundred Years of Solitude, is a kind of aesthetic battle fatigue, since every page is rammed full of life beyond the capacity of any single reader to absorb. Whether the
impacted quality of this novel’s texture is finally a virtue I am not sure, since sometimes I feel like a man invited to dinner who has been served nothing but an enormous platter of Turkish Delight. Yet it is all story, where everything conceivable and inconceivable is happening at once, from creation to apocalypse, birth to death. Roberto González Echevarría has gone so far as to surmise that in some sense it is the reader who must die at the end of the story, and perhaps it is the sheer richness of the text that serves to destroy us. Joyce half-seriously envisioned an ideal reader cursed with insomnia who would spend her life in unpacking Finnegans Wake. The reader need not translate One Hundred Years of Solitude, a novel that deserves its popularity as it has no surface difficulties whatsoever. And yet, a new dimension is added to reading by this book. Its ideal reader has to be like its most memorable personage, the sublimely outrageous Colonel Aureliano Buendía, who “had wept in his mother’s womb and been born with his eyes open.” There are no wasted sentences, no mere transitions, in this novel, and you must notice everything at the moment you read it. It will all cohere, at least as myth and metaphor if not always as literary meaning.

In the presence of an extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination. That Emersonian maxim is Wallace Stevens’s and is worthy of the visionary of Notes toward a Supreme Fiction and An Ordinary Evening in New Haven. Macondo is a supreme fiction, and there are no ordinary evenings within its boundaries. Satire, even parody, and most fantasy—these are now scarcely possible in the United States. How can you satirize Ronald Reagan or Jerry Falwell? Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 ceases to seem fantasy whenever I visit Southern California, and a ride on the New York City subway tends to reduce all literary realism to an idealizing projection. Some aspects of Latin American existence transcend even the inventions of García Márquez. I am informed, on good authority, that the older of the Duvalier dictators of Haiti, the illustrious Papa Doc, commanded that all black dogs in his nation be destroyed when he came to believe that a principal enemy had transformed himself into a black dog. Much that is fantastic in One Hundred Years of Solitude would be fantastic anywhere, but much that seems unlikely to a North American critic may well be a representation of reality.

Emir Monegal emphasized that García Márquez’s masterwork was unique among Latin American novels, being radically different from the diverse achievements of Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Lezama Lima, Mario Vargas Llosa, Miguel Angel Asturias, Manuel Puig, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and so many more. The affinities to Borges and to Carpentier were noted by Monegal as by Arenas, but Monegal’s dialectical
point seemed to be that García Márquez was representative only by join-
ing all his colleagues in not being representative. Yet it is now true that, for
most North American readers, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* comes first to
mind when they think of the Hispanic novel in America. Alejo Carpentier’s
*Explosion in a Cathedral* may be an even stronger book, but only Borges has
dominated the North American literary imagination as García Márquez
has with his grand fantasy. It is inevitable that we are fated to identify *One
Hundred Years of Solitude* with an entire culture, almost as though it were a
new *Don Quixote*, which it most definitely is not. Comparisons to Balzac
and even to Faulkner are also not very fair to García Márquez. The titan-
ic inventiveness of Balzac dwarfs the later visionary, and nothing even in
Macondo is as much a negative Sublime as the fearsome quest of the
Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying*. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is more of the
stature of Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, latecom-
ers’ fantasies, strong inheritors of waning traditions.

Whatever its limitations may or may not be, García Márquez’s major
narrative now enjoys canonical status as well as a representative function.
Its cultural status continues to be enhanced, and it would be foolish to
quarrel with such a phenomenon. I wish to address myself only to the
question of how seriously, as readers, we need to receive the book’s scrip-
tural aspect. The novel’s third sentence is: “The world was so recent that
things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was neces-
sary to point,” and the third sentence from the end is long and beautiful:

Macondo was already a fearful whirlwind of dust and rubble being
spun about by the wrath of the biblical hurricane when Aureliano
skipped eleven pages so as not to lose time with facts he knew only
too well, and he began to decipher the instant that he was living,
deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deci-
phering the last page of the parchment, as if he were looking into
a speaking mirror.

The time span between this Genesis and this Apocalypse is six gener-
ations, so that José Arcadio Buendía, the line’s founder, is the grandfather
of the last Aureliano’s grandfather. The grandfather of Dante’s grandfather,
the crusader Cassaguida, tells his descendant Dante that the poet perceives
the truth because he gazes into that mirror in which the great and small of
this life, before they think, behold their thought. Aureliano, at the end,
reads the Sanskrit parchment of the gypsy, Borges-like Magus, and looks
into a speaking mirror, beholding his thought before he thinks it. But does
he, like Dante, behold the truth? Was Florence, like Macondo, a city of
mirrors (or mirages) in contrast to the realities of the Inferno, the Purgatorio, the Paradiso? Is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* only a speaking mirror? Or does it contain, somehow within it, an Inferno, a Purgatorio, a Paradiso?

Only the experience and disciplined reflections of a great many more strong readers will serve to answer those questions with any conclusiveness. The final eminence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for now remains undecided. What is clear to the book’s contemporaries is that García Márquez has given contemporary culture, in North America and Europe, as much as in Latin America, one of its double handful of necessary narratives, without which we will understand neither one another nor our own selves.

*Love in the Time of Cholera*

The aesthetic principle of *Love in the Time of Cholera* is only a slightly chastened version of what might be the motto of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “Anything goes”, or even “Everything goes”. Anything and everything goes into the mix: Faulkner, Kafka Borges, Carpentier, Conrad, Joyce. Both novels are Scriptures: *Solitude* is an Old Testament, and *Cholera* a New Testament, at least for García Márquez and the most devoted of his readers and critics. I myself have come to value *Cholera* over *Solitude*, but that is a choice of riches.

What Faulkner—who most valued the Bible (as literature only), Shakespeare, Melville, Conrad, and Joyce—would have made of these New World Hispanic masterpieces, I cannot surmise. The verbal cascades he would have recognized as akin to his own, and the heroic individualism surely would have moved him. Yet he went about while waiting for his doom to lift, and his greatest figures—Darl Bundren, Quentin Compson, Sutpen, Joe Christmas, Popeye—are damned beyond damnation. Though Faulkner could be as grandly comic as Dickens, as is witnessed by the Snopes family, who now constitute the Texan Republican party, led by Tom De Lay Snopes, while our nation has chosen Benito Bush as Il Duce. Oscar Wilde was always right: life has no choice but to imitate art.

The antic joy of García Márquez might have been shrugged away by Faulkner, at least in his tragic mode, but he would have approved the last-ditch humanism affirmed both by precursor and latecomer. Decadence, the obsessive fear of incest, the drowning out of creative solitude by an ocean of information: these are common themes and apprehensions. What then is the saving difference, besides amazing high spirits in García Márquez, that distinguishes the two?
Faulkner’s hopes rarely are persuasive: his greatest characters are as nihilistic as Shakespeare’s. The immense popularity of García Márquez was earned by his exuberance, which veils his own apocalyptic forebodings. What Shakespeare was to Faulkner, Cervantes necessarily is to García Márquez: the truest ancestor. Cervantes, in his dark wisdom, is not less nihilistic than Shakespeare, and I do not believe that either ultimately was a Christian believer, any more than Faulkner or García Márquez can be said to be.

García Márquez’s difference from all three is more evident in *Cholera* than in *Solitude*: he really does have a High Romantic faith in Eros, though he knows the Freudian truth that love too frequently is a mask for the Death Drive. Yet I prefer *Cholera* to *Solitude* finally because Florentine Ariza is dauntless, as here in the novel’s closing passage:

“Let us keep going, going, going, back to La Dorada.”

Fermina Daza shuddered because she recognized his former voice, illuminated by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and she looked at the Captain: he was their destiny. But the Captain did not see her because he was stupefied by Florentino Ariza’s tremendous powers of inspiration.

“Do you mean what you say?” he asked.

“From the moment I was born,” said Florentino Ariza, “I have never said anything I did not mean.”

The Captain looked at Fermina Daza and saw on her eyelashes the first glimmer of wintry frost. Then he looked at Florentino Ariza, his invincible power, his intrepid love, and he was overwhelmed by the belated suspicion that it is life, more than death, that has no limit.

“And how long do you think we can keep up this goddamn coming and going?” he asked.

Florentino Ariza had kept his answer ready for fifty-three years, seven months, and eleven days and nights.

“Forever,” he said.
The Left Hand of Darkness

I

In a recent parable, “She Unnames Them” (The New Yorker, January 21, 1985), the best contemporary author of literary fantasy sums up the consequences of Eve’s unnamning of the animals that Adam had named:

None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another’s scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another’s blood or flesh, keep one another warm—that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food.

This might serve as a coda for all Ursula Kroeber Le Guin’s varied works to date. She is essentially a mythological fantasist; the true genre for her characteristic tale is romance, and she has a high place in the long American tradition of the romance, a dominant mode among us from Hawthorne down to Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot Forty-Nine. Because science fiction is a popular mode, she is named as a science-fiction writer, and a certain defiance in her proudly asserts that the naming is accurate. But no
one reading, say Philip K. Dick, as I have been doing after reading Le Guin’s discussion of his work in *The Language of the Night*, is likely to associate the prose achievement of Le Guin with that of her acknowledged precursor. She is a fierce defender of the possibilities for science fiction, to the extent of calling Philip K. Dick “our own homegrown Borges” and even of implying that Dick ought not to be compared to Kafka only because Dick is “not an absurdist” and his work “is not (as Kafka’s was) autistic.”

After reading Dick, one can only murmur that a literary critic is in slight danger of judging Dick to be “our Borges” or of finding Dick in the cosmos of Kafka, the Dante of our century. But Le Guin as critic, loyal to her colleagues who publish in such periodicals as *Fantastic*, *Galaxy*, *Amazing*, *Orbit* and the rest, seems to me not the same writer as the visionary of *The Earthsea Trilogy*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed* and *The Beginning Place*. Better than Tolkien, far better than Doris Lessing, Le Guin is the overwhelming contemporary instance of a superbly imaginative creator and major stylist who chose (or was chosen by) “fantasy and science fiction.” At her most remarkable, as in what still seems to me her masterpiece, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she offers a sexual vision that strangely complements Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and James Merrill’s *Changing Light at Sandover*. I can think of only one modern fantasy I prefer to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and that is David Lindsay’s *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), but Lindsay’s uncanny nightmare of a book survives its dreadful writing, while Le Guin seems never to have written a wrong or bad sentence. One has only to quote some of her final sentences to know again her absolute rhetorical authority:

But he had not brought anything. His hands were empty, as they had always been.
(*The Dispossessed*)

Gravely she walked beside him up the white streets of Havnor, holding his hand, like a child coming home.
(*The Tombs of Atuan*)

There is more than one road to the city.
(*The Beginning Place*)

But the boy, Therem’s son, said stammering, “Will you tell us how he died?—Will you tell us about the other worlds out among the stars—the other kinds of men, the other lives?”
(*The Left Hand of Darkness*)
When her precise, dialectical style—always evocative, sometimes sublime in its restrained pathos—is exquisitely fitted to her powers of invention, as in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin achieves a kind of sensibility very nearly unique in contemporary fiction. It is the pure storyteller’s sensibility that induces in the reader a state of uncertainty, of not knowing what comes next. What Walter Benjamin praised in Leskov is exactly relevant to Le Guin:

Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death....

The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was the need created by the myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest....

Elsewhere in his essay on Leskov, Benjamin asserts that: “The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out.” One can be skeptical of Benjamin’s Marxist judgment that such a waning, if waning it be, is “only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history.” Far more impressively, Benjamin once remarked of Kafka’s stories that in them, “narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: to postpone the future.” Le Guin’s narrative art, though so frequently set in the future, not only borrows its authority from death but also works to postpone the future, works to protect us against myth and its nightmares.

I am aware that this is hardly consonant with the accounts of her narrative purposes that Le Guin gives in the essays of *The Language of the Night*. But Lawrence’s adage is perfectly applicable to Le Guin: trust the tale, not the teller, and there is no purer storyteller writing now in English than Le Guin. Her true credo is spoken by one of her uncanniest creations, Faxe the Weaver, master of the Foretelling, to conclude the beautiful chapter, “The Domestication of Hunch,” in *The Left Hand of Darkness*:

“The unknown,” said Faxe’s soft voice in the forest, “the unforetold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. No Handdara, no Yomesh, no hearth gods, nothing. But also if it were proven that there is a God, there would be no religion..... Tell me,
Genry, what is known? What is sure, predictable, inevitable—the one certain thing you know concerning your future, and mine?”

“That we shall die.”

“Yes. There’s really only one question that can be answered, Genry, and we already know the answer ... the only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.”

The fine irony, that this is the master Foreteller speaking, is almost irrelevant to Le Guin’s profound narrative purpose. She herself is the master of a dialectical narrative mode in which nothing happens without involving its opposite. The shrewdly elliptical title, The Left Hand of Darkness, leaves out the crucial substantive in Le Guin’s Taoist verse:

Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way.

The way is the Tao, exquisitely fused by Le Guin into her essentially Northern mythology. “Kemmer” is the active phase of the cycle of human sexuality on the planet Gethen or Winter, the site of The Left Hand of Darkness. Winter vision, even in the books widely separated in substance and tone from her masterpiece, best suits Le Guin’s kind of storytelling. Mythology, from her childhood on, seems to have meant Norse rather than Classical stories. Like Blake’s and Emily Brontë’s, her imagination is at home with Odin and Yggdrasil. Yet she alters the cosmos of the Eddas so that it loses some, not all, of its masculine aggressiveness and stoic harshness. Her Taoism, rather than her equivocal Jungianism, has the quiet force that tempers the ferocity of the Northern vision.

II

“Visibility without discrimination, solitude without privacy,” is Le Guin’s judgment upon the capital of the Shing, who in 4370 A.D. rule what had been the United States, in her novel, City of Illusions. In an introduction to The Left Hand of Darkness, belatedly added to the book seven years after its publication, Le Guin sharply reminds us that: “I write science fiction, and science fiction isn’t about the future. I don’t know any more
about the future than you do, and very likely less.” Like Faxe the Weaver, she prefers ignorance of the future, and yet, again like Faxe, she is a master of Foretelling, which both is and is not a mode of moral prophecy. It is, in that it offers a moral vision of the present; it is not, precisely because it refuses to say that “If you go on so, the result is so.” The United States in 1985 still offers “visibility without discrimination, solitude without privacy.” As for the United States in 4370, one can quote “Self,” a lyric meditation from Le Guin’s rather neglected *Hard Words and Other Poems* (1981):

```
You cannot measure the circumference
but there are centerpoints:
stones, and a woman washing at a ford,
the water runs red-brown from what she washes.
The mouths of caves. The mouths of bells.
The sky in winter under snowclouds
to northward, green of jade.
No star is farther from it than the glint
of mica in a pebble in the hand,
or nearer. Distance is my god.
```

Distance, circumference, the unmeasurable, goal, the actual future which can only be our dying; Le Guin evades these, and her narratives instead treasure wisdom or the centerpoints. Yet the poem just before “Self” in *Hard Words*, cunningly titled “Amazed,” tells us where wisdom is to be found, in the disavowal of “I” by “eye,” a not un-Emersonian epiphany:

```
The center is not where the center is
but where I will be when I follow
the lines of stones that wind about a center
that is not there
    but there.
The lines of stones lead inward, bringing
the follower to the beginning
where all I knew
    is flew.
Stone is stone and more than stone;
the center opens like an eyelid opening.
Each rose a maze: the hollow hills:
I am not I
    but eye.
```
One thinks of the shifting centers in every Le Guin narrative, and of her naming the mole as her totem in another poem. She is a maze maker or “shaper of darkness / into ways and hollows,” who always likes the country on the other side. Or she is “beginning’s daughter” who “sings of stones.” Her Taoism celebrates the strength of water over stone, and yet stone is her characteristic trope. As her words are hard, so are most of her women and men, fit after all for Northern or winter myth. One can say off her that she writes a hard-edged phantasmagoria, or that it is the Promethean rather than the Narcissistic element in her literary fantasy that provides her with her motive for metaphor.

In some sense, all of her writings call us forth to quest into stony places, where the object of the quest can never quite he located. Her most mature quester, the scientist Shevek in The Dispossessed, comes to apprehend that truly he is both subject and object in the quest, always already gone on, always already there. A Promethean anarchist, Shevek has surmounted self-consciousness and self-defense, but at the cost of a considerable loss in significance. He represents Le Guin’s ideal Odonian society, where the isolated idealist like Shelley or Kropotkin has become the norm, yet normative anarchism cannot be represented except as permanent revolution, and permanent revolution defies aesthetic as well as political representation. Shevek is beyond these limits of representation and more than that, “his hands were empty, as they had always been.” Deprived of the wounded self-regard that our primary narcissism converts into aggression, Shevek becomes nearly as colorless as the actual personality upon whom he is based, the physicist Robert Oppenheimer. Even Le Guin cannot have it both ways; the ideological anarchism of The Dispossessed divests her hero of his narcissistic ego, and so of much of his fictive interest. Jung is a better psychological guide in purely mythic realms, like Le Guin’s Earthsea, then he is in psychic realms closer to our own, as in The Dispossessed.

III

Le Guin’s greatest accomplishment, certainly reflecting the finest balance of her powers, is The Left Hand of Darkness, though I hasten to name this her finest work to date. At fifty-five, she remains beginning’s daughter, and there are imaginative felicities in The Beginning Place (1980) that are subtler and bolder than anything in The Left Hand of Darkness (1969). But conceptually and stylistically, Left Hand is the strongest of her dozen or so major narratives. It is a book that sustains many rereadings, partly because its enigmas are unresolvable, and partly because it has the crucial quality of a great representation, which is that it yields up new perspectives upon
what we call reality. Though immensely popular (some thirty paperback printings), it seems to me critically undervalued, with rather too much emphasis upon its supposed flaws. The best known negative critique is by Stanislaw Lem, who judged the sexual element in the book irrelevant to its story, and improbably treated in any case. This is clearly a weak misreading on Lem’s part. What the protagonist, Genly Ai, continuously fails to understand about the inhabitants of the planet Winter is precisely that their sexuality gives them a mode of consciousness profoundly alien to his (and ours). Le Guin, with admirable irony, replied to feminist and other critics that indeed she had “left out too much” and could “only be very grateful to those readers, men and women, whose willingness to participate in the experiment led them to fill in that omission with the work of their own imagination.” Too courteous to say, with Blake, that her care was not to make matters explicit to the idiot, Le Guin wisely has relied upon her extraordinary book to do its work of self-clarification across the fifteen years of its reception.

The book’s principal aesthetic strength is its representation of the character and personality of Estraven, the Prime Minister who sacrifices position, honor, freedom and finally his life in order to hasten the future, by aiding Genly Ai’s difficult mission. As the ambassador of the Ekumen, a benign federation of planets, Ai needs to surmount his own perspective as a disinterested cultural anthropologist if he is to understand the androgynes who make up the entire population of the isolated planet alternatively called Gethen or Winter. Without understanding, there is no hope of persuading them, even for their own obvious good, to join with the rest of the cosmos. What is most interesting about Ai (the name suggesting at once the ego, the eye, and an outcry of pain) is his reluctance to go beyond the limits of his own rationality, which would require seeing the causal link between his sexuality and mode of consciousness.

The sexuality of the dwellers upon the planet Winter remains Le Guin’s subtlest and most surprising invention:

A Gethenian in first-phase kemmer, if kept alone or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus. Yet the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative. When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by touch—secretion? scent?) until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the chance, takes on
the other sexual role (? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer—partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored).

The narrator here is neither Ai nor Le Guin but a field investigator of the Ekumen, wryly cataloging a weird matter. Her field notes add a number of sharper observations: these androgynes have no sexual drive at all for about 21 or 22 out of every 26 days. Anyone can and usually does bear children, “and the mother of several children may be the father of several more,” descent being reckoned from the mother, known as “the parent in the flesh.” There is no Oedipal ambivalence of children toward parents, no rape or unwilling sex, no dualistic division of humankind into active and passive. All Gethenians are natural monists, with no need to sublimate anything, and little inclination towards warfare.

Neither Le Guin nor any of her narrators give us a clear sense of any casual relation between a world of nearly perpetual winter and the ambisexual nature of its inhabitants, yet an uncanny association between the context of coldness and the unforeseeable sexuality of each individual persists throughout. Though Lem insisted anxiety must attend the unpredictability of one’s gender, Le Guin’s book persuasively refuses any such anxiety. There is an imaginative intimation that entering upon any sexual identity for about one-fifth of the time is more than welcome to anyone who must battle perpetually just to stay warm! Le Guin’s humor, here as elsewhere, filters in slyly, surprising us in a writer who is essentially both somber and serene.

The one Gethenian we get to know well is Estraven, certainly a more sympathetic figure than the slow-to-learn Ai. Estraven is Le Guin’s greatest triumph in characterization, and yet remains enigmatic, as he must. How are we to understand the psychology of a manwoman, utterly free of emotional ambivalence, of which the masterpiece after all is the Oedipal conflict? And how are we to understand a fiercely competitive person, since the Gethenians are superbly agonistic, who yet lacks any component of sexual aggressiveness, let alone its cause in a sexually wounded narcissism? Most fundamentally we are dualists, and perhaps our involuntary and Universal Freudianism (present even in a professed Jungian, like Le Guin) is the result of that being the conceptualized dualism most easily available to us. But the people of Winter are Le Guin’s shrewd way of showing us that all our dualisms—Platonic, Pauline, Cartesian, Freudian—not only have a sexual root but are permanent because we are bisexual rather than ambisexual beings. Freud obviously would not have disagreed, and evidently Le Guin is more Freudian than she acknowledges herself to be.

Winter, aside from its properly ghastly weather, is no Utopia. Karhide,
Estraven’s country, is ruled by a clinically mad king, and the rival power, Orgoreyn, is founded upon a barely hidden system of concentration camps. Androgyny is clearly neither a political nor a sexual ideal in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. And yet, mysteriously and beautifully, the book suggests that Winter’s ambisexuality is a more imaginative condition than our bisexuality. Like the unfallen Miltonic angels, the Gethenians know more than either men or women can know. As with the angels, this does not make them better or wiser, but evidently they see more than we do, since each one of them is Tiresias, as it were. This, at last, is the difference between Estraven and Genly Ai. Knowing and seeing more, Estraven is better able to love, and freer therefore to sacrifice than his friend can be.

Yet that, though imaginative, is merely a generic difference. Le Guin’s art is to give us also a more individual difference between Ai and Estraven. Ai is a kind of skeptical Horatio who arrives almost too late at a love for Estraven as a kind of ambisexual Hamlet, but who survives, like Horatio, to tell his friend’s story:

> For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose: a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our bitter journey, that it might as well be called, now as later, love. But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came....

The difference is more than sexual, and so cannot be bridged by sexual love, which Ai and Estraven avoid. It is the difference between Horatio and Hamlet, between the audience’s surrogate and the tragic hero, who is beyond both surrogate and audience. Estraven dies in Ai’s arms, but uttering his own dead brother’s name, that brother having been his incestuous lover, and father of Estraven’s son. In a transference both curious and moving, Estraven has associated Ai with his lost brother-lover, to whom he had vowed faithfulness. It is another of Le Guin’s strengths that, in context, this has intense pathos and nothing of the grotesque whatsoever. More than disbelief becomes suspended by the narrative art of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

IV

That Le Guin, more than Tolkien, has raised fantasy into high literature, for our time, seems evident to me because her questers never
abandon the world where we have to live, the world of Freud’s reality prin-
ciple. Her praise of Tolkien does not convince me that The Lord of the Rings
is not tendentious and moralizing, but her generosity does provide an
authentic self-description:

For like all great artists he escapes ideology by being too quick for
its nets, too complex for its grand simplicities, too fantastic for its
rationality, too real for its generalizations.

This introduction could end there, but I would rather allow Le Guin
to speak of herself directly:

Words are my matter. I have chipped one stone
for thirty years and still it is not done,
that image of the thing I cannot see.
I cannot finish it and set it free,
transformed to energy.

There is a touch of Yeats here, Le Guin’s voice being most her own in
narrative prose, but the burden is authentic Le Guin: the sense of limit, the
limits of the senses, the granite labor at hard words, and the ongoing image
that is her characteristic trope, an unfinished stone. Like her Genly Ai, she
is a far-fetcher, to use her own term for visionary metaphor. It was also the
Elizabethan rhetorician Puttenham’s term for transumption or metalepsis,
the trope that reverses time, and makes lateness into an earliness. Le Guin
is a grand far-fetcher or transumer of the true tradition of romance we call
literary fantasy. No one else now among us matches her at rendering freely
“that image of the thing I cannot see.”
Political interpretation has been all the rage, academic and journalistic, during the last thirty years. No contemporary novelist of anything like Toni Morrison’s eminence is so insistent that she desires political interpretation by her exegetes. She certainly has received what she calls for: an entire sect of cheerleaders crowd in her wake. Very little can be done against such a fashion at this time. If the United States achieves a larger measure of social justice in a generation or so, then Morrison yet may be esteemed more for her narrative art, invention, and style than for her exemplary political correctness. Myself an archaic survival, a dinosaur still lurching about the halls of Yale and New York University, I go on reading for aesthetic experience only. This introduction therefore will consider *Sula* only as an artistic achievement, and not as a weapon wielded against indubitable societal oppression by a celebrated African-American feminist Marxist.

*Sula*

Sula herself is a total rebel against all society, all conventions and nearly all moralities. A “demon” in the eyes of the black community, Sula is a kind of Lilith, taking sexual satisfaction where she will. No evil but doom-eager, Sula quests desperately for freedom, but she necessarily is self-victimized, as Morrison make clear:

In a way, her strangeness, her naiveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her...
with all she longed for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.

Trust the tale and not the teller: is Sula an artist without an art form, or is she a Zora Neale Hurston-like vitalist who has wandered into the wrong novel? Morrison brooks no rivals: Ralph Ellison is a hidden target in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, while Hurston’s heroic egoism is parodied in *Sula*. Aesthetically, this is all to the good; Morrison is at her best when she is most agonistic. Sula Peace bears a name itself ironic, since her mode of individualism can achieve no peace whatsoever. Her mother Hannah, the freest of all erotic beings, dies in an accidental fire that can be interpreted as a punishment only if you are morally diseased. Sula, like Hannah, is a natural seductress, a witch if again you have it so. But ideological readings of her pathos seem to me as irrelevant as moral judgments; Sula floats free of interpretative designs, including Morrison’s own. She remains Morrison’s most memorable character, largely because she resists categorization. Her challenge to the community is both ancient and original; doom-eagerness cannot be confined. Her intensity and fatedness are alike Faulknerian; she would give another dimension to *Sanctuary*, without disturbing the violent cosmos of that now underrated novel. As a vivid figure, she is curiously unique in Morrison’s fiction, and we allegorize or moralize Sula to our own loss. No program of Liberation would have saved her from herself, or from the individuality of her familial past.

*The Bluest Eye*

*The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s first novel, was published when she was thirty-nine and is anything but novice work. Michael Wood, an authentic literary critic, made the best comment on this “lucid and eloquent” narrative that I have ever seen:

Each member of the family interprets and acts out of his or her ugliness, but none of then understands that the all-knowing master is not God but only history and habit; the projection of their own numbed collusion with the mythology of beauty and ugliness that oppresses them beyond their already grim social oppression.

Morrison herself, in an Afterword of 1994, looked back across a quarter-century and emphasized her “reliance for full comprehension in codes embedded in black culture.” A reader who is not black or female must do the best he can; like Michael Wood, I have found *The Bluest Eye* to be completely
lucid since I first read it, back in 1970. Like *Sula* and *The Song of Solomon* after it, the book seems to me successful in universal terms, even if one shares neither Morrison’s origins nor her ideologies. *Beloved*, Morrison’s most famous romance narrative, seems to me successful in universal terms, even if one shares neither Morrison’s origins nor her ideologies. *Beloved*, Morrison’s most famous romance narrative, seems to me successful in universal terms, even if one shares neither Morrison’s origins nor her ideologies. But her early phase has many of the canonical qualifications of the traditional Western literary kind that she fiercely rejects as being irrelevant to her.

The essays reprinted in this volume are, almost all of them, ideological, and follow Morrison’s lead in being the kind of appreciation that she wants. I add a brief appreciation here, in the full awareness that I am necessarily incorrect, since I am an outworn aesthete, and not a “cultural critic.” What I never forget about *The Bluest Eye* is its terrifying penultimate paragraph, where the narrator censures herself and her friends for turning away from Pecola because the child’s madness, engendered by the trauma of being raped by her father, Cholly, “bored us in the end”:

Oh, some of us “loved” her. The Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her. I’m sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelope her, give something of her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possess his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover’s inward eye.

The unhappy wisdom of this is happily free of any cultural narcissism whatsoever. Class, race, even gender do not over-determine this bleakness. Morrison’s heroic survivors in *Beloved* are intended to stand up both in and against their history. Perhaps they do, but the torments they have endured also are tendentiously elaborated, because the author has an ideological design upon us, her guilty readers, white and black, male and female. The narrator of *The Bluest Eye* persuades me, where the narration of *Beloved* does not. In D.H. Lawrence’s terms, I trust both the tale and the teller in *The Bluest Eye*. In *Beloved*, I do not trust the tale.

*Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison’s third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), seems to me her
masterwork to date, though *Beloved* (1987) has even more readers. A superb, highly conscious artist from her beginning, Morrison is also a committed social activist. Exemplary as it is, her African-American feminist stance is the prime concern of nearly all her critics, which makes for a certain monotony in their cheerleading. Morrison is scarcely responsible for them, though I detect an intensification of ideological fervor when I pass from rereading *Song of Solomon* to rereading *Beloved* and then go on to *Jazz* and *Paradise*, her most recent novels. A novelist’s politics are part of her panoply, her arms and armor. Time stales our coverings; fictions that endure do so despite the passionate commitments of their authors, while claquers, however sincere, do not assure literary survival. The very titles of many of the essays in this volume testify to political obsessions: “black cultural nationalism,” “myth, ideology, and gender,” “race and class consciousness,” “political identity,” “competing discourses.” Morrison, far cannier than her enthusiasts, at her most persuasive transcends her own indubitable concerns. Her art, grounded in African-American realities and concerns, is nevertheless not primarily naturalistic in its aims and modes.

Morrison has been vehement in asserting that African-American literature is her aesthetic context: she has invoked slave narratives, folklore, spirituals, and jazz songs. So advanced a stylist and storyteller is not likely to celebrate Zora Neale Hurston as a forerunner, or to imagine a relation between herself and Richard Wright, or James Baldwin. Her authentic rival is the late Ralph Waldo Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* remains the most extraordinary achievement in African-American fiction. Morrison subtly wards off *Invisible Man* (1952), from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) on to *Paradise*. Though she has deprecated the “complex series of evasions” of Modernist literature and its criticism, no one is more brilliant at her own complex series of evasions, particularly of Ralph Ellison, unwanted strong precursor. This is not to suggest that Ellison is her prime precursor: William Faulkner shadows Morrison’s work always, and inspires even more creative evasions in her best writing.

I am aware that I am at variance with nearly all of Morrison’s critics, who take their lead from her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, one of her most adroit evasions of the central Western literary tradition that, in mere fact, has fostered her. But then, as a professional literary critic, I must declare an interest, since my argument for the inescapability of what I have termed “the anxiety of influence” is contested by the culturally correct. There is no anguish of contamination or guilt of inheritance for black women writers in particular, I frequently am admonished. Patriarchal, capitalistic, phallocentric notions must be swept aside: they are racist, sexist, exclusionary, exploitative. If even Shakespeare
can become Alternative Shakespeare, then Toni Morrison can spring full-grown from the head of Black Athena.

Every strong writer welcomes the opportunity to be an original, and Morrison’s literary achievement more than justifies her sly embrace of African-American cultural narcissism. Her critics seem to me quite another matter, but my Editor’s Note is an appropriate context for commenting upon them. Here I desire only to discuss, rather briefly, the genesis of Song of Solomon’s authentic aesthetic strength from the creative agony with Faulkner and with Ellison. Morrison deftly uses Faulkner while parrying Ellison: out of the strong comes forth sweetness. Song of Solomon exuberantly is informed by the creative gusto of Morrison’s sense of victory in the contest that is inevitable for the art of literature. Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche both pioneered in reminding us that the Athenians conceived of literature as an agony. Nietzsche admirably condensed this insight in his grand fragment, “Homer’s Contest”:

Every talent must unfold itself in fighting ... And just as the youths were educated through contests, their educators were also engaged in contests with each other. The great musical masters, Pindar and Simonides, stood side by side, mistrustful and jealous; in the spirit of contest. The sophist, the advanced teacher of antiquity, meets another sophist; even the most universal type of instruction, through the drama, was meted out to the people only in the form of a tremendous wrestling among the great musical and dramatic artists. How wonderful! “Even the artist hates the artist.” Whereas modern man fears nothing in an artist more than the emotion of any personal fight, the Greek knows the artist only as engaged in a personal fight. Precisely where modern man senses the weakness of a work of art, the Hellene seeks the source of its greatest strength.

Probably Morrison would dissent from Nietzsche, but that would be Morrison the critic, not Morrison the novelist, who is engaged in a personal fight with Invisible Man and with Faulkner’s Light in August. Morrison’s career is still in progress; it is too soon to prophesy whether she will yet surpass The Song of Solomon. Again, I am aware that admirers of Beloved, a highly deliberate work of art, believe that Morrison has transcended her earlier work. Since I find Beloved ideologically over-determined, and therefore in places somewhat tendentious, I prefer Song of Solomon. Highly conscious as she is of the American romance tradition, from Hawthorne and Melville through Faulkner and Ellison, Morrison
wonderfully subverts that tradition in *Song of Solomon*. This subversion is not primarily ideological, but properly imaginative and revisionary. Great solitaries—Hester Prynne, Captain Ahab, Joe Christmas, Invisible Man—are joined by a different kind of solitary, Milkman Dead. Milkman, like his precursors, quests for the restoration of his true self, lest he remain a Jonah, but Morrison shapes her protagonist’s quest so that it is communitarian despite itself. She does the same in *Beloved*, yet with an inverted sentimentalism that may be the consequence of too overt a reliance upon the political myth of a social energy inherent in the souls of Southern blacks. In *Song of Solomon*, a work of more individual mythopoeia, the refining of community is aesthetically persuasive.

Ellison’s nameless Invisible Man is massively persuasive in his final judgment that there is no community for him, black or white:

Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos ... or imagination. That too I’ve learned in the cellar, and not by deadening my sense of perception; I’m invisible, not blind.

Morrison’s Milkman Dead reaches a conclusion radically revisionary of Ellison’s nameless man:

How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as “Macon Dead,” recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning ... When you know your name, you should hang to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do.

The Invisible Man, who will accept no name whatsoever, has stepped into chaos or imagination, two words for the same entity, or are they antithesis? Ellison, as an Emersonian, allows for both readings. Morrison, born Chloe Anthony Wofford, has held on to her original middle name as the “real” one. Milkman loses the false name, “Dead,” to acquire the ancestral real name, Solomon or Shalimar. Ellison perhaps would have judged that Morrison had kept within narrower borders than she required; I never discussed her work with him, so I do not know, but African-American nationalism, or any sort, was what he had rejected in his poignant and deluded Ras the Exhorter. Milkman’s superb poignance is that he is anything but an Exhorter.
Faulkner I find everywhere in Morrison, generally transmuted, yet never finally transcended. In our century, Wallace Stevens wrote the poems of our climate, and Faulkner wrote the best of our novels, particularly in *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*. Returning to a fictive South, Milkman also returns to Faulkner, primarily to *The Bear* and its rituals of initiation. I dislike going against Morrison’s own passionate critical pronouncements, yet I hardly am attempting “to place value only where that influence is located.” Joseph Conrad does not crowd out Faulkner, nor does Faulkner render Morrison less gifted, less black, less female, less Marxist. Even the strongest of novelists cannot choose their own precursors. Hemingway wanted to assert *Huckleberry Finn* as his origin, but the ethos and mode of *The Sun Also Rises* are distinctly Conradian. “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness,” Morrison insists. She ought to be right, and as a nation we would be better if she were right. One learns the truth about American Religion, I am convinced, if we trace its origin to the early black Baptists in America, who carried an African *gnosis* with them, in which “the little me within the big me” was the ultimate, unfallen reality. Morrison, like Faulkner, has a great deal to teach us about both “white” American and African-American identity. In a long enough perspective, Faulkner and Morrison may be teaching the same troubled truths.

*Beloved*

The cultural importance of Toni Morrison’s most popular novel, *Beloved* (1987), hardly can be overstressed. I have just reread it, after a decade, in a paperback printing numbered 41; in time doubtless there will be hundreds of reprints. Of all Morrison’s novels, it puzzles me most: the style is remarkably adroit, baroque in its splendor, and the authority of the narrative is firmly established. The characters are problematic, for me; unlike the protagonists of Morrison’s earlier novels, they suggest ideograms. I think that is because *Beloved* is a powerfully tendentious romance; it has too clear a design upon its readers, of whatever race and gender. The storyteller of *Sula* (1975) and of *Song of Solomon* (1977) has been replaced by a formidable ideologue, who perhaps knows too well what she wishes her book to accomplish.

Morrison strongly insists that her literary context is essentially African American, and *Beloved* overtly invokes slave narratives as its precursors. I hardly doubt that the novel’s stance is African-American feminist Marxist, as most of the exegetes reprinted in this volume proclaim. And yet the style and narrative procedures have more of a literary relationship to William
Faulkner and Virginia Woolf than to any African-American writers. I am aware that such an assertion risks going against Morrison’s own warning “that finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature had value, provided the valued process does not become self-anointing.” I mildly observe (since both my personal and critical esteem for Morrison is enormous) that “finding or imposing” (italics mine, of course) is a very shrewd equivocation. Morrison, both in prose style and in narrative mode, has a complex and permanent relationship to Faulkner and to Woolf. *Beloved*, in a long perspective, is a child of Faulkner’s masterpiece, *As I Lay Dying*, while the heroine, Sethe, has more in common with Lena Grove of *Light in August* than with any female character of African-American fiction. This is anything but a limitation, aesthetically considered, but is rejected by Morrison and her critical disciples alike. Ideology aside, Morrison’s fierce assertion of independence is the norm for any strong writer, but I do not think that this denial of a swerve from indubitable literary origins can be a critical value in itself.

None of this would matter if the ideologies of political correctness were not so deeply embedded in *Beloved* as to make Sethe a less persuasive representation of an possible human being than she might have been. Trauma has much less to do with Sethe’s more-than-Faulknerian sense of guilt than the novel’s exegetes have argued. The guilt of being a survivor is not unique to any oppressed people; programs in guilt are an almost universal temptation. *Beloved* is a calculated series of shocks; whether the memory of shock is aesthetically persuasive has to seem secondary in a novel dedicated to the innumerable victims of American slavery. One steps very warily in raising the aesthetic issue in regard to a book whose moral and social value is beyond dissent. Still, Sethe is a character in a visionary romance that also insists upon its realistic and historical veracity. A literary character has to be judged finally upon the basis of literary criteria, which simply are not “patriarchal” or “capitalistic” or “Western imperialist.” Morrison, whose earlier novels were not as over-determined by ideological considerations as *Beloved* is, may have sacrificed much of her art upon the altar of a politics perhaps admirable in itself, but not necessarily in the service of high literature (if one is willing to grant that such an entity still exists.)

The terrors depicted in *Beloved* may be beyond the capacity of literary representation itself, which is an enigma that has crippled every attempt to portray the Nazi slaughter of European Jewry. The African-American critic Stanley Crouch has been much condemned for expressing his disdain in regard to *Beloved*. Crouch, I think, underestimated the book’s stylistic achievement, but his healthy distrust of ideologies is, alas, germane to
aspects of Beloved. Sentimentalism is not in one sense relevant to Beloved: how can any emotion be in excess of its object when slavery is the object? And yet the novel’s final passage about Sethe could prove, someday, to be a kind of period piece:

He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back; the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella’s fist. The mean black eyes. The wet dress steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers.

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?”

The pathos is admirable, rather too much so. Sethe is given the explicit tribute that the entire book as sought to constitute. She is the heroic African-American mother, who has survived terrors both natural and supernatural, and has maintained her integrity and her humanity. Morrison’s design has been fulfilled, but is Sethe a person or an abstraction? Time will sift this matter out; cultural politics do not answer such a question. Morrison must be judged finally, in Beloved, against As I Lay Dying and Mrs. Dalloway, rather than against Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861). The canonical novelist of Song of Solomon deserves no less.
Philip Roth
(1933–)

The Zuckerman Tetralogy

Philip Roth’s Zuckerman Bound binds together The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound and The Anatomy Lesson, adding to them as epilogue a wild short novel, The Prague Orgy, which is at once the bleakest and funniest writing Roth has done. The totality is certainly the novelist’s finest achievement to date, eclipsing even his best single fictions, the exuberantly notorious Portnoy’s Complaint, and the undervalued and ferocious My Life As a Man. Zuckerman Bound is a classic apologia, an aggressive defense of Roth’s moral stance as an author. Its cosmos derives candidly from the Freudian interpretation as being unbearable. Roth knows that Freud and Kafka mark the origins and limits of still-emerging literary culture, American and Jewish, which has an uneasy relationship to normative Judaism and its waning culture. I suspect that Roth knows and accepts also what his surrogate, Zuckerman, is sometimes too outraged to recognize: breaking a new road both causes outrage in others, and demands payment in which the outrageous provoker punishes himself. Perhaps that is the Jewish version of Emerson’s American Law and Compensation: nothing is got for nothing.

Zuckerman Bound merits something reasonably close to the highest level of aesthetic praise for tragicomedy, partly because as a formal totality it becomes much more than the sum of its parts. Those parts are surprisingly diverse: The Ghost Writer is a Jamesonian parable of fictional influence, economical and shapely, beautifully modulated, while Zuckerman Unbound is more characteristically Rothian, being freer in form and more joyously expressionistic in its diction. The Anatomy Lesson is a farce bordering on fantasy, closer in mode and spirit to Nathanael West than is anything else by Roth. With The Prague Orgy, Roth has transcended himself,
or perhaps shown himself and others that, being just past fifty, he has scarcely begun to display his powers. I have read nothing else in recent American fiction that rivals Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying Lot of 49* and episodes like the story of Byron the light bulb in the same author's *Gravity's Rainbow*. *The Prague Orgy* is of that disturbing eminence: obscenely outrageous and yet brilliantly reflective of a paranoid reality that has become universal. But the Rothian difference from Nathanael West and Pynchon should also be emphasized. Roth paradoxically is still engaged in moral prophecy; he continues to be outraged by the outrageous—in societies, others and himself. There is in him nothing of West's Gnostic preference for the posture of the Satanic editor, Shrike, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, or of Pynchon's Kabbalistic doctrine of sado-anarchism. Roth's negative exuberance is not in the service of negative theology, but intimates instead a nostalgia for the morality once engendered by the Jewish normative tradition.

This is the harsh irony, obsessively exploited throughout *Zuckerman Bound*, of the attack made upon Zuckerman’s *Carnovsky* (Roth's *Portnoy’s Complaint*) by the literary critic Milton Appel (Irving Howe). Zuckerman has received a mortal wound from Appel, and Roth endeavors to commemorate the wound and the wounder, in the spirit of James Joyce permanently impaling the Irish poet, physician and general roustabout, Oliver St. John Gogarty, as the immortally egregious Malachi (Buck) Mulligan of *Ulysses*. There is plenty of literary precedent for settling scores in this way; it is as old as Hellenistic Alexandria, and as recent as Saul Bellow’s portrait of Jack Ludwig as Valentine Gersbach in *Herzog*. Roth, characteristically scrupulous, presents Appel as dignified, serious and sincere, and Zuckerman as dangerously lunatic in this matter, but since the results are endlessly hilarious, the revenge is sharp nevertheless.

*Zuckerman Unbound* makes clear, at least to me, that Roth indeed is a Jewish writer in the sense that Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud are not, and do not care to be. Bellow and Malamud, in their fiction, strive to be North American Jewish only as Tolstoy was Russian, or Faulkner was American Southern. Roth is certainly Jewish in his fiction, because his absolute concern never ceases to be the pain of the relations between children and parents, and between husband and wife, and in him this pain invariably results from the incommensurability between rigorously moral normative tradition whose expectations rarely can be satisfied, and the reality of the way we live now. Zuckerman’s insane resentment of the moralizing Milton Appel, and of even fiercer critics, is a deliberate self-parody of Roth’s more-than-ironic reaction to how badly he has been read. Against both Appel and the covens of maenads, Roth defends Zuckerman
(and so himself) as a kind of Talmudic Orpheus, by defining any man as “clay with aspirations.”

What wins over the reader is that both defense and definition are conveyed by the highest humor now being written. *The Anatomy Lesson* and *The Prague Orgy*, in particular, provoke a cleansing and continuous laughter, sometimes so intense that in itself it becomes astonishingly painful. One of the many aesthetic gains of binding together the entire Zuckerman ordeal (it cannot be called a saga) is to let the reader experience the gradual acceleration of wit from the gentle Chekhovian wistfulness of *The Ghost Writer*, on to the Gogolian sense of the ridiculous in *Zuckerman Unbound*, and then the boisterous Westian farce of *The Anatomy Lesson*, only to end in the merciless Kafkan irrealism of *The Prague Orgy*.

I will center most of what follows on *The Prague Orgy*, both because it is the only part of *Zuckerman Unbound* that is new, and because it is the best of Roth, a kind of coda to all his fiction so far. Haunting it necessarily is the spirit of Kafka, a dangerous influence upon any writer, and particularly dangerous, until now, for Roth. Witness his short novel, *The Breast*, his major aesthetic disaster so far, surpassing such livelier failures as *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel*. Against the error of *The Breast*, can be set the funniest pages in *The Professor of Desire*, where the great dream concerning “Kafka’s whore” is clearly the imaginative prelude to *The Prague Orgy*. David Kepesh, Roth’s Professor of Desire, falls asleep in Prague and confronts “everything I ever hoped for,” a guided visit with an official interpreter to an old woman, possibly once Kafka’s whore. The heart of her revelation is Rothian rather than Kafkan, as she integrates the greatest modern Jewish writers with all the other ghosts of her Jewish clientele:

“...They were clean and they were gentlemen. As God is my witness, they never beat on my backside. Even in bed they had manners.”

“But is there anything about Kafka in particular that she remembers? I didn’t come here, to her, to Prague, to talk about nice Jewish boys.”

She gives some thought to the question; or, more likely, no thought. Just sits there trying out being dead.

“You see, he wasn’t so special,” she finally says. “I don’t mean he wasn’t a gentleman. They were all gentlemen.”

This could be the quintessential Roth passage: the Jewish joke turned, not against itself, nor against the Jews, and certainly not against Kafka, but against history, against the way things were, and are, and yet will be. Unlike the humor of Nathanael West (particularly in his *The Dream Life of*...
Balso Snell) and of Woody Allen, there is no trace of Jewish anti-Semitism in Roth’s pained laughter. Roth’s wit uncannily follows the psychic pattern set out by Freud in his late paper on “Humor” (1928), which speculates that the superego allows jesting so as to speak some “kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego.” The ego of poor Zuckerman is certainly intimidated enough, and the reader rejoices at being allowed to share some hilarious words of comfort with him.

When last we saw the afflicted Zuckerman, at the close of The Anatomy Lesson, he had progressed (or regressed) from painfully lying back on his play-mat, Roger’s Thesaurus propped beneath his head and four women serving his many needs, to wandering the corridors of a university hospital, a patient playing at being an intern. A few years later, a physically recovered Zuckerman is in Prague, as visiting literary lion, encountering so paranoid a social reality that New York seems, by contrast, the forest of Arden. Zuckerman, “the American authority on Jewish demons,” quests for the unpublished Yiddish stories of the elder Sinovsky, perhaps murdered by the Nazis. The exiled younger Sinovsky’s abandoned wife, Olga, guards the manuscripts in Prague. In a deliberate parody of James’s “The Aspern Papers,” Zuckerman needs somehow to seduce the alcoholic and insatiable Olga into releasing stories supposedly worthy of Sholom Aleichem of Isaac Babel, written in “the Yiddish of Flaubert.”

Being Zuckerman, he seduces no one and secures the Yiddish manuscripts anyway, only to have them confiscated by the Czech Minister of Culture and his thugs, who proceed to expel “Zuckerman the Zionist agent” back to “the little world around the corner” in New York City. In a final scene subtler, sadder, and funnier than all previous Roth, the frustrated Zuckerman endures the moralizing of the Minister of Culture, who attacks America for having forgotten that “masterpiece,” Betty MacDonald’s The Egg and I. Associating himself with K., the hero of Kafka’s The Castle, Zuckerman is furious at his expulsion, and utters a lament for the more overt paranoia he must abandon:

... here where there’s no nonsense about purity and goodness, where the division is not that easy to discern between the heroic and the perverse, where every sort of repression foments a parody of freedom and the suffering of their historical misfortune engenders in its imaginative victims these clownish forms of human despair.

That farewell-to-Prague has as its undersong: here where Zuckerman is not an anomaly, but indeed a model of decorum and restraint compared to anyone else who is at all interesting. Perhaps there
is another undertone: a farewell-to-Zuckerman on Roth’s part. The author of *Zuckerman Bound* at last my have exorcised the afterglow of *Portnoy’s Complaint*. There is an eloquent plea for release in *The Anatomy Lesson*, where Zuckerman tries to renounce his fate as a writer:

> It may look to outsiders like the life of freedom—not on a schedule, in command of yourself, singled out for glory, the choice apparently to write about anything. But once one’s writing, it’s *all* limits. Bound to a subject. Bound to make a book of it...

Zuckerman bound, indeed, but bound in particular to the most ancient of Covenants—that is Roth’s particular election, or self-election. In his critical book, *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), the last and best essay, “Looking at Kafka,” comments on the change that is manifested in Kafka’s later fiction, observing that it is:

> ... touched by a spirit of personal reconciliation and sardonic self acceptance, by a tolerance of one’s own brand of madness ... the piercing masochistic irony ... has given way here to a critique of the self and its preoccupations that, though bordering on mockery, no longer seeks to resolve itself in images of the uttermost humiliation and defeat.... Yet there is more here than a metaphor for the insanely defended ego, whose striving for invulnerability produces a defensive system that must in its turn become the object of perpetual concern—there is also a very unromantic and hardheaded fable about how and why art is made, a portrait of the artist in all his ingenuity, anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, relentlessness, obsessiveness, secretiveness, paranoia, and self-addiction, a portrait of the magical thinker at the end of his tether...

Roth intended this as commentary on Kafka’s “The Burrow.” Eloquent and poignant, it is far more accurate as a descriptive prophecy of *Zuckerman Bound*. Kafka resists nearly all interpretation, so that what most needs interpretation in him is his evasion of interpretation. That Roth reads himself into his precursor is a normal and healthy procedure in the literary struggle for self-identification. Unlike Kafka, Roth tries to evade, not interpretation, but guilt, partly because he lives the truth of Kafka’s motto of the penal colony: “Guilt is never to be doubted.” Roth has earned a permanent place in American literature by a comic genius that need never be doubted again, wherever it chooses to take him next.
Portnoy’s Complaint

After a full generation since it first appeared, *Portnoy’s Complaint* superbly sustains rereading. Nothing of Roth’s has dwindled to a Period Piece, even if *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good* now seem uncharacteristic for the author of *Sabbath’s Theater, American Pastoral*, and *The Human Stain*. There are fictions by Roth that never found me: *Our Gang*, *The Breast*, *The Great American Novel*. From *My Life as a Man* (1974) to the present, Roth has been an Old Master, but *Portnoy’s Complaint* remains the most vital of his earlier works.

Vitality, in the Shakespearean or Falstaffian sense, and its representation in personality and character, is Roth’s greatest gift, which is why I would nominate *Sabbath’s Theater* as his sublime achievement. It matters that we see how astonishing a creation *Sabbath’s Theater* is. What are the authentic eminences of American fiction in the second half of the Twentieth century? My experience as an obsessive reader would center first upon Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Mason & Dixon*, to which one adds Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*. When I turn to Roth, I happily am deluged: the tetralogy *Zuckerman Bound*, *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, and then the American historical sequence that includes *Sabbath’s Theater, American Pastoral, I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*. The sheer drive and fecundity of this later Roth makes me think of Faulkner at his earlier splendor: *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner upon his heights is a frightening comparison to venture, but *Sabbath’s Theater* and *American Pastoral* will sustain the contrast. Nothing even by Roth has the uncanny originality of *As I Lay Dying*, yet *Sabbath’s Theater* and the terrible pathos of *American Pastoral* have their own uncanniness. The wildness and freedom of *Portnoy’s Complaint* now seem very different when taken as a prelude to the advent of *Sabbath’s Theater*, just over a quarter-century later.

Though the confrontation between the late Irving Howe and Roth over Roth’s supposed self-hatred is pragmatically prehistoric (in 2003), it has left some scars upon what ought to be called the novelist’s aesthetic consciousness. In Shakespearean terms, Roth writes comedy or tragi-comedy, in the mode of the Problem Plays: *Troilus and Cressida*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*. The exquisite rancidities of this Shakespearean mode do not appear to be Roth’s object. He seems to prefer Falstaff and Lear among Shakespeare’s characters, and both of them get into Mickey Sabbath, who necessarily lacks the Falstaffian wit and Learian grandeur. Sabbath is an heroic vitalist, but in retrospect what else is Alex
Portnoy? The comedy, painful to start with, hurts unbearably when you reread Sabbath’s Theater. How hurtful is the hilarity of Portnoy’s Complaint?

My favorite Yiddish apothegm, since my childhood, I translate as: “Sleep faster, we need the pillows.” Roth’s inescapability is that he has usurped this mode, perhaps not forever, but certainly for the early twenty-first century. Sleeping faster is a cure for the anguish of contamination: by Jewish history; by Kafka; by one’s audience after achieving celebrity with Portnoy’s Complaint.

Alex Portnoy is not going to age into Mickey Sabbath: Roth’s protagonists are neither Roth nor one another. But viewing Portnoy retrospectively, through Sabbath’s outrageousness, allows readers to see what otherwise we may be too dazzled or too overcome by laughter to realize. Alex Portnoy, however mother-ridden, has an extraordinary potential for more life that he is unlikely to fulfill. Not that fulfillment would be glorious or redemptive; Sabbath’s grinding vitalism carries him past the edge of madness. Portnoy, liberal and humane (except, of course, in regard to women he desires), calls himself “rich with rage”, but his fiercest anger is light years away from Sabbath’s erotic fury.

Aside from Roth’s complex aesthetic maturation, the differences between Portnoy and Sabbath is the shadow of Shakespeare, of King Lear’s madness and Falstaff’s refusal of embitterment and estrangement. Sabbath is fighting for his life, within the limits of what he understands life to be: the erotic, in all its ramifications. So intense is Sabbath that the denunciations directed at him are once accurate and totally irrelevant, as here from his friend, Norman:

“The walking panegyric for obscenity,” Norman said. “The inverted saint whose message is desecration. Isn’t it tiresome in 1994, this role of rebel-hero? What an odd time to be thinking of sex as rebellion. Are we back to Lawrence’s gamekeeper? At this late hour? To be out with that beard of yours, upholding the virtues of fetishism and voyeurism. To be out with that belly of yours, championing pornography and flying the flag of your prick. What a pathetic, outmoded old crank you are, Mickey Sabbath. The discredited male polemic’s last gasp. Even as the bloodiest of all centuries comes to an end, you’re out working day and night to create an erotic scandal. You fucking relic, Mickey! You fifties antique! Linda Lovelace is already light-years behind us, but you persist in quarreling with society as though Eisenhower is president!” But then, almost apologetically, he added, “The immensity of your isolation is horrifying. That’s all I really mean to say.”
“And there you’d be surprised,” Sabbath replied. “I don’t think you ever gave isolation a real shot. It’s the best preparation I know of for death.”

Roth has placed Sabbath near the outer limit of organized society: a beggar, vagrant, and courter of death. It does not matter: Sabbath is redeemed through sheer vitalism. Alex Portnoy now seems more a parody of that frenetic drive. *Portnoy’s Complaint* is a marvelous comedy; *Sabbath’s Theater* is a tragi-comedy, and its Shakespearean reverberations are legitimate and persuasive.
Cormac McCarthy

(1933–)

_Blood Meridian_

_Blood Meridian_ (1985) seems to me the authentic American apocalyptic novel, more relevant even in 2000 than it was fifteen years ago. The fulfilled renown of _Moby-Dick_ and of _As I Lay Dying_ is augmented by _Blood Meridian_, since Cormac McCarthy is the worthy disciple both of Melville and of Faulkner. I venture that no other living American novelist, not even Pynchon, has given us a book as strong and memorable as _Blood Meridian_, much as I appreciate Don DeLillo’s _Underworld_, Philip Roth’s _Zuckerman Bound, Sabbath’s Theater_, and _American Pastoral_, and Pynchon’s _Gravity’s Rainbow_ and _Mason & Dixon_. McCarthy himself, in his recent Border trilogy, commencing with the superb _All the Pretty Horses_, has not matched _Blood Meridian_, but it is the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed.

My concern being the reader, I will begin by confessing that my first two attempts to read through _Blood Meridian_ failed, because I flinched from the overwhelming carnage that McCarthy portrays. The violence begins on the novel’s second page, when the fifteen-year-old Kid is shot in the back and just below the heart, and continues almost with no respite until the end, thirty years later, when Judge Holden, the most frightening figure in all of American literature, murders the Kid in an outhouse. So appalling are the continuous massacres and mutilations of _Blood Meridian_ that one could be reading a United Nations report on the horrors of Kosovo in 1999.

Nevertheless, I urge the reader to persevere, because _Blood Meridian_ is a canonical imaginative achievement, both an American and a universal tragedy of blood. Judge Holden is a villain worthy of Shakespeare, Iago-like and demoniac, a theoretician of war everlasting. And the book’s magnificence—its language, landscape, persons, conceptions—at last
transcends the violence, and convert goriness into terrifying art, an art comparable to Melville’s and to Faulkner’s. When I teach the book, many of my students resist it initially (as I did, and as some of my friends continue to do). Television saturates us with actual as well as imagined violence, and I turn away, either in shock or in disgust. But I cannot turn away from Blood Meridian, now that I know how to read it, and why it has to be read. None of its carnage is gratuitous or redundant; it belonged to the Mexico–Texas borderlands in 1849–50, which is where and when most of the novel is set. I suppose one could call Blood Meridian a “historical novel,” since it chronicles the actual expedition of the Glanton gang, a murderous paramilitary force sent out both by Mexican and Texan authorities to murder and scalp as many Indians as possible. Yet it does not have the aura of historical fiction, since what it depicts seethes on, in the United States, and nearly everywhere else, as we enter the third millennium. Judge Holden, the prophet of war, is unlikely to be without honor in our years to come.

Even as you learn to endure the slaughter McCarthy describes, you become accustomed to the book’s high style, again as overtly Shakespearean as it is Faulknerian. There are passages of Melvillean-Faulknerian baroque richness and intensity in The Crying of Lot 49, and elsewhere in Pynchon, but we can never be sure that they are not parodic. The prose of Blood Meridian soars, yet with its own economy, and its dialogue is always persuasive, particularly when the uncanny Judge Holden speaks (chapter 14, p. 199):

\[\text{The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.}\]

\[\text{Toadvine sat with his boots crossed before the fire. No man can acquaint himself with everything on this earth, he said.}\]

\[\text{The judge tilted his great head. The man who believes that the secrets of this world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.}\]

Judge Holden is the spiritual leader of Glanton’s filibusters, and McCarthy persuasively gives the self-styled judge a mythic status, appropriate
for a deep Machiavelli whose “thread of order” recalls Iago’s magic web, in which Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio are caught. Though all of the more colorful and murderous raiders are vividly characterized for us, the killing-machine Glanton with the others, the novel turns always upon its two central figures, Judge Holden and the Kid. We first meet the Judge on page 6: an enormous man, bald as a stone, no trace of a beard, and eyes without either brows or lashes. A seven-foot-tall albino, he almost seems to have come from some other world, and we learn to wonder about the Judge, who never sleeps, dances and fiddles with extraordinary art and energy, rapes and murders little children of both sexes, and who says that he will never die. By the book’s close, I have come to believe that the Judge is immortal. And yet the Judge, while both more and less than human, is as individuated as Iago or Macbeth, and is quite at home in the Texan–Mexican borderlands where we watch him operate in 1849–50, and then find him again in 1878, not a day older after twenty-eight years, though the Kid, a sixteen-year-old at the start of Glanton’s foray, is forty-five when murdered by the Judge at the end.

McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the Kid from another mindless scalper of Indians to the courageous confronter of the Judge in their final debate in a saloon. But though the Kid’s moral maturation is heartening, his personality remains largely a cipher, as anonymous as his lack of a name. The three glories of the book are the Judge, the landscape, and (dreadful to say this) the slaughters, which are aesthetically distanced by McCarthy in a number of complex ways.

What is the reader to make of the Judge? He is immortal as principle, as War Everlasting, but is he a person, or something other? McCarthy will not tell us, which is all the better, since the ambiguity is most stimulating. Melville’s Captain Ahab, though a Promethean demigod, is necessarily mortal, and perishes with the Pequod and all its crew, except for Ishmael. After he has killed the Kid, Blood Meridian’s Ishmael, Judge Holden is the last survivor of Glanton’s scalping crusade. Destroying the Native-American nations of the Southwest is hardly analogous to the hunt to slay Moby-Dick, and yet McCarthy gives us some curious parallels between the two quests. The most striking is between Melville’s chapter 19, where a ragged prophet, who calls himself Elijah, warns Ishmael and Queequeg against sailing on the Pequod, and McCarthy’s chapter 4, where “an old disordered Mennonite” warns the Kid and his comrades not to join Captain Worth’s filibuster, a disaster that preludes the greater catastrophe of Glanton’s campaign.

McCarthy’s invocation of Moby-Dick, while impressive and suggestive, in itself does not do much to illuminate Judge Holden for us. Ahab has his
preternatural aspects, including his harpooner Fedellah and Parsee whale-boat crew, and the captain's conversion to their Zoroastrian faith. Elijah tells Ishmael touches of other Ahabian mysteries: a three-day trance off Cape Horn, slaying a Spaniard in front of a presumably Catholic altar in Santa Ysabel, and a wholly enigmatic spitting into a “silver calabash.” Yet all these are transparencies compared to the enigmas of Judge Holden, who seems to judge the entire earth, and whose name suggests a holding, presumably of sway over all he encounters. And yet, the Judge, unlike Ahab, is not wholly fictive; like Glanton, he is a historic filibuster or free-booter. McCarthy tells us most in the Kid’s dream visions of Judge Holden, towards the close of the novel (chapter 22, pp. 309–10):

In that sleep and in sleep to follow the judge did visit. Who would come other? A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents, he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing.

I think that McCarthy is warning his reader that the Judge is Moby-Dick rather than Ahab. As another white enigma, the albino Judge, like the albino whale, cannot be slain. Melville, a professed Gnostic, who believed that some “anarch hand or cosmic blunder” had divided us into two fallen sexes, gives us a Manichean quester in Ahab. McCarthy gives Judge Holden the powers and purposes of the bad angels or demiurges that the Gnostics called archons, but he tells us not to make such an identification (as the critic Leo Daugherty eloquently has). Any “system,” including the Gnostic one, will not divide the Judge back into his origins. The “ultimate atavistic egg” will not be found. What can the reader do with the haunting and terrifying Judge?

Let us begin by saying that Judge Holden, though his gladsome prophecy of eternal war is authentically universal, is first and foremost a Western American, no matter how cosmopolitan his background (he speaks all languages, knows all arts and sciences, and can perform magical, shamanistic metamorphoses). The Texan–Mexican border is a superb place for a war-god like the Judge to be. He carries a rifle, mounted in silver,
with its name inscribed under the checkpiece: *Et In Arcadia Ego*. In the American Arcadia, death is also always there, incarnated in the Judge’s weapon, which never misses. If the American pastoral tradition essentially is the Western film, then the Judge incarnates that tradition, though he would require a director light-years beyond the late Sam Peckinpah, whose *The Wild Bunch* portrays mildness itself when compared to Glanton’s paramilitaries. I resort though, as before, to Iago, who transfers war from the camp and the field to every other locale, and is a pyromaniac setting everything and everyone ablaze with the flame of battle. The Judge might be Iago before *Othello* begins, when the war-god Othello was still worshipped by his “honest” color officer, his ancient or ensign. The Judge speaks with an authority that chills me even as Iago leaves me terrified:

This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence.

If McCarthy does not want us to regard the Judge as a Gnostic archon or supernatural being, the reader may still feel that it hardly seems sufficient to designate Holden as a nineteenth-century Western American Iago. Since *Blood Meridian*, like the much longer *Moby-Dick*, is more prose epic than novel, the Glanton foray can seem a post-Homeric quest, where the various heroes (or thugs) have a disguised god among them, which appears to be the Judge’s Herculean role. The Glanton gang passes into a sinister aesthetic glory at the close of chapter 13, when they progress from murdering and scalping Indians to butchering the Mexicans who have hired them:

They entered the city haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted. The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor’s house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers and the Sociedad was disbanded and the bounty rescinded. Within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos posted for Glanton’s head.

I break into this passage, partly to observe that from this point on the filibusters pursue the way down and out to an apocalyptic conclusion, but
also to urge the reader to hear, and admire, the sublime sentence that follows directly, because we are at the visionary center of *Blood Meridian*.

They rode out on the north road as would parties bound for El Paso but before they were even quite out of sight of the city they had turned their tragic mounts to the west and they rode infatuate and half fond toward the red demise of that day, toward the evening lands and the distant pandemonium of the sun.

Since Cormac McCarthy’s language, like Melville’s and Faulkner’s, frequently is deliberately archaic, the *meridian* of the title probably means the zenith or noon position of the sun in the sky. Glanton, the Judge, the Kid, and their fellows are not described as “tragic”—their long-suffering horses are—and they are “infatuate” and half-mad (“fond”) because they have broken away from any semblance of order. McCarthy knows, as does the reader, that an “order” urging the destruction of the entire Native American population of the Southwest is an obscene idea of order, but he wants the reader to know also that the Glanton gang is now aware that they are unsponsored and free to run totally amok. The sentence I have just quoted has a morally ambiguous greatness to it, but that is the greatness of *Blood Meridian*, and indeed of Homer and of Shakespeare. McCarthy so contextualizes the sentence that the amazing contrast between its high gestures and the murderous thugs who evoke the splendor is not ironic but tragic. The tragedy is ours, as readers, and not the Glanton gang’s, since we are not going to mourn their demise except for the Kid’s, and even there our reaction will be equivocal.

My passion for *Blood Meridian* is so fierce that I want to go on expounding it, but the courageous reader should now be (I hope) pretty well into the main movement of the book. I will confine myself here to the final encounter between the preternatural Judge Holden and the Kid, who had broken with the insane crusade twenty-eight years before, and now at middle age must confront the ageless Judge. Their dialogue is the finest achievement in this book of augmenting wonders, and may move the reader as nothing else in *Blood Meridian* does. I reread it perpetually and cannot persuade myself that I have come to the end of it.

The Judge and the Kid drink together, after the avenging Judge tells the Kid that this night his soul will be demanded of him. Knowing he is no match for the Judge, the Kid nevertheless defies Holden, with laconic replies playing against the Judge’s rolling grandiloquence. After demanding to know where their slain comrades are, the Judge asks: “And where is the fiddler and where the dance?”
I guess you can tell me.

I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?

You aint nothin.

To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic. “You speak truer than you know,” the Judge replies, and two pages later murders the Kid, most horribly. Blood Meridian, except for a one-paragraph epilogue, ends with the Judge triumphantly dancing and fiddling at once, and proclaiming that he never sleeps and he will never die. But McCarthy does not let Judge Holden have the last word.

The strangest passage in Blood Meridian, the epilogue is set at dawn, where a nameless man progresses over a plain by means of holes that he makes in the rocky ground. Employing a two-handled implement, the man strikes “the fire out of the rock which God has put there.” Around the man are wanderers searching for bones, and he continues to strike fire in the holes, and then they move on. And that is all.

The subtitle of Blood Meridian is The Evening Redness in the West, which belongs to the Judge, last survivor of the Glanton gang. Perhaps all that the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him.

All the Pretty Horses

If there is a pragmatic tradition of the American Sublime, then Cormac McCarthy’s fictions are its culmination. Moby-Dick and Faulkner’s major, early novels are McCarthy’s prime precursors. Melville’s Ahab fuses together Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists—Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth—and crosses them with a quest both Promethean and American. Even as Montaigne’s Plato became Emerson’s, so Melville’s Shakespeare becomes Cormac McCarthy’s. Though critics will go on associating McCarthy with Faulkner, who certainly affected McCarthy’s style in Suttree (1979), the visionary of Blood Meridian (1985) and The Border Trilogy (1992, 1994, 1998) has much less in common with Faulkner, and shares more profoundly in Melville’s debt to Shakespeare.
Melville, by giving us Ahab and Ishmael, took care to distance the reader from Ahab, if not from his quest. McCarthy’s protagonists tend to be apostles of the will-to-identity, except for the Iago-like Judge Holden of *Blood Meridian*, who is the Will Incarnate. John Grady Cole, who survives in *All the Pretty Horses* only to be destroyed in *Cities of the Plain*, is replaced in *The Crossing* by Billy Parham, who is capable of learning what the heroic Grady Cole evades, the knowledge that Jehovah (Yahweh) holds in his very name: “Where that is I am not.” God will be present where and when he chooses to be present, and absent more often than present.

The aesthetic achievement of *All the Pretty Horses* surpasses that of *Cities of the Plain*, if only because McCarthy is too deeply invested in John Grady Cole to let the young man (really still a boy) die with the proper distancing of authorial concern. No one will compose a rival to *Blood Meridian*, not even McCarthy, but *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* are of the eminence of *Suttree*. If I had to choose a narrative by McCarthy that could stand on its own in relation to *Blood Meridian*, it probably would be *All the Pretty Horses*. John Grady Cole quests for freedom, and discovers what neither Suttree nor Billy Parham needs to discover, which is that freedom in an American context is another name for solitude. The self’s freedom, for Cormac McCarthy, has no social aspect whatsoever.

I speak of McCarthy as visionary novelist, and not necessarily as a citizen of El Paso, Texas. Emerson identified freedom with power, only available at the crossing, in the shooting of a gulf, a darting to an aim. Since we care for Hamlet, even though he cares for none, we have to assume that Shakespeare also had a considerable investment in Hamlet. The richest aspect of *All the Pretty Horses* is that we learn to care strongly about the development of John Grady Cole, and perhaps we can surmise that Cormac McCarthy is also moved by this most sympathetic of his protagonists.

*All the Pretty Horses* was published seven years after *Blood Meridian*, and is set almost a full century later in history. John Grady Cole is about the same age as McCarthy would have been in 1948. There is no more an identification between McCarthy and the young Cole, who evidently will not live to see twenty, than there is between Shakespeare and Prince Hamlet. And yet the reverberation of an heroic poignance is clearly heard throughout *All the Pretty Horses*. It may be that McCarthy’s hard-won authorial detachment toward the Kid in *Blood Meridian* had cost the novelist too much, in the emotional register. Whether my surmise is accurate or not, the reader shares with McCarthy an affectionate stance toward the heroic youth at the center of *All the Pretty Horses*.
In different ways, I prefer *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld* to *Mao II*, but a crucial element of Don DeLillo’s achievement is his uncanny, proleptic sense of the triumph of the Age of Terror, which is the peculiar strength of *Mao II*. In 2002, *Mao II* is the way we live now, in the Age of George W. Bush, John Ashcroft, and Osama bin Laden. One can venture that character is irrelevant to DeLillo because he has a good claim to have invented those clearly fictive personages: Dubya, Ashcroft, Osama. As for plot, what relevance can it have in a cosmos where *everything* can turn out to be part of a terror scheme. That may seem the anarcho-sadism of Thomas Pynchon, whose earlier, paranoid visions were the prime precursors of DeLillo. And yet Pynchonian paranoia was systematic; DeLillon paranoia retains a random element, which probably has something to do with the Romantic Transcendentalism that somehow lingers in DeLillo.

DeLillo is soft-spoken, without pretence, a man of good will. You could not insert him into one of his novels, not even as Nick Shay in *Underworld*. He is the antitype of *Mao II*’s Bill Gray, despite some superficial resemblances. Gray, like Pynchon, hides himself in order to write, but dies as a witness to a new reality, in which the terrorist has usurped the novelist. East Beirut, where the novel closes, is the New Everywhere.

A novel that begins in Yankee Stadium (sacred ground for DeLillo and myself), with 6,500 couples simultaneously being married by the Reverend Moon, ends with an East Beirut wedding escorted by a tank and jeep mounted with a recoilless rifle. And all this would be routine, were it not for the intimations of a pathos, almost a transcendence, that DeLillo imparts to that final vision of marriage:

Civilans talking and laughing and well dressed, twenty adults and
half as many children, mostly girls in pretty dresses and white knee-stockings and patent-leather shoes. And here is the stunning thing that takes her a moment to understand, that this is a wedding party going by. The bride and groom carry champagne glasses and some of the girls hold sparklers that send off showers of excited light. A guest in a pastel tuxedo smokes a long cigar and does a dance around a shell hole, delighting the kids. The bride's gown is beautiful, with lacy appliqué at the bodice, and she looks surprisingly alive, they all look transcendent, free of limits and unsurprised to be here. They make it seem only natural that a wedding might advance in resplendence with a free-lance tank as escort. Sparklers going. Other children holding roses tissued in fern. Brita is gripping the rail. She wants to dance or laugh or jump off the balcony. It seems completely possible that she will land softly among them and walk along in her pajama shirt and panties all the way to heaven.

If there is a DeLilllon counter-force to the Age of Terror, it must be there: “they all look transcendent, free of limits.” We learn to recognize a DeLillo scene from such near-epiphanies. Unlike most of his critics, DeLillo has an Emersonian longing for the transcendental and extraordinary, for privileged moments.

How permanent an achievement is Mao II, compared to Underworld? Let it be affirmed at once that DeLillo does not write Period Pieces, as Updike and Bellow go on doing. Bill Gray is a sad creation, and yet his aesthetic dignity is considerable. He is an authentic writer deeply fearful that the new Time of Terror renders his art irrelevant. Samuel Beckett could alter consciousness; Bill Gray knows that he cannot. Any bomb-thrower is far more competent to modify our consciousness of reality.

It is disconcerting to reread Mao II just eleven years after its publication, and one year after the destruction of the World Trade Center. What shocked us must have confirmed DeLillo in his anguished apprehension of reality. Mao II in time may seem like secondary DeLillo, but it will lose its wisdom only if someday we pass out of our unhappy time.

White Noise

Don DeLillo’s masterwork is Underworld (1997), which is long, uneven, and wonderful. White Noise (1985) would appear to be his most popular novel: the paperback in which I have just reread it is the thirty-first printing. I doubt that it will prove as permanent as Underworld, but revisiting
clearly demonstrates that it is much more than a period piece. Critics frequently associate DeLillo with William Gaddis and Robert Coover, as with the formidable Thomas Pynchon. *Underworld* is something different, and may have more affinities with Philip Roth than with Pynchon. DeLillo, in *White Noise*, is a High Romantic in the age of virtual reality and related irrealisms. Frank Lentricchia, who has become DeLillo’s canonical critic, is accurate in suggesting that Jack Gladney descends from Joyce’s Poldy Bloom, and like Poldy, DeLillo’s protagonist has a touch of the poet about him. One large difference is that Gladney is a first-person narrator; another is that Poldy has a benign immensity that Gladney cannot match. Though another cuckold, Poldy is a Romantic individualist, like Joyce himself. A century later, the amiable Gladney is trapped in a network of systems, another unit in the Age of Information.

DeLillo is a comedian of the spirit, haunted by omens of the end of our time. *White Noise* is very funny, and very disturbing: it is another of the American comic apocalypses that include Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger*, Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, Nathaniel West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* and Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. That is a high order of company, and *White Noise* almost sustains it.

DeLillo is a master of deadpan outrageousness: Jack Gladney is chairman and professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill. Though he is the American inventor of his discipline, Gladney has no affective reaction to Hitler: it appears to be a subject like any other these days, be it Eskimo Lesbian Studies or Post-Colonialism.

But all of *White Noise* is comic outrage; everything becomes funny, be it the fear of death, adultery, airborne toxic events, the struggles of the family romance, advanced supermarkets, or what you will. Simultaneously, everything becomes anxious, in a world where even the nuns only pretend to believe, and where the first three of Gladney’s four wives each had some connection to the world of espionage.

Until *Underworld*, DeLillo’s characters are curious blends of personalities and ideograms. Gladney is such a blend: we are persuaded by his love for Babette, his adulterous but well-meaning wife, and by his warm relations with his rather varied children. And yet he is as just as much Fear-of-Death as he is a husband and a father.

Where is DeLillo in *White Noise*? Close to the end of the book, he gives us a long paragraph of astonishing power and distinction, one of the most memorable passages in American writing of the later twentieth century:

We go to the overpass all the time. Babette, Wilder and I. We take a thermos of iced tea, park the car, watch the setting sun. Clouds
are no deterrent. Clouds intensify the drama, trap the shape of light. Heavy overcasts have little effect. Light bursts through, tracers and smoky arcs. Overcasts enhance the mood. We find little to say to each other. More cars arrive, parking in a line that extends down to the residential zone. People walk up the incline and onto the overpass, carrying fruit and nuts, cool drinks, mainly the middle-aged, the elderly, some with webbed beach chairs which they set out on the sidewalk, but younger couples also, arm in arm at the rail, looking west. The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. The bands of color reach so high, seem at times to separate into their constituent parts. There are turret-ed skies, light storms, softly falling streamers. It is hard to know how we should feel about this. Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don’t know how to feel, are ready to go either way. Rain is no deterrent. Rain brings on graded displays, wonderful running hues. More cars arrive, people come trudging up the incline. The spirit of these warm evenings is hard to describe. There is anticipation in the air but it is not the expectant midsummer hum of a shirtsleeve crowd, a sandlot game, with coherent precedents, a history of secure response. The waiting is introverted, uneven, almost backward and shy, tending toward silence. What else do we feel? Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means, we don’t know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass. The collapsible chairs are yanked open, the old people sit. What is there to say? The sunsets linger and so do we. The sky is under a spell, powerful and storied. Now and then a car actually crosses the overpass, moving slowly, deferentially. People keep coming up the incline, some in wheelchairs, twisted by disease, those who attend them bending low to push against the grade. I didn’t know how many handicapped and helpless people there were in town until the warm nights brought crowds to the overpass. Cars speed beneath us, coming from the west, from out of the towering light, and we watch them as if for a sign, as if they carry on their painted surfaces some residue of the sunset, a barely detectable luster or film of telltale dust. No one plays a radio or speaks in a voice that is much above a whisper. Something golden falls, a softness
delivered to the air. There are people walking dogs, there are kids on bikes, a man with a camera and long lens, waiting for his moment. It is not until some time after dark has fallen, the insects screaming in the heat, that we slowly begin to disperse, shyly, politely, car after car, restored to our separate and defensible selves.

It is a major American prose-poem, marked by the aura of the airborne toxic event, and yet balanced upon the edge of a transcendental revelation. DeLillo, who is so easily mistaken for a Post-Modernist End-Gamer, is rather clearly a visionary, a late Emersonian American Romantic, like the Wallace Stevens who turns blankly on the sand in *The Auroras of Autumn*. Light bursts through, and the sky, as in Stevens, takes on an exalted narrative life. Awe transcends fear, transcends the past of awe. Is it wonder or dread, an epiphany or mere, reductive pollution? What matters is that brightness falls from the air, before all the viewers return to their separate selves.

This is more than Transcendentalism in the last ditch, or Romanticism on the wane. Nothing is affirmed, not even illusion. We turn to DeLillo for woe and wonder alike, accurately persuaded of his high artistry, of something well beyond a study of the nostalgias.

*Underworld*

One can venture that the major American novelists now at work are Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy. They write the Style of our Age, and each has composed canonical works. For DeLillo, I would name these as *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*, certainly his principal book up to this time. Roth, immensely prolific, wrote his masterpiece in the scabrous *Sabbath’s Theater*, while his tetralogy, *Zuckerman Bound*, and *American Pastoral* are equally likely to survive our era. McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* continues to overwhelm me: *Suttree* before it, *All the Pretty Horses* more recently, also should be permanent. Pynchon, named by Tony Tanner as DeLillo’s precursor, is an central to our narrative fiction now as John Ashbery is to our poetry. *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* have defined our culture—to call it that—and *Mason & Dixon* is even more remarkable, a work of amazing geniality and a kind of hopeless hope.

If just four recent fictions are to be selected for the United States in the early years of the twenty-first century, then name them as *Blood Meridian*, *Sabbath’s Theater*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Underworld*. All of DeLillo is in *Underworld*, and so is New York City 1951–96. He has not written the
epic of the city; perhaps Hart Crane did that forever, with *The Bridge* (1930). But DeLillo’s sense of America, in the second half of the twentieth century, is achieved perfectly in *Underworld*.

DeLillo, a wisdom writer, makes no Hemingwayesque attempt to challenge Shakespeare and Tolstoy. Nor does he desire any contest with Pynchon, though Tony Tanner shrewdly implies that this was unavoidable. Pynchon’s cosmos of paranoia, indispensable waste, plastic consumerism is the literary context of *Underworld*. DeLillo is highly aware of his own belatedness, yet his resources are extraordinary, and he so subsumes Pynchon so as to achieve a distinguished triumph over any anguish of contamination that might have impeded *Underworld*. By the time the vast book concludes, DeLillo’s relation to Pynchon is like Pynchon’s own relation to *The Recognitions* of William Gaddis and to Borges. The Pynchon–DeLillo implicit contest becomes akin to *Blood Meridian*’s struggle with Melville and Faulkner or Roth’s permanent status as Franz Kafka’s grandnephew (as it were).

Tanner, disappointed with *Underworld*, argued otherwise, and sometimes cannot be refuted. I wince when Tanner observes: “And, crucially, *Underworld* has no Tristero.” Tristero remains the greatest of Pynchonian inventions: *The Crying of Lot 49*’s sublimely mad, subversive alternative to the United States Postal Service is not matched by *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s interplay between the System and the Zone. Nor, as Tanner insists, does *Underworld* have so persuasive a universal connection to justify its declarations that everything is linked and connected. But again, DeLillo knows this and makes of his supposed weakness a radical strength.

Tanner is again accurate when he observes that Nick Shay, DeLillo’s surrogate, as a character is just not there at all, nor does Shay want to be. The only character with a consciousness before Mason and Dixon, anywhere in Pynchon, is Oedipa Maas, and she is there only in the closing moments of the novella. The only consciousness in DeLillo is DeLillo; despite his supposed Post-Modernism, he is a High Romantic Transcendentalist determined not to be out of his time. If there is religiosity in *Underworld*, it is not DeLillo’s and is portrayed as part of the waste. And yet there is something more profound than mere nostalgia in DeLillo’s Romanticism. His authentic masters are Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and his visions, flashing out against the noise and the waste, are enduring illuminations.

At the opening of “Self-Reliance,” Emerson gave us a superb irony:

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.
DeLillo lovingly parodies this in Nick Shay’s final meditation:

Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging.

Tanner was anxious about the epiphanies of DeLillo’s urban transcendentalism, and wondered if they were only evidences of a decayed Catholicism. And yet, DeLillo’s vibrant Emersonianism seems to me clear enough. Underworld, which Tanner says is totally reliant on history, actually is self-reliant and like Emerson is adversarial to history. Old Bronx boy and baseball fan that I am (like DeLillo, addicted to the Yankees), I thrill to the Prologue of Underworld, which I wish had kept its title of “Pafko at the Wall.” Though you could say that DeLillo is following baseball history in his vision of Bobby Thomson’s Shot Heard Round the World in October 1951, I myself have strong memories of that moment at the old Polo Grounds, and what I recall is mere history, and “it is all falling indelibly into the past.” Romantic vision of the high mode, whether in Song of Myself or Underworld, is precisely what does not fall.
I suppose that Pynchon’s masterwork, to date, is *Mason & Dixon*, but my personal passion for *The Crying of Lot 49* is too strong to yield to any other book. Visionary romance is the genre of *The Crying of Lot 49*. The book seems like a lot of other things: detective story turned inside out, social satire, American apocalypse, but essentially it is romance, a narrative that so meshes fantasy and American reality that they cannot be disengaged. Its protagonist, Oedipa, is amiable but persuasive neither as personality nor as character. She doesn’t have to be. After thirty-six years, *The Crying of Lot 49* is perfectly revelatory of current American paranoia in the Age of George W. Bush.

Since the United States, at this time, looks to me like a disorganized paranoia (though such mighty archons as Ashcroft and Poindexter labor to organize it), one feels that it ought to engender an opposing force like the Tristero, an underground postal system that is something of an alternative culture. There cannot, in our America, be any alternative cultures because Dubya, the entertainment industry, the universities, the media, all have subsumed one another. The Tristero, sublimely paranoid, is too different to be absorbed. It will not go to war with Iraq, it will not vote, it will not pay taxes or postal fees. It is what Pynchon elsewhere terms sado-anarchism.

As such, it is a parody of Pentecostalism; *The Crying of Lot 49* is neither political nor religious in its stance. But it is very concerned with the United States of America: is the Tristero system an anarchist alternative to America? Pynchon answers no questions, but something in Oedipa’s final meditation may constitute an implicit answer:

Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero.
For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.

This marvelously intricate passage comes down to a grim choice of realities: paranoia or sado-anarchism. I wake up these mornings, drink tea, and stare at (I cannot quite read it) The New York Times, which clearly is paranoid. The first page (Monday, November 25, 2002) tells me about a young female evangelist murdered in Lebanon, and imparts the news (which is no news) that the middle class in Dubya's paranoia are losing their health benefits. Further down, there is a story about whether or not women will join a golf club. And so it goes. There had better be a Tristero, at least in our imaginations.

*Gravity's Rainbow*

We all carry about with us our personal catalog of the experiences that matter most—our own versions of what they used to call the Sublime. So far as aesthetic experience in twentieth-century America is concerned, I myself have a short list for the American Sublime: the war that concludes the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*; Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*; Wallace Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn"; nearly all of Hart Crane; Charlie Parker playing "Parker's Mood" and "I Remember You"; Bud Powell performing "Un Poco Loco"; Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*; and most recently, the story of Byron the light bulb in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

I am not suggesting that there is not much more of the Sublime in *Gravity's Rainbow* than the not quite eight pages that make up the story of Byron the Bulb. Pynchon is the greatest master of the negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West, and if nothing besides Byron the Bulb in *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to me quite as perfect as all of *The Crying of Lot 49*, that may be because no one could hope to write the first authentic post-Holocaust novel and achieve a total vision without fearful cost. Yet the story of Byron the Bulb, for me, touches one of the limits of art, and I want to read it very closely here, so as to suggest what is most vital and least problematic about Pynchon's achievement as a writer, indeed as the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time. We are now, in my judgment, in the Age of John Ashbery and of Thomas Pynchon, which is not to suggest any inadequacy in such marvelous works as James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* or Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* but only
to indicate one critic’s conviction as to what now constitutes the Spirit of the Age.

For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System. No one is going to dispute such a conviction; reading the New York Times first thing every morning is sufficient to convince one that not even Pynchon’s imagination can match journalistic irreality. What is more startling about Pynchon is that he has found ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both the impulse and its representations always are defeated. In the Zone (which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it, the kenoma or Great Emptiness) the force of the System, of They (whom the Gnostics called the Archons) is in some sense irresistible, as all overdetermination must be irresistible. Yet there is a Counterforce, hardly distinguished in its efficacy, but it never does (or can) give up. Unfortunately, its hero is the extraordinarily ordinary Tyrone Slothrop, who is a perpetual disaster, and whose ultimate fate, being “scattered” (rather in the biblical sense), is accomplished by Pynchon with dismaying literalness. And yet—Slothrop, who has not inspired much affection even in Pynchon’s best critics, remains more hero than antihero, despite the critics, and despite Pynchon himself.

There are more than four hundred named characters in Gravity’s Rainbow, and perhaps twenty of these have something we might want to call personality, but only Tyrone Slothrop (however negatively) could be judged a self-representation (however involuntary) on the author’s part. Slothrop is a Kabbalistic version of Pynchon himself, rather in the way that Scythrop the poet in Thomas Love Peacock’s Nightmare Abbey is intentionally a loving satire upon Peacock’s friend the poet Shelley, but Kabbalistically is a representation of Peacock himself. I am not interested in adding Nightmare Abbey to the maddening catalog of “sources” for Gravity’s Rainbow (though Slothrop’s very name probably alludes to Scythrop’s, with the image of a giant sloth replacing the acuity of the Shelleyan scythe). What does concern me is the Kabbalistic winding path that is Pynchon’s authentic and Gnostic image for the route through the kelippot or evil husks that the light must take if it is to survive in the ultimate breaking of the vessels, the Holocaust brought about by the System at its most evil, yet hardly at its most prevalent.

The not unimpressive polemic of Norman Mailer—that Fascism always lurks where plastic dominates—is in Pynchon not a polemic but a total vision. Mailer, for all his legitimate status as Representative Man, lacks invention except in Ancient Evenings, and there he cannot discipline his inventiveness. Pynchon surpasses every American writer since Faulkner at invention, which Dr. Samuel Johnson, greatest of Western literary critics,
rightly considered to be the essence of poetry or fiction. What can be judged Pynchon’s greatest talent is his vast control, a preternatural ability to order so immense an exuberance at invention. Pynchon’s supreme aesthetic quality is what Hazlitt called *gusto*, or what Blake intended in his Infernal proverb: “Exuberance is Beauty.”

Sadly, that is precisely what the Counterforce lacks: gusto. Slothrop never gives up; always defeated, he goes on, bloody and bowed, but has to yield to entropy, to a dread scattering. Yet he lacks all exuberance; he is the American as conditioned reflex, colorless and hapless.

Nothing holds or could hold *Gravity’s Rainbow* together—except Slothrop. When he is finally scattered, the book stops, and the apocalyptic rocket blasts off. Still, Slothrop is more than a Derridean dissemination, if only because he does enable Pynchon to gather together seven hundred and sixty pages. Nor is *Gravity’s Rainbow* what is now called “a text.” It is a novel, with a beginning, an end, and a monstrous conglomerate of middles. This could not be if the *schlemiel* Slothrop were wholly antipathetic. Instead, he does enlist something crucial in the elitest reader, a something that is scattered when the hero, poor Plasticman or Rocketman, is apocalyptically scattered.

Pynchon, as Richard Poirier has best seen and said, is a weird blend of the esoteric and insanely learned with the popular or the supposedly popular. Or, to follow Pynchon’s own lead, he is a Kabbalistic writer, esoteric not only in his theosophical allusiveness (like Yeats) but actually in his deeper patterns (like Malcolm Lowry in *Under the Volcano*). A Kabbalistic novel is something beyond an oxymoron not because the Kabbalah does not tell stories (it does) but because its stories are all exegetical, however wild and mythical. That does give a useful clue for reading Pynchon, who always seems not so much to be telling his bewildering, labyrinthine story as writing a wistful commentary upon it as a story already twice-told, though it hasn’t been, and truly can’t be told at all.

II

That returns us to Byron the Bulb, whose story can’t be told because poor Byron the indomitable really is immortal. He can never burn out, which at least is an annoyance for the whole paranoid System, and at most is an embarrassment for them. They cannot compel Byron to submit to the law of entropy, or the death drive, and yet they can deny him any context in which his immortality will at last be anything but a provocation to his own madness. A living reminder that the System can never quite win, poor Byron the Bulb becomes a death-in-life reminder that the System also can
never quite lose. Byron, unlike Slothrop, cannot be scattered, but his high consciousness represents the dark fate of the Gnosis in Pynchon’s vision. For all its negativity, Gnosticism remains a mode of transcendental belief. Pynchon’s is a Gnosis without transcendence. There is a Counterforce, but there is no fathering and mothering abyss to which it can return.

And yet the light bulb is named Byron, and is a source of light and cannot burn out. Why Byron? Well, he could hardly be Goethe the Bulb or Wordsworth the Bulb or even Joyce the Bulb. There must be the insouciance of personal myth in his name. Probably he could have been Oscar the Bulb, after the author of The Importance of Being Earnest or of that marvelous fairy tale “The Remarkable Rocket.” Or perhaps he might have been Groucho the Bulb. But Byron the Bulb is best, and not merely for ironic purposes. Humiliated but immortal, this Byron, too, might proclaim:

But there is that within me which shall tire
Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
Like the remembered tone of a mute lyre.

Byron the Bulb is essentially Childe Harold in the Zone:

He would not yield dominion of his mind
To spirits against whom his own rebell’d.

Like Childe Harold, Byron the Bulb is condemned to the fate of all High-Romantic Prometheans:

there is a fire
And motion of the soul which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but aspire
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

There are, alas, no high adventures for Byron the Bulb. We see him first in the Bulb Baby Heaven, maintained by the System or Company as part of its business of fostering demiurgic illusions:
One way or another, these Bulb folks are in the business of providing the appearance of power, power against the night, without the reality.

From the start, Byron is an anomaly, attempting to recruit the other Baby Bulbs in his great crusade against the Company. His is already a voice in the Zone, since he is as old as time.

Trouble with Byron’s he’s an old, old soul, trapped inside the glass prison of a Baby Bulb.

Like the noble Lord Byron plotting to lead the Greeks in their Revolution against the Turks, Byron the Bulb has his High-Romantic vision:

When M-Day finally does roll around, you can bet Byron’s elated. He has passed the time hatching some really insane grandiose plans—he’s gonna organize all the Bulbs, see, get him a power base in Berlin, he’s already hep to the Strobing Tactic, all you do is develop the knack (Yogic, almost) of shutting off and on at a rate close to the human brain’s alpha rhythm, and you can actually trigger an epileptic fit! True. Byron has had a vision against the rafters of his ward, of 20 million Bulbs, all over Europe, at a given synchronizing pulse arranged by one of his many agents in the Grid, all these Bulbs beginning to strobe together, humans thrashing around the 20 million rooms like fish on the beaches of Perfect Energy—Attention, humans, this has been a warning to you. Next time, a few of us will explode. Ha-ha. Yes we’ll unleash our Kamikaze squads! You’ve heard of the Kirghiz Light? well that’s the ass end of a firefly compared to what we’re gonna—oh, you haven’t heard of the—oh, well, too bad. Cause a few Bulbs, say a million, a mere 5% of our number, are more than willing to flame out in one grand burst instead of patiently waiting out their design hours.... So Byron dreams of his Guerrilla Strike Force, gonna get Herbert Hoover, Stanley Baldwin, all of them, right in the face with one coordinated blast.

The rhetoric of bravado here is tempered and defeated by a rhetoric of desperation. A rude awakening awaits Byron, because the System has in place already its branch, “Phoebus,” the international light-bulb cartel, headquartered of course in Switzerland. Phoebus, god of light and of
pestilence “determines the operational lives of all the bulbs in the world,” and yet does not as yet know that Byron, rebel against the cartel’s repression, is immortal. As an immortal, bearer of the Gnostic Spark or pneuma, Byron must acquire knowledge, initially the sadness of the knowledge of love:

One by one, over the months, the other bulbs burn out, and are gone. The first few of these hit Byron hard. He’s still a new arrival, still hasn’t accepted his immortality. But on through the burning hours he starts to learn about the transience of others: learns that loving them while they’re here becomes easier, and also more intense—to love as if each design-hour will be the last. Byron soon enough becomes a Permanent Old-Timer. Others can recognize his immortality on sight, but it’s never discussed except in a general way, when folklore comes flickering in from other parts of the Grid, tales of the Immortals, one in a kabbalist’s study in Lyons who’s supposed to know magic, another in Norway outside a warehouse facing arctic whiteness with a stoicism more southerly bulbs begin strobing faintly just at the thought of. If other Immortals are out there, they remain silent. But it is a silence with much, perhaps, everything, in it.

A silence that may have everything in it is a Gnostic concept but falls away into the silence of impotence, on the part of the other bulbs, when the System eventually sends its agent to unscrew Byron:

At 800 hours—another routine precaution—a Berlin agent is sent out to the opium den to transfer Byron. She is wearing asbestos-lined kid gloves and seven-inch spike heels, no not so she can fit in with the crowd, but so that she can reach that sconce to unscrew Byron. The other bulbs watch, in barely subdued terror. The word goes out along the Grid. At something close to the speed of light, every bulb, Azos looking down the empty black Bakelite streets, Nitralampen and Wotan Gs at night soccer matches, Just-Wolframs, Monowatts and Siriuses, every bulb in Europe knows what’s happened. They are silent with impotence, with surrender in the face of struggles they thought were all myth. We can’t help, this common thought humming through pastures of sleeping sheep, down Autobahns and to the bitter ends of coaling piers in the North, there’s never been anything we could do.... Anyone shows us the meanest hope of transcending and the Committee on Incandescent Anomalies comes in and takes him away. Some do
protest, maybe, here and there, but it’s only information, glow-modulated, harmless, nothing close to the explosions in the faces of the powerful that Byron once envisioned, back there in his Baby ward, in his innocence.

Romantics are Incandescent Anomalies, a phrase wholly appropriate to John Ashbery’s belated self-illuminations also, defeated epiphanies that always ask the question: Was it information? The information that Pynchon gives us has Byron taken to a “control point,” where he burns on until the committee on Incandescent Anomalies sends a hit man after him. Like the noble Lord Byron, who was more than half in love with easeful death before he went off to die in Greece, Byron the Bulb is now content to be recycled also, but he is bound upon his own wheel of fire, and so must continue as a now involuntary prophet and hero:

But here something odd happens. Yes, damned odd. The plan is to smash up Byron and send him back right there in the shop to cullet and batch—salvage the tungsten, of course—and let him be reincarnated in the glassblower’s next project (a balloon setting out on a journey from the top of a white skyscraper). This wouldn’t be too bad a deal for Byron—he knows as well as Phoebus does how many hours he has on him. Here in the shop he’s watched enough glass being melted back into the structureless pool from which all glass forms spring and re-spring, and wouldn’t mind going through it himself. But he is trapped on the Karmic wheel. The glowing orange batch is a taunt, a cruelty. There’s no escape for Byron, he’s doomed to an infinite regress of sockets and bulb-snatchers. In zips young Hansel Geschwindig, a Weimar street urchin—twirls Byron out of the ceiling into a careful pocket and Gesssschhhhhwindig! out the door again. Darkness invades the dreams of the glassblower. Of all the unpleasantries his dreams grab in out of the night air, an extinguished light is the worst. Light, in his dreams, was always hope: the basic, mortal hope. As the contacts break helically away, hope turns to darkness, and the glassblower wakes sharply tonight crying, “Who? Wbo?”

Byron the Bulb’s Promethean fire is now a taunt and a cruelty. A mad comedy, “an infinite regress of sockets and bulb-snatchers,” will be the poor Bulb’s destiny, a repetition-compulsion akin to the entropic flight and scattering of the heroic schlemiel Slothrop. The stone-faced search parties of the Phoebus combine move out into the streets of Berlin. But Byron is off
upon his unwilling travels: Berlin to Hamburg to Helgoland to Nürnberg, until (after many narrow escapes):

He is scavenged next day (the field now deathempty, columned, pale, streaked with long mudpuddles, morning clouds lengthening behind the gilded swastika and wreath) by a poor Jewish ragpicker, and taken on, on into another 15 years of preservation against chance and against Phoebus. He will be screwed into mother (Mutter) after mother, as the female threads of German light-bulb sockets are known, for some reason that escapes everybody.

Can we surmise the reason? The cartel gives up, and decides to declare Byron legally burned out, a declaration that deceives nobody.

Through his years of survival, all these various rescues of Byron happen as if by accident. Whenever he can, he tries to instruct any bulbs nearby in the evil nature of Phoebus, and in the need for solidarity against the cartel. He has come to see how Bulb must move beyond its role as conveyor of light-energy alone. Phoebus has restricted Bulb to this one identity. “But there are other frequencies, above and below the visible band. Bulb can give heat. Bulb can provide energy for plants to grow, illegal plants, inside closets, for example. Bulb can penetrate the sleeping eye, and operate among the dreams of men.” Some bulbs listened attentively—others thought of ways to fink to Phoebus. Some of the older anti-Byronists were able to fool with their parameters in systematic ways that would show up on the ebonite meters under the Swiss mountain: there were even a few self-immolations, hoping to draw the hit men down.

This darkness of vain treachery helps to flesh out the reason for Byron’s survival. Call it the necessity of myth, or of gossip aging productively into myth. Not that Phoebus loses any part of its profit; rather, it establishes a subtler and more intricate international cartel pattern:

Byron, as he burns on, sees more and more of this pattern. He learns how to make contact with other kinds of electric appliances, in homes, in factories and out in the streets. Each has something to tell him. The pattern gathers in his soul (Seele, as the core of the earlier carbon filament was known in Germany), and the grander and clearer it grows, the more desperate Byron gets. Someday he
will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don’t last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it.

This seems to me the saddest paragraph in all of Pynchon; at least, it hurts me the most. In it is Pynchon’s despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah, since Byron the Bulb does achieve the Gnosis, complete knowledge, but purchases that knowledge by impotence, the loss of power. Byron can neither be martyred, nor betray his own prophetic vocation. What remains is madness: limitless rage and frustration, which at last he learns to enjoy.

That ends the story of Byron the Bulb, and ends something in Pynchon also. What is left—whether in Gravity’s Rainbow or in the immense work-in-progress, a historical novel depicting the coming-on of the American Civil War and reported to have the title The Mason-Dixon Line—is the studying of new modalities of post-Apocalyptic silence. Pynchon seems now to be where his precursor Emerson prophesied the American visionary must be:

There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each, but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts,—I and the Abyss.

If at best, the I is an immortal but hapless light bulb and the Abyss, our Gnostic foremother and forefather, is the socket into which that poor I of a bulb is screwed, then the two absorbing facts themselves have ceased to absorb.
Rereading Auster’s *New York Trilogy* is for me, an odd experience, if only because I never can decide how to regard these three spare, refined narratives. Auster can seem a French novelist who writes in American English, but his American literary culture is extensive and finally decisive. He acknowledges Kafka and Beckett as his masters, while finding Cervantes to be his imaginative ideal. The curious version of “detective stories” that determines the shape of the Trilogy is more in the mode of Borges (itself Kafkan) than in that of the hard-boiled genre of Raymond Chandler and his followers. If there is an American counter-tradition that turns the detective stories of Poe inside out, its chief practitioners are Hawthorne and Melville, the principal narrative writers of the Age of Emerson and Walt Whitman.

Auster can be said to cross Hawthorne with Kafka, as Borges did. The Argentine fabulist remarked that his favorite story was Hawthorne’s “Wakefield”, an altogether Austerian tale. Wakefield vanishes from home and marriage, but only to establish residence a few streets away. After a considerable interval, he returns to his life, in a reunion as inexplicable as his withdrawal. Auster, a more considerable poet in prose than in verse, is perhaps less a novelist than he is a romancer, really a pre-Cervantine kind of exposition.

Aesthetic dignity is the keynote of everything I have read by Auster. If there is a missing element in Auster’s achievement, it is comedy, even of a grotesque variety. It seems fair to contrast Auster with Philip Roth, half a generation older, yet another lifelong disciple of Franz Kafka. Painful as Roth’s humor tends to be, it is uproarious and heartening. Perhaps it carries
the Blessing, the “more life” of Jewish tradition, though in singular form. Weirdly enough, by implication, Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist” (a favorite of both Roth and Auster) also bears the Blessing. Kafka is comprehensive enough, in his extreme way, to sustain both Roth and Auster. But Kafka’s somber comedy remains comic: in Auster no one seems to laugh. The Jewish joke, which links Freud, Kafka, and Roth, has no presence in Auster.

What—I think—takes its place are Auster’s own appearances in his fictions. In City of Glass the protagonist, Quinn, who writes mystery novels under the name of Poe’s William Wilson, enjoys an omelette prepared for him by “Paul Auster”. Quinn and Auster have an unsurprising conversation about Cervantes, and then Quinn meets Auster’s wife, Siri, and son, Daniel. Again, this is unsurprising, and is charming, yet puzzling, at least to me. What does it do for City of Glass? Now that “French Theory” is only still hot in Peoria, the disruption of representation is hardly worth a shrug, since in no way does Auster practice an art that seeks to imitate social reality. His Art of Hunger celebrates Beckett, Kafka, Kanut Hamsun and Paul Celan as seers of absence. I want to murmur: “Yes, but,” and then enlarge the “but.” These elliptical literary artists also manifest a richness that makes me care about what happens next. Auster seems to have no such concern.

Auster’s creative minimalism has moved many good readers, both here and abroad. If Auster evades me, I therefore blame myself. And even so, I go back to my master, Dr. Samuel Johnson, who rightly commended Shakespeare for his just representations of general nature.
IN AN ACCOMPLISHED ESSAY, MYRA JEHLEN SEES AMY TAN, AGAINST ALL
odds, returning to Whitman’s stance and singing a latter-day Song of Myself. That implicitly is high praise, and if justified might give The Joy Luck Club an
aesthetic dignity beyond the popular success it continues to enjoy. Will it be
a permanent part of the revised canon of an American literature “opened up”
by consideration of gender and ethnicity, or will it prove only another period
piece, in which we currently abound?

Amy Tan is a skilled storyteller, and a remarkable personality. Jehlen
charmingly says: “Amy Tan has read her Emerson, and she doesn’t believe
him. This is not surprising, as he probably would have doubted her.” I
would murmur that it all depends upon which Emerson Tan has read, as
there are so many. Having met and admired Tan, I would recommend The
Conduct of Life, which is consonant with her rugged but amiable stance
towards reality.

Jehlen eloquently concludes by stating both Tan’s relation to Whitman
and the significant differences:

Jing-Mei becomes herself finally when, like Whitman, she can
be the writer of the Body and the writer of the Soul, can sing both
others and herself. If she is Whitman’s critic as well as his descen-
dant, it is because America has lost its innocence in the matter of
individualism. Moreover, the duplicities of the notion of the uni-
versal self have been revealed in our time especially by the protes-
tations of people of Amy Tan’s kind: women and non-whites. It is
not surprising that Jing-Mei’s claim be not as universal as
Whitman’s, nor that its costs be apparent. It is surprising to find her claiming the old transcendent, appropriating self at all, and, in the name of culture, singing a latter-day “Song of Myself.”

Jehlen is aware, as I am, that Whitman attempted to speak for women as for men, and for all ethnic strains. What she doubts is the Whitmanian possibility of universal representation, since we are in a time of group identities: gendered, diversely oriented sexual preferences, ethnicities. And yet Whitman, at his best, permanently has reached and held a universal audience. *Song of Myself* is not a period piece.
Further Reading


Index

Absalom, Absalom! (Faulkner), 314–15, 317, 322, 328, 384, 477, 529
influence on, 217
narrative, 323, 326
numinous shadow in, 323–26, 353
Across the River and Into the Trees (Hemingway), 337
Ada (Nabokov), 340
Adam Bede (Eliot, G.), 67, 141, 147
Adams, Robert M., 72–73
Adorno, T.W., 366
Adventures of Augie March, The (Bellow), 418–20, 422
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Twain), xviii, 91–92, 327, 400, 480, 521
freedom and loneliness in, 169–70
influence of, 230–31, 233
Adventures of Roderick Random, The (Smollett), 59
Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Twain), 230
Advertisements for Myself (Mailer), 477–78, 480
After Strange Gods (Eliot, T.S.), 174, 181, 189, 374
Age of Innocence (Wharton), 192, 220–21
Agnes Grey (Brontë, A.), 125
Alexandria: A History and a Guide (Forster), 253–55
Algren, Nelson, 126, 331
Allen, Walter, 137
All the King’s Men (Warren), 382, 384–86
All the Names (Saramago), 462–63
All the Pretty Horses (McCarthy), 532, 538–39, 544
All’s Well That Ends Well (Shakespeare), 47, 529
Alter, Robert, 409
Altitudes and Extensions (Warren), 381
Ambassadors, The (James), 104, 193, 198–202, 212
American, The (James), 193
American Dream, An (Mailer), 477, 479–81
American Pastoral (Roth), 529, 532, 544
American Scene, The (James), 197–98, 236
American Tragedy, An (Dreiser), 169, 236, 243, 305, 352, 395, 479
Ammons, A.R., 241
Anatomy Lesson, The (Roth), 524, 526–28
Anatomy of Melancholy, The (Burton), 10
Ancient Evenings (Mailer), 477, 480–81, 549
Anderson, Sherwood, 236, 313
Animal Farm (Orwell), 242, 363, 369–71
Anna Karenina (Tolstoy), 76, 163–68, 202
Apple, Max, 478–79
Argas, Reinard, 500
Aristotle, 10, 181
Armies of the Night, The (Mailer), 480
Arnold, Matthew, 139
Arrowsmith (Lewis), 302–5
Art of Hunger (Auster), 558
Art of Thomas Hardy, The (Johnson, L.), 188
Ashbery, John, 241, 544, 548, 554
As I Lay Dying (Faulkner), xvii, 314, 328, 477, 492, 529
American sublime in, 92, 192, 353, 365, 502, 548
influence of, 169, 345, 495, 521–23, 532
irony, 317
narrative, 315, 318, 322
quest for community, 315–17
Asolando (Browning), 380–81
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book/Author</th>
<th>Page Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant, The (Malamud)</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asturias, Miguel Angel</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As You Like It (Shakespeare)</td>
<td>46–47, 64–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Fault (Chopin)</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Heaven's Gate (Warren)</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist's Tragedy, The (Tourneur)</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auden, W.H.</td>
<td>262, 471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auerbach, Erich</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimesis</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aureng-Zebe (Dryden)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Auroras of Autumn, The” (Stevens)</td>
<td>226, 332, 544, 548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auslander, Joseph</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austen, Jane</td>
<td>death, 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences of</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence on</td>
<td>xviii, 48–49, 51–52, 66, 192, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansfield Park</td>
<td>53, 56–59, 62–66, 69, 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>53, 62–71, 141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protagonists, xix, 51, 59–63, 65–66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanditon</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satire and irony of</td>
<td>49, 51–52, 55, 62–64, 66–67, 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense and Sensibility</td>
<td>62, 64, 143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auster, Paul</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art of Hunger</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New York Trilogy, 557–58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn of the Patriarch, The (Márquez)</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awakening, The (Chopin)</td>
<td>204–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babbitt (Lewis)</td>
<td>302–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backward Glance, A (Wharton)</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon, Francis</td>
<td>10–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin, James, xvii, 518</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fire Next Time</td>
<td>484–87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go Tell It on the Mountain</td>
<td>482–84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Name in the Street</td>
<td>484, 487–89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Price of the Ticket</td>
<td>487, 489–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballad of the Sad Café, The (McCullers)</td>
<td>433, 436–37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltasar and Blimunda (Saramago)</td>
<td>455–59, 461–62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balzac, Honoré de, 1, 137, 243, 302, 344</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Harlot High and Low</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences of</td>
<td>171–72, 203, 224, 502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences on</td>
<td>xviii, 88–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Last Incarnation of Vautrin</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Illusions</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Père Goriot</td>
<td>87–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splendors and Miseries of the Courtesans</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band of Angels (Warren)</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barber, C.L.</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barchester Towers (Trollope)</td>
<td>119–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barzilai, Shuli</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bates, W.J.</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle of the Books, The (Swift)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baudelaire, Charles, 1, 25, 89, 151, 302</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayou Folk (Chopin)</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear, The (Faulkner)</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaver, Harold</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beckett, Samuel, xviii, 151, 259, 365, 445</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endgame</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How It Is</td>
<td>387, 390–91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences of</td>
<td>557–58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences on</td>
<td>173, 387–92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krapp’s Last Tape</td>
<td>389–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable</td>
<td>152, 387–92, 404, 438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murphy</td>
<td>387–88, 390, 438–39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proust</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting for Godot</td>
<td>389–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watt</td>
<td>387–88, 390, 438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Place, The (Le Guin)</td>
<td>506, 510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behan, Brendan</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Here (Warren)</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellow, Saul</td>
<td>354, 446, 541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Adventures of Augie March</td>
<td>418–20, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangling Man</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dean’s December</td>
<td>418, 422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Henderson the Rain King, 418, 422–23
Herzog, 418–25, 525
Humboldt’s Gift, 418–19, 422–23
Mr. Sammler’s Planet, 411, 418, 422
Seize the Day, 418
The Victim, 418
Beloved (Morrison), 517–23
Benjamin, Walter, 507
Berenson, Bernard, 194
Berg, Jan Hendrik Van Den, 22, 278
Bête humaine, La (Zola), 171
Between the Acts (Woolf), 267–68
Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Freud), 341, 450
Bishop, Elizabeth, 241, 328
“Crusoe in England,” 3
Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth (Wright), 394, 396–98
Black Prince, The (Murdock), 445, 449–50
Blake, William, 364, 423, 511, 550
Book of Urizen, 80
double of self, 78–79
The Four Zoas, 282
influences of, 18, 37, 44, 85, 126, 132, 135, 157–60, 249, 267, 271,
316, 389, 462, 464, 495, 508
Jerusalem, 112
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 285
Milton, 112
Black House (Dickens), 93, 107–8, 112–18, 149
Blindness (Saramago), 462–63, 474
Blood Meridian (McCarthy), 92, 169, 529, 544–45
narrative of, xviii, 246, 532–38
Bloom, Harold
Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds, 241
How to Read and Why, xvii, 244
“Blue Hotel, The” (Crane, S.), 245
Bluest Eye, The (Morrison), 516–18
Book of Urizen (Blake), 80
Borderers, The (Wordsworth), 126
Borges, Jorge Luis
influences of, 173, 455, 464, 500–1, 503, 506, 545, 557
Bosomians The (James), 149, 198
Breast, The (Roth), 526, 529
“Bride Comes to Yellow Sky, The” (Crane, S.), 245
Bridge, The (Crane, H.), 545
Brighton Rock (Greene), 375–79
Brod, Max, 272
“Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and The True Way,” 273
Brodkey, Harold
Women and Angels, 354
Brontë, Anne, 188
Agnes Grey, 125
Byron’s influence on, 125–26
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, 125
Brontë, Charlotte, xviii, xix, 135, 188, 300
Byron’s influence on, 125–30
“Caroline Vernon,” 126
death, 133
Jane Eyre, 67, 127–30, 134
The Professor, 125
Shirley, 125, 130
Villette, 125, 130
Brontë, Emily, xviii, xix, 188, 508
Byron’s influence on, 125–26, 131, 134
death, 133
“Farewell to Angria,” 130
Wuthering Heights, 67, 125–26, 129, 131–36, 296
Brooks, Cleanth, 314–15, 320
Brothers Karamazov (Dostoevsky), 156–62
Browne, Thomas
Pseudodoxia Epidemica, 10
Brown, Frederick
Zola: A Life, 171–72
Browning, Robert, 112, 224, 294
Asokando, 380–81
“Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” 118
Bruno’s Dream (Murdock), 445
INDEX

Buchan, John, 372
   The Thirty-Nine Steps, 374
Bundren, Darl, 212
Bunyan, John
   The Pilgrim’s Progress, 4, 44
Burgess, Anthony
   A Clockwork Orange, 441
   The Clockwork Testament; or, Enderby’s End, 438, 442
   Enderby’s Dark Lady; or, No End to Enderby, 438, 442, 444
   Enderby Outside, 438, 442
   Inside Enderby, 438, 442–44
   Man of Nazareth, 442
   Moses, 441
   Nothing Like the Sun, 438–39, 442, 444
   A Story of Shakespeare’s Love-life, 438
Burke, Kenneth, xv, 241, 333, 364
Burney, Fanny, 51, 57
   Evelina, 38, 48–50
Burton, Robert
   The Anatomy of Melancholy, 10
Byron, Lord, 331, 525, 554
   Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, 77
   death, 126
   Don Juan, 112, 477
   double of self, 78
   influences of, 67, 73, 86, 88, 125–32, 134, 181
   Lara, 129
   Manfred, 80, 129, 132, 134

Caleb Williams (Godwin), 80–81
Call of the Wild, The (London), 242
Calvin, John, 3, 46
Camus, Albert
   influences on, 401–2, 404–7
   The Plague, 404–7, 463
   The Stranger, 401–4, 407
Candida (Voltaire), 401, 407
Canetti, Elias, 446
“Cares of a Family Man, The” (Kafka), 279–81
Carlyle, Thomas, 199, 364
   influences of, 96–98, 107, 139, 369, 481–82, 495
   “Natural Supernaturalism,” 211
   Sartor Resartus, 15, 282
   “Caroline Vernon” (Brontë), 126
   Carpenter’s Gothic (Gaddis), 452
   Carpenter, Alejo, 501, 503
   Explosion in a Cathedral, 502
Carroll, Lewis, 243
   The Hunting of the Snark, 340
   Through the Looking Glass, 340
   “White Knight’s Ballad,” 139
   “Casabianca” (Hemans), xiv
Castle, The (Kafka), 282, 287–90
Catcher in the Rye, The (Salinger), 244
Cather, Willa, 302, 351
   death, 235
   Death Comes for the Archbishop,
   235–36
   influences on, 235–39
   A Lost Lady, 192, 235–39
   My Antonia, 91, 169, 235–39
   “On the Art of Fiction,” 236
   O Pioneers!, 235
   The Professor’s House, 235–37
   Shadows on the Rock, 235
Cave, The (Saramago), 455, 463
Celan, Paul, 259
Cervantes, Miguel de, 34, 89, 153, 329
   influence of, xvii, 504, 557
   The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de La Mancha, xvii, 1–2, 4, 75,
   231, 502
Chambers, Jessie
   D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record,
   296
Chandler, Raymond, 557
Changing Light at Sandover (Merrill),
   506, 548
Charterhouse of Parma, The (Stendhal), 75
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 34, 369
Chesteron, G.K., 374
Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (Byron), 77
   “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” (Browning), 118
Chopin, Kate
   At Fault, 204
INDEX

_The Awakening_, 204–9
_Bayou Folk_, 204
influences on, 204–5
_A Night in Acadie_, 204
_Christmas Carol, A_ (Dickens), 97
Church, Richard, 78
_Cities of the Plain_ (McCarthy), 539
_Citizen of the World, The_ (Goldsmith), 46
_City of Illusions_ (Le Guin), 508
_Civilization and Its Discontents_ (Freud), 450–51
_Clarissa_ (Richardson), xvii, 28, 53, 107, 192
Lovelace in, 23–26, 55, 61, 66
_Clockwork Orange, A_ (Burgess), 441
_Clockwork Testament, The_; or, _Enderby's End_ (Burgess), 438, 442
Cohn, Robert, 331
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, xv, 29, 82–83, 85, 126, 438
Collins, William, 33
_Comician as the Letter C, The_ (Stevens), 236
_Commonplace Book_ (Forster), 250
_Concluding Unscientific Postscript_ (Kierkegaard), 464
_Condition Humaine, La. See Man's Fate_ (Malraux)
_Conduct of Life, The_ (Emerson), 193, 390, 559
_Confessions of Zeno_ (Svevo), 422
_Confidence Man, The_ (Melville), 542
_Confidential Agent, The_ (Greene), 374
_Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court_ (Twain), 480
_Conquest of Granada, The_ (Dryden), 24
Conrad, Joseph, xviii, 137, 245–46, 248
_Hart of Darkness_, 211–13, 218, 253, 324–25, 332, 384
influences on, 173, 192, 263, 387
_Lord Jim_, 211, 213, 216–19, 324, 332
_The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”_ 211
_Nostromo_, 211–17, 253, 265, 314, 324, 343, 345, 382–83
_The Secret Agent_, 149, 213, 216, 315, 320
_Under Western Eyes_, 213, 216
_Victory_, 213, 217, 265, 324
“Youth,” 210
Cook, Timothy, 242
_Cool Million, A_ (West), 305, 353, 360–61, 366, 494
Cooover, Robert, 542
_Corrections, The_ (Franzen), 453
Cortázar, Julio, 501
_Counternife, The_ (Roth), 529
Cowley, Malcolm, 314
_The Portable Faulkner_, 318
Cowper, William, 66
Craig, G. Armour, 59–60
Crane, Hart, 92, 241, 328, 331, 334, 548
_The Bridge_, 545
Crane, Stephen
“The Blue Hotel,” 245
“The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” 245
death, 245
influences of, 245–46, 336
influences on, 246, 248
_Maggie: A Girl of the Streets_, 248
“A Man Adrift on a Slim Spar,” 245
“The Open Boat,” 245
_The Red Badge of Courage_, 245–48
“War is Kind,” 245
_Crime and Punishment_ (Dostoevsky), 155–58
_Crossing, The_ (McCarthy), 539
Crowley, John
_Little, Big_, 243
“Crusoe in England” (Bishop), 3
_Crying of Lot 49, The_ (Pynchon), xvii, 169, 477, 547–48
American sublime in, 192, 328, 501,
Index

505, 525, 529, 542, 544–45
influence of, 454
influence on, 353, 533
Curtius, E.R., 241
*Custom of the Country* (Wharton), 220–23

“Daisy Miller” (James), 193
*Dangling Man* (Bellow), 418
*Daniel Deronda* (Eliot, G.), 141–45
“Daniel Deronda: A Conversation” (James), 141–42
Dante, 1, 89, 91, 150, 159, 241
influences of, 279, 286, 440–41, 502, 506
*Darkness Visible* (Golding), 399
*David Copperfield* (Dickens), 103–7, 117, 145
*Day of the Locust, The* (West), 353, 360
Dean’s December, The (Bellow), 418, 422
*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Cather), 235–36
*Débâcle, Le* (Zola), 171
*Decline and Fall* (Waugh), 39
*Deer Park, The* (Mailer), 481
Defoe, Daniel, 22, 364
*Moll Flanders*, 3, 6–9, 38
*Robinson Crusoe*, 3–6
DeLillo, Don, 453
*Libra*, 540, 544
*Mao II*, 540–41
*Underworld*, xviii, 169, 454, 529, 532, 540–42, 544–46
*White Noise*, 454, 540–44
*Demian* (Hesse), 240
Derrida, Jacques, 174, 283
Descartes, René, 10–11
*Deserted Village, The* (Goldsmith), 43–44
De Vere, Edward, 243
*D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (Chambers), 296
Dickens, Charles, 137, 139, 423
* Bleak House*, 93, 107–8, 112–18, 149
* A Christmas Carol*, 97
criticism, 93–97

*David Copperfield*, 103–7, 117, 145
*Edwin Drood*, 97
*Great Expectations*, 97, 103–4, 143
*Hard Times*, 107–12, 148
influences of, 28, 52, 104–7, 121, 263, 302, 318, 370, 452, 503
influences on, 41, 45, 192
*Little Dorrit*, 93
*Our Mutual Friend*, 93, 97, 112
*Pickwick Papers*, 97
satire of, 95
* A Tale of Two Cities*, 97–103, 404
Dickinson, Emily, 1, 92, 146, 193, 241, 329, 416
Dick, Philip K., 506
Dickstein, Morris, 242–43
*Dispossessed, The* (Le Guin), 506, 510
*Docteur Pascal, Le* (Zola), 171
*Doctor Faustus* (Mann), 240–41
*Dodsword* (Lewis, S.), 302–3, 305
*Don Juan* (Byron), 112, 477
“Dostoyevski and Parricide” (Freud), 159
*Brothers Karamazov*, 156–62
*Crime and Punishment*, 155–58
*The Idiot*, 157
influences of, 319, 402, 404–5
influences on, xviii
*The Possessed*, 157
*Dream Life of Balso Snell, The* (West), 353, 360, 526–27
Dreiser, Theodore, 192, 302, 308, 313, 340, 351
*An American Tragedy*, 169, 236, 243, 305, 352, 479
influences of, 393–95, 397–98
*Sister Carrie*, 243, 352
*Drum-Taps* (Whitman), 93
Dryden, John
*Aureng-Zebe*, 24
*The Conquest of Granada*, 24
*Dubliners* (Joyce), 329
*Duchess of Malfi, The* (Webster), 377
“Dynamics of the Transference, The”
INDEX

(Freud), 433–34
Dynasts, The (Shelley), 173

Earthsea Trilogy, The (Le Guin), 506
East of Eden (Steinbeck), 347
“Economic Problem in Masochism, The” (Freud), 180–81
Edwin Drood (Dickens), 97
Egg and I, The (MacDonald), 527
Eliot, George, 129, 191
Adam Bede, 67, 141, 147
Daniel Deronda, 141–45
Felix Holt, the Radical, 141
influences of, 52, 173–74, 188–89
influences on, 63, 140, 150–51, 192, 197, 202
Middlemarch, 28, 69, 107, 112, 126, 138, 141, 143, 145, 147, 149–50, 198, 268, 480
The Mill on the Floss, 145–47, 179
“Notes on Forms in Art,” 137
narrative tradition, 139, 218
protagonists, 23, 59–61
Romola, 141, 480
Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe, 141, 147–49
Eliot, T.S., 96, 155, 189, 213, 241, 306
After Strange Gods, 174, 181, 188, 374
Four Quartets, 453
on Gulliver’s Travels, 17
The Idea of a Christian Society, 374
influences on, 193–94, 198, 263, 294, 319, 328
on Joyce, 269–70
The Waste Land, 235, 314, 320, 453, 495
Elliott, Emory, 242–43
Ellison, Ralph Waldo, 351
influences on, xviii, 412, 416–17, 516
The Invisible Man, 169, 412–17, 518–20
Elmer Gantry (Lewis, S.), 302
Emma (Austen), 28, 52–53, 69, 107, 112, 141
Emma Woodhouse in, 59–63, 66, 68, 126
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 55, 139
The Conduct of Life, 193, 390, 559
Essays, xviii, 92
“Experience,” 198
Nature, 420
“The Over-Soul,” 350
self-reliance, 193, 329, 416–17, 545–46
Empson, William, xv
“Joyce’s Intentions,” 369–71
Emrich, Wilhelm, 280, 288–89
Enderby’s Dark Lady; or, No End to Enderby (Burgess), 438, 442, 444
Enderby Outside (Burgess), 438, 442
Endgame (Beckett), 390
End of the Affair, The (Greene), 373
Engel, Monroe, 107–8
Epipsychidion (Shelley), 174
Erikson, Erik, 492
Essays (Emerson), xviii, 92
Ethan Frome (Wharton), 223–27
Evelina (Burney), 38, 48–50
Everything That Rises Must Converge (O’Connor), 494–97
Excursion, The (Wordsworth), 57, 147
Executioner’s Song, The (Mailer), 477, 479–80
“Experience” (Emerson), 198
Explosion in a Cathedral (Carpentier), 502
Fable, A (Faulkner), 313, 315, 318, 322, 326
Fall of Hyperion, The (Keats), 18
“Family Romances” (Freud), 143
“Farewell to Angria” (Brontë, C.), 130
Index

Farewell to Arms, A (Hemingway), 330, 332, 334–36
“Farewell to Omsk, A” (Perelman), 155
Fathers and Sons (Turgenev), 158
Faulkner, William, 91, 235, 259, 338, 351, 434
As I Lay Dying, xvii, 92, 169, 192, 314–18, 322, 324, 328, 345, 353, 365, 477, 492, 495, 502, 521–23, 529, 532, 548
The Bear, 521
A Fable, 313, 315, 318, 322, 326
Go Down, Moses, 314
The Hamlet, 314
influences on, 313–15, 317, 319, 322–25, 329, 331, 343, 382, 452
Intruder in the Dust, 318
Knight’s Gambit, 318
on Moll Flanders, 6–7
Requiem for a Nun, 318
romance forms of, xviii, 115, 313, 319, 424
Sanctuary, 314, 319–22, 328, 353, 494, 516
The Wild Palms, 314
Faust (Goethe), 453
Felix Holt, the Radical ( Eliot, G.), 141
Fiedler, Leslie, 334
Fielding, Henry, 57, 59, 193
aesthetic eminence of, 38, 51–52
romance forms, 28–29, 33–34
Tom Jones, 28–32
Finnegans Wake (Joyce), 270, 387–88, 501
Firbank, Ronald, 357
Fire Next Time, The (Baldwin), 484–87
Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists, The (Murdoch), 449–50
First Forty-Nine Stories, The (Hemingway), 328, 481
Fish, Harold
The Duel Image, 409
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 92, 235, 302
The Great Gatsby, 169, 212, 236, 305, 311–12, 328, 331, 353, 477
influences of, 313–14, 321, 351, 357
influences on, 192, 263, 329
romance forms of, xviii, 315
Tender is the Night, 150, 311–12
Fixer, The (Malamud), 408–11
Flaubert, Gustave, 1, 87, 204, 235, 344
influences of, 63, 211, 422, 441, 527
irony of, 154
Madame Bovary, 151–54, 202, 434
romantic vision of, 153
Fletcher, Angus, 332, 391
Fogel, Aaron, 217
Folsom, Michael Brewster, 242
Forms of Life (Price), 143
Forster, E.M., xix, 212
Commonplace Book, 250
The Hill of Devi, 251–53
Howards End, 249–50
influences on, 249–51
A Passage to India, 249–51, 253, 255–58
For Whom the Bell Tolls (Hemingway), 330
Four Just Men, The (Wallace), 374
Four Quartets (Eliot, T.S.), 453
Four Zoas, The (Blake), 282
Frankenstein (Shelley, M.), 77–86, 134
Frank, Jacob, 275, 284, 359–60
Franzen, Jonathan
The Corrections, 453
Free Fall (Golding), 399
Freud, Sigmund, 120, 162, 179, 339, 387, 446
Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 341,
Civilization and Its Discontents, 450–51
“Dostoyevski and Parricide,” 159
“The Dynamics of the Transference,” 433–34
“The Economic Problem in Masochism,” 180–81
“Family Romances,” 143
“Humor,” 527
influences of, 173, 176, 187–88, 194, 236–37, 318, 340–41, 441, 484, 504, 558
An Outline of Psychoanalysis, 288
reality principle, 47, 68, 224, 290–91, 514
superego, 143, 356
Totem and Taboo, 159–60, 229
Frolic of His Own, A (Gaddis), 452
Frost, Robert, 193, 241, 328, 331
Frye, Northrop, xv, 33, 176, 241
Fuentes, Carlos, 500–1

Gaddis, William, 542
Carpenter’s Gothic, 452
A Frolic of His Own, 452
JR, 452
The Recognitions, 452–54, 545
Garland, Hamlin, 302
Garnett, Edward, 295
Genealogy of Morals, Tbe (Nietzsche), 224
Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds (Bloom), 241
Germinai (Zola), 171
Ghost Writer, Tbe (Roth), 524–28
Gibbon, Edward
The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 46
Gide, André, 9, 317, 423
Gilbert, Sandra M., 128, 134, 206
Girard, René, 401–2, 494
Go Down, Moses (Faulkner), 314
“God Rest You Merry Gentlemen,” (Hemingway), 329
Godwin, William, 77, 86
Caleb Williams, 80–81
Goethe, xv, 1, 45, 150, 195
Faust, 453
Golden Bowl, Tbe (James), 105, 212
Golding, William
Darkness Visible, 399
Free Fall, 399
The Inheritors, 399
Lord of the Flies, 399–400
Pincher Martin, 399
Goldsmith, Oliver, xvii, 43–47
The Citizen of the World, 46
The Deserted Village, 43–44
Retaliation, 44
She Stoops to Conquer, 43–44, 46–47
The Traveller, 44
The Vicar of Wakefield, 38, 43–46
Good Apprentice, Tbe (Murdoch), 445–51
Good Man Is Hard to Find, A
(O’Connor), 494–95
Gospel According to Jesus Christ, Tbe
(Saramago), 455, 461–75
Go Tell It on the Mountain (Baldwin), 482–84
Grahame, Kenneth
The Wind in the Willows, 243, 370
Grapes of Wrath, Tbe (Steinbeck), 347–52
Gravity’s Rainbow (Pynchon), 412, 529, 532
Byron the Bulb in, 413–14, 525, 548–56
Gray, Thomas, 33
Great American Novel, Tbe (Roth), 526, 529
Great Expectations (Dickens), 97, 103–4, 143
Great Gatsby, Tbe (Fitzgerald), 169, 305, 317
INDEX

328, 477
American dream in, 236, 311–12, 353
influence of, 212, 331
Greene, Graham, 446
Brighton Rock, 375–79
The Confidential Agent, 374
The End of the Affair, 373
The Heart of the Matter, 373–74, 377
“Henry James: The Religious Aspect,” 373
influences on, 372–75
The Ministry of Fear, 374
Our Man in Havana, 374
The Power and the Glory, 374–75, 377
The Quiet American, 374
“Rider Haggard’s Secret,” 372–73
The Third Man, 374
This Gun for Hire, 374–77
Griffith, Hugh, 31
Gubar, Susan, 128, 134
Guerard, Albert J., 217, 322
Gulliver’s Travels (Swift), 14–21, 369, 400
Guttmann, Allen, 409

Habit of Being, The (O’Connor), 494
Haggard, Rider, 372–73
King Solomon’s Mines, 374
She, 374
Hamlet, The (Faulkner), 314
Handful of Dust, A (Waugh), 39
Hard Times (Dickens), 107–12, 148
Hardwick, Elizabeth, 476
Hard Words and Other Poems (Le Guin), 509
Hardy, Thomas, xviii, 150, 387
influences of, 125, 173–75, 182–83, 185–89, 294, 296, 300, 322
Jude the Obscure, 175, 177, 181, 188–91
The Mayor of Casterbridge, 173–81, 191
The Return of the Native, 147, 175, 181–84, 190–91
Tess of the D’Urbervilles, 126, 175, 181, 184–88, 191
The Well-Beloved, 188
The Woodlanders, 190, 237
Harlot High and Low, A (Balzac), 90
Hartman, Geoffrey, 343, 476
Harvest of Hellenism, The (Peters), 254
Harvey, W.J., 112–13
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 313, 395, 557
influences of, 193–94, 227, 322, 452, 493, 505, 519
The Marble Faun, 91–92, 192
Hazlitt, William, xv, 7–8, 44
Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, The (McCullers), 433–36
Heart of Darkness (Conrad), 212–13, 253, 324–25, 332, 384
Heart of the Matter, The (Greene), 373–74, 377
Heller, Erich, 275–76, 282, 287
Hemans, Felecia
“Casabianca,” xiv
Hemingway, Ernest, 170, 235, 357
Across the River and Into the Trees, 337
death, 328
A Farewell to Arms, 330, 332, 334–36
The First Forty-Nine Stories, 328, 481
For Whom the Bell Tolls, 330
“God Rest You Merry Gentleman,” 329
influences of, 302, 321, 347, 351, 401–2, 476–81, 545
influences on, 92, 192, 245–46, 313–14, 327–28, 350
“The Old Man at the Bridge,” 330
The Old Man and the Sea, 336–38
“A Natural History of the Dead,” 329
romance, forms of, xviii, 126, 315, 423
The Sun Also Rises, 169, 212, 236, 328–29, 331–34, 337–38, 348–49, 353, 477, 481, 521
INDEX

To Have and Have Not, 330
Winner Takes Nothing, 331
Henderson the Rain King (Bellow), 418, 422–23
Henry IV (Shakespeare), 159
“Henry James: The Religious Aspect” (Greene), 374
Herbert, Christopher, 119–21
Hertzog (Bellow), 418–25, 525
Hesse, Herman
Demian, 240
Magister Ludi (The Glass Bead Game), 240–41
Siddhartha, 240
Steppenwolf, 240
Hilles, Frederick W., 28
Hill, Geoffrey, 188
Hill of Devi, The (Forster) Maharajah in, 251–53
History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, The (Gibbon), 466
History of the Siege of Lisbon, The (Saramago), 461–63
Hobbes, Thomas
Leviathan, 76
Hollander, John, 239, 332, 340, 391–92
Homage to Catalonia (Orwell), 364, 369
Homer, 104, 159, 215, 246
Iliad, 199, 494
influences of, 277, 282, 441
Hope, Anthony
The Prisoner of Zenda, 374
Horkheimer, Max, 366
House of Mirth, The (Wharton), 220
Howards End (Forster), 249–50
Howe, Irving, 529
How It Is (Beckett), 387, 390–91
How to Read and Why (Bloom), xvii, 244
Hugo, Victor, 1, 88, 171, 201
Human Comedy, The (Saroyan), 89
Human Stain, The (Roth), 529
Humboldt’s Gift (Bellow), 418–19, 422–23
Mr. Sammler’s Planet, 411, 418
Seize the Day, 418
The Victim, 418
“Humor” (Freud), 527
Humphries, Jefferson, 495
Humphry Clinker (Smollett), 38–42
“Hunter Gracchus, The” (Kafka), 278–79
Hunting of the Snark, The (Carroll), 340
Hurston, Zora Neale, 516, 518
Moses: Man of the Mountain, 306
Their Eyes Were Watching God, 306–10
Hutton, R.H., 177–78
Huxley, Aldous, 357
Huysmans, J.K., 249
Hyman, Stanley Edgar, 354
“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (Shelley, P.), 81
Ibsen Henrik, 177, 189
Brand, 271
Idiot, The (Dostoevsky), 157
Iliad (Homer), 199, 494
Imaginary Portraits (Pater), 211
I Married a Communist (Roth), 529
Impressionism forms of, 199, 218, 234, 248, 407
“Incidents in the Life of my uncle Arly” (Lear), 139
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Jacobs), 523
In Dubious Battle (Steinbeck), 347
Infante, Guillermo Cabrera, 501
Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de La Mancha, The (Cervantes), xvii, 1–2, 4, 74, 231, 502
Inheritors, The (Golding), 399
“In the Penal Colony” (Kafka), 19
Inside Enderby (Burgess), 438, 442–44
“Interview with Mark Twain, An” (Twain), 230
Intruder in the Dust (Faulkner), 318
Invisible Man, The (Ellison), 169, 412–17, 518–20
Irwin, John T., 313, 323, 326
It Can’t Happen Here (Lewis, S.), 366
Jacobs, Harriet
   *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 523

James, Henry, 44, 63, 96, 137, 189, 245, 248, 313
   *The Ambassadors*, 104, 193, 198–202, 212
   *The American*, 193
   *The American Scene*, 197–98, 236
on Balzac, 87, 89–90
   *The Bostonians*, 149, 198
“Daisy Miller,” 193
“Daniel Deronda: A Conversation,” 141–42
death, 236, 318
on Dickens, 93–95
on George Eliot, 141–42, 147
   *The Golden Bowl*, 105, 212
influences on, 192–99, 203, 263, 268, 350, 374
on *Madame Bovary*, 152–53
   *Princess Casamassima* (James), 104
protagonists, xix, 23, 59–60
   *The Spoils of Poynton*, 211
   *What Maisie Knew*, 211
   *The Wings of the Dove*, 105, 192, 198, 373

*Jane Eyre* (Brontë, C.), 67, 126–30, 134

*Jazz* (Morrison), 517–18

Jehlen, Myra, 559

*Jerusalem* (Blake), 112

Jesenská, Milena, 272–73

Jewett, Sarah Orne, 235–36

*Jew of Malta, The* (Marlowe), 39

*John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (Warren), 381

Johnson, Ben, 41, 43–45, 51, 93, 96

Johnson, Edgar, 105

Johnson, Lionel, 187

*The Art of Thomas Hardy*, 188

Johnson, Samuel, xvii, 4, 40, 59, 65–66, 364, 442, 549, 558
   on *Clarissa*, 26
   on *Evelina*, 48
   on Fielding, 28–29, 32
   *Lives of the Poets*, xv
   *The Rambler*, 52, 58, 70
   *Rasselas*, 52
   on *Tristram Shandy*, 33, 244
“Josephine the Singer and the Mouse Folk” (Kafka), 284–86

*Journey to Portugal* (Saramago), 462

Joyce, James, xviii, 52, 259, 279, 337

   *Dubliners*, 329
   *Finnegans Wake*, 270, 387–88, 501
influences of, 174, 192
on *Moll Flanders*, 6–7
   *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 269–71
“Joyce’s Intentions” (Empson), 369–71

*Joy Luck Club, The* (Tan), 559–60

*JR* (Gaddis), 452

*Jude the Obscure* (Hardy), 175, 177, 181, 184, 188–91

*Jungle, The* (Sinclair), 242–44

*Jungle Book, The* (Kipling), 228, 246

*Just So Stories* (Kipling), 228

Kafka, Franz, xviii, 259, 365, 391–92
   “The Cares of a Family Man,” 279–81
   *The Castle*, 282, 287–90, 527
evasiveness, 275–76, 278–80, 283, 288
   “The Hunter Gracchus,” 278–79
influences on, 121, 152
   “Josephine the Singer and the
### Index

**Mouse Folk,** 284–86

“In the Penal Colony,” 19

“The Problem of Our Laws,” 284–85, 293

spirituality, 272–78, 281–87, 290–93

The Trial, 19, 290–93

Kangaroo (Lawrence), 301

Karamazov Companion, A (Terras), 158

Keats, John, 83, 112, 139, 153, 442

The Fall of Hyperion, 18

influences of, 311, 315, 317, 322–23

“Ode on Melancholy,” 336

Ode to Indolence, 315

To Autumn, 315, 322

Kendrick, Walter M., 119


Kermode, Frank, 213, 230

Kidnapped (Stevenson), 374

Kierkegaard, Soren, 105, 139, 160

Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 464

Kim (Kipling), 230–34, 327, 400

King Lear (Shakespeare), 118, 466

King Solomon’s Mines (Haggard), 374

Kipling, Rudyard, xvii, 229, 373

influences on, 230–34

“An Interview with Mark Twain,” 230

The Jungle Book, 228, 246

Just So Stories, 228

Kim, 228, 230–34, 327, 400

“The Man Who Would Be King,” 228

Knight’s Gambit ( Faulkner), 318

Krapp’s Last Tape (Beckett), 389–90

Lady Chatterley’s Lover (Lawrence), 301

Lamb, Charles, 7

Lambert, Louis, 89

Lampedusa, Guiseppe de

The Leopard, 75

Lancelot (Percy), 426–28, 430

Language of the Night, The (Le Guin), 506–7

Lanham, Richard, 34, 36

Lara (Byron), 129

L’Assommoir (Zola), 171

Last Gentleman, The (Percy), 426

Last Incarnation of Vautrin, The (Balzac), 90

Lawrence, D.H., xviii –xiv, xix, 168

and human sexuality, 294–95, 300–1, 356

influences of, 125–26, 150, 308, 369, 423, 433, 517

influences on, 23, 263, 294–97, 300

Kangaroo, 301

Lady Chatterley’s Lover, 301

The Man Who Died, 356, 461, 471

The Plumed Serpent, 301, 356

The Rainbow, 125, 174, 265, 295, 297–301, 434

Sons and Lovers, 145, 295–98

A Study of Thomas Hardy, 174–75, 179–80, 188–89

Women in Love, 107, 125, 174, 265, 295, 297–301

“Leaning Tower, The” (Woolf), 262–63

Lear, Edward

“Incidents in the Life of my uncle Arly,” 139

Leary, Lewis, 207

Leaves of Grass (Whitman), xviii, 92, 169, 205, 231

Leavis, F.R., 141, 146, 148

Le Carré, John, 374

Left Hand of Darkness (Le Guin), xviii, 225, 505–14

Le Guin, Ursula K.

The Beginning Place, 506, 510

City of Illusions, 508

The Dispossessed, 506, 510

The Earthsea Trilogy, 506

Hard Words and Other Poems, 509

The Language of the Night, 506–7

The Left Hand of Darkness, xviii, 225, 505–14

The Tombs of Atuan, 506

Leopard, The (Lampedusa), 75

Lessing, Doris, 307, 506

Lessing, G.E., xv

Letting Go (Roth), 529
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leviathan (Hobbes)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, C.S.</td>
<td>52, 56–57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, R.W.B.</td>
<td>220, 224, 412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, Sinclair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Arrowsmith</em></td>
<td>302–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Babbitt</em></td>
<td>302–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dodsworth</em></td>
<td>302–3, 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Elmer Gantry</em></td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It Can’t Happen Here</em></td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Main Street</em></td>
<td>302, 397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, Wyndham</td>
<td>306, 335, 366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Libra</em> (DeLillo)</td>
<td>540, 544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Light in August</em> (Faulkner)</td>
<td>169, 477, 519, 521–22, 529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narrations</td>
<td>314–15, 317, 322–24, 328, 353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lima, Lezama</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsay, David</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Voyage to Arcturus</em></td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lion and the Unicorn, The</em> (Orwell)</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little, Big</em> (Crowley)</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little Dorrit</em> (Dickens)</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lives of the Poets</em> (Johnson)</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llosa, Mario Vargas</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locke, John</td>
<td>33–34, 56–57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lolita</em> (Nabokov)</td>
<td>339–42, 422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London, Jack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Call of the Wild</em></td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lord Jim</em> (Conrad)</td>
<td>211, 213, 216–19, 324, 332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lord of the Flies</em> (Golding)</td>
<td>399–400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lord of the Rings, The</em> (Tolkien)</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lost Illusions</em> (Balzac)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book</em> (Percy)</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lost Lady, A</em> (Cather)</td>
<td>192, 235–39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Love in the Ruins</em> (Percy)</td>
<td>426–27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Love in the Time of Cholera</em> (Márquez)</td>
<td>503–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Macbeth</em> (Shakespeare)</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacDonald, Betty</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Egg and I</em> (Flaubert)</td>
<td>151–54, 202, 434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Maggie: A Girl of the Streets</em> (Crane, S.)</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Magic Mountain</em> (Mann)</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Magister Ludi</em> (The Glass Bead Game) (Hesse)</td>
<td>240–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailer, Norman</td>
<td>126, 246, 329, 354, 418, 423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Advertisements for Myself</em></td>
<td>477–78, 480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>An American Dream</em></td>
<td>477, 479–81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ancient Evenings</em></td>
<td>477, 480–81, 549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Armies of the Night</em></td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>criticism</td>
<td>476–79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Deer Park</em></td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Executioner’s Song</em></td>
<td>477, 479–80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Naked and the Dead</em></td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Salammbô</em></td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Why Are We In Vietnam?</em></td>
<td>477, 480–81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Main Street</em> (Lewis, S.)</td>
<td>302, 397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malamud, Bernard</td>
<td>354, 525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Assistant</em></td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Fixer</em></td>
<td>408–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Tenants</em></td>
<td>408–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malraux, André</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man’s Fate</em></td>
<td>343–46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Man Adrift on a Slim Spar, A” (Crane, S.)</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Manfred</em> (Byron)</td>
<td>80, 129, 132, 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mann, Thomas</td>
<td>259, 478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Doctor Faustus</em></td>
<td>240–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences on</td>
<td>173, 387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Magic Mountain</em></td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man of Nazareth</em></td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man, Paul de</td>
<td>174, 478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man’s Fate</em> (Malraux)</td>
<td>343–46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mansfield Park</em> (Austen)</td>
<td>53, 62–63, 65, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanny Price in</td>
<td>56–59, 64, 66, 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man Who Died, The</em> (Lawrence)</td>
<td>356, 461, 471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Man Who Would Be King, The” (Kipling)</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man Without Qualities, The</em> (Musil)</td>
<td>259–61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mao II (DeLillo), 540–41
Marble Faun, The (Hawthorne), 91–92, 192
Marius the Epicurean (Pater), 211, 264
Marlowe, Christopher, 41–42, 104
The Jew of Malta, 39
Márquez, Gabriel García, 445
The Autumn of the Patriarch, 500
influences on, xviii, 500–4
Love in the Time of Cholera, 503–4
One Hundred Years of Solitude, 500–4
Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The (Blake), 285
Martz, Louis L., 296, 334
Marx, Karl, 188
on Robinson Crusoe, 3
Mason, A.E.W., 372
Mason & Dixon (Pynchon), xviii, 453, 529, 532, 544, 547, 556
Matthiessen, F.O., 201
Maud (Tennyson), 111
Maugham, Somerset
The Moon and Sixpence, 357
Maupassant, Guy de, 173, 211, 329–30
Mayor of Casterbridge, The (Hardy), 173–81, 191
McCarthy, Cormac
All the Pretty Horses, 532, 538–39, 544
Blood Meridian, xviii, 92, 169, 246, 529, 532–39, 544–45
Cities of the Plain, 539
The Crossing, 539
influences on, xviii, 452–53
Suttree, 538, 544
McCullers, Carson
The Ballad of the Sad Café, 433, 436–37
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, 433–36
influences on, 434
Reflections in a Golden Eye, 433, 436
McKillop, A.D., 24
McMaster, Juliet, 63
Measure for Measure (Shakespeare), 529
Meisel, Perry, 263
Melville, Herman, 183, 313
The Confidence Man, 542
influences of, 246, 322, 326, 329–30, 405, 503, 519, 532–39, 545, 557
influences on, 193, 464
irony, 253
Moby Dick, xvii–xviii, 91–92, 131, 169, 192, 231, 296, 404, 412, 453, 480, 532, 534, 536, 538
Omoo, 357
Pierrot, 480
Typee, 357
Mencken, H.L., 303, 397
Merrill, James, 241
Changing Light at Sandover, 506, 548
Messianic Idea in Judaism, The (Scholem), 353–54, 359
Michael (Wordsworth), 315
Middlemarch (Eliot, G.), 28, 107, 112, 145, 480
Dorothea Brooke in, 126, 141, 143, 149–50, 198, 268
Lydgate in, 143
Will Ladislaw, 61, 141
Miller, J. Hillis, 119, 174, 184–87, 265
Millgate, Michael, 188
Mill on the Floss, The (Eliot), 141, 145–47, 179
Milne, A.A., 6
Milton (Blake), 112
Milton, John, 153, 513
influence of, 44, 52, 90, 126, 286, 294, 364, 369
Paradise Lost, 57, 79–80, 83–85, 88, 134, 388
Samson Agonistes, 127
Mimesis (Auerbach), 265
Ministry of Fear, The (Greene), 374
Minter, David, 313
Miss Lonelyhearts (West), 169, 328–29, 412
influence of, 477, 492, 495
negative vision in, 192, 305, 353–62, 365, 525, 542, 548
Moby Dick (Melville), xvii, 91–92, 169, 480
influence of, xviii, 6, 131, 192, 231, 296, 404, 412, 453, 532, 534, 536, 538

Modernism
forms of, 174, 177, 259, 263, 265, 306, 389, 422–24

Molan, Ann, 70

Molière, 1, 88

Moll Flanders (Defoe), 3, 6–9, 38

Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (Beckett), 152, 387–92, 404, 438

Monegal, Emir, 501

Monod, Sylvère, 128

Montaigne, Michel de, 1

“Mont Blanc” (Shelley, P.), 81

Mookerjee, R.N., 242

Moon and Sixpence, The (Maugham), 357

Moore, George, 358

Morgan, Susan, 69

Morley, John, 139–41

Morris, Matthew J., 242–43

Morrison, Toni, xviii–xix
Beloved, 517–23
The Bluest Eye, 516–18
Jazz, 517–18
Paradise, 517–18
Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, 518
Song of Solomon, 516–21, 523
Sula, 515–16, 521

Morris, William, 107, 249

Moses (Burgess), 441

Moses: Man of the Mountain (Hurston), 306

Moviegoer, The (Percy), 426–32

Mr. Sammler’s Planet (Bellow), 411, 418, 422

Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf), 61, 263–65

Murdoch, Iris, xviii
The Black Prince, 445, 449–50
Bruno’s Dream, 445
The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists, 449–50
The Good Apprentice, 445–51

Under the Net, 449
A Word Child, 445

Murphy (Beckett), 387–88, 390, 438–39

Musil, Robert
death, 260
The Man Without Qualities, 259–61
My Antonia (Cather), 91, 169, 235–39
Myers, E.W.H., 138
Myers, L.H.
The Near and the Far, 138
My Life As a Man (Roth), 524, 529
Mysterious Stranger, The (Twain), 542
Mystery and Manners (O’Connor), 494

Nabokov, Vladimir, 423
Ada, 340
Lolita, 339–42, 422
Pale Fire, 169, 502

Naked and the Dead, The (Mailer), 478

Nana (Zola), 171

Native Son (Wright) 393–98
“Natural History of the Dead, A” (Hemingway), 329

Naturalism, xvii, 172, 248, 445
“Natural Supernaturalism” (Caryle), 211

Nature (Emerson), 420

Near and the Far, The (Myers), 138

New York Trilogy, The (Auster), 557–58

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 139, 213
on George Eliot, 150
on Emerson, 194, 201
The Genealogy of Morals, 224
influences on, 387, 401

Nigger of the “Narcissus,” The (Conrad), 211

Night in Acadie, A (Chopin), 204

Night Rider (Warren), 381–82

1984 (Orwell)
aesthetic failure of, 364–66, 369–70
irony and satire, 363–70

No Name in the Street (Baldwin), 484,
487–89
Norton, Charles Eliot, 194
Nostromo (Conrad), 212, 253, 314, 345
illusions and irony in, 215–16
modern imagination of, 265
narrative, 211, 213, 217, 324, 343, 382
“Notes on Forms in Art” (Eliot, G.), 137
Notes toward a Supreme Fiction (Stevens), 501
Nothing Like the Sun (Burgess), 438–39, 442, 444
O’Connor, Flannery, 430
Everything That Rises Must Converge, 494–97
A Good Man Is Hard to Find, 494–95
The Habit of Being, 494
influences on, xviii, 452, 491–95
Mystery and Manners, 494
The Violent Bear It Away, 169, 491–95
Wise Blood, 494–95
“Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Earliest Childhood” (Wordsworth), 68
“Ode on Melancholy” (Keats), 336
Ode to Indolence (Keats), 315
Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck), 347, 350–52
O’Hara, John, 331
Old Cumberland Beggar, The (Wordsworth), 315
“Old Man at the Bridge” (Hemingway), 330
Old Man and the Sea, The (Hemingway), 336–38
Omoo (Melville), 357
“On the Art of Fiction” (Cather), 236
One Hundred Years of Solitude (Márquez), 500–4
O’Neill, Eugene, 351–52, 434
“Open Boat, The” (Crane, S.), 245
Operation Shylock (Roth), 529
O Pioneers! (Cather), 235
Oranging of America, The (Apple), 478–79
Ordinary Evening in New Haven, An (Stevens), 501
Orwell, George, 19, 482
Animal Farm, 242, 363, 369–71
Homage to Catalonia, 364, 369
The Lion and the Unicorn, 369
1984, 363–70
Shooting an Elephant, 369
Othello (Shakespeare), 214, 536
Our Gang (Roth), 526, 529
Our Man in Havana (Greene), 374
Our Mutual Friend (Dickens), 93, 97, 112
Outline of Psychoanalysis, An (Freud), 288
“Over-Soul, The” (Emerson), 350
Owen, Wilfred, 188
Pale Fire (Nabokov), 169, 502
Paradise (Morrison), 517–18
Paradise Lost (Milton), 57, 79–80, 83–85, 134
influence of, 88, 388
Pascal, Blaise, 72, 401
Passage to India (Forster), 249–51, 253, 255–58
Pater, Walter, xiv–xv, 133, 139, 314
Imaginary Portraits, 211
on Madame Bovary, 154
Marius the Epicurean, 211, 264
The Renaissance, 182, 191, 229–30, 234
Paulson, Ronald, 49
Pawel, Ernst, 283, 291
Percy, Walker, 446
Lancelot, 426–28, 430
The Last Gentleman, 426
Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book, 427
Love in the Ruins, 426–27
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Moviegoer</td>
<td>426–32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Second Coming</td>
<td>426–28, 432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Père Goriot</em> (Balzac)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vautrin in, 87–90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perelman, S.J.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Farewell to Omsk,” 155</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Persuasion</em> (Austen)</td>
<td>53, 62–71, 141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peters, F.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Harvest of Hellenism</em></td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickwick Papers (Dickens)</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pierre</em> (Melville)</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pike, Burton</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pilgrim’s Progress, The</em> (Bunyan), 4, 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pincher Martin</em> (Golding)</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Place to Come To, A</em> (Warren)</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Plague, The</em> (Camus)</td>
<td>404–7, 463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato, 135, 389, 538</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination</em> (Morrison)</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plimpton, George</td>
<td>337, 478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Plumed Serpent, The</em> (Lawrence)</td>
<td>301, 356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poe, Edgar Allen</td>
<td>172, 334, 395, 557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Poems of Our Climate, The” (Stevens), 193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poirier, Richard</td>
<td>477, 479–80, 550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politzer, Heinz</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pope, Alexander</td>
<td>28, 32–34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popper, Karl</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porcher, Frances</td>
<td>205–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Portable Faulkner, The</em> (Cowley)</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portnoy’s Complaint (Roth)</td>
<td>524–25, 528–31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, A</em> (Joyce)</td>
<td>269–71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Portrait of a Lady, The</em> (James)</td>
<td>28, 92, 107, 169, 192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel Archer in, 91, 126, 141, 150, 198, 201–3, 221, 250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influence of, 105, 220, 373</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessed, The (Dostoevsky)</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pot-Bouille (Zola)</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pottle, Frederick A.</td>
<td>81, 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poulet, Georges</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pound, Ezra</td>
<td>236, 263, 328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Power and the Glory, The</em> (Greene)</td>
<td>374–75, 377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prague Orgy, The</em> (Roth)</td>
<td>524–26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prelude, The</em> (Wordsworth)</td>
<td>112, 388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price, Martin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on <em>Anna Karenina</em>, 168</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Conrad</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Defoe, 3, 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Dickens</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Fielding</td>
<td>28–29, 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Forms of Life</em></td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on <em>Gulliver’s Travels</em>, 17–18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Richardson</td>
<td>23, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Sterne</td>
<td>34, 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Price of the Ticket, The</em> (Baldwin)</td>
<td>487, 489–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pride and Prejudice</em> (Austen)</td>
<td>52, 59, 62, 69, 112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Bennet in, 53–56, 63–66, 141</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Princess Casamassima</em> (James)</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prisoner of Zenda, The</em> (Hope)</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pritchett, V.S.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Problem of Our Laws, The” (Kafka), 284–85, 293</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Professor The</em> (Brontë, C.), 125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Professor of Desire, The</em> (Roth), 526</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Professor’s House, The</em> (Cather), 235–37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prometheus Unbound</em> (Shelley, P.), 77, 79–81, 197</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>482, 491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dissent, 7, 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fundamentalists, 431</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sensibility, 52, 294</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Proust</em> (Beckett)</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proust, Marcel, xvii, 1, 96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences of, 22, 25, 89, 152, 251, 259, 279, 340–41, 344, 391, 441, 446, 495</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences on, 154, 173, 387</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pseudodoxia Epidemica</em> (Browne), 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puig, Manuel</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pynchon, Thomas</td>
<td>351, 476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Crying of Lot 49</em>, xvii, 169, 192, 328, 353, 454, 477, 501, 505, 340</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
525, 529, 533, 542, 545, 547–48
influence, 38, 329, 445, 481, 540
*Mason & Dixon*, xviii, 453, 529, 532, 544, 547, 556

**Quiet American, The** (Greene), 374

Raban, Jonathan, 452
Rabelais, Francois, 1, 37, 88, 95–97
Racine, 1
Raffel, Burton, 88
*Rainbow, The* (Lawrence), 125, 174, 265, 295, 298–301, 434
*Rambler The* (Johnson, S.), 52, 58, 70
Rasselas (Johnson, S.), 52
*Reading Myself and Others* (Roth), 528

**Realism**
forms of, xvii, 153–54, 172, 221, 224–25, 248, 445, 456
*Recognitions, The* (Gaddis), 452–54, 545
*Red Badge of Courage, The* (Crane, S.), 245–48
*Red and the Black, The* (Stendhal), 72–76
*Reflections in a Golden Eye* (McCullers), 433, 436

“Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and The True Way” (Brod), 273
Reif, Philip, 295
*Renaissance, The* (Pater), 182, 191, 229–30, 234
*Requiem for a Nun* (Faulkner), 318
“Resolution and Independence” (Wordsworth), 139
*Retaliation* (Goldsmith), 44
*Return of the Native, The* (Hardy), 147, 175, 181–84, 190–91
*Reve, Le* (Zola), 171
*Revolt of Islam, The* (Shelley), 147, 174
Richardson, Samuel, 29, 38, 48, 57, 307, 423

**Sir Charles Grandison**, 51
“Rider Haggard's Secret” (Greene), 372–73
Riesman, David, 492
*Rise of the Novel, The* (Watt), 29, 51–52
Robb, Graham, 88
*Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe), 3–6
Robinson, Douglas, 412

**Romanticism**
*Romola* (Eliot, G.), 141, 480
*Room of One's Own, A* (Woolf), 56, 267
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 132–33, 206
Roth, Philip, 354, 453, 542, 557–58

**American Pastoral**, 529, 532, 544
*The Anatomy Lesson*, 524, 526–28
*The Breast*, 526, 529
*The Counterlife*, 529
*The Ghost Writer*, 524–28
*The Great American Novel*, 526, 529
*The Human Stain*, 529
*I Married a Communist*, 529
*Letting Go*, 529
*My Life As a Man*, 524, 529
*Operation Shylock*, 529
*Our Gang*, 526, 529
*Portnoy's Complaint*, 524–25, 528–31
*The Prague Orgy*, 524–26
*The Professor of Desire*, 526
*Reading Myself and Others*, 528
*Sabbath's Theater*, xviii, 169, 529–32, 544
*When She Was Good*, 529
*Zuckerman Bound*, 524–29, 532, 544, 548
*Zuckerman Unbound*, 524–28
Rousseau, Jean Jacques, 23, 33, 401
*Ruined Cottage, The* (Wordsworth), 147, 388, 434
Ruskin, John, 107, 211, 364
influences of, 94, 111, 139–40, 199,
251, 270, 336, 389, 422, 441
madness, 144
Ryle, Gilbert, 10

Sabbath’s Theater (Roth), xviii, 169, 529–32, 544
Saint-Beuve, Charles Augustin, xv
Salammbô (Mailer), 477
Sale, William M., 22, 383
Salinger, J.D.
The Catcher in the Rye, 244
Samson Agonistes (Milton), 127
Sanctuary (Faulkner), 314, 319–22, 328, 353, 516
Sanditon (Austen), 67
Saramago, José
All the Names, 462–63
Baltasar and Blimunda, 455–59, 461–62
Blindness, 462–63, 474
The Cave, 455, 463
The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, 455, 461–75
The History of the Siege of Lisbon, 461–63
Journey to Portugal, 462
The Siege of Libson, 474
The Stone Raft, 459–62
The Tale of the Unknown Island, 474
The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis, 458–59, 461–62
Saroyan, William
The Human Comedy, 89
Sartor Resartus (Carlyle), 15, 282
Sartre, Jean Paul, 153, 401, 445, 451
Scarlet Letter, The (Hawthorne), xviii, 150, 169, 192, 198, 223
Dimmesdale in, 92, 202–3
Hester Prynne in, xix, 91–92, 202–3
Schlemiel As Modern Hero, The (Wisse), 409
Schloem, Gershom
on Kafka, 272, 275, 277, 284, 293
The Messianic Idea in Judaism, 353–54, 359
Schopenhauer, Arthur, 126, 128
influences of, 173, 176, 187, 189–90, 208–9, 295, 387–89
Will to Live, 163–65, 173, 187, 189–90, 224, 388
The World as Will and Representation, 76, 173, 387
Schorer, Mark, 365
Scott, Walter, 59, 88, 133, 203, 263
Scribner, Charles, 329, 478
Second Coming, The (Percy), 426–28, 432
Secret Agent, The (Conrad), 149, 213, 216, 320
Seize the Day (Bellow), 418
Selected Poems (Warren), 380–81
Sense and Sensibility (Austen), 62, 64, 143
Sensibar, Judith L., 314
Sentimental Journey, A (Sterne), 40
Shadows on the Rock (Cather), 235
Shakespeare, William, 89, 241, 243
All’s Well That Ends Well, 47, 529
As You Like It, 46–47, 64–65
Henry IV, 159
King Lear, 118, 466
Macbeth, 282
Measure for Measure, 529
Othello, 214, 536
Troilus and Cressida, 199, 529
Shaw, George Bernard, 103–4, 107
She (Haggard), 374
Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft
Frankenstein, 77–86, 134
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 57, 112, 126, 364, 477
double of self, 78
The Dynasts, 173
Epipsychidion, 174
“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” 81

“Mont Blanc,” 81
Prometheus Unbound, 77, 79–81, 197
The Revolt of Islam, 147, 174
The Triumph of Life, 434
She Stoops to Conquer (Goldsmith), 43–44, 46–47

Shirley (Bronte, C.), 125, 130
Shooting an Elephant (Orwell), 369
Siddhartha (Hesse), 240
Siege of Lisbon, The (Saramago), 474
Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe (Eliot, G.), 141, 147–49

Sinclair, Upton
The Jungle, 242–44

Sir Charles Grandison (Richardson), 51
Sister Carrie (Dreiser), 243, 352, 395

“Sleepers, The “ (Whitman), 206
Smith, Carl S., 242
Smollett, Tobias, 28, 49, 104
The Adventures of Roderick Random, 59
dead, 38

Humphry Clinker, 38–42

Snow, C.P., 119

Socrates, 449

“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (O’Connor), 498–99
Song of Myself (Whitman), 169, 205, 271, 420, 477, 546, 559–60
Song of Solomon (Morrison), 517–21, 523

Sons and Lovers (Lawrence), 145, 295–98

Sound and the Fury, The (Faulkner), 305, 352–53, 477, 529
family romance in, 313, 319
fear of mortality in, 317–18
narrative, 314–15, 322, 324, 328
Spark, Muriel, 78
Spenser, Edmund, 304

Splendors and Miseries of the Courtesans (Balzac), 90
Spoils of Poynton The (James), 211

Sportsman’s Sketchbook, A (Turgenev), 238
Staves, Susan, 49
Steinbeck, John, 302
dead, 347
East of Eden, 347
The Grapes of Wrath, 347–52
In Dubious Battle, 347
Of Mice and Men, 347, 350–52

Stein, Gertrude, 476
Stendhal, 1, 63, 75, 171, 246
The Charterhouse of Parma, 75
influences of, 246, 344, 478
influences on, xviii

The Red and the Black, 72–76
Stephen, James Fitzjames, 97–98

Steppenwolf (Hesse), 240
Sterne, Laurence, 38, 339
A Sentimental Journey, 40

Tristram Shandy, 33–37, 244
Stevenson, Robert Louis, 142, 177, 231, 372, 375, 464

Kidnapped, 374
Treasure Island, 374

Weir of Hermiston, 374

Stevens, Wallace, 33, 92, 209, 398
“The Auroras of Autumn,” 226, 332, 544, 548

The Comedian as the Letter C, 236
dead, 384
influences of, 230, 241, 369, 480, 521
influences on, 263, 328–29, 331, 334, 350

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, 501
An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, 501

“The Poems of Our Climate,” 193

Stone Raft, The (Saramago), 459–62

Story of Shakespeare’s Love-life, A (Burgess), 438

Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 144, 157
Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 364, 367
Stranger, The (Camus), 401–4, 407
Strauss, Leo, 276

Study of Thomas Hardy, A (Lawrence),
INDEX

174–75, 179–80, 188–89
Sula (Morrison), 515–16, 521
Sun Also Rises (The) (Hemingway), 169, 236, 477, 521
influence of, 212, 328, 353, 481
parataxis, 332–33
Suttree (McCarthy), 538, 544
Svevo, Italo
Confessions of Zeno, 422
Swift, Jonathan, 32, 364, 442
The Battle of the Books, 10
Gulliver’s Travels, 14–21, 369, 400
irony and satire, 11, 13, 16–19, 21, 34, 39–40, 95, 387, 400, 457
A Tale of a Tub, 10–15, 21, 387
Swinburne, Charles Algernon, 133, 206
Totem and Taboo (Freud), 159–60
Tale of Margaret, The (Wordsworth), 315
Tale of a Tub, A (Swift), 10–15, 21, 387
Tale of Two Cities, A (Dickens), 97–103, 404
Tale of the Unknown Island, The (Saramago), 474
Tan, Amy
The Joy Luck Club, 559–60
Tanner, Tony, 544–45
Tate, Allen, 6, 381
Tavernier-Courbin, Jacqueline, 242
Tave, Stuart M., 55, 57, 63–65, 67–68
Tenant of Wildfell Hall, The (Brontë, A.), 125
Tenants, The (Malamud), 408–11
Tender is the Night (Fitzgerald), 150, 311–12
Tennyson, Alfred, 112
Maud, 111
Terras, Victor
A Karamazov Companion, 158
Terre, La (Zola), 171
Tess of the D’Urbervilles (Hardy), 175, 181
Tess in, 126, 184–88, 191
Thackeray, William Makepeace, 52, 129, 139
on Gulliver’s Travels, 17
Vanity Fair, 127, 221–22
Their Eyes Were Watching God (Hurston), 306–10
Thérèse Raquin (Zola), 171–72
Thibaudet, Albert, 153
Third Man, The (Greene), 374
Thirty-Nine Steps, The (Buchan), 374
This Gun for Hire (Greene), 374–77
Thomas, Dylan, 442
Thoreau, Henry David, 193, 303–4, 308, 329, 545
Walden, 92
Through the Looking Glass (Carroll), 340
Tillotson, Geoffrey, 112
To Autumn (Keats), 315, 322
To Have and Have Not (Hemingway), 330
To the Lighthouse (Woolf), 265–68
Tolkien, J.R., 506, 513
The Lord of the Rings, 514
Tolstoy, Leo, 89, 137, 215
Anna Karenina, 76, 163–68, 202
influences of, 63, 93, 145, 174, 189, 246, 300, 329, 334, 478, 525, 545
influences on, 157, 173, 387
styles of, 159, 161
War and Peace, 158, 163
Tombs of Atuan, The (Le Guin), 506
Tom Jones (Fielding), 28–31
Totem and Taboo (Freud), 159–60, 229
Tourneur, Cyril, 375
The Atheist’s Tragedy, 319
Transcendentalism, 205, 540, 544, 546
Traveller, The (Goldsmith), 44
Treasure Island (Stevenson), 374
Trial, The (Kafka), 19, 290–93
Trilling, Lionel, 236
on 1984, 363, 365, 369
on Austen, 55–57
on Dreiser, 479
on Forster, 249, 253
on Kipling, 228
INDEX

on Lolita, 340
Tristram Shandy (Sterne), 33–37, 244
Triumph of Life, The (Shelley), 434
Troilus and Cressida (Shakespeare), 199, 529
Trollope, Anthony, 139
Barchester Towers, 119–24
influences of, 121
The Warden, 119
Turgenev, Ivan, 173, 329–30, 387
Fathers and Sons, 158
A Sportsman’s Sketchbook, 238
Twain, Mark, xiv, 41, 192, 313, 322, 330, 424
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, xviii, 91–92, 169–70, 230–31, 233, 327, 400, 480, 521
Adventures of Tom Sawyer, 230
Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, 480
influences of, 327–28
The Mysterious Stranger, 542
romance forms of, xvii–xviii
Typee (Melville), 357
Ulysses (Joyce), xvii, 28, 64, 104, 107, 250, 305, 525
Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Stowe), 364, 367
Under the Net (Murdoch), 449
Under Western Eyes (Conrad), 213, 216
Underworld (DeLillo), 169, 454, 529, 532
narrative of, xvii, 540–42, 544–46
Updike, John, 334, 446, 541
Valéry, Paul, xv
Vanity Fair (Thackeray), 127, 221–22
Vechten, Carl Van, 309
Vicar of Wakefield, The (Goldsmith), 38, 43, 44–46
Victim, The (Bellow), 418
Victory (Conrad), 213, 217, 265, 324
Vidal, Gore, 126
Vile Bodies (Waugh), 39
Villette (Brontë, C.), 125, 130
Violent Bear It Away, The (O’Connor), 169, 491–95
Virgil, 246
Voltaire, 88
Candide, 401, 407
Zadig, 401, 407
Voyage to Arcturus (Lindsay), 506
Waiting for Godot (Beckett), 389–90
Walden (Thoreau), 92
Wallace, Edgar
The Four Just Men, 374
Warden, The (Trollope), 119
War and Peace (Tolstoy), 158, 163
“War is Kind” (Crane, S.), 245
Warren, Robert Penn, 223
All the King’s Men, 382–86
Altitudes and Extensions, 381
At Heaven’s Gate, 382
Band of Angels, 382
Being Here, 381
on Hemingway, 328, 330
influences on, xvii, 192, 319, 334, 380–85
John Brown: The Making of a Martyr, 381
Night Rider, 381–82
A Place to Come To, 382
Selected Poems, 380–81
World Enough and Time, 223, 382–83
Watt (Beckett), 387–88, 390, 438
Watt, Ian
on Austen, 51–52
on Conrad, 211, 217
on Defoe, 3, 22
on Fielding, 29
on Richardson, 22, 26
The Rise of the Novel, 29, 51
Waugh, Evelyn, 123, 374
Decline and Fall, 39
A Handful of Dust, 39
Vile Bodies, 39
Waves, The (Woolf), 266
Webster, John, 375, 384
   The Duchess of Malfi, 377
   The White Devil, 319, 323, 377, 379
Weil, Simone, 450, 494
Weir of Hermiston (Stevenson), 374
Well-Beloved, The (Hardy), 188
Wells, H.G., 236, 366
   West, Nathanael, 351, 362, 493, 524
      A Cool Million, 305, 353, 360–61, 366, 494
      The Day of the Locust, 353, 360
defath, 353, 453
   The Dream Life of Balso Snell, 353, 360, 526–27
      Miss Lonelyhearts, 169, 192, 305, 328–29, 353–62, 365, 412, 477, 492, 495, 525, 542, 548
Weyman, Stanley, 372
Wharton, Edith, xix, 92, 235
   Age of Innocence, 192, 220–21, 227
   A Backward Glance, 220
   The Custom of the Country, 220–23
defath, 220
   Ethan Frome, 223–27
   The House of Mirth, 220
   influences on, 220–21, 224–27
What Maisie Knew (James), 211
   “When Lilies Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (Whitman), 206, 209, 320
   When She Was Good (Roth), 529
   White Devil, The (Webster), 319, 323, 377, 379
   “White Knight’s Ballad” (Carroll), 139
   White Noise (DeLillo), 454, 540–44
   Drum·Taps, 93
   influences of, 297, 309–10, 328–29, 331–32, 334, 354, 361, 419, 430, 545, 557
   influences on, 173, 192–93, 204–9
   Leaves of Grass, xviii, 92, 169, 205, 231
   “The Sleepers,” 206
   Song of Myself, 169, 205, 271, 420, 477, 546, 559–60
   “When Lilies Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” 206, 209, 320
Why Are We In Vietnam? (Mailer), 477, 480–81
Wilde, Oscar, xiv, 104, 123, 206, 229, 263, 331, 358, 367, 462, 503
Wild Palms, The (Faulkner), 314
Wilkins, Sophie, 259
Williams, Raymond, 365–66
Williams, William Carlos, 328
Wimsatt, William, K., 237
Wind in the Willows, The (Grahame), 243, 370
Wings of the Dove, The (James), 105, 192, 198, 373
Winner Takes Nothing (Hemingway), 331
Wise Blood (O’Connor), 494–95
Wisse, Ruth R.
   The Schlemiel As Modern Hero, 409
Wolfe, Thomas, 236, 243, 313, 338
Wollstonecraft, Mary, 77
Women and Angels (Brodkey), 354
Women in Love (Lawrence), 107, 125, 174, 265, 295–301
Woodlanders, The (Hardy), 190, 237
Wood, Michael, 516
Woolf, Virginia, xviii–xix, 4, 23, 58, 191, 522
   Between the Acts, 267–68
defath, 262
   influences on, 262–67
   “The Leaning Tower,” 262–63
   Mrs. Dalloway, 61, 263–65, 523
   A Room of One’s Own, 56, 267
   To the Lighthouse, 265–68
   The Waves, 266
Word Child, A (Murdoch), 445
Wordsworth, William, 23, 83, 150, 423
   The Borderers, 126
   The Excursion, 57, 147
   imagination, 57–58
   Michael, 315
“Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Earliest Childhood,” 68
The Old Cumberland Beggar, 315
The Prelude, 112, 388
“Resolution and Independence,” 139
The Ruined Cottage, 147, 388, 434
The Tale of Margaret, 315
World as Will and Representation, The (Schopenhauer), 76, 173, 387
World Enough and Time (Warren), 223, 382–83
Wright, Richard, 518
Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth, 394, 396–98
influences on, 393–95, 397–98
Native Son, 393–96
Wuthering Heights (Brontë, E.), 67, 125–26, 129–36
Wyatt, David M., 313

Yalden, Thomas, xv
Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis, The (Saramago), 458–59, 461–62
Yeats, William Butler, 191, 197, 330, 358
influences of, 188–89, 229, 249, 262–63, 514, 550
Yoder, Jon A., 242
“Youth” (Conrad), 210

Zabel, M.D., 174
Zadig (Voltaire), 401, 407
Zola, Émile, 89, 243
La Bête humaine, 171
death, 171
Le Débâcle, 171
Le Docteur Pascal, 171
Germinal, 171
influences of, 248
influences on, 171–73, 387
L'Assommoir, 171
Nana, 171
Pot-Bouille, 171
Le Rêve, 171
La Terre, 171
Thérèse Raquin, 171–72
Zola: A Life (Brown), 171–72
Zuckerman Bound (Roth), 524–29, 532, 544, 548
Zuckerman Unbound (Roth), 524–28
About the Author