

ADJUSTMENT, TRAGIC HUMANISM AND ITALY

1. — « How shall I ever again endure the restraint and bondage of Boston? » asked W. W. Story, the American sculptor, writing home from Italy in 1848. In Boston, he said, « there is no such thing as flesh and blood... the sky itself is cold and distant. The heart grows into stone »¹. Story was a professional expatriate and hence a special case, but his opinions were shared by many other Americans who, coming to Italy in search of Tradition and the picturesque, became fascinated by the country's sensual warmth. In the nineteenth century, when amateur anthropology or psychology did not compete with simple tourism, the prevalent image of Italy was that suggested by Van Wyck Brooks' title, « the dream of Arcadia ». Longfellow may be taken as typical of general opinion when he refers to Italy as « the land of sun, and the land of song... the land of dreams and visions of delight »². This sunny image, however, was often modified by a titillating consciousness of the darker possibilities of an exotic Italy. And, for a selected few, the gothic expectations fostered by Washington Irving out of Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe seemed to conform to a reality far more ambiguous than that associated with ghost tales or Byronic poses. For those sensitive to the less smiling aspects of life, Italy inspired nightmares as well as visions of delight. Describing Rome in a letter of 1900, William James employs a vocabulary that would be equally appropriate to an imaginative evocation of the mysteries of the unconscious:

The things the eyes most gloat on, the inconceivably corrupted, besmeared and ulcerated surfaces, the black and cavernous glimpses of

¹ Quoted in VAN WYCK BROOKS, *The Dream of Arcadia: American Writers and Artists in Italy, 1760-1915*, New York, 1958, p. 100.

² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.

interiors, have no suggestions save of moral horror, and their tactile values, as Berenson would say, are pure gooseflesh. Nevertheless, the sight of them delights³.

William James' description conforms to a gothic tradition which uses Italy to provide settings for dark dramas of evil and guilt. Speaking of this symbolic Italy, Leslie Fiedler notes that «it is Italy, the Mediterranean South with its overtones of papistry and lust, that is the true ghost» haunting the protagonists of gothic fables. «Through a dream landscape, usually called by the name of some actual Italian place, a girl flees in terror and alone amid crumbling castles, antique dungeons, and ghosts who are never really ghosts»⁴. This plot is varied by Hawthorne, touched on by Henry James and most recently revived by William Styron in *Set This House on Fire*, a novel we shall presently discuss at some length. Despite its often absurdly theatrical devices, the gothic romance seems to provide an apt set of symbols for those who would plumb what Hawthorne, in *The Marble Faun*, terms «those dark caverns into which men must descend if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence». Gothicism's thematic bias is well described by Leslie Fiedler:

Implicit in the gothic novel from the beginning is a final way of redeeming it that is precisely opposite in its implications to the device of the explained supernatural, a way of proving not that its terror is less true than it seems but more true. There *is* a place in men's lives where pictures do in fact bleed, ghosts gibber and shriek, maidens run forever through mysterious landscapes from nameless foes; that place is, of course, the world of dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motivate them. This world the dogmatic optimism and shallow psychology of the Age of Reason had denied; and this world it is the final, perhaps the essential purpose of the gothic romance to assert. Between the lapsing of orthodox doctrines of original sin and the emergence of modern scientific theories of the unconscious, Europe possessed non dignified, recognized vocabulary for expressing certain dark truths about the human soul⁵.

³ Quoted in *Ibidem*, p. 68.

⁴ LESLIE FIEDLER, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, New York, 1969, pp. 107-108.

⁵ FIEDLER, *American Novel*, p. 123.

Gothicism is also an intimate and perhaps inevitable corollary to the dream of sun-drenched, sensual and luxuriant Italy. For the very promise of flesh and blood, the license vouchsafed man's animal nature, contains a threat of anarchy. To cater to the exigencies of primal forces is always to court engulfment. Hence Italy becomes an extreme symbol combining not only the dangers of the primitive but also the hazards which world-weary European experience holds in store for American innocence. For those, such as Henry James, who are concerned with this latter theme, the attractions of European culture are generally vitiated by the presence of corruption and sin. As in the case of the dark crime of the de Bellegarde's, in *The American*, there is always a skeleton in the European closet. But whereas England and France may offer terrible examples of accommodation with evil, Italy is frequently considered to be in and of itself mortally dangerous. The country itself seems to exude poison vapors, like that which struck down Daisy Miller. There is always the chance that in thawing out « restraint and bondage » primal forces may be unleashed and the reign of terror which constitutes the gothic nightmare may become reality. To the decadence of European experience is added the threat of pre-social evil. Luxuriance and exotic beauty may mask moral horror, as in Hawthorne's « Rappaccini's Daughter », where Italy becomes a poisonous garden, a kind of anti-Eden.

The usefulness of Italy as a stage for foreign actors lies precisely in the balancing of gothic and what we may call Arcadian aspects. Italy's Arcadian qualities derive from the permissiveness of what Hawthorne termed « the particular mode of life, and its freedom from the enthrallments of Society »⁶. While partaking of the revivification of the senses which so appealed to W. W. Story, most Americans sought freedom from social rigidity rather than from moral restraints. If the charm of Italy was, as Stendhal said, akin to that of being

⁶ Quoted in RANDALL STEWART, *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, New Haven, 1943, p. 193.

in love, the love affair was in general platonic and the love-object that « accumulation of history and culture » on which James placed such a premium in his study of Hawthorne. Innocent tourism, artistic training, the pleasures of nature: these were the order of the day. Though many regretted Italy's « wicked misery » and attacked the tyranny of Austria or the Church, such negative reactions usually gave way before the country's exoticism, simplicity and human warmth⁷. Yet the innocent freedom of Arcadia was a pure delight only for those who could believe that man was by nature good and that there were no snakes in Eden. For those, such as Hawthorne or James, who conceived of original sin as an ineluctable part of the human condition, the state of nature fundamental to Arcadia threatened to encourage those dark forces which law and society had striven to restrain. As Daisy Miller found out to her cost, natural innocence *per se* is no protection against the gothic. Donatello, in *The Marble Faun*, is another case in point. In his story the sunny, picturesque and innocently amoral Arcadian Italy must confront the darkness, guilt and moral horror of the gothic Italy. Donatello's fall from innocence is a re-enactment of the drama of original sin. And it is notable that, from Hawthorne to William Styron, the Italian background has inspired a consideration of the dilemmas of innocence and evil.

Hawthorne and James were essentially concerned with the metaphysics of evil. Mr. Fiedler notwithstanding, one cannot properly equate their vision of man's imperfections with the forces psychology has subsumed within the concept of the Id. Numbers of modern writers have, however, made this equation. The idea of Italy as representative of the sensually impulsive South, geographical analogue to man's torrid libido, has come to re-inforce many assumptions already implicit in the gothic. In Thomas Mann's « Death in Venice », for example, Italy becomes the effective setting for the fulfilment

⁷ These generalizations are drawn from Brooks' *The Dream of Arcadia*.

of Aschenbach's vision of an over-ripe primeval wilderness, symbol of the festering impulses he has tried to repress. This vision makes Aschenbach « throb with terror, yet with a longing inexplicable » and draws him South to Venice, disease and death.

The current dream of Italy adds the insights of psychology to the generalized promise of sensual refreshment under a Southern sun. Though the dangers of the primitive inevitably lurk, like Mann's crouching tiger, in the background, the prevalent emphasis is on the therapeutic virtues of a « siren land ». The basic attitude emerges clearly from D. H. Lawrence's explanation of why the Italians so delight in D'Annunzio's poetry:

It was the language which did it. It was the Italian passion for rhetoric, for the speech which appeals to the senses and makes no demand on the mind. When an Englishman listens to a speech he wants at least to imagine that he understands thoroughly and impersonally what is meant. But an Italian only cares about the emotions. It is the movement, the physical effect of the language upon the blood which gives him supreme satisfaction. He is like a child, hearing and feeling without understanding. It is the sensuous gratification he asks for⁸.

Unfortunately, Italy was not as unresponsive to D'Annunzio's message as Lawrence, writing in 1913, suggests. But we are concerned with an image whose necessities deal highhandedly with fact. The elements fundamental to Lawrence's description — emotionalism, sensualism, intense personalism and a closeness to childhood — recur insistently in the works which determine the modern American conception of Italy. One need only think of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. More recently, the kind of fascination Italy now exerts on American writers has been well stated by Eleanor Clark in *Rome and a Villa*. As in the nineteenth century, Italy is viewed as a land of dreams; however, Longfellow's innocent visions of delight have given way before psycho-

⁸ D. H. LAWRENCE, *Twilight in Italy*, London, 1956, p. 62.

analytic sophistication. Roman spaces seem to « open out or close up before you suddenly as in dreams, and a tormenting dream-like sexual gaiety seems to rise you cannot tell how from the streets »⁹.

You walk close to your dreams. Sometimes it seems that these pulsing crowds with their daily and yearly rhythms established so long ago none of it has to be decided any more, with their elbows and knees and souls and buttocks touching and rubbing and everybody most pleased and agreeable when it is like that, in a bus for instance, will in another minute all be naked, or will have fish-tails or horses' behinds like the characters of the fountains. For the Anglo-Saxon mind, ruled by conscience and the romantic, rigid in its privacies, everything here is shocking — an endless revelation and immersion; this is the vocabulary of our sleep; and the key image is always water¹⁰.

Like Lawrence, Miss Clark slips a proselytizing note into her observations. It would be a good thing if the Anglo-Saxon conscience were shocked. We are in need of a therapeutic immersion; our arthritic rigidities should submit to « the gallant assault of Rome »: an assault which is « total and terrible ». This point of view is contingent on a belief that immersion in the unconscious is essentially salutary: that the primitive is a source of creativity and strength rather than a heart of darkness. Serious American writers, almost compulsively attuned to « the horrors of the half-known life », tend to be less sanguine. Yet from the « beats » to the protagonists of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* or William Styron's *Set This House on Fire* experience of, and rapprochement with, the forces of the primitive are considered imperative. The significance of the image projected by Lawrence and Miss Clark lies in the suggestion that Italy is a country in particular and intimate relation with man's elemental nature: an idea which, replacing the attractions of Tradition, now forms the vital basis of Italy's appeal.

⁹ ELEANOR CLARK, *Rome and a Villa*, London, 1953, p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

That Italy is closer to the essential and the natural than other countries, that Italians deal with life *ad hominem* undercutting the abstract and the formal by insistent recourse to the personal, that in Italy man is his own creature and not society's: these and other generalities constitute a time-honored myth. Hawthorne, in the preface to *The Marble Faun*, explains that he has chosen Italy as his scene because it affords « a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America ». In Italy, as Miss Clark says, « you walk close to your dreams ». In a world of poetry or dreams characters are freed from irrelevant « actualities » and from « the enthrallments of Society » and can act out their profoundest desires or dilemmas. For those disaffected with an America increasingly definable in terms of such phrases as « the organization man », « the hidden persuaders » and the « lonely crowd », Italy provides a special precinct within which man seems safe from repressive or depersonalizing influences.

Attempting to explain the American thirst for ruins and shadows, Ruskin observed in a letter written in 1856:

After the scraped cleanliness and business and fussiness of America, mildew and mould may be meat and drink to you, and languor the best sort of life, and weeds a bewitchment... the very sense that nobody about you is taking account of anything, but that all is going on into an unspelt, unsummed, undistinguished heap of helplessness must be a relief to you, coming out of that atmosphere of calculation¹¹.

Ruskin's analysis is pertinent to the contrast between an unnaturally over-structured America and an Italy in which nature has gone to seed from lack of control. More importantly, however, the emphasis on helplessness and muddle serves to introduce a crucial extension of Italy's usability. Americans interested in living in or « using » Italy, rather than in touring or transacting business, tend to accept the cliché of chauvinistic regionalism which states that in the current period of industria-

¹¹ Quoted in BROOKS, *Dream of Arcadia*, p. 125.

lization and modernization northern Italy has become indifferently European. According to this point of view, only the South remains truly Italian. Above Florence, Americanization, with its gadgets and efficiency and depersonalization, is destroying what, in the eyes of foreigners at least, have seemed to be Italy's prime virtues. The Italy sought out by those in flight from institutional conformity must remain humanly picturesque, unsullied by progress. It must not be cleaned up, must remain true to the image Ruskin evokes. Inevitably, such an Italy will include not only mildew and mould, but poverty, sickness and human misery. Behind the picturesque and the human there exists the underdeveloped and the brutalized.

Italy's rewards are thus bound up in the spectacle of what Hawthorne termed its «wicked misery». Mark Twain was merely reflecting the split consciousness of other «innocents abroad» when he defined Italy as «that vast museum of magnificence and misery». A characteristic modern attitude is expressed by the protagonist of Irwin Shaw's *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1960). During a visit to Rome, the hero is approached by a «ragged, bent woman with a dirty child in her arms» who demands alms and runs after him crying «'Americano, Americano', holding out her other hand, claw-like and filthy». Though he gives her a hundred lire, she stares:

after him, ungrateful, unappeased, and he had the feeling that the hundred lire had given her did not make up for the warmth of the meal he had just eaten, for the pretty girl by his side, for the luxury or the hotel room he was approaching.

«It is to remind us,» [his companion says]... «Remind us of how close we are to Africa here in Italy... and how we pay for it».

The guilty conscience created by the spectacle of poverty and underdevelopment is, for Mr. Shaw's hero, merely a passing mood. For others, however, the matter is more serious.

The human misery which is woven into the very texture of life in parts of Italy recalls the theme of persecution so dear to the gothic world view. Beyond the superficial tourist's guilt felt by the protagonist of *Two Weeks in Another Town* there can also be a profound sense of implication in the tragic discrepancies of the human condition. An attitude which activates the American's sense of guilt and calls into play his complex and haunted sense of mission.

Discussing the particular suitability of the gothic form for the portrayal and working-out of guilt, Leslie Fiedler notes that:

...in the United States, certain special guilts awaited projection in the gothic form. A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a society immune to the compounded evil of the past... But the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia, and the abominations of the slave trade, in which the black man, rum and money were inextricably intertwined in a knot of guilt, provided new evidence that evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind¹².

In the nineteenth century, a handful of socially conscious Americans found it easy to equate the tragic condition of the Negro with that of the Italian degraded and oppressed by foreign powers of the Church. Visiting a goldsmith's shop in Rome, Harriet Beecher Stowe was presented with the sculpted head of an Egyptian slave. «Madam», one of the owners said, «we know what you have been to the poor slave. We ourselves are but poor slaves still in Italy. You feel for us»¹³. In the mid-nineteenth century as now the spectacle of poverty and tyranny could awaken that tendency towards officious and even diabolic reformism imputed to Americans by numbers of writers from Hawthorne to Graham Greene. Yet, in this century at least, the putative equation between the Italian situation and the American can evoke a less equivocal response.

¹² FIEDLER, *American Novel*, p. 127.

¹³ From a narrative by Mrs. Stowe's companion, Annie Field, quoted in BROOKS, *Dream of Arcadia*, p. 129.

Since Italy's problems are not in point of fact America's, except insofar as all men are implicated in human misery, involvement in these problems can be relatively objective; relieved of the virulent guilts which arise from complicity in America's dark past, concern with Italy's dilemmas can prove a cathartic experience¹⁴. Moreover, while the ramifications of America's moral condition have become impossibly complex, Italy's «wicked misery» presents a seemingly more manageable challenge. As a literary image if not as a human fact, Italy offers the disaffected American an opportunity to come to terms with his own country and situation. Administering a wonder drug to an ill and poverty-stricken peasant in the Tramonti, the protagonist of *Set This House on Fire* must humor the dying man by indulging his belief in America as a kind of Eldorado. The hero feels «sudden pain and longing himself, and annoyance at the demeaning nostalgia and... wondering at the feeling, [realizes] simply that whatever else he might say against his native land, there would not be this particular gross wrong and insult to mortal flesh».

Set This House on Fire employs a southern Italian town as its setting, but the particular episode just referred to could just as well take place in Africa, India or any other «underdeveloped» area. Indeed, one might legitimately object that many of the aspects we have discussed are not necessarily peculiar to the current image of Italy. Africa provides a more traditional metaphor for the darkness of the unconscious than does Italy. Sensualism and unrationalized emotionalism are at least equally the hallmark of the «mysterious» East or of Pacific isles. Italy must vie with Germany or even the American South as a gothic setting. Nor is Italy unique in providing a synthesis of the foregoing qualities. What makes the image of Italy unique and compelling is the combination of these qualities with the «accumulation of history and custom», that increment of tradition which was for Henry

¹⁴ This point will be taken up more fully in reference to *Set This House of Fire*.

James and others the very heart of « the denser, richer, warmer European spectacle ». Especially for those who now react against the over-valuation of rationalism, against the myopic vision of man's potentialities and fate by the eighteenth century dream of progress, Italy's balancing of darkness and light seems profoundly pertinent. In fact, the point of view implicit in the modern ideal of Italy appears closely related to the message which John Strachey, in a recent article, discovers in the work of Koestler, Pasternak and other contemporary anti-rationalists:

Unless we give far greater weight to the subjective side of man, unless we recognize the power of Pasternak's *troika* of values [Christianity, love and art], we shall achieve only disasters. The creativeness of personal relations, of aesthetics or of religious experience, is what matters today, wherever at any rate the economic problem is on the way to solution¹⁵.

Particularly for those Americans who, rebelling against depersonalization and a purely mechanistic ideology of progress, seek a setting for subjectivism that will not at the same time involve a total capitulation to the primitive, Italy comes to represent a promised land. What is being sought is less a descent into the mealstrom of the unconscious than an accommodation of the darkness with the light. The African heart of darkness, the irresponsible sensualism of tropic daydreams, the paralyzingly brutal misery of many areas of the world: each might offset American innocence and untangle the contortions created by American life. But such extremes would go beyond the intention of therapy; such shock treatment might maim instead of heal. Italy's social dilemmas are solvable; its gothic potential is balanced by that myth of the triumphantly unified ego, « the Renaissance man »; its sensualism is seen in the light of « the creativeness of personal relations ». And if these statements seem too good to be

¹⁵ JOHN STRACHEY, « The Strangled Cry (II), » *Encounter*, XV (December, 1960), p. 37.

accurate, we must remember that literal accuracy is not the province of dreams. The American dream of Italy merely projects upon a foreign background images of fear and hope which serve to suggest the dreamer's private necessities.

2. — In its major aspects, the American dream of Italy projects a preoccupation with self-definition and wholeness which has become one of the hallmarks of the national life. For many serious observers and artists, as well as for popular culture, an ideal of creative personal relations has been placed on the pedestal once reserved for religion, patriotism, heroism or social idealism. The phenomenon is clearly evident in Archiband MacLeish's *J. B.*, where the protagonist, stricken and despoiled, turns with his final hope not to God but to a metaphysic of human love. In its lower common denominator, the same idea may be observed in recent Tom and Jerry cartoons where, for the first time, it is occasionally suggested that cat and mouse can adjust their differences. Adjustment, the happy ending, has rarely been so analysed, complicated and insisted upon. Films, advertisements and the whole apparatus of mass culture glorify the ideally adjusted individual who, having achieved creative rapprochement with his own potentialities, is able to love, to communicate, to attain «togetherness» with another in despite of the intrusions of a beleaguering world. As America's amateur or professional psychotherapists in residence have defined it, the love underlying adjustment is to be no *coup de foudre*: the great passion is to be replaced by the painstakingly constructed relationship. This love is maturity's redemptive ideal: the end-product of a process demanding an initial bulwark of parental love (or some therapeutic substitute) and the contingent practice of self-love. Only where the formative requirements have been satisfied can the final stage be achieved.

American popular culture is most concerned with this final stage which, like other aspects of the «good life», is

believed to be within everyone's reach. Togetherness is the pragmatic reward conferred upon the adjusted. Since popular culture has absorbed certain of the insights of psychology, it no longer seeks to deny the delinquent traits inherent in man's nature. Yet the self-knowledge which is a prerequisite of wholeness must be pursued according to the canons of positive thought. The gothic mansion of the psyche must be put in order, renovated in line with the principles of modern housekeeping. «Facts» must be faced. But, if faced with virile optimism and with the security assured by achieved togetherness, the facts of human life, like those of nature, can be made to harmonize with the goals of progress. The mysterious, unquestionably dangerous realm of the unconscious is a new frontier: a wilderness to be tamed, settled and redeemed for civilization.

To the serious writer, the clichés of togetherness of positive thinking are, of course, anathema. Yet the pervasive tenance of adjustment psychology, in conjunction with certain aspects of the current literary-critical situation, helps to explain the direction taken by certain responsible novelists and critics. In the study of American literature a time is now foreseeable when almost all the facts will have been assembled, when all that competence and scholarship can say not just about Emily Dickinson or Herman Melville but also about Henry Timrod or Robert Montgomery Bird will have been said. Confronted with libraries of data, critics tend to place renewed emphasis on collation, interpretation and the formulation of synoptic theories. And, given a climate of opinion dominated by psychology and the social sciences, it is inevitable that criticism should make use of new techniques and eschew a merely literary approach to the American tradition. Particularly in the study of the American novel, psychology and sociology have been incorporated into the critical method. The pioneering example of Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* combined with a more sophisticated psychiatry inspires a concern with the veiled meanings and emotional presupposi-

tions of the novelistic tradition. As Philip Rieff, in a recent study of the ramifications of Freudian ideology, points out, this type of criticism is deeply committed to the psychoanalytic theory of interpretation:

Because the « depths » from which art is presumed to emerge cannot be expressed directly, a transparent straight-forward, literal art is a contradiction in Freudian terms. As the broadest way into the unconscious, art demands interpretation. Here one thinks of the characteristic modern claim that the literary critic's job is co-extensive with that of the creative writer — a claim frequently influenced by psychoanalytic prepossessions... Once it is acknowledged that art can never be directly intelligible, but always conceals meanings and motives that must be dug out, then critical interpretation becomes not a supplementary but an integral and even superior aspect of creativity. Freud provides a model instance of the work of the imagination, the dream... Interpretation, Freud concludes, is needed in order to complete the dream; indeed, some « over-interpretation » is always necessary. The present efflorescence of academic literary criticism... follows closely this model relation of neurotic symptom and medicinal interpretation¹⁶.

This conception of interpretation is pertinent to the work of such critics as Philip Rahv, Richard Chase, and Leslie Fiedler. Carried to its logical extreme, therapeutic criticism goes considerably beyond the relatively modest province staked out by those psychological critics who, following the model of Freud's essay on Dostoevsky, attempted to investigate a given author's psyche through an analysis of his works. Adding Jung to Freud, certain therapeutic critics base their research on an entire literary tradition in order to lay bare psychological configurations of a race.

As the Marxist or sociological critics of the thirties used American literature to adduce an economic or class imbalance, so the therapeutic critic seeks to expose psychological maladjustment and malfunction. This intention is clearly evident in Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*,

¹⁶ PHILIP RIEFF, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, London, 1960, p. 122.

unquestionably the most significant work of therapeutic literary criticism to date:

I do not relish the role of a private eye making court-room revelations, but it is one into which some of our writers have, not without malice, forced the critic... The failure of the American fictionalist to deal with adult heterosexual love and his consequent obsession with death, incest and innocent homosexuality are not merely matters of historical interest or literary relevance¹⁷.

As Mr. Fiedler's tone suggests, his book is intended as considerably more than an essay in literary criticism. Rather, it is meant as a tract for the times, an argumentatively reformist document, an often unfair but always provocative piece of psychological as opposed to social muckraking. It is a radical book insofar as it would overthrow not the tyranny of class structure or government but that of the cultural super-ego. Mr. Fiedler treats the various novels in the American tradition as functions of a single cultural personality. These novels are the dreams and fantasies America brings to the therapist for analysis; the pattern they reveal is shown to be seriously warped. As in analysis, the causes and ramifications of this pattern must be faced before the patient can become whole, before he can adjust his potentialities to the demands of mature, responsible life.

According to Mr. Fiedler, the American personality has been crucially deformed through its acceptance of a false ideal of love. The sexual maladjustment observable in the American novel derives from the influence of eighteenth century bourgeois sentimentalism. « The values of the Sentimental Love Religion, inextricably bound up with the example of Richardson, entered into the American novel at the moment of its creation... the three chief strands of our earliest fiction... are at one in espousing 'that religion and philosophy of which the effects are to be seen in *Clarissa*' »¹⁸. *Clarissa* is « the bourgeois Maiden, whose virginity is the emblem of the ethical

¹⁷ FIEDLER, *American Novel*, p. vii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

purity of her class, the soul of a world whose body is money; and upon her triumph and fall the fate of that class symbolically depends »¹⁹. In the pattern established by Richardson, even practical religion is redefined according to sentimental codes²⁰. Sentimentalism not only insists on distorting man's basic nature: the feminist, bourgeois philosophy it espouses also denies the place of reason in human affairs. In sentimental mythology, the female symbolizes the principle of salvation and the male that of damnation; Adam tries to lead Eve astray. One of the most dangerous results of this turnabout stems from the value it places on anti-intellectualism.

Although *Clarissa* itself was a work of considerable psychological sophistication, the sub-literature it generated both exploited and degraded Richardson's exposition of the sentimental code. In the hands of innumerable women writers the sentimental novel became a farrago of specious moralizing, stereotyped heroes and heroines and shrewd doses of vicarious titillation. The values that entered the American novel were those of debased Richardsonianism.

It is not enough... simply to say that Sentimentalism triumphed everywhere in our fiction; it must also be added that it proved almost everywhere a *blight*, a universal influence which was also a universal calamity. The Pure Young Maiden who derives from *Clarissa* and pre-empted the place of the heroine in our classic books is almost invariably a dull and embarrassing figure, a monster of virtue, her derivation of vulgarization and a falling off. The scarcely distinguishable ingenues of Cooper, the incredible Lucy over whom Melville drives in *Pierre*... Hawthorne's pale Priscilla and unbearably dovelike Hilda: these are the scandals of our literature. Indeed, it was their awareness of the inadequacy of such female characters (and their inability to imagine others) that led many of our authors to that strategy of evasion, that flight from society to nature, from the world of women to the haunts of womanless men, which sets our novel apart from that of the Western world²¹.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The charge that American novelists have been unable to deal realistically and maturely with women and with love is hardly a new one. However, Mr. Fiedler considerably broadens the area of attack by inculpating the Sentimental Love Religion as well as the traditional *bête noire*, Puritanism. More importantly, by interpreting novels as symbolic projections of the national psyche, Mr. Fiedler quite consciously goes beyond the accepted scope of objective criticism or intellectual history. His plangently repeated assertion that American novelists «avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and a woman» and shy away «from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature woman» is meant not only as an explanation of certain historical tendencies but also as a Laurentian diatribe against a continuing scandal.

For Mr. Fiedler, «genital maturity», that wholeness resulting from fully accepted sensual knowledge, is the precondition of love. As the Marxist critics believed in an ideal polity, the therapeutic critic envisions an ideal psychology. Sentimentalism takes over from Capitalism the role of villain; the literary tradition is used to adduce examples of psychological rather than civic *malaise*. Thus, for example, Mr. Fiedler rings changes on Lawrence's analysis of Hawthorne by declaring that:

The Scarlet Letter is, in one of its major aspects, a portrayal of the attenuation of sex in America, the shrinking on our shores from Brobdingnagian parents to Lilliputian children. In a note in his journal, Hawthorne reminds himself that Brobdingnag, where Gulliver once sat astride the nipples of gross, lusty girls, was located on the coast of North America, home of the mid-nineteenth-century fleshless bluestocking! *The Scarlet Letter* is concerned not only with passion but also with America (another possible signification of Hester's letter), that is to say, it attempts to find in the story of Hester and Dimmesdale a paradigm of the fall of love in the New World²².

As has already been suggested, the Brobdingnagian sensual utopia which Mr. Fiedler, if not Hawthorne, so keenly

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 506-508.

regrets is currently imagined in Italy. A fuller paean to lush, substantial femininity may be found in Eleanor Clark's description of Roman women:

Foreign men who take up with them or try to are nearly dashed to pieces ... With their dumpy graceless bodies and an air of empire about their heads and shoulders ... these Roman women move in the blazing noon of a terrible cold sensuality, that can kill because it is so truly gay ... They lose not an atom of their tremendous inner conviction because their calculations have brought them to a prospect of doing the washing for the next fifty years under an image of the Madonna. Their power even takes on another depth of joyousness once that is settled. The drive of femininity, which is of the whole being and so just the opposite of nymphomania, never gives out ... With their children it is a torrent treatment that may go on for thirty years, or never stop, of huggings and slappings and spoiling and tyrannical ordering about. The American, reflecting on his own childhood, feels exposed as to a break in Boulder Dam²³.

Miss Clark is myth-making, of course, but the qualities she lavishes on Roman women seem answers to the deficiencies Mr. Fiedler detests in American heroines. Moreover, the conjunction is hardly coincidental. Much of *Love and Death in the American Novel* was written in Italy; the list of acknowledgements includes as many Italians as Americans. But beyond any specific literary or intellectual influences, it may be hazarded that Italy's crucial contribution to Mr. Fiedler's work derives from the perspective vouchsafed by the image of sensual wholeness Miss Clark evokes.

Since Mr. Fiedler's chosen role is that of «private eye» or psychic muckraker, he is more concerned with the task of investigation than with that of describing ideal alternatives. In a rather general fashion he opposes the European, and particularly the French, handling of the possibilities of love with the American avoidance of the topic. However, though he would object vehemently to the association, the positive values underlying Mr. Fiedler's thesis are not essentially dissimilar to those of adjustment philosophy. His vision of a

²³ CLARK, *Rome and a Villa*, pp. 40-41.

somehow redemptive sensual maturity is closely related to the ideology of popular psychology for which the achievement of Love becomes the symbol of complete adjustment. To be sure, this belief is not stated baldly in the pages of *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Yet the insistent emphasis on the attenuation of sex and the fall of love endows the positive alternatives of «genital maturity» and achieved love with a preternatural importance. Instead of being the pragmatic proof of an honest, painstakingly created adjustment to the facts of life, love comes to seem a manifestation of grace.

Sentimentalism and the fate of love, however, form only the distaff side of Mr. Fiedler's exposition. The rejection of mature sexuality is a symptom of America's attempt to repress all of the basic verities of man's nature. Speaking of the impact of «genteel liberalism», Mr. Fiedler notes that:

Before the righteous assault of female middle-class Americans, profanity and candor disappeared from art, and even violence itself, most American of themes, was threatened with extinction. The denial of the Fall, implicit in all such reforms, led inevitably to the denial of the flesh; and passion came to be regarded as a semi-bestial self-indulgence of males ...²⁴

To understand his conception of the Fall we must recall Mr. Fiedler's contention that, «between the lapsing of orthodox doctrines of original sin and the emergence of modern scientific theories of the unconscious, Europe possessed no dignified, recognized vocabulary for expressing certain dark truths about the human soul». Instead of the Christian conception of a visible and an invisible world, the former being accepted as self-sufficient only by the spiritually illiterate, Mr. Fiedler insists on the Freudian duality of conscious and unconscious. In this revised scheme, the dark truths of the unconscious represent an ultimate reality which American feminized, middle-brow culture has tried systematically to reject. The

²⁴ FIEDLER, *American Novel*, pp. 254-255.

denial of love is the inevitable corollary of the denial of original sin (*i. e.* of the potentialities and dark truths of the unconscious). As a result of this denial, to use W.W. Story's relatively mild phrase, « the heart grows into stone ».

Given this position, it becomes clear that to redeem love one must face up to the forces of the unconscious. The corrective to sentimentalism thus becomes gothicism, which in Mr. Fiedler's definition is particularly structured to convey hidden or dangerous truths. Gothic experience, as we shall see in William Styron's novel, represents an initiation into that darkness out of which love must grow. More specifically, it provides a method for dealing directly with the subterranean guilts which inhibit love. Equally significant from the point of view of Mr. Fiedler's psychological radicalism is the fact that both gothicism and its less cogent predecessor, anti-bourgeois sentimentalism, attempt to defy the hypocrisies and repressions of the *status quo* by refusing to ignore those dark forces official culture strives to whitewash.

The modern tradition of anti-bourgeois sentimentalism stems from *Werther* and is, « in its most extreme form, the anti-type, the mirror image of the bourgeois sentimental novel. Where the latter is woman-centered and feminist, the former is male-centered and anti-feminist; where the latter is conservative and anti-intellectual, the former is radical and anti-philistine »²⁵.

As the novel becomes in the hands of the anti-bourgeois writer more lyrical and more autobiographical than the Richardsonian prototype, seduction and adultery (unconsummated in life but fulfilled in the grave) turn into symbols not of a struggle between established and rising classes, but between the exceptional individual and conventional society... By the very act of becoming a writer, [the self-conscious artist of the new age] has (he cannot help feeling) betrayed his father, abandoned the male world of consciousness and action for a dark flirtation with the unconscious... The girls who symbolize this betrayal of the paternal principle must be, less equivocally even than *Clarissa*, images of the

²⁵ FIEDLER, *American Novel*, p. 89.

Great Mother; they must be discovered first by their loves like Charlotte [in *Werther*] surrounded by « six lovely children » or even seen in the midst of life as the living symbol of eternal motherhood ...²⁶

The crux of *Love and Death in the American Novel* lies in its exposition of the role that the gothic sub-genre, which loosely incorporates the tendencies of anti-bourgeois sentimentalism, has performed in American fiction from Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner. As usual, Mr. Fiedler begins his discussion by summarizing European origins and models. As Richardson's *Clarissa* is the prototype of the sentimental novel, so M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* is the most « classic » of the gothic romances. Gothicism and sentimentalism share a number of themes, particularly that of seduction, but while the latter insists on the force of light and redemption the former « is committed to portraying the power of darkness ». « The fully developed gothic centers not on the heroine (the persecuted principle of salvation) but on the villain (the persecuting principle of damnation) ». Moreover, the gothic typically projects a sense of guilt and anxiety originally associated with incest but later deriving from « the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past which he has been striving to destroy »²⁷. Expanding on the patterns of anti-bourgeois sentimentalism, gothic fiction:

projects a fear of the solitude which is the price of freedom; and on the other hand, an almost hysterical attack on all institutions which might inhibit that freedom or mitigate the solitude it breeds. Chief of the gothic symbols is, of course the Maiden in flight — understood in the spirit of *The Monk* as representing the uprooted soul of the artist, the spirit of the man who has lost his moral home. Not the violation or the death which sets such a flight in motion, but the flight itself figures forth the essential meaning of the antibourgeois gothic, for which the girl on the run and her pursuer become only alternate versions of the same plight²⁸.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

The gothic took root and flourished in America because the death of love had « left a vacuum at the affective heart of the American novel into which there rushed the love of death »; deprived of love as a subject, our novelists « turned to fables of loneliness and terror ». For writers peculiarly sensitive to the modulations of « moral horror », gothicism provided an apt set of symbols. Not only did the form allow for the projection of such native guilts as slavery and the exploitation of the Indian, it also created, by means of the pasteboard mask of melodrama, a potentially popular method of insinuating a whole body of unpopular truths. However, the profound revolutionary implications of the European gothic tended to suffer a violent sea change en route to America. Hence in the American gothic:

the heathen, unredeemed wilderness and not the decaying monuments of a dying class, nature and not society becomes the symbol of evil. Similarly not the aristocrat but the Indian, not the dandified courtier but the savage colored man is postulated as the embodiment of villainy.

Our novel of terror... is well on the way to becoming a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition. The European gothic identified blackness with the superego and was therefore revolutionary in its implications; the American gothic (at least insofar as it followed the example of [Charles Brockden] Brown) identified evil with the id and was therefore conservative at its deepest level of implication, whatever the intent of its authors²⁹.

Identifying evil with the id, and at the same time taking the investigation of the id's dark forces as its most pressing theme, American gothicism could hardly avoid being charged with morbidity or worse. Shunning the smiling surfaces of life in pursuit of its terrible knowledge, gothicism itself came to seem a Faustian enterprise³⁰. But whereas Faust might say « yes » to life in all its manifestations, American writers sought from the diabolic bargain the guerdon of dissent. For

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

those committed to the final wisdom of darkness, dalliance with, the light becomes a cowardly equivocation: a refusal to abandon our insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, an avoidance of that appalling ocean which is man's fate. Since Mr. Fiedler shares this point of view (which is indeed the «moral» of his exposition) it is worth quoting at some length his idea of the role serious gothic writers have performed, and must continue to perform, in American literature:

Among the assumptions of Melville and Hawthorne are the following: that the world of appearances is at once real and a mask through which we can perceive more ultimate forces at work; that Nature is inscrutable, perhaps basically hostile to man but certainly in some sense alien; that in man and Nature alike there is a «diabolical» element, a «mystery of iniquity»; that it is impossible to know fully either God or ourselves, and that our only protection from destructive self-deceit is the pressure and presence of others; that to be alone is, therefore, to be lost; that evil is real, and that the thinking man breaks his heart trying to solve its compatibility with the existence of a good God or his own glimmering perceptions of goodness. From this it follows that the writer's duty is to say, «Nay!»; to deny the easy affirmations by which most men live, and to expose the blackness of life most men try to ignore. For tragic humanists, it is the function of art not to console or sustain, much less to entertain, but to *disturb* by telling a truth which is always unwelcome; and they consequently find it easy to view themselves in Faustian terms, to think of their dangerous vocation as a bargain with the Devil. It is for these reasons that they speak of their books ... as «hell-fired» or «wicked». ... In 1850, the sole name for what we would call the unconscious was «hell»; and forays into that region were therefore regarded as courting damnation. It is perhaps as apt a way as any of describing the risks involved in descending below the threshold of ordinary consciousness, the dangers of alienation or madness.

It is because they come to terms so frankly with the Faustian implications of their own enterprise that writers like Melville and Hawthorne (later Twain and Faulkner too) are able to create Faustian characters, satisfy the dimly perceived need of many Americans to have their national existence projected in terms of a compact with the Devil. In Hawthorne, the scientist and the social reformer; in Melville, the ruthless exploiter of nature and the magnetic leader of men; in Twain, the refugee from culture, the young man who goes West; in Faulkner the self-made man fighting for status and security — in each, some standard and respected American type is identified with the black

magician who bartered away his soul. There is scarcely a heroic ideal which is not, in one or another of these writers' gothic books, illuminated by a wierd and lurid light. Such ideals are not, it should be clear, merely travestied or debunked; they are rather revealed as equivocal, problematic — redeemed from easy sentimental acceptance and raised to tragic power³¹.

The function of tragic humanism is similar to that of therapeutic criticism: the fearless exposure of those truths which genteel, sentimental culture has sought to evade or repress. The attenuation of sex and the fall of love are the result of the distortions and falsifications which the American psyche has utilized to avoid the psychological facts of life. In order to guide America to that wholeness which is therapy's goal, serious writers and critics must adopt a method analogous to that of psychoanalysis. Writers must disclose with insistent honesty all that lies below the threshold of ordinary consciousness. Critics must not allow America to falsify the material thus presented or to evade its dark implications. Only when the nation's sick soul is laid bare can the process of positive cure begin.

This is Mr. Fiedler's ideal programme. In practice, however, the goal of wholeness or adjustment seems not only intrinsically vague but also inconsistent with the methods of tragic humanism. Popular culture tends to enshrine the achievement of love as a final faith: the only viable metaphysic available to those who can accept neither formal religion nor social idealism. Mr. Fiedler, of course, rejects this doctrine. The interpretative system he adopts hopes to achieve a pragmatic *modus vivendi*, not a metaphysical panacea. The ideal of « genital maturity », while owing something to Lawrence's mystique of libidinal adjustment, is a functional aim and as such far removed from the conventions of the sentimental love religion. Insofar as the current philosophy of togetherness is an amalgam of these conventions and misconceived psychology, it must be labeled an evasion of true psychological realism.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 418-19.

Yet, as we have noted, Mr. Fiedler's insistence on the frightful effects of the fall of love seems to suggest a belief in something more than « genital maturity », to imply a vision of love as salvation. Since this alternative is developed only by indirection, Mr. Fiedler is able to adumbrate the virtues of redemptive love while dissenting from all of its current manifestations. Unlike other programmatic critics, he may be doctrinaire without being specific. Hence love can, on the literal level of the book, be redefined as « genital maturity » and still be reasserted a kind of final faith on the level of implication.

A similar contradiction exists in the discussion of tragic humanism. The assumptions deduced from Melville and Hawthorne are relevant and unexceptionable. These writers certainly desire to express profound and most likely unwelcome truths about the nature of man and of the universe. One of their most vivid concerns is unquestionably the problem of evil. At this point, however, Mr. Fiedler intervenes as *raisonneur*, redefining evil and its attendant spirits in terms of the Freudian theory of the unconscious. The mystery of iniquity must thus be seen as ultimately solvable if not yet solved. One serious objection to this redefinition is that since numbers of modern writers concerned with the power of blackness have rejected the psychological explanation of evil there is no reason to assume it would have been satisfactory to Melville or Hawthorne. As a propagandist for psychological enlightenment, Mr. Fiedler is, of course, committed to a confrontation with « the blackness of life most men try to ignore ». Such a confrontation is a requisite of therapy. Men must be made whole whether they desire wholeness or not, just as political systems must be imposed for the good of the « people ». The equation of evil with unconscious allows Mr. Fiedler to reinterpret metaphysics as psychological muckraking and to consider nineteenth-century tragic humanists as prophets of the psychoanalytic millennium. Yet to turn Melville, Hawthorne and other tragic humanists into mere polemicists is to distort their complex vision; to accept a by-product of their honesty

as their essential aim. That Mr. Fiedler avoids the worst excesses of such a simplification is due not only to a critical integrity which is often at odds with his doctrines but also to the fact that he does not wholly accept his own equation of evil and unconscious.

Both the analytic method and the programmatic thesis of *Love and Death in the American Novel* imply that the function of tragic humanism's truth-telling must be to free the way for some rapprochement with the facts of the unconscious. We must follow Stein's dictum in *Lord Jim*: « in the destructive element, immerse ». Yet here, as in the equivocation between pragmatic adjustment and love as faith, Mr. Fiedler undermines his explicit rationale. Instead of simply equating the traditional idea of evil with the modern conception of unconscious forces, he redefines evil on the basis of psychological insights. All the dark horror associated with evil is retained. Hence those who deal with the hidden truths of man's psyche must face forces which are not merely socially obnoxious but unwelcome *per se*: an unmitigable blackness before which any hope of adjustment must appear a facile evasion. To emphasize such truths is not merely to disturb, or to dissent from a society which tries to ignore them, but to be overwhelmed by moral horror and ambiguity. To insist on an ineluctable confrontation with such truths would be to call forth a literature committed to despairing variations on the impasse Melville reaches in *Pierre*. As an independent thinker attempting to review the concerns treated by most American serious fiction, Mr. Fiedler has every right to espouse so extreme a position. However, as a critic, he is bound to a broader view. He must, for example, deal with the fact that, at the close of Melville's finest novel, Ishmael's escape represents not simply a plot device but a challenge to the tragic vision of the universe and hence an act of faith. Mr. Fiedler's apparent fear of sentimental evasion prevents him from dealing directly with the possibility of such faith. Unable either to share or finally to abandon hope, he tends to ignore it. Meanwhile his attack on all conventions

which might mitigate the blackness of darkness takes on an almost hysterical vehemence and rigidity. The insistence on absolute honesty and the dissent from all compromise become not therapeutic but compulsive. Mr. Fiedler's psychological radicalism leads him into the same trap as that which threatens the passionate revolutionist: the ideal for which he fights is eclipsed by the necessities of disturbance or dissent.

The confusion between the goals of literature and those of polemic which vitiates part of *Love and Death in the American Novel* does not, of course, invalidate the central exposition of the evasiveness, juvenility and violence that characterize much of our fiction. Indeed, precisely because Mr. Fiedler's own thought reflects the tension between moral horror and faith which quickens the work of our greatest authors, he is particularly perceptive in his discussion of the effects sentimental falsifications and the emasculation of love have had on the attempts of tragic humanism to create a positive bulwark against darkness. Surely it is disturbing to observe how often the human bond which allows our Ishmaels to turn away from the flame of evil is with another man rather than a woman. Equally significant, though Mr. Fiedler does not discuss the point, is the effect the fall of love has had on the American postulation of evil. Evil, as characteristically presented in American fiction, seems associated less with the horrors of war and the slaughter of innocence so vivid to European writers than with the human, social and metaphysical ramifications of tyranny. Our gothicism relies heavily on Trilby-Svengali relationships and on situations in which a hypertrophied will attempts, either by demonism or brute force, to gain control over weaker wills. Moreover, such situations are most generally presented as taking place not between a man and a woman but between two men or one man and society. From Chillingworth to Willy Stark the evil potentialities, either for tyranny or sadistic laceration, of these associations have been central to the American tradition. Though psychology can provide at best only a partial explanation of this

phenomenon, it is probable that the failure of mature heterosexual love is one of the roots of our concern with, and vulnerability toward, the fascination of the tyrannous will.

The great virtue of *Love and Death in the American Novel* is that, despite its doctrinaire distortions, it provokes reconsideration of the most fundamental tendencies of the American imagination. For the purposes of our discussion, Mr. Fiedler's emphasis on the highly problematic relationship between the darkness of serious American concerns and the current commitment to a redemptive ideal of adjusted love is particularly pertinent. By suggesting a hope of wholeness while at the same time demanding an acceptance of the tragic facts about the human condition, Mr. Fiedler reflects a dualism already noted in regard to the Arcadian and gothic myths of Italy. Since Italy offers both a therapeutic hope of sensuous maturity and a background consecrated by tradition to eruptions of untamed forces it too poses the problem: how to repossess our elemental nature, to keep our hearts from turning to stone, and still avoid destruction and the chance of being overwhelmed by moral horror. Mr. Fiedler's concerns are, of course, by no means an exact parallel of those associated with Italy's present appeal. None the less, it is hardly surprising that the one recent American novel to attempt a resolution of tragic humanism's assumptions and adjustment's promises should make extensive use of Italy's gothic and Arcadian resources.

3. — In its hugeness of theme and scope, William Styron's *Set This House on Fire*³² is a most characteristically American novel. The title is taken from a passage in which John Donne speaks of God's efforts to win back the errant soul. All other methods of persuasion having failed, the body which houses the soul is set on fire as a symbolic foretaste of the utter desolation of damnation. To reject God's love is to invite eternal

³² WILLIAM STYRON, *Set This House on Fire*, New York, 1960.

seclusion from this love, an eternally, unconsumated firing of desire. Mr. Styron's novel treats not only the themes of faith, love and evil, but also such matters as the problem of guilt, the role and education of the artist and the difficulties involved in achieving a viable identity as an American. Unfortunately, this grandness of intention is often compromised by tenuous structural devices and the presence of unsuccessful passages and scenes. Yet the level of achievement is in general high. The serious attempt both to examine and to resolve the crucial dilemmas already noted in this essay is conducted with a subtlety and awareness of complexity which are the evidence of mature and certain talent.

In most essential respects, *Set This House on Fire* conforms to Leslie Fiedler's definition of the gothic form. Set in a town named Sambuco, romantically isolated among the cliffs overlooking Amalfi, the plot unfolds against a desolate and mysterious nighttime landscape. Most of the peripheral characters are drawn from film-land's *dolce vita* — a world which, as Nathaniel West realized, provides a wonderfully appropriate atmosphere for modern gothicism. Mr. Styron is almost hyper-conscious of the gothic tradition. The film being shot at Sambuco is a modern-dress version of the Beatrice Cenci story: a tragic tale of patricide and incest which figures importantly in both *Pierre* and *The Marble Faun*. While eschewing supernatural devices, the action is none the less devoted to the most extreme and melodramatic situations. The tone is set at the very beginning of the novel when the narrator, Peter Leverett declares that the «awesome and shocking» events he is to describe include «a murder and a rape which ended, too, in death, along with a series of other incidents not so violent yet grim and distressing». The gothic role of hero-villain is divided between two characters: Cass Kinsolving, a self-destroying, guilt-ridden artist seeking to free himself into «the condition of love», and Mason Flagg, a wealthy American in search of sensation and dominance. In a similar fashion the «persecuted maiden» and the «living

symbol of eternal motherhood », occasionally presented as one figure in gothic romances, are here separated. The former role is assigned to the beautiful Francesca, who is pursued, raped and finally murdered. The latter function falls to Cass wife, Poppy, whose somewhat simple-minded refusal of all intellectual or rational complexity is highly appropriate to a stereotype of the female principle.

The novel's central action is compressed into one nightmarish day and night. Just before returning to the States after several years in Italy, Peter Leverett receives an invitation from Mason Flagg, whom he had known at school in Virginia, to spend a week in Sambuco. En route from Rome, Leverett runs down a cyclist; though in no way responsible for the accident, he must bear the hysterical insults of the young man's mother, who blames all Italy's woes on the Americans. Burdened with a dazed sense of guilt and totally exhausted, he arrives in Sambuco. The town is over-run by members of the film unit; Mason, who has rented the ancient and picturesque Palazzo d'Affitto, is acting as amateur impresario and host. After a troubled sleep, Leverett joins the guests at the Palazzo. The party, incongruous enough in its mélange of grotesque personalities, is made even stranger by a background of mysterious sights and sounds. A girl runs screaming down the corridors; Mason enters in angry pursuit, his face scratched and bloody; from the floor below a phonograph blastingly alternates a hillbilly revival song and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Cass Kinsolving, who, it turns out, lives in the Palazzo and owns the phonograph, enters, drunkenly ranting speeches from *Oedipus at Colonus*. Holding out the promise of a bottle of whiskey, Mason lures Cass into performing a series of obscene and humiliating imitations. Sickened by the spectacle, Leverett intervenes and, somewhat later, is persuaded by Cass to hike to a neighboring valley in order to help attend a dying peasant. Returning to the Palazzo, he falls into an exhausted sleep which is troubled by nightmare fantasies woven around mysterious cries and screams. When he awakens late

the next day, he learns that these screams had been part of a reality more terrible than his dreams. The girl has been raped and murdered presumably by Mason, who has committed suicide.

This chain of events forms the subject of a series of encounters between Leverett and Cass which take place a few years later and in which the two men attempt to discover the significance of the gothic tragedy and their own roles in it. Their desire, of course, is to achieve catharsis. The first step in this direction, however, makes it evident that they must begin by trying to reach some conclusion about Mason, whose ambiguous friendship with Leverett and attempt to possess Cass' soul are crucial to the tragedy's meaning. Is Mason evil or merely vile? The name Mason Flagg suggests that its bearer may be particularly representative of his country. Is America then evil or vile? Partial answers to these questions are contained in two flashbacks dealing with Leverett's friendship with Mason in the years before the Sambuco episode. In the first of these, Leverett recalls Mason as he had known him when they were both at boarding school. Son of a multi-millionaire investor and a doting, ego-centric mother, Mason appears superficially to have all the advantages: money, dynamic personal charm, intelligence. Yet he seems from the beginning a wierd mixture of Claggart, Gatsby and Dmitri Karamozaov. Mason's morals are more or less a product of the world inhabited by his shallow, self-indulgent and hysterically self-pitying mother, whose assumptions about life resemble those of the *dolce vita*. What Mason is to become, however, results from an attempt to reconcile this kind of degeneracy with the image of his father: an almost mythic figure, a modern robber baron who combines a pioneer's rectitude with a « sheer, annihilating authority », an « almost regal » power of will. When Mason is expelled from school for having seduced a feeble-minded young girl, his father rejects him as a « contemptible swine ». His mother, on the

other hand, is fast won over by his charm. Whether Mason is a contemptible swine or a monster of evil is a question which must be set aside for later discussion. The point of this presentation of Mason's background is seemingly to suggest that his later triumphs are a successful attempt to imitate his father's kinetically masculine authority without any right to such authority. Mason's mother provides the model for his assertions of will and hence the world in which he will choose to live is one in which moral discrimination and integrity have been undermined by moral dissipation. Mason will live a dynamically false lie in a society of weaker lies; he will achieve his goals by an exploitation of the corruption and guilt in others.

The action in the second flashback occurs years later when Leverett encounters Mason in a Greenwich village bar. Mason is now an aspiring playwright. The play he is working on deals with his own experiences during World War II. As he tells it to Leverett, the story is a marvelous cloak and dagger affair taking place in Yugoslavia and including the love of a beautiful native girl, the death of a faithful comrade and a hair-raising last-minute escape. The life Mason leads seems almost as fabulous as his story. Living in an artist's studio, done up in such a way as to combine Beverly Hills and Bohemia, Mason has absorbed characteristics of both the Artist and the Beat. He has become a sort of walking encyclopedia of facts and theories, wearing « his really amazing erudition flashily and blatantly, like a man outfitted for a costume ball ». As opposed to Leverett, who calls himself a « square », Mason is a fully engaged denizen of what he terms « *le nouveau libertinage* ».

Sex is the last frontier [he tells Leverett], the only area left where men can find full expression of their individuality, full freedom. Where men can cast off the constrictions and conventions of society and regain their identity as humans. And I don't mean any dreary, dry little middle-class grope and spasm, either. I mean the total exploration of sex, as Sade envisioned it.

Following this cult, Mason explores the fringe world of drugs, orgies and occult erotica. With Carol, his lush mistress, he leads a night-time life of compulsive depravity; with Celia, his lovely wife, he becomes during the day a model of intelligent respectability and charm.

Leverett's reaction to Mason is one of fascination and disgust. He feels Mason to be « more imaginative, more intelligent than [himself], and at the same time more corrupt ». During this period Mason pays the bills, supplies the girls and acts as stage manager for Leverett's life. The latter is awed and grateful but at the same time disturbed by the thought that it might be « possible to remain under Mason's aegis » for the rest of his days: « Because if I suspected that there was a lust for ownership in these big gestures of Mason's, I also realized with some shame that my willingness to be owned was stronger than I ever wanted to admit ». Yet, if Mason's lust for ownership and extensive corruption disturb, the scale of his powers and activities is still extraordinary and impressive.

...the more I saw of Mason in his dual role of daytime squire and nighttime nihilist... the more it became apparent to me that here was a truly distinctive young American — able in a time of hideous surfeit, and 'Togetherness' lurid mist, to revolt from conventional values, to plunge into a chic vortex of sensation, dope, and fabricated sin, though all the while retaining a strong grip in his two million dollars.

Rich, gloriously handsome, erudite, witty, gifted, a hero of the war, with a wife over whom the goddesses must grit their teeth in rage — what else could a man wish to be. Could earth hold more youthful promise? Beside him... I felt pitifully small, and I gloomed over all that forbade me to see all that I disapproved of in him as a superb Renaissance spilling-over, manly as a stud-horse, instead of corruption.

The night before Leverett is to leave for Italy, Celia, Mason's wife, bursts into his apartment. Mason has attacked her and she is bruised and hysterical. From her Leverett learns that Mason's war record is a complete fabrication: a draft dodger, he was never in Yugoslavia and never wounded.

Celia, however, is still hopelessly in love, and defends Mason's lie as «only part of that breadth and vastness of his whole personality, part of his *vision* of life, which was so broad and encompassing that it just had to include exaggeration and stretchings of truth». Celia, though lovely and charming, is only a superficially educated college girl; like Mason's other women, she regards him as a kind of matinee idol. She accepts his seeming deficiencies as part of a pattern too grand for her understanding. Innocent and vulnerable, she is a perfect subject for Mason's hypnotic mastery; indeed, as Leverett learns at the end of this, Mason has been systematically driving her insane by refusing to make love to her.

Celia's story and example are sordid enough illustrations of Mason's corrupt influence. Yet, in order to explain why, several years later, Leverett will accept Mason's invitation to Sambuco, they must be juxtaposed against a quite different idea of Mason's character. The morning after the episode with Celia, Mason appears on shipboard to wish Leverett farewell. Having stocked Leverett's cabin with a Midas horde of gifts, he proceeds to refer once again to his war experiences. Leverett, rebellious and enraged, calls him a liar. Seemingly stunned, Mason crumples before the charge, weakly pleading friendship:

His shoulder still heaving as if with palsy, he took my hand, turning that simple gesture of farewell into the sorriest act of loveliness, of naked longing, I think I have ever known... Before I could say another word... he was gone... leaving my hand clutched around a wad of French money... Mortified, I tried to call out after him, but he was already lost from sight — except for one last brief glimpse I had of him at the top of a distant stairway: with his head bent down there seeking the steps he looked curiously clumsy and inept; not the old breezy magician but vulnerable, bumbling and for an instant wildly confused — future's darling, a man with one foot poised in the thinnest of air.

Mason's last gift reminds Leverett of the story of the unpopular rich boy who spends his allowance buying other children's company; the gesture is «one of recompense and hire, and

laden with the anguish of friendliness ». At the same time we remember that Mason's *nouveau libertinage* is a most gloomy cult: that at no point does he appear truly involved in his debauchery, remaining always somehow apart, serious and lonely. For Leverett, it is the mysterious contrast between pathetic insecurity and epitomized youthful promise that allows Mason to retain a measure of his original stature.

The first half of *Set This House on Fire* is devoted in large part to Leverett's bewildered description of the events at Sambuco and to the two flashbacks just discussed. Both because Leverett is incompletely realized as a character and because he partakes of the moral disorientation Mason personifies, his narrative is rarely convincing enough to permit a willing suspension of disbelief. However, in the second half of the novel, Leverett is set aside and Cass Kinsolving, the man whose house has been set on fire and the book's true protagonist, steps to the center of the stage. Seen in antagonism to Cass, Mason becomes for the first time a believably complex and meaningful character. As Cass relates the story of his life to Leverett, we come to realize that the Sambuco tragedy embodies for him the two extremes of the Italian myth. The pure and beautiful Francesca promises salvation in Arcadia; Mason, the evil genius whose power derives from the guilts and failures of others, threatens to corrupt Arcadia and to damn the searching soul to gothic darkness.

Cass' background is not presented with much fulness. A poor Southerner, he joined the army at an early age and suffered some form of shell-shock during the war. While recuperating, he meets a psychoanalyst who, though unable to help in any formal way, takes a liking to him and presses him to attempt a career as an artist. From this point onwards Cass develops into a complexly fragmented figure. Unable to believe in God, he none the less retains the manner of a Southern Baptist preacher; self-educated in bits and snatches, he uses what culture he has achieved (mostly, it would seem, Greek tragedy) to provide a correlative to his own dilemmas.

These dilemmas are tremendous if obscure. Cass is afflicted with a lacerating sense of guilt which poisons his existence; convinced he is in some way evil, he tries to blind self-hatred with alcohol. But drunk or sober he must do battle: laying siege with despairing awkwardness to the repressed truths which somehow keep him from the freedom of self-knowledge and the uninhibited enjoyment of love and practice of art.

Through a process of self-analysis confusedly compounding Sophocles and Freud, Cass reconstructs the two seminal episodes of his early life. The first is a brief encounter with a young girl who manages to combine the vocabulary of Jehovah's Witnesses with an ingenuous yet somehow completely pure commitment to the wonders of the body and of love. From her, Cass learns of the redemption obtainable through love unmarred by guilt. The memory of their encounter becomes a vision of sensual honesty similar to that suggested by Lawrence. The second episode is equally decisive: a classically traumatic experience which Cass represses and which comes to light only near the end of the novel. At fifteen, spurred on despite his initial unwillingness by the vindictive rage of a salesman for whom he is working, Cass takes part in the brutal destruction of a Negro's home. Caught up in the salesman's orgasm of hatred, Cass becomes for a moment not a man but a beast. The vision of love born of the encounter with the girl leads Cass to marry Poppy, an earth-mother type, innocent of evil and complexity to the point of simple-mindedness, yet completely honest, good and devoted. The destruction of the Negro's home, combined in an unclear way with Cass' war record, produces an unfocused but overpowering sense of sin, a self-hatred which forces Cass to the verge of alcoholic suicide.

The two episodes Cass relates motivate and determine his actions during the period preceding his arrival in Sambuco. His story begins in Paris where, accompanied by Poppy and his brood of children, he has gone in hopes of finding an

atmosphere exempt from the falsifications which undermine the honest practice of art in the United States. Even in Paris, however, he is driven to drink and, physically exhausted as well as emotionally depleted, he undergoes a peculiar type of nervous breakdown. He is seized by brief but remarkably intense visions whose effect is evoked by means of the vocabulary of mystical communion: rapture, perception of essence, of the «eliveness» of beauty divorced from but including the self, achievement of passive selflessness before the in-dwelling of the Godhead:

...when you try to describe a — a state like this. You end up like some shaggy tenth-century anchorite, hooting and hollering that he's been raped by a platoon of angels. ...Well, anyway, maybe you can see how, if I got such a boot out of these spells, I didn't want to give up the very thing that caused them, even if the very thing that caused them was a self-destructive thing of booze and slow starvation and nervous exhaustion. Suicide, really.

Though the vision of selflessness, of oneness with that natural goodness of grace which all men possess though few can realize, will have crucial implications in the novel, Cass rejects the state of rapture for what it is: «a sick, drunken daydream, with no more truth in it than the hallucination of some poor old mad starving hermit». The knowledge that the daydream is specious exacerbates Cass' sense of guilt and stimulates his urge to self-destruction, which now amounts almost to a lust for death. He conceives the idea of murdering his family and committing suicide, since «God was not even a lie, but worse, that He was weaker than the evil He created».

Before Cass can accomplish this massacre, however, he has a vision which seems to promise a far better life:

I saw some southern land with olive trees and orange blossoms and girls with merry black eyes... this smell of perfume and pines and orange blossoms and girls, a'l mixed up in one sweet blissful fragrance of peace and repose and joy. And over all of it, somehow, vague and indistinct but possessing the whole scene: a girl's sweet voice calling, some southern Lorelei calling me and beckoning me on.

The dream, as Cass interprets it, is of some sort of salvation in Italy. The « southern Lorelei » promises a fulfilment of the hope of sensual wholeness born of the youthful episode Cass has already described. Drawn by this promise, Cass moves his family to the south of France, to Florence and finally to Rome, where he manages to re-establish a semblance of normal life. He removes « himself from the seductive world of night and from erotic daydreams and sour semi-suicidal moods, brushing his teeth twice a day and polishing his shoes and cleansing his breath with Listerine ».

Yet this state in itself had its drastic shortcomings. ...the closer he approached this condition of palmy beatitude — the whole man operating with all his Godgiven faculties wide-open — the closer, paradoxically, he saw himself coming to be a nice young fellow with a blurred grin, a kind of emotional eunuch in whom that necessary part of the self which saw the world with passion and recklessness, and which had to be flayed and exacerbated and even maddened to retain its vision had been cut away...

Cass' dilemma here is clearly a version of the conflict between the assumptions of tragic humanism and the conformity Mr. Fiedler associates with adjustment. Convinced that life has become « flat, stupid, sterile », he lapses back into alcoholism at the first opportunity. Again the need to escape possesses him. Half-maddened, yelling revival hymns and gulping Grappa, he drives southward on his Vespa in search of his promised land. He runs out of gas near Sambuco, enters the town, and is arrested for making a drunken disturbance in the local hotel. At the Sambuco police station, Cass meets two of three characters who will preside over his fate: Francesca, a beautiful peasant girl, the Lorelei of his vision; and Luigi, a self-educated policeman who claims, paradoxically, to be both a fascist and a humanist. Taken by the beauty of the town and tantalized by the memory of the girl, Cass decides to settle down. He brings his family to Sambuco where, practically penniless, usually drunk, he passes the time until Mason's unexpected arrival.

Cass continually refers to his experiences in Europe as an awakening. From another point of view, his behavior suggests that of a man in the throes of a particularly tense and difficult course of psychoanalysis. Having refused the alien and mechanistic aide of a professional analyst, Cass is attempting alone the painful process of self-discovery and liberation. The interim period spent in Sambuco before Mason's appearance marks a crisis in this process. Alone, except for his loving but uncomprehending wife and for the occasional company of Luigi, who comprehends but cannot help, Cass manages to dredge up the repressed memory of the episode with the Negro. Since this memory is among the most essential causes of his self-castigating guilt, the fact that Cass can now contemplate it has crucial significance. As Cass explains to Leverett in the course of their long dialogue:

No, there are no amends or atonement for a thing like that. But there is another thing, and though it won't bring back that busted stove or plaster bulldog... it's something and it's strong. What I mean is, you live with it. You live with it even when you've put it out of your mind — or think you have — and maybe there's some penance or justice in that.

At this moment of recognition, and consequent intensification of trauma and self-hatred, Mason enters Sambuco in his cerise Cadillac: « this loose long lanky Mason, handsome as a Vitalis ad and looking about as American as it's possible to get ». Mistaking Cass for an American sculptor with a vaguely similar name, Mason proceeds to flatter him and to praise his work with a great display of platitudinous erudition. Mason's tone, the general falsity of the situation and the man, taken with a vulgar remark he makes about Francesca who re-enters the novel at this point by coming to ask Cass for a job, rapidly create a nightmarish situation. For Cass, Mason seems the very image of all he had come to Europe to escape:

...the man in all those car advertisements — you, the young guy waving there — he looks so beautiful and educated and everything...

And he's *going* places. I mean electronics. Politics. What they call communications. Advertising. Saleshood. Outer space. God only knows. And he's as ignorant as an Albanian peasant.

Perceiving at once all that Leverett had been unable to see, or tried to explain or whitewash, Cass denounces Mason to his face. Mason reacts with the same pitiful air of deflation and misery which Leverett has already noted. Yet even before Cass takes in Mason's reaction, he is stopped in the midst of his diatribe by a realization of his own position:

« The only true experience, by God », I said, « is the one where a man learns to love himself. And his country! » And as I said these words... that nightmare I'd had came crashing back like a wave, and then those Negroes and that ruined cabin so long ago and all of that, which seemed to be the symbol of the no-count bastard I'd been all my life, and I became absolutely twisted and wrenched with a feeling I'd never felt before — guilt and homesickness and remorse and pity all combined — and I felt the tears streaming idiotically down my cheeks ».

Cass' tears indicate that he achieved a state of contrition. Substituting religious for psychoanalytic terms (a legitimate exercise, since Mr. Styron, like Leslie Fiedler, seems to consider the two vocabularies complementary), we may say that Cass is ready to commence the positive task of regeneration and rectification of the will. This task is rendered almost impossible, however, by the fact that Cass can accept neither formal theology nor formal analysis; in particular, he is unable to formulate for himself any stage beyond that of contrition. Unable to hope for heaven, he places his faith on a tenuous vision, amounting to a quasi-mystical affirmation of adjustment's ideals, of a potential wholeness somehow available to every man. Cass' house has been set on fire in order to bring him to the realization that he has denied love (the guiltless, selfless condition of freedom) and to impel him to fight to repossess his right to love. Mason arrives at the moment of realization and it soon becomes clear that he is the antagonist Cass must overcome if the vision of wholeness through love is to be achieved. Self-recognition and contrition do not in

themselves guarantee cure or salvation. Cass' recognition of what a « no-count bastard » he has been can lead him either to the positive penance of facing, trying to live with his guilt or to the negative penance of rejecting his self and passively inviting destruction. As we shall see, Mason will provide the means by which the latter alternative may be accomplished, while Luigi will insist on the difficult virtues of the former. Throughout the climacteric of the novel, which begins with Mason's entrance, Francesca will embody the vision of love and thus provide a counterbalance to Mason, who embodies the perversion of love.

Playing on Cass' evident weaknesses (his desire for self-abasement, his penury and craving for liquor), Mason gradually enslaves him. He inveigles Cass into painting a pornographic picture in return for food and drink. This perversion of his art along with his ever-increasing need to drink stimulates Cass' sense of guilt and forces him further into Mason's power. He sinks so low as to become a kind of obscene jester for Mason's guests, performing at his master's command humiliating charades in the course of which he abandons every vestige of human dignity. Feeling he has no right to exist, he gives himself over to Mason's diabolic tyranny asking as his only reward for an uninterrupted supply of whiskey. Yet, during this terrible period, there remains one human sector in which Cass is able to retain a measure of self-respect. The only times he rebels against Mason's domination are when Mason, who has hired Francesca as a servant, makes lewd remarks or suggestions about the girl. With Francesca, Cass hopes to free himself into the condition of love. Together, they conspire to steal supplies from Mason. These they carry to Francesca's father, a mortally tubercular peasant who lives in the poverty-stricken Tramonti some distance from Sambuco. Co-ordinate with Cass' love for Francesca is his attempt to cure Michele, her father. By curing Michele, who inhabits a hut which exudes the same « stink of wretchedness » as « a black sharecropper's cabin », Cass hopes to expiate his par-

icipation in the destruction of the Negro's home. Moreover, listening to Michele's daydreams of America — the pathetic promised land of the peasant's imagination, Cass is able to revise his own conception of his homeland, realizing «that whatever else he might say about his native land, there would not be this particular gross wrong and insult to mortal flesh».

Yet, in order to aide Michele, Cass must debase himself even further before Mason, who alone can provide the necessary drugs. The final act of the *Sambuco* tragedy begins when Mason refuses Cass the miracle drug which might save Michele's life; or rather, Mason withholds the drug, making its delivery contingent on Cass's performance of the sickening charades which are the symbol of his degradation. For the drug, like the liquor or indeed even Francesca, are important to Mason only as means for establishing what comes to seem an ambiguously sexual domination over Cass. Something of the complexity of Mason's feeling can be seen in the look he gives Cass after having refused to hand over the drug: a glance «composed in part of such hate [yet] made up in at least equal part of something else not quite love but its loathsome resemblance». In this regard, Mason's rape of Francesca later in the evening contains a curious symbolism. As Cass attempts to explain to Leverett:

[Mason] knew that for a while he had the pluperfect victim — a man he could own completely, and who lay back and slopped up his food and drink, and who was so close to total corruption himself that he gloried in being owned. But he sensed, too, that his victim had changed now, had found something — some focus, some strength, some reality... by raping [Francesca] he raped the two of us: that night I felt he had committed some filthy, unspeakable violation upon life itself.

The fundamental components of the action Leverett arrives to witness are: Cass' alcoholic stupor during which he performs the ghastly rite demanded by Mason and from which he later recovers sufficiently to enlist Leverett's aide in stealing the drug and in hiking into the Tramonti to administer it to Michele; Mason's rape of Francesca; the murder of Francesca

by a feeble-minded town beggar, Cass' assumption that Mason has murdered Francesca and his subsequent murder of Mason. After the murders, Luigi, the assistant to the local police sergeant, arranges the evidence to make it appear that Mason had killed Francesca and then taken his own life. Luigi's reasons for indulging in a deception which might well ruin his own career form the most direct statement of the novel's moral thesis. Cass wants to give himself up, to go to jail and thus to continue his guilt-inspired abdication of will. Cass finds the idea of liberty appalling: « Yearning for enclosure, for confinement, I was faced with nothing but the vista of freedom like a wide and empty plain ». Luigi, however, insists that Cass go free:

«...this existence itself [he says] is an emprisonment. Once we were at least able to talk with our Jailer, but now even He has gone away, leaving us alone with the knowledge of insufferable loss... to confine any but the mad dogs among us is to compound that knowledge of insufferable loss with a blackness like the blackness of eternal night. I have seen prisons, they are the closest thing to hell on earth. And you are not a mad dog. I suppose I lied to keep you from this kind of punishment. But I suspect that is not all. I know you and your hideous sense of guilt too well.... In Jail you would wallow in your guilt. As I say, I did not wish to allow you that luxury ».

« Simply consider your guilt itself — your other guilt, the abominable guilt you have carried with you so long, this sinful guilt which has made you a drunkard, and caused you to wallow in your self-pity, and made you fail in your art. ...Ask what it was. Ask yourself whether it is not better to go free now, if only so that you may be able to strike down this other guilt of yours and learn to enjoy what there is left in life to enjoy. Because if by now, through what you have endured, you have not learned *something*, then... fifty years in jail will teach you nothing ». He came close to me... « For the love of God, Cass », he said. « Consider the *good* in yourself! Consider hope! Consider joy! »

Luigi's philosophy approximates that of tragic humanism as suggested by Mr. Fiedler. Abandoned by God, and tortured by the evils and guilts inherent in his nature, man's condition is dark indeed. Yet Luigi directly states what Mr. Fiedler manages to suggest only by highly ambiguous indirection: that

there is good as well as evil and that man must battle against the surrounding darkness in order to reclaim this good. It is this knowledge that Cass finally accepts. The death of Francesca and the murder of Mason are symbolically if not realistically inevitable. For both characters are in this sense externalizations of Cass' struggle and victory: Francesca, an impossible but necessary goal, Arcadia's embodiment; Mason, the tyrannous, gothic projection of Cass' guilt. As the novel ends, Cass, now living quietly in the South with his wife and children and earning a small income from painting and political cartooning, sums up his experience:

Now I suppose I should tell you that through some sort of suffering I had reached grace, and how at the moment I knew it, but this would not be true, because at that moment [of return to wife and country] I didn't really know what I had reached or found. I wish I could tell you that I had found some belief, some rock, and that here on this rock anything might prevail — that here madness might become reason, and grief joy, and no yes. And even death itself death no longer, but a resurrection.

But to be truthful, you see, I can only tell you this: that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever — but in the hope of being what I could be for a time. This would be an ecstasy. God knows it would.

Near the beginning of *Set This House on Fire* there is a brief but vital episode in which Peter Leverett, on his way to see Cass and to begin the series of exchanges which will form the bulk of the novel, stops off to visit his hometown in Virginia. The town's charm, its intimate relation to the land and sea, in short its «peculiar romance», have been destroyed by «progress». Its personality has been lost amid a welter of super-highways, super-markets, houses bristling with television antennas and flashy, impersonal developments. What once scorned Eden has become an anonymous suburb. Leverett feels lost, sundered from his roots; he suggests that «perhaps one of the reasons we Americans are so exceptionally nervous

and driven is that our past is effaced almost before it is made present ». For Leverett's father, however, the fate of the town is symbolic of an even more profound blight; the specious constructions of progress reflect a complacent evasion:

...what this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and terrible, like what happened to Jericho or the cities of the plain — something terrible I mean, son, so that when people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be men again, human beings, not a bunch of smug contented hogs rooting at the troughs. Ciphers without mind or soul or heart. ...We've sold our birthright... and you know what we've sold out for? A bunch of chromium junk from Detroit put together with chewing gum and spit.

The demand for agony and grief recalls the functions Leslie Fiedler assigns to gothicism. America's values have been corrupted by unthinking conformity to the ideals of gimcrack progress. We are a nation of spoiled children. Paralysed in perpetual adolescence, we can experience neither the complex fulness of adult emotions nor the challenge of adult responsibilities. Yet we delude ourselves that ours is the best of all conditions: that inexperience signifies innocence, that the statistics of progress are as valuable as the ideas and feelings which constitute understanding. Given this situation, our only hope for maturity lies in the experience of those sobering truths about human nature which official culture has repressed. Only by facing the ambiguities and even terrors which are as profound an aspect of our inheritance as our material achievements can we become men again. The meretricious façade of modern America represents a denial of certain dark truths which none the less endure below the threshold of the national consciousness. Our roots and these truths are inextricably intertwined: to reject the latter is to abandon the former, to be lost and incomplete.

The interdependence of public and private maturity is one of the major theses of *Set This House on Fire*. The condition of love Cass seeks is a synthesis of self-love, love of a good woman and love of country. The reverse of this condition

involves self-hate; loveless sexuality (or impotence or homosexuality) and rejection of country: antithetical reactions which are associated with or reinforced by the figure of Mason Flagg. Mason is, as Leverett claims, a most representative American, but what he represents is the distorted, corrupt America attacked by Leverett's father. Mason's *nouveau libertinage*, his philosophy of sex as individualism's last frontier, is a pretentious product of adolescent prurience, a symptom of unachieved «genital maturity». Mason's over-ripe and essentially pleasureless concern with the erotic along with his tendency to impotence (apparently he makes love only to women he can treat as whores or victims) convinces Cass that he is nothing but «a bleeding little prude». Though never fully clarified, the homosexual element implicit in Mason's attempt to «possess» Leverett and Cass is equally indicative of a failure to achieve normal fulfilment. In Mason's character the impulses of love are transmogrified into a lust for power, a tyrannous and sadistic delight in dominating others. Whatever the specific explanation of his sexual maladjustment, it seems clear that Mason represents a nightmare image, a pathological end-product of America's denial of love.

From another point of view, however, Mason's febrile concern with sex may be seen as the *reductio ad nauseam* of popular psychology's preoccupation with such concepts as «genital maturity». In this regard as in many others, Mason's life appears a grandiose realization of the ideals and day-dreams of a morally disoriented culture. His charm is that of the Madison Avenue stereotype of the perfect young American. His erudition is founded on the quiz program ideal of intelligence: the walking almanac. His corruption realizes the wish-fulfilment fantasies nurtured by popular semipornography. Successful businessman and aspiring playwright, he has one foot in Wall Street and the other in Bohemia and yet avoids becoming either «square» or «queer». Fulfilling so perfectly the ideals established by American mass media, Mason becomes the representative hero of a nation of «smug con-

tented hogs ». Yet Mason is more than a mere embodiment of specious ideals; if he were only that he could never hope to triumph over Cass. The moral horror Mason inspires stems less from his intrinsic fraudulence (he is neither businessman nor war hero, his artistic career and sexual prowess are fictions) than from his attempt to command that authority and « almost regal » power of will which were his father's most impressive characteristics. Corrupted by the egoism, hedonism and petulant self-pity of his mother's world, Mason none the less desires to enact the role and command the respect American tradition assigns to the virile, dynamic pioneer or the empire-building businessman. Since the moral basis of the « sheer, annihilating authority » Mason wants to assert is purely negative, the empire he would create and rule must be corrupt: a new version of the cities of the plain. Given this prospective, the positive values symbolized by Francesca and espoused by Cass become subversive and must be eliminated if Mason's ideology is to triumph. Mason's ultimate victory is dependent on his ability to subdue those like Cass whose goodness has been compromised by guilts and fears and to win over those like Leverett whose moral integrity has been weakened by the vitiating ideals which blight American life.

As a tyrannical embodiment of a false America, Mason is wholly convincing. Unfortunately, however, Mr. Styron wishes us to view Mason not just as a personification of the corrupt and the specious but also as an essentially weak, pitiful man whose force derives from the manipulation of a nation's guilts and terrors. The discontinuity between these two viewpoints seriously affects our reaction to Cass' killing of Mason. If Mason embodies an absolute principle of corruption, then this act becomes a justifiable tyrannicide; if, on the other hand, Mason is merely the pathetic little rich boy of Leverett's image, contemptible but not evil if properly understood, then Cass must be taken as a murderer. This all-important ambiguity arises because Mr. Styron, like Leslie Fiedler, tends to define evil in terms of psychology while at the same time

being unable to abandon the idea of evil as an absolute and inexplicable moral phenomenon. Psychologically, evil is defined in reference to the irrational guilts which corrode the personality and inhibit wholeness; morally, evil is postulated as man's inhumanity to man, the inexplicable desire to oppress others. Behind these two approaches to evil we find, again as in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, a tension between the assumptions of adjustment psychology and those of tragic humanism. This becomes particularly clear in Mason's case when we realize that we are being asked both to understand his problem (hence to view his maladjustment as the pathetic result of parental influences) *and* to judge him as evil by the absolute moral standards of tragic humanism.

Mr. Styron's effort to combine the goal of adjustment with the standards of tragic humanism appears to better effect in his portrait of Cass. Self-reliant, of the people, strong in native decency and latent creativity, Cass is potentially Mason's opposite: the personification of all that is good in America. That he is for a long while unable to fulfil this function, that he squanders his resources in dissipation and self-hate, is due to his youthful experience of the evil in his own nature. By repressing the memory of his participation in an act of racial oppression, Cass compounds moral with psychological evil. Mr. Styron accepts Leslie Fiedler's assertion that such oppression is the characteristic American version of original sin and that the guilt thus generated is fundamental to American gothicism. Insofar as Cass provides the center of consciousness in *Set This House on Fire*, it may be said that the entire gothic tragedy at Sambuco is a projection of his «dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motivate them». Cass' working backward from his monstrous guilt to the crime which produced that guilt is intended as a model of the profitable interaction of tragic humanism's fearless exposure of dark truths and adjustment's goal of living with these truths. Until we come to terms with the crime in which we are all implicated we cannot hope to achieve wholeness: cut off by an

obscure sense of guilt from self-respect, we must either destroy whatever potential goodness it is still in our power to achieve or allow ourselves to become human flotsam, slaves of any stronger will. Since oppression is absolutely evil, our complicity in it, whether active or passive, cannot be expiated. Following Dostocvsky and other great tragic humanists, Mr. Styron insists that no one must be allowed to relieve us of the burden of our crime. Yet the knowledge of our terrible complicity is also the price of our maturity. Living with this knowledge provides some sort of atonement, or at least permits the attainment of a tragic realism which not only makes easy sentimental acceptance impossible but also frees us to perform the duties owed to common humanity and self-respect.

It is at this point that *Set This House on Fire* deviates from Leslie Fiedler's conception of the American gothic. Mason, the persecuting principle of damnation, projects not just the moral horror lying below the threshold of consciousness but also the power of « all institutions which inhibit freedom ». Both the dark forces of the id and the tyrannical super-ego are postulated as evil: hence the novel's moral viewpoint cannot be defined either as radical (though it attacks the institutions Mason reflects) or as conservative (though it equates certain forces of the id with evil). Moreover, the minimal adjustment Cass achieves would perhaps be termed an evasion by Mr. Fiedler, since this *modus vivendi* suggests that acceptance of the assumptions of tragic humanism need not, indeed should not, involve engulfment in the « blackness of darkness ». What Cass achieves is an awareness of the darkness of the human condition tempered by a belief that life is none the less to be lived in joy as much as in sorrow. After the deaths of Francesca and Mason, the extreme embodiments of his ideal of love and his self-hate, Cass is somehow freed to return to wife and country. He teaches art to « Sunday amateurs » and has a small success as a political cartoonist. As opposed, for example, to Hawthorne's Goodman Brown,

whose perception that all men are tainted with evil turns him into « a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man », Cass is able to achieve a measure of adjustment and of happiness.

That Cass is able to survive « hellfire and the crucible », to emerge as a man instead of a debilitated and shadowy shell, is due to William Styron's revision of the absolute commitment to gothic darkness demanded by Leslie Fiedler. This revision is closely and specifically connected with certain of the therapeutic aspects of the current American myth of Italy. Not only is Cass beckoned southward by an Arcadian vision, he is also saved from virtual suicide by Luigi's insistence on the lessons to be learned from an initiation into the gothic. For if Francesca represents the ideal of guiltlessness and wholeness in love expressed by D. H. Lawrence and Eleanor Clark, then Luigi speaks with the authority of that experience of evil so crucial to the Hawthorne of *The Marble Faun*. Since America has denied or perverted love and evaded or repressed the tragic realities of life, the American attempting to repossess a just perspective tends to romanticize both aspects of experience and to endow them with a preternatural vividness. At one point Luigi accuses Cass of being « a damnable romantic from the north ». The judgment is accurate. Cass flings himself between the absolutes of innocence and experience, purity and guilt. Because America, in denying original sin and its ramifications, has obliterated the meaning of the past, Cass and other Americans must start from scratch: must confront the existence of evil and the vision of love as pristine facts. Cass is, of course, an exemplary rather than a typical case. An orphan, he seeks the father who will enable him to understand his ancestry; self-taught (a necessity in a culture which falsifies learning), he seeks a teacher who will help him to convert knowledge to wisdom. For though Cass' self-reliance and loneliness are both necessary and valuable, they are not finally sufficient: they provide no protection against the adolescent absolutism which reacts to the know-

ledge of evil by self-destructiveness and to the vision of love by a desire for the impossible. What Cass must learn from Luigi, America's European father and teacher, is an adjusted tragic humanism. Only through this philosophy can Cass survive to repossess his birthright and avoid defeat at Mason's hands. The ideal Francesca embodies and the possibility of exorcising guilt provided by Michele are vital aspects of the Italian background, but they are secondary to the lesson Luigi would teach. Luigi speaks for a revised conception of that « accumulation of history and culture » Americans once came to Europe to seek. The serious American now coming to Europe can no longer browse among aesthetic traditions and Arcadian landscapes, half-fascinated, half-repelled by the skeletons in the European closet. What Cass must discover is not so much Tradition as it is a way of dealing with the tragic facts and concomitant guilts with which European history has had to come to terms. Luigi's philosophy is not just a result of his experience of war (which teaches him we are all criminally guilty) nor of his discovery that we have been abandoned by God and are alone: rather, it is a product of the total knowledge of a race and of the realism enforced by this knowledge. Luigi reasserts the necessity of proportion in the face of man's gothic predicament. His advice to Cass comes as close as it is perhaps possible to come to a symbiosis of tragic knowledge and adjustment's ideal of love. His conviction that there is a « depth of joyousness » to counterbalance the depths of evil and of guilt may, of course, be said to constitute an evasion of the fullest implications of moral horror. Yet, by the same token, for those convinced of the fragility of our position in a God-less universe, any hope or faith may seem a futile subterfuge. One must at least believe with Cass that it is better to opt for life than to retreat into suicidal darkness and leave the stage to be occupied by such as Mason.

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