

“THE GREAT ART OF TELLING THE TRUTH”: TRAGIC
EVASION IN AMERICAN FICTION, 1798-1952

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Abstract: My dissertation examines signal works of American tragic fiction—novels, novellas, and short stories—from Charles Brockden Brown to Ralph Ellison. With the exception of scholar-critics like Rita Felski and Terry Eagleton, many of today’s literary commentators have little to say about tragedy, especially as it has appeared in American literature. My study is an attempt to fill this critical void. Despite their differences in style and subject, as well as their distance from each other in time, the works I treat present unique variations on a theme I call *tragic evasion*. Again and again in American fiction we encounter characters who evade tragic realities, who turn away—physically and psychologically—from their problems only to run up against the limits of themselves and their world. Drawn to certain falsehoods and half-truths, including the myth of Adamic innocence and the dream of radical freedom, these characters seek escape from a world of moral ambiguity and tragic limitation. My title derives from “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in which Herman Melville suggests that it is possible for an American writer to rise to the level of a Shakespeare by revealing the “Truth” about a character, a situation, and, by symbolic extension, a nation: “For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches.” The authors I cover are all “masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,” tragic visionaries determined to rend the veil and make us *see*, if “only by cunning glimpses.” The dissertation addresses the following questions: Why have so many American fiction writers, separated across time, explored evasion and its tragic consequences? What cultural ideas and historical conditions, intrinsic to life in America, might account for evasion and its tragic consequences? Why are the forms and visions of American tragic fiction—though never severed from the broader Western tragic tradition—more daringly experimental than some of the dramatic tragedies of the past? Across five chapters I perform close readings of several tragedies of evasion: Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*; Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and *The Scarlet Letter*; Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave*; Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*; William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*; Katherine Anne Porter’s *Noon Wine*; Eudora Welty’s “The Hitch-Hikers”; and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. These classic works, each illuminating the others, confront their evasive characters with the tragic actualities of American experience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“America has always taken tragedy lightly. Too busy to stop the activity of their ‘twenty-million-horse-power’ society, Americans ignore tragic motives that would have overshadowed the middle-ages; and the world learns to regard assassination as a form of hysteria, and death as neurosis, to be treated by a rest-cure” (Adams 386). Henry Adams’s observation of the American tendency to shun the tragic—which must be safely repackaged in therapeutic terms for easy consumption—has been made time and again by our literary artists and cultural critics. Many of the nation’s fiction writers, in particular, have long taken it upon themselves to be the bearers of bad news, tragic visionaries determined to rend the veil and make us *see*. This dissertation will examine signal works of American tragic fiction from Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Despite their differences in style and subject, as well as their distance from each other in time, the fictions I treat present unique variations on a theme I call *tragic evasion*. Again and again in American fiction we encounter characters who evade tragic realities, who turn away—physically or psychologically (or both)—from their problems only to run up against the limits of themselves and their world. Drawn to peculiarly American falsehoods and half-truths, including the myth of Adamic innocence and the dream of radical freedom, these characters seek escape from a world of moral ambiguity and tragic limitation.

Donning any number of formal disguises, American tragedies of evasion might be thought of as constituting Herman Melville's "great Art of Telling the Truth," as the author so memorably put it in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (75). Melville suggests that it is possible for an American writer to rise to the level of a Shakespeare by revealing the "Truth" about a character, a situation, and, by symbolic extension, a nation: "For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches" (75). The American tragedians covered in this study reveal "Truth," their painstaking artistry affording us "cunning glimpses" of unmasked reality. These tragic truth-tellers refuse to grant their evaders an unobstructed view of sunlit skies without first directing their gaze into the abyss.

In writing this study, I have wrestled with some persistent questions: Why have so many American fiction writers, separated across time, been drawn to evasion and its tragic consequences? What cultural ideas and historical conditions, intrinsic to life in America, might help account for the tragic potential of evasion? Why are the forms and visions of American tragic fiction—though never completely severed from the broader Western tragic tradition—more elastic and daringly experimental than some of the dramatic tragedies of the past? These are not easy questions to answer, and any answer given may seem incomplete and exploratory. Whenever one identifies a recurrent pattern in a body of literature, noting the pattern's movement from author to author, era to era, one runs a considerable risk. Pattern hunting can lead to any number of generalizations, distortions, and oversimplifications. The pitfalls cannot be overstated: the pattern entices overeager critics, offering them something that is—to paraphrase an old H. L. Mencken quip—neat, plausible, and wrong. Nevertheless, when done with careful attention to shifts in historical and artistic contexts, this approach may prove to be a valuable index to the workings of the American literary imagination over time. I do not intend (or pretend) to deliver the final word on American tragic fiction. My aim is suggestive, not exhaustive. I will presently lay out the specifics of my argument, clarify terms, and

provide an overview of each chapter. For the moment, however, we would profit from considering the place of literary tragedy in recent criticism.

Tragedy and the Contemporary Critical Scene

Tragedy has received limited commentary since the 1980s, but it is gradually regaining traction. For tragedy continues to have claims on our attention, and today's critics should be as ready as ever to recognize the significance of the form, in all its potential guises. Terry Eagleton is perhaps more responsible than anyone for bringing critical attention back to tragedy in the twenty-first century. His 2002 study *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* is largely a polemical defense of tragedy's abiding importance. Eagleton takes postmodern theorists to task for their squeamishness when it comes to dealing with tragedy: "There is an ontological depth and high seriousness about the genre which grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being. As an aristocrat among art forms, its tone is too solemn and portentous for a streetwise, sceptical culture" (ix). Although Eagleton rightly broadens the category of the tragic by moving it away from a rigid Aristotelianism—and although he defends the unjustly maligned notion of the universal in tragedy: "[S]uffering is a mightily powerful language to share in common, one in which many diverse life-forms can strike up a dialogue" (xvi)—Eagleton's insistent polemical tone, his advocacy for Marxism and his disdain for academic postmodernism (as if these perspectives were the only ways to regard tragedy), diminishes his overall assessment of the genre's continued relevance. Eagleton also shortchanges American expressions of the tragic, though he briefly remarks on tragedy in Melville, Hawthorne, and James.

K. M Newman's *Modern Literature and the Tragic* (2008), acknowledging Eagleton's work (but also finding it too polemical), furthers the discussion of literary tragedy by examining the ways in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors responded to emergent philosophical ideas of the tragic, such as those advanced by the German Idealists. Newman shows that "certain writers,"

like Conrad, Hardy, and Tolstoy, believed that “modern intellectual developments—particularly Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Darwinian evolutionary theory—created a new basis for the tragic in modern times” (6). Newman carries out some fine interpretations of individual texts, including works of fiction. He believes that, after the emergence of the tragic philosophies of Hegel and German Idealism, literary tragedy seeps into forms other than the drama. The “lack of congruency between a poetics of tragedy and a philosophy of the tragic,” Newman argues, “means that discussion of the tragic can’t be confined only to drama (or even just to serious drama) but must also consider other types of literature, especially fiction” (6). For all its critical virtues, Newman’s study is, like Eagleton’s, deficient in its consideration of tragedy in American literature. With the rather predictable exceptions of tragic playwrights like Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill, Newman makes no effort to analyze tragic form and vision in an American context.

Rowan Williams’s *The Tragic Imagination* (2016), in which the author also recognizes Eagleton’s revival of the topic, urges us to revisit classic dramatic tragedies for renewed insight into a world that makes “tragic narration and representation less and less welcome” (2). Contemporary society evades the terrifying disclosures of tragic literature. Our era, Williams writes, is subject to “an instrumentalizing and managerial spirit, an anxious shrinking of language into formula and cliché, a nervousness around emotional risk and exposure that is balanced by a profound and fluent sentimentality, a desperate not-knowing-how-to-cope faced with a nightmare world of mass atrocity that sits alongside the acquisitive fevers of our economy” (2). A deep immersion in tragic drama, for Williams, can help us face the “nightmare world” we inhabit. Because tragedy “typically leaves questions painfully open,” we are better prepared to deal with things as they are (3). The “challenge,” says Williams, “is not only how we speak without false consolation in a world like this but how we keep our culture alive to the fact that it *is* ‘a world like this’” (3). It is “the denial of fundamental disease and non-resolution” that intensifies “our sickness” (3). According to Williams, “the tragic imagination resists that denial, not out of pessimism but out of a rather odd confidence that language

is not so easily exhausted or defeated” (3). Williams’s study also engages in some overdue critique of the critique of tragedy. For example, Williams sees as misguided the not uncommon complaint that tragedy is a supposedly colonizing and chauvinistic Western discourse. Such a criticism is, in its crudest form, little more than a version of the genetic fallacy. He ventures the refreshingly commonsensical observation that “if literary tragedy is indeed, as many would claim, the product of an exclusively European cultural history, this does not mean it fails to raise issues of abiding and general importance and to offer ways of confronting them” (138).

My dissertation is partly indebted to Williams’s study for encouraging my thinking about the theme of evasion in tragedy. Although Williams limits his readings almost exclusively to English and European dramatic tragedies, he nonetheless spurred my interest in the pattern of evasion I detected in American fiction. The studies by Eagleton, Newman, and Williams are all extremely valuable, keeping tragedy alive as an ongoing topic for criticism.¹ Yet they unfortunately neglect the corpus of American tragic fiction. (The fact that they are all English critics, perhaps sharing greater intimacy and familiarity with the English and European tragic tradition, may or may not have some bearing on their neglect of American writing.) By failing to suggest how an American context alters the forms and visions of tragedy, these studies leave us with a critical lacuna that must be addressed.

By far the most galvanizing critical reflection on tragedy in recent decades, which in part prompted this dissertation, is Rita Felski’s introduction to her collection *Rethinking Tragedy* (2008). Felski asks us to challenge the ways that traditionalists and postmodern theorists alike have addressed tragic literature. She maintains that critics today are faced with the “danger of assuming, in a manner all too easily exposed as smug and naïve, that our own historical moment is uniquely equipped to transcend the benighted errors and obfuscations of the past” (1). The tragic, in art as in life, “is shown

¹ Tragedy in the field of philosophy also continues to garner attention. See, for example, Julian Young’s *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (2013) and Christopher Hamilton’s *A Philosophy of Tragedy* (2016). For a philosophically sophisticated reading of classic literary tragedies, see Richard Gaskin’s *Tragedy and Redress in Western Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (2018).

to persist—against official ideologies of utopian optimism and political perfectibility—into the present” (23). For Felski, the “recognition of both the perishability and the persistence of the tragic—a form we think we have left behind, yet which continues to haunt us—heralds the rebirth of tragic criticism” (23). Felski wants critics to expand the definition of what constitutes a work of tragedy, and she highlights works of American fiction and even cinema that might fulfill the expectations of a revised definition.

As one of the foremost theorists in the “post-critique” movement, Felski believes, as I do, that it is time for critics to go beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion—to go beyond, as she remarks elsewhere, the predictable “rhetoric of *againstness*” (*Limits of Critique* 17)—when rethinking tragedy. Historicizing forms of ideology critique, though important, are no longer the most effective methods for dealing with the subtleties and complexities of tragic literature. Felski notes how, in the wake of poststructuralism, critics and theorists have automatically assumed that tragedy takes “on the role of ideology in cloaking the historically contingent in the mantle of the eternal and the inevitable” (“Introduction” 4). While she concedes the value of questioning ahistorical readings of tragedy, Felski remains critical of reductive historicizing that demands “texts be wholly explicable by the time-bound conditions of their origins” (“Introduction” 15). Such an inflexible brand of historicism, according to Felski, is “unable to account for the ways in which texts persist and signify across time” (“Introduction” 15). She therefore encourages a revised criticism that would attend to literary tragedy, in its most elastic sense, by combining historical *and* aesthetic approaches.

A new criticism focused on tragedy, mindful of context yet seeking literary interconnectedness, would entail not merely “a rereading of Greek plays but a concerted effort to rethink the definition of tragedy from the ground up and to expand the corpus of what counts as tragic art” (“Introduction” 6). Contemporary critics would do well to think outside the Aristotelian or Elizabethan codifications of tragedy and embrace something more dynamic. Felski argues that we should begin thinking of tragedy as a fluid mode instead of a stable genre, since the former term

“lends itself to the complicated history and vicissitudes of tragic art. Modes are adjectival . . . denoting a selective group of features rather than a text’s overall defining structure; the term thus draws our attention to the hybrid, mixed qualities of genres” (“Introduction” 14). The tragic mode, Felski writes, “can emancipate us from prescriptive taxonomies in literary criticism that persist in equating the tragic with a now virtually defunct form of poetic drama” (“Introduction” 14). Reconceiving tragedy in modal terms, the critic is able to examine what Felski calls the “shape of suffering,” that is, the tragedian’s “distinctive forming of material” (“Introduction” 10). Open to a new tragic poetics, the critic will attend to “the formal particulars that render sadness tragic” in a specific literary work, including “details of plot and structure” as well as “characterization and language” (“Introduction” 14).² I see my study as a small contribution to this larger critical enterprise. The “shape[s] of suffering” in the works I examine are richly protean, suited to and inseparable from each author’s personal vision of evasion. I impose no arbitrary set of formalistic criteria on these works; they take whatever form their authors, some of the most inventive stylists in literary history, have deemed apposite to the tragic occasion at hand. As I detail at the end of Chapter Two, American tragic writers were essentially fated to conceive of genre and form as loosely as possible, creating a malleable tragic mode tailored to a rowdy young democracy.

Felski knows that for her enterprise to succeed, certain inescapable questions must be posed and possibly answered, including the following: “What are the most salient and distinctive features of

² Modal conceptions of tragedy have been proposed by some earlier critics as well. Northrop Frye’s “Theory of Modes” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) is a post-Aristotelian attempt to deal with the complexity of genres. Tragedy may be “high mimetic” or “low mimetic,” but it may also blur into “ironic” and “comic” modes (see Frye, 33-67). As R. P. Draper remarks, Frye’s theory demonstrates that there is “not one uniform category of tragedy, but a variety of modes of tragedy, and, furthermore, variable modality within each particular mode” (“Introduction” 21). Writing in the same year as Frye, Nathan A. Scott Jr. recognized that a tragic vision “may gain many of its most deeply moving expressions in drama but [it] may also come to great expression in poetry, in the novel, in philosophy, [and] in history (think of Tacitus or of Spengler)” (“Foreword” x). The problems of defining tragedy according to a total, unchanging dramatic structure are apparent enough. As David Lenson argued in 1975, “It is more helpful in the final analysis to think of tragic elements or ‘norms’ . . . which a given work may contain in greater or lesser density. The result of this attitude is a flexible, fairly liberal idea of a tradition” (viii). In the end, says Lenson, “the theory of tragedy is best which specifies least” (171). I agree with Lenson entirely.

tragedy? Is there a necessary connection between tragedy and drama or can tragedy appear in diverse genres? Are there distinctively modern, or postmodern, forms in which a tragic sensibility can be expressed?" ("Introduction" 6). Since the publication of Felski's essay collection in 2008, a number of critics have gone on to offer some useful if tentative answers. By far the most robust academic response has been *PMLA*'s special issue, 129.4, from 2014. Although readers will learn a great deal about the ways in which we might reimagine tragedy in our own time, the special issue—with the partial exception of Peter Lancelot Mallios's article on the Constitution of the United States as a tragic document—does not provide enough coverage of tragedy as it has existed in American prose fiction. It is precisely this critical neglect that has led me to undertake this project.

Let me hasten to add that I am not arguing for a kind of American literary exceptionalism; in point of fact, the tragic fictions I examine incorporate an amplitude of transatlantic borrowings and demonstrate an indebtedness to the full range of the Western literary heritage. But there seems to me a glaring gap in the critical record when it comes to the development of tragic fiction within the United States. While one can point to recent critical writings on tragedy in the works of individual American authors, playwrights, and filmmakers, one is hard put to identify a single sustained study on American tragic fiction as a whole.³ To acquire a better understanding of how critics have approached tragedy in an American literary context, we must take stock of certain older studies, written in the heyday of the New Criticism and the myth-and-symbol school. It is only by engaging with the work

³ For recent studies of tragedy in American drama, see Robert J. Andreach's 2014 book *Tragedy in the Contemporary American Theatre* and editor David Palmer's 2018 essay collection *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama*. For studies dealing with tragedy in American cinema and television, see John L. Simons and Robert Merrill's 2011 book *Peckinpah's Tragic Westerns: A Critical Study* and Paul Cantor's 2019 study *Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords, and Zombies*. For some recent commentary on tragedy in the works of individual American authors, see Joel Diggory's 2016 article "Tragedy wrought to its uttermost": Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* and the Art of Dying" (in *Philip Roth Studies*) and his 2017 article "'A world of ruins': Tragedy and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*" (in *The Cambridge Quarterly*). Also see Carly Osborn's 2020 book, *Tragic Novels, René Girard, and the American Dream: Sacrifice in Suburbia*.

of these past critics, by building upon and quarreling with their observations and formulations, that I can hope to articulate my own conception of American tragic fiction.

Classic Studies of American Tragic Fiction: A Critical Overview

It was during the late '30s and early '40s, an era influenced heavily by the tragic modernism of artists like Eliot and Yeats, that the discourse of tragedy and the tragic vision seems to have become a fixture among a new school of Americanists. F. O. Matthiessen's famous chapters on Hawthorne and Melville, in his *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), are surely the most essential musings on American tragic fiction from this period, inspiring critical commentary for decades to come.⁴ Shifting from writers of "transcendental affirmation," like Emerson and Whitman, to those who voice a tragic "counterstatement," like Hawthorne and Melville, Matthiessen outlines some criteria for tragedy (179). The writer of tragedy must possess "a mature understanding of the relation of the individual to society, and, more especially, of the nature of good and evil" (179). Should the tragic writer lack a "coherent grasp of social forces," or "of man as a social being," he runs the risk of having "no frame of reference within which to make actual his dramatic conflicts" (179). For Matthiessen, the tragic protagonist "is never merely an individual, he is a man in action, in conflict with other individuals in a definite social order" (179).

Matthiessen's ideal tragic writer also performs a dialectical balancing act, holding in tension various opposites. The American tragedian, personified for Matthiessen in Hawthorne and Melville, must have "a profound comprehension of the mixed nature of life, of the fact that even the most perfect man cannot be wholly good" (179-80). Without a sense of the moral ambiguity inherent in human beings and human situations, the tragic writer "will not give the illusion of human reality"

⁴ Two other works from the era, both dealing with tragedy in Melville, are worth noting: Stanley Geist's *Herman Melville: The Tragic Vision and the Heroic Ideal* (1939) and William Ellery Sedgwick's *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (1944).

(180). Tragedy, unlike melodrama, does not presuppose an easily defined and discernible moral order. We do not find, Matthiessen tells us, “the situation of a faultless individual (or class) overwhelmed by an evil world” (180). Authentic and successful tragedy, in Matthiessen’s estimation, “is built on the experienced realization that man is radically imperfect” (180). But tragedy must be more than a tale of unrelieved misery and creaturely frailty. For Matthiessen, “tragedy must likewise contain a recognition that man, pitiful as he may be in his finite weakness, is still capable of apprehending perfection, and of becoming transfigured by that vision” (180). The American tragedian must struggle “to envisage some reconciliation between such opposites,” positioning himself “as far from the chaos of despair as he is from ill-founded optimism” (180). The full power of a writer’s tragic sense of life “can be . . . briefly scrutinized in his ability to hold an undismayed control between the pressure of conflicting forces” (349). I mostly share Matthiessen’s assumptions about the necessity for social forces and moral ambiguity in tragic works. Moreover, his idea of the tragic artist as someone who charts a middle course between the Scylla of “despair” and the Charybdis of “ill-founded optimism” is crucial to my own thinking about modal tragedy in a democratic society, particularly as it relates to Ralph Ellison’s attempted synthesis of tragedy and comedy, pessimism and optimism.⁵

Nevertheless, Matthiessen’s discussion of the tragic vision in Hawthorne and Melville has its limitations. The author admits that he makes “no pretence of abstracting a general theory of tragedy,” but instead “crystallize[s] out certain attributes that are common also to the practice of both Shakespeare and Milton” (xiv). Parallels between Shakespearean and Miltonian tragedy and the fictions of Hawthorne and Melville, though they reveal the profound transatlantic influence on nineteenth-century American authors, do not tell us enough about the differentiating themes and conflicts that America’s new tragedians chose to explore. What is more, Matthiessen, like so many critics of his era, clings to an implicit Aristotelianism. There is finally no getting rid of Aristotle’s

⁵ For a fair-minded reassessment of Matthiessen’s critical achievement, see Samuel Otter’s 2015 article in *J19*, “*American Renaissance* and Us.”

notions of tragedy; they will inevitably continue to fascinate artists and critics alike. But America's early tragedians skillfully complicate and complement Aristotle's *Poetics*, as I show throughout the following chapters. Lastly, Matthiessen's analysis of *Benito Cereno* involves what seems to me a grave misreading of Melville's ironic racial symbolism, as well as an inadequate account of the author's treatment of the historical tragedy that was American slavery. And Matthiessen offers no discussion whatever of Frederick Douglass's writings as they might relate to the tragedy of slavery (I attempt to address such lapses in Chapter Four).

Matthiessen's example brought about several classic studies in the post-war years that, at the very least, touched on tragedy in American literature and culture. Foremost among these was R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955).⁶ Lewis combines an interest in the history of ideas with close readings of particular historical and literary texts to clarify what he sees as the major mythic metaphor of the American nineteenth century: the image of Adam before the Fall. In Lewis's words, "A century ago, the image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas was that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1). The cultural dialogue of the era, contentiously filled with conflicting voices, created a rich range of response to this Adamic figure. The ensuing dialogue, among artists and cultural commentators of the age, was one of the "peculiar capacities of the inhabitants of the new world" (2). The ideas most frequently involved in the dialogue included "innocence, novelty, experience, sin, time, evil, hope, the present, memory, the past, tradition" (2), all of which provided "materials for the creative imagination" (3).

Employing Emersonian terms, Lewis categorizes the voices heard in the national dialogue of the era. The first two voices come from "the party of Hope and the party of Memory. For the third

⁶ I would include three other works from this era that consider, to varying degrees, tragedy in relation to American fiction: Harry Levin's *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958), Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), and Leo Marx's *The Machine and the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964).

party there is no proper name: unless we call it the party of Irony” (7). The party of “Hope” was characterized by Emersonianism and transcendental thinking (and general optimism); the hopeful party celebrated, with little qualification, America’s Adamic newness and progressive march into the future. The party of “Memory” was distinguished by a traditional concern for the past and the Calvinistic sense of original sin. The party of “Irony,” of particular interest to Lewis (and to us), was marked by “a tragic optimism: by a sense of the tragic collisions to which innocence was liable (something unthinkable among the hopeful), and equally by an awareness of the heightened perception and humanity which suffering made possible (something unthinkable among the nostalgic)” (7-8). More than the others, the party of Irony, including Hawthorne and Melville, saw the “tragedy inherent in [the Adamic figure’s] innocence and newness” (6). The ironists realized that “the vision of innocence and the claim of newness” offered them “occasions for reflection and invention, for a testing of moral and artistic possibilities” (9).

The sense of radical innocence in American life, as the ironists knew, led to some fascinating and productive paradoxes, well suited to the purposes of the literary imagination. According to Lewis,

The illusion of freedom from the past led to a more real relation to the continuing tradition. The vision of innocence stimulated a positive and original sense of tragedy. Without the illusion, we are conscious, no longer of tradition, but simply and coldly of the burden of history. And without the vision, we are left, not with a mature tragic spirit, but merely with a sterile awareness of evil uninvigorated by a sense of loss. For the notion of original sin draws its compelling strength from the prior notion of original innocence. (9)

My own understanding of tragic evasion owes much to Lewis’s view about the myths of innocence and radical freedom, and to his identification of persistent dialectical tensions in American history and culture. I show in my final chapter, for instance, that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* endeavors to

synthesize the Emersonian and Melvillean strands of our culture, suggesting a way to withstand the onslaught of tragic experience. The writers I treat may all be thought of as members of what Lewis calls the party of Irony. Yet, for all its insight and usefulness, Lewis's study does not lay out the defining elements of an American tragic tradition, however suggestive it may be toward that end. Moreover, the tragic implications of American slavery, as in Matthiessen's study, are given short shrift. For example, Herman Melville's and Frederick Douglass's wrestling with the tragedy of slavery during the 1850s is never mentioned; in fact, Douglass's name does not appear once in Lewis's book.⁷

The 1970s saw the first and only critical studies that tried to define an American tragic tradition in literature. I will offer a brief overview and critique of the books in question: Harold P. Simonson's *The Closed Frontier: Studies in American Literary Tragedy* (1970) and Dan Vogel's *The Three Masks of American Tragedy* (1974). Simonson's study does not cling to an Aristotelian notion of tragic form. He sees American expressions of the tragic, arising from whatever lowly corner of democratic life, as legitimate and profound: "Great tragic writers come in any age" (53). For Simonson, American tragic writers are chiefly responding, if only metaphorically, to the closing of the Western frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, published in his 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," addressed the centrality of the opening of the frontier in nineteenth-century America; but Turner did not examine "the ramifications of his fateful announcement that now, in the century's final decade, the frontier was closed" (Vogel 5). Certain American writers, in Simonson's view, understood far better than Turner that the significance of the closed frontier was its tragic nature. Simonson selects four American authors—far too few, I think—who recognized the tragic potentialities of the closed frontier: Mark Twain, Henry Adams, Ole Rølvaag, and Nathanael West. These writers saw tragedy as not only a literary mode, but also as "a

⁷ However, in 1981 Lewis performed an excellent close reading of the work of Ellison, Douglass, and Toni Morrison. See his chapter "Ritual Naming: Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison" in *Literary Reflections: A Shoring of Images, 1960-1993*.

way of looking at life—American life” (5). The tragedy of the closed frontier “touches the national psyche; it affects a people’s consciousness and, perhaps, its unconscious as well” (5).

The closed frontier, according to Simonson, is the *sine qua non* of American tragic experience. It confronts the American Adam, in his endless new dawn of possibilities, with the fact of human limitation. The tragic protagonist must awaken to the reality of his or her situation: “Instead of a limitless frontier there is a wall. The tension comes from the illusory prospect of the one and the certitude of the other. Existence in this tension is the heart of tragedy” (6). Some of Simonson’s finest observations on American tragedy emerge in the early chapters before he reads his four authors. His discussion of Melville and the symbolic imagery of walls, while dealt with rather too hastily, constitutes some of the most penetrating writing in the book. He also perceives the American penchant for evading tragic actualities, pointing out how the national “[a]version for tragedy explains the passion for escape” (43). From my perspective, it is specifically this attitude of avoiding tragedy and seeking escape from it, and not merely a single event like the closing of the frontier, that can be said to underlie most of our tragic fiction. Despite Simonson’s worthy contributions to the study of tragedy in American literature, his argument is too narrow and his body of texts too slim. To be sure, his reconsideration of *Huckleberry Finn* as tragedy and his reading of eschatology in Adams’s *The Education* are thought provoking, but he leaves so many other nineteenth- and twentieth-century works—pertaining directly to the American frontier and its passing—unexamined. Furthermore, he tries to fit American tragic experience as a totality into the framework of a closed frontier. As in the previous studies, no attempt is made to grapple with the tragic legacy of American slavery, which would seem as—if not more—important to depictions of tragedy in American literature. And a study of tragedy and the American frontier seems incomplete, to say the least, without a consideration of Native American fiction and its dramatization of tragic suffering.

Dan Vogel’s *The Three Masks of American Tragedy* is the more searching and thorough of the two studies. Vogel engages fully with the extant scholarship on tragedy, covering critical

treatments of the genre from Aristotle to Arthur Miller. He also investigates some of the particular cultural-historical conditions that helped foster an American sense of tragedy. Vogel laments the absence of any systematic and wide-ranging critical studies on the topic: “There is no study, to my knowledge, that has attempted to view American tragic writing as a cohesive genre, to discover overall concepts of tragedy in our democratic literature, and to point out lines of continuity in theme and method. This book is such an effort” (x). (He had apparently not heard of or read Simonson’s study from four years earlier.) As Vogel rightly demonstrates, American “authors themselves thought they were writing tragedies. . . . In essays, letters, and other statements, some of our tragic novelists and playwrights ruminate on the traditions of tragedy and how they fit into them” (x). American writers fought for the right of their common characters to attain the status of tragic heroes: “The ‘small-fry’ tragic heroes of American literature have nothing to be ashamed of. In their chromosomes they carry the genealogy of heroes of magnitude who are part of Western culture” (xii). Vogel postulates three archetypal “masks” as forming the noble ancestry of American tragic heroes: the masks of Oedipus Tyrannos, Christ, and Satan (xii). These classical and Christian models offered American tragedians, in their modern democratic context, a line of continuity with the Western tragic tradition from antiquity to early modernity.

While Vogel relies perhaps too heavily on these classical and Christian character archetypes to advance his argument, he does acknowledge the formal transformation that the genre necessarily underwent in America. The drama, as Vogel shows, was no longer the only conceivable vehicle for tragic presentation: “The challenge of American tragedians was to absorb, sift, and fulfill the residual qualities of tragedy to fit the society and time for which they were writing. . . . New literary forms emended Aristotle’s expectation that the drama, not other styles of narrative, was the only proper form of tragedy” (4). Tragedy’s shift from drama to other literary forms—an issue I examine in more depth near the end of the following chapter—coincided with a deemphasizing of plot as primary to the tragic effect. Against Aristotelian orthodoxy, American tragic writers—and modern tragic writers

in general—have turned toward character.⁸ As Vogel maintains, “The burden of achieving catharsis in tragedy in democratic literature has shifted to the hero, who carries the mystique of the Individual. Today, character is primary; the actions often are small and narrow” (7). Vogel is correct to point this out, though he pays little attention to other formal elements stressed by writers of modern tragic fiction, such as literary symbolism, which I will later argue is fundamental to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s reconceptualization of the tragic mode.

There is much else to recommend Vogel’s study, especially his careful analyses of major works, including modern American plays, that I do not cover here: Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Vogel’s organizational gambit of the three archetypal masks, though finally too restrictive to provide adequate explanatory power, effectively showcases American tragic writers’ strong ties to the classical and Christian heritages. The most serious defect in Vogel’s study is one that aligns it with the other studies: it lacks an in-depth exploration of slavery and its aftershocks, or any suggestion that the topic is absolutely integral to our comprehension of American tragic fiction as a whole. Despite his capable readings of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, the issue of slavery and race is given minimal attention. And while all the works Vogel elucidates are by any measure major examples of the genre in its American context, he overlooks many other deserving

⁸ To be clear, Aristotle’s commentary on tragic form—including audience response via the effects of form—was erected into an orthodoxy by his later followers. As R. P. Draper points out, the principles in the *Poetics* were originally intended to be “practical” rather than “prescriptive,” simple “inferences” drawn from what Aristotle “observed to be the custom of the Greek theatre” (16). Later critics, especially during the Renaissance, gave Aristotle’s principles “a codified formalisation which isolated them from the conditions to which they were appropriate” (16). The Greek philosopher did not, for instance, focus very much on the unities of time and place (though he did focus on action). These unities were largely invented and turned into dramatic prescriptions by Renaissance figures like Castelvetro and, somewhat later, the French classicists. For a thorough examination of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, including an overview of its rediscovery during the Renaissance and its troubled translational history, see the second chapter of Geoffrey Brereton’s *Principles of Tragedy: A Rational Examination of the Tragic Concept in Life and Literature*, 21-47.

fictions beyond the drama and the novel (such as tragic short stories and novellas, some of which I will investigate in the following chapters).

All of these studies establish sufficient grounds for an updated inquiry into American tragedy. My own view of American tragic fiction as preeminently concerned with the theme of evasion builds upon the foundations laid by these—and other—early Americanists. Although I broaden the category of American tragedy by tracing a recurrent theme across a wide body of fictional works, certain assumptions about American “innocence” and radical freedom continue to inform my thinking. Our nation’s tragic fiction, from Charles Brockden Brown to Ralph Ellison, has borne out the persistence of these notions of the American self, indicating time and again that tragic disillusionment—and sometimes death and destruction—is the price to be paid for evading reality and naively clinging to myths and half-truths. However, I deepen the conversation by illustrating the significance of slavery and its aftermath in American tragic fiction. As Rita Felski argues in her introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy*, the tragic dimension of race is “confirmed by literary reckonings with the legacy of slavery that have emerged from the African diaspora in the United States and the Caribbean, many of which draw heavily on tragic topoi” (“Introduction” 13). Indeed, narratives about race increasingly represent “one way in which tragic consciousness is played out in the modern world” (“Introduction” 13). The national evasion of slavery and its vicious legacy finds powerful expression in works by Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, and Ralph Ellison (though other examples from black and white authors could be cited).⁹ I also show, most explicitly in the novellas and stories of three twentieth-century

⁹ James Baldwin, for example, writes powerfully about America’s tragic evasion of racial injustice. In “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin reminds us of “what white Americans do not face when they regard a Negro: reality—the fact that life is tragic” (339). He continues: “Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us the sun will go down for the last, last time” (339). Our “trouble,” Baldwin asserts, “is that we will sacrifice the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have” (339). White Americans, says Baldwin, “do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them” (339). The tragedy of American slavery, including the dehumanization of black Americans under segregation, has brought about immense tragic suffering. But there is “something very beautiful” in the efforts of black Americans to struggle against their tragic conditions (343). As Baldwin puts it, “people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it

Southern modernists, how the evasion of unpleasant psychological facts can lead to the tragic waste of moral potential. Having said this, I would now like to define what I mean by “evasion” and explain why I see it as the controlling theme of so much American tragic fiction.

Tragic Evasion in a Land of Idealism

The idea of evasion in American fiction is not new. Matthiessen, Lewis, Simonson, and Vogel all remark on the American habit of avoiding reality through acts of self-deception and escape. Two other studies from the post-war era also comment on evasion. In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler writes that American authors frequently employ a “strategy of evasion, that flight from society to nature, from the world of women to the haunts of womenless men, which sets our novel apart from that of the rest of the Western world” (76). Fiedler’s version of evasion is based on the sexual anxieties and frustrations of white-male characters who flee the domestic sphere for the freedom of the wilderness, typically involving themselves in a friendship, sometimes homoerotic, with a darker-skinned man (Chingachgook, Queequeg, or the enslaved Jim of *Huckleberry Finn*). Yet Fiedler was also aware of the American tendency to substitute the ideal for the real, an act of evasion fraught with potentially tragic consequences. Similarly, in *The Escape Motif in American Fiction: Mark Twain to Richard Wright* (1972), Sam Bluefarb traces the theme of escape in the American novel. Like Simonson, he sees the flight of many American characters from their complex realities—which is but another form of tragic evasion—as associated with the closing of the frontier. But Bluefarb wisely addresses the doomed flight of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, which creates a fascinating juxtaposition with the attempted escapes of white characters in the other novels. Yet, surprisingly, these studies have not taken up evasion—be it

knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable” (343). Baldwin speaks here of something like Melville’s “wisdom that is woe,” which is only attained through tragic experience. I will discuss this idea in my final chapter on Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

physical flight or psychological avoidance—as the most significant unifying theme of American tragic writing from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day.

Tragic evasion, as I use the term, describes a character's avoidance of or flight from certain grave moral, social, psychological, or existential questions and predicaments. It is the trap in which the American tragic hero almost inevitably gets caught: in attempting to sidestep tragic reality, the protagonist walks—or, better, stumbles—directly into it. I. A. Richards, many decades ago, noted tragedy's unparalleled capacity for undermining our evasive tactics:

It is essential to recognize that in the full tragic experience there is no suppression. The mind does not shy away from anything, it does not protect itself with any illusion, it stands uncomforted, unintimidated, alone and self-reliant. The test of its success is whether it can face what is before it and respond to it without any of the innumerable subterfuges by which it ordinarily dodges the full development of experience. Suppressions and sublimations alike are devices by which we endeavour to avoid issues that might bewilder us. The essence of Tragedy is that it forces us to live for a moment without them. (145)

Richards tells us how tragedy refuses to permit evasion in its audiences or readers (a point worth remembering), but the same idea may be applied to the characters within a tragic work. Tragic protagonists, like tragic readers and spectators, often live by their illusions and “subterfuges,” until reality is exposed for what it is. Classical and Shakespearean evaders come to mind, but then so do the fictional Americans I discuss here: Clara Wieland daydreaming in her Enlightenment shrine at Mettingen; Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale in the forest contemplating an impossible escape; Captain Delano happily closing his eyes to human depravity; Royal Earle Thompson failing to understand his own psychological divisions; Invisible Man blindly playing the pawn in other people's power games. But all of these characters must undergo a moment of tragic recognition—something not unlike

Aristotle's *anagnorisis*—when things are revealed for what they are. Some recognize the moment only to perish tragically soon thereafter; others must learn to live with the consequences of their new-found tragic awareness, abandoning evasion and facing the future hopefully, despairingly, or ambivalently; and still others may briefly see things for what they are but cannot reconcile themselves to the truth. Such characters, like Eudora Welty's Tom Harris, see the moral magnitude of their situation yet choose to go on evading, come what may.

If evasion can be discerned in tragic works from other times and places, why does the theme surface with such notable frequency in American fiction? There are many possible answers to this question, but one in particular seems to me hard to refute. A nation dedicated to ideals like freedom and equality, which has since its founding held its ideals to be sacrosanct and exceptional, has in some sense predisposed itself to tragedy. Evasion thus becomes a common defense mechanism in an idealistic and forward-looking nation, a way of shielding the ideal from the real and the Yea from the Nay.¹⁰ Some of the most appalling evasions we witness in American tragic fiction, like those committed by Melville's Captain Delano, are the self-deluding subterfuges of an incorrigible American optimist. The grass is always greener, turn a new leaf, there is always tomorrow, look for the silver lining—these are the perilous clichés of the democratic tragic evader, an Adamic “innocent” almost wholly lacking in the sense of evil, unwilling to let the morally ambiguous data of reality make the smallest dint in his or her epistemological armor. American idealism and optimism, enabling a stubborn ethos of evasion, set the stage for tragedy. “To define tragedy most simply,”

¹⁰ John D. Barbour sees tragedy as a critique of virtue and idealism, but also as a reaffirmation of the necessity for ethical action (whatever its risks): “Tragedy can help us take a critical perspective on our moral absolutes, which all too often justify our inflicting suffering on other persons. Yet if tragedy helps us to imagine the potential liabilities and dangers in particular ideals of virtue, it also forces us to recognize that a person's deepest moral beliefs are indispensable not because they are always successful in action but because even in failure they remain commanding as ideals or requirements for the self” (189). Tragedy reminds us that our ideals are fallible and carry with them tragic potential when they fail to operate in or conform to reality. But life is all dreary despair without them. See Barbour's *Tragedy as a Critique of Virtue: The Novel and Ethical Reflection*, which includes readings of American tragic fictions like James's *The Princess Casamissima*, Melville's *Billy Budd*, and Warren's *All the King's Men*.

writes Harold Kaplan, “is to say that it means always the discovery of limits to an heroic enterprise or stance. As such there would necessarily be a tragic component in the moral education of the free man. The great secular optimism of democracy invited [a tragic] response” (149). American tragedians, by throwing shafts of light on our manifold evasions, have helped, in their non-didactic way, to administer “the moral education of the free man.”¹¹

In a democratic nation based on the noblest of ideals—which we have so often failed to live up to—tragedy lurks quietly in the shadows and awaits its disillusioning moment. Cyrus Hoy claims that the disparity between ideality and reality lies at the heart of the most renowned dramatic tragedies, comedies, and tragicomedies. These works exemplify the “discrepancy between the noble intention and the ignoble deed,” which “points directly to the most glaring contradiction in the human condition: that which exists between man as he is, and man as he might be, or as he thinks he might be” (5). I submit that our democratic tragedies of evasion may well depict the vast gulf between the ideal and the real more emphatically than tragedies from antiquity or early modernity. Even the idealistic Emerson himself came to see the chasm between the ideal and real, and between faith and fact, as possibly unbridgeable: “In every house, in the heart of each maiden and of each boy, in the soul of the soaring saint, this chasm is found,—between the largest promise of ideal power and the shabby experience” (qtd. in Whicher 157). As Stephen Whicher has argued, “This chasm is the Emersonian tragedy, a tragedy of incapacity” (157). The great art of telling the truth, fighting to assert itself in a land of sunny idealism, requires the American tragedian to forswear the false assurances of wishful thinking and open our eyes to the things we would rather not see. Some of the writers I

¹¹ Ralph Ellison also noted that, in establishing the American Republic from the very summit of idealism, the nation’s founders surely perceived the tragic dimension of their project, especially when it came to the principle of equality: “From this height of human aspiration the ethical implications of democratic equality were revealed as tragic, for if there was radiance and glory in the future that stretched so grandly before them, there was also mystery and turbulence and darkness astir in its depths. Therefore the final climb would require not only courage, but an acceptance of the tragic nature of their enterprise and the adoption of a tragic attitude that was rendered unacceptable by the optimism developed in revolutionary struggle, no less than by the tempting and virginal richness of the land which was now rendered accessible” (“Perspective of Literature” 777).

examine, however far afield they wander from traditional forms, still adhere to the Aristotelian principle of peripety to expose the hazards of evasion. Peripety, the reversal of fortune, “underlines . . . nothing less than the deep disparity between intentions and deeds, expectations and their more or less equivocal fulfillment, the ideal at which one aims and the reality in which one is enmeshed. One expects good, and evil comes; one looks for light and is plunged into darkness” (Hoy 308). The reversal of fortune may be the only way that the American evader, confusing ideals for realities and intentions for deeds, can come to see the dark truth of his or her situation.

Tragic Vision: A Key Term

I will often use the term *tragic vision*—or, alternately, the *vision of evasion*—when discussing the fictions of these American authors.¹² In general, I concur with Nathan A. Scott Jr.’s formulation of a tragic vision as “an *attitude of attentiveness* to the contingencies and sufferings” and “quandaries and ambiguities of life”—which is to say, an attentiveness to the tragic preconditions of existence itself (“Foreword” x).¹³ Yet, more particularly, I see the vision as an attitude of attentiveness to the peculiar ways in which American characters have sought to evade the sufferings,

¹² Helen Gardner, in 1971, could write of “a strong reaction . . . against attempts to characterize ‘the tragic sense’ or ‘the tragic vision.’ The very phrases sound old-fashioned and rather stuffy” (16). Yet such terms, however unfashionable, continue to signify a way of looking at life, an artistic or philosophical or even practical attitude toward the world, that critics cannot blithely disregard. As Gardner puts it, “[H]owever impatient we may feel with well-worn phrases such as ‘the tragic vision’ or ‘the tragic sense’ and however strongly that we declare that we are interested in tragedies and not in some vague concept of ‘the tragic’, we cannot ignore the extension of the adjective” (17). Early on, “the tragic” was taken from specific works of dramatic art, “tragedies,” and applied “to events and episodes in actual life resembling those on which the tragic poets based their plays” (17). Gardner also notes the extension of the word “tragic” to forms other than the drama, including those not necessarily reliant on plot and character, like painting, sculpture, and music (17).

¹³ These preconditions might be understood as the “boundary situations,” or “ultimate situations,” that the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers saw as ineradicable features of being: “[T]here are situations which remain essentially the same even if their momentary aspect changes and their shattering force is obscured: I must die, I must suffer, I must struggle, I am subject to chance, I involve myself inexorably in guilt. . . . [There] are situations we cannot evade or change. . . . In our day-to-day lives we often evade them, by closing our eyes and living as if they did not exist. We forget that we must die, forget our guilt, and forget that we are at the mercy of chance” (19-20). Many of the evaders that we will encounter are attempting to evade life’s boundary situations, to live as if they did not exist.

contingencies, quandaries, and ambiguities of life *as experienced in the United States*. An author's tragic vision expresses a sense of shared human suffering—a sense of our collective vulnerability to the preconditions of existence and to any number of injustices—but it simultaneously “admits wide variations and degree” and is always informed by highly specific historical circumstances (Sewell 4).¹⁴ Though based on a foundation of common human folly and frailty, an author's tragic vision is finally one among others, and rarely does it harden into some totalizing ideology or doctrine, even if it has no choice but to work with historical materials that are ideologically inflected. The rich ambiguity and Keatsian negative capability of the best American tragedians—qualities indicative of their “tragic humanism,” a term on which I will elaborate in the dissertation's conclusion—usually cancel out any temptation to promote dogma or ideology. Building on Miguel de Unamuno's idea of a “tragic sense of life,”¹⁵ Richard B. Sewall argues that the tragic “has much to do with mood, feeling, tone—it is a sense of life, not a doctrine. In a work of literature, it is pervasive, implicit, inhering in

¹⁴ A tragic vision of life is not possible, as I see it, without an acceptance of a shared humanity that is forever susceptible to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, whatever their specific historical or sociopolitical origins. The vision also demands a recognition of the intimate interplay between particularity and universality, on which (I think) the profoundest literature thrives. Transatlantic slavery was not, of course, a form of tragic suffering that all people experienced. But it is telling how a white American author like Herman Melville, in *Benito Cereno*, could so powerfully represent the tragic implications of slavery for America, raising moral questions about cruelty and injustice which are at once universally human and historically specific. A shared sense of tragic agony, as an African American writer like Ralph Ellison insisted, can be arrived at only through the presentation of a particular situation that occurs within a particular context. The tragic episodes in *Invisible Man* are inseparable from the sociopolitical context that gave rise to the aftereffects of American slavery, yet the depiction of African American suffering still resonates with anyone who happens to be a fully conscious and sentient human reader. As Ellison wrote in 1956, “[F]or all its social, cultural and historical uniqueness, American Negro life is but yet another example of the diverse patterns of American life, and its predicament yet another example of the universal predicament of modern man” (*Selected Letters* 398). The radical suspicion of the universal, while justifiable in some contexts, can lead to a denial of our common vulnerability to tragic suffering, which in turn can lead, in the extreme, to a denial of our capacity to achieve any genuine understanding, communication, or sympathy with those different from ourselves. For persuasive critiques of the suspicion and rejection of the universal, see Terry Eagleton's introduction to *Sweet Violence* (2002) and Claes G. Ryn's *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (2003, updated in 2019). Ryn is very fair in pointing out the dangers of both absolute particularism, as advocated by many postmodern theorists, and absolute universalism, as advocated by many neo-conservative intellectuals.

¹⁵ Unamuno's philosophical treatise, locating the heart of tragic experience in the contradictions inherent in human nature, posits the tragic sense of life as something “possessed” by both “individual men” and “whole peoples. And this sense does not so much flow from ideas as determine them, even though afterwards, as is manifest, these ideas react upon it and confirm it” (17).

every detail, every phrase, metaphor, character, and action, each one qualifying and being qualified by every other” (vii). For Sewell, the tragic attitude is best thought of as “a sum of insights, intuitions, feelings, to which the words ‘vision’ or ‘view’ or ‘sense of life,’ however inadequate, are most readily applicable” (4).¹⁶

The phrase “tragic vision” is in keeping with Rita Felski’s call for a more flexible, modal conception of tragedy. An author’s tragic vision, his or her attitude of attentiveness to tragic experience, is embodied aesthetically in the work of fiction itself, taking on what Felski terms the “shape of suffering,” the writer’s “distinctive forming of material” (“Introduction” 10). The vision is therefore not a nebulous, free-floating abstraction: it is rendered concretely in the work itself, and is—to use Sewell’s words once more—“pervasive, implicit, inhering in every detail, every phrase, metaphor, character, and action, each one qualifying and being qualified by every other” (vii). Part of my task, then, will be to give special attention to the aesthetic texture of each fiction, explicating the unique ways in which these authors convey their tragic vision of evasion. Before moving into interpretations and analyses of individual texts, I will provide a preview of the chapters to come.

Looking Ahead: Chapter Summaries

Chapter Two begins with an overview of the myth of Adamic innocence and the New World’s “fall into history.” I carry out a short reading of the “slave-in-the-cage” chapter from Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*. The Edenic vision of America is exposed as illusory,

¹⁶ Murray Krieger distinguishes between “tragedy,” the form of a literary object, and “the tragic vision,” “a subject’s psychology, his view and version of reality” (3). Krieger contends that the tragic vision “was born *inside* tragedy, as a part of it: as a possession of the tragic hero, the vision was a reflection in the realm of thematics of the fully fashioned aesthetic totality which was tragedy” (3). The vision, which Krieger describes as “fearful and even demoniac in its revelations,” necessitated “the ultimate soothing power of the aesthetic form which contained it—of tragedy itself—in order to preserve for the world a sanity which the vision itself denied” (3). Modern tragic works, in particular, involve a Dionysian principle of extremity and destruction, verging on chaotic nihilism, that requires the Apollonian order of aesthetic form. The shaping energy of form tames the passions of the Dionysian vision, making even the darkest tragedy an expression of affirmation. While Krieger’s theory is fascinating, it is also limited by its use of Nietzschean terminology to define the tragic vision, turning an attitude of attentiveness that varies widely from writer to writer into a more severely restricted idea associated with a profound nihilism.

setting the stage for future American tragedies of evasion. From there, I undertake an extensive interpretation of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), America's first novelistic tragedy of evasion. I show how the "mysterious stranger" motif in the novel, which begins with the introduction of Carwin, gradually dissolves the Wieland circle's epistemological certainty about their innocence and separation from the calamities of history. Finally, working from observations made in the interpretation of Brown's novel, I offer an account of the development of American tragic fiction from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the age of Melville and Hawthorne. I pay attention to the emergence of a modal conception of tragedy in the young Republic; in addition, I propose Melville as a sort of theorist who developed an influential poetics of democratic tragedy for the maturing nation.

Chapter Three stresses the importance of Hawthorne's symbolistic romance aesthetic in his depiction of the tragic realities of American history. My interpretation of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" underscores the tale's setting of Colonial Boston, especially Hawthorne's defamiliarizing element of moonlight and how it reveals and conceals the reality of young Robin's nocturnal quest through the maze-like streets of the city. I conclude that Robin's tragic evasions are also indicative of the historical evasions of the American Patriots. Turning to Hawthorne's most revered tragic work, *The Scarlet Letter*, I examine the symbolic function of seventeenth-century Boston. All the scenic details of place afford Hawthorne the ability to heighten and complicate the novel's controlling tension: that between radical freedom and tragic limitation (and between the related opposition of the ideal and the real). Hester is shown to be a tragic evader, yet one with whom Hawthorne (and the reader) sympathizes. Hawthorne counterbalances his sense of tragic necessity with what Harold Kaplan calls "tragic sympathy."

Chapter Four examines Fredrick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* and Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. The novellas are both based on historical revolts on board slave ships, yet each work imaginatively transforms its historical materials into remarkably complex and insightful fictional

narratives. I consider the ways in which characters from each novella choose to transform their moral consciousness concerning slavery or, conversely, continue to deploy strategies of evasion, allowing the tragedy of slavery to go unaddressed. Douglass's Mr. Listwell is morally transformed by overhearing the heroic slave's impassioned rhetoric, whereas Tom Grant continues to evade reality—despite conceding the virtues of the heroic slave—by asserting his and the white race's ultimate superiority. Melville's obtusely optimistic Captain Delano, the epitome of the American tragic evader, denies human depravity and his (and his nation's) complicity in African slavery. Don Benito Cereno, on the other hand, is paralyzed with pessimism, having come face to face with the violent vengeance of Babo, the cunning slave revolt leader. I also comment on how both novellas express their authors' difficulty, during the middle of the 1850s, to see a way out of the catastrophe of American slavery. While Douglass, having been formerly enslaved himself, sees the construction of a heroic ideal as essential to his people's liberation, the ending of his novella is marked by a feeling of uncertainty for, and even pessimism about, the best way forward. Melville, in some regards, can be likened to the paralyzed Spaniard, Don Benito. The tangled knot of slavery is too intricate for any single mind to undo. Although his novella is set at the end of the 1700s (for symbolic reasons), Melville seems to sense the looming tragedy of the American Civil War among his novella's deep shadows, which merely foreshadow the deeper shadows to come.

Chapter Five extends A. C. Bradley's idea of "tragic waste," which he applied to the plays of Shakespeare, to three Southern modernist fictions: William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Katherine Anne Porter's *Noon Wine*, and Eudora Welty's "The Hitch-Hikers." In these works, tragic waste is everywhere: the waste of an individual's moral potential as well as the larger "wasteland" that is the modern world. I situate Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* among his more famous modernist tragedies. I argue that Cash and Darl Bundren embody two competing visions of the tragic: one morally grounded and creative, the other nihilistic and ultimately destructive. Although most members of the family are evaders of their unpleasant circumstances, Darl is a ruthless truth-teller who can see through the

illusions. Yet, paradoxically, Darl's truth-telling becomes its own kind of evasion, an evasion of the necessity for imperfect familial and communal relations. Cash, though he feels for his brother, realizes that balance, creativity, and the acceptance human folly are essential to living. In the end, Darl disintegrates into madness, tragically wasting his potential as a moral being. Cash, however, endures by holding fast to those things that can assuage tragic suffering. Porter's Mr. Thompson, I argue, evades the divisions and conflicting impulses within his own psyche, refusing to comprehend and accept his deepest self as it is figured forth in the strangers Mr. Helton and Mr. Hatch. The tragic waste of his life culminates in suicide. My reading of Welty's "The Hitch-Hikers" points up the tragic status of her alienated salesman, Tom Harris. He evades the tragic implications of his rootless occupation and turns his back on an opportunity to redeem himself through community, creativity, and communication. He is fated to go on aimlessly selling his office supplies, lost in the wasteland of modern America.

Chapter Six completes my investigation of evasion by arguing that Ralph Ellison is the quintessential tragicomic artist of American democracy, a writer who attempts to synthesize the Emersonian and Melvillean strands of American culture. I frame the argument by turning to Melville's metaphor of the Catskill eagle, which concludes the "Try-Works" chapter of *Moby-Dick*. Like the eagle, Ellison shows us how we might dive down into the darkest gorges while soaring out again into the sunlight. Ellison's protagonist is an evader who searches, unconsciously at first, to acquire his own life-sustaining tragicomic vision, one capable of blending laughter, tragic sympathy, and a "reflective temper" in order to stave off the tragic realities of post-slavery America. I read the novel's epilogue as the protagonist's effort to acknowledge tragic limits while insisting on transformative possibilities. Taking up Melville's veiled challenge to discover "a wisdom that is woe" in the depths of tragic experience, Ellison shows us that evasion and despair are far from the only responses to tragedy in a multiracial democracy.

A final word about my critical assumptions is in order. If we are to apprehend the particular meanings and values embedded in these tragedies of evasion, we need a critical approach as attuned to the artistry of individual works as it is aware of historical contexts. I concur with Eugene Goodheart: “Literary experience is not a pure thing; it is an amalgam of interests that includes the political, the historical, the ethical, and so on, but not necessarily at the expense of the aesthetic” (34). Like Goodheart, I am convinced that literary criticism must entail, among other things, the activity of aesthetic discovery. The ambitions of such a criticism are admittedly modest, but what we discover—or rediscover—in the process can make a given work more exciting and comprehensible, even more edifying, to ourselves and others. I continue to believe that literary criticism can be, as Rita Felski puts it, “respectful, even reverential, in tone, with the critic adopting the role of a disciple or follower, aspiring to go beyond the text in the service of the text, to aid in the revelation of hidden mysteries. Here interpretation is a good-faith effort to draw out a text’s implicit meanings” (*The Limits of Critique* 57). I hope to undertake good-faith interpretations of each of these works. And if I occasionally betray my respect and even reverence for the authors, so much the better.

CHAPTER II

STIRRINGS OF A TRAGIC CONSCIOUSNESS: THE FALL OF THE “NEW MAN,” BROWN’S *WIELAND* AS A TRAGEDY OF EVASION, AND THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN TRAGIC FICTION

The Fall of the “New Man”

“What, then, is the American, this new man?” asks J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*. The work is a landmark in the history of American culture: it solidifies the mythic-pastoral vision of the American as a self-sufficient yeoman farmer, an Adamic figure free from the ancient miseries of the Old World. This “new man” stands at the dawn of something hitherto unknown and unexperienced in the annals of history, finding himself a shaper of radical beginnings. Crèvecoeur’s farmer sees his new man, the American, as one who “acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions” (70). As R. W. B. Lewis put it in his classic study, this radically new man was “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritance of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). Many American writers, despite major cultural shifts over time, would continue to imagine variations on the theme of radical beginnings, cultivating what Terrence Martin has called the “habit of telling the world over again” (132). But in the years prior to and immediately after the

American Revolution, a world of fresh possibilities beckoned as never before; it stretched out infinitely before the eyes of an awestruck people (especially before the eyes of patriotic poets and rhapsodic orators), the errors and misfortunes of the past seemingly purged from the new man's new-found Eden.¹

Or so goes the mythmaking. For as that cold-eyed realist and witty naysayer Ambrose Bierce would later write in *The Devil's Dictionary*, misfortune is “the kind of fortune that never misses” (164). Crèvecoeur's age was as ravaged by misfortune and conflict—by, in a word, tragedy—as nearly any other. Throughout *Letters*, the reader is given glimpses into a much more unsettling American reality of which Crèvecoeur seems aware. In Letter IX, the author's discourse on slavery turns to questions of a benign and just God: “Is there, then, no superintending power who conducts the moral operations of the world, as well as the physical?” (173). Concerning human iniquity, Crèvecoeur reflects on “crimes of the most heinous nature, committed from one end of the world to the other” (173). The utopian cast of the earlier rhetoric takes a dark turn:

We observe avarice, rapine, and murder, equally prevailing in all parts [of the world]. History perpetually tells us of millions of people abandoned to the caprice of the maddest princes, and of whole nations devoted to the blind furies of tyrants. Countries destroyed, nations ultimately buried in ruins by other nations, some parts of the world beautifully cultivated, returned again into their pristine state, the fruits of ages of industry, the toil of thousands in a short time

¹ D. H. Lawrence, in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, mocks Crèvecoeur: “Where *is* this new bird called the true American? Show us the homunculus of the new era. Go on, show us him. Because all that is visible to the naked European eye, in America, is a sort of recreant European. We want to see this missing link of the next era” (vii). Lawrence later notes, with not a little irony in his voice, that the English Romantics were giddy over the publication of *Letters*: “A new world, a world of the Noble Savage and Pristine Nature and Paradisal Simplicity and all that gorgeousness that flows out of the unsullied fount of the ink bottle” (23). Leo Marx challenges Lawrence's oversimplified view of the author: Crèvecoeur “does not believe, as Lawrence says he does, that Nature is sweet and pure. He admires improved nature, a landscape that is a made thing, a fusion of work and spontaneous process” (112).

destroyed by few! If one corner breathes in peace for a few years, it is, in turn subjected, torn, and levelled; one would almost believe the principles of action in man, considered as the first agent of this planet, to be poisoned in their most essential parts. . . . Benignity, moderation, and justice are virtues adapted only to the humble paths of life; we love to talk of virtue and to admire its beauty while in the shade of solitude and retirement, but when we step forward into active life, if it happen to be in competition with any passion or desire, do we observe it to prevail? . . . Such is the perverseness of human nature; who can describe it in all its latitude?

The curtain is, for a time, drawn back to expose the illusoriness of sentimental constructions of nature and humankind: the antipastoral and the dystopian, the eschatological and the tragic—these appear implacable and triumphant. As Leo Marx has written, Crèvecoeur was never an unqualified sentimental primitivist, for “he had no illusions about the condition of man in a state of nature,” though he did idealize Native American life (114). But his own evasion of historical reality is perhaps best revealed in his imagining the inchoate nation as a “great American asylum” (Crèvecoeur 68), a sanctuary beyond and largely unsusceptible to the corruption and guile of the Old World, “a peaceful, lovely, classless, bountiful pasture” (Marx 116).² But the tragic fissures in Crèvecoeur’s idealized landscape—the political, historical, and psychological burden of things

² Other evasions, or at least distortions, of historical fact and cultural complexity should be noted, including Crèvecoeur’s carefully fabricated narrative persona. The historian Sean Wilentz points out that Crèvecoeur “dissembled shamelessly,” presenting himself “as if he were an ordinary native tiller of the soil” rather than a French intellectual idealizing American husbandry and the American landscape (15). Furthermore, the author portrayed the natives as “noble savages,” superior in their primitive simplicity to Europeans and the colonists: “Without temples, without priests, without kings, and without laws, they are in many instances superior to us; and the proofs of what I advance are that they live without care, sleep without inquietude, take life as it comes, bearing all its asperities with unparalleled patience, and die without any kind of apprehension for what they have done or for what they expect to meet with hereafter” (215). Yet, whatever romantic idealizations he might have indulged, Crèvecoeur never lost a tragic sense of humanity’s imperfectability: “I am not founding my future prosperity on golden dreams. Place mankind where you will, they must always have adverse circumstances to struggle with; from nature, accidents, constitution; from seasons, from that great combination of mischances which perpetually lead us to diseases, to poverty, etc.” (215).

as they are (and not as people wish them to be)—refuse suppression. The author was by no means completely blind to the moral ambiguities lurking within the new Eden.³

The most significant fissure in Crèvecoeur's idyllic surface appears near the end of Letter IX. To furnish readers with a terrifyingly vivid illustration of his thoughts on "civilized society," the farmer turns to a scene that has "oppressed" his "mind" ever since he "became a witness to it" (177). The gloomy philosophical musings of the earlier portion of the letter culminate in the farmer's encounter with a caged slave, who, having had his eyes "picked out" by birds and now on the verge of death, requests a drink of water (178). The scene begins with a conventional pastoral image of the farmer on a tranquil ramble along "a small path leading through a pleasant wood" (177), a scene that rapidly degenerates, in Harold Beaver's words, into a "a nightmare stroll into the American forest of the unconscious" (102). The peaceful idyll is interrupted, the air around the farmer becoming "strongly agitated" as he beholds the gruesome scene (178):

I perceived a Negro, suspended in the cage and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek-bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places; and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets and

³ Perhaps something in the American landscape itself invites such idealizations, however false they are to history. Writing in *The American Scene*, Henry James observes the details of the New England hills and woodlands. He wonders why "the whole connotation" of these landscapes are "so *delicately* Arcadian" (367). The rugged character of the land, despite lacking that "higher finish," somehow "insist[s]" on evoking the "idyllic *type*"—that is, Arcadia—in its overall aspect (367). For James, it is "as if the higher finish, even at the hand of nature, were in some sort a perversion, and hillsides and rocky eminences and wild orchards, in short any common sequestered spot, could strike one as the more exquisitely and ideally Sicilian, Theocritan, poetic, romantic, academic, from their not bearing the burden of too much history" (367-68). James admits that traces of human history mark the idyllic grandeur of the land: "The history was there in its degree, and one came upon it, on sunny afternoons, in the form of the classic abandoned farm of the rude forefather who had lost patience with his fate" (368). But the scars of this history stand out meagerly against the majestic scenery: "These scenes of old, hard New England effort, defeated by the soil and the climate and reclaimed by nature and time—the crumbled, lonely chimney-stack, the overgrown threshold, the dried-up well, the cart-track vague and lost—these seemed only notes to interfere, in their meagerness, with the queer *other*, the larger, eloquence that one kept reading into the picture" (368). The temptation to read pastoral perfection "into the picture," to graft a European literary convention onto the American landscape, may be habitual among our writers, though many have wisely resisted—or ironically redirected—the sentimental impulse to do so.

from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dripped and tinged the ground beneath. No sooner were the birds flown than swarms of insects covered the whole body of this unfortunate wretch, eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood. I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled; I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this Negro in all its dismal latitude. The living spectre, though deprived of his eyes, could still distinctly hear, and in his uncouth dialect begged me to give him some water to allay his thirst. Humanity herself would have recoiled back with horror; she would have balanced whether to lessen reliefless distress or mercifully with one blow to end this dreadful scene of agonizing torture! (178)

The scene is a striking early example of American Gothic, anticipating the grisly and grotesque imagery in Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe. (It also prefigures those harrowing depictions of slavery and its violent consequences that will later preoccupy Douglass in *The Heroic Slave* and Melville in *Benito Cereno*.) The encounter is no doubt a fiction, yet it communicates with horrifying clarity the new man's fall into the morally compromised world of historical actuality.⁴ Amid the natural charms of the pastoral landscape, the farmer experiences a tragic epiphany: he and the new society he represents have not escaped the benighted past, but are instead implicated in perpetuating its worst crimes and cruelties. The American pastoral romance at its best does not retreat into some ahistorical world elsewhere; it confronts the tragic facts of American history, slavery being foremost among them. Reflecting on the "Africanist presence" in classic American fiction, Toni Morrison argues that the romance form is not itself "an evasion of history" but rather "a head-on encounter with very real, pressing historical forces and the

⁴ According to Beaver, Crèvecoeur "was content to explore much of the American South by proxy; those frenchified accents alone suggest a fictional contrivance. For this is a deliberate Gothic fiction whose overt Christian symbolism serves only to underline the un-Christian horror of a slave society" (103-04).

contradictions inherent in them as they came to be experienced by writers” (36). (Morrison’s point will be driven home again in the following chapter.)

This scene sets the stage, as it were, for future American tragedies of evasion (particularly those about slavery and its aftermath). Crèvecoeur’s farmer, though he gives water to the dying slave, evades the impulse to do more: “Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered enough strength to walk away and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine” (179). The plantation owners tell the farmer that they caged the slave as punishment for his having killed the overseer. The punishment, however, is perfectly reasonable according to the internal logic of a slave society: “They told me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary, and supported the doctrines of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice, with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present. Adieu” (179). The evader of this tragic situation refuses to be troubled; in this case, both the narrator and his audience will, at least within the text, ignore the distressing moral questions raised by this “shocking spectacle.” The new man’s presumption of innocence, even if believed only halfheartedly, makes him prone to tragedy: the postlapsarian world of the dark past is really the selfsame world of farmer’s present.⁵ None of this should surprise us. The new man’s fall, as Terrence Martin observes, is preordained by the biblical myth on which it is based: “Although it served to emphasize the moral superiority of the American character, the model of Adam—especially an Adam poised to embrace the future—was in some ways unfortunate for a new nation to project, for the only thing Adam could do, and did, was fall” (208).

⁵ In keeping with the Edenic implications of his letters, Crèvecoeur suggestively follows the scene of the caged slave with one in which two serpents fight to the death. The aura of pastoral innocence disappears, and only the fallen world of history and ruthless struggle remains. The farmer’s tragic consciousness has been awakened.

Brown's *Wieland* as a Tragedy of Evasion

Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798), with its investigation into the limits of human reason and the depths of human depravity, is the first realized novelistic tragedy of evasion in the early American Republic.⁶ The myth of Adamic Americans who attempt an escape from historical pressures is here given its most compelling early treatment. The classic American romance, aspects of which are also on display in Crèvecoeur, acquires much of its distinguishing character in Brown's first novel.⁷ Although *Wieland*, as Donald Ringe notes, gains much of its weird allure from "one branch of the late eighteenth-century Gothic mode," the novel "goes far beyond its predecessors in adapting that form to a serious psychological purpose" (*American Gothic* 50).

But the novel's psychological dimension—which explores self-delusion, naïveté, and the irrational workings of the unconscious mind—is fused with an equally important social one: the *Wieland* coterie's tragedy serves as a violent cautionary tale, warning the young Republic of its vulnerability to historical contingency and calamity. *Wieland* addresses certain bugbears of the post-revolutionary American mind: the effects of the unconstrained artistic imagination (which

⁶ There can be little doubt about the influence of Brown's novel on future romancers. For example, *Wieland* seems to have made quite the impression on James Fenimore Cooper, whose narrator in *Notions of the Americans* recalls his experience reading Brown's novel. Cooper's narrator claims that Brown "curbed his talents by as few allusions as possible to actual society"—though this avoidance of society seems to me essential to *Wieland*'s tragic evasions—but that he remained "distinguished for power and comprehensiveness of thought." He goes on: "I remember to have read one of his books (*Wieland*) when a boy, and I take it to be a never-failing evidence of genius, that, amid a thousand similar pictures which have succeeded, the images it has left still stand distinct and prominent in my recollection" (158). Cooper's narrator concludes that Brown "flattered no particular prejudice of the nation in any of his works" (158).

⁷ I use the term "romance" as outlined by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (see pages 12 and 13 in particular). Some of Chase's assertions are tenuous and at times untenable generalizations about American literary history, but his book retains valid insights into a major form of American novel writing. Romance is an elastic term, describing modes as various as the Gothic, the frontier narrative, the pastoral fable, the prose epic, tragic fiction, and, as examined here, the cloistral tale. In fact, all of these offshoots of American romance should be seen as highly permeable and interrelated modes. It seems safe to say that the array of elements distinguishing the romance does not apply only to full-length novels: the sketches, tales, and novellas of many nineteenth-century American authors also exude an aesthetic that "freely veer[s] toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms" (Chase 13). I will further discuss the idea of American romance in Chapter Three.

Brown himself effectively indulges); the consequences of social and historical isolation; the practicality of utopian thinking; the deterministic powers of the past. Here, at the end of the eighteenth century, is a politically informed fiction that calls into question basic assumptions of the Jeffersonian democratic ideal, placing in its stead a pessimistic view of human nature.

Although the novel is set just prior to the American Revolution, the *Wieland* tragedy reveals the conservative anxieties of the Federalist Era. Jane Tompkins, for instance, makes a case for the novel as a sort of political tract, “not so much a work of art in our modern sense of the term,” but rather “an attempt to influence public policy” (43).⁸ According to Tompkins, the naively optimistic world of the *Wieland* circle is “one where authority is not vested in particular institutions of a visible and external sort” (53). The dangers of a world devoid of external checks and authorities becomes appallingly clear amid the madness and murder that ensues. Tompkins argues that the novel performs a “patriotic” duty, with “its main action, in an attempt to alert people to the dangers of mob rule, realiz[ing] the Federalist nightmare” (58). Conceived in this way, the tragedy of the *Wielands* allegorizes a potential tragedy for the young Republic, a downfall to be brought about by unchecked political permissiveness.

I concede the thrust of Tompkins’ historicist interpretation, even if Brown’s putatively virtuous social intentions become obscured by the novel’s sensationalism. But I maintain that

⁸ Tompkins also refers to the 1798 letter Brown sent, along with a copy of *Wieland*, to Vice President Thomas Jefferson. Much of the novel’s didactic content is implied rather than declared, veiled behind Brown’s hectic violence and Gothic enigmas. Whatever Brown hoped for Jefferson to take away from the novel is not readily apparent, and even the letter itself is vague and indirect. He partly wishes to obtain Jefferson’s “good opinion,” a “recommendation” that “will contribute to diffuse the knowledge of its author, and facilitate a favorable reception to future performances” (“Letter to Thomas Jefferson” 313). Regarding Brown’s precise didactic intentions, however, one can only speculate. The author seems to have been in agreement with his era’s insistence on the social utility of art: literature should serve a purpose by inculcating public virtue. Brown wrote tracts and treatises on a variety of progressive causes, and he was involved with the political radicalism espoused by William Godwin. Yet, as Michael Davitt Bell explains, Brown would eventually undergo a “conversion to Federalist conservatism” (44). A reactionary pessimism seems to be implicit in *Wieland*. Did the author expect Jefferson to read the novel as a critique of disorder ushered in by an overly optimistic egalitarianism? This seems possible, but it is hard to know if the Pollyannaish Jefferson could have made much sense of Brown’s bloody tragedy. As the historian Gordon Wood states, Jefferson was “the pure American innocent. He had little understanding of man’s capacity for evil and had no tragic sense whatsoever” (115). Of course, *pace* Wood, Jefferson’s ownership of and relationship to his slaves surely makes his “innocence” a much more complicated thing.

Wieland's function as a political cautionary tale in no way lessens Brown's conscious artistry, which he ingeniously deploys to unsettle his readers and heighten the tragic mood. *Wieland*, then, is more than just a time-bound artifact about Federalist paranoia in the 1780s and '90s. Whatever its contemporary social utility, Brown's tragedy, "dictated by an adventurous and lawless fancy," transcends its immediate context by depicting a family's tragic undoing that resonates in profoundly psychological and archetypal ways (*Wieland* 62); consequently, *Wieland* resembles the more artistically daring fictions that will become prominent in the American Romantic period of the nineteenth century. Without denying its original historical purposes—which are in any case integrated unobtrusively into Brown's aesthetic design—we should also embrace *Wieland* as a major literary achievement, America's first tragedy of evasion.⁹

Brown's rendition of tragic evasion gathers much of its strength from a narrative pattern that will later typify a popular mode of American storytelling: the tale of the mysterious stranger, or the cloistral story. Roy Male explains that "the cloistral story is the quest or the picaresque turned inside out ('outside in' would be better), and perhaps if we used this adjective for it, the category of fiction it describes would be more widely recognized" (9).¹⁰ He lays out the pattern of

⁹ The novel's tragic elements have not gone unnoticed by other critics. Wayne Franklin, for instance, sees *Wieland* as subverting "mere melodrama" and retooling aspects of Shakespearean comedy and tragedy, thereby laying a foundation for certain future American writers (163). Roberta F. Weldon argues that Brown creates a family tragedy in which the family's "flaws lead to its tragic fall" (2). Nina Baym contends that *Wieland* is a botched attempt at tragedy because it does not develop *Wieland*'s descent into madness and suspend the audience "in that profound alembic of pity and fear with which a tragic fall is experienced" ("A Minority Reading" 91). These critics shed light on the novel as a tragic fiction, but none of them seem aware of how conventions belonging to the cloistral story augment the novel's tragic situation; nor is the theme of evasion treated as central to the tragic occurrences of the narrative.

¹⁰ Male follows the mysterious stranger story back to Washington Irving's 1807 sketch "The Little Man in Black" (8). (He briefly mentions the earlier *Wieland*, but only to deny it further analysis.) From that point forward, Male discovers the same archetypal pattern in several nineteenth- and twentieth-century American short stories, novels, and novellas: Hawthorne's "The Grey Champion," Melville's *Bartleby*, Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, Crane's "The Blue Hotel," Hemingway's "The Killers," Porter's "Noon Wine," Faulkner's "Spotted Horses," McCullers's "The Ballad of the Sad Café," O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," Warren's "Blackberry Winter," and many others. As significant as Male's study is, it lacks a sufficient discussion of the genre's historical development and its European antecedents (especially in England and Germany). A new study tracing the particular cultural origins of the cloistral tale would make for an indispensable companion piece to Male's book.

the classic cloistral story as follows: “Into an isolated setting intrude one or more mysterious strangers who are potential saviors, potential destroyers, or ambiguous combinations of both. There then occurs some fatal form of transaction between the external and the internal, a testing or transformation of the insiders by the intruder(s)” (10). The cloistral story pattern tends to expose a character’s evasive behavior, with the stranger’s intrusion often unveiling truths that the insider would rather keep hidden. In Male’s words, the cloistral story

presents us with a model of ordinary waking consciousness deeply imbedded in its routinized psychological, social, and metaphysical assumptions and now suddenly confronted with a problem in the guise of a mysterious intruder. What has been taken for granted as reality is challenged, the precariousness of human identity is laid bare, the mystery of how we interact with the world and with other human beings is concretely dramatized. (29)

Wieland conforms to Male’s narrative specifications, despite the author’s unjust banishment of the novel from his study.¹¹ The intrusion of the mysterious Carwin, that “double-tongued deceiver” (*Wieland* 181), into the artificial Eden of Mettingen—the novel’s cloistral setting—brings about a series of violent and destabilizing events, leading to an alteration in Clara Wieland’s consciousness. This narrative pattern, which advances much of the dramatic action and

¹¹ To maintain the purity of cloistral fiction as he defines it, Male decides to “exclude those narratives in which we eventually take the point of view of the stranger or follow him on his travels” (11). For the stranger to sustain his aura of mystery, the narrative’s other characters must always observe the stranger but never be observed by him. Male therefore concludes that Brown’s shifting to Carwin’s point of view disqualifies the novel from becoming genuine cloistral fiction (11). Male’s rationale for excluding *Wieland* is insufficient. The shift to Carwin’s point of view does not significantly diminish the intruder’s mystique; if anything, it remains mostly intact. Besides, Male himself later insists that the mysterious outsider is not nearly so important as the challenge he poses to the mundane world of the insiders (29). Much of Carwin’s mysterious aura is sustained by the fact that readers can never know whether the stranger speaks the truth when denying his involvement in the *Wieland* murders. Brown’s prequel to the novel, *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, might also be said to dissipate Carwin’s status as a mysterious stranger. But the explanations given for Carwin’s origins and behavior in that rough-hewn prequel in no way detract from the uncanny happenings in *Wieland*.

develops the novel's themes, is the necessary vehicle for Brown's tragedy.¹² Carwin's interruption of daily life at Mettingen forces Clara to confront the tragic actualities of her past and present, revealing to her (and to readers) the illusions that she and her circle have imposed on their world in order to evade the adult complexities of self and society, psychology and history.

From the outset, Brown suggests that the Wielands suffer a congenital susceptibility to tragedy, the stage having already been prepared for their tragic downfall.¹³ Larzer Ziff points out that the novel consists of a series of "fresh starts" in which characters renounce the past and try to remake their world (55). The fourth of these fresh starts involves the education of Clara and her brother, their meeting of the Pleyel siblings, and the remodeling of Mettingen—the family farm along the banks of the Schuylkill—as a sanctuary of Enlightenment values. Under the custody of their maiden aunt, the young Clara and Theodore enjoy a liberal upbringing: "Our social pleasures were subject to no unreasonable restraints. We were instructed in most branches of useful knowledge, and were saved from the corruption and tyranny of boarding schools" (19). "Our education," Clara writes, "had been modeled by no religious standard. We were left to the guidance of our own understanding, and the casual impressions society might make upon us" (20). Theodore's considerable inheritance frees him from hard labor, making it possible to live a life devoted to leisure and learning. The enlightened and liberal Wielands gradually withdraw themselves "from the society of others" (19). Emancipated from oppressive constraints and

¹² The cloistral story is often tragic. Among the tragic examples of the form, we must—following Male—include works like Melville's *Bartleby* (a sort of cloistral tragicomedy), Warren's "Blackberry Winter," and McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. I would also include two that I analyze in the present study: Porter's "Noon Wine" and Welty's "The Hitch-Hikers." Finally, I would add to this category a tragic novel like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which Male was unable to write about in 1979.

¹³ Brown likewise suggests the tragic nature of his novel when he inserts a metafictional reference concerning a German book described as "a tragedy" (62). The book, says Clara, "was minute and diffuse, and dictated by an adventurous and lawless fancy. It was a chain of audacious acts, and unheard-of disasters" (62). As Clara tells it, the narrative depicted "the conflict of headlong passions," which "were portrayed in wild numbers, and with terrific energy" (62). The German tragedy hints at the "the conflict of headlong passions" in Brown's own novel, for the tragic fiction of *Wieland* will also culminate in "audacious acts, and unheard-of disasters."

customs, and content with nothing more than “the guidance of [their] own understanding,” they at last cloister themselves within the borders of Mettingen. Readers are left to infer that the younger Wielands’ proclivity for social isolation originates in their father’s religious fundamentalism, which led him “to retire into solitude, and shut out every species of society” (12). One of the novel’s several ironies is that this forward-looking family unknowingly inherits the sins and pathologies of their father. To complicate matters further, their “liberated” severance from traditional religion and moral authority only compounds their susceptibility to tragedy: in their shrine to reason at Mettingen, the Wielands can happily (and naively) evade troubling facts about themselves and their world.

We cannot grasp *Wieland*’s tragic import without considering Mettingen, the setting in which the main action occurs. After their father’s unexplainable death in the temple, the young Wielands inherit the property. The relatively isolated Mettingen is symbolically and dramatically integral to the ensuing tragedy. An “isolated, circumscribed setting,” according to Roy Male, is present in all works of cloistral fiction: “Reflecting its origins in drama, all or nearly all of the action occurs in one place. New Characters are introduced as if they were entering a stage, and movement is limited. The setting may not be actually fixed . . . but it is enclosed” (15). Although Clara recounts the events of her grandfather’s and father’s lives in Europe—as well as the events of her flight back to the Old World in the novel’s denouement—the main incidents she narrates, including the stranger’s disruption of the Wieland circle’s sense of tranquility, occur within the borders of Mettingen. Moreover, Clara describes Carwin’s first appearance as his “entrance on the stage” (41). (Theatrical references and images surface throughout the novel.) Brown’s rural setting of Mettingen establishes the “prior sense of regional, institutional, or domestic identity” requisite for the intruder’s “threat of displacement” to take effect (Male 15). And it is only by the stranger’s violation of the cloistral space that Clara’s evasions are revealed.

Clara portrays Mettingen as a New World Eden, built paradoxically on Enlightenment values, whose inhabitants imagine they have overcome the benightedness of the past and will

avoid a future “fall.” This false sense of peace and security is necessary to the fulfillment of the later tragic peripeteia. Male states that “[t]he typical beginning of cloistral stories establishes a feeling of either claustrophobia or its opposite, claustrophilia” (19). Brown, through the narrative consciousness of Clara, creates a mood of claustrophilia at Mettingen, “the deeply satisfying sense of security and energy conservation produced by the knowledge that one belongs to a cloister or a fireside circle” (Male 19). During the “[s]ix years of uninterrupted happiness” (Brown 23) spent in the secure surroundings of Mettingen, “[t]he future, like the present, was serene. Time was supposed to have only new delights in store” (20).

The symbolic centerpiece of the Wielands’ utopian illusion comes in the form of their father’s temple. The temple, a monument to the elder Wieland’s religiosity and the site of his mysterious combustion, is remade into a neoclassical shrine dedicated to reason and high culture:

The temple was no longer assigned to its ancient use. From an Italian adventurer, who erroneously imagined that he could find employment for his skill, and sale for his sculptures in America, my brother had purchased a bust of Cicero. . . . We hired the same artist to hew a suitable pedestal from a neighbouring quarry. This was placed in the temple, and the bust rested upon it. Opposite this was a harpsichord, sheltered by a temporary roof from the weather. This was the place of resort in the evenings of the summer. Here we sung, and talked, and read, and occasionally banqueted. Every joyous and tender scene most dear to my memory, is connected with this edifice. Here the performances of our musical and poetical ancestor were rehearsed. Here my brother’s children received the rudiments of their education; here a thousand conversations, pregnant with delight and improvement, took place; and here the social affections were accustomed to expand, and the tear of delicious sympathy to be shed. (22)

More than anything else, this passage betrays the siblings’ stunning naïveté and tendency toward evasion. For instance, the adventurer’s failure to sell his classically-inspired sculptures suggests

that Ciceronian virtues of eloquence and reason, which Theodore admires above all else, are merely empty gestures amid the harsh realities of early America. What is more, Clara associates only the most “joyous and tender scenes” of her life with the temple, even though it was the site of her father’s ghastly end when she was just six years old (22). Her remarks here directly contradict her despondent statements at the end of the previous chapter, when she tells readers that the impressions her father’s death “made upon” her “can never be effaced”: “[A]s I advanced in age, and became more fully acquainted with these facts, they oftener became the subject of my thoughts” (18). Both Clara and Theodore intentionally filter out unpleasant facts that would undermine their sense of peace and stability.

The characters’ cloistered life at Mettingen steadily reveals their separation from and indifference to the cruel circumstances affecting the broader society. Clara demonstrates as much in her comments on war:

The sound of war had been heard, but it was at such a distance as to enhance our enjoyment by affording objects of comparison. The Indians were repulsed on the one side, and Canada was conquered on the other. Revolutions and battles, however calamitous to those who occupied the scene, contributed in some sort to our happiness, by agitating our minds with curiosity, and furnishing causes of patriotic exultation. (23)

Anthony Galluzzo sees the passage as an aestheticization of war that “certainly borrows from Burke’s theory of sublimity,” in which terror perceived at an aesthetic distance may evoke a profoundly sublime experience (255-56). As Galluzzo says of the passage, “War, significantly reduced to a ‘sound,’ is enjoyed in a state of contemplative repose” (255). In spite of the “calamitous” nature of the events—the “repulsed” Indians, a “conquered” Canada, the “Revolutions and battles”—Clara describes them as though they were pleasing objects for leisurely contemplation. Attempting to maintain their illusion of prelapsarian security, Clara and company minimize the horrors of war, turning them into causes for “happiness” and “patriotic

exultation.” This reduction of the atrocities of war to the sentimental banalities of leisured life further reveals the rampant self-delusion among the Wieland coterie; or, perhaps more to the point, it reveals a willful suppression of the tragic sense of life.

This lack of tragic awareness arises often in the novel, such as when Pleyel tries to convince Theodore Wieland to go to Europe to collect his inheritance. Clara says that should her brother accept the offer, “he must exchange present certainties for what was distant and contingent,” as if life at Mettingen were somehow certain and without contingency (33). She also wonders what her brother would gain “in a land of turbulence and war,” as if the frontier surrounding Mettingen were not marked by both (33). The cloistral setting of Mettingen, a false Eden built with “the service of African slaves,” grants the characters a brief asylum from inconvenient facts, affording them the pretense of being able to live outside of time (11). Brown’s characters are prisoners to what David Noble has argued is “the central myth of our civilization—the transcendence of time” (xi). But Carwin’s unexpected arrival will disabuse Mettingen’s inhabitants of their utopian fantasies, precipitating their fall into the violent tempest of the historical world.

The intrusion of the mysterious stranger reveals the deep inadequacies of Clara’s secluded life. After convincing herself to go on writing of her first meeting with Carwin, whom she calls the “most fatal and potent of mankind,” Clara initially focuses on his “harmless appearances” (41):

His pace was a careless and lingering one, and had none of that gracefulness and ease which distinguish a person with certain advantages of education from a clown. His gait was rustic and awkward. His form was ungainly and disproportioned. Shoulders broad and square, his head drooping, his body of uniform breadth, supported by long and lank legs, were the ingredients of his frame. His garb was not ill adapted to such a figure. A slouched hat, tarnished by the weather, a coat of thick grey cloth, cut and wrought, as it seemed, by a

country tailor, blue worsted stockings, and shoes fastened by thongs, and deeply discoloured by dust, which brush had never disturbed, constituted his dress. (41-42)

Clara admits to finding “nothing remarkable in these appearances” (42). Yet Clara’s response to Carwin’s appearances unintentionally exposes the debilitating effects of her isolation from the outside world: “I cannot tell why I gazed upon them, on this occasion, with more than ordinary attention, unless it were that such figures were seldom seen by me, except on the road or field” (42). Within the borders of Mettingen such country “clowns” are nowhere to be seen, since its “lawn was only traversed by men whose views were directed to the pleasures of the walk, or the grandeur of the scenery” (42). Brown, through the voice of his frequently unreliable narrator, points up the dangers of social isolation. Life at Mettingen severely hinders Clara’s understanding of life in the broader society. For Clara, a stroll through the grounds at Mettingen represents a rarefied, aestheticized activity accessible only to those sensitive enough to appreciate the “pleasures” and “grandeur of the scenery”; the perambulations of a common laborer or itinerant bumpkin are quite beyond her elitist worldview.

But Carwin’s ragged appearances—and the tension between appearance and reality is everywhere in the novel—belie his otherworldly aura. Despite his rough looks, Clara still cannot tell why she observed him “with more than ordinary attention” (42). She applies her obsessive empiricism to the figure of Carwin, “drawing, from outward appearances, those inferences with respect to the intellectual history of this person, which experience affords us” (42). Nevertheless, Carwin’s mystique only grows once Clara hears his voice; his words, she confesses, “affected me as somewhat singular, but what chiefly rendered them remarkable, was the tone that accompanied them. It was wholly new” (43). Clara finds herself overcome with emotion, unable to express how or why the stranger’s voice affects her: “It imparted to me an emotion altogether involuntary and incontrollable” (43). By insinuating himself into her consciousness, Carwin begins to undermine something Clara values dearly: her quasi-religious faith in empirical evidence and reason. Rarely

before have her emotions so overruled her rational faculties. The logical discordance between Carwin's unkempt appearance and his "mellifluous" voice suggests as much: "My fancy had conjured up a very different image. A form, an attitude, and garb, were instantly created worthy to accompany such elocution; but this person was, in all visible respects, the reverse of this phantom. Strange as it may seem, I could not speedily reconcile myself to this disappointment" (43). This first encounter with Carwin causes Clara's irrational mind, long dormant in her isolation at Mettingen, to reassert itself.

The uncanny figure of Carwin conjures certain archetypal and supernatural associations.¹⁴ Clara simply cannot comprehend him. She sinks "into a fit of musing," during which she ponders every feature of the stranger's countenance and concludes that what she sees there is ineffable (42). She begins to sense the disruptive power—partly sexual—that Carwin wields over her. When Pleyel describes meeting the mysterious Carwin three years earlier during a trip to Spain, readers learn that the latter was "seated on a stone" among the ancient ruins of "the scite of the theatre of old Saguntum" (54). Brown could not have chosen a more symbolically charged setting for a first encounter with Carwin: he thrives on ruination and the subversion of order, including an individual's psychological and spiritual order. That he sits upon the site of an ancient theater is even more telling, considering his vocal "performances" and the "role" he plays in hastening the Wieland murders, which come to seem as "preordained as a Greek tragedy" (Manly 317). To be fair, Carwin does carry out some of his biloquistic schemes simply to escape being caught in certain incriminating situations, though this in no way cancels out his more sinister aims.

In spite of his better qualities, his learnedness and eloquence, Carwin is more destroyer than creator, more devil than angel. Surely Donald Ringe is correct that Carwin's motives, "never

¹⁴ Carwin's uncanny characteristics are consistent with the stranger figure of the classic cloistral story. "With the entrance of the stranger," writes Roy Male, "the mythic impinges upon the normal human world" (19). The intruder "may resemble various archetypal figures: Mephistopheles, Satan, the trickster, and so forth," and he usually exudes "a slightly supernatural quality" (20). The strangers of cloistral fiction "are almost always potential saviors, destroyers, or ambiguous combinations of both" (21).

pure nor untinged with selfishness, increasingly darken as he continues to act” (*Charles Brockden Brown* 40). Carwin himself knows that his vocal deceptions have set into motion something truly destructive. He displays (or feigns displaying) remorse for some of the events, but he also admits succumbing to a perverse pleasure. In recounting the trickery he carries out on Pleyel and Theodore, Carwin tells Clara that his “passion for mystery, and a species of imposture, which I deemed harmless, was thus awakened afresh. . . . I cannot convey to you an adequate idea of the kind of gratification which I derived from these exploits; yet I meditated nothing” (150). Although Carwin claims he “meditated nothing” in his deceiving of Pleyel and Theodore, he confesses that “the daemon of mischief” seized him when it came to Clara (150): “Hence a vague project occurred to me, to put this courage to the test. A woman capable of recollection in danger, of warding off groundless panics, of discerning the true mode of proceeding, and profiting by her best resources, is a prodigy. I was desirous of ascertaining whether you were such an one” (151). Carwin, according to Ringe, comes off “as a rather cold and heartless villain” who, regardless of his remarkable intelligence, “falls easy prey to fallacious reasoning and is incapable of resisting the temptation to use his power” (*Charles Brockden Brown* 41).

The paradigmatic outsider of cloistral fiction arrives as if unconsciously summoned by the insiders of the narrative: “Though there is no logical reason for the entrance of the stranger, it is equally true that he comes as if in answer to some unuttered call. . . . This is probably a fictional way of saying that mysterious intruders tend to be representative of what man has become alienated from: God, the past, nature, other people, himself” (Male 21). The “unuttered call” to which Carwin seems to respond may be a call from within the unconscious minds of Clara and her brother, both of whom—despite their supposed fealty to Enlightenment values—are predisposed to irrational impulses, which they naturally strive to suppress. Soon after the introduction of Carwin, Clara’s world rapidly darkens, both literally and figuratively. The day after the encounter is “one of darkness and storm” (44). The foreshadowing of things to come is obvious enough. From this juncture forward, as William M. Manly points out, “Clara’s

involuntary fantasies soon veer to a morbid preoccupation with her father's mysterious death and her own legacy of possible madness" (317). In spite of her declarations of reason and empiricism, Clara remains prone, like her father and brother, to brooding on the irrational and supernatural. Carwin's arrival heightens the responsiveness of an inherited trait that has remained mostly dormant. The meeting of Carwin, along with the seemingly supernatural occurrences in the closet and in the recess, moves Clara closer to "the private hell of doubt and uncertainty" pervading the novel's climax (Manly 317). Her future narrating self, having already suffered the tragic events of the narrative, reflects on human irrationality and laments her own lack of foresight: "So flexible, and yet so stubborn, is the human mind. So obedient to impulses the most transient and brief, and yet so unalterably observant of the direction which is given to it! How little did I then foresee the termination of that chain, of which this may be regarded as the first link?" (44). All will terminate in death and madness.

Carwin's entrance on the scene entails a complete destabilizing of the Wieland circle's perceived epistemological and ontological certainties. Clara contemplates this instability as she sits alone by her window after the passing of the storm. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Why was my mind absorbed in thoughts ominous and dreary? Why did my bosom heave with sighs, and my eyes overflow with tears? Was the tempest that had just passed a signal of the ruin which impended over me? . . . Something whispered that the happiness we at present enjoyed was set on mutable foundations. Death must happen to all. Whether our felicity was to be subverted by it to-morrow, or whether it was ordained that we should lay down our heads full of years and honor, was a question no human being could solve. At other times, these ideas seldom intruded. I either forbore to reflect upon the destiny that is reserved for all men, or the reflection was mixed up with images that disrobed it of terror; but now the uncertainty of life occurred to me without any of its usual and alleviating accompaniments. I said to myself, we must die.

Sooner or later, we must disappear for ever from the face of the earth. Whatever be the links that hold us to life, they must be broken. This scene of existence is, in all its parts, calamitous. The greater number is oppressed with immediate evils, and those, the tide of whose fortunes is full, how small is their portion of enjoyment, since they know that it will terminate. (45)

This is the vision of human suffering at the heart of Brown's tragedy of evasion. Clara senses that her "present happiness" rests on "mutable foundations," that the stable world in which she imagines herself living is but a chimera. She briefly attains tragic awareness, recognizing the fragility of her own life and the mutability of existence itself. And she admits, with more candor than at any other point in the novel, the "calamitous" reality of her situation. But Clara quickly ignores this moment of frightening clarity, reverting to her standard evasive tactics: "For some time I indulged myself, without reluctance, in these gloomy thoughts; but at length, the dejection which they produced became insupportably painful. I endeavored to dissipate it with music" (46). Carwin, among other things, is a *memento mori*, reminding the residents of Mettingen that their pastoral seclusion cannot gainsay life's "mutable foundations."

Distilling what he sees as the principal elements of tragedy, John Morreall asserts that "[l]ife is full of tension, struggle, and danger, and our success or failure often depends on chance factors that we do not understand" (9). Carwin's mysterious arrival represents such a chance factor: his entrance unveils the latent irrationalities dwelling within Clara and plunges her ordered world into chaos. Moreall contends that tragic protagonists "prefer the physically and cognitively safe—the familiar, normal, routine, or standard. Unanticipated and unfamiliar events are threatening. Tragedy has a low tolerance for cognitive dissonance—for something that does not fit what we already know or believe" (24). Not unlike other tragic evaders that we will encounter, Clara relies on the routine, the familiar, the unthreatening. The cloistral setting of Mettingen has heretofore acted as a sanctuary from external chaos, protecting Clara and her friends from physical and psychological harm. Within this unmolested space, Clara could rest assured that her

senses did not deceive her. But Carwin, most insidiously through his biloquism, blurs the lines between that which *is* and that which *seems*. After Carwin perpetrates his first vocal deceptions in Clara's bedroom—an act also connoting the threat of sexual violation—Clara admits to the destruction of her sense of security and tranquility: “How had my ancient security vanished! That dwelling, which had hitherto been an inviolate asylum, was now beset with danger to my life. That solitude, formerly so dear to me, could no longer be endured” (49). Carwin's deceptions pose a serious challenge to Clara's cherished worldview. And yet, though she acknowledges the illusoriness of her security, Clara clings stubbornly to her old habits of thinking.

Unlike comic heroes—who tend to open themselves up to uncertainties and incongruities—tragic heroes stick to their conventional ways of knowing, refusing “to call into question the categories and patterns of thought that they inherit” (Morreall 25). Clara's inability to consider phenomena from outside her epistemological framework merely hastens the inevitable tragedy. After her initial meeting with Carwin, Clara undergoes several experiences that defy her ability to reason. Her nightmare while sleeping in the recess along the riverbank is a case in point:

Either the uneasiness of my posture, or some slight indisposition molested my repose with dreams of no cheerful hue. After various incoherences had taken their turn to occupy my fancy, I at length imagined myself walking, in the evening twilight, to my brother's habitation. A pit, me thought, had been dug in the path I had taken, of which I was not aware. As I carelessly pursued my walk, I thought I saw my brother, standing at some distance before me, beckoning and calling me to make haste. He stood on the opposite edge of the gulph. I mended my pace, and one step more would have plunged me into this abyss, had not some one from behind caught suddenly my arm, and exclaimed, in a voice of eagerness and terror, “Hold! Hold!” (51).

That the dream takes place in the “evening twilight” hints at all things unknowable, and at the faultiness of human perception. (Brown will continue to use twilight imagery—with its

suggestions of dimness, obscurity, and liminality—elsewhere in the novel, such as when Clara confronts Carwin in her chamber [144].) The abyss that Clara sees is a figurative foreshadowing of the abyss of irrational violence into which she will plummet after Carwin’s arrival. Theodore’s beckoning, moreover, seems to augur his future attempts at murdering his sister. Clara struggles to make sense of this dream and of the subsequent voice she hears. She assures readers of her goodness and sensibility, perplexed as to why such mysterious misfortunes should befall her: “what had I done to deserve to be made the victim of malignant passions?” (53).

For someone who asserts the primacy of reason and sensory data—especially early in the novel—Clara repeatedly finds herself in situations which undermine her epistemological arrogance. Although Clara seeks to identify the causes of the strange happenings at Mettingen, she nonetheless comes across things which permit no rational understanding. As she exclaims after irrationally mistaking Pleyel for Carwin, “What is man, that knowledge is so sparingly conferred upon him! that his heart should be wrung with distress, and his frame be exanimated with fear, though his safety be encompassed within impregnable walls! What are the bounds of human imbecility!” (80). Clara, in one of her more honest moments, concedes human frailty and limitation; it is an acknowledgment, however transitory, of tragic reality.

Yet, in the novel’s conclusion, Clara attempts to rationalize the narrative’s irrational events by appending a pat cautionary message to the closing paragraph: “If Wieland had framed juster notions of moral duty, and of the divine attributes; or if I had been gifted with ordinary equanimity or foresight, the double-tongued deceiver would have been baffled and repelled” (181). Her message may fulfill the obligatory didacticism of the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility, but it comes across as false to the earlier tragic events of the narrative. If being honest with herself and her readers, Clara knows she cannot make sense of the senseless murder and mayhem she has witnessed. She assigns blame for something inexplicably malevolent to the simple “errors of the sufferers” (181). These unconvincing concluding remarks do not agree with the tone of despair Clara expresses in the novel’s opening pages. She first softens her words by

stating that her tale will serve the didactic purpose of “show[ing] the immeasurable evils that flow from an erroneous or imperfect discipline” (7). But then she goes on to say that “[t]he sentiment that dictates my feelings is not hope. Futurity has no power over my thoughts. To all that is to come I am perfectly indifferent. With regard to myself, I have nothing more to fear. Fate has done its worst. Henceforth I am callous to misfortune” (7).

Clara’s hopeless and resigned tone set readers up for a story that will disallow simplistic solutions. Despite the grisly and possibly inexplicable incidents of the narrative—the patriarch’s spontaneous combustion, Theodore’s murder of his family, and so forth—Clara feels compelled to insert ready-made explanations to render the unknowable knowable: she is determined to salvage her foundering Enlightenment philosophy no matter the cost. However, if we conceive of the novel as attempting to suggest the tragic repercussions of evasion, then Clara’s inconsistencies and contradictions seem less like aesthetic defects and more like crucial aspects of Brown’s formal design.

Wieland, in the midst of the Enlightenment, cautions readers about the persistence of human folly and frailty; there is always, Brown seems to say, a price to be paid for evading the limitations of our intellectual and moral capacities.¹⁵ Brown’s vision of evasion undercuts the author’s own early utopian thinking, challenging the cult of Godwinian rationalism and revolutionary idealism. Such tragic pessimism was perhaps a strange position for a fiction writer to hold in the young Republic, yet it established a nay-saying attitude that many future American writers would follow. A primary task for American tragic writers, of whatever era, has been to record the collision of the ideal of innocence with the reality of guilt. Brown’s tragedy of evasion,

¹⁵ Brown’s tragedy of evasion denies utopian notions of perfectibility, which are evasions of humanity’s morally ambiguous entanglements. The author’s tragic vision corresponds to Melville’s critique of utopianism in his poem “A Reasonable Constitution”: “What though Reason forged your scheme? / ’Twas Reason dreamed the Utopia’s dream: / ’Tis dream to think that Reason can / Govern the reasoning creature, man” (892-93).

adroitly exploiting elements of the cloistral tale, dramatizes this conflict more powerfully than any other novel of the early national period.

The Further Development of American Tragic Fiction

In his preface to *Edgar Huntly*—a frontier Gothic romance which contains its own tragic elements—Brown discusses American fiction writing in a way that would come to characterize many of the declarations of literary nationalism in the nineteenth century. The young author demands new themes and “new motives to curiosity” for the American “moral painter” (641). The “field of investigation, opened to us by our own country,” Brown argues, “should differ essentially” from that of Europe (641). Not content to work entirely in the European tradition, merely transposing “[p]uerile superstition and exploded manners,” as well as “Gothic castles and chimeras,” Brown insists on an American literature preoccupied with autochthonous subject matter: “The sources of amusement to the fancy and instruction to the heart, that are peculiar to ourselves, are equally numerous and inexhaustible” (641). As we have seen, Brown was a shrewd observer of the evasions of eighteenth-century America, which include the fantasy of innocence and the belief in ahistorical existence. Long before other imaginative writers, he saw the potential for tragedy to be derived from native conditions.

But Brown’s tragic vision in *Wieland*, as well as the tragic visions we find in the works of later authors like Hawthorne and Melville, did not arise in a cultural vacuum. The tragic sense in America can partly be traced back to the Puritanism of seventeenth-century New England, with its fixation on original sin and innate depravity. As William H. Shurr has pointed out, “obsessive preoccupation with the forces defined by calvinism has determined our perception of the tragic” (121). Yet Shurr interprets the legacy of Calvinism on future American tragedians too narrowly. He claims that “the calvinist heritage” imposed a “crippling limitation” on American writers, leaving “room for only one real evil; no other sin than the sexual can set the American conscience reverberating so loudly” (123). While there is much in this—the author is persuasive when demonstrating the sexual emphasis of Eugene O’Neill’s dramatic tragedies—Shurr neglects the

many other Calvinistic aspects, formal and thematic, detectable in American tragic fiction: the persistence of evil, inescapable guilt, fatalism and a sense of “predestination,” human nature/psychology as radically flawed, the imagery of light and darkness, figurations of Satan.¹⁶ Leslie Fiedler understood the Calvinist connection well: “[I]t is, indeed, in their efforts to come to terms with a Puritan heritage, to render its insights in secular terms, that our chief nineteenth-century novelists reach the level of tragedy” (430).¹⁷ The old Calvinist dogma, as revived by people like Jonathan Edwards during the Great Awakening, may have lost much of its religious force by the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth century, but writers of tragic fiction brilliantly repurposed some of its constituent parts to expose the shallowness and hypocrisy of both the new utopian optimism and the old Puritan authoritarianism (as Hawthorne would do time and again).

By the nineteenth century, would-be American tragedians could draw from a rich fund of homegrown and European sources: the Calvinism of old New England, the vulnerability of the Enlightenment-era Adamic figure, post-Revolution anxiety, the stain of slavery, the example of classical and Elizabethan tragedy, and so forth. But the literary form itself was undergoing a sea change. Despite the existence of a popular theater in America, dramatic tragedy never fully took hold until the twentieth century, when playwrights like Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller endeavored self-consciously to refine and recontextualize traditional models.¹⁸ The

¹⁶ Melville thought that the “great power of blackness” in Hawthorne “derive[d] its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance” (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 73).

¹⁷ Fiedler also saw how Hawthorne and Melville “engage in a common attempt to redeem the complex values of Puritanism from religion to art. It is hard to find a name for their view of the world; but perhaps the term ‘tragic Humanism’ will do as well as any” (432). In the conclusion, I will discuss the American writers treated in this dissertation as “tragic humanists,” defining “tragic humanism” in more detail than Fiedler.

¹⁸ There were some exceptions. For example, Thomas Godfrey’s *Prince of Parthia* (1765) was the first dramatic tragedy written by an American (and the first to be performed by professional actors). But it is a pastiche of English and European tragic conventions, a play set in ancient times and distant lands that does

nineteenth century saw a steady rise in literacy and a consequent demand for fiction. “It should not be surprising,” writes David Lenson, “to observe that tragedy followed the changes in generic predominance that took place during the eighteenth century, when drama was on the decline and the lyric and novel in the ascendant” (5). The lyric and the novel may have superseded drama in popularity, but theatrical elements would continue to supply writers of American tragic fiction with vitalizing metaphors and images. The situation is nicely summed up by Alan Ackerman, Jr.: “The lack of a standardized, ‘legitimate’ theater did not betoken a society without theater, but, on the contrary, it enabled a theater that, like a living organism, spread into new forms in order to survive” (39).¹⁹

The struggle for American writers in the nineteenth century was to reimagine forms commensurate with a rapidly expanding democracy. The “new motives to curiosity” that Brown had called for in his preface to *Edgar Huntly* were germane not only to American themes and subjects, but also to experimental literary modes. Traditional formal and generic boundaries, adamantly adhered to during the neoclassical period in Britain and Europe, were soon reshaped and recombined in the young Republic. In his study of the transformation of the epic genre in America, John P. McWilliams writes that by 1810 there was a “breakdown of generic categories” (2). According to McWilliams, “Romance, novel, history, and epic became overlapping rather than discrete literary types; their infinite possibilities for blending produced exhilarating possibilities as well as pathless confusion” (2). This “liberating generic flexibility,” while also occurring to some degree across the Atlantic, was of the essence in America (McWilliams 5).

not deal with tragic themes drawn from life in the American colonies. For more on Godfrey’s rather obscure play, see F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*, page 427.

¹⁹ Ackerman elaborates on some of the ways in which theatrical elements were adopted by the newer literary forms: “The literature between 1830 and 1900 reveals a remarkably fruitful proliferation of theatrical metaphors, not simply of the “all the world’s a stage” variety but also more obliquely in the self-referentiality of theatrical voices, theatrical bodies, and the stages or platforms upon which fictional and real characters ‘perform.’ Moreover, formal aspects of theater are reimagined in nineteenth-century America as being themselves representable in prose and poetry” (Ackerman 38-39).

Tragedy could no longer be accepted as a rarefied, aristocratic genre; it now had to accommodate the broad and variegated experiences of life in a tumultuous democracy. “It was not the age,” says Jeannette King, “that provided inadequate material for tragedy, but the old forms that were inadequate to convey the tragedy of the age” (38).²⁰ Although King is writing about the development of the tragic novel in Victorian Britain, her words likewise apply to the modal conception of tragedy that was concurrently taking root in America.

With class lines being blurred and social hierarchies rearranged, particularly in the Jacksonian era, it makes sense that literary forms and genres also underwent alterations. Tocqueville, that keenest observer of America in the nineteenth century, took note of the differences between the literatures of aristocratic and democratic societies. Writing just prior to the explosion of originality in American letters, the Frenchman commented on the fact that many authors in the United States “are English in substance, and still more so in form” (416). Such writers “transport into the midst of democracy the ideas and literary fashions which are current among the aristocratic nations they have taken for their model” (416). Tocqueville believed that Americans had, at that time, “no literature,” but he was “convinced” they would “ultimately” have one with a “character [that] will be peculiarly its own” (416). Nevertheless, he was able to generalize about some of the differences between aristocratic and democratic literatures. Unlike aristocratic societies, which maintain a “code” for literary creation “at once strict and traditional” (416), democratic societies will produce a literature that cannot be “subjected to strict rules, and it is impossible that any such rules should ever be permanent” (418). The style and form of a democratic literature “will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, over-burdened, and, loose[.] . . .

²⁰ But in turning to fiction for “new versions of tragedy,” nineteenth-century writers “did not completely reject traditional tragic theory and practice” (King 39). Because the writers of the era were far more steeped in the classics than most educated people today, “it is unlikely that any writer could form his ideas of tragedy in a void. Whether he imitated, modified, or rejected the tradition, it is important to understand his feelings for, and relationship to, this classical inheritance” (King 39). American authors like Hawthorne and Melville shared this complex relationship to the tragic tradition.

[L]iterary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigour of thought—frequently of great variety and singular fecundity. The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste” (418-19). Within the American democratic matrix, in which “[r]anks are . . . intermingled and confounded,” a new tragic fiction assumed new shapes (Tocqueville 417). The hybrid fictional work, which David S. Reynolds defines as an “open text,” offered American writers of the nineteenth century—and into the twentieth—a “democratic meeting place for numerous idioms and voices from other kinds of contemporary texts” (9). American tragic fictions, beginning with Brown’s *Wieland*, are dynamic open texts, melding modes and genres, classical and contemporary, to portray the varieties of tragic experience in a boisterous democracy.

It was Herman Melville who first articulated a sort of poetics of American tragedy, taking Nathaniel Hawthorne as the ideal personification of the fiction writer as tragedian, the supreme practitioner of “the great Art of telling the truth.” In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville—adopting the persona of a Virginian summering in Vermont—writes of the “great power of blackness” in Hawthorne that “fixes and fascinates” him, a tragic darkness which “furnishes the infinite obscure of [Hawthorne’s] back-ground” (74). This background is not unlike the one “against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits” (74). Using Shakespeare as his touchstone—a paragon of tragic vision for Hawthorne and, as becomes increasingly apparent in the essay, himself—Melville lauds the playwright for “those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality” (74). But if Shakespeare’s tragic perception inspires American fiction writers, they must still toil under different political and historical conditions. What is bardolatry “for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life?” (76). Melville, audacious as ever, assures readers that American Shakespeares are coming: “Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the

Ohio” (76). The “great mistake,” as Melville sees it, is that too many Americans believe that “the great American literary genius” will arrive dressed “in the costume of Queen Elizabeth’s day” (76). Yet Melville, who undoubtedly has himself in mind as much as Hawthorne, knows that “great geniuses are part of the times; they themselves are the times; and possess a correspondent coloring” (77). If American tragedians were to emerge, with a range and vision equivalent to Shakespeare’s, they would have to exploit the tragic materials intrinsic to their own time and place.

A common complaint, from James Fenimore Cooper to Lionel Trilling, was that America’s cultural and historical soil was too shallow to yield the greatest literary art.²¹ A special problem for our writers, then, was to discover a way to make serious literature from the supposed thinness of American society and culture. Melville, however, would not hear of it. The resources for great literature were inexhaustible, and America was a veritable treasure trove for the ambitious literary imagination. Although endowed with a realist’s sense of tragic limits, Melville—at least the pre-*Moby-Dick* Melville—was not above the romanticist’s vision of unbridled possibility, even going so far as to invoke the Adamic figure. He refused to believe that the world had turned “grey and grizzled,” that it had “lost that fresh charm which she wore of old, and by virtue of which the great poets of past times made themselves what we esteem them to be” (77-78). “The world is as young today,” he declares, “as when it was created; and this Vermont morning dew is as wet to my feet, as Eden’s dew to Adam’s” (78). There still existed “new charms and mysteries . . . for this latter generation to find. . . . The trillionth part has not yet been

²¹ For Cooper’s comments on the “poverty of materials” in American life, see his *Notions of the Americans*, especially pages 156-161. For Trilling’s view of the matter, see “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” in *The Liberal Imagination*, pages 212-13 in particular. Trilling realizes that American society in the twentieth century had “become more complex and pressing. And even so we do not have the novel that touches significantly on society, on manners” (213). A short critique of Trilling’s position can be found in Ralph Ellison’s “Society, Morality and the Novel,” an essay included in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, pages 714-18. For a fuller critique of the idea of the thinness of American culture, including a critique of the accusation that America lacks a tradition in the novel of manners, see James W. Tuttleton’s *The Novel of Manners in America* (1972).

said; and all that has been said, but multiplies the avenues to what remains to be said” (78). The issue for the American fiction writer was not a dearth of resources, but instead a “superabundance of material” that had the effect of “incapacitat[ing] modern authors” (78).

With *Moby-Dick*, Melville discovered the native materials he needed to recast tragedy in the American vein. Nearly a hundred years before Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Melville was busy molding an American tragic hero (or anti-hero). Unlike Aristotle’s tragic protagonist, “a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation” (*Poetics* 73), a member of a prominent family (like Oedipus), Melville’s is a member of “the kingly commons” (*Moby-Dick* 104) who attains an “august dignity” (103). Yet Captain Ahab is also a man of uncommon qualities, related in his way to the tragic heroes of old: “He’s a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn’t speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab’s above the common” (*Moby-Dick* 78). Ahab’s often grandiloquent rhetoric suggests that Melville was following Aristotle’s rules for diction and style, writing in “a language that is pleasurably embellished” (*Poetics* 64). Ahab is at once the new democratic tragic protagonist and—in accordance with ancient tradition—“above the common.”

All of Melville’s characters, even the lowliest individual, possess a “democratic dignity” that “radiates without end from God,” who is “the centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!” (103). Perhaps anticipating the criticisms of more traditionalist critics, Melville justifies his attributing tragic grandeur to common characters:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some

ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then, against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! (104-05).

Here was a new kind of tragedy, formally and thematically, for a young democracy. Tragic situations abounded in America, even among the so-called hoi polloi. As Melville wrote much later in *Billy Budd*, “Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part. Down among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted. And the circumstances that provoke it, however trivial or mean, are no measure of its power.” Until the end of his career, Melville held fast to this democratic notion of tragedy.

A democratic tragedy, modal in its form and egalitarian in its *dramatis personae*, enabled Melville to investigate, without falsification, the sundry dilemmas and tribulations afflicting the nation and its collective psyche. Melville’s democratic tragedies—among which we might reasonably include *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Israel Potter*, *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno*, *The Confidence Man*, and *Billy Budd* (to say nothing of his many tragic poems)—attest to their author’s broad human affinities, to his sense of a universal tragic or tragicomic suffering, as applicable to ship captains as it is to scribes and African slaves. American democracy, in the ideal, conduces to sympathy for all who are burdened by this mortal coil, regardless of rank or race, thus opening our eyes to a shared vision of life as tragic. “Democracy in Melville’s writings,” according to Robert Milder, “is not set against a backdrop of universal consonance and seen as its natural expression in society and politics; it is set against a backdrop of blackness, or tragic *dissonance*, and advanced as a humanly wrought stay against nothingness and common victimhood” (*Exiled Royalties* 51). As a fortification against tragic existence, Melville saw American democracy, enfeebled and compromised though it was throughout his lifetime, as the best of all imperfect political structures. Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*, though a Burkean spokesman for king and

country, conceivably echoes Melville's own final acceptance of the shabby bulwark of American civilization: "'With mankind' . . . 'forms, measured forms, are everything'" (166-67).

While Melville saw the tragic as an ineradicable part of being itself, he never stopped criticizing those peculiarly American attitudes that turned a blind eye and deaf ear to human suffering, or wittingly or unwittingly initiated or exacerbated such suffering. We need consider only a few of his major characters. Ahab, in one reading, is a perversion of the transcendental individualist, unchecked in his extremism, relying on himself and his intuition alone, whom we can imagine mouthing Emerson's declaration from "Self-Reliance": "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it" (262). Melville's lawyer-narrator from *Bartleby*, that "eminently *safe* man," espouses the utilitarian economic values of Wall Street without perceiving—at least not at first—how such values commodify and dehumanize others (4).²² Captain Delano of *Benito Cereno* exhibits the Adamic mentality of the "new man" stretched to the point of moral obtuseness, and his incorrigibly naïve optimism disables his capacity to detect the ruse aboard the ship or recognize his and his country's complicity in the depravity of the slave trade.

These characters, whatever their considerable differences, are all *tragic evaders* in one form or another: Ahab's monomania and zealous individualism result in his evading all alternative outcomes—which are implied in the other ships and captains encountered on the journey, as well as put forth by the commonsensical Starbuck—for the crew of the *Pequod*; the lawyer's philistinism and money-making values permit him to evade any brush with the tragic

²² Melville's lawyer, though superficially resembling the more simple-minded Captain Delano, is actually one of the author's most morally mixed characters. I resist the tendentious and two-dimensional—and always popular—interpretation of the lawyer as a villainous representative of American capitalism and patriarchal power. He is on one level, and most noticeably at an early stage in the narrative, an embodiment of these things; he is frequently self-satisfied and self-serving, a conformist member of his class. But he also matures morally, struggling to comprehend and show compassion for the enigma that is Bartleby. For the two best defenses of the lawyer, which read him as a flawed but decent man, see Milton R. Stern's "Towards 'Bartleby the Scrivener'" and Dan McCall's *The Silence of Bartleby*.

facts of life, until the miserable figure of Bartleby appears on the doorstep of the law office; and Delano—like the lawyer, another of Melville’s merry bachelors²³— evades the larger politico-moral implications of the slave revolt on the *San Dominick*. Like all the works treated in this dissertation, Melville’s tragedies of evasion convey what Stanley Edgar Hyman called, referring to the fictions of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, “a bitter sense of our civilization’s falsity,” a falsity fostered and maintained by a national tendency to erect convenient illusions and thereby evade inconvenient realities—tragedy being the outcome (38).

In a letter to Hawthorne praising *The House of the Seven Gables*, Melville again points to tragedy as the great art of telling the truth. He discerns in Hawthorne “a certain tragic phase of humanity,” by which Melville means “the tragicalness of human thought in its own unbiased, native, and profounder workings” (Niemeyer 40). Far “more deeply” than other writers, Hawthorne captures “the intense feeling of the visible truth,” which Melville, playfully parodying the tone of the philosopher, defines as “the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him” (40). Through all the national evasions (public and private), through all the yea-saying half-truths about limitless progress, the tragic visionary says “NO! in thunder,” pointing to “the visible truth” without flinching (41). Put another way, the “lies” of tragic fiction tell the “truth” about those painful facts of American life from which the majority seek to shield themselves.

Tragedies of evasion, from Brown’s *Wieland* to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (and beyond), have carried out an essential function in American society, offering an outlet for what Harry Levin once described as “the dark wisdom of our deeper minds” (xii). In a country where the ideological kitsch of optimism and exceptionalism is dinned into the heads of every citizen,

²³ Melville’s bachelors are men unwedded to life in all its ironies and complications; they can afford to be successful, optimistic, and of good cheer because they have learned to shut out an entire realm of human experience—the realm of the tragic. The lawyer is one such bachelor, and Delano, captain of the *Bachelor’s Delight*, is another. For some illuminating remarks on Melville’s bachelor figures, see Richard Harter Fogle’s *Melville’s Shorter Tales*, 46, 50-51, 105, and 132.

where the citizen, in the words of George Santayana, “seems to bear lightly the sorrowful burden of human knowledge,” the American tragic writer dares to penetrate those gloomy chasms concealed by the official—and quite superficial—rhetoric of sunlight and affirmation (97). But American tragic fiction, perhaps reflecting its democratic origins, only occasionally succumbs to a vision of cosmic despair and negation; only rarely does it become “absolute tragedy,” George Steiner’s designation for a tragic work, like Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* or Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in which we are faced with “the image of man as unwanted in life,” an image of total existential and metaphysical homelessness that is “almost unendurable to human reason and sensibility” (xi-xii).²⁴

Freely mingling conventional literary idioms and listening closely to the conflicting voices of democracy, American tragic fiction often strives to balance—and thoroughly ponder the possible validity of—opposite yet complementary realms of experience: self and society, emotionality and rationality, freedom and order, past and future, sincerity and irony, belief and skepticism, pessimism and optimism, tragedy and comedy. Among these pairings, the final two are particularly telling. American tragic writers are reluctant to condemn their characters to the workings of ineluctable fate without first testing the adequacy of hopeful or comic alternatives,

²⁴ Exceptions, partial and whole, exist. *Wieland* contains many of the ingredients of absolute tragedy, but its didactic intentions, however confused and ambivalent, keep out the total dark. The darkness of absolute tragedy is a constant in Melville’s characterization of Ahab, who is quite clearly Lear-like in his brooding over what, if anything, lies behind the mask. But Ishamael, with his humor and generous spirit, furnishes the novel with a countervailing democratic ethos. Of the nineteenth-century works examined herein, Melville’s *Benito Cereno* comes nearest to absolute tragedy. One finds no ameliorating influence within the text (unless we count Melville’s exquisite artistry as its own affirmation), likely because Melville, by 1855, was unable to see a way out of the tragedy of slavery which was tearing the nation apart. Certain naturalist works, like those of Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, advance a notion of social and even biological determinism that can become nearly absolute. Naturalist tragedy, if one can speak of it, is unrelenting, relieved only by the occasional insertion of socialist or reformist rhetoric. American modernism and postmodernism, absorbing the new horrors of the twentieth century, generate some versions of absolute or near-absolute tragedy. The novels of William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy, for example, often channel an absolute sense of inescapable fate and cosmic pessimism. For Steiner, absolute tragedy demonstrates that there are “forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence” (8). There is always a terrible element involved in absolute tragedy, something like “a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood” (Steiner 9).

even if these at last prove flimsy or false. F. O. Matthiessen was right to say that the tragedian, most especially in America, “must . . . possess the power to envisage some reconciliation between such opposites, and the control to hold an inexorable balance. He must be as far from the chaos of despair as he is from ill-founded optimism” (180). Although these writers seldom give a perfectly equal hearing to the opposing sides in “the dialectic of yea and nay,” they nonetheless pay due respect to the moral tensions and ambiguities involved in American tragic experience (Kaplan 182). They attempt, to the best of their ability, to write tragedies of “the whole truth,” about which I shall have more to say in the conclusion.

As I show in the final chapter, Ralph Ellison—with the nineteenth-century examples of Douglass, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain fresh in his mind—came closer than any other American writer to fulfilling the task of Melville’s “Catskill eagle,” which can “dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces” (*Moby-Dick* 328). Ellison, the quintessential tragicomic artist and thinker for American democracy, embraces “a wisdom that is woe” and avoids “a woe that is madness,” asserting a hard-won sense of individual free will and social optimism even while magnifying tragic realities (*Moby-Dick* 328). The writers in this study, with Ellison as the synthesizing moral consciousness, believed that, to one degree or another, “democracy needn’t be founded on a shallow optimism bound to collide with experience or to leave the nation puerile in its collective evasions” (Milder 71). But before we can fruitfully begin to discuss tragedy in the twentieth century, we have to remain in the nineteenth for the next two chapters. To understand the aesthetic development of tragic fiction, after Brown’s *Wieland* and before Melville’s major phase, we must first examine Hawthorne’s vision of evasion. For it is by means of his celebrated symbolic-romance aesthetic that Hawthorne widens and deepens the American tragic imagination.

CHAPTER III

TRAGIC EVASIONS IN “NEUTRAL TERRITORY”: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HAWTHORNE’S SYMBOLIC SETTINGS IN “MY KINSMAN, MAJOR MOLINEUX” AND *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Hawthornian Symbolism and the Vision of Evasion

Hawthorne’s vision of evasion pervades several of his tragic works, and it is channeled through imagery and symbolism as much as it is through plot and character. One of the ways the author reinvents tragedy in the medium of prose fiction is by making symbolic elements the activating essentials of his art. Certain indelible Hawthornian symbols, like Hester Prynne’s scarlet letter or Reverend Hooper’s black veil, call immediate attention to themselves, their importance suggested even in the titles of the works in which they appear. Yet Hawthorne’s symbolism finds expression in more than individual objects: his settings, both landscapes and domestic spaces, are often multivalent symbols, not merely picturesque backdrops. These “functional settings,” as Patricia Ann Carlson has referred to them, involve “a process which endows material fact with imaginative significance” (11). Throughout Hawthorne’s fictive cosmos, the scenic details of a place are pregnant with figurative meanings and carry out a dynamic function, augmenting themes and conflicts which are also present in characterization and action.

I intend to read two of Hawthorne's most famous works—"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and *The Scarlet Letter* closely and extensively, explicating the relationship between symbolic setting and tragic evasion.¹ More broadly, I plan to show that Hawthorne's symbolic romance aesthetic exposes hard facts about American historical experience. Building on Brown's experiments in American tragedy, Hawthorne's fictions set out to probe certain national evasions, especially original innocence and radical freedom. As Henry Nash Smith once said of the matter:

What [Hawthorne] called 'burrowing . . . into the depths of our nature, for the purposes of psychological romance' challenged the right to an easy conscience that was claimed implicitly for every American by the Adamic myth of rebirth and innocence in the New World. For the deep truth of the human heart that Hawthorne discovered was not perfectibility but guilt. This discovery, in turn, disturbed the cheerful surface of prosperity and contentment that was supposed to prevail in American society. (21)

Of Hawthorne's major tragic works, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and *The Scarlet Letter* exemplify most completely the author's ability to weave the tragic implications of American history into the symbolic fabric of romance.² The orchestration of imagery and tone, of

¹ For my purposes, Eliseo Vivas's formulation of "the constitutive symbol" does justice to Hawthorne's symbolic complexity. Constitutive symbols, in the sphere of imaginative literature, can exist as entire works, as significant components of a work, or simultaneously as both (31). Vivas contrasts polysemous constitutive symbols with "quasi-symbols" (or "pseudo-symbols"), images or objects which unequivocally "stand for" another thing (32). Constitutive symbols operate "at profounder levels and in more complex ways" than the more common "quasi-symbol" (41). Vivas argues that constitutive symbols, highly charged with manifold feelings and associations, frequently go "beyond elucidation by discursive language" (38). As a component of a work of literature, a constitutive symbol may manifest as "a complex situation or scene . . . which gathers the significance of events preceding it and illumines the scenes or situations that follow" (39). The settings of *The Scarlet Letter* and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" are, I submit, preeminent constitutive symbols (Hester's scarlet "A" is another). Furthermore, both fictions are so richly laden with symbolism that each work, as a totality, can be accurately described as a constitutive symbol.

² This is not to slight the tragic power of tales like "Roger Malvin's Burial," "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," "Young Goodman Brown," "Rappaccini's Daughter," or "Ethan Brand." Nor is it to devalue the other major romances, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The Blithedale Romance*, and *The Marble Faun*, all of which attend to various evasions of tragic reality. These hold a place among the foundational works of

characterization and action, of form and vision is arguably more unified and balanced in these two works than anywhere else in the author's oeuvre; the ideas of original innocence and radical freedom are subjected more intensely to Hawthorne's witheringly tragic gaze. And it is, I argue, through the symbolic density of the locales in both fictions that Hawthorne can convey so much about the tribulations of American historical experience. The *what* of Hawthorne's tragic fiction, which comprises its profound moral and historical implications, can only be fully apprehended and appreciated through the *how* of his signature romance style.

The Romancer as Tragedian: Hawthorne's Symbolistic Tragic Fiction

At this point, however, some literary-historical context will help clarify Hawthorne's aesthetic contribution to the development of American tragic fiction. Symbolic settings, which Hawthorne often describes in striking detail, reinvigorate and enlarge the formal possibilities of tragedy as prescribed by Aristotle and dramatized by tragedians through the nineteenth century. We must recall that, for Aristotle, tragedy "is a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of some magnitude" (64). A tragic romance like *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, mostly fulfills this classical criterion.³ But as a nineteenth-century novelist and writer of short fiction, Hawthorne moves beyond dramatic action as arranged in plot, which Aristotle sees as the "soul" of tragedy, and exploits description and narration, which Aristotle sees as inessential (64).

American tragic fiction. But *The Scarlet Letter* and "My Kinsman" imaginatively distill Hawthorne's sense of the tragic burden of American history in a way the author's other canonical works cannot quite manage.

³ For a discussion of the novel's Aristotelian dramatic structure, see Malcolm Cowley's 1957 article "Five Acts of the Scarlet Letter." Cowley argues that Hawthorne's novel "had recaptured, for his New England, the essence of Greek tragedy" (16). Relatedly, Richard Sewall suggests that *The Scarlet Letter*, along with Melville's *Moby-Dick*, was a novelistic revival of dramatic tragedy: "As is often the case in the history of genres, a vehicle once thought trivial, a device for mere story telling, became . . . the closest modern approximation of the Greek and Elizabethan tragic theaters" (85). On the striking resemblances between the *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus and Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, see Paul Elmer More's *Shelburne Essays on American Literature*, page 118.

Conversant with the Greek plays and myths, as well as an admirer of early modern drama, Hawthorne nonetheless fashioned an elaborately symbolic-allegorical mode of tragedy that borrowed from the Romantic aesthetics of his own age. There is, as Millicent Bell suggests, an interesting irony in this: “When one recognizes how Hawthorne set himself athwart much of Romanticism, particularly its optimistic ethics—its cheerful view of the nature of men and of their relations with one another—it is astounding to realize how large a Romantic residue remains in his thinking” (32). His attitude of tragic realism notwithstanding, Hawthorne inhabited a cultural atmosphere thick with transcendental and Romantic thought, which prompted him to cultivate a “taste for symbolism and allegory [that] is obviously related to a metaphysics which saw the world as the manifestation of one essence” (13). While part of his symbolic imagination was informed by these nineteenth-century artistic and intellectual trends, Hawthorne also looked back to the religious typology of his seventeenth-century Puritan forebears, a people at once zealously opposed to signs and symbols yet descrying them everywhere in God’s handiwork. The author assimilated these divergent sources into a symbolistic style all his own, reimagining tragedy within the sphere of prose fiction. Hawthorne’s predilection for the symbolic merged with his sense of the tragic, and both took up residence in his personal aesthetics.

Hawthorne’s interest in symbolic-allegorical representation, including an interest in the symbolic-allegorical effects to be achieved with setting and scene, is a chief characteristic of his poetics of romance (as loosely outlined in his multiple prefaces).⁴ The author turned to the romance as the proper vehicle for exploring his own tragic impressions of regional and national

⁴ Since the era of Goethe and Coleridge, the term “allegory” has often been viewed as a simplistic and antiquated mode of figurative expression. Whereas allegory connotes to the modern ear fixed meanings and religious intentions, symbolism tends to imply a web of associations and significations more suitable to freewheeling post-Romantic literary practices. An admirer of the allegories of Spenser and Bunyan, Hawthorne reshaped traditional allegory to fit his own sophisticatedly tragic (even modern) sense of the world. To avoid confusion, however, I have decided to subsume Hawthorne’s allegorical mode under the umbrella terms of “symbolism” and “symbolistic,” pointing out instances of allegorical expression only when the need arises. For a historically informed understanding of the differences between allegory and symbolism, and how the two operate in Hawthorne’s fiction, see Ursula Brumm’s *American Thought and Religious Typology*, especially chapter two and chapter seven.

life, the aesthetic flexibility of the mode ensuring the free play of his symbolic imagination. Richard Chase would much later define nineteenth-century American romance as a “freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction” than the socially realistic novel of England (viii). American romance, according to Chase, inclined more “toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms” (15).⁵ Hawthorne would have likely nodded in assent to Chase’s description, seeing in it much of his own approach to fiction.

But symbolistic romance as Hawthorne typically envisioned and practiced it was the author’s way of getting at tragic *reality*, a distinctive version of Melville’s “great Art of Telling the Truth,” and not a fanciful form of escapism (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 75). It was Hawthorne’s hope that his fictions would be seen as “attempts . . . to open an intercourse with the world” (“Preface to *Twice-told Tales*” 320). As Lionel Trilling said in response to V. L. Parrington’s misreading of Hawthorne as a writer incapable of dealing with the hard stuff of reality, “The man who could raise those brilliant and serious doubts about the nature and possibility of moral perfection, the man who could keep himself aloof from the ‘Yankee reality’ and who could dissent from the orthodoxies of dissent and tell us so much about the nature of moral zeal, is of course dealing exactly with reality” (9). Hawthornian romance, then, is not an evasion of reality—be it historical, social, political, psychological, or existential—but rather a creative confrontation with it. The romancer, as Hawthorne explains in “The Custom-House,” must cast strange light over the familiar world of everyday experience. But if the writer “cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances” (28).

⁵ Beginning in the 1980s, the “New Americanists” largely rejected Chase’s thesis as ahistorical, exclusionary, and ideologically motivated. Chase’s broad claims about American literature and culture were viewed as advancing a Cold War agenda of American hegemony and exceptionalism. For proponents of this revisionism, see Nina Baym’s 1984 article “Concepts of Romance in Hawthorne’s America” (in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*) and William Ellis’s 1989 study *The Theory of the American Romance: An Ideology in American Intellectual History*. For a defense of Chase’s thesis and a refutation of the New Americanist position, see G. R. Thompson and Eric Carl Link’s *Neutral Ground: New Traditionalism and the American Romance Controversy* (1999).

This brings us back to the function of setting in Hawthorne's tragic fiction. The author notes in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* that the romancer "wishes to claim a certain latitude" in his work, and to "so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture" (351). The stylized, symbolic aesthetics of romance thus allow Hawthorne to distill and heighten (or lower) whichever formal elements he sees fit: characters, objects, images, and, of course, entire settings. There is no question that ancient and early modern tragedians also employed highly expressive settings, often via descriptions verbalized by characters within a play (as stage scenery was minimal, even nonexistent, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). We recall, for instance, "Job on the ash-heap" or "Prometheus on the crag" or "Lear on the heath" (Sewell 5). Louise Cowan views the setting of many classic tragedies, from ancient Greece to Elizabethan England, as a sort of borderland, a "no place" in which the protagonist must descend as if "into Tartarus itself" (13). This "tragic *Khora*," a netherworld from which the tragic hero cannot escape, has taken many shapes: a "stony cliff," a "bloody ground," a "blasted heath," a "dung heap," a "pit for beasts" (13).

Hawthorne also creates tragic borderlands, investing his settings "with a quality of strangeness and remoteness" ("The Custom-House" 28). Readers of his fiction enter into "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" ("The Custom-House" 28). Richard Chase likewise maintains that the world of romance "is conceived not so much as a place as a state of mind—the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle" (19). Hawthorne's settings represent, on the one hand, an extension of the psycho-mythic borderlands depicted (or implied) in many earlier tragedies and, on the other, a creative reconfiguration of actual historical places that connote a host of complex ideas and associations. Having availed himself of the formal versatility intrinsic to the nineteenth-century romance-novel

and its condensed offshoots (i.e. the sketch and the tale), Hawthorne is able to “bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture” in ways that past tragedians could not. His “neutral territories” are resultantly richer, more brimful of complex figurative meanings, than those depicted in many tragedies prior to the advent of prose fiction and the flowering of literary romanticism.

A Moonlit Tragedy of Initiation: “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

In “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” the symbolic heightening of Colonial Boston into a “neutral territory” directs our attention not only to the localized meanings implicit in action and character, but also to the tragic implications of American history embedded in and allegorized by the tale as a whole. Hawthorne’s borderland locale exhibits a symbolic spatial design that—similar to what we shall see in *The Scarlet Letter*—conveys a feeling of entrapment and limitation. But aside from its spatial purport, the setting symbolically renders the problems of perception—namely, the difficulties involved in separating appearance from reality. Moonlight saturates the entire scene; it is a defamiliarizing aesthetic device, lending the setting that “quality of strangeness and remoteness” peculiar to romance (“The Custom-House” 28). The strange moonlit imagery of the city objectifies young Robin’s interior sense of alienation and bewilderment, his sense of an adult world, morally muddled and tragically tinged, that he has yet to comprehend. The moon irradiates Robin’s journey to adulthood from the moment he enters the city, and its beguiling beams produce a variety of effects across the narrative. Moonlight unifies all the symbolic aspects of the setting, evoking an oneiric atmosphere of shape-shifting forms and menacing uncertainty. Colonial Boston, in the years prior to the American Revolution, is the epicenter of a world in tumultuous transition, just as Robin himself is caught in a tumultuous transition between boyhood and adulthood. In this unstable world, clear distinctions have become indistinct, certainties have blurred into ambiguities.

Hawthorne inverts the classic pattern of the pastoral fable: instead of retreating from the city and lighting out for the territory, young Robin retreats from his family's frontier home to seek his destiny in the city. The story takes place on a moonlit night of lunacy, riot, and mischief.⁶ To enter the city, Robin must cross the river guided by a ferryman. Hawthorne's evocation of Charon, the ferryman of Hades, contributes to the story's remarkable unity of tone. More important, however, is how the presence of the mythic ferryman quietly undermines Robin's naïve belief that he has come to the city simply to "begin the world" with help from his Tory kinsman, Major Molineux (15). The city Robin enters is an infernal city of the living dead, a nightmarish region suspended somewhere in Robin's consciousness between sleep and waking; it is a place of radical disillusionment for a hopeful youth on the cusp of adulthood.

In the moonlit streets of Boston, all that appears to be one thing may in fact be something else, and the moonlight conceals as quickly as it reveals. When sizing up his kinsman's possible abode, Robin thinks to himself: "This low hovel cannot be my kinsman's dwelling' . . . 'nor yonder old house, where the moonlight enters at the broken casement; and truly I see none hereabouts that might be worthy of him" (4). At this point in the story, Robin uncritically accepts that his perceptions correspond neatly with reality; he remains oblivious to deceptive appearances. The same moon that shines on this "low hovel" shines on some "houses more respectable in their appearance" along the same street, which Robin is "glad to perceive" (4). But as the story goes on, that which Robin perceives as "reality" grows more and more difficult to discern, and the moonlight begins to play tricks on his imagination. The streets themselves begin to take on a nightmarish quality by metamorphosing into a labyrinth: "He now became entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets, which crossed each other, and meandered at no

⁶ Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the subject of my final chapter, contains frequent parallels and allusions to Hawthorne's tale. Robin's rite of passage, like *Invisible Man*'s, degenerates into a Gothic nightmare in which nothing is what it seems. Both Robin and *Invisible Man* are swallowed up by psychological, social, and political forces they cannot comprehend. And both the fate of Robin and *Invisible Man* remain uncertain, though Ellison's epilogue suggests a hopefulness less discernable in Hawthorne's story.

great distance from the water-side” (5). The “masts of vessels” that puncture “the moonlight above the tops of buildings” resemble the tall trees of some dark forest (5). The city streets become a mazy wilderness, and an atmosphere of ominous emptiness pervades the scene: “[T]he streets were empty, the shops were closed, and lights were visible only in the second stories of a few dwelling-houses” (6).

Hawthorne wants readers to understand that Robin is virginal in more ways than one. The boy’s quest must terminate in the loss of his bumpkin “innocence.” Having tried unsuccessfully on multiple occasions to locate his kinsman, Robin wanders “into a street of mean appearance” lined with “ill-built houses” (9). The moonlight casts a beam upon “a strip of scarlet petticoat” and the “sparkle” of a pretty mistress’s eye (9). Robin is, so to speak, moonstruck by the alluring young woman, whose eyes, under the silvery lunar light, “possessed a sly freedom, which triumphed over those of Robin” (9). She tries to lure Robin inside by insisting that ““Major Molineux dwells here”” (9). The young woman, her voice “the airy counterpart of melted silver,” captivates the naïve youth, even though “he could not help doubting whether that sweet voice spoke gospel truth” (9). Here moonlight works ironically, conjuring the clichés associated with the innocence of romantic love. But the “shrewd” Robin lacks the shrewdness to discern that the woman in the red petticoat is a prostitute, and the “small, dark edifice of two stories,” whose “front apartment had the aspect of a shop for petty commodities,” is a brothel. (The woman in the red petticoat’s comments on Major Molineux also suggest that Robin’s idealized kinsman may himself be a regular client, something which deepens Hawthorne’s exploration of moral ambiguity.) Moonlight once again deceives the boy. Not all is what it seems in this city of dreadful night. Vice and guilt, sin and woe—such are the tragic realities of the world beyond Robin’s country homestead.

Leaving the woman in the scarlet petticoat, Robin’s trek through the city grows even more exhausting and disorienting: “He now roamed desperately, and at random, through the

town” (11). The desolation of the city remains palpable: “The streets lay before him, strange and desolate, and the lights were extinguished in almost every house” (11). The elusiveness of his kinsman, the rebuffs of the townsfolk whenever the Major’s name is mentioned, the simultaneously attractive and repellent strangeness of the moonlit city—all of these frustrate the youth’s best efforts. But Hawthorne’s symbolic setting intervenes just in time to grant Robin a momentary stay against confusion. The church at which he finally awaits the arrival of his kinsman promises stability and comfort, faith and domestic order, a solid rock amid the mutable phantasms of the nocturnal city. Yet even here the moonlight continues to play havoc with Robin’s perception.

The visual phenomena of light and shadow were essential elements of Hawthorne’s auctorial palette. Shifts in lighting, as Darrel Abel has shown, “not only brought out changed saliences in the visible scene, but also prompted corresponding ideas to emerge into consciousness” (88). Hawthorne discovered in the moonlight “[a]n agency for transforming vision,” a defamiliarizing device that could mark “a significant change in the apparent aspects of reality” (Abel 89). As Hawthorne’s narrator puts it, echoing ideas the author would later express in “The Custom-House,” “the moon, ‘creating, like the imaginative power, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects,’ gave something of romance to a scene, that might not have possessed it in the light of day” (12). Observing the street, Robin works hard “to define forms of distant objects, starting away with almost ghostly indistinctness, just as his eye appeared to grasp them” (12). There is something unreliable in the moonlight, as perhaps there is in an artist’s imaginative power; it is at times warm and inviting, but also cold and mocking. The world of solid things becomes airy, enchanted, whimsical, maddeningly ambiguous.

The church, being a holy place, a rock of ages, would seem to guarantee a restoration of the youth’s equilibrium and perception (11). But the boy’s disorienting ordeal is far from over. The stillness and “snore of the sleeping town,” broken intermittently by “a low, dull, dreamy

sound, compounded of many voices” and, “now and then, a distant shout,” lull Robin into a drowsy state (13). To fend off sleep, he climbs into the church window and peers inside:

There the moonbeams came trembling in, and fell down on the deserted pews, and extended along the quiet aisles. A fainter, yet more awful radiance, was hovering round the pulpit, and one solitary ray had dared to rest upon the opened page of the great bible. Had nature, in that deep hour, become a worshipper in the house, which man had builded? Or was that heavenly light the visible sanctity of the place, visible because no earthly and impure feet were within the walls? The scene made Robin’s heart shiver with a sensation of loneliness, stronger than he had ever felt in the remotest depths of his native woods; so he turned away, and sat down again before the door. (13)

Robin’s search for solace is again frustrated. The emptiness of the church, more than “the remotest emptiness of his native woods,” fills him with a terrible forlornness, undermining the church’s status as a site of living tradition and community (13). The empty church not only externalizes Robin’s emotions, but may also image forth the state of religious faith itself in the youth’s destabilizing historical moment (123).⁷ Yet the sheer loneliness and emptiness of the scene, lit by the “awful radiance” of the moonbeams and compounded for us by the

⁷ One of Hawthorne’s most perceptive early critics was Paul Elmer More, who noted the author’s penetrating insights into modern loneliness and alienation. More’s remarks on Hawthorne’s working in a post-religious era, while perhaps overstated for rhetorical effect, are instructive to read when considering the image of the empty church. According to More, when the orthodoxy of Calvinism had waned “there resulted necessarily a feeling of anguish and bereavement more tragic than any previous moral stage through which the world had passed” (123). “The loneliness of the individual,” More continues, “which had been vaguely felt and lamented by poets and philosophers of the past, took on a poignancy altogether unexampled. It needed but an artist with the vision of Hawthorne to represent this feeling as the one tragic calamity of mortal life, as the great primeval curse of sin” (123). Of course, there were other tragic calamities preoccupying Hawthorne, such as those depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* and “My Kinsman.” But a sense of modern loneliness and alienation, perhaps engendered in part by the disintegration of traditional faith, also haunts both works. And it lies at the very heart of such tales as “Wakefield,” “Young Goodman Brown,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “Ethan Brand.”

indeterminacy of the narrator's rhetorical questions, is briefly relieved by Robin's dream-reverie of his father, whom the boy sees "holding the scriptures in the golden light that shone from the western clouds" (13).

Robin's dream-reverie, transporting his thoughts "over forest, hill, and stream," momentarily restores the youth's sense of rootedness, orientation, and spiritual and familial devotion (13). His family's country farm, albeit seen only in Robin's mind, is one of the tale's most significant symbolic locales. This domestic space—hearth and home is often portrayed as a moral center in Hawthorne's fiction—initially gives Robin great comfort. He hears the reassuring voice of his devout father: "He heard the old thanksgivings for daily mercies, the old supplications for their continuance, to which he had so often listened in weariness, but which were now among his dear remembrances" (13). Unlike the denizens of the city, Robin's clergyman father offers hospitality, fellowship, and prayer to his neighbors and any "wayfaring man"—perhaps someone like Robin himself—who "might pause to drink at that fountain, and keep his heart pure by freshening the memory of home" (13). The idyllic scene, however, takes a dark turn when Robin's father speaks to his family in prayer of "the Absent One": "Then [Robin] saw them go in at the door; and when Robin would have entered also, the latch tinkled into its place, and he was excluded from his home" (14). Though temporarily restorative, the dream-reverie confronts the "shrewd" youth with one of the cold realities he has evaded the entire night: on the threshold of adulthood, he will be severed from the familial ties that have hitherto secured his identity. He can't go home again, as it were, and is left to wander the city streets, on "that evening of ambiguity and weariness," in search of his Tory kinsman, a man universally reviled by the riotous citizens (13).

Hawthorne again undercuts the youth's access to refuge and stability, returning him to the shape-shifting realm of the moonlit city. "'Am I here, or there?'" the boy cries on waking (14). Robin's ability to distinguish appearance from reality is now severely weakened. With his mind

“vibrating between fancy and reality,” the youth witnesses the mansion across from the church blur in and out of focus, “the pillars of the balcony” turning into “the tall bare stems of pines,” shrinking into “human figures,” and resettling “in their true shape and size” before undergoing a “new succession of changes” (14). But Robin is permitted another respite, another suspension in the chaotic flux, with the arrival of the kindly stranger (one of several father figures in the narrative), whose presence furnishes the tale with its only scene of cordial communication.⁸ The stranger will remain with Robin until the tale’s end, when the night’s spell is finally broken and the youth’s rite of initiation complete.

The lambent moonlight enveloping the setting is soon “disturbed” by “a redder light” that alternately reveals and conceals (17). The rioting Patriots spill into the street, carrying “a dense multitude of torches” that obscure “by their glare whatever object they” illuminate (17). Robin is able to make out the “the double-faced fellow”—one of the tale’s most fascinating symbolic characters—as well as “wild figures in the Indian dress, and many fantastic shapes without model” (17). But the luridly lit, phantasmagoric procession only exacerbates Robin’s anxiety, bafflement, and dubious perception.⁹ Suddenly, however, a change occurs in the overall atmosphere of the street scene: the cacophony of the mob ceases, leaving only “a universal hum,

⁸ G. R. Thompson persuasively advances the idea that the kindly stranger might be “an embodiment of the ‘third-person’ narrator of the tale,” who has stepped “into the story to watch, and watch with, Robin” (*The Art of Authorial Presence* 155). This mysterious stranger, Thompson argues, is “*not Hawthorne*, but a symbolic figuration of, a substitute agent for, a Hawthorne: that is, an *author figure*, symbolically present in the narrative” (*The Art of Authorial Presence* 156).

⁹ John Caldwell Stubbs takes the procession image, “the image of life seen as a parade, a carnival, a spectacle, or a masquerade,” to be “an ordering metaphor in Hawthorne’s work” (52). Stubbs labels the metaphor “the procession of life,” after Hawthorne’s sketch of the same name, since Hawthorne often views life as funeral march toward death. But the metaphor is not so simple. The procession of life, for Hawthorne, is “*festal* as well as *funeral*” (52). “At times,” writes Stubbs, “Hawthorne may stress the mortality of [the] world, at other times its energy” (53). If Robin is to “rise in the world,” he will have to join the tragicomic parade of existence, which is concretized for him in the Patriot mob. And when he laughs loudest at the sight of his tarred-and-feathered kinsman, Robin unwittingly declares his membership in life’s festal and funeral procession. In so doing, the youth enters adulthood and “becomes liable to a fearsome array of complex emotions” (Stubbs 70-71).

nearly allied to silence” (17). The sudden silence is like the holding of one’s breath on the brink of some momentous epiphany. On the visual plane, too, Hawthorne prepares Robin and us for an unambiguous revelation: “Right before Robin’s eyes was an uncovered cart. There the torches blazed the brightest, there the moon shone out like day, and there, in tar-and-feathery dignity, sate his kinsman, Major Molineux!” (17). It is in this moment that all of the youth’s perplexities, misunderstandings, and misperceptions swiftly recede into the background as the reality of the situation—in which Robin has been the butt of a rather cruel joke—comes to the fore. Moonlight, which has so exasperatingly concealed the truth from Robin, at last shines “out like day,” revealing reality without obfuscation.

The tale’s total aesthetic texture constitutes an ingeniously wrought *discordia concors*, a seamless *mélange* of contrasting aural-visual elements (unified by the motif of moonlight) and genre trappings (tragic, comic, allegorical, fabulistic, mythic). But Major Molineux’s scene of tragic humiliation is strictly—and effectively—Aristotelian in its presentation:

He was an elderly man, of large and majestic person, and strong, square features, betokening a steady soul; but steady as it was, his enemies had found the means to shake it. His face was pale as death, and far more ghastly; the broad forehead was contracted in his agony, so that the eyebrows formed one dark grey line; his eyes were red and wild, and the foam hung white upon his quivering lip. His whole frame was agitated by a quick, and continual tremor, which his pride strove to quell, even in those circumstances of overwhelming humiliation. But perhaps the bitterest pang of all was when his eyes met those of Robin; for he evidently knew him on the instant, as the youth stood witnessing the foul disgrace of a head that had grown grey in honor. They stared at each other in silence, and Robin’s knees shook, and his hair bristled, with a mixture of pity and terror. (17-18)

Robin's profound moment of recognition at the sight of his "majestic" kinsman brought low elicits in him (and readers) the classically tragic emotions of pity and fear.¹⁰ The scene accumulates additional force from its suggestion of Robin's complicity in his uncle's tragic ordeal.¹¹ Robin, having come face-to-face with the ritualistic shaming of his kinsman, now faces a morally compromised world of tragic choices and divided allegiances, of mixed motives and wavering emotions; the boy's night journey is, to quote Michael Colacurcio, a disillusioning "passage from the single-mindedness of childhood to the fallen wisdom of adult duplicity" (146).

Watching the humiliated old man suffer, "majestic still in his agony," Robin stands frozen, unable to come to his kinsman's defense (18). But with a "bewildering excitement" overtaking him, a "mental inebriety" aroused by "the preceding adventures of the night, the unexpected appearance of the crowd, the torches, the confused din, and the hush that followed, the spectre of his kinsman reviled by that great multitude"—with all this overtaking him, Robin joins the mob's fiendish mockery, laughing loudest of all (18).¹² The laughter may itself be an

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, in his 1910 essay "The Tragic Theatre," articulates the spectator's response to tragedy in a way that mirrors Robin's emotional epiphany. For instance, Hawthorne tells us Robin's "hair bristled" at the sight of his disgraced kinsman (18). Yeats writes that "in the supreme moment of tragic art there comes upon one that strange sensation as though the hair of one's head stood up" (243). The poet even associates the experience of tragedy with an atmosphere of reverie and trance, as well as with the imagery of moonlight: "Tragic art . . . moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. . . . We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea" (244). We might also deepen our apprehension of Robin's epiphanic experience—particularly when it comes to the silence and stillness of the scene—by turning to another Irish modernist. See James Joyce's definitions of the tragic emotions and the phenomenon of aesthetic arrest in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, page 183.

¹¹ Another factor complicating the moral dilemma of the scene is Hawthorne's forcing his Jacksonian-era readers to set aside their patriotic zeal and sympathize with Major Molineux. In the third section of his sketch "Old News," Hawthorne takes things even further, adopting the persona of an inveterate Tory. He urges his readers to look askance at radical change and acknowledge the validity of the conservative loyalist's perspective: "A revolution, or anything, that interrupts social order, may afford opportunities for the individual display of eminent virtue; but, its effects are pernicious to general morality" (274). As Larry J. Reynolds has demonstrated, Hawthorne possessed a conservative sensibility at odds with the values of many of his fellow writers and citizens: "Like Edmund Burke, [Hawthorne] came to disdain radical action and to imagine revolution and warfare in terms of a breakdown in the familial order—murder of the father, distress for mother and children" (*Devils and Rebels* 15).

¹² In "Ethan Brand," Hawthorne's narrator pauses to reflect on the moral ambiguity of laughter, which, "when out of place, mistimed, or bursting forth from a disordered state of feeling, may be the most terrible

evasive technique, a way for Robin to cope with a buildup of confused and warring emotions—guilt, fear, pity, spite—in a situation from which he cannot turn away; nevertheless, Robin has assisted the mob in “trampling . . . on an old man’s heart” (19). The intermingling of conflicting emotional states is always a hazard in Hawthorne’s fiction, though the author understands such an intermingling to be a permanent fact of human experience.¹³

Robin’s evasions throughout the tale—which include his obvious pose of “shrewdness” and rationality, his ineffectually suppressed violent (perhaps Oedipal) tendencies, his incredulity toward psychological and moral complexity, his equivocal response to his kinsman’s tragedy—may also allegorize, in a single personage, many of the incipient nation’s own evasions as it breaks from its paternal authority across the Atlantic. For in the closing paragraphs, the moonlight and torchlight having finally revealed things as they are, Hawthorne’s narrative voice seems to indict the Patriot mob as they carry on “in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment” (18-19). Will these Patriots, Robin among them, go on to “rise in the world,” independent and idealistic, architects of an “innocent” and “exceptional” nation (19)? Or will they evade the moral knots and quandaries which history has thrust upon them? Even a project as honorable as the American Revolution, Hawthorne hints, is accompanied by all the pitfalls of human imperfection. (Was Molineux actually guilty of anything? or were the Patriots merely seeking a convenient scapegoat and a little violent fun?) As Oscar Mandel says of the tragic dimension of social upheaval, “there are no clean revolutions” (165). Without ever denying the

modulation of the human voice. The laughter of one asleep, even if it be a little child,—the madman’s laugh,—the wild, screaming laugh of a born idiot,—are sounds that we sometimes tremble to hear, and would always willingly forget” (257). The narrator concludes by saying that “[p]oets have imagined no utterance of fiends or hobgoblins so fearfully appropriate as a laugh” (257). Robin’s laughter at his kinsman conveys something of this fiendish timbre.

¹³ As the narrator of “Rappaccini’s Daughter” puts it, “Blessed are all simple emotions, be they dark or bright! It is the lurid intermixture of the two that produces the illuminating blaze of the infernal regions” (238).

existence of hope and sympathy, Hawthorne reminds us that an acceptance of moral ambiguity and tragic limitation is the better part of wisdom.

“A Dark Necessity”: Tragic Limitation in the Symbolic Setting of *The Scarlet Letter*

We have seen how Hawthorne’s settings establish, recapitulate, and complicate the conflicts and tensions, the ideas and themes, that the author has set out to investigate. *The Scarlet Letter* provides another, much fuller, illustration of how the author handles the symbolic potential of a fictive space. Seventeenth-century Boston and its forested precincts are more than stages whereon the human drama is enacted; they are conduits through which Hawthorne’s thematic meanings, often suggestively ambiguous or contradictory, are figured forth. By orchestrating dramatic encounters within richly symbolic locales—a complete moral geography that includes Boston’s prison, scaffold, and bordering forests—Hawthorne intensifies his tragic purpose. One of the controlling tensions in the novel, which Hawthorne partly insinuates through symbolic setting, is that between radical freedom and tragic limitation, along with a closely related opposition: the ideal versus the real. Hester Prynne is Hawthorne’s principal tragic evader—though her evasions are also closely bound up with the evasions of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth—attempting in her way and at different junctures in the narrative to ignore immovable facts about her historical conditions and her relation to Puritan society.

Hawthorne’s Puritan Boston, a liminal zone between wilderness and the open sea, is a borderland setting that, from the novel’s outset, envelopes readers in a world of tragic limits. As we read in the opening pages, “The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the

site of a prison” (35).¹⁴ The highest hopes for human flourishing—and this is especially crucial given Hawthorne’s early American context—must inevitably clash with tragic realities. People will forever dream and strive, but they must always err and die along the way. And it is here that Hawthorne establishes the tension between human aspiration and human limitation, between the ideal and the real. The author then goes on to transmit this thematic opposition symbolically through a variety of concrete particulars in Hester’s surroundings.

As the Puritan citizens, in their “sad-colored garments,” await the appearance of the accused Hester, Hawthorne reiterates his theme in symbolic terms (35). The prison, whose door “was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes,” embodies all those qualities that Hawthorne—and his free-spirited Hester—associates with Puritan Boston in particular and civilization in general (35). The following description should give us pause:

Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the New World. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. (35)

Here, in microcosm, is Hester’s society: oppressive, iron-like, gloomy. But the prison’s antiquated quality suggests more than Puritan society’s austerity and oppressiveness. That the prison “seemed never to have known a youthful era” points also to the ineradicable facts of human depravity and moral transgression, realities with which every society must contend. Definitions of what constitutes criminality and moral turpitude will change over time (often justly

¹⁴ Hawthorne’s love-hate for his ancestors is perhaps best summed up in a well-known line from “Main-Street”: “Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages” (1039).

so), but crime and punishment remain. Like the cemetery, the tenebrous prison represents one of the tragic limits of Hester's world.

Hawthorne immediately counterbalances this symbol of limitation with one of freedom and natural purity:

Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned prisoner as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. (35)

Hawthorne previously darkened the shadows surrounding Boston's prison and cemetery, but here he brightens the setting with an opposing image. The verdure, even the "unsightly vegetation," contrasts sharply with the "ugly edifice" of the prison. The wild rose bush, along with the unattractive weeds and grass plot, expresses an entirely different set of associations. If the prison and cemetery signify human limitation, the vegetation in the prison yard suggest the vibrancy of nature. The rose bush, especially, corresponds to Hester's own "impulsive and passionate nature" (41). (Indeed, even its color, associated with passion, matches the letter on her breast.) She, too, blooms brightly in the shadow of "the black flower of civilized society"; she, too, is viewed by her rigid and dour fellow citizens as an untamed element of nature.

Yet the tension between these two symbols, the one ostensibly embodying societal oppression and the other natural freedom, slacks off into ambiguity. Hawthorne complicates

matters with the words “delicate” and “fragile.” For Hester’s natural vitality, like the vitality of the rose bush, exists in precarious tension with the constraints of civilization. Inspiring yet fragile, her defiant free spirit hovers always on the verge of tragic extinction. The intrusive narration, however, attempts to allay our worst fears. By figuratively plucking a wild rose for the reader, Hawthorne’s narrator hopes that it may “serve . . . to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (36). Hawthorne has brilliantly configured, in the novel’s opening pages, a symbolic setting to help establish the thematic oppositions that govern the tragedy.

Because it subdivides into multiple symbolic sites, the interior of Boston is one of the most expressive settings in Hawthorne’s moral geography. If the prison, the cemetery, and the rose bush develop the opposition between freedom and limitation—or, in more classically tragic terms, between free will and fate—the scaffold works further variations on the same theme, but with even greater symbolic resonance. By revisiting the scaffold three times in the plot—at the beginning, the middle, and the end—Hawthorne reinforces and deepens the implications he established at the prison. In each scaffold episode the characters converge at integral moments in the drama, moments at which conflicts are underscored and insights revealed. But the symbolic import of the scaffold lies principally in its function as a variant of an *axis mundi*, a sacred center, or what Mircea Eliade defines as the “symbolism of the center,” which one finds cross-culturally as a “formative principle” of human spatial organization (65). Hawthorne portrays the scaffold as an emblem of social repression, a site of punishment for individuals who would break Puritan—and therefore God’s—law. Standing “nearly beneath the eaves of Boston’s earliest church,” this central “fixture” of the community exists as a sacred site where transgressors may be punished in the eyes of both God and the Puritans (40).

The significance of the scaffold as a kind of symbolic center for Hester cannot be understated. After listening to Dimmesdale's powerful final sermon, Hester stands "statue-like at the foot of the scaffold," experiencing the sermon's inexplicable sway over her (144):

If the minister's voice had not kept her there, there would nevertheless have been an inevitable magnetism in that spot, whence she dated the first hour of her life of ignominy. There was a sense within her,—too ill-defined to be made a thought, but weighing heavily on her mind,—that her whole orb of life, both before and after, was connected with this spot, as with the one point that gave it unity. (144-45)

The scaffold marks the spot where Hester's old life figuratively ended and her new one began. It becomes a consecrated place, as privately sacred to her as it is publicly sacred to the Puritan authorities.¹⁵ Although the scaffold stands as another tragic obstacle to her innate sense of freedom—and although it must forever remind her of her transgression—it nonetheless remains a defining emblem in her new life. The suffering and ostracism she must undergo following her first ordeal on the scaffold are harsh; yet her tragedy also fills her life with renewed purpose, as we observe in the birth of Pearl and in her needlework.

The scaffold's placement at "the western extremity of the market-place" is equally revealing (40). Built "on the edge of the western wilderness," Puritan Boston is a site of orderly

¹⁵ Hester's perverse attraction to the spot, the "inevitable magnetism" that she feels, is the same phenomenon Hawthorne describes in "The Custom-House." In spite of the more unsettling aspects of the Puritan past, Salem compels the author to return. When one has lived one's life—or lived with one's family—in a particular locale for long enough, according to Hawthorne, a connection is established "between the human being and the locality, quite independent of any charm in the scenery or moral circumstances that surround him. It is not love, but instinct" (12). Hawthorne explains that even if a locale had been "joyless" for the individual, "[t]he spell survives, and just as powerfully as if the natal spot were an earthly paradise" (12). The scaffold becomes for Hester, ironically, her "natal spot." By the end of the novel she returns to Boston, site of her tragic ordeal.

opposition to the “disorder” of the western wilderness (41).¹⁶ The scaffold, Hawthorne’s most resonant symbol of Puritan order, literally abuts and figuratively *rebut*s the chaos of the western wilderness. In the Christian tradition, as Eliade points out regarding directional symbolism, “The West . . . is the realm of darkness, of grief, of death, the realm of the eternal mansions of the dead, who await the resurrection of the flesh and the Last Judgement” (61-62). The scaffold, then, is the mechanism by which sacred order is maintained in the face of dark and chaotic forces. Hester, associated with wild and impulsive nature, in some sense embodies this western realm, which inevitably places her in conflict with the Calvinist community. But from her nonconformist perspective the western wilderness, far from signifying death and darkness, promises untrammelled freedom; it suggests to her proto-Romantic imagination a space for casting off the chains of Puritanism and starting anew.

One instantly associates Hester, a woman of “natural dignity and force of character,” with the forest that borders the western edge of the Boston settlement (38); and it is with the forest that one likewise associates Pearl, the elfin child who “could not be made amenable to rules” (9). Yet, for all their wildness and independence, Hester and her daughter are also inextricably—which is to say, tragically—bound to Puritan society. Hawthorne points up both their relation to and severance from society with his description of the banished Hester’s new-found abode:

On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants. It stood on the

¹⁶ The exception to this occurs near the novel’s end, when natives, “in their savage finery,” and pirates, “those rough-looking desperadoes,” come to town for the procession (138). At that point in the novel, Boston shows itself entirely susceptible to infiltration by “uncivilized” forces.

shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west. A clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula, did not so much conceal the cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed. (54)

Though this reads as little more than basic description, the passage provides abundant detail about Hester's tragic situation. Banished to this boundary between civilization and wilderness, and inhabiting a house that is itself an image of domestic uncertainty and fragility, Hester and her child must attempt to thrive as outcasts. That the former settler abandoned the cottage due to sterile soil—a problem even Governor Bellingham faces in his ornamental garden—tells us as much about the austere life of seventeenth-century New England as it does about Hester's psychological and social state. The “clump of scrubby trees”—the sole vegetation on the peninsula—also emphasizes the essential barrenness of Hester's predicament.

But the most telling sentence in the above passage refers to the cottage's spatial positioning. Hester's new home faces the western wilderness, a space in which the outcast woman perceives the promise of freedom, renewal, and possibility. The sea, which borders the other half of the cottage, also carries associations of unimpeded movement, rejuvenation, and individual liberation; yet each of these bordering spaces hides a dark underside. Donald Ringe has argued persuasively that each of the novel's symbolic locales shifts in meaning at different stages in the narrative. Through much of the novel, Puritan Boston, lodged between ocean and wilderness, “embodies a value and purpose that allows it to exist and go forward in spite of the threatening chaos that surrounds it” (Ringe, “Romantic Iconology” 98). Unlike Boston, the “forest and the sea are wild and lawless regions” (Ringe, “Romantic Iconology” 98). But during the forest meeting between Hester and Dimmesdale a transition occurs. In Ringe's words, “the pattern of imagery shifts and the forest takes on a meaning related to, but nonetheless markedly different from, what it usually signifies in the romance. . . . Boston becomes the constricting town; the

unlimited forest and sea are transmuted into places of freedom, where the self may explore and grow” (“Romantic Iconology” 99-100). However, the forest’s potential as a wholesome refuge is short-lived. The primeval woodland may beckon with its vastness and apparent promise of escape, but it also conceals its worst terrors, its red teeth and red claws. The sea, too, may tantalize Hester with visions of freedom and renewal, but its terrifying power and violence will continue unabated, above and below its briny surface. Hester, who later tells Dimmesdale that they could escape back to Europe, forgets that the Old World across the sea, with its old prejudices and old injustices, may be as illusory a refuge as the New World forests.

Hawthorne’s forest is the most evocative location in the novel’s spatial arrangement, a symbolic space exhibiting “an inconclusive luxuriance of meaning” (Feidelson 15). This is borne out in the forest encounter between Hester and Dimmesdale. Here the romancer’s symbolic heightening achieves its strongest effects, vivifying the forest with several possible meanings, one of which is the opposition between freedom and limitation. Hester hopes to inform Dimmesdale of Chillingworth’s nefarious intentions. To do this properly, Hester believes that she and the minister “would need the whole wide world to breathe in,” having “never thought of meeting him in any narrower privacy than beneath the open sky” (111). Hester undertakes this sylvan retreat with renewed optimism. But her walk into the dark woods, on a “chill and somber” day, follows an extremely narrow footpath bounded on either side by “[t]he mystery of the primeval forest. This hemmed it in so narrowly, and stood so black and dense on either side, and disclosed such imperfect glimpses of the sky above, that, to Hester’s mind, it imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering” (111). Hawthorne darkens the pastoral retreat, and external nature once again acts as an objective correlative to Hester’s internal malaise. The narrow trail, hemmed in by the dark and mysterious trees, may imply that the “freedom” which presumably inheres in this realm is simply another form of entrapment. Even here, in the western wilderness of the New World, the shadow of a “dark necessity” hangs over Hester (106).

Her freedom of choice would seem as narrow as the footpath on which she walks. The sunbeams penetrating the forest canopy are themselves “feebly sportive, at best, in the predominant pensiveness of the day and scene” (111).

The author adroitly manages this light-and-shadow imagery throughout the forest interlude, modulating the potential significations of the setting. As Hester and Dimmesdale sit on the trunk of a fallen tree, they reflect on their transgression. Nature itself seems to mourn over the sad spectacle in its midst: “The forest was obscure around them, and creaked with a blast that was passing through it. The boughs were tossing heavily above their heads; while one solemn old tree groaned dolefully to another, as if telling the sad story of the pair that sat beneath, or constrained to forebode evil to come” (118). Like the little brook flowing “over a bed of fallen and drowned leaves,” which resembles young Pearl and whispers its melancholy “tales out of the heart of the old forest whence it flowed,” the woods surrounding Hester and Dimmesdale seem to take on the emotional coloring of the tragic lovers (113). But Hawthorne’s use of personification—or the “pathetic fallacy”—is characteristically ambiguous, a prime instance of his deploying “the device of multiple choice” (Matthiessen 276).¹⁷ Two figurative interpretations of the doleful woods are provided: they are either recounting the sad story of Hester and Dimmesdale *or* struggling not to foreshadow further tragedy. And, of course, the obvious naturalistic explanation—that the trees are simply swaying in the wind—remains. Even so, Hawthorne never completely stabilizes the meaning for us or the characters. One hears or perceives in nature whatever one finds pertinent to

¹⁷ Matthiessen sees “the device of multiple choice” as one of Hawthorne’s “most fertile resources” (276). Ursula Bruum notes that this ambiguity technique has also been commented on by other formalist critics, whom she quotes: “Yvor Winters is skeptical and expresses himself more sharply when he calls it ‘the formula of alternative possibilities.’ Richard H. Fogle sees it not only as a technique but as ‘a pervasive quality of mind.’ ‘It can be an evasion, and it is sometimes no more than a mannerism. But as a whole it embodies Hawthorne’s deepest insights’” (160). Bruum herself criticizes Hawthorne’s device of multiple choice as “reveal[ing] an inconsistency in style” (160). I tend to agree with Fogle.

one's own experience—and sorrow and guilt, given the lovers' situation, would seem the most fitting emotions for the forest to imitate.

Into this moody symbolic scene, however, Hawthorne introduces a transiently hopeful note. The shadowy forest also becomes a brief sanctuary for the ill-fated couple: “No golden light had ever been so precious as the gloom of this dark forest. Here, seen only by his eyes, the scarlet letter need not burn into the bosom of the fallen woman! Here, seen only by her eyes, Arthur Dimmesdale, false to God and man, might be, for one moment, true!” (118). If their sin “had a consecration of its own,” the gloomy forest likewise offers, if only for a fleeting moment, a consecrated space that seems to exist outside of time (118). Their meeting in the “dim wood . . . was like the first encounter, in the world beyond the grave, of two spirits who had been intimately connected in their former life, but now stood coldly shuddering, in mutual dread; as not yet familiar with their state, nor wanted to the companionship of disembodied beings” (115). For a short time, the two earth-bound “ghosts” feel they are “inhabitants of the same sphere” (115). The “dim wood” transforms into an ethereal realm where time itself seems to stand still, a small mercy in a mostly unforgiving tale. The forest interlude is the one moment in the narrative when the tragic lovers voice their true feelings and discuss what was and what might be (without any judgment from the Puritan community or the fiendish Chillingworth).¹⁸ However dark and foreboding the forest appears, Hawthorne stops short here of suggesting that this is a tragedy of unrelieved suffering.

Yet by heightening the symbolic artifice of the scene, Hawthorne in effect reveals the illusoriness of it all. As Donald Ringe observes, “the interlude cannot last. It is, after all, a kind of

¹⁸ But Harold Kaplan reminds us that, for the tragically minded Hawthorne, “pain, not happiness or innocence, was the natural ground of human communication and the support of human communities” (151). “When Hester and Dimmesdale mount the scaffold,” Kaplan argues, “they are together in a profounder sense than in the forest, and *all* are together—the husband, the child, the lovers, the people, the place, in effect the whole moral world and its contradictions” (151).

everlasting present, freed from time and all the constraints of the past, and opening up before them the illusion of a future unrelated to what has already occurred” (“Romantic Iconology” 101). Perhaps enchanted by the forest’s spell, Hester is prepared to accept the brightest possible interpretation of the interlude. She even persuades Dimmesdale, for a time, that his inner burdens would vanish were he to escape the confines of the Puritan community. Hester uses her “magnetic power” over Dimmesdale’s broken spirit, attempting to convince him that their world is not so narrow as it seems:

“Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest track? Backward to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes; but onward, too! Deeper it goes, and deeper, into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step; until, some few miles hence, the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man’s tread. There thou art free! So brief a journey would bring thee from a world where thou hast been most wretched, to one where thou mayest still be happy! Is there not shade enough in all this boundless forest to hide thy heart from the gaze of Roger Chillingworth?” (119)

There is much rhetorical appeal in Hester’s exhortations, but her words also betray a naïve evasion of her actual circumstances.

Hester’s tragic evasion lies in her failure to see that, in almost every conceivable human situation, social and familial obligations, as well as any number of politico-historical factors, limit the quest for and attainment of radical individual freedom. For Hawthorne the tragedian, we are all historically bounded creatures, frail beings in time, and therefore subject to (or *subjects of*) the little plot of ground history has allotted us. Hester additionally fails to see that one cannot run away from oneself and “Begin all anew!” (119). What Henry James called Hawthorne’s “deeper psychology,” which includes an understanding of human beings as their own worst jailers, haunts

the scene (*Hawthorne* 319). For an individual's sense of guilt and failure is not so easily put aside, whether the individual flees across a vast sea or into a remote corner of the wilderness. A mere change in scenery, Hawthorne suggests, cannot fundamentally change what we carry within. Hester, moreover, refuses to acknowledge that the wilderness (or the sea) may paradoxically undermine one's quest for freedom, since there exist no mechanisms of law and order (however imperfect) to mitigate human depravity or the perilous vagaries of nature. What D. H. Lawrence said of Dimmesdale in this scene is quite to the point: "He knows there is no new country, no new life on the globe to-day. It is the same old thing, in different degrees, everywhere. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*" (90).

The tragic irony in Hawthorne's forest interlude is that Dimmesdale and Hester are not driven forward toward new freedoms, but backward toward the old limitations of the Puritan community—toward that symbol of social punishment whence the tragedy commenced.¹⁹ And yet, though Hester's vision of renewal and possibility in the forest cannot be actualized, we—and, it seems, Hawthorne—admire her for seeking a path of her own volition. "[S]he has," writes Robert Milder, "glimpsed a life—her own, the New World's, all humanity's—beyond the life of repressive Christendom and is acting to bring it about" (*Hawthorne's Habitations* 106). Hester's tragedy is that she can imagine a new world, a new life, even while her actual circumstances militate against its realization. But in the very act of imagining alternatives, she has won a small victory in a tragic world.

Although Dimmesdale senses the imprudence of Hester's escape plan, the "natural" woman has still managed to fillip the minister's dormant impulsiveness. Upon his return to the settlement, Dimmesdale notices a change in forest scenery: the "pathway among the woods

¹⁹ This is a point also made by R. W. B. Lewis in *The American Adam*: "But the energy aroused by their [forest] encounter drives them back instead, at the end, to the heart of the society, to the penitential platform which is also the heart of the book's structure" (114).

seemed wilder, more uncouth with its rude natural obstacles, and less trodden by the foot of man, than he remembered it on his outward journey” (129). He begins to undergo “a revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling,” and he feels impelled “to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other” (130). His exposure in the forest to the thought of inexhaustible possibilities seems to have scrambled his moral compass. The minister now finds himself, as the chapter title indicates, “in a maze.” His devout ethical framework cannot restrain the passions that the forest—and its rhetorically and sensually mesmerizing spokeswoman, Hester—has provoked in him. Yet the minister soon channels his socially disruptive, perverse urges into a quasi-Romanticist sermon, “which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he” (134). Not surprisingly, none of this eludes Hawthorne’s ubiquitous ambiguity. Is Dimmesdale really divinely inspired? or is his behavior a manifestation of his Puritanical repression? Is Hester again to be viewed as a temptress for eliciting unhealthy passions in the minister? or is Puritanism itself to be blamed for restricting the minister’s ability to experience such passions? Are these passions unfortunate, since they hasten him to an early grave? or do they set in motion a kind of fortunate fall that inspires the minister’s most ethically and aesthetically profound sermon? The questions are left open, but we again see the influential relationship between a symbolic setting and a character’s actions.

If Hester in the forest evades the reality of her circumstances, she seems to accept her tragic lot by the novel’s conclusion. Hawthorne imagines what Oscar Mandel calls a “post-tragic episode,” a final section of a work in which tragic awareness or recognition—*anagnorisis*, to cast it in Aristotelian terms—is achieved “after the tragedy has been consummated” (158). In post-tragic episodes “we may on occasion find an uplift, a reconciliation, or on the other side a final push into the abyss” (158). Hester’s return to the site of her tragic ordeal, an act “of her own free will,” signals the potential for hope, redemption, and gradual meliorism (154). The many

desperate and dispossessed women who seek “her counsel,” wondering about the “remedy” to their own tragic situations, are reassured by Hester’s “firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (154-55).

Hawthorne’s keen tragic vision, what we might call, following Henry James, his “cat-like faculty for seeing in the dark” (*Hawthorne* 319), contains within itself a counterpoise of “tragic sympathy” (Kaplan 153).²⁰ The author-narrator sympathizes with Hester’s spontaneity and spiritedness, and with her final hopefulness, even as he disapproves of her evasions and self-deceptions. In an effort to “relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (36), Hawthorne—and Hester to her fellow women—extends tragic sympathy, “a kind of transcendent good faith, the last appeal, as it might be put, in the face of irremediable conflict” (Kaplan 153). The novel’s symbolic settings, through their richness of implication, have tried to tell us all along that powerful tragedy does not preclude the power of sympathy, and that the light of human possibility may be seen glimmering even in the darkness of tragic necessity.²¹

²⁰ Hawthorne believed that authentic community, notably in a democracy populated by citizens adhering to antithetical values, is sustained by a common realization “that pain, not happiness or innocence, [is] the natural ground of human communication and the support of human communities” (Kaplan 151). For Hawthorne, sympathy is “not a fountain of easy sentiment, but a response to antagonisms which seem impossible to resolve” (Kaplan 153). Kaplan’s concept of tragic sympathy will be discussed again in Chapter Six, when I examine Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

²¹ Milton Stern finds the ending of *The Scarlet Letter* unjustified, a resolution contrived to placate the readers of sentimental fiction and meet the demands of marketplace ideology. Stern judges the ending “evasive at every level” (*Contexts for Hawthorne* 158). What we read in the conclusion, according to Stern, is a “failure of nerve,” Hawthorne’s “unmaking in political rhetoric what he has painstakingly created in image, characterization, and event” (*Contexts for Hawthorne* 158). But I think Hawthorne’s power of tragic sympathy explains the ending far more satisfactorily. The silver lining of the novel’s conclusion is earned through Hester’s facing up to the thunderclouds of tragic reality.

Conclusion: Hawthorne as Symbolist and “Moral Historian”

Some will object that to dwell on Hawthorne’s symbolic settings is to indulge in a narrow formalism and avoid the author’s engagement with the sociopolitical and historical world. Such a charge is misdirected. Again, Hawthorne’s anti-realistic aesthetic is a uniquely paradoxical way of communicating historical consciousness and an attitude of tragic realism.²² For Emily Buddick, the American romance writer may create

worlds outside civilization as we know it—in fantasy castles of the mind, on the margins of the wilderness between country and forest, on the sea—anywhere and consequently nowhere. This is not to say that no sociopolitical, economic world informs these texts or stands behind them. But the texts figure forth and comment on the socioeconomic, political world a certain way, which is described by the writers themselves and by later critics as romance. (*Nineteenth-Century American Romance* 8-9)²³

²² Hawthorne’s placement of *The Scarlet Letter* in a symbolic realm of the distant past helps to reveal the “essential truth”—the tragic truth—of history. As Richard Harter Fogle argues, Hawthorne “cannot guarantee the literal truth of his narrative,” but he “suggests that the essential truth is clearer; as facts shade off into the background, meaning is left in the foreground unshadowed and disencumbered. The years, he pretends, have winnowed his material, leaving only what is enduring” (*Hawthorne’s Fiction* 143). Thus, certain tragic facts of American experience are thrown into sharp relief, somehow “truer” for having been distilled through the alembic of Hawthorne’s romance aesthetic.

²³ In an earlier study, *Fiction and Historical Consciousness: The American Romance Tradition*, Budick maintains that the American historical romance tradition—from Brockden Brown to John Updike—rejects “mimetic modes of representation” while placing equal emphasis “on specified settings in place and time (in what we generally call history)” (ix). The American historical romance, in Budick’s view, “renders a double consciousness of interpretive processes” (ix). Despite the heavy machinery of symbolism and allegory, the romance “presents a world that, however defamiliarized, is still intensely recognizable” (ix). In other words, the “processes of defamiliarization and representation do not neutralize each other” (ix). This summarizes my own understanding of Hawthorne’s symbolistic aesthetic, though Budick has little to say about the interplay between tragedy and symbolic setting.

More than decorative backdrops, Hawthorne's settings are symbolic moral geographies that correspond intimately to the drama of his fictions, all of which imaginatively encode the tragic conflicts and burdens of American history.²⁴

Michael Colacurcio's framing of Hawthorne as a "moral historian," as a writer deeply engaged with the history of his region and nation, as a man who exercised "an extraordinary power critically to discern and dramatically to recreate the moral conditions under which earlier generations of Americans had lived and, in one way or another, sought salvation," is not in irresolvable conflict with the view of the author as a symbolic romancer (13).²⁵ Hawthorne the symbolist and Hawthorne the moral historian frequently combine to produce Hawthorne the tragedian of American historical experience. In his symbolically sophisticated tragic fiction—the upshot of a supreme literary imagination—we discover that text and context, work and world, exist always in a state of reciprocity, each mutually reflecting and illuminating the other.

²⁴ Oddly, Richard Chase judges the setting of *The Scarlet Letter* to be less vitally involved in the lives of the characters. For Chase, "the setting, although sketchy, is pictorially very beautiful and symbolically *à propos*. But none of the characters has a *sense* of the setting; that is all in the author's mind and hence the setting is never dramatized but remains instead a handsomely tapestried backdrop" (23). Chase rightly concedes that the settings are symbolically appropriate, but his claim about characters lacking a sense of the setting is erroneous and easily refuted. For example, I would instance Dimmesdale's awareness in the forest "that this brook is the boundary between two worlds, and that thou canst never meet thy Pearl again. Or is she an elfish spirit, who, as the legends of our childhood taught us, is forbidden to cross a running stream?" (125). Or consider Pearl's apostrophizing of the brook, which seems to impart its symbolic nature to her: "O brook! O foolish and tiresome little brook!" cried Pearl, after listening awhile to its talk. "Why art thou so sad? Pluck up a spirit, and do not be all the time sighing and murmuring!" (113). Also odd is Chase's denial of genuine tragedy in the American romance. See pages 40 and 41 in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*.

²⁵ Colacurcio's *The Province of Piety* is in many ways a masterclass in exhaustive historical interpretation. Still, I agree with G. R. Thompson's fair critique of Colacurcio's reading of "My Kinsman": "Colacurcio finally displaces the literary significations of the story, or at least marginalizes them to an unacceptable degree. He tends to privilege a certain kind of narrow, literary historicism, deconstructing the aesthetic" (*The Art of Authorial Presence* 154).

CHAPTER IV

MORAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRAGIC EVASIONS IN DOUGLASS'S *THE HEROIC SLAVE* and MELVILLE'S *BENITO CERENO*

Both Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853) and Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855) are based on actual nineteenth-century maritime slave revolts. Douglass imaginatively reconstructs events, some of them little more than "marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities" (Douglass 5), in the life of Madison Washington, a slave who led a rebellion aboard the *Creole* in October of 1841. Melville reimagines an 1805 revolt—changed for thematic purposes to 1799—on board the Spanish ship the *Tryal*, as recorded in Chapter 18 of Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (1807). The authors reshape these historical materials for distinct yet complementary fictional purposes. For the pre-Civil War Douglass and Melville, transatlantic slavery was a profound national tragedy that suggested no easy solution, at least no solution that precluded some manner of violence.

As characters like Douglass's Tom Grant and Melville's Amasa Delano suggest, both writers were aware of and unsettled by white America's tendency toward evasion whenever confronted with the brutal realities of slavery. And yet that perennial tension in American life and letters between boundless optimism and tragic limitation persists in the authors' respective visions. Douglass, the ex-slave and fiery abolitionist, conceives of white moral transformation as within the realm of political possibility. Melville, the broodingly philosophical literary artist, sees

things rather more pessimistically: white America will go on evading the moral abomination of slavery, which will inexorably culminate in some tragic calamity (as it would several years later with the start of the Civil War). Both novellas—one marked by a tempered optimism, the other by a pervasive pessimism—demonstrate a fictional working out of their authors’ hopes, anxieties, and ambivalences over white America’s response to slavery, particularly its response to violent insurrection.¹

In *The Heroic Slave* Douglass’s eloquent and intrepid Madison Washington, with his righteous words and deeds, transforms the prejudiced mindsets of the two main white characters, Mr. Listwell and Tom Grant. Despite Douglass’s serious doubts about white conversion to abolitionism—we should not, for instance, downplay the implied uncertainties of the novella’s conclusion—*The Heroic Slave* presents insurrection as a legitimate continuation of the American Revolution. “Love of liberty, not hatred of whites,” according to Larry J. Reynolds, “motivates the killings on the fictional *Creole*. Washington is no Babo” (*Righteous Violence* 104). In Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, however, Babo’s ironic words, violent deeds, and final silence drive Cereno into monastic isolation—and to his eventual death—while recommitting Captain Delano to the comforting illusions of his obtuse optimism. The novella expresses Melville’s tragic pessimism regarding slavery’s existence—and widespread tolerance by whites—in antebellum America. A detailed explication of both texts offers us the rare benefit of reading Douglass and Melville at work in the same era and in the same verbal medium, exploring parallel situations. While a comparative analysis of these works must be undertaken with an awareness of Douglass’s and Melville’s differing social, political, and racial statuses in nineteenth-century

¹ For in-depth discussions of the affinities and differences between Douglass and Melville, see Robert K. Wallace’s *Douglass and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style* (2005) and Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter’s edited collection *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation* (2008).

America, such an analysis must also be willing to stress the authors' common concerns, developed dramatically through their respective fictions, about the national tragedy of slavery.²

Douglass's Ideal Speaker and Ideal Listener

Douglass's exploration of sympathetic white characters begins with Mr. Listwell overhearing Madison Washington—named after two of the most famous American founders, both Virginians—as he soliloquizes in a “dark pine forest” one Sabbath morning in Virginia (5). Listwell, whose ability to “listen well” leads to his abolitionist conversion, is drawn toward the eloquent voice in the woods, “curious to know what thoughts and feelings, or, it might be, high aspirations, guided those rich and mellow accents” (5). After “concealing himself by the side of a huge fallen tree,” Listwell settles in to hear the slave's powerful words. As John Stauffer argues, Douglass “highlights the power that a sublime vision—in the form of a black slave—can have over a white subject” (119). Washington's words are of a piece with his sublime physical appearance:

Madison was of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong. In his movements he seemed to combine, with the strength of the lion, the lion's elasticity. His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron. His face was ‘black, but comely.’ His eye, lit with emotion, kept guard under a brow as dark and as

² John Ernest cautions critics and scholars who attempt comparative analyses of Douglass and Melville to avoid oversimplifying their major differences. As he notes, “Although [Melville and Douglass] lived in the same historical period, they lived in different complexes of community, space, and time—and, therefore, to a significant extent, in different historical continuums” (22). What is more, Ernest worries that “a comparative study of a prominent white writer and a prominent black writer runs the risk of simplifying race” (34). Ernest reminds us that “Douglass never had the luxury of approaching writing as something separate from his activist labors or from his position as a public representative of an oppressed minority” (33). Such distinctions matter greatly to an accurate account of Douglass in relation to Melville. But commonalities and shared points of reference between the authors should not be problematized to the degree that we fear to make connections potentially crucial to literary and historical knowledge; in fact, one can respect and highlight differences—political, economic, racial, and so forth—between the writers while also tracing shared patterns of temperament and thought.

glossy as the raven's wing. His whole appearance betokened Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect. A child might play in his arms, or dance on his shoulders. A giant's strength, but not a giant's heart was in him. His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness. (7)

Douglass, blending Romantic motifs with classical and biblical elements, exploits the Western artistic and spiritual tradition in his description of Washington's masculine features. Such a rhetorical strategy is doubtlessly an appeal to what was, in 1853, a majority white reading audience. Yet Washington's verbal felicity remains perhaps his most effective and affecting attribute: "But his voice, that unfailing index of the soul, though full and melodious, had that in it which could terrify as well as charm." (7). By the scene's conclusion, awe-inspiring physicality and eloquence combine to engender Listwell's transformation.

Experiencing a variation of aesthetic or spiritual arrest, Listwell is struck still by Washington's sublime presence: "As our traveler gazed upon him, he almost trembled at the thought of his dangerous intrusion. Still he could not quit the place. He long desired to sound the mysterious depths of the thoughts and feelings of a slave" (7). By turns frightened and fascinated, Listwell refuses "to allow so providential an opportunity to pass unimproved," and endeavors "to hear more" (7). After voicing further "[s]cathing denunciations of the cruelty and injustice of slavery" (7), Washington walks away "amidst the wildering woods" (8). Listwell, pondering the foregoing scene, finds himself "in motionless silence, meditating on the extraordinary revelations to which he had listened. He seemed fastened to the spot, and stood half hoping, half fearing the return of the sable preacher to his solitary temple" (8). Douglass's use of religious conversion language throughout the scene is apposite: Washington's words ring "through the chambers of [Listwell's] soul," and the empathetic listener undergoes a complete conversion of mind and spirit (8). "From this hour," Listwell proclaims, "I am an abolitionist" (9). The reformed Listwell now desires to "atone" for his "past indifference to this ill-starred race," pledging to fight "for the

speedy emancipation of every slave in the land” (9). John Stauffer maintains that Listwell “is Douglass’s vision of an ideal white man. He is an astute observer of blacks: by perceiving them, he learns to treat them as humans and equals” (120).

Listwell’s character arc, skillfully constructed by Douglass, indicates a moral evolution across the first three parts of the novella: namely, the character’s progression from empathetic listener, to runaway slave protector, to slave rebellion accomplice (however limited by circumstances). This development entails a transition from a passive to an active state, though Listwell must finally remain outside the action of the revolt itself. (He instead supplies the metal files with which Washington will free himself and the other slaves from their chains.) Listwell’s transformation in the forest is an entirely subjective affair, but in the following two parts of the novella Listwell has the opportunity to act on behalf of his abolitionist principles.

Listwell: From Passive Listener to Active Abolitionist

In Part II, Listwell and Washington meet again five years later at Listwell’s Ohio home in the winter of 1840. As in the opening scene, Listwell (accompanied by his wife) plays the role of empathetic listener; this time, however, Listwell decides to shelter the runaway Washington. Whereas in the previous episode Listwell is the solitary traveler who happens upon Washington in the woods, in Part II the roles are reversed. Douglass crafts a formal symmetry between Parts I and II—with each part dramatizing one man stumbling across another by seeming chance—but complicates the similarities by including considerable differences. Washington, for example, accidentally enters Listwell’s *property*, the white man’s “own happy home” (9), something entirely out of reach for a slave. Furthermore, in the earlier scene, the forest in which Washington soliloquizes is very likely the property of a white man, possibly Washington’s owner. Hence, in both cases, Douglass portrays Washington as a homeless trespasser who, though dignified and eloquent, is nearer to the beasts of the forest than to property holding whites like Listwell. When

Listwell eavesdrops on Washington, the white man is watching and listening to someone who has, since birth, been denied the right to a home and property.

Listwell's transformation in the woods, as hinted earlier, occurs in a state of quasi-aesthetic detachment. While Douglass casts Listwell's conversion to abolitionism in an optimistic light, he also suggests that the conversion requires no great effort from the white man. To put it another way, for five years Listwell remains something of an arm-chair abolitionist, a man who admires the antislavery movement from a distance, thus keeping himself away from the dangers of active political commitment. Listwell's hatred of slavery, in fine, costs him very little. Jane E. Schultz notes that, in revealing himself to the Listwells, Washington makes a far bolder move than Listwell does in the earlier scene. As she puts it, Washington's "fugitive status endangers him in a way that Mr. Listwell's status, as a free man, does not. While Listwell might have chosen to reveal himself in the earlier encounter, Washington does so only at his peril" (56-57). But Washington's brave decision to reveal himself will have another transformative effect on Mr. Listwell, motivating him to shelter the runaway and facilitate his escape to Canada.

Washington's arrival shatters Mr. Listwell's quiet complacency. Douglass intimates as much in his opening description, conveying the contemplative stillness that marked Listwell's experience in the previous scene. The Listwells, that "happy pair," "seemed to sit in silent fascination, gazing on the fire" (10). Yet the quiet scene is a mere "*reverie*" (10). Douglass undercuts the serenity by evoking a mood of disquietude that prepares readers for Washington's arrival: the night is "cold and dark," a windy and "restless" night full of "strange noises" and "strange fancies" (10). The couple's reverie is suddenly interrupted by the growling dog outside. With a brilliant touch of irony, Douglass turns the initially aggressive dog into a "whimpering and dancing" canine that reacts to the runaway as if he were "a newly made friend" (11). As Schultz remarks, "for the fugitive slave, dogs are the symbolic emissaries of failed escape and return to

bondage” (57). Douglass’s subverting of the dog’s pro-slavery associations signals, at the outset of this key scene, the potential for interracial neighborliness and harmony.

As in the forest episode, Listwell here embodies the empathetic listener who pays full attention to Washington’s harrowing tale. But the slave’s appearance at Listwell’s doorstep instantly places the white man in a moral predicament, forcing him to decide on a course of action. The formerly complacent abolitionist, having “felt all the evening as if somebody would be here to-night,” decides to shelter the runaway (11). Listwell, recognizing the slave, reveals all:

Instantly Mr. Listwell exclaimed, (as the recollection of the Virginia forest scene flashed upon him), “Oh, sir, I know not your name, but I have seen your face, and heard your voice before. I am glad to see you. *I know all*. You are flying for your liberty,—be seated,—be seated,—banish all fear. You are safe under my roof.” (11).

Washington is understandably “disconcerted and disquieted” by the white man’s words (11). Douglass explains to his readers that the “timidity and suspicion of persons escaping from slavery are easily awakened, and often what is intended to dispel the one, and to allay the other, has precisely the opposite effect” (11). For his part, however, Listwell is quite sincere in his offering of shelter and safety; he attempts to rectify the “unhappy impression made by his words and action” by adopting “a more quiet and inquiring aspect” (11-12). Douglass imagines a white man who, faced with the moral urgency of a runaway slave at his doorstep, rejects his past complacency and chooses to *act*.

Even more radical, Douglass imagines a white man who does not, within the boundaries of his own property, reproduce the unjust racial hierarchies of the larger society. We see this, for instance, in Listwell’s uncommon generosity. Washington, trekking through the bitter cold on his way to freedom in Canada, asks of Listwell only a small favor: “[M]y object in calling upon you

was, to beg the privilege of resting my weary limbs for the night in your barn” (12). Washington expects no more than this, but Listwell promises the runaway finer accommodations than the shelter of his cold barn: ““A resting place, indeed, sir, you shall have; not, however, in my barn, but in the best room of my house. Consider yourself, if you please, under the roof of a friend; for such I am to you, and to all your deeply injured race” (12). The slave “appeared scarcely to understand what such hospitality could mean. It was the first time in his life that he had met so humane and friendly a greeting at the hands of persons whose color was unlike his own” (12). Washington’s lifelong experience of whites has been one of continual cruelty and oppression; his bewilderment is therefore not surprising. Yet the slave finds it impossible “to doubt the charitableness of his new friends, or the genuineness of the welcome so freely given” (13).

Douglass further subverts power relations between the races by positioning Washington as an interlocutor on equal footing with a white man in a white man’s house. Over postprandial tea, with “all doubts and apprehensions banished,” the Listwells and the runaway gather around “the blazing fire” and engage in a conversation that lasts “till long after midnight” (13). Douglass gives us a conversation between people of equal human worth, with Washington also taking on the role of listener. Listwell reveals the secret of his eavesdropping in the forest and his conversion to abolitionism. Upon hearing Listwell’s tale, “Madison looked quite astonished, and felt amazed at the narration to which he had listened” (13). Washington, too, seems to experience something of a conversion in listening to Listwell’s emotional experience: the runaway slave at last encounters a white man of sensitivity and compassion. In this way, both men can be said to have undergone an expansion of consciousness.

Throughout most of Part II, the converted Listwell—with his wife at his side—fulfills his established role as listener, hearing out the fugitive’s story. Halfway through Washington’s narrative, Listwell declares that he and his wife “are deeply interested in everything which can throw light on the hardships of people escaping from slavery” (18). Even after making a choice

that poses a great risk to himself and his livelihood, Listwell intends to know more about Washington's life. The white man's continual striving to comprehend the feelings of a runaway slave is one of Douglass's most remarkable achievements in the novella (given the historical context in which it was written). After hearing Washington's tale of escape, Listwell assures the runaway that he has nothing to fear: "[F]or if it cost my farm, I shall see you safely out of the states, and on your way to a land of liberty. Thank God that there is *such* a land so near us!" (24). (That Canada—and other British territories—is the "land of liberty" is an irony Douglass stresses throughout the text.) The conversion is complete: Listwell, in spite of his complacent abolitionism, has finally acted on principle. His willingness to "listen well" to a slave's tale of tragic suffering has prompted the white man to moral action.

The Land of Washington and Jefferson as Gothic Nightmare

In Part III of the novella, Douglass depicts Listwell revisiting the slave state of Virginia. Yet Douglass's presentation of Old Dominion has darkened substantially since Part I. Seeking shelter for the night, Listwell decides to stay at a "somewhat ancient and famous public tavern," a place that sat "upon the great road from Petersburg, Virginia, to Richmond" (27). The fabled land of America's Revolutionary heroes and greatest presidents is now reduced to a dilapidated tavern. This "gloomy mantle of ruin" functions as an apt symbol of sin and depravity, those traits which have turned Virginia into a land of Gothic horrors.³ The tavern was, we are told, "quite notorious

³ In the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass already displays a familiarity with certain Gothic tropes and rhetoric. In addition to depicting the cruelest white overseers in fiendish terms, Douglass describes the lonesome fate of his grandmother, who had served Douglass's "old master faithfully from youth to old age" (55). His grandmother's "present owners" decide that she is "of but little value" and remove her to "a little hut" in the woods, making "her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness" (56-57). Douglass paints a Gothic picture of his Grandmother's despair, employing the imagery of darkness, gloom, and the grave: "The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone. She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl. All is gloom. The grave is at the door" (56). As Teresa Goddu notes, the Gothic's "focus on the terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment, and the weight of sin provides a useful vocabulary and register of images by which to represent slavery and its horrors" (qtd. in Hinds 93).

in its better days,” a gathering place for “leading gamblers, horse racers, cock-fighters, and slave traders from all the country about” (27). Even when the building was in fine shape, its stateliness, as Douglass will continue to suggest, was a thin veil concealing corruption and sin. Here slave traders are really no different from “gamblers, horse racers, cock-fighters”; and the slaves are mere objects of profit, on the same level as the animals. The “old rookery” attracts birds of “ill omen,” which would seem to include some rather unsavory human birds as well (27). But like so much else in Virginia, the erstwhile home to many of the nation’s most venerated founding fathers, the old tavern has “lost much of its ancient consequence and splendor,” despite trying to maintain “some gaiety and high life” (27). Douglass equates the tavern with the slaveholding South itself, full of moral rot yet maintaining a façade of aristocratic grandeur. Indeed, a traveler passing by the tavern may be easily deceived, since “the fine old portico looks well at a distance” (27). But if the traveler were to take a “nearer view,” he would find that the tavern “does little to sustain this pretension” (27). For in spite of the building’s expanse and “imposing style,” the effects of “time and dissipation” have left their “ineffaceable marks upon it” (27). The curious stranger might well regard the entire South and its institutions in the same way. By taking a closer look, the stranger, though initially awed by the seeming grandeur of things, would soon notice the moral “dissipation” of a region marred by “ineffaceable marks.”

About midway through the passage, Douglass’s description veers off into darker Gothic territory, with the tavern becoming somewhat reminiscent of Poe’s *House of Usher*:

The gloomy mantle of ruin is, already, out-spread to envelop it, and its remains, even but now remind one of a human skull, after the flesh has mingled with the earth. Old hats and rags fill the places in the upper window once occupied by large panes of glass, and the moulding boards along the roofing have dropped off from their places, leaving holes and crevices in the rented wall for bats and swallows to build their nests in. The platform of the portico, which fronts the

highway is a rickety affair, its planks are loose, and in some places entirely gone, leaving effective man-traps in their stead for nocturnal ramblers. The wooden pillars, which once supported it, but which hang as encumbrances, are all rotten and tremble with the touch. . . . The side of the great building seen from the road is much discolored in the sundry places by slops poured from the upper windows, rendering it unsightly and offensive in other respects. (27-28)

Not unlike Poe's decaying mansion, Douglass's tavern gives the impression of a human face, but of a face in the form of a skull, a sort of *memento mori*. Beneath the South's aristocratic patina lies a grinning death's-head, a telling emblem for a place in which human beings are "converted into merchandise, and linked in iron bands, with no regard to decency or humanity!" (34). The stained and "discolored" building, now inhabited by "bats" and birds, has lost whatever sturdiness it once had, having become "rickety" and "rotten." Douglass suggests that the moral evil of slavery—and the vicious racism which supports it—has not only "stained" the institutions of the South, but also rendered the structural integrity of the entire society unstable, destined to collapse under the weight of its unspeakable injustices. Yet Douglass's indictment does not stop with the slaveholding South. For it is America as a whole, the nation whose most prominent idealists were born and raised in Virginia, that faces tragic ruin of a similar magnitude if it fails to live up to its creed. Such hypocrisy is unsustainable "in a country boasting of its liberty, independence, and high civilization!" (34).

Staying the night in the tavern, Listwell—once again playing the role of listener—overhears the "corrupt tongues" of the ruffians and slave traders in the barroom (32). The "vulgarity and dark profanity" Listwell hears stands in direct contrast to Madison Washington's eloquence at the novella's start (32). As Douglass's narrator remarks, "A more brutal set of creatures, perhaps, never congregated" (33). It is as if Listwell had entered some infernal heart of darkness, a sinister world in which whites are the very fiends they have long accused blacks of

being. Interacting with men whom he considers “worse than swine,” Listwell comes to realize his moral dilemma at the tavern (33). Should he pretend to be a slave trader? or should he announce his abolitionism? He understands that to “reveal himself, and to impart a knowledge of his real character and sentiments would, to say the least, be imparting intelligence with the certainty of seeing it and himself both abused” (33). Douglass yet again puts Listwell in a difficult situation that will test his allegiance to moral principles. For all his hatred of slavery, Listwell prefers “to trust the mercy of God for his soul, than the humanity of slave-traders for his body. Bodily fear, not conscientious scruples, prevailed” (34). Douglass is cognizant of the limitations Listwell faces as a white abolitionist in antebellum America. The white man’s ability for action can go only so far before practical considerations of personal and familial safety win out. But Douglass does not make excuses for Listwell: one can always sacrifice more. After all, it is the brutalized slave Madison Washington—not the secure and propertied Listwell—who courageously takes most of the risks throughout the narrative.

The Tragedy of Slavery Unmasked: Listwell’s Recommitment to Abolitionism

Listwell’s commitment to the abolitionist cause is solidified toward the end of Part III. He witnesses, “for the first time in his life, a slave-gang on their way to market. A sad sight truly” (34). Douglass’s narrator intrudes, providing moral commentary on the horrific scene:

Here were one hundred and thirty human beings,—children of a common Creator—guilty of no crime—men and women, with hearts, minds, and deathless spirits, chained and fettered, and bound for the market, in a christian country,—a country boasting of its liberty, independence, and high civilization! Humanity converted into merchandise, and linked in iron bands, with no regard to decency or humanity! All sizes, ages, and sexes, mothers, fathers, daughters, brothers, sisters,—all huddled together, on their way to market to be sold and separated from home, and from each other *forever*. And all to fill the pockets of men too

lazy to work for an honest living, and who gain their fortune by plundering the helpless, and trafficking in the souls and sinews of men. As he gazed upon this revolting and heart-rending scene, our informant said he almost doubted the existence of a God of justice! And he stood wondering that the earth did not open and swallow such wickedness. (35)

Here, in perhaps the most emotionally charged passage in the novella, Douglass's narrator attacks American slavery. Listwell no longer has the luxury of regarding the matter from the comfort of his Ohio farm. Douglass's sympathetic white man, free of all mitigating factors, beholds the unrelentingly tragic world of slavery. The terror and hopelessness of Washington's tragic reality threatens to extinguish Listwell's faith in a just deity: "[O]ur informant said he almost doubted the existence of a God of justice!" (35).

By way of another astonishing coincidence, Listwell discovers an opportunity to redeem his failure of nerve in the tavern. Gazing "up and down the fettered ranks, he met the glance of one whose face he thought he had seen before" (35). A recaptured Madison Washington stands among the slaves. Earlier in the novella, Listwell is frozen with aesthetic and spiritual awe at the image of the noble slave declaiming in the forest. Despite brimming with genuine human sorrow (thereby securing Listwell's commitment to abolitionism), the earlier scene is idealized, and hence rather distant from slavery's vile reality. Listwell is again "completely stunned. A thunderbolt could not have struck him more dumb. He stood, for a few moments, as motionless as one petrified" (35). Now, however, he is arrested not only by the shock of encountering Washington in such an improbable circumstance, but also by the sight of the noble and eloquent slave reduced to such squalid conditions. There can be no pleasant aestheticizing of the slave coffle. Listwell seems to undergo yet another epiphany, a sudden awareness that dispels any lingering illusions he may hold about the horrors of that "peculiar institution."

Although dispiriting in the extreme, the encounter outside the tavern with Washington motivates Listwell's final gesture of antislavery solidarity. The white man listens to Washington's story of his failed attempt to free his wife and of his subsequent re-enslavement. Realizing that Washington will be shipped farther south, Listwell doubts his ability to aid the slave: "I fear I can do nothing for you. Put your trust in God, and bear your sad lot with the manly fortitude that becomes a man" (38). But Listwell senses that something more may have brought the two men together once again, possibly an act of divine providence:

The strangeness of meeting again one whom he had met on two several occasions before, under extraordinary circumstances, was well calculated to suggest the idea that a supernatural power, a wakeful providence, or an inexorable fate, had linked their destiny together; and that no efforts of his could disentangle him from the mysterious web of circumstances which enfolded him. (39)

Listwell, unexpectedly crossing paths with Washington for a third time, cannot disavow the idea that some sort of non-tragic fate may be responsible for bringing their lives together. He arrives in Richmond just before Washington and the other slaves are to board the *Creole*; while there, he decides to "do his friend Madison one last service" by purchasing "three strong *files*" from a hardware store (40). As Washington walks past, Listwell manages to slip the files into the slave's pocket. With this final act of friendship and abolitionist commitment, Listwell watches the slave ship disappear from sight: "Farewell! farewell! brave and true man! God grant that brighter skies may smile upon your future than have yet looked down upon your thorny pathway" (41).

Douglass's Complex Evader: Tom Grant

Douglass communicates his own hopes for a post-slavery America in the character of Listwell. As an educated white northerner, Listwell is easily susceptible to abolitionist conversion through Washington's oratorical power. The character of Tom Grant, a native Virginian and first

mate of the *Creole*, poses a greater difficulty for Douglass. Liberally reimagining the historical record, Douglass explores a white southerner's complex and conflicted response to the *Creole* slave revolt. Although Washington's heroic actions and eloquent words alter some of Grant's racist preconceptions, the white sailor's deep-seated prejudices keep him from total conversion. The narrative strategy governing Part IV represents Douglass's most ingenious authorial move in the novella. The central narrator fades into the background—interrupting only occasionally for descriptive purposes—in order to foreground a dialogue between Grant and a racist sailor named Jack Williams. Consequently, Part IV plays out as a debate over slavery by two white southerners in a Virginia coffee house. Douglass again uses Virginia as a symbolic space rife with conflict and anxiety over race and nationhood. Marked by a tragically ironic history, Virginia is the birth place of many Revolutionary heroes but also of the heroic slave, “a man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry” (4). It is the heroic and patriotic poise of Madison Washington, a man who “deserved [liberty] as much as Thomas Jefferson,” that in part changes Grant's views on slavery (4).

Jack Williams, the racist sailor, cannot accept what happened during the slave revolt on the *Creole*, an event he believes was “miserably and disgracefully managed” (42). The “whole disaster,” according to Williams, “was the result of the ignorance of the real character of *darkies* in general. With half a dozen resolute white men . . . I could have had the rascals in irons in ten minutes” (42-43). Williams makes essentializing claims about the innate character of blacks. For Williams, all one needs in “dealing with a set of rebellious *darkies*, is to show that yer not afraid of ‘em. . . . [A] good stout whip, or a stiff rope's end, is better than all the guns at Old Point to quell a *nigger* insurrection” (43). Grant once shared Williams' low estimation of blacks, but he has now seen evidence of black courage and magnanimity (though he remains unwilling to recognize blacks as absolute equals). He rejects that “the negro is, naturally, a coward” or that Williams's “theory of managing slaves will stand the test of *salt* water” (14). Grant asserts that

putting down a revolt on a plantation is not the same as quelling “an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty” (44). The open ocean as a zone unencumbered by the laws of the land is crucial here. For Washington and the slaves, the sea enshrines natural law rather than the arbitrary, man-made law of the state of Virginia. The temptation to rebel “where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty”—and of human equality—is great. Grant challenges Williams’s belief in the innate timidity and cowardice of blacks: “For the negro to act cowardly on shore, may be to act wisely; and I’ve some doubts whether you, Mr. Williams, would find it very convenient were you a slave in Algiers, to raise your hand against the bayonets of a whole government” (44). Although Williams maintains his racist conviction that “a nigger’s a nigger, on sea or land,” Grant has changed his own thinking about blacks in the aftermath of the revolt (44).

Grant’s conversion is genuine yet limited. The first mate asserts his new-found opposition to slavery: “I’m resolved never to endanger my life again in a cause which my conscience does not approve. I dare say *here* what many men *feel*, but *dare not speak*, that this whole slave-trading business is a disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia” (45). For a white Southerner in antebellum Virginia, such a pronouncement is radical. But Douglass, always a shrewd observer of his white contemporaries, recognized the psychological difficulties that a white Virginian of the era would have had in overcoming deeply ingrained prejudices. Upon hearing Grant’s declaration, Williams charges Grant with being “as good an abolitionist as Garrison himself” (45). Despite Grant’s assertion that slavery “is a disgrace and a scandal to Old Virginia,” Williams’s accusation of abolitionism seems to repulse the first mate, causing him to rise from his chair in a fit of pique: “*That man does not live who shall offer me an insult with impunity*” (45).

That Douglass chose such a morally conflicted white man to speak out against slavery in Virginia is a bold rhetorical maneuver. Douglass’s omniscient narrator has very little to do with

the dialogue between Grant and Williams. The revolt on the *Creole*, including Washington's words and deeds, is recounted solely through Grant's perspective. Douglass therefore entrusts a morally compromised white character with a vital narrative task, and the results are revealing. As Robert Stepto argues, Grant becomes "a white Southern storyteller of a tale of black freedom" (197). Grant concedes Williams's racist point that blacks are "ignorant," acknowledging that "as a general rule, they are ignorant; but had [Williams] been on board the *Creole* . . . he would have seen cause to admit that there are exceptions to this general rule" (47). In some ways, Grant's encounter with Washington mirrors Listwell's: the sailor is also struck by the eloquence of the slave, who spoke with the "utmost propriety" and with "pronunciation equal to that of any schoolmaster" (47).

But Grant's conversion relies as well on Washington's commanding physical presence and martial leadership. This heroic slave, in Grant's view, "was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand" (47). By way of his imposing physique and rhetorical mastery, Washington successfully commands the insurrection. When Grant tries to regain control of the ship from Washington—still unwilling to see a "good brig commanded by a *black murderer*"—the slave exerts his preternatural strength: "[H]e pushed me back with his strong, black arm, as though I had been a boy of twelve" (48). This is one of only a handful of relatively bloodless acts of violence during the *Creole* revolt. The events aboard the *Creole* are governed by reason and moral restraint. Grant himself admits that Washington, in addition to his strength and intrepid leadership, displayed an unmatched nobility of spirit: "His manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose" (47).

Ivy G. Wilson suggests that Washington leads the revolt through the *threat* of black violence, a threat continually kept at bay by the slave's personal sense of justice and restraint: "Throughout 'The Heroic Slave' the size and strength of the protagonist are detailed but rarely exposed in action, as though to figure a violent black masculinity only to contain it by the man's

higher, cerebral nature” (234). Wilson further notes that Douglass “was surely attempting to preempt accusations of wanton black violence” (234). Washington speaks to both Grant and his white readership when he delivers his justification for the revolt: “You call me a *black murderer*. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that **LIBERTY**, not *malice*, is the motive for this night’s work” (48). Douglass reinstates the patriotic theme to bolster Washington’s justification: “We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, *so were they*” (48). Washington’s eloquent speech, analogizing the *Creole* slave revolt to the actions of the Revolutionary fathers, wins Grant’s respect. The sailor forgets his racial animosity for the moment, finding himself “disarmed” by the “impudent speech” (49). As he recalls, “I forgot his blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech. It seemed as if the souls of both the great dead (whose names he bore) had entered him” (49). At this point in the narrative, Grant’s conversion most closely resembles Listwell’s, since the sailor has also “listened well” to Washington’s mesmerizing rhetoric. For Douglass, there was no more effective agent of racial justice than a literate slave speaking truth—and speaking it well.

But Douglass closes his tale with unresolved problems. However altered by Washington’s actions during the insurrection, Grant will not abjure his entrenched feelings of racial superiority: “I confess, gentleman, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any honorable enterprise” (50). The sailor bases his final objection to Washington’s revolt on skin color alone. Such reasoning is without merit, but it permits the only stance wholly acceptable to a white Southerner of Grant’s era (providing him with a perfect excuse for moral evasion). As Grant goes on to explain, “It was not that [Washington’s] principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior” (51). Douglass may invest Listwell with his highest aspirations for white transformation, but Grant exemplifies the more probable outcome. Carrie Hyde contends that

“Grant models a form of conciliatory identification with Madison,” standing as an “intermediary between Listwell’s avowed (if still fairly anemic) abolitionism and Williams’s blatant bigotry” (244). Grant’s compromised position helps keep the novella—burdened as it sometimes is with Romantic bombast—from palliating the tragic realities it fictionalizes.

Douglass’s Ambivalent Resolution

To make matters more complicated, Douglass leaves readers uncertain as to the fate of Madison Washington. The author implies, at the surface level of plot, that Washington and the slaves, celebrated by “a multitude of sympathizing spectators,” live happily ever after on the island of Nassau (51). Ivy G. Wilson believes that the “final image of the text, of the cohort not returning to the United States but remaining in Nassau, overwhelmingly conveys much of the postcolonial condition of being without a home, of being an exile” (237). Such homelessness may result in more tragic suffering for Washington and his band of ex-slaves. But then, as Wilson goes on to write, there is solidarity to be had among blacks “whose affiliations and affinities are determined less by their reference to the United States than by their relationship to other blacks in the diaspora” (237).

Douglass’s only work of fiction is, according to Larry J. Reynolds, “one of the most internally conflicted yet thematically rich antislavery texts written during the antebellum period” (*Righteous Violence* 87). Even after establishing Washington’s patriotic credentials and having him perform speeches infused with the spirit of ’76—reorienting the worldview of two white Americans in the process—Douglass chooses to end on a note of irony, with the heroic slave taking his chances in the British colonies as a free subject. The tragedy of American slavery is therefore left in the hands of men like Listwell and Grant, the sons of the fathers responsible for perpetuating the nation’s original sin. In spite of its scenes of interracial optimism and harmony, *The Heroic Slave* concludes with a rather pessimistic view of America and its hypocritical

toleration of slavery. The novella seems to say, as Douglass himself does in his famed Fourth of July speech, that “America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future” (57-58).

Melville’s Tragic Pessimism: *Benito Cereno* and the Tragedy of Slavery

Douglass’s words from his Fourth of July address apply more chillingly to *Benito Cereno*. Melville changes the historical date of the actual slave revolt from 1805 to 1799. The change, as other critics have noted,⁴ alludes to one of the novella’s foremost themes: America’s rise, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, as a vigorous and enterprising democracy still chained, as it were, to the institution of slavery, the nation’s abominable inheritance from the Old World. The congenial Yankee captain, Amasa Delano, along with his ship and crew, embodies certain elements of this youthful America on the cusp of a new century: its practicality and industriousness; its yea-saying and forward-looking disposition; and, above all, its tendency toward self-deception and evasion in the face of its own ethical failings and creedal contradictions. Like Douglass, Melville investigates the psychology of a white American (a respectable Northerner), exposing his flawed assumptions and moral negligence.

Melville gives us a contrasting figure in the form of Benito Cereno. The Spanish captain—ostensibly in command of a “Spanish merchantman of the first class” (36), a decaying, “hearse-like” vessel (37)—is an avatar for an obsolescent world order upheld by slavery and imperialism. The Spaniard and the American, representatives of their respective societies, both

⁴ Michael T. Gilmore, for example, also points out that Melville situates the novel in 1799 because the new century would be dominated by American expansion (165-66). However, Gilmore discerns a literary reason as well: “The year 1799 also found *le genre noir* flourishing in both England and America: *Caleb Williams* . . . had been published in 1794, *Wieland* in 1798, and Godwin’s *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* in 1799 itself” (166). Melville may have had these Gothic novels in mind while writing the Gothic-inspired *Benito Cereno*, since the Gothic genre’s obsession with horror and the irrational was a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. Surely Melville thought about this in relation to Captain Delano, a personification of certain Enlightenment attitudes.

respond to Babo's insurrection differently. Delano, a New England liberal who believes (uncritically) in the human ability to begin anew, blinds himself to the negative implications that Babo's masquerade and revolt hold for a young America involved in slavery. Cereno, emblem of a disintegrating Spanish Empire, retires from the world only to die in seclusion under the shadow that the "negro" has cast upon him. Regardless of the differences in response, both Delano and Cereno adopt mechanisms for evading reality. If Douglass's Listwell and Grant at least demonstrate the possibility of a maturation of consciousness and conscience, Melville's two captains leave readers in a state of total uncertainty. Melville wonders whether the question of slavery is irresolvable, or whether the matter can be resolved only by recourse to horrific violence.

Perception as Deception and Delano's American Exceptionalism

From the start, Melville's third-person limited narrator—always scanning the world from Delano's point of view—invokes the metaphor of sight. Perception in the novella, especially Delano's, is never clear; it never corresponds exactly with reality; it is partial at best, illusory at worst. Everything along the coast of the uninhabited island of St. Maria is "gray," covered with "troubled gray vapors" (35). As Delano watches the slave ship enter the bay, his observation "is not much facilitated by the vapors partly mantling the hull, through which the far matin light from her cabin streamed equivocally enough" (35). The movements of the slave ship "might have been a deception of the vapors, but, the longer the stranger was watched, the more singular appeared her maneuvers" (36). The ship is shrouded by "shreds of fog" through which Delano "dimly descrie[s]" dark monk-like figures (36). Melville creates a world in which things are only "fitfully revealed," in which "seemed" and "appeared" are the operative verbs (37). At the level of plot, this atmosphere of unreliable perception—of perception blurring into *deception*—builds suspense. However, at the figurative level it telegraphs to readers that Delano will continually misperceive the situation aboard the *San Dominick*.

Delano's manner of seeing and knowing the world is inseparable from his American background. As William Spanos observes, the narrator's "deliberate effort to re-present the story of this encounter from Delano's eyes . . . is so basic that the reader is compelled from the outset to think of it as a story about visual perception or, more precisely, *American* seeing" (106). Spanos argues that Delano holds fast to an "American exceptionalist perspective" (109). Condescending to the slaves and the Spanish alike, Delano regards himself as exceptional because of his country of origin. What Spanos calls "the *myth* of American exceptionalism," as personified in Delano,

is the inscribed belief that Americans are radically different from and superior to Europeans because they are a *new* people, *innocent* of the debilitating consequences of national old age and a long tradition—cultural decadence, moral corruption, ethical cynicism, practical impotence, and politically [sic] tyranny. Americans are instead optimistic, trustful, future-oriented, practically productive, and, not least, benevolent: a messianic people whose providential purpose is to enlighten the benighted everywhere in the world. (109)

Melville undermines Delano's epistemological immodesty time and again, revealing the faultiness of his perception of the situation, of black intelligence, of his nation's "innocence," and of human depravity.

The good Captain Delano, trapped in his "enlightened" worldview, lacks the sense of evil: he can detect wickedness neither in himself nor in others (though he does intermittently intuit that a conspiracy could be afoot). He comes off as incorrigibly cheery, "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man" (35). This characterization is borne out by Delano's penchant for self-deception. The American at times suspects sinister motives, but he quickly neutralizes his fears by squaring them

with his rational and optimistic worldview. To use Melville's superb metaphor, Delano's doubts and fears, however frequent, melt away, "as the mild sun" of his "good-nature regain[s] its meridian" (52). Delano reassures himself that his "mistrust" will "yet be proved illusory" (53). Even after witnessing a number of suspicious activities, Delano refuses to credit the possibility that the scene aboard the *San Dominick* may be a "wicked imposture" (52), or that his own life may be in danger: "I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is someone above" (64).⁵

The Melvillean Vision of Depravity

Melville's vision of human depravity, of the manifold and often subtle ways depravity operates, cannot not be reduced, ignored, or explained away. Some early critics attributed depravity exclusively to Babo and the rebelling slaves, seeing them as rather crude manifestations of a Manichean evil.⁶ While such a reading is clumsy and hardly sufficient, it is not without some

⁵ Delano's worldview is a prime example of what the philosopher Roger Scruton calls "unscrupulous optimism." This brand of optimism "makes leaps of thought that are not leaps of faith but refusals to acknowledge that reason has withdrawn its support from them. It does not count the cost of failure or imagine the worst case scenario" (22). According to Scruton, "There is a kind of *addiction* that informs the most destructive forms of optimism: a desire to cross out reality, as the premise from which practical reason begins, and replace it with a system of compliant illusions" (25). Scruton advocates a practical attitude of "scrupulous optimism," which "knows the uses of pessimism, and when to qualify our plans with a dose of it" (22). The scrupulous optimist charts a middle course between the extremes of unscrupulous optimism and "*systematic*" pessimism, whose adherents "take the imperfections of the human world as defining it" (29). See Scruton's *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope*.

⁶ Yvor Winters takes the Manichean view. In fairness, Winters was a highly perceptive (if highly idiosyncratic) formalist critic. Still, his reading of *Benito Cereno* strikes me as wrongheaded: "The morality of slavery is not an issue in this story; the issue is this, that through a series of acts of performance and of negligence, the fundamental evil of a group of men, evil which normally should have been kept in abeyance, is free to act" (222). The idea that Melville's tale is uninterested in the morality of slavery is patently false: the novella is rich with evidence to the contrary. Melville seems tormented by the "malign evil" America had inherited from the Old World (and writings throughout his career support such a view). And while Melville was always concerned with the problem of evil in a cosmic or metaphysical sense, the topic of slavery provided him with human evil in its most appallingly concrete and earthbound form. Winters' most curious lapse in critical discernment is his notion that the slaves alone embody a "fundamental evil." This interpretation reduces the novella to a melodramatic morality play, ignoring Melville's overall ambiguity and his insinuation that Delano and Cereno are complicit in the worst kind of human depravity.

justification. Babo *does* wield a sinister intelligence: Iago-like, the slave leader's brain is a terrifying "hive of subtlety" (102). Unlike Shakespeare's villain, however, Babo's malignity is not motiveless, though the slave leader's cruel excesses call into question the righteousness of the revolt.⁷ One cannot deny that the slaves under his command perpetrate ghastly barbarities, such as shearing the flesh from Aranda's body and fixing his skeleton to the ship's figurehead. For Melville, all human beings possess the capacity for depravity (hence the predominance of gray in the novella, a color Melville associates with moral ambiguity). Alan Moore Emery is right to defend the tale as "firmly integrationist" in its preoccupation with depravity (316). Emery points to substantial textual evidence indicating that Melville saw depravity as "an essential attribute of all men rather than the private failing of an individual race" (308). But Melville was painfully aware that unjust social conditions would increase the likelihood of bloodshed. Delano speaks more truthfully than he knows when he exclaims that "slavery breeds ugly passions in man!" (75). The slaves' violent revolt, then, is justified insofar as it represents retaliation for the brutality inflicted upon them and a reclamation of their freedom. Readers who would equate blackness—as associated with Babo and the slaves—with unmitigated evil are mistaken.⁸

⁷ "On the *San Dominick*," argues Larry J. Reynolds, "Babo shows Toussaint's intelligence and shrewdness, and perhaps even Madison Washington's restraint (by preserving some of the crew); however, his sadistic treatment of Cereno places him among those slaves of San Domingo known for their cruelty toward whites during their revolt. It thus becomes difficult to place Babo on a higher moral plane than his dead master, Don Alexandro Aranda" (*Righteous Violence* 194).

⁸ Those who would interpret the novella as a strict allegory about good and evil, expressed through a simplistically racialized color palette, miss the nuance and intricacy of Melville's art. His evocative color scheme—composed of white, black, and gray—works in complex ways, negating the traditional opposition of white (good) and black (evil). As in *Moby-Dick*, white takes on multivalent associations, many of them interchangeable with the conventionally negative ideas about blackness. In *Benito Cereno*, white tends to signify death and decay, sickness and evil. Aranda's blanched bones—his skeleton giving "chalky comment on the chalked words below, 'Follow your leader'" (86)—are mockingly fastened to the ship's figurehead over the original image of "Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World." Such an image conveys nothing pure and innocent about whiteness. The white skeleton of Aranda, according to Michael T. Gilmore, "suggests that America has sold out its ideals by continuing to tolerate slavery, and that the New World has become as spiritually dead as the Old" (174).

Delano's Complicity

Delano may delude himself into believing that his “conscience is clean” and that “someone above” takes special interest in his affairs, but he fails to acknowledge his own involvement in the very depravity from which he exempts himself (64). His casual dehumanization of the slaves on the *San Dominick*, for example, reveals the “soft depravity” of his New England liberalism. As Emery explains,

Melville did not . . . underline the barbarity of Babo's blacks out of a 'literary' disregard for racial implication, or a casual conflation of blackness with evil, but in direct response to the contemporary image of the Negro as more “docile,” “cheerful,” and “harmonious” than other men: to Melville, black depravity was a matter of 'topical' concern. Yet so, too, was white depravity. (308)

Working in his signature paradoxical mode, Melville renders Babo and the slaves fully human by underscoring their capacity for depravity. Delano's “white depravity,” his espousal of dehumanizing stereotypes about black docility and cheerfulness, is arguably more destructive than the naked violence of the revolting slaves.

Delano's likening of blacks to animals, which seems to him an accurate and even benign analogy, helps to legitimize the continuance of racism and, by extension, slavery (and with it the certainty of violent insurrection). The Captain takes to “negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (71). The problem is that Delano, doing what comes “naturally,” simply cannot comprehend the broader social and historical consequences of his racist thinking. As he walks the deck, he notices “a slumbering negress,” lying “like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock” (60). The “doe” holds to her breast “a wide-awake fawn” whose hands are “like two paws, clambering upon her” (60). What in reality is a morally inexcusable scene of deprivation becomes, in Delano's imagination, an idyllic interlude of “naked nature” and

“pure tenderness and love” (61). To Delano, blacks are animal-like innocents who display “the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind,” a mind incapable of complex thought (71). When Babo prepares to shave his master, Delano comments on the slave’s “certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (70-71). This dehumanizing conception of blacks, which amounts to a total distortion of human intelligence and emotion, sets Delano’s mind at ease, distancing him from questions of moral complexity and responsibility. And so Delano, as Laura Barret writes, “flounders through the text, utterly oblivious to his own absence of neutrality, unaware of an ideology that prevents him from seeing anything around him, and fundamentally unable to change his perspective, even in the midst of disorienting evidence to the contrary” (420).

Delano, the American exceptionalist and democrat, regards himself—and his countrymen—as having progressed beyond the backward and inhumane ways of the old European powers. Yet Melville suggests that Delano’s sense of moral superiority, like so much else in the novella, is illusory. On board the *San Dominick*,

the principal relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon, medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked. (37)

The stern-piece gains symbolic strength as the narrative proceeds, reinforcing the themes of masquerade and depravity. The image compels us to think about who is actually wearing the mask of domination in the master-slave relationship, which Melville always depicts as unstable and arbitrary. At first glance, we are tempted to read the image as symbolic of the deceptive relationship between Cereno and Babo. But like the rest of the novella’s dense symbolism—and

characteristic of Melvillean symbolism more generally—the stern-piece generates multiple significations. Aside from foreshadowing the Cereno-Babo masquerade, the symbol forces us to consider whether the face behind the mask might not belong to one Amasa Delano, the good-natured American from Duxbury, Massachusetts. During the intense climactic scene, Melville literalizes the symbol through the action, leaving little doubt that the masked satyr—though by turns a figuration of Cereno and Babo—does indeed represent Delano (and, it follows, the young American Republic). Wrestling with Cereno and Babo in the transport boat, Delano “on one side, again clutched the half-reclined Don Benito . . . while his right foot, on the other side, ground the prostrate negro” (85). This live-action replication of the stern-piece, writes Michael T. Gilmore, “dramatically emphasizes that America has perpetuated the tyranny of Europe by subjugating the black” (175).

Cereno’s Paralyzing Pessimism

The final two sections of the novella, including the deposition and the coda in Lima, permit a fuller understanding of Cereno’s perspective of and response to the insurrection. Delano’s way of coping with the complex moral implications of the rebellion is to filter them out. His evasive strategy, to quote William Spanos, relies on his “*optimistic* way of seeing that always already transforms the anxiety and distrust precipitated by the emergence of an anomaly, a contradiction—a mystery, as it were—into a complacent confidence” (107). Cereno, unlike the American, can take no refuge in a self-deceptive ideology of optimism: he has gazed too deeply into the tragic abyss. Babo merely reflects back at Cereno the depravity inherent in an imperialistic worldview. This mirroring effect between the slave leader and the Spaniard recurs throughout the narrative. Both have played the role of captain and slave, both are roughly the same age, and both, though in different ways and to varying degrees, have blood on their hands.⁹

⁹ For more details on this, see Gilmore, *The Middle Way: Puritanism and Ideology in American Romantic Fiction*, 177-78.

But Cereno is not entirely immune to self-deception. When he and Delano converse about their experience, Cereno remarks that “your last act was to clutch, for a monster, not only an innocent man, but the most pitiable of all men” (101). We should, in this instance, read Cereno’s words with as much skepticism as we would reserve for Delano’s utterances. The idea that Cereno is “an innocent man” or the “most pitiable of all men”—considering his profitable involvement in the slave trade and the truly pitiable status of his slaves—is absurd. And, in any case, the Spaniard’s brooding behavior after the revolt belies his claim of innocence.

Rather than accept, as Delano urges him to, that “the past is passed,” Cereno becomes a physical and—Melville implies—spiritual invalid so traumatized by past events that he withdraws from the world altogether (101). The Spaniard has stared into the face of evil and recognized himself staring back. When he reveals that it is “the negro” who has left him paralyzed in gloom, Cereno hints that he has seen in Babo not some evil “Other”—or, at any rate, not only an evil “Other”—but, in fact, himself (101). Is not the depravity Cereno encounters among the slaves in some sense an unadulterated version of the Spaniard’s own “civilized” ideology? Is it not in some sense a grisly reminder that his own civilization is maintained through systematic brutality? George Dekker notes that Delano’s “certainties are so strong and high, like walls against unpleasant truths, that he and the civilization he represents, appear to be indestructible—for the time being” (203). But the social, economic, and political ideology that distanced Cereno from a common slave like Babo—that, indeed, constituted Cereno’s total reality—has been shattered. Dekker elaborates:

Cereno’s will to live is destroyed because the different certainties of his world as a Spanish gentleman have been pulled down and caricatured with ferocious irony. Unable either to forget or to confront his traumatic memories, he is

unwilling, even as a legal witness, to describe some of the things that befell him or look at Babo long enough to identify him as ringleader of the mutiny. (203)

Cereno chooses—or is in some sense fated by circumstances to choose—inaction, withdrawal, and, finally, death. The happily oblivious Delano implores the Spaniard to “[f]orget it. See, you bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves” (101). Delano’s sentimental platitudes can offer no solace. Cereno reminds the American that the natural elements can forget because they have no memory, “because they are not human” (101). Delano’s philosophy of turning a new leaf, given the context, equates to turning a blind eye to the “malign evil” of slavery that both he and his young nation have inherited from the Old World (that is, Cereno’s world). Dekker makes an important point about each character’s perspective: “As Delano’s is of the present and Cereno’s of the past, so—who can doubt?—Babo’s vision is of the future” (205). The wickedly cunning Babo, whose “slight frame” was “inadequate to that which it held” (102), foreshadows the “deeper shadows to come” for a young America (35).

Melville: American Tragedian

According to Andrew Delbanco, Melville “regarded slavery . . . as a crime not only against one subjugated race but against humanity,” yet he “was not sure where to place responsibility for it or how to begin to redress it” (157). Melville might have depicted Babo as another heroic Madison Washington, but the author was conflicted about the use of violence on all sides, believing that “the dark side of mankind surfaced most noticeably and frighteningly during riots, mutinies, rebellions, and revolutions” (Reynolds, *Righteous Violence* 187). This was true of Melville before, during, and after the Civil War. Melville’s vision, particularly as he matured as an artist, was inescapably tragic. *Benito Cereno* is not a classical tragedy in form, but its enveloping mood of ambiguity and foreboding, its presentment of human depravity, and its

emphasis (through Delano) on moral evasion constitute a supreme tragic vision. Stanley Geist long ago captured the essence of Melville as tragedian:

From a writer of travel books which spoke disrespectfully of missionaries, he became an explorer of tragedy, and the human situation became more intolerably tragic the longer he observed it. He knew nothing of “Evil” as a principle operating in men’s lives—countless critical opinions notwithstanding. But he knew much about life as a thing of sorrow and bitterness and frustration; about men set at cross-purposes in a world which staggered on drunkenly indifferent to their plight, leaving to every generation the doleful legacy of all past generations’ sins and errors and blindness. He knew nothing of “Fate” as a principle affecting life. But he knew much about men destroyed in the pursuit of their most noble intentions as though their destinies were presided over and directed to a predetermined end by some malignant agency; and much about the ensnarement of men’s thoughts and deeds in a tissue of subconscious motives and instincts against which all conscious effort is futile. One may call this knowledge the vision of tragedy; and one may say that Melville’s unfolding within himself was the attainment of the tragic vision. (19)

What better topic than slavery for Melville to depict “the doleful legacy of all past generations’ sins and errors and blindness”? What better character than the optimistic Amasa Delano to illustrate “the ensnarement” of “thoughts and deeds in a tissue of subconscious motives and instincts against which all conscious effort is futile”? *Benito Cereno* is quintessential Melvillean tragedy.¹⁰

¹⁰ Melville’s “Supplement” to *Battle Pieces*, his poetry collection published just over a decade after *Benito Cereno*, is a profound meditation on the national tragedy of the Civil War. Melville begins on a note of hope, counting himself among those “who always abhorred slavery as an atheistical iniquity,” one who will “gladly” join “in the exulting chorus of humanity over its downfall” (148). He calls for a restoration of

Conclusion: Melville, Douglass, and the Tragic Knot of Slavery

If Douglass retains some hope in the ability of Listwell and Grant to act ethically and undergo a transformation of consciousness, the more pessimistic Melville seems to nullify any such possibility. It is true that Cereno undergoes an irreversible alteration of consciousness. But his experience of the slave revolt leaves him demoralized and withdrawn, unable to change even in the minimal way that Douglass's Tom Grant does. Neither Delano nor Cereno can untangle the Gordian knot that Babo's revolt—and transatlantic slavery itself—signifies. As the aged sailor who works the ropes tells Delano, the intricate knot exists for “someone else to undo” (63). Whoever this “someone else” might be—and from our vantage point in history Lincoln, the Union Army, and countless antislavery activists (including Douglass) seem to have partially fulfilled the role—Melville could not, in 1855, hope to untangle the tragic knot of slavery. He could dramatize the moral predicament only in an atmosphere of ambiguity and ambivalence, nudging his readers to observe closely the behavior of a self-deluding Yankee and a traumatized Spaniard. In their respective novellas, Douglass and Melville arrive at divergent conclusions about the ability of whites to take moral action against slavery. But both authors powerfully express a tragic vision of their divided nation: a vision of an America that “is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future” (“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” 58).

peace and goodwill in the nation: “Let us be Christians toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men” (148). But Melville's sense of tragic irony soon reemerges. He once again seems to intuit in the post-war nation that there are “[s]hadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come” (*Benito Cereno* 35). In their effort to restore goodwill in the nation, Americans may do the opposite: “Nor should we forget that benevolent desires, after passing a certain point, can not undertake their own fulfillment without incurring the risk of evils beyond those sought to be remedied” (148). The potential for further tragedy still lurked in the war-torn nation, and Jim Crow and the future struggle for civil rights have since validated Melville's fears. Near the end of the “Supplement,” Melville presciently asserts that “[t]he years of the war tried our devotion to the Union; the time of peace may test the sincerity of our faith in democracy” (150). He concludes by employing the tragic rhetoric of Aristotle: “Let us pray that the terrible historic tragedy of our time may not have been enacted without instructing our whole beloved country through *terror and pity*; and may fulfilment verify in the end those expectations which kindle the bards of Progress and Humanity” (151 *Italics Mine*).

CHAPTER V

“TRAGIC WASTE” IN WILLIAM FAULKNER’S *AS I LAY DYING*, KATHERINE ANNE PORTER’S *NOON WINE*, AND EUDORA WELTY’S “THE HITCH-HIKERS”: THREE SOUTHERN TRAGEDIES OF EVASION

In his *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), A. C. Bradley introduces the concept of “tragic waste.” Bradley’s uses the term to elucidate characters in Shakespeare’s plays, but it might also be used to highlight a repeated sub-theme in many American tragedies of evasion. Along with the “greatness of the tragic hero,” Bradley regards this concept, which he describes less analytically as “a feeling,” “as the centre of the tragic impression” (16):

This central feeling is the impression of waste. With Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with, and even to merge in, a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste. ‘What a piece of work is man,’ we cry; ‘so much more beautiful and so much more terrible than we knew! Why should he be so if this beauty and greatness only tortures itself and throws itself away?’ (16)

An “impression” of waste comes over the reader continually in American tragedies of evasion. But the sense of waste gathers additional tragic implications by the first half of the twentieth century, an era whose most resonant literary work—and comprehensive metaphor—is Eliot’s

The Waste Land. The concept of tragic waste, then, conceivably extends beyond the nature of a character in an individual work to encompass the collective temper of an entire epoch.

Certain Depression-era writers associated with the Southern Renaissance dramatize tragic waste with unrivaled literary prowess. What we discover through the concrete presentations of their fictions is a set of characters whose individual evasions are themselves tragically wasteful; these characters lay waste, as it were, to their own potential as responsible moral beings. I read three Southern modernist tragedies of evasion—William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Katherine Anne Porter’s *Noon Wine*, and Eudora Welty’s “The Hitch-Hikers”—as representative of the “impression of waste.” All three fictions generate a sense of tragic waste in relation not only to an individual character, but also to a modern world gone awry, a world that has become a moral and spiritual wasteland. Other Southern tragedies of evasion could be examined for the recurrent theme of waste: William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Allen Tate’s *The Fathers*, and Robert Penn Warren’s “Blackberry Winter” come readily to mind. But the three I have selected relate to each other in special ways. These texts suggest that the evasion of modern despair and alienation, of social and familial dysfunction, and of the divisions of the human psyche can bring about the waste a protagonist’s moral potential. Above all, these particular works put forward (if only indirectly) creative and humane ways of coping with the tragic realities of twentieth-century America: carpentry, music, communication, and a sense of place and community.

Given the troubling history of the American South, Southern modernists like Faulkner, Porter, and Welty were agonizingly aware of a world that seemed broken and wasted. The South’s historical institutionalization of slavery, its subsequent loss of the Civil War, its perpetuation of Jim Crow, the decay of its old aristocracy, the fragmentation of its communal life, its rapid industrialization, and its participation in the First World War became raw materials for the region’s imaginative writers, Faulkner being among the earliest to synthesize the facts of this troubled history into a mature tragic fiction. Although the works I treat here only occasionally

allude to these destabilizing factors, each of the fictions brilliantly evokes a modern sense of brokenness and waste—moral, social, material, and spiritual. Faulkner’s Bundrens and Porter’s Thompsons are representatives of Southern agricultural life, people who might once have been idealized as Jeffersonian yeoman farmers. But they are, more or less (and with notable exceptions), as lost as Welty’s salesman, Tom Harris, whose rootless occupation leads him deeper into the “wastes” of modern America. Faulkner, Porter, and Welty know that tragedy always finds a way, whatever self-deceptive strategies we deploy to fend it off. They all carry Melville’s great art of telling the truth into the twentieth-century.

Two Visions of the Tragic in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*

William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* rarely receives credit as one of the author’s tragedies. Its characters seem too “low,” too absurd and comic, for the tragic effect to take hold; it seems to lack the Aristotelian magnitude Faulkner discovered in the personages of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, or *Light in August*. The Bundrens, with the grotesque Anse as patriarch, in no way resemble some high-born dynasty, even if they face a potentially tragic undoing as a family (which Darl perceives so well). Yet Faulkner persuades us of the tragic stature of his local yokels, as Laurence Michel well understands:

Thoreau said, apropos of the little people of the world, that most men live lives of quiet desperation; this is certainly a tragic insight, but an incomplete one.

Faulkner lifts it into the exhilarating realm of the tragic by evoking the demonic, by animating the desperation, and eminently by his transferral of the big words of tragic response to his homely, cheesy situations. There are gestures of defiance; acts of violence; Homeric battles of wit and epic trickeries—but all leavened and kept from the characteristically modern pitfall of bathos by turning the ludicrous

into an asset instead of a danger: tears and laughter alternating and consuming one another. (113)

The farcical and comic elements of the narrative are ballasted by the high seriousness of Darl's negations and Cash's affirmations, both of which heighten the novel's tragically poignant sense of the human capacity for evasion and waste. With Darl and Cash, Faulkner's tour de force in narrative point of view also becomes an exemplary work of democratic tragedy. To his countrified commoners Faulkner, perhaps taking a cue from Melville, "ascribe[s] high qualities, though dark," and "weave[s] round them tragic graces" (*Moby-Dick* 103). Faulkner chooses, in Darl and Cash, his "champions from the kingly commons," brothers with opposing visions of and responses to tragic existence (*Moby-Dick* 104).

Addie Bundren's death disrupts the family's ordinary flow of daily life until her burial is at last carried out. Within this liminal phase—that is, within the period of the Bundrens' tragicomic journey to Jefferson—each family member undergoes, in Hyatt Waggoner's words, "a search for a lost center of value, a direct probing of ultimate questions" (*William Faulkner* 62). The hardships of the journey force the characters, some more than others, to ponder these "ultimate questions," among which the question of death is paramount; for the chief theme of the novel, Irving Howe once wrote, "is death, death as it shapes life" (176). Dewey Dell and Vardaman certainly struggle to comprehend their mother's death, but selfish motivations—the former's fixation on her abortion and the latter's desire for the toy train—tend to blunt their budding tragic awareness. Similarly, Anse's obsession with procuring new teeth and a new Mrs. Bundren overrides any concern he may have for human transience and death. And Jewel, though heroically sacrificing on behalf of his deceased mother, remains too silent and unreflective to express an interest in such profundities (unless he somehow expresses it through his characteristic obscenities). Of all the family members, only Darl and Cash reach any serious existential

conclusions. Both confront “death as it shapes life,” though their responses to tragic reality could not be more different.

Darl and Cash embody antithetical tragic visions, two ways of dealing with inescapable suffering and death. Darl, whom Harold Bloom views as “a visionary who finally crosses the border into madness,” sees to the tragic core of things (239); he harbors no reassuring illusions and engages in no evasive tactics; he espouses a cosmic pessimism so bleak that he inevitably succumbs to total nihilism. Cash, the craftsman and carpenter, exemplifying honest work and balance, takes an altogether different stance toward the world’s grim realities. In contrast to Darl, Cash “knows less but cares more” (Waggoner 71). Cash may not see the heart of darkness quite as lucidly as Darl, but he suffers enough to realize that pain and death—as much as human folly and frivolity—are to be accepted as preconditions for living in the world. Darl’s tragic sense, his immense awareness of a horrible waste at the heart of things, finally arrests his growth as a character, driving him to madness; conversely, Cash’s tragic awareness propels him toward a morally and emotionally stabilizing acceptance of human imperfection and limitation. To put it more precisely, Darl’s consciousness, no longer capable of supporting his terrible knowledge, disintegrates; Cash’s consciousness matures, reconciling the novel’s opposition of words and deeds while also locating meaning in human creativity. Faulkner seems to imply the ultimate ethical value of these antithetical epistemologies structurally, bookending the novel with one of Darl’s internal monologues at the beginning and one of Cash’s at the end. I will examine Darl and Cash individually and at length, but to understand them sufficiently as characters we must glance at Addie’s powerful soliloquy.

All of the major tensions and conflicts of the novel originate in Addie. Her sole monologue, in fact, helps illuminate some of the reasons why the Bundrens behave as they do. For Olga Vickery, “it is Addie not as a mother, corpse, or promise but as an element in the blood of her children who dominates and shapes their complex psychological reactions” (52). Any

comprehension of Darl and Cash therefore requires an understanding of Addie's formative experiences. The ultimate question of death, and how to live meaningfully in its shadow, has haunted Addie her entire life. She recalls how her father "used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (Faulkner 169). Addie resents her father's vision of futility, as it leads her to believe that her unruly school children—"each with his and her secret and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other and strange to mine" (169-170)—are her life's sole purpose: "I would hate my father for having ever planted me" (170). Her father's words also instill in her a hatred for what she perceives as the ineffectualness of language. Addie soon begins exalting actions above words, since actions result in unmistakable communication. Hence, she whips her students with a switch: "Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever" (170). Addie believes that people must assert themselves in a gesture beyond words if they are to make their existence known. She thus establishes a kind of inverted religion, one rejecting the word and the soul in favor of the deed and the body.

The birth of Cash, Addie's first-born son, engenders a new awareness in Addie: child-bearing, a deed unaccompanied by words, becomes that which prepares her "to stay dead a long time" (169). As Addie explains, Cash's birth invests her life with a sense of purpose grounded in material reality, not merely in words:

when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it. That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not.
(172)

In Addie's view, the term "motherhood"—like Anse's empty talk of "love" and Cora's pontificating about "sin"—is "just a shape to fill a lack" (172); it takes on meaning only through the act of childrearing itself. Cash's birth, then, verifies for Addie her philosophy of deeds over words. But Addie's nonverbal affection for Cash only throws into relief her disdain for Anse, a man whose survival in the world depends on his ability to manipulate others with pious platitudes. With Cash's birth, Addie's "aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation: time, Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle" (172). Addie and Anse, who embody the polar opposites of actions and words, cannot bridge the gulf between them, but the former maintains an anti-verbal, almost telepathic, communion with Cash (and, in a somewhat different way, with Jewel) until her death. This mother-child relationship, formed at the peak of Addie's belief in pure action, may have the effect of turning Cash, the noble craftsman, into the moral center of his family.

In stark contrast, Addie refuses to recognize Darl as her legitimate son. She initially believes Anse's words deceived her into the pregnancy, and this forever marks Darl as the outcast, doubtlessly affecting his slow slide into nihilism and insanity. Addie expresses her feelings in yet another superbly lyrical passage, quite remarkable for a woman so vehemently opposed to words:

Then I found that I had Darl. At first I would not believe it. Then I believed that I would kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me, hidden within a word like within a paper screen and struck me in the back through it. But then I realized that I had been tricked by words older than Anse or love, and that the same word had tricked Anse too, and that my revenge would be that he would never know I was taking revenge. And when Darl was born I asked Anse to promise to take me back to Jefferson when I die, because I knew my father had been right, even

when he couldn't have known he was right anymore than I could have known he was wrong. (172-73)

Because “Addie accepts the fact that she and Anse live in different worlds, her second child, Darl, comes as the ultimate and unforgivable outrage” (Vickery 54). Addie forsakes Darl, since she thinks Anse tricked her into having him. Yet she soon revises her original suspicion, realizing that she and Anse “had been tricked by words older than Anse or love.” Despite not revealing what these “older” words are, Addie seems to acknowledge here that certain words may have consequences in the material world. Consequently, part of the revenge she plans to take on Anse—namely, her asking for Anse’s *word* to bury her in Jefferson next to her father—requires language yet will reveal itself through physical experience. The physical tribulations of the journey turn out to be both terrifying and farcical; but Addie’s planned revenge ironically punishes her children far more than it does Anse, who merely uses those around him to see the journey through successfully.

Darl’s birth hastens Addie’s conversion to her father’s nihilistic philosophy of getting ready to stay dead. Unlike Cash, born at the height of Addie’s faith in actions, Darl arrives under a bad sign, entering the Bundren family precisely when the matriarch adopts her fatalistic worldview. Addie recognizes only Cash and Jewel as her own—“My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth” (175)—since she conceived both of them in the name of doing over saying. Darl, along with Dewey Dell and Vardaman, belongs to Anse alone, and Addie makes it perfectly clear that these children “are his and not mine” (176). Darl’s tragic insight and brooding interiority stem from his abandonment. He comes into the world a motherless child: “I cannot love my mother because I have no mother” (95). He grows to see things for what they truly are, and knows more about his family’s dark secrets than anyone.

Faulkner gives Darl nineteen of the novel's fifty-nine interior monologues, including the opening chapter. The tone and diction of Darl's first monologue differ considerably from what we find in his later narrations. Here Darl appears more in control of his observations, communicating vivid and concrete descriptions: "The cottonhouse is of rough logs, from between which the chinking has long fallen. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight, a single broad window in two opposite walls giving onto the approaches of the path" (4). In his first few monologues, Darl's darker musings remain subdued; he even refrains from the lyricism of later chapters, such as readers encounter during the river crossing. Yet in these straightforward moments of description Darl perhaps betrays what Cleanth Brooks calls "the supreme lucidity of the mad" (143). Darl, who will later succumb to madness, at first sees more perceptively and, to some extent, more objectively than the other characters.

The novel's opening chapter establishes the reader's trust in Darl as a detached narrator. For instance, Darl opens with a matter-of-fact description of returning with Jewel from the field: "Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file. Although I am fifteen feet ahead of him, anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own" (3). The narration delivers a sense of objectivity in the precise relating of facts. Darl also spatially configures the relationship among the three eldest brothers without apparent bias: Addie's first beloved son, Cash, is up ahead diligently sawing planks for the coffin; the outcast and anguished seer, Darl, occupies the middle of the path up to the house (fitting for the second born); and Addie's illicit son and inarticulate savior, Jewel, follows fifteen feet behind Darl. Perhaps most important, Darl comments truthfully, and without envy, on Cash's carpentry: "A good carpenter. Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort" (4-5). It may be that, as Hyatt Waggoner puts it, Darl "can observe accurately because he is beyond caring" (71). Cash, on the other hand, cares too much

about the family and crafting the coffin to see the frequently ludicrous events plainly. But he does notice Darl's apparent objectivity: "I see all the while how folks could say he was queer, but that was the very reason couldn't nobody hold it personal. It was like he was outside of it too, same as you, and getting mad at it would be kind of like getting mad at a mud-puddle that splashed you when you stepped in it" (236). In spite of his tragic descent into madness, Darl does not—even when he imagines particular scenarios, such as Addie's deathbed scene—become a wholly unreliable narrator.

Having nothing to lose or care for, Darl sees with an almost preternatural clarity free of illusions. He is not, like others around him, an evader of unpleasant realities. The other characters comment on his ability seemingly to know their thoughts. Vernon Tull makes note of Darl's eerie perception before they all attempt the river crossing:

He is looking at me. He don't say nothing; just looks at me with them queer eyes of hisn that makes folks talk. I always say it aint never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you. It's like he had got inside of you, someway. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes. (125)

Tull's comments offer further evidence of Darl's objectivity. Darl's gaze makes Tull feel as if he were regarding himself from a third-person perspective. Tull's consideration of Darl also hints at how the latter exists outside of Addie's binary of words and deeds, since it "aint never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you" (125). Darl rarely speaks or acts: he observes and listens, enabling him to take note of facts others would prefer to keep hidden. Dewey Dell, to offer another example, intuitively realizes that Darl knows of her sexual rendezvous with Lefe and her subsequent pregnancy: "It was then, and then I saw Darl and he knew. He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words,

and I knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us” (26).

Darl’s immense powers of perception stir resentment in the others, especially in Dewey Dell, Anse, and Jewel. His knowledge of family secrets leads to his becoming a scapegoat onto which the family members unleash their repressed animosities. Cash sees this first-hand when the men from the asylum come for Darl. He witnesses Dewey Dell attack her brother, “scratching and clawing at him like a wild cat, while the other one [i.e. the other asylum official] and pa and Jewel throwed Darl down and held him lying on his back, looking up at me” (237). Darl’s penetrating perception threatens the very foundations of familial and communal life. To be sure, his unflinching awareness of absurdity and tragic waste is a necessary counterweight to the foolish pieties and self-deceptions of certain other characters. But Darl’s truth-telling is often petty, cruel, and unheroic. Although Darl sees with appalling clarity everyone else’s evasions, an awful paradox emerges as the novel goes on: his truth-telling morphs into another form of evasion, and another kind of tragic waste.

Darl’s consuming tragic vision, his “Shakespearean awareness of nothingness,” compels him to question both the external world of nature and the internal world of consciousness (Bloom 243). Darl observes nature itself as a manifestation of the tragic waste of the original chaos, the residue of a cosmic disaster: “Above the ceaseless surface they stand—trees, cane, vines—rootless, severed from the earth, spectral above a scene of immense yet circumscribed desolation filled with the void of the waste and mournful water” (142). The “desolation” of the exterior world objectifies Darl’s interior anguish. For Darl, the landscape holds little in the way of beauty or revitalizing potential; his thoughts, too keenly attuned to the apparent calamity of existence, only deepen his despair. Consciousness, incomplete or lacking in the other characters, is Darl’s curse. He questions his own material existence as well as that of the external world, which explains his use of words like “spectral” to describe the landscape. Darl articulates a skepticism

of his own being in monologue seventeen: “In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not” (80). Not only is the external world a possible chimera for Darl, but his own flesh-and-blood existence as one of Addie’s children may be illusory as well. Jewel, the inarticulate man of action, remains unburdened by such existential quandaries, as Darl well knows: “Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not” (80). Jewel does not lack conscience—he displays incredible selflessness by surrendering his horse and saving Addie’s coffin from flood and fire—but he seems to lack self-consciousness. Questions of being and nothingness are not problems for Jewel; for Darl, though, such questions are of the essence, paralyzing his will to engage in any meaningful action.

Darl finally breaks under the strain of his unsustainable nihilistic vision. Shortly before arriving at Gillespie’s farm, Darl and the others foolishly splint Cash’s leg with cement. Darl notes his brother’s physical suffering—to which, significantly, the entire family contributes—and imagines escaping from the pain of the material realm: “If you could just ravel out into time. That would be nice. It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time” (208). This would appear to indicate Darl’s final reflection on the possibility of consciousness without corporeal constraint, an ephemeral daydream of transcendence. But from this point forward Darl, observing no good reasons to believe in divinity or purposeful existence, undergoes complete psychological disintegration. Faulkner’s structural pattern in this section of the novel emphasizes Darl’s mental regression by alternating his soliloquies with those of his impulsively imaginative youngest brother. Darl tells Vardaman to listen to Addie’s corpse beseech God “to hide her away from the sight of man” (215). “Their shared delusion,” says Olga Vickery, “suggests that for both of them the world of fantasy has become as real as the concrete facts which we call reality” (59). But this

“delusion is grounded in the conviction that the funeral has become an unbearable travesty of filial piety” (Vickery 59).

Vickery’s point is crucial to our making sense of Darl’s actions at Gillespie’s. The scene is, tellingly, one of the only instances in which Darl takes action of any kind. The shameful sham of the funeral procession, compounded by his knowledge of the family’s unsavory secrets, sends the already pessimistic Darl over the edge of the abyss. Michel Delville rightly observes that “[Darl] seems to be swept along, against his own will, by an empty ritual whose absurdity and obscenity become so intolerable that he eventually decides to set fire to the barn” (69). Readers can interpret Darl’s barn burning as the act of a total lunatic or as a morally responsible reaction to the Bundrens’ foolhardy journey, which has surpassed the limits of decency and become a public nuisance and spectacle; in all likelihood, the truth lies somewhere in between. It is rather easy to sympathize with Darl’s deed, to regard it as largely justifiable. By the novel’s conclusion, even the level-headed Cash will question Darl’s supposed insanity and admit sympathy for his brother’s radical action.

However, Darl does not strive to create meaning for his life or for the lives of those around him. Existing in a world evidently devoid of authentic purpose and ritual, and lost in the depths of his own tortured consciousness, Darl sees no valid reason to support himself, his family, or his community; instead, he accepts madness as his preordained fate. He succumbs to absurdity and futility—in short, nothingness vanquishes being. But by seeing too much and seeing too well, by being unable to overlook the all-too-human frailties of his family and community (or take pity on them), Darl stands guilty of his own kind of evasion and engenders the greatest impression of waste in the novel. With his penetrating consciousness, Darl is a combination of seer and visionary artist. His mind throbs with fertile creative potential, but he lays waste to his own moral imagination and surrenders himself to Dionysian forces unchecked by any Apollonian principle of order. To employ one of Faulkner’s favorite words, Darl does not *endure*. Evading any

responsibility to endure the follies and hypocrisies of his family and community—of the human species more generally—Darl seals his tragic fate. As an artist figure, perhaps a poet, Darl fails in what Faulkner views as the artist’s task. As the author wrote in his address upon receiving the Nobel Prize: “The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail” (650). Darl has no props or pillars to give. Readers, like Cash by the end of the novel, are overcome by their own sense of waste as they behold Darl’s undoing. Dorthea Krook contends that the readerly experience of tragic waste occurs “because the suffering, culminating in total loss and deprivation, is that of a human creature endowed with extraordinary gifts and powers,” and it is this “which we feel . . . to be so shocking, so appalling a waste” (251). The psychological self-destruction of a man “endowed with extraordinary gifts and powers,” a man like Darl, appalls us deeply.

Cash embodies an altogether different way of facing tragic reality. If Darl is the undisciplined visionary artist as destroyer, Cash is the controlled craftsman, an earthy creator and meaning-maker. This juxtaposition risks oversimplifying the brothers, but the contrast seems part of Faulkner’s overarching design. Such an interpretation avoids the simplistic allegorizing of Cash, the carpenter, as Christ. Readers will likely conceive of Cash, who is “loyal, patient, long-suffering, and forbearing,” as Christ-like, and Faulkner no doubt intends certain Christ associations (Waggoner 183). Nevertheless, Cash bears resemblance to Christ only in a modern, secular context—which is to say, in a disenchanting world shorn of transcendentally redemptive possibilities. Cash does not discover some spiritual method to redeem suffering in the novel, but he does face tragedy with great endurance and affirms creativity as an antidote to absurdity.

Characters frequently comment on Cash’s creative impulse and craftsmanship. In the opening monologue, Darl tells of Cash’s meticulous work ethic:

Standing in a litter of chips, he is fitting two of the boards together. Between the shadow spaces they are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade: a good carpenter, Cash is. He holds the two planks on the trestle, fitted along the edge in a quarter of the finished box. He kneels and squints along the edge of them, then he lowers them and takes up the adze. (4)

Darl's detailed description points up Cash's dedication to his craft. The methodical effort expended on Addie's coffin also says something about Cash's approach to life: in a possibly disordered universe Cash's carpentry brings about order, imposes shape, bestows meaning. Wood, the raw material of his trade (and a major motif in the novel), exists in the natural world without any direct human purpose; but Cash shapes this material into an object meaningful to human life and, as emblemized by Addie's coffin, human death. Thus, the natural material of the cosmos, which Darl views only as "an emptiness, a falling away from a prior reality," represents for Cash an opportunity for life-affirming work (Bloom 244). The impulse to transform raw nature into something of value—not necessarily something of monetary value, but rather of emotional and communal value—makes Cash uniquely human, a being with a gift for creation.

But Cash's consummate workmanship, though it signals human meaning in an alternately indifferent and hostile universe, also points up one of the faults of his character. For Cash in no way represents an unattainable ideal of the human being as creator; if readers see him as a Christ figure, he remains a limited and frail savior. He inherits his weaknesses (as well as his strengths), not surprisingly, from Addie. Unlike Darl, Cash starts out nearly oblivious to the secrets and hostilities imperiling his family. His dedication to perfecting his mother's coffin expresses deep filial love and affirms human significance, but his almost monomaniacal obsession with the coffin blinds him to the truths that Darl cannot unsee. Darl imagines, probably accurately, Cash working unceasingly into the night during the rainstorm: "Yet the motion of the saw has not faltered, as

though it and the arm functioned in a tranquil conviction that rain was an illusion of the mind” (77). Cash’s preoccupation with the quality of his labor does not, in the first half of the novel, permit him to think deeply about the implications of Addie’s death. After driving “the last nail” (79), Cash “stands stiffly up and looks down at the finished coffin, the others watching him. In the lantern light his face is calm, musing; slowly he strokes his hands on his raincoated thighs in a gesture deliberate, final and composed” (79). Cash’s quiet satisfaction with his work closes his mind to the dangers besieging the family. His thirteen pithy reasons for making the coffin “on the bevel” reveal his pride as a methodical and caring carpenter, yet his consciousness at this point lacks the scope necessary to achieve tragic awareness (82). Cash’s inflexible adherence to Addie’s philosophy of actions over words initially hinders the maturation of his consciousness, and his fixation on perfecting the coffin allows him to evade the mendacities that his brother cannot (tragically) overlook in the least.

Cash’s shift in consciousness begins at a moment prior to the crossing of the flooded river. Before the three brothers attempt to ford the river, Darl meets Cash’s eye: “[H]e and I look at one another with long probing looks, looks that plunge unimpeded through one another’s eyes and into the ultimate secret place where for an instant Darl and Cash crouch flagrant and unabashed in all the old terror and the old foreboding, alert and secret without shame” (142). This marks a profound moment in the novel in two ways. First, it is one of the only points in the novel at which two separate consciousnesses interpenetrate. For an instant Darl and Cash cross into each other’s “ultimate secret place” and come to a mutual understanding of their situation. Second, and most pertinent to the discussion at hand, the moment signifies a transition in Cash’s awareness of reality. The true gravity of the situation, rousing “the old terror and the old foreboding,” suddenly reveals itself to Cash: the supposedly sacrosanct journey of burial has devolved into a life-threatening sideshow, an absurd spectacle of waste. He realizes that the journey, to quote Olga Vickery, “is destroying the significance it should affirm” (58). The

carpenter sees at last the unnecessary dangers to which Anse has exposed the family. He therefore comes to sympathize, however cautiously, with Darl's contempt for the absurdity of the enterprise. Yet it will take the physical suffering Cash experiences after the river crossing for him to acquire an even fuller consciousness.

Half-drowned and with a broken leg yet again, Cash has no choice but to reflect on dire existential matters, particularly on Darl's dubious place within the family. Lying atop the coffin he painstakingly created for his mother—a strikingly suggestive image—Cash will quietly suffer for his family's irrational choices. Despite his pain, he still clings to his principles of craftsmanship and balance. His brief and broken monologue following the river crossing suggests as much: “It wasn't on balance. I told them that if they wanted it to tote and ride on a balance, they would have to” (165). On the literal level, Cash's words mean exactly what they say: he cares for the structural balance of the coffin. Figuratively, however, the words seem to express a desire from within his maturing consciousness: he wishes to restore balance to his imbalanced family, which in turn might restore some balance to the chaotic and off-kilter world itself. Perhaps this is why Cash, in his semi-conscious state, asks Dewey Dell for his tools: “‘What is it, Cash?’ Dewey Dell said. She leaned down. ‘His tools,’ she said. Vernon got them and put them into the wagon. Dewey Dell lifted Cash's head so he could see” (181). Without his tools Cash's life—and, arguably, the lives of the other Bundrens—holds little meaning. The family also seems to intuit the creative power associated with Cash's tools, which in part explains why Jewel struggles to retrieve them from the river bottom. The family may unite to comfort Cash and recover his tools, but they will also worsen his suffering by splinting his leg with cement. However, his physical disability will prove crucial to his maturation as a character. In this moment, argues Irving Howe, Cash “gains an understanding of the journey, implicitly taking it as a test of character and integrity. He matures in his feelings and in his power to express them”

(188). The injuries Cash suffers from his family's recklessness force him to abandon his preferred mode of creative action for one of contemplation.

At the novel's conclusion Cash delivers his two most intimate monologues, both suggesting the extent to which he has grown as a character. In the interval between the river crossing and the Bundrens' arrival in Jefferson, the immobile Cash undoubtedly reflects intensely on himself, his family, and Darl's place within it; his first monologue in Jefferson would seem to bear this out. Cash reluctantly agrees to Darl's incarceration in the asylum at Jackson: "It wasn't nothing else to do. It was either send him to Jackson or have Gillespie sue us, because he knowed some way that Darl set fire to it" (232). The others—specifically Anse, Dewey Dell, and Jewel—lash out at Darl as the men from the asylum detain him. But Cash expresses his *reluctance* to send Darl to Jackson, thus complicating the decision. This reluctance sets Cash apart, ethically and intellectually, from the rest of the family. His ability to sympathize with Darl's perspective signals a pivotal event in the novel as a whole. The novel's structure, composed of multiple points of view, reinforces each individual's ultimate isolation from another; or, to put it differently, the novel's structure suggests the difficulty of one consciousness to connect with another. But Cash's insight into and sympathy with Darl's point of view refutes the idea of the total isolation and impenetrability of individual consciousness. Cash, ever defined by his concern for balance, places Darl's actions on the scales of justice, mentally weighing the facts of the case. He finds the charge of insanity far too arbitrary: "Sometimes I aint so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. . . . It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it" (233). Cash even admits that he also wanted the journey to fail. He frequently thought to himself "how it would be God's blessing if He did take her outen our hands and get shut of her in some clean way" (233). In these matters, Cash expresses a remarkable understanding of and sympathy for his brother.

Nevertheless, Cash cannot abide Darl's "deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his own sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into" (238). Here the oppositional lines between the brothers' competing visions manifest themselves most sharply: "I dont reckon nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property. That's how I reckon a man is crazy. That's how he cant see eye to eye with other folks. And I reckon there aint nothing else to do with him but what the most folks say is right" (234). Cash, the carpenter and the meaning-maker, thus agrees to banish Darl, the nihilist and the destroyer, from the family and the community.

Some critics take umbrage at Cash's decision. Jason S. Todd argues that Cash despises the deceased Addie for usurping the paternal authority of Anse, and that Cash's approval of Darl's fate aligns Cash with a pernicious patriarchy: "Cash respects society's opinion just as he respects his father's: he puts his faith in the power structure he sees as most stable; otherwise, the structure will collapse and leave him with nothing. Cash's devotion lies not with the best authority but with the one society says should rule: Anse" (59). Todd contrives a pat and predictable interpretation that distorts Faulkner's emotionally nuanced tragic vision. For example, Todd glosses over the tragic ambivalence Cash exhibits during his final monologues. Looking up into Cash's eyes as the asylum officials pin him to the ground, Darl utters words that will surely haunt his sympathetic brother forever: "I thought you would have told me," he said. "I never thought you wouldn't have" (237). Cash's conflicting emotions are apparent: "It was bad so. It was bad. A fellow cant get away from a shoddy job. He cant do it" (238). Cash continues to vacillate between remorse and condemnation. Even though he tells Darl that the asylum will be better for him—"Down there it'll be quiet, with none of the bothering and such. It'll be better for you, Darl" (238)—he ends the first of his two concluding monologues on an equivocal note: "But I aint so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what aint" (238). In the last monologue, he imagines a better world in which Darl could enjoy music with the family on a

winter night: “I would think what a shame Darl couldn’t be to enjoy it too” (261). The ambivalence with which Cash responds to Darl’s fate shows a thoughtfulness and sensitivity absent in the other Bundrens. And such ambivalence, implying an acute awareness of the tragedy inherent in certain moral choices, demonstrates that Cash has attained “his full humanity in which reason and intuition, words and action merge into a single though complex response” (Vickery 58).

As I Lay Dying is as much Cash’s tragedy as it is Darl’s, and here a literary analogy suggests itself. Some critics view the tragedy in Melville’s *Billy Budd* as belonging as much (and probably more) to Captain Vere as it does to Billy and the sailors. Joel Porte, among others, has claimed that the Captain’s momentous decision to hang Billy makes Vere the tragic protagonist: “Forced to witness, and finally take part in, the excruciatingly incomprehensible struggle between good and evil, [Vere] is constrained to accept a difficult position of moral neutrality. Vere has learned how to compromise . . . and it is precisely his conscious awareness of the necessity of making moral compromises that defines his tragedy” (188). Cash Bundren, like the good Captain, must “live on in a fallen world bearing the burden of dark knowledge” (Porte 188) and settle for a “conscious adherence to the middle way” (Porte 189). To be sure, the hyper-conscious Darl, well aware of humanity’s worst proclivities, is no prelapsarian Billy. Even so, Cash’s position in his family mirrors Vere’s position aboard his war ship: a position dictating that compromise (agreeing to Darl’s incarceration) and allegiance to principles (balance and creativity) must sometimes outweigh one’s emotional identification with another’s plight. To save his family from total ruin, Cash painfully consents to send Darl to the asylum—and therein lies Cash’s tragedy. Just as the sailors aboard the *Bellipotent* regard the Adamic Billy as somehow not of this world, so Cash sees Darl as existing outside any conventional social framework. As he says of his exiled brother in the last monologue: “This world is not his world; this life his life” (261). Although Cash does not, like Captain Vere, moderate between two archetypal figures of good and evil, he

attempts something more challenging: restoring balance to his family by reconciling the epistemological extremes of its members and by personifying what is best in words, actions, and imagination.

Darl and Cash both possess tragic visions of existence, but only Cash, who in his full consciousness bears the heaviest burden of his family's tragedy, can acknowledge the profound waste in life while still affirming endurance and creativity. Darl, for all his interior lyricism and truth-telling power, offers no means to assuage the suffering in life, grants no possibility for meaningful action, and proposes no good reasons for human perseverance. Darl, ironically, becomes a tragic evader himself, turning his back on a world radically out of joint; he thereby wastes his own creative energies on negations, slipping steadily into madness. Cash evades much in the beginning, but he develops morally along the way. While he makes meaning through his carpentry, Cash also appreciates music. As he says in the novel's final monologue: "I don't know if a little music aint about the nicest thing a fellow can have. Seems like when he comes in tired of a night, it aint nothing could rest him like having a little music played and him resting" (259). Having accepted the tragic foundation of life, with all its pain and waste and ambiguity, Cash now seeks that which makes life tolerable. "Cash *endures*," writes Irving Malick, "because . . . he concentrates upon creation rather than destruction. His association with the gramophone is symbolic. Cash can work and can listen to music; his life is methodical but also emotional" (48). If Faulkner ends the novel with the dubious image of Anse introducing the family to his new teeth and his new wife, the reader nonetheless senses that Cash is now better prepared for whatever else may befall his family.

Porter's *Noon Wine*: The Tragic Waste of a Divided Self

In Katherine Anne Porter's fiction, as Robert Penn Warren was first to observe, thematic meaning accretes by way of paradox: subtle contradictions manifest suggestively in

characterization and are reinforced through patterns of imagery and phraseology. This approach to craft permits Porter to get at the “truth” of her subject, no matter how fuzzy or fragmentary said truth might be. Her best fictions, nearly all of them short stories or short novels, never fail to yield, says Warren, a “delicate balancing of rival considerations,” a “scrupulous development of competing claims to attention and action,” an “interplay of the humorous and the serious,” and a “refusal to take the straight line, the formula, through the material at hand” (20). Darlene Harbour Unrue has meticulously demonstrated that Porter saw humans as “compelled toward the discovery of truth” (7). But Porter was not so naïve as to believe that truth is something stable and effortlessly apprehended. According to Unrue, Porter “regarded the movement toward truth as arduous and never complete, and it moreover was filled with illusion” (7). Porter’s characters often fail to understand and accept the perplexing paradoxes built into their behaviors and their situations—in fact, they often *evade* them—and the price they pay is tragic. “To know oneself,” Unrue maintains, “requires confronting all parts of elemental self, including, for want of a better word, the darkness” (7). The tragic waste on display in Porter’s *Noon Wine* has much to do with Royal Earle Thompson’s unwillingness to see himself whole and confront his internal divisions. The actual “truth” of his situation—relating to his murder of Homer T. Hatch—is never faced squarely. Mr. Thompson never freely admits his complicity and guilt, never acknowledges his deepest uncertainties and insecurities, never puts aside his superficial pride and concern for appearances; his tragedy follows from his evasion of the unflattering, contradictory, and frustratingly opaque truth of his situation.

In a nod to traditional tragedy, Porter endows Mr. Thompson with the mixed character traits of a tragic protagonist. The regality of his full name, Royal Earle Thompson, even suggests his kinship, alternately mocking and serious, with classic English tragedy. He is not without a certain integrity—in his defense of the mysterious Olaf Helton (itself a mixed act of self-interest and decency), in his perception of wickedness in Mr. Hatch, in his apparently genuine love for his

family—but he conceals his flaws and inadequacies, masking them with pride and assertiveness. “He was a noisy proud man,” we read at the outset (232). Throughout the tale, Porter’s narrator gives the reader a privileged vantage point, a kind of ironic distance, from which to regard the farmer.

Within the first several pages we discover clues concerning Mr. Thompson’s character. He is a bigoted hypocrite, as we learn through his dialogue with Helton: “I had two niggers but they got into a cutting scrape up the creek last week, one of ’em dead now and the other in the hoosegow at Cold Springs. Neither one of ’em worth killing, come right down to it” (233). While he holds the African American workers in contempt for their violence, he will himself murder another man (another white man) on his own property. He is also cheap: “There was nothing wrong with him except that he hated like the devil to pay wages. ‘You furnish grub and shack,’ he said, ‘and then you got to pay ’em besides. It ain’t right. ‘Besides the wear and tear on your implements,’ he said, ‘they just let everything go to rack and ruin’” (233-34). We soon find, however, that Mr. Thompson is the one who has let his farm go to “rack and ruin.” The front gate “was now sunk so firmly on its broken hinges no one thought of trying to close it” (232); the milk house is “only another shack of weather-beaten boards nailed together hastily” (237); the spring on Mr. Thompson’s property would potentially be worth a fortune, “if ever they got around to doing anything with it” (237). The state of his farm causes Mr. Thompson to seek a scapegoat: “Not a soul on the place would raise a hand to it, he had all he could do with his regular work” (244). He even deflects from his own irresponsibility by insisting that his sons will take up the slack and turn things around: “[T]hey were going to learn how to take hold and run the place right” (245). And dairy farming threatens Mr. Thompson’s gender identity, since he cannot “outgrow his deep conviction that running a dairy and chasing after chickens was woman’s work” (243). “Wrestling with a calf,” we are told, “unmanned him, like having to change a baby’s diaper” (243).

Unwilling to face down and accept his insecurities and moral failings, Mr. Thompson insists on keeping up appearances. We learn early in the narrative that he engages only in “carefully limited fields of activity,” lest he be viewed in a negative light. As Porter’s narrator puts it, he had a “feeling for the appearance of things, his own appearance in the sight of God and man. ‘It don’t *look* right,’ was his final reason for not doing anything he did not wish to do” (244). Mr. Thompson’s obsession with appearances is one of the central factors in his tragic downfall. If he misjudges Helton on appearances and behavior—the stranger, physically and socially the opposite of Thompson (though mirroring him in other ways), miraculously restores order and prosperity to the farm—he accurately judges the appearances of Mr. Hatch, an unscrupulous lawman who has come looking for the fratricidal Helton. But Mr. Thompson’s accuracy in judging Hatch by his appearances leads only to total ruin. Porter discloses much about Mr. Thompson’s shortcomings through dialogue exchanges with his wife and children, through examinations of his thoughts, and through descriptions of his looks and actions. More telling than these, however, are the uncanny parallels and suggestive differences between the two strangers and Mr. Thompson. A comparative analysis of the three men reveals even more about the farmer’s hang-ups and buried resentments.

Like Brown’s *Wieland*, *Noon Wine* is a classic American “cloistral” tale. But here we have two strangers whose entrance through the front gate (nine years apart) of the Thompsons’ south Texas farm ushers in both prosperity and tragedy. The strangers, different from and similar to Mr. Thompson, aid us in our understanding the farmer’s downfall. The first stranger’s arrival on the farm reveals a deep connection to Mr. Thompson and his eventual fate. Helton, the “tall bony” Swede from North Dakota, acts “as if he knew the place well and knew where he was going and what he would find there” (232). Arriving at Mr. Thompson’s front porch, Helton “folded up and settled down as if it would be a long time before he got up again” (233). Once hired on as a helping hand, Helton swings the butter churn “as if he had been working on the

place for years” (235). The Swede shows a strange passivity in his stare: “His eyes sat in his head and let things pass by them. They didn’t seem to be expecting to see anything worth looking at” (233). There is something ghostly (even Bartleby-like) about Helton, who is mostly silent and only occasionally speaks “as from the tomb” (234). As such, Mr. Helton is the opposite of Mr. Thompson, a “noisy proud man” who often roars with laughter, probably to mask his own insecurities (232).

Mr. Helton likewise differs from Mr. Thompson in his productivity. The struggling farmer has allowed his farm to fall into disrepair, literally *wasting* the productive potentiality of the place. The milk house, for example, “was only another shack of weather-beaten boards nailed together hastily” (237). But the Swede revitalizes the farm in every way. Ellie Thompson, assuming the worst about the work ethic of the stranger, is stunned by what she sees in the milk house: “The cream had been skimmed and set aside, there was a rich roll of butter, the wooden molds and shallow pans had been scrubbed and scalded for the first time in who knows when, the barrel was full of buttermilk ready for the pigs and the weanling calves, the hard-packed dirt floor had been swept smooth” (237). Mr. Thompson, having made numerous excuses for the disorder on his farm (half-blaming his invalid wife and scapegoating his children), cannot deny the reversal of fortune Helton brings about. As time passes, Mr. Thompson admits that “[t]here seemed to be nothing the fellow couldn’t do, all in the day’s work and as a matter of course” (245). Helton gets up “at five o’clock in the morning,” tending to the cows, the milk house, “the piles of trash around the barns and house,” the churning of butter, the nesting of hens, the feeding of hogs (24). Mr. Helton, it seems, “had never heard of the difference between man’s and woman’s work on a farm” (245). It is because he does not make such distinctions—because he shows no concern for *appearances*—that Helton can transform Mr. Thompson’s failing farm.

Although envious and resentful of Helton's productivity, Mr. Thompson (and the rest of his family) gets used to the Swede's silent but beneficial presence.¹

Whatever their differences, Porter sets up parallels between Mr. Helton and Mr. Thompson that are easy to miss. The most consequential of these parallels, alongside the men's shared propensity for aggression and violence, is a facility for music. The Swede owns a set of harmonicas, on which he obsessively plays the same tune. Mrs. Thompson tells Mr. Helton that they "used to have an old accordion, and Mr. Thompson could play it right smart, but the little boys broke it up" (238). This shared musical ability, mentioned only once, suggests a relation between the two characters that takes on a larger thematic significance. Music is an ordering principle, a harmonizing activity in a world of disharmony (which reminds us of Cash Bundren's relationship with music). That Mr. Thompson's sons, whom Porter depicts as unruly and prone to aggression, broke their father's accordion establishes not only the tension between creativity and destruction which we observe throughout the narrative, but also the implication that the suspension of music somehow results in entropy (e.g. the disorder and unproductiveness of the farm) and tragedy (e.g. Helton's killing his brother, Thompson's killing Hatch, the lawmen's killing Helton, and Thompson's killing himself).

We later infer that the single air Mr. Helton plays on his harmonica, "Noon Wine," in some way betokens Mr. Thompson's fate. Mr. Hatch, with what seems a devilish knowingness, relates the meaning of the "Scandahoovian song": "Where I come from they sing it a lot. In North Dakota, they sing it. It says something about starting out in the morning feeling so good you can't hardly stand it, so you drink up all your likker before noon. All the likker, y'understand, that you was saving for the noon lay-off. The words ain't much, but it's a pretty tune. It's a kind of

¹As Thomas F. Walsh argues, "It is as if Helton has done away with the woman's role by taking it on himself. Thus, in bringing prosperity to the farm, he displaces Mr. Thompson's wife, an act which Thompson subconsciously approves" (89).

drinking song” (257). The song is itself an expression of tragic waste, a bittersweet lament for the premature consumption of precious resources; it is a symbolically veiled recapitulation of the trajectory of Mr. Thompson’s life. The farmer started out with high hopes, attaining a respectable level of success; yet he squandered his dream through his own laziness, pride, and intemperance. Mrs. Thompson, now weak and sickly, “wanted to believe in her husband, and there were too many times when she couldn’t. She wanted to believe that tomorrow, or at least the day after, life, such a battle at best, was going to be better” (236). For nine years straight, life is indeed better on the Thompson farm, thanks to the hard work of the silent Mr. Helton.

But the cessation of music, particularly of “Noon Wine,” that “pretty tune, merry and sad” (much like life itself), portends grave misfortune for these characters (236). Mr. Hatch tells Mr. Thompson that the mysterious Swede, years earlier in North Dakota, “went loony one day in the hayfield and shoved a pitchfork right square through his brother, when they was makin’ hay” (262). According to Hatch’s telling of the story, Mr. Helton went into a murderous rage because his brother, in an effort to serenade his fiancée, borrowed a new harmonica “and lost it” (262). Before the family knows anything about this alleged murder, Mrs. Thompson warns Mr. Helton to keep the harmonicas out of the sight of her rambunctious sons: “You’d better set them harmonicas on a high shelf or they’ll be after them. They’re great hands for getting into things” (238). The boys do eventually get into Mr. Helton’s harmonicas, and their actions bring the Swede to the verge of violence. Mrs. Thompson watches the strange scene unfold from behind a screen of fig leaves:

If it had been a noisy spectacle, it would have been quite natural. It was the silence that struck her. Mr. Helton was shaking Arthur by the shoulders, ferociously, his face most terribly fixed and pale. Arthur’s head snapped back and forth and he had not stiffened in resistance, as he did when Mr. Thompson tried to shake him. His eyes were rather frightened, but surprised, too, probably

more surprised than anything else. Herbert stood by meekly, watching. Mr. Helton dropped Arthur, and seized Herbert, and shook him with the same methodical ferocity, the same face of hatred. Herbert's mouth crumpled, as if he would cry, but he made no sound. Mr. Helton let him go, turned and strode into the shack, and the little boys ran, as if for their lives, without a word. (248)

The incident is notable for a number of reasons. For one, its structural placement in the narrative, just before the arrival of Mr. Hatch several years later, seems to foreshadow the tragedy to come; it is as if Mr. Helton senses that the boys' tampering with the harmonicas, "blowing in them and getting them all dirty and full of spit," will lead to catastrophe (250). Moreover, the scene further develops the doubling motif that underscores an uncanny likeness between Mr. Thompson and Mr. Helton. Here the silent Swede symbolically displaces the "noisy proud" farmer as father (232). We discern that the two "fathers," who have both had their instruments damaged by the boys, are meant to mirror each other. Like Mr. Helton, Mr. Thompson has also "thrashed" the boys, however different Arthur's reaction was to both cases (252). Mr. Thompson's spat with his sons was, we surmise, something of a "noisy spectacle," quite unlike Helton's. And yet Mr. Thompson, when regarding his misfortunes, can also lapse into Helton-like inarticulateness: "Mr. Thompson knew, *without putting it into words*, that he had been going steadily downhill" (244 *Italics Mine*). On the psycho-symbolic plane, the nonverbal Helton is an element of Thompson's divided psychology. Porter deepens the implications of this doubling motif by introducing another stranger, Homer T. Hatch, whose arrival interrupts the nine years of prosperity on the Thompson farm.

Mr. Hatch's extended dialogue scene with Mr. Thompson is the narrative's principal set piece: everything moves toward it and away from it. Porter artfully indicates the similarities and differences between the two men. Unlike Mr. Thompson, Mr. Hatch "was more like a man been fat recently. His skin was baggy and his clothes were too big for him, and he somehow looked

like a man who should be fat, ordinarily, but who might have just got over a spell of sickness. Mr. Thompson didn't take to his looks at all, he couldn't say why" (253). There is much to parse in this: we detect an overtone of imposture in the ill-fitting clothes, and the word "sickness" supports the idea that Mr. Hatch embodies human evil, possibly some principle of motiveless malignity. And we once again note Mr. Thompson's relationship to Mr. Helton in the nonverbal realm of the intuitive, for he is unable to *say* why he does not approve of Mr. Hatch's looks (just as he cannot put into words his intuitive understanding of his own decline). The baggy-skinned Mr. Hatch, with his ill-fitting attire and "rabbit teeth brown as shoe leather," is Mr. Thompson's dark alter-ego (254). To put it another way, Mr. Hatch is Mr. Thompson turned inside out, with all the farmer's worst qualities displayed to the world. As Frederick J. Hoffmann writes, Mr. Hatch's "every gesture, every remark, serves as a kind of grotesque parody of Thompson's own nature. It is as though Thompson were glowering at himself in a mirror" (46). The farmer seems to intuit this personal connection to Hatch: "Mr. Thompson kept glancing at the face near him. He certainly did remind Mr. Thompson of somebody, or maybe he really had seen the man himself somewhere. He couldn't just place the features" (255). What Mr. Thompson dimly recognizes in the stranger is his own public persona, a parodic and more nefarious version of his social self.

Porter elaborates on the idea of Mr. Hatch as Mr. Thompson's doppelgänger. For example, Mr. Hatch's habit of shaking hands with himself reinforces the doubling motif: "The stranger opened his mouth and began to shout with merriment, and he shook hands with himself as if he hadn't met himself for a long time" (255). When it comes to boisterousness, moreover, Mr. Hatch surpasses the noisy Mr. Thompson to an exaggerated degree. The farmer gets nervous over the stranger's "joviality," "because the expression in the man's eyes didn't match the sounds he was making" (254). At one point in the conversation, Mr. Thompson guffaws at his own comments. His laughter is instantly echoed—but more shrilly—by Mr. Hatch:

The stranger folded his arms over his stomach and went into a kind of fit, roaring until he had tears in his eyes. Mr. Thompson stopped shouting and eyed the stranger uneasily. Now he liked a good laugh as well as any man, but there ought to be a little moderation. Now this feller laughed like a perfect lunatic, that was a fact. And he wasn't laughing because he really thought things were funny, either. He was laughing for reasons of his own. (256)

Mr. Thompson's feeling for the appearance of things, albeit superficial, helps him see Mr. Hatch's fraudulence. Mr. Hatch insists that Helton is a lunatic, having once been placed in straightjacket and sent to an asylum. But Mr. Thompson perceives the lunacy in Mr. Hatch, a spurious agent of law and order—in fact, a bounty hunter—who has arrived on the farm to arrest Mr. Helton for murder, though he more likely has “reasons of his own.”

All three men, however, share some relation to madness. Mr. Thompson mentions that his Aunt Ida, having “got vi'lent,” was placed in a straightjacket and “tied . . . to an iron ring in the wall” until she strained so hard that she died (258). One cannot dismiss the inference that the three characters objectify divided fragments of a single consciousness. It would perhaps be too neat, too schematic, to posit each of the three men as embodying a part of Freud's conceptualization of the psyche: the id, the superego, and the ego (though surely Aunt *Ida* has something to do with the id). But suffice it to say that the two strangers impel Mr. Thompson to face “the stranger” within himself, making him more aware—though not necessarily more comprehending—of the personal traits, honorable and dishonorable, that he has suppressed and evaded.

Mr. Hatch also indirectly gives vent to Mr. Thompson's feelings of resentment toward his sickly wife. When the farmer jokes that he might “go crazy” himself “for a change”—though the joke contains more truth than he can know in that moment—the stranger's response puts the

farmer ill at ease: “‘Haw, ha,’ said Mr. Hatch, ‘heh, he, that’s good! Ha, ha, ha, I hadn’t thought of it jes like that. Yeah, that’s right! Let’s all go crazy and get rid of our wives and save our money, hey?’ He smiled unpleasantly, showing his little rabbit teeth” (258).² We sense that Mr. Hatch knows far more about the tensions in the Thompsons’ relationship than any mere stranger possibly could. He proves to be a master manipulator: “He had a strange way of taking the words out of Mr. Thompson’s mouth, turning them around and mixing them up until Mr. Thompson didn’t know himself what he had said” (259). Mr. Thompson’s attempt to explain himself more clearly is of no avail, and Mr. Hatch persists in twisting the farmer’s words to convey a more malicious intent: “I never had much use for a woman always complainin’. I’d get rid of her mighty quick, yes, sir, mighty quick. It’s just as you say: a dead loss, keepin’ one of ’em up” (259). Mr. Thompson knows his words have been distorted: “This was not at all what Mr. Thompson had been trying to say; he had been trying to explain that a wife as expensive as his was a credit to a man” (259). Yet the farmer’s defensiveness also suggests that Mr. Hatch has exposed Mr. Thompson’s dark desire to relieve himself of the burden of his wife. While the farmer would not likely take the fantasy so far as to “get rid” of his wife violently, he has quietly defied and avoided her within the narrative. His feelings of resentment—and his wife’s—are integral to the unfolding of the Thompson tragedy.

Porter creates a tense and darkly humorous segment of dialogue between the two men as they sit across from each other in the afternoon swelter, sharing opinions on the finer qualities of chewing tobacco. Their actions and words express much more narrative meaning than a cursory

² It is worth noting that Mrs. Thompson is also associated with rabbit imagery. As Darlene Harbour Unrue points out, Ellie Thompson “has ‘weak eyes’ that often are ‘frightened,’ and when Mr. Thompson gives ‘her a good pinch on her thin little rump,’ he says, ‘No more meat on you than a rabbit.’ She keeps her little sons ‘hopping’ and once warns Herbert, ‘Cut those carrot tops closer’” (44). Mrs. Thompson embodies the side of the rabbit that “is gentle, skittish, and weak, but Hatch shows us another side, its viciousness” (44). This suggests that Mrs. Thompson has her own unconscious and unexamined relationship to Mr. Hatch. She has “her own inner darkness” (45). The rabbit images become, over the course of the novella, symbolic of “the oppositions of timidity and violence” (45).

reading would suggest. Mr. Thompson cuts “an enormous plug of tobacco with his horn-handled pocket-knife” (259). In response to this gesture, Mr. Hatch produces “a huge Bowie knife with a long blade sharply whetted,” slicing “off a large wad and put[ting] it in his mouth” (259). The phallic symbolism comes as little surprise: both men take pride in exhibiting what they perceive as masculine behaviors. (The two even go so far as to compare tobacco plugs.) More significant, however, is how Porter arranges the scene to create the impression that Mr. Thompson is looking at a distorted reflection of himself, as though in a funhouse mirror; for his double replicates the very same actions, but in a ludicrous manner. It is as if a competition were underway for control of the farmer’s psyche.

The ensuing dialogue, seemingly trivial, reveals much about Mr. Thompson’s divided self. Mr. Hatch makes it clear that he does not like “any sweetenin’” of his tobacco, preferring a “dry, natural leaf, medium strong” (260). Mr. Thompson disagrees: “A little sweetenin’ don’t do no harm so far as I’m concerned . . . but it’s got to be mighty little” (260). The farmer situates his taste in tobacco, which is for a “strong” and “heavy-cured” leaf, somewhere between the extremes of the all-natural and the artificially sweetened plug (260). The two men seem to be speaking of one thing in terms of another. David Yost believes that this coded exchange reiterates the anxieties of nativist racism that Mr. Thompson has shown since first meeting Mr. Helton. For example, Mr. Hatch’s insistence on a “natural leaf” without any “sweetenin’” is “an assertion that mirrors his concern with racial and national purity and his attempt to portray Helton as an unassimilated outsider” (Yost 83). The word “sweetenin’,” according to Yost, may be read as a pun on “Swedening,” an allusion to Mr. Helton’s Swedish ethnicity and suggestive of “the process by which the community might change with Helton’s assimilation” (83). Yost’s interpretation is convincing, borne out by the textual evidence within the novella. But his reading by no means exhausts interpretive possibility. For even as we discern the nativist connotations of

the dialogue, certain psychological and existential meanings, germane to our understanding of Mr. Thompson's evasions and the tragic waste of his life, begin to emerge.

The debate over tobacco between Mr. Thompson and his doppelgänger returns us to the import couched in the song "Noon Wine."³ This bittersweet air, "merry and sad," expresses not only the Thompsons' fortunes and misfortunes, but also the joy and tragedy, the prosperity and decline, of life itself (236). Like the natural cycles of life, "the same changeless tune" continues day after day, "night after night" (247). The stages involved in the Thompsons' varying responses to the song mirror the typical stages of a human lifespan: "At first the Thompsons liked it very much, and always stopped to listen. Later there came a time when they were fairly sick of it, and began to wish to each other that he would learn a new one. At last they did not hear it any more, it was as natural as the sound of the wind rising in the evenings, or the cows lowing, or their own voices" (247). The Thompsons' reactions move from happiness to bitterness to acceptance. In the final stage, the Thompsons have reconciled themselves to something that is, like the life cycle, natural. (The initial stage mimics the song's original lyrics "about starting out in the morning feeling so good you can't hardly stand it" [257]). Like life in general and the Thompsons' life in particular, Helton's song contains many "sudden turns," and his "harmonicas were in different keys, some lower and *sweeter* than the others" (247 *Italics Mine*). Life's bitterness cannot exist without its sweetness, and vice versa. All of this brings us back to Mr. Hatch's hatred for a *sweetened* tobacco plug.

If we view Mr. Hatch as the id-like projection of Mr. Thompson's psyche—even as he remains a "real," concrete character—then his distaste for tobacco "sweetenin'" generates more resonance. Mr. Hatch cannot stomach the prosperity and relative stability that the Swede has

³ Mr. Hatch himself is musically inclined: "I used to play 'Little Brown Jug' on the fiddle when I was younger than I am now" (257). We should recall that the fiddle, in folklore, is the preferred instrument of the Devil.

brought to the Thompson farm through his honest labor and harmonica playing. The stranger insinuates that the Swede—a sort of personification of Mr. Thompson’s untapped potential and dormant conscience—is an imposter, a mere “cheap leaf” who hides his true nature with “sweetenin’” (260). As Mr. Hatch says to Mr. Thompson, “Artificial flavorin’ . . . is put in to cover up a cheap leaf and make a man think he’s getting’ somethin’ more than he *is* getting’. Even a little sweetenin’ is a sign of a cheap leaf, you can mark my words” (260). Mr. Hatch—whose very name is by turns redolent of a portal or “hatch” to the underworld of the unconscious self, the “hatching” of a wicked scheme, and even of “Scratch,” the Devil’s nickname—sees all manifestations of decency and goodness as artificial flavorings, forms of concealment and disguise. To be sure, Mr. Hatch employs his own strategies of concealment; he is a “cheap leaf” who pretends to represent law and order and preys on Mr. Thompson’s anxieties over appearances: “It won’t look very good to your neighbors that you was harbring an escaped loonatic who killed his own brother, and then you refused to give him up. It will look mighty funny” (266). Still, Mr. Hatch would much prefer life’s bitterness without its sweetness, its malevolence without its benevolence. Although he mirrors Mr. Hatch in several ways, the farmer’s acceptance of a “little sweetenin’” in life distances him from the total depravity of the stranger. Whereas Mr. Thompson squirts his tobacco juice at door stones or ragweeds, Mr. Hatch squirts his “at a dry-looking little rose bush that was having a hard enough time as it was, standing all day in the blazing sun, its roots clenched in the baked earth” (260). So much for a “little sweetenin’” (260). Mr. Hatch is a sower of discord and destruction, the deepest and darkest part of Mr. Thompson’s psyche.⁴ And he would like nothing better than to lay waste to the Thompsons’ interval of “sweet” prosperity.

⁴ Eudora Welty finds “Mr. Hatch the scariest character [Porter] ever made, and he’s just set down there in Texas, like a chair. There he stands, part of the everyday furniture of living. He’s opaque, and he’s the devil. Walking in at Mr. Thompson’s gate—the same gate by which his tracked-down victim walked in first—he is that much more horrifying, almost too solid to the eyes to be countenanced” (“The Eye of the Story” 44).

With Mr. Thompson's killing of Mr. Hatch, the doubling between Mr. Helton and the farmer becomes clearer: both are murderers and both become outcasts—strangers—in their own communities. According to Frederick J. Hoffman, "The two men who face each other at the beginning, Olaf Helton and Earle Thompson, eventually are joined in the unconscious world of guilt and implication" (45). Both are, in their way, fratricidal: Helton is guilty of murdering his brother with a pitchfork, after having presumably gone "crazy with the heat" (262); Thompson is guilty of murdering his scheming alter-ego with an axe on a scorching August day. By killing Mr. Hatch, Mr. Thompson kills off that part of his psyche which threatens to deprive him of the only good thing in his family's life. (The murder scene is rather reminiscent of Poe's "The Black Cat," in which the maniacal narrator murders his so-called "wife" with an axe.) While he senses the warring factions of himself, Mr. Thompson is never able fully to understand them and how they have helped to set his tragedy in motion. As a result, the farmer reverts to his old evasive ways by trying to maintain appearances in the eyes of his community. Constantly pleading his innocence to his neighbors, despite having been acquitted by law, Mr. Thompson at last proves himself a "cheap leaf."

The final section of the novella seems to indict both Mr. Thompson and his community. We know Mr. Helton is innocent, that he was in fact trying to help Mr. Thompson against Mr. Hatch. We also know that Mr. Thompson has merely imagined Mr. Helton's being stabbed in order to justify the killing of Mr. Hatch. In truth, Mr. Thompson's killing of Mr. Hatch is driven by, appropriately, some irrational enmity toward the stranger, "a slow muffled resentment climbing from somewhere deep down in him, climbing and spreading all through him" (261). But Mr. Helton's status as an outsider and foreigner makes him the perfect scapegoat. Local law enforcement is just as compromised by the nativist prejudices that we observe in Mr. Thompson and his odious double. Mrs. Thompson cannot bear to recall the mysterious Swede's sad fate, his "being hunted like a mad dog, everybody turning out with ropes and guns and sticks to catch and

tie him” (270). The sheriff tells Mrs. Thompson that the Swede was “crazy as a loon; he picked up rocks and tried to brain every man that got near him” (270). We learn that Mr. Helton, before dying, “fought like a wildcat” when trying to retrieve two harmonicas that fell out of his “jumper pocket” (270). The harmony kept alive by the swede’s playing of “Noon Wine” every day for nine years is finally broken. What else, other than tragedy, could be expected? Mrs. Thompson blames her husband, who had “to be a murderer and ruin his boys’ lives and cause Mr. Helton to be killed like a mad dog” (270).

Mr. Thompson’s appearance as an upstanding, all-American farmer saves him from prison, though not from himself. Mr. Burleigh, Thompson’s lawyer, promises to get the farmer off the hook, but only by making Mrs. Thompson bear false witness, an act that any dutiful wife is expected to perform. Going from door to door, his wife at his side to corroborate his story, Mr. Thompson continues to assert his innocence, but only because he knows the depths of his guilt. Mr. Thompson’s compulsive need for a tidy solution to a morally messy problem only makes matters worse. But the farmer’s neighbors likewise contribute to the problem by refusing to acknowledge any ambiguity in his situation. Mr. Thompson knows that the neighbors, in their religious absolutism, believe murder is murder. In an attempt to keep up appearances, he tells the McClellans that “there’s some things I don’t want no misunderstanding about in the neighbors’ minds . . .” (275). It is now Mr. Thompson who has become a stranger—a stranger to himself, his family, and his community. Springing from bed with angry thoughts of what might have been, Mr. Thompson startles his sleeping wife: “Light the lamp, light the lamp, Ellie” (277). But Ellie Thompson cannot light the lamp because all chance for illumination has long since left the story. She instead gives “a shrill weak scream” (278).

“Any true work of art,” Porter said in an interview, “has got to give you the feeling of reconciliation—what the Greeks would call catharsis, the purification of your mind and imagination—through an ending that is endurable because it is right and true. Oh, not in any

pawky individual idea of morality or some parochial idea of right and wrong. Sometimes the end is very tragic because it needs to be” (Thompson 14). One can imagine other outcomes for Mr. Thompson than suicide, but, as Porter remarks in the interview, “being what he was, he already *has* chosen, and he can’t go back on it now” (Thompson 14). The sense of tragic inevitability hangs over *Noon Wine* from start to finish.

In a 1940 essay on the tragic novels of Thomas Hardy, Porter writes much that we should consider in light of Mr. Thompson’s tragedy. Hardy’s characters, Porter argues, have “decisions to make” (“On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy” 604). But if his characters do not make these decisions “entirely on the plane of reason, it is because Hardy was interested most in that hairline dividing the rational from the instinctive, the opposition, we might call it, between nature, and second nature; that is, between instinct and the habits of thought fixed upon the individual by his education and his environment. Such characters of his as are led by their emotions come to tragedy” (604). As Porter sees it, Hardy “did not need the Greeks to teach him that the Furies do arrive punctually, and that neither act, nor will, nor intention will serve to deflect a man’s destiny from him, once he has taken the step which decides it” (604). Porter’s comments on “nature” and “second nature,” whatever insight they give into Hardy’s novels, are pertinent to Mr. Thompson’s tragedy. The farmer is led by his “second nature,” by buried emotions and urges. Acting on his impulsive resentment of Mr. Hatch—really a deep-seated resentment of himself that he cannot comprehend and would rather ignore—Mr. Thompson takes the step “which decides” his fate. Through his various evasions, his refusals to confront and accept his own inadequacies, violent tendencies, and other defects of character, Mr. Thompson sees only one way out. Lying in a fetal position, shotgun under his chin, the farmer will at last escape the judgmental gaze of his family and his community. This is the tragic waste of the life of Mr. Royal Earle Thompson.

Without a “Ball of Golden Thread”: Tragic Waste in Welty’s “The Hitch-Hikers”

Eudora Welty’s first salesman tragedy was 1936’s “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” later included alongside “The Hitch-Hikers,” her second salesman tragedy, in her collection *A Curtain of Green* (1941). The earlier story, the tragedy of R. J. Bowman, remains one of her finest explorations of modern American rootlessness. What is perhaps the most memorable sentence from that story captures the theme brilliantly: “This time tomorrow he would be somewhere on a good graveled road, driving his car past things that happened to people, quicker than their happening” (151). Many critics have pointed out “that one of the most frequent motifs in Welty’s stories throughout her career is the tragedy of isolation” (Schmidt 50). Tom Harris of “The Hitch-Hikers,” like Bowman in the earlier story, has no relation to an authentic community. Attracted to the freedom he sees in the mobility of the salesman, Harris chooses to uproot himself from all ties to memory and locality. For Welty, place is that which keeps us grounded in the world. A quotation from her essay “Place in Fiction” tells us much about Welty’s view of the matter:

It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are. Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it. It perseveres in bringing us back to earth when we fly too high. It never really stops informing us, for it is forever astir, alive, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man itself. One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is a sense of direction too. Carried off we might be in spirit, and should be, when we are reading or writing something good; but it is the sense of place going with us still that is the ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and in every sense of the word to bring us home. (792)

Tom Harris is “carried off” by a romantic perception of the freedom of the open road, but in so doing he has severed himself from any “ball of golden thread” that would secure him to a place he might call home.

As Katherine Anne Porter pointed out in her introduction to Welty’s first story collection, the texture of “The Hitch-Hikers,” like that of some of Welty’s other stories, “combines an objective reporting with great perception of mental or emotional states” (588 “Eudora Welty and *A Curtain of Green*”). Welty also creates an abstract, dream-like ambiance in certain scenes to heighten Harris’s sense of isolation and alienation. We enter into Harris’s emotions in a way similar to our entering Mr. Thompson’s in *Noon Wine*. The two hitchhiking strangers, like Mr. Helton and Mr. Hatch in Porter’s novella, project qualities of Tom Harris’s inner life. The entrance of the two tramps, Sanford and Sobby, into Harris’s car forces the salesman to reckon with his evasion of a suppressed yearning for rootedness, memory, creativity, and communication. These elements, and their collision with what Welty sees as a rootless and ruthless modern world, are critical to our making sense of the story.

The Mississippi Delta of Welty’s tale is a place in turbulent transition, its communities and roadsides being absorbed into a mass commercial culture (and the economic turmoil of the Great Depression seems to have further destabilized traditional habits of working and living). Harris, his car loaded with office supplies, is the perfect image of the rootless, money-driven modern man. But the country people of the region are also uprooted. The narrator describes one of the hitchhikers’ feet, jutting out into the road, as “an old root” (76)—which is to say, a root no longer rooted in its proper place; and an unrooted root is dead and useless. Sanford, the garrulous guitar-playing hitchhiker, becomes associated with Harris’s longing for memory and rootedness; Sobby, the silent drifter who later murders Sanford, becomes associated with the individualistic and morally indifferent modern world. These associations develop in more complex ways as the narrative unfolds, but we find Welty suggesting a tradition-modernity binary early on when the

two tramps step out of Harris's car, with one standing beneath the electric glare of a street light while the other waits "in the shadow of the statue of the Confederate soldier" (79). Harris engages in an internal conflict between his modern self and his traditional self, between his individualism and his communalism. The two tramps dramatize this inner struggle in the outer action of the story.

Closely related to rootlessness (and the longing for *rootedness*) are memory and creativity. After stopping at a roadside hamburger joint, Harris pays close attention to Sanford and his yellow guitar. He senses something of his former self in the musically inclined tramp. Sanford, claiming to have "come down from the hills," is apparently steeped in memories of a folk music tradition (78). Complaining of the mass-produced nature of the songs on the jukebox—"Same songs ever'where"—Sanford insists that his family, especially his mother, "sung true" (78). We find out later, during Harris's meeting with Carol Thames, that Harris used to play piano for dancers at a hotel on the coast, though he denies this and thereby rejects his own memories. Despite his evasion of his memory and creativity, Harris desperately wishes to hear Sanford play the guitar: "You wouldn't stop and play somewhere like this? For them to dance? When you know all the songs?" (79). Sanford mentions his silent partner, who seems "bogged in inarticulate anger" (77): "He'd gripe. He don't like foolin' around. He wants to git on. You always git a partner got notions" (79). The silent tramp, who wastes no time and just "wants to git on," finds his psycho-symbolic correspondence in the anti-social side of Harris's psyche. For as much as Harris quietly yearns for all the things which the guitar-playing Sanford seems to represent, he also remains drawn to a life of modern mobility, on his own and on the road. The salesman betrays his unstoppable urge to "git on," to leave the past in his rearview mirror, when Sanford asks him to drive back to the diner to return Sobby's empty beer bottle: "'Too late,' said Harris rather firmly, speeding on into Dulcie, thinking, I was about to take directions from him" (79). Harris's barely submerged resentment toward Sanford is later dramatized when Sobby hits

the guitar player over the head (with the same beer bottle that Sanford wanted to return to the diner) after reaching Dulcie. Memory and creativity are literally and figuratively dying in the aftermath of this incident.

The longing for “authentic” communication—and it is well to place quotation marks around “authentic” since Welty sometimes renders the authenticity of communication uncertain—pervades the story. Welty structures her tale around polarities based on communication: sound and silence, speaking and listening. Harris’s tendency, at the time we encounter him in the story, is to listen and keep silent: “[T]he more anyone said, the further he was drawn into a willingness to listen. . . . It had got to be a pattern in his days and nights, it was almost automatic, like the way his hand went to his pocket for money” (78). Yet Welty complicates the possible virtue of Harris’s habit for listening by comparing it to the act of unreflectively taking money from his pocket to purchase things, which he does anytime he feels a genuine connection being made. When Sanford tries to further conversation with Harris, the salesman quickly veers off the road toward the diner to get a hamburger, “in some automatic gesture of evasion” (77). When Carol Thames calls to Harris from outside the hotel window, he answers and listens “[a]utomatically,” taking her to the “All-Nite” to “get a Coca-Cola” (88). The mechanized connotations of “automatic” tell us much about the salesman’s approach to human relationships and communication.

Harris’s willingness to listen often overrides his willingness to express himself honestly and completely. Rather like old Mike, the hotel proprietor’s “ancient collie dog,” Harris’s “spirit’s gone” (81). To speak candidly of himself, of his past or his desires (even to play music again), would make Harris vulnerable to commitments and obligations, to serious relationships and a stable social life. All of these are anathema to the occupation of a travelling salesman, whose life is always in flux, in transition—in limbo. To succeed in this modern and mobile world, Harris suppresses his own desire for song, for storytelling, for community. The little dramas

enacted during his travels belong to others, not to him. As Welty's narrator puts it while Harris lies emotionally numb on the hotel bed, "[N]one of any of this his, not his to keep, but belonging to the people of these towns he passed through, coming out of their rooted pasts and their mock rambles, coming out of their time. He himself had no time. He was free; helpless" (88).

Welty amplifies Harris's feelings of loneliness and alienation in the party scene that dominates the middle of the story. The detailed realism of the previous scenes gives way to a more surreal, abstract style, which mirrors Harris's mental state. On the way to the party, the salesman seems to grow conscious of his isolation: "Walking over to the party, so as not to use his car, making the only sounds in the dark wet street, and only partly aware of the indeterminate shapes of houses with their soft-shining fanlights marking them off, there with the rain falling mist-like through the trees, he almost forgot what town he was in and which house he was bound for" (83). Welty, as so often in the story, uses objective scenic elements to express Harris's subjective mood. Here the elements lose their vividness, becoming "indeterminate shapes" in an indistinct space with no noise except Harris's footsteps. The loneliness evoked is palpable, and is made more so by Harris's forgetting what town he is in and where he is going. The "mist-like" rain, which falls consistently during this section of the story, also externalizes Harris's isolation. He seems to recognize his disorientation: he is not somewhere in particular, but rather nowhere at all. The town of Dulcie becomes interchangeable with all the other towns through which Harris has passed.

Harris's isolation is further stressed by the effect of dissociation that Welty creates in the party scene. Ruth, who knows Harris and has invited him to the party, is portrayed as somewhat vulgar, a woman in "a long dark dress"—the opposite of Carol Thames, who dresses in white—who has given herself over to the individualistic commercial world that Harris represents (83). She is loud and speaks of Harris as if she knows him deeply, but their relationship does not likely go beyond casual sex, which Welty implies through Ruth's apparent jealousy when Harris speaks

of other places or to Carol Thames. Ruth says of him, perhaps only half-jokingly, that he is “nothing but a vagabond” (84). Other than the brief descriptions of Ruth and Carol Thames, no other characters are concretely drawn. There are “at least two people playing a duet on the piano,” but they are never fleshed out (83). Upon entering the house, Harris shakes several random hands, but no one is described (83); it is as though the hands were disembodied. Mixed in with the piano and the talking is the sound of a ringing phone: “Somewhere in the house the phone rang and rang, and he caught himself jumping. Nobody was answering it” (84). The word “Somewhere” at the beginning of the sentence, followed by “Nobody,” adds to the abstract, imprecise quality of the scene. The discord of sounds also underscores a breakdown in meaningful communication, which remains a central theme in the story.

Welty’s style becomes more oblique and elliptical when she makes the jarring transition from the party in Dulcie to Leland, where Carol Thames lives. Common transitional signs and basic exposition are withheld, creating a dream-like atmosphere and a greater sense of dislocation. Harris’s feelings of isolation and anxiety—exacerbated by his worry over whether the guitar-playing tramp is still alive—would seem to reach their pinnacle here. Somebody (again, nobody in particular) in one of the cars requests that the revelers “go holler off the bridge” (84). Welty’s usual attention to the concrete particulars of landscape no longer apply: “They drove over a little gravel road, miles through the misty fields, and came to the bridge out in the middle of nowhere” (84). Harris and the revelers now find themselves literally in the middle of nowhere, and they entertain themselves by shouting from the bridge to hear their echoes.⁵ Without much warning, Welty soon transitions back to Ruth’s house: “Back in the lighted rooms at Ruth’s he saw Carol, his date, give him a strange little glance” (85). The meaning of the “little glance,” like nearly everything else in the party scene, is unexplained. The rest of the partygoers, who appear

⁵ For an insightful interpretation of the psychological and linguistic symbolism of the bridge scene, including an explication of the partygoers’ echoes, their dancing, and the flowing river, see pages 61-62 in James Walter’s article “The Fate of the Story Teller in Eudora Welty’s ‘The Hitch-Hikers.’”

to idealize Harris's "freedom" as much as Harris idealizes Sanford's, demand to hear the story of the possible murder in the salesman's car. There seems to be a yearning among all of these characters, including Harris, to hear stories, since stories shape experience and create a sense of communal continuity from which these modern people are disconnected. But through the hubbub of the party, where shadowy revelers come into and move out of focus, the salesman's inner isolation overwhelms. Harris leaves the party and returns to the emptiness of his hotel room.

As Harris lies helpless on his hotel bed, wondering about the fate of the severely injured Sanford (figuratively, a concern with his own fate), Welty evokes the barrenness of Harris's life as a salesman. The run-down hotel room, a perfect symbol of transience, is the salesman's only home, a space lit by an "unshaded bulb," surrounded by "bare plaster walls," and furnished with an "empty dresser" (87). Adding to the barrenness and forlornness of the imagery, Welty includes a defective ceiling fan "which clicked with each revolution" (87). Harris, "unconsciously breathing in a rhythm related to the beat of the fan," is for an instant grotesquely identified with the defective machine; the two, man and machine, become one. The salesman lies on the bed utterly alone, feeling "the helplessness of his life" (87).

But into this despairing picture of modern loneliness Welty introduces an alternative in the figure of Carol Thames, Harris's "date" from the party. Carol, in her white dress, calls out to him from the darkness: "He could not see her, but she must have been standing on the little plot of grass that ran around the side of the hotel" (88). In contrast to the barren hotel room, the exterior world where Carol awaits is verdant, wet and misty, fecund and feminine—a world, in short, of renewal and potential. On their walk to the All-Nite café, the two pass a "tall wet church," a structure signifying communal values and stability (unlike Harris's car, or the hotel, or the hamburger joint, or the All-Nite). And the young Carol Thames, her full name suggesting both the creativity of song ("carol") and the memory of time (which is linked to the story's river

references, like “Thames”), appears as a vessel of innocence and possibility.⁶ She used to hear Harris play piano “at the manning hotel on the coast every summer” (89). In those days, the sociable Harris “talked at intermission” (89). Looking at him with “her child’s face,” Carol wants to know how he has been holding up over the years (89). Harris, for his part, says nothing in reply. The salesman reverts to playing the role of detached listener, in spite of Carol’s declaration of concern and, indeed, love. Harris clearly recognizes the occasion as somehow significant: “The past and the present joined like this, he thought, it never happened often to me, and it probably won’t again” (89). But it is of no use. Harris’s fate is sealed.

Carol fails to open Harris up to intimate communication. From here on, Welty returns to images of a destabilized modernity. As the couple approaches the café, they pass “a little depot where a restless switch engine was hissing” (89). Not only does the engine convey the “restlessness” and impersonal mobility of the modern world, but its serpent-like “hissing” contributes to the scene’s postlapsarian imagery. We note a similarly charged image when the two sit down beneath “a calendar with some picture of giant trees being cut down” (89). For Welty, the modern world is a “fallen” one; there are machines in the garden. The image is quite literally a depiction of something being uprooted. That the image is on a calendar also suggests time moving relentlessly into the future (the abandonment of memory). Carol tries to remain hopeful, but Harris squanders this chance to achieve meaningful connection and communication.

Writing of Henry James’s tragic fiction, Jeannette King makes some observations that throw light on Tom Harris’s situation. Although James often conforms to “the pattern of

⁶ Carol is likely more complex than this makes her sound. Welty’s characters, whatever their symbolic function, are always to be viewed as if they were flesh-and-blood people. Upon Harris’s first seeing Carol, the narrator mentions the little bag in which she carries her nightgown. This may imply that Carol is prepared to have casual, meaningless sex. Even if we take Carol Thames to be promiscuous, it does not negate the fact that she represents the possibility of a more meaningful relationship for Harris. Moreover, Welty hints that Carol, too, is seeking a more fulfilling and authentic existence, one of community, communication, and love. She is just as much a part of the disorienting modern world as Tom Harris.

traditional tragedy, ending with the hero's death, he equally often presents the alternative pattern of the tragic life, with its stress not on finality, but on continuity" (127). Tragedy does not always mean "that life is too short, but that the individual is unable or unwilling to lead that life to the full" (King 128). The rest of her words are worth pondering in relation to Harris's tragedy:

What the individual makes of life depends on certain personal possibilities of circumstance or character. The particular opportunities he is given may fail to live up to his imagination and ambitions, but it is equally possible that his imagination fails to live up to the opportunity. What is ultimately wasted is not the individual and his talents, but life itself. . . . When opportunity fails to live up to the imagination, the temptation is to live too fast. This is typically the tragedy of the young. Life seems too short and too restricted, so that the individual endeavours to cram the maximum of experience into the limited scope available. He fails to take time to reflect, to evaluate what he is doing and why. There is no time to connect, to form relationships with potential for growth. Leaving the past behind in his haste, the individual becomes increasingly isolated. (128)

Although King shows how this pertains to James's Roderick Hudson and Christina Light, we can also see how it describes exactly Tom Harris's predicament. Harris leaves everything behind him, moving blindly into the future. Like Porter's Mr. Thompson, Welty's salesman arrives at no epiphany, no shattering moment of *anagnorisis*. Peter Schmidt claims that Welty's male and female tragic protagonists "experience no recognition scene, at least in the classic sense. . . . They remain caught within their delusions and their hubris—just on the verge of uncovering the sources of their torment, but never doing so. Her tragic characters are forced to endure forever the 'wandering' of their souls that leads them into the darkest parts of their psyches" (106). Tom Harris's evasions have led to the tragic waste of his life's full potential.

The morning after Harris's meeting with Carol Thames, the guitar player is dead—and so, spiritually, is Harris. Returning from the barbershop, his car polished and cleansed of blood, Harris has symbolically cleansed himself of the previous night's happenings, washing away any burden of guilt or regret. The only token of the past left to dispose of is Sanford's guitar, which Harris promptly hands over to a black boy. It is perhaps significant that the young African American, representative of an oppressed class of Southerners, should receive the symbol of everything Harris wanted but wasted. Harris can now move into the future, office supplies in tow, without anything—love, memory, community, communication, tradition—to hold him back. He is free to be the quintessential modern man, cut from all the ties that bind, severed from the ball of golden thread which alone could lead him back to a place he calls home.

Conclusion

At a time when Joseph Wood Krutch, espousing an extreme historical relativism in his 1928 essay "The Tragic Fallacy," declared tragedy dead, "no longer written in either the dramatic or any other form," the fictions of these three Southern modernists—Faulkner, Porter, and Welty—demonstrated that, to the contrary, tragedy was alive and well in modern America, whatever its formal permutations (272). "The values of tragedy have not disappeared," wrote Richard B. Sewall in 1959, "even if they are no longer embodied in the traditional symbolic figure of the tragic hero. They have been scattered, relocated, distributed" (129). The democratic modal conception of the form has continued to thrive. The tragic waste that Bradley saw in Shakespeare's grand protagonists reemerges, albeit in a distinctively modern sense, in Faulkner's and Porter's lowly farmers and in Welty's alienated salesman. For even in twentieth-century American fiction we can feel what Bradley called the "mystery" of tragedy, and we are persuaded to "realize so vividly the worth of that which is wasted that we cannot possibly seek comfort in the reflection that all is vanity" (17).

We can assume, with good right, that Porter speaks as much for Faulkner and Welty as she does for herself when she affirms the fiction writer's task. She understands the slipperiness of the word "truth," but she still insists, with her literary ancestor Melville, that the writer must tell the truth and resist any urge to sugarcoat or fall victim to her own evasions:

Great art is hardly ever agreeable; the artist should remind you that, for some, experience is a horror in this world, and that the human imagination also knows horror. He should direct you to points of view you have not examined before, or cause you to comprehend, even if you do not sympathize with predicaments not your own, ways of life, manners of speech, even of dress, above all of the unique human heart, outside of your normal experience. And this can better be done by presentation than by argument. The presentation must be real, with a truth beyond the artist's own prejudices, loves, hates. . . ("My First Speech" 692-93)⁷

Porter's is the credo of an uncompromising tragedian. It is Melville's great art of telling the truth taking shape in a new century, dauntlessly plumbing the dark side of American experience. But it will require the tragicomic imagination of Ralph Ellison to give this truth-telling credo its most dazzling expression. And it is to Ellison's *Invisible Man* that we now turn.

⁷ Porter makes a distinction between the serious fiction writer's subtle art and the heavy-handed operations of the propagandist: "The outright propagandist sets up in me such a fury of opposition I am not apt to care much whether he has got his facts straight or not. He is like someone standing on your toes, between you and an open window, describing the view to you. All I ask him to do is to open the window, stand out of the way, and let me look at the view for myself" ("My First Speech" 692).

CHAPTER VI

“A WISDOM THAT IS WOE:” THE QUEST FOR TRAGICOMIC VISION IN RALPH ELLISON’S *INVISIBLE MAN*

Melville’s Catskill Eagle and the Ellisonian Vision of Tragedy

The famed “Catskill eagle” passage that concludes “The Try-Works” chapter in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* never ceases to claim our attention. Having been lulled into “a brief standing sleep” at the tiller, while the “fiend shapes” of the harpooners melt down the whale blubber in an unreal atmosphere of smoke and fire, Ishmael accidentally inverts the position of the *Pequod*, his “back to her prow and the compass” (327-28). Quickly saving the ship from capsizing, Ishmael is prompted to engage in another bout of philosophical reflection. He speaks in the imperative voice, beseeching readers never to mistake mere appearances for realities: “Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly” (328). Ishmael instructs us to behold “the natural sun,” “the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars” (328). But this brings about its own problems, since the truth-telling glare of the light of day “hides not Virginia’s Dismal Swamp, nor Rome’s accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all of the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon” (328). The eternal yea-sayer, the jovial sun-worshipper, evades tragic reality and must face total disillusionment. For Ishmael (as for Melville), “the mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be

true—not true or undeveloped” (328). Ishmael invokes Solomon as the most as the most profound purveyor of wisdom, and Ecclesiastes as the truest of all books, “the fine hammered steal of woe” (328). And yet the man who “dodges hospitals and jails, and walks fast crossing grave-yards, and would rather talk of operas than hell . . .”—such a man is unfit “to sit down on tombstones, and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon” (328).

In the final paragraph of “The Try-Works,” Ishmael proposes a middle way between foolish optimism and unreasonable pessimism. As the philosophizing sailor puts it, “There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness” (328). Captain Ahab is destroyed by a monomaniacal “woe that is madness.”¹ He can perceive nothing but what he sees as the whale’s—and therefore the universe’s—intentional malevolence. Ahab has pushed off from the “one insular Tahiti” of the soul and is at last adrift among “all the horrors of the half known life” (225). Melville, through the voice of Ishmael, tells us there is another way forward:

[T]here is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (328)

As Damien Schlarb observes, “Solomon may teach skepticism, but he simultaneously warns skeptics that any myopic view of reality, be it optimist or pessimist, leads to madness (as represented in Ahab)” (146). The Catskill eagle alone, says Schlarb, “can behold reality from multiple vantage points” (147). Melville, I submit, poses a veiled challenge to himself and to other American writers who would dare to master the great art of telling the truth: strive to

¹ We note that characters like Don Benito Cereno and Darl Bundren have also been lost to a woe that is madness, both paralyzed by an all-consuming pessimism.

emulate the Catskill eagle by penetrating the darkest gorges, but without ever neglecting the reality of the sunny spaces above. The eagle metaphor, likely based, as Larry J. Reynolds has shown, on Asher Durand's 1849 painting "Kindred Spirits," affirms a tragic sense of life tempered by a tough-minded sense of hope. According to Reynolds, Melville's eagle "represents the superiority of the man who has known suffering, who has encountered the woe of life, endured it, and risen above it" ("Melville's Catskill Eagle" 11). Only by mimicking the eagle can the American tragedian—or his or her fictional characters—hope to transform tragic suffering and conflict into "a wisdom that is woe."²

I believe that no American author took up Melville's indirect challenge with more alacrity and audacity than Ralph Ellison. Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man* is the author's response to Melville, a wondrously inventive expression of the tragicomic that blends African American blues and folklore traditions with the aesthetics of literary modernism. Ellisonian tragedy dwells in the chasm between America's noblest ideals—as articulated in the nation's founding documents—and its unjust racial relations, a contradiction which the novel's epilogue in part attempts to reconcile. The nameless narrator of the novel starts out as an inveterate evader, turning away from the tragic injustices besetting him and others. By the novel's end, however, he can—like the Catskill eagle in its deepest dive into the gorge—ascend from the lower depths to the sunny spaces, having acquired a tragicomic vision of his own, a hard-won wisdom to help him carry on in life. I will elaborate on this more in the pages to come. For now, it is well to consider how Ellison's lifelong interest in the tragic, as well as his positioning of himself within the American literary canon, derived chiefly from his understanding of the political and cultural conditions of nineteenth-century America.

² For a subtle close reading of the final three paragraphs of "The Try-Works," see R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam*, pages 131-34.

Ellison and the Nineteenth-Century Tragic Tradition in American Fiction

M. Cooper Harriss argues that the nineteenth century was the source of Ellison's tragic vision of American history:

Ellison thrived on understanding the American nineteenth century as an era when the founding promises of a democratic prospect were forged in the early republic, tested by antebellum debates and ritual violence over the very nature of freedom and national identity, and in the years of reckoning that followed the failures of Reconstruction, fulfilled a tragic mode. For Ellison the 1800s represented the most fecund period of American history and mythology, one that the remarkable democratic struggles of his own century (the contours of which he strained mightily to contain novelistically) could neither escape nor find adequate comprehension in its absence. (146)

The legacy of slavery and the aftershocks of the Civil War pervaded—and perverted—Ellison's own historical moment, though hope and possibility remained. As James Seaton avers, Ellison saw the unfolding of American history as “neither a story of straightforward progress nor a narrative of power and victimization. Tragic in its structure, American history is a drama that moves slowly and crookedly toward the fulfillment of the democratic faith” (165). The author felt that such a dramatically tragic history demanded an equally tragic art, one which would keep the democratic flame burning. But something vital seemed to have vanished from the twentieth-century American novel. As Ellison wrote in 1967, the postmodern novel was in a shabby state: “Instead of aspiring to project a vision of the complexity and diversity of the total experience, the novelist loses faith and falls back on something which is called ‘black comedy’—which is neither black nor comic, but is a cry of despair” (“The Novel as a Function of American Democracy” 764). Such novels contained “[t]alent, technique and artistic competence,” but they were bereft of

“a certain necessary faith in human possibility before the next unknown” (764). Cleverly rendered forms of modern despair and absurdism lacked the edification afforded by the great tragic and comic works of the American nineteenth century, works which, like *Moby-Dick*, often concerned themselves with the health of the nation’s democracy.

With *Invisible Man*, Ellison sought to realign the mid-twentieth-century novel with America’s tragic yet hopeful nineteenth-century classics. Ellison’s novel, in Timothy Parrish’s view, “was the definitive reply to and summation of the nineteenth-century American tradition of Stowe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Crane, and, finally, Faulkner” (xi). Upon receiving the National Book Award in 1953, Ellison stated that in his attempt to create a novel whose “range was both broader and deeper,” he found himself drawn to “our classical nineteenth-century novelists” (“Brave Words” 152). These writers’ “works were imaginative projections of conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love” (“Brave Words” 152). Ellison knew that some of America’s canonical writers, endowed with their own profound tragic sense, were among the first to criticize slavery and the cruel injustices of their time, even if their cultural advantages and historical circumstances limited their perception and response.³

Racial separatism in American culture was, for Ellison, an absurd fantasy. It was each individual’s duty, whatever his or her race, to seek to possess a cultural inheritance in the broadest sense. As he remarked in a letter to John F. Callhan, “I had been a bookish kid, and despite the realities of racial segregation I saw nothing incongruous in identifying with artists whom I considered to be the best, no matter their color, nationality, or where they operated

³ In *The Complex Fate*, a classic critical study published the same year as *Invisible Man*, Marius Bewley argued that the writers of the traditional canon “form a line in American writing based on a finely critical consciousness of the national society” (3). If these artists “had great faith in America, they were also among the greatest critics—and sometimes very bitter ones—America has ever had” (4).

beyond the color line” (*The Selected Letters* 861). Ellison was well aware of an African American presence even in canonical works written by whites: “For me to try to look at American literature written by whites—say Melville, for example—and not know that I’m there, my people are there, not just in terms of character but in terms of symbols, in terms of vision, in terms of speech, in terms of mythology . . . The stuff is there” (“Indivisible Man” 373). Ellison’s race nonetheless proved an obstacle to his artistic endeavors, an ugly fact with which his mostly white literary predecessors did not have to contend. The author’s “studies,” says Timothy Parrish, “were pursued from an isolated position within a library that had been segregated according to race” (xi). Yet Ellison’s determination to carve out a space for himself in the American literary canon was, despite the controversy it continues to generate, a radical act.⁴ But inserting himself into the American canon was only a part of Ellison’s lasting achievement: he was also refining and expanding the possibilities of a democratic tragic mode as previously envisioned by writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner. Here was a unique sensibility wresting the common stuff of black experience from the flux of American life, forming it into the basis for a tragicomic art of the highest order.

The Quest for Tragicomic Vision

Vision and blindness are two of Ellison’s controlling metaphors in *Invisible Man*. It is therefore fitting that the narrator seeks, unconsciously at first, his own *tragic vision* of life. Such a vision, at times dispiriting and terrifying in its revelations, is ultimately emancipatory, capable of freeing the hero from his self-imposed illusions—his *evasions*—and granting him the ability to behold the world anew. Some characters in the novel, most memorably Mr. Norton, cling to their

⁴ For political-historical critiques of Ellison and his novel, see Jerry Gafio Watts’s *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* and Barbara Foley’s *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*.

evasions and remain blind to the tragic, unable to perceive the injustices underlying their reality. Others have already acquired a full or partial tragic vision—Bledsoe, Barbee, Ras, Rinehart, and several others—and respond to tragic circumstances along a spectrum ranging from the nastily cynical (Bledsoe) to the lyrically hopeful (Barbee). Fortifying Invisible Man’s experiences, giving them a sense of purpose and continuity and stability, are the novel’s “anchor figures,” black elders who embody the American past. They have achieved their own “wisdom that is woe” and impart what wisdom they can to the young narrator. And yet no one else’s vision is wholly adequate to the protagonist’s needs; he must, in the end, discover a vision suitable to *his* individual experience of racism and dehumanization. The epilogue, despite its ambivalences, thus becomes essential to the hero’s acquisition of a potentially new way of seeing and ordering his tragic world.

The vision sought, consciously and unconsciously, by Invisible Man is not purely tragic, but rather tragicomic. Ellison saw the tragicomic attitude as fundamental to survival, especially as a black man in America. The tragicomic vision comprehends the lessons of tragic experience while still laughing at the ironies and absurdities of social organization and human misbehavior; it keeps things loose, possibilities open, even when others insist on compliance with the rigidities of ideological thinking; it cultivates wisdom out of woe by recognizing that laughter, to put it in a Twain-like formulation, protects human freedom and heals human suffering. It is the way of the Catskill eagle, as filtered through Ellison’s *sui generis* imagination. For Ellison, “the sociological conditions which have made for so much misery in Negro life are not necessarily the only factors which make for the values which I feel should endure and shall endure” (“That Same Pain” 80). The enduring values Ellison wrote of could be located in the “tragicomic confrontation with life,” which provokes tears as well as laughter in the face of American folly (“That Same Pain” 80).

The tragicomic, as Ellison understood it, was inseparable from the truth-telling function of the literary artist. As he explained at a conference with Robert Penn Warren and C. Vann Woodward, fictional narrative differs from “official history” in that

the novelists try to deal with the unpleasant facts, difficult facts, and Faulkner dealt with the most unpleasant facts on race. I suppose that’s why American history has not been ultimately concerned with tragedy, while literature, at its best, always has. It’s always trying to find ways of dealing with the unpleasant facts, and the only way, the profoundest human way, of dealing with the unpleasant, is to place it conjunction with the pleasant. Thus fiction, at its best, moves ever a blending of the tragic with the comic—or towards that mode which we know as the Blues. (“The Uses of History in Fiction” 64)

Ellison’s tragicomic-blues sensibility suffuses the entirety of *Invisible Man*. The unpleasant realities of the protagonist’s world, harrowing though they be, are always balanced by the comic angle. The novelist cannot afford, as can the “official” historian, to distort or excise “unpleasant facts”—he or she cannot afford to be, in a word, an evader. But by joyfully shaping and reimagining his or her materials, the novelist can present the unpleasant in an aesthetically pleasant, even comic, way. Tragic facts are thus elevated through the workings of the literary imagination. The tragicomic vision of the blues, according to Ellison’s close friend and fellow author Albert Murray, finally expresses “a sense of life that is affirmative” (208). The lyrics of the blues “reflect” a confrontation with “the absurd, the unfortunate, and the catastrophic; but they also reflect the person making the confrontation, his self-control, his sense of structure and style; and they express, among other things, his sense of humor as well as his sense of ambiguity and his sense of possibility” (Murray 208). Ellison, harnessing the spirit of the blues tradition in

his novel, responds to tragedy “not with hysterics and desperation, but through the wisdom of poetry informed by pragmatic insight” (209).⁵

The Hero “Abandoned and Adrift”: The Significance of Ellison’s Anchor Figures

The protagonist’s quest through modern America is threatened always with the chaos lurking behind the appearances of things. Ellison’s lifelong friend, the African American theologian and literary critic Nathan A. Scott Jr., wrote in 1965 that “what seems to underlie most of the representative poetry, drama, and fiction of our period, as something of a basic premise, is a sense that the anchoring center of life is broken and that the world is therefore abandoned and adrift” (*The Broken Center* ix). Ellison’s novel depicts a world and a protagonist that are “abandoned and adrift.” Invisible Man seeks the moorings which would stabilize his existence. Although drifting along on the chaotic currents of modern America offers many possibilities for constructing one’s identity—as we see in the mysterious shapeshifter Rinehart—it ultimately carries the protagonist helplessly into an uncertain future, the past be damned. Aside from the central orchestrating consciousness of the narrator, the novel incorporates many other voices, including the voices of those who speak from or embody a link to the slave past. The past of slavery continually ruptures the surface of the novel’s present, though these historical ruptures are not altogether negative. Throughout the novel, characters appear who have learned to identify and cope with certain tragic realities that the evasive protagonist cannot yet see or would prefer to ignore. These characters are usually black folk types who, as Marc C. Conner notes, awaken the hero “to where he has come from and what he has left behind” (“The Litany of Things” 182). They function as structural anchors in a narrative that moves increasingly toward the surreal and

⁵ Ellison’s own statements on the tragicomic nature of the blues accord with Murray’s. Consider the following: “The blues speaks to us simultaneously of the tragic and comic aspects of the human condition, and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death, and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences” (“Blues People” 286).

the chaotic. These anchor figures are anti-Rineharts who keep the protagonist (and thus narrative itself) from drifting into a sea of unmitigated chaos and confusion; they keep him from foolishly severing all ties to the past and losing his identity in the perplexities of the present, which would only endanger his future. As slavery's past asserts itself in violent or irrational ways, at times threatening to destabilize the entire narrative, several anchor figures who embody "home" and the Southern past will appear, offering experiential wisdom and guidance (and sometimes admonishing the young man for his foolishness).

One of the most important early encounters with an anchor figure occurs at the Golden Day. While providing medical care to a traumatized Mr. Norton, a black vet speaks of his time in France during the First World War. The Vet had been abroad "[l]ong enough to forget some fundamentals which I should never have forgotten" (91). When Norton asks the Vet what he means, the Vet's reply is telling: "Things about life. Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought . . ." (91). Out of a naïve blindness to the cruelties of war and to the homegrown racism that rendered his service as a soldier and medical professional meaningless, the Vet now realizes he had abandoned that tragic sense of life which "most peasants and folk people" intuitively possess. Though a sense of the tragic is not exclusive to peasants and folk people, they, perhaps more than any other class, have learned to face the calamities of history as a matter of course. The black veterans at the Golden Day come from this folk or peasant class. All of them, having experienced the hell of a foreign war and the added trauma of domestic racism, are tragic figures. But their collective tragedy stems in part from their loss or abandonment of a sustaining tragicomic vision, which, in Ellison's novel, fosters a wisdom that is woe. Most of the vets have sadly succumbed to a woe that is madness, and they react to their condition as little more than naked ids determined to overthrow their superegos, as Ellison indicates with their brutal assault on the aptly named

Supercargo. The old doctor, unlike many of the other vets, seems at some point to have recovered his tragicomic vision.

The Vet soon reminds Norton and Invisible Man of their failure to perceive the tragic. He comments first on Invisible Man's ignorance:

“[H]e has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. *Understand*. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!” (94)

The narrator tries to assure Mr. Norton that “the man was crazy,” but Invisible Man knows well that everything the Vet says is, at least at this point in the narrative, true (93). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator essentially pleads guilty to the Vet's accusations: “I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer” (15). His evasion of reality, which includes his willful suppression of emotion and humanity, renders him easily susceptible to manipulation by others, making him the quintessential “mechanical man” (an image which reappears in variant forms throughout the novel). The hero, in short, lacks the tragicomic vision that would liberate him from the schemes of others.

Like Invisible Man, Mr. Norton cannot see the tragic nature of his society. Earlier, on the drive to Trueblood's cabin, Norton speaks of his “pleasant fate” and of black success as being tied to his destiny as a donor (40). Invisible Man rightly wonders how anybody's fate could be pleasant: “I had always thought of it as something painful. No one I knew spoke of it as

pleasant—not even Woodridge, who made us read Greek plays” (40). The reference to classical drama, likely the Greek tragedies, suggests that even as a black American in the twentieth century, the hero can relate to ancient depictions of cruel fate and human suffering. Yet Norton’s pleasant brand of fate, lacking tragedy, troubles Invisible Man. He recalls his grandfather’s talk of fate as having “nothing pleasant about it,” and he admits that he “had tried to forget it” (40). That Norton can talk cheerfully about his fate implies a social and economic privilege entirely absent from the lives of most Southern blacks; it also points up a consciousness completely unaccustomed to tragic experience (as Norton’s reaction to Trueblood’s story partly demonstrates). As John F. Callahan argues, Norton “evokes those New Englanders who thought freedom and abolition a transcendent goal but who, caught up in Gilded Age materialism, offered money in place of moral commitment and whose money often upheld the new order of white supremacy” (“Chaos, Complexity” 135).

The supposedly crazy Vet, with characteristic Ellisonian irony, demonstrates much more sanity than the deluded hero and his equally deluded white benefactor. The wise old Vet knows that both Mr. Norton and the boy do not realize they are playing scripted roles. He chides them for their blindness:

You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see—and you, looking for destiny! It’s classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force—” (95).

In this world of deceptive appearances, the “crazy” are revealed to be sane and the “foolish” to be wise. Brutalized by war and racism, the Vet sees through the power dynamics at play in the

relationship between Invisible Man and Mr. Norton. Like one of Shakespeare's wise fools, the Vet lays bare the true nature of things, and he exposes the connection between Norton and Invisible Man for what it is: merely a modernized and sanitized version of the master-slave relationship.

Despite their rocky encounter at the Golden Day, the Vet later offers Invisible Man sound fatherly advice while they are on the northbound bus: “[F]or God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface’ . . . ‘Come out of the fog, young man’” (153). (Fog will become a recurrent image as the novel goes along, reminiscent of Melville’s use of fog in *Benito Cereno*.) The Vet further warns the hero to resist the powers that be. When Crenshaw asks “who’s this *they* you talking so much about?” (154), the Vet’s response is significant: “They? Why, the same *they* we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances—the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more. The big man who’s never there, where you think he is” (154). The Vet’s words not only foreshadow future events—Clifton ends up a tragic figure who defies fate, who refuses to have his strings pulled any longer—but they also remind the hero of the tragic condition of black people in a post-slavery America. The Vet knows first-hand that the legacy of slavery perpetuates the suffering of black people; to remain blind to this fact is itself tragic. As Susan McWilliams points out, if slavery remains the great American tragedy, “it is so in part because Americans fail to recognize its full dimensions. The United States still lacks a common tragic awareness and language . . . and that lack of common tragic awareness and language is itself a great national tragedy” (142). Yet this tragic dimension of American life is offset to some extent by *possibility*: “Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you’ll discover it” (156). Most of the remaining narrative will involve Invisible Man’s attempt to discover this possibility for himself. The Vet becomes the first of several characters who will, without ulterior motive, guide the narrator toward the awareness he needs to form a meaningful identity and attain a mature tragicomic vision of his own.

Another essential anchor figure, however brief his appearance in the narrative, is Peter Wheatstraw. Not long after his arrival in the city, the narrator runs into Wheatstraw on the street, “singing in a clear and ringing voice”: “It was a blues, and I walked along behind him remembering the times that I heard such singing at home. It seemed that here some memories slipped around my life at the campus and went back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind” (173). The old feelings of home, long suppressed, return to the narrator as he hears the singing of the blues song; he even experiences “a certain comfort in walking along beside him, as though we’d walked this way before through other mornings, in other places . . .” (175). Wheatstraw has known his share of pain, like most of the older black folks from the South. But he seems to have developed his own tragicomic ways of coping: song, laughter, verbal play—these are Wheatstraw’s survival strategies. Wheatstraw obliquely imparts some wisdom to the narrator, but the narrator cannot, in the moment at any rate, pick up on it. The unused blueprints filling Wheatstraw’s cart recall the Vet’s remarks on possibility. The narrator must discover his own possibilities in life, yet he continues to get himself stuck in other people’s *plans*. The chaotic fluidity that reigns outside the “official” version of American life is too dynamic and unpredictable a phenomenon to be contained by any single abstract blueprint. As Wheatstraw tells it, “I asked the man why they getting rid of all this stuff and he said they get in the way so every once and a while they have to throw ’em out to make place for the new plans. Plenty of these ain’t never been used, you know” (175). The narrator, still under the sway of Bledsoe’s way of thinking, finds the changing of plans “a mistake. You have to stick to the plan” (175). Wheatstraw’s reply sums up Invisible Man’s naïveté: “You kinda young, daddy-o” (175). As Tony Tanner has suggested, the scene is a “little parable in passing” (61). “What the narrator has to learn,” writes Tanner, “is that there are bound to be plans, but that any one plan you get involved in may well involve some falsification or constriction of your essential self” (61). Eventually he does learn the lesson implied in his encounter with Wheatstraw, which is why he

escapes to his subterranean lair in “a border area” of the city (5). For it is only in such a liminal zone that the narrator can, for a time, exist outside the suffocating plans of others.

Mary Rambo represents another wise anchor figure, a maternal one, who takes in the protagonist after the accident at the paint factory. As she says to Invisible Man, “*You in good hands, daddy, Miss Mary always helping somebody and you need some help 'cause you black as me and white as a sheet*” (253). Mary reminds the youth that he, as a young black man from the South, must lead the way to a better future:

‘It’s you young folks what’s going to make the changes,’ she said. ‘Y’all’s the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And I tell you something else, it’s the ones from the South that’s got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgets. They find a place for theyselves and forgits the ones on the bottom. Oh, heap of them *talks* about doing things, but they done really forgot. No, it’s you young ones what has to remember and take the lead. (255)

Mary’s exhortation is important for a couple of reasons. First, it is a discourse on the importance of memory, of not forgetting the past. That it comes directly after the bizarre incident in the hospital, when Invisible Man has literally lost his memory, underscores how essential Mary’s role is, reorienting the disoriented narrative and narrator at a crucial juncture in the novel. Second, the exhortation is vague enough that Invisible Man must decide which of his memories—sorrowful or inspiring—matter the most and why. Similarly, Mary’s emphasis on change and action remains unspecified, opening up the protagonist’s mind to a diverse range of possible changes he can begin to make at both the individual and social level. To be sure, he will go on learning the hard way; but Mary has put these notions in his head at a moment when he needed to hear them most, and he will gradually come around to apprehending the wisdom in her words. Even at this stage in the novel, Invisible Man understands that Mary is more than a friend, that she exists as a vital

source of wisdom and stability in a world abandoned and adrift: “[S]he was something more—a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face” (58).

The last anchor figure encountered before Invisible Man gets sucked into the chaos of the novel’s final section is Brother Tarp. When Invisible Man calls Brother Tarp into his office to ask him about the anonymous letter of warning, the young man is jolted by the old man’s appearance: “Framed there in the gray, early morning light of the door, my grandfather seemed to look from his eyes. I gave a quick gasp” (384). Invisible Man’s mind periodically returns to the memory of his grandfather (another anchor figure, born a slave, who exists as a kind of ghostly presence). But the sudden and uncanny resemblance between Brother Tarp and Invisible Man’s grandfather, however fleeting, underscores the significance of Tarp’s small role in the narrative. Ellison implies that Tarp, like the grandfather, believes that blacks should “affirm the principle on which the country was built,” though “not the men who did the violence” (574). We can infer as much from the fact that Brother Tarp hangs the portrait of Frederick Douglass, a great affirmer of the principle, on the narrator’s office wall. Invisible Man’s grandfather used to speak piously of Douglass, and so, too, does Brother Tarp: ““He was a great man. You just take a look at him once in a while” (378). Douglass’s portrait functions as one of several memory objects in the novel; it conjures Invisible Man’s memories of his grandfather, which he would rather suppress: “I sat now facing the portrait of Frederick Douglass, feeling a sudden piety, remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of my grandfather’s voice” (378-79).

Ellison likewise suggests that Douglass’s portrait has inspired Invisible Man to create the multicultural poster hanging in his office, the pictures on it symbolizing the bonds between past, present, and future. A legend appended to the poster says: “After the Struggle: The Rainbow of America’s Future” (385). Brother Tarp reassures him that the inspiring quality of the poster is why the everyday members of the Brotherhood continue to respect him (even while Brother Jack

and the higher ups find him a threat). The old man tells the narrator his story of bondage and escape from a chain gang in the South after nineteen years of hard labor, all for the crime of saying “no to a man who wanted to take something from me” (387). It is at this point that Brother Tarp bequeaths another memory object to the young man, an “oily piece of filed steel” from his broken shackles (389). Brother Tarp admits it is an odd gift, “but I think it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against” (388). Always afraid of the emotions stirred by people and objects that make him think of his former life in the South, Invisible Man neither wants nor knows what to do with the shackle. But he is soon overcome by the thoughts of home, the feelings of reverence for the struggles of the past, the sense of obligation to the future. The broken shackle reminds him of something a father might pass on to a son, which he was to accept “because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of the paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future” (389-90). The memento binds him to a past that he cannot repudiate if he hopes to acquire a mature tragicomic vision, a wisdom that is woe.

Against the Ideological: The Power of Song and Tragic Sympathy

Ellison occasionally uses certain public events and ceremonies in the novel—including Barbee’s sermon, the eviction speech, and, most strikingly, Clifton’s funeral—to throw into sharp relief the tragic nature of the hero’s world. Chapter 21, the funeral scene, is one of the most vital of Invisible Man’s several epiphanies in the novel. The hero initially views the funeral, though not without ambivalence, as a political mission to avenge Clifton’s death and lure “lost members back into the ranks” of the Brotherhood (448). He admits that it “would be ruthless,” but “ruthlessness in the interest of Brotherhood” (448). As he watches the procession, Invisible Man wonders what motivates the crowd of mourners:

Why were they here? Why had they found us? Because they knew Clifton? Or for the occasion his death gave them to express their protestations, a time and place to come together, to stand touching and sweating and breathing and looking in a common direction? Was either explanation adequate in itself? Did it signify love or politicized hate? And could politics ever be an expression of love? (452)

Invisible Man shrewdly perceives the inadequacy of single explanations for the crowd's presence, just as he had earlier noticed the inadequacy of the Brotherhood's "scientific" historical theory in explaining those who seem to exist outside official history. His final question here is perhaps the most important posed in the novel. Invisible Man gradually comes to see that politics, even of the most humane and idealistic sort, usually fail to account for and accommodate the complexities, ironies, and contradictions of everyday human experience. Political ideology inclines toward the doctrinaire, and it can express little to no love for individuals who might begin to think in ways unsanctioned by party dogma. Rigid political thought, in fine, cannot fully accept tragic or tragicomic ways of knowing reality. Richard B. Sewall maintains that the tragic "is not for those who cannot live with unsolved questions or unresolved doubts," and that "the vision of life peculiar to the mystic, the pious, the propagandist, the confirmed optimist or pessimist—or the confirmed anything—is not tragic" (5). But Rita Felski hastens to add that the tragic view of life "is not opposed to politics, only to a politics that draws its strength from moral and metaphysical absolutes" (12). Such a complex and ambiguous understanding of politics will come to characterize the protagonist's own burgeoning tragicomic vision, especially during the funeral scene.

Soon after posing these questions, Invisible Man experiences an overwhelming manifestation of the tragic spirit. Clifton's funeral march, starting out beneath a "thin overcast of clouds" (450), eventually becomes illuminated by an "unveiled sun" (452), and the ritual reveals a true brotherhood united by tragic sympathy. During the earlier eviction scene, the old woman's

crying has a “strange effect” on Invisible Man, and he is “drawn to the old couple by a warm, dark, rising whirlpool of emotion” (270).⁶ Similarly, during the funeral procession, “an old, plaintive, masculine voice” begins to sing, eliciting a familiar yet long-suppressed emotion in him (452). Ellison notes elsewhere that tragedy and song go hand in hand: “There is nothing like having a harsh reality nudging you along to make you feel that there is some virtue in song. . . . What I am saying is that when we are closest to the tragic realities of human existence, we have a deeper appreciation for song and for the lyric mode” (“The Novel as a Function of American Democracy” 762). The funeral scene illustrates Ellison’s point magnificently. A “euphonium horn” from the band promptly joins “the old man’s husky baritone” in capturing the tragic tenor of the traditional slave song “There’s Many a Thousand Gone” (452). Invisible Man, perched “high up over the park,” senses the emotional force of the song, remembering it as “a song from the past, the past of the campus and the still earlier past of home” (452). Eric Sundquist tells us that the tune “is among the simplest but most profound songs created by African American slaves,” one which “speaks first of all of the times when a slave will be released from bondage—whether through emancipation, escape, or death—but it may also be read as a tribute to the thousands of Africans who have died in the middle passage from Africa to America, under slavery, or through violence and hardship since” (125). The song evokes this tragic history and the anchor figures associated with it in Ellison’s novel: Invisible Man’s grandfather, Mary Rambo, the Founder of the college, Homer Barbee, the old evicted couple, Brother Tarp, and several others.

The tragic mood of the scene soon takes on a more a universal significance, though without ever sacrificing the specificity of its African-American context. The protagonist looks

⁶ The eviction scene is another pivotal epiphanic moment, and the old couple are two more anchor figures whose belongings are powerful memory objects. For an excellent interpretation of the scene, and of other anchor figures, see Marc C. Conner’s “The Litany of Things: Sacrament and History in *Invisible Man*” in Morel’s *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man*, pages 171-92.

upon the old man with “a twinge of envy,” for he sings intrepidly and with composure, undeterred by sorrow, injustice, and death (453). His visage betrays a life acquainted with unjust suffering and violence, but also a life that has endured in spite of these facts: “It was a worn, old, yellow face and his eyes were closed and I could see a knife welt around his upturned neck as his throat threw out the song” (453). The lyrics of the old man’s song clearly relate Clifton’s death to the unjust social relations white America has perpetuated since slavery. Yet the old man simultaneously invests “the same old slave-borne words” with a feeling of shared human tragedy, touching “upon something deeper than protest, or religion” and moving even those who “had been born in other lands” (453). Invisible Man realizes that “the old man and the man with the horn” have stirred a slumbering sentiment in the crowd that unites whites and blacks in lamenting the human cost of the tragic situation (453). All involved in the procession—and the reader, too—sense the unifying effect of the old man’s threnody, each individual held captive to the tragic emotions of pity and terror. The hero also senses a transcendent resonance in the song, which is, he says, “deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name” (453). And the song, as a form of creative expression, affirms hope even as it expresses sorrow. In its woeful yet hopeful sublimity, the song soars amid the dark gorges and sunny spaces inhabited by Melville’s Catskill eagle.

But the song does not engender the hero’s epiphany as quickly as one might expect. Still under the influence of the Brotherhood’s doctrine, Invisible Man at first tries hard to control his feelings, and he begins his speech with a sense of “futility about it all and an anger” (454). The crowd nonetheless detects the genuine sentiment underlying his ragged rhetoric, as did the previous crowds at both the eviction and the Brotherhood’s convention. He struggles against the dormant feelings the old man’s song has awakened, cursing himself for the emotional tone of his address: “It wasn’t the way I wanted it to go, it wasn’t political. Brother Jack probably wouldn’t approve of it at all, but I had to keep going as I could go” (457). Finally, unable to go on, he ends

the speech proclaiming his disappointment: “I had let it get away from me, had been unable to bring in the political issues” (459). Presently, however, the hero no longer sees an amorphous crowd of mourners, but rather “the set faces of individual men and women” (459). Brother Jack and his followers profess to care for the downtrodden, yet they see people only as masses to be manipulated according to their pseudoscientific theory; they do not see people as individual human beings to be cherished for their individuality.

Invisible Man’s insight into the sanctity of the individual—which he has sensed from early on in the novel—attests to the life-affirming power of the old man’s song. John F. Callahan views the narrator’s new awareness as “the first indication of a different sense of politics” (“The Lingering Question” 223).⁷ This “different sense of politics” is not about “masses” and the totalitarian theories to which the masses must conform. Rather, it is about a federation of unique individuals who, affected by complex tragic realities, find purpose in what Ellison calls those “great rituals of human hope,” such as the communal singing of the old slave song (“Working Notes” 345). Invisible Man’s mind, Callahan continues, “is opened by the epiphany of song” because “the old man and the horn player. . . step out from the mass and show themselves as individuals,” which “compel[s] others to join and form a community for the duration of the song and maybe beyond” (223). The song, uniting individual citizens (not mere “masses”), suggests the possibility of a different kind of politics based on “tragic sympathy,” as mentioned earlier in our discussion of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. As Harold Kaplan contends in his reading of

⁷ This “different sense of politics” is never fully spelled out. Robert Butler believes that the novel “is centered in a deeply political vision that is altogether consistent with the nonviolent revolution that would succeed where earlier movements sponsored by radically leftist ideologies failed. Ellison’s novel clearly upholds and vividly dramatizes the three core values that Martin Luther King Jr., C. T. Vivien, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Farmer, and many others stressed: (1) nonviolence, (2) Christian love, and (3) integration” (44). I think there is much truth in this, though Ellison’s complex artistry—freighted with ambiguities and ambivalences—is such that the novel resists any clear and certain political philosophy, especially one that could be described as “altogether consistent.” If pressed, however, I would agree with Butler that the novel fits most comfortably within the politics of nonviolent revolution. Ellison was firmly on the side of racial integration and peaceful demonstration, and his open-ended tragicomic vision is in sympathy with these democratic ideals.

Hawthorne's novel, tragic sympathy obtains "where the world's problems seem hopeless" (153). Far from "a fountain of easy sentiment," tragic sympathy "stands for a kind of transcendent good faith, the last appeal . . . in the face of irremediable conflict" (153). Being no more than "an action of the 'heart' [tragic sympathy] solves nothing in the entanglement of interests, yet it is a mute, unarguing affirmation of unity, the context itself of the community's survival" (153). Although the old man's song is by no means "mute," it is an affirmation of communal unity, an expression of sympathy for the tragic waste and pain of black experience. And the capacity for tragic sympathy is a necessary part of the tragicomic vision that Ellison advances as an alternative to the dehumanizing ideological vision of the Brotherhood.

Attaining Tragicomic Vision: Self and Society in the Epilogue

The epilogue depicts a subterranean Invisible Man sifting through the narrative fragments of his journey and attempting to organize them into a meaningful and coherent whole. The hero's problem, as Ellison points out in his "Working Notes to *Invisible Man*," is that "he is a man born into a tragic [and] irrational situation who attempts to respond to it as if it were completely logical," and who tries to succeed "within the tight framework granted him by jim crow [*sic*]" (344). Yet the tragic realities of Invisible Man's world "reveal the essential inadequacy of such a scheme for the full development of personality" (344). Beckoning from society's opposite extreme is the kingdom of chaos. Rinehart, confidence man and trickster, has attained his own rather nihilistic tragic vision, knowing as he does that chaos, which he can mischievously manipulate for his own benefit, lurks just behind the façade of civilizational order. But both alternatives are equally unsuited to Invisible Man's temperament by the time of the epilogue: the hero can neither conform to the racist and corrupt social order nor entirely embrace the unethical Rinehart's "vast, seething hot world of fluidity" (498). Only by temporarily falling outside of history—literally and figuratively falling—can he acquire the hard-won wisdom of a tragicomic vision. But to do this properly, he must extinguish all his former illusions while simultaneously

rekindling his capacity to see the truth and hold fast to hope. The epilogue, then, offers the narrator a chance to make sense of his harrowing social experiences and answer a question that has haunted him from the very beginning: Who am I?

Throughout the epilogue, the narrator wrestles with questions of self and society. He describes both of these spheres, the private and the social (which always overlap and interpenetrate), as essentially tragic. Invisible Man admits to his many evasions, to committing nearly self-destructive acts of self-deception, and to quelling his own deepest feelings for the sake of others: “Too often, in order to justify *them*, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out and wagged like the door of an empty house in a high wind” (573). The simile here is an apt image for a man who denies his own individuality: it is a form emptied of any distinguishing content or notable character—merely a house, not a home. (It also reiterates the fundamental *homelessness* of his condition.) By avoiding unjust realities and advocating for the “mistaken beliefs” of others—the beliefs of those false fathers like Bledsoe and Brother Jack—Invisible Man comes dangerously close to being a cipher (573). His persistent turning away from reality, his inability to face things for what they actually are and assert who he actually is, indicates a sort of tragic flaw, or, in Aristotelian terms, *hamartia*. He confesses to what he deems his “sickness”: “The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me” (575). Invisible Man realizes that part of his tragic situation arises from his own flawed character, and is not wholly “due to the ‘political situation’” (575).

Invisible Man posits creativity as a defense against the chaos of a tragic world, and possibly as a means to redeem his tragic flaw. As Tony Tanner says of the narrator, “This is not the artist as hero so much as the hero out of dire necessity having to become an artist. For it is only in the ‘symbolic’ freedom of lexical space that he can both find and be himself” (59).

Invisible Man identifies chaos and imagination: “Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he’s a master of it—or imagination” (576). Imagination, in this context, may be construed as art, or the imaginative shaping of chaos. In “Society, Morality and the Novel,” Ellison makes the case that the novelist’s art “seeks to take the surface ‘facts’ of experience and arrange them in such ways that for a magic moment reality comes into sharp and significant focus” (702). Part of what Ellison sees as a novel’s “social function” (703) deals with the shaping of everyday reality, the “seizing from the flux and flow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience . . . from which emerge our sense of humanity and our conception of human value” (702). Invisible Man takes it upon himself to create “from the flux and flow” of his experience a narrative, or a memoir, that gives formal coherence to the often tragic and absurd events of his life. This act of art, the need “to put it all down” in writing, is necessary to his acquisition of a tragicomic vision (579). When Invisible Man comments on Louis Armstrong’s lyrics, he is really commenting on the life-affirming power of art, particularly art in the tragicomic mode of the blues:

And there’s still a conflict within me: With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, “Open the window and let the foul air out,” while the other says, “It was good green corn before the harvest.” Of course Louis was kidding, *he* wouldn’t have thrown the old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of the old Bad Air’s horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I’ll be up and around with mine. (581)

Art, no matter how full of “foul air,” can clarify and edify, instruct and delight. To do away with the “old Bad Air,” with the suffering of tragedy, is to strip art of its most vital material. By preserving in his narrative the “the old Bad Air” of tragic experience, the hero comes nearer to achieving a mature consciousness. Still, for all his concern with his new role as a creative

individual, Invisible Man finds himself “drawn upward again” (579), wanting to refashion himself socially.

The social dimension of the epilogue begins with Invisible Man attempting to tease out the implications of his grandfather’s riddle and square the tragic legacy of slavery with, presumably, America’s founding documents. Interpreting his grandfather’s mysterious “deathbed advice,” Invisible Man concludes that the dying man “*must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence” (574). Although the reader never learns precisely which principle is to be affirmed, it seems safe to say that the protagonist means equality as articulated in “the ‘sacred documents’ of this nation—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights” (Ellison, “Commencement Address” 412). The “men who did the violence” are those whose betrayal of these sacred documents set into motion some of the nation’s most tragic events, from slavery to the Civil War to the Harlem riots depicted in the novel. Invisible Man wonders if his grandfather meant that these men, who had dreamed the principle “into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past” and “violated and compromised [it] to the point of absurdity,” should be rejected totally or redeemed through our affirming the principle. He poses the question thus: “[D]id he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle, because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs?” (574). Invisible Man wonders further if black Americans, those who were “brutalized and sacrificed” in the name of the founding, should ultimately act as custodians of the principle, in case those in power try to destroy both it and oppressed black people (574).

Invisible Man never provides unequivocal answers to these searching and complicated questions, but his general tone eventually inclines toward the affirmative. Alex Zamalin sees the protagonist’s examination of his grandfather’s dying words as a wish to reclaim the founding ideals and show “that American democratic faith ran so deep that its most passionate defenders

were those historically denied its fruits” (71). Those historically denied the fruits of American democracy are also those less likely to forget the nation’s greatest tragedy. The American predilection for evading unpleasant historical truths frustrated Ellison throughout his career. In “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” Ellison demolishes the racist fantasy of “purging the nation of blacks,” and criticizes America’s lack of tragic consciousness: “While we are aware that there is something inescapably tragic about the cost of achieving our democratic ideals, we keep such tragic awareness segregated in the rear of our minds. We allow it to come to the fore only during moments of great national crisis” (581).⁸ Ellison partly seems to use the epilogue as a way of working out his own tragic view of American society. Like Ellison in his essays, *Invisible Man* wrestles with the ironic nature of the founding, seeking to reconcile the contradictions between America’s professed principles and its unjust racial history. If he is to acquire a tragicomic vision at all—and if his experiences are to reflect more than just mere happenstance—then an uncompromising look at the nation’s historical record is of the essence. Yet by the epilogue’s end he *seems* to have attained his tragicomic vision, one which unflinchingly faces the facts of racism and affirms democracy’s highest principle. The narrator hints at a potentially purposeful life not only as an artist but also as a citizen, “since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581).

Invisible Man’s tragicomic vision, his wisdom that is woe, includes the capacity for laughter and tragic sympathy, but also for the cultivation of a “reflective temper.” The philosopher John Kekes advances “the reflective temper” as “an attitude to life” that is “considered and calm” in response to life’s tragic calamities, which are all marked by the evils of “contingency, indifference, and destructiveness” (202-03). A tragic vision alone is not enough: it

⁸ One is reminded of William Carlos Williams’s words, from *In the American Grain*, about the nation’s lack of the tragic sense of life: “Who is open to injuries? Not Americans. Get hurt; you’re a fool. The only hero is he who is not hurt. We have no feeling for the tragic. Let the sucker who fails get his. What’s tragic in that? That’s funny! To hell with him. He didn’t make good, that’s all” (180).

may dispel our evasions by exposing hard truths we would rather not face, but our awareness of the tragic truth merely reminds us “that we are at the mercy of forces we cannot control, forces that shape our very attempts to control them” (203). The reflective temper grants us the ability to respond meaningfully to tragic experience. As Kekes puts it, “Our response [to tragedy] is improved by reflection on the essential conditions of life because it increases our control” (205). We learn to control ourselves as both victims and potential victimizers and to understand and accept those things which exist within and beyond our control. The most significant aspect of the reflective temper “is not that it enables us to cope with tragedy when it happens but that it helps us to increase our control over our lives by doing what we can to avoid causing and suffering evil” (216).

The artist, the novelist or blues player or creator of some other stripe, will almost invariably develop a reflective temper.⁹ *Invisible Man*, of course, engages in deep reflection in writing his narrative; it permits him to triumph momentarily over unshaped chaos and tragic actuality, revealing to him that one of the possibilities inherent in his story is the discovery of a lasting wisdom derived from the experience of injustice and suffering.¹⁰ But it is Ralph Ellison himself who, as the quintessential tragicomic artist of American democracy, exercises a supreme reflective temper by transcending mere optimism and pessimism, flying high in that rarefied realm of Melville’s Catskill eagle. He opens up unexplored territories for American tragic fiction and boldly endeavors to reconcile our national “dialectic of yea and nay,” making our

⁹ In addition to *Invisible Man*, I would argue that Cash Bundren is another creative character who, in his thoughtfulness and concern for craftsmanship and music, attains a reflective temper over the course of his tragic ordeal. A character like Welty’s Tom Harris has the opportunity to develop a reflective temper and build a meaningful life, but he ultimately chooses the isolating “freedom” of the open road.

¹⁰ The epilogue also gives us some sense of the restorative resolution associated with traditional comedy. According to Cyrus Hoy, “Comedy ends with a restoration of the individual to himself, and to all that, in the widest sense, can be said to give him his identity. He will have lost it, if he ever had it, through sundry transgressions, follies, and inconsistencies; also through the force of the sundry delusions which he has entertained, which keep him from knowing himself or his proper good. But his proper good is defined for him at last, he has the wit to see it for what it is, and it is still—wonderful to relate—within his grasp, which is not the least of the marvels which comedy celebrates” (312).

Emersonian and Melvillean selves the very best of friends (Kaplan 182). And it is no exaggeration to say, as Marc C. Conner and Lucas Morel have said, that “Ellison’s always-expanding understanding of the form of the novel, his insistence on never reducing the complexity of American culture to fashionable statements or empty postures, and the generative, tragicomic, yet ultimately affirming ethos of his writings reveal him to be perhaps the most significant American writer in the post-World War II period” (“Introduction” *The New Territory* 30-31).

CHAPTER VII

“THE SANE MADNESS OF VITAL TRUTH”: SOME CLOSING REMARKS ON AMERICAN TRAGIC FICTION

I have argued throughout this dissertation that much of our American tragic fiction, albeit formally and stylistically diverse, is linked by the iterative theme of evasion. The pattern of evasion presents us with characters who try to ignore or flee tragic actualities, who turn away—physically or psychologically (or both)—from their problems only to run up against the limits of themselves and their world. Drawn to peculiarly American falsehoods and half-truths—like the myth of Adamic innocence and the dream of radical freedom and the autonomous self—these characters seek escape from a world of moral ambiguity and tragic limitation. I have further argued that American tragic writers, from Charles Brockden Brown to Ralph Ellison, have all practiced Melville’s “great Art of Telling the Truth,” rending the veil and casting light on those evasive behaviors which bring about tragic consequences (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 75). To be sure, I have not exhausted the possibilities of American tragic fiction. There are other tragic dilemmas and pitfalls with which American tragedians—some of whom continue to write in the twenty-first century—have doubtlessly been preoccupied. I have, however, underlined what I believe to be a controlling theme in many works of classic American fiction, works which can rightly be labeled tragic.

As I stated in the introduction, I have intended for this dissertation to be suggestive rather than definitive. I have selected works, both well-known and underappreciated, that strike me as

first-rate American tragedies of evasion. There are many other exemplary fictions, from the American Renaissance era to the end of the twentieth century, that I did not include here but considered representative of the thematic pattern. We find visions of evasion in, for instance, Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Melville's *Bartleby*; in Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and Frank Norris's *McTeague*; in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" and William Dean Howells' *The Shadow of a Dream*; in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas"; in Robert Penn Warren's *Wilderness* and John Williams's *Butcher's Crossing*; in John Cheever's "The Swimmer" and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. Moreover, the tragic evasion of slavery and its legacy could be profitably explored in any number of brilliant works by African American writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and, more recently, Colson Whitehead.

It seems tragic truth-tellers in literature have long posed a threat. Plato famously had no problem banishing the poets from his ideal city. They offered no real wisdom, for they were merely imitators of other imitations. The ideal Forms were all that mattered. On this view, poetry becomes philosophically and politically suspect, threatening the stability of an ideal metaphysical and political order. Plato's refusal to countenance poetry is, arguably, a tragic evasion. The philosopher knows that the poets, especially the tragedians, create imagined worlds which nonetheless reflect and illuminate, challenge and expose, the world as it is, a world in which the tragic cannot be fully gainsaid. (Eliot's well-known remark about humankind's inability to bear very much reality would seem to the point here.) Tragic fiction therefore has an essential role to play in a free society.

American tragic fiction, Melville's great art of telling the truth, manages to show us that which we would rather turn away from, but it does so through "cunning glimpses," with the most unbearable tragic realities revealing themselves in the writer's overall aesthetic "covertly, and by

snatches” (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 75). Melville’s tragic poetics, though loosely defined, rely on the example of Shakespeare because the playwright’s fictional world is able to show us “the truth” about this “world of lies”—that is, the actual historical world of evasion we inhabit—in a way unrivaled by most other literary artists:

But it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality;—these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. Through the dark mouths of the characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth. (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 74)

Truth, for Shakespeare as for Melville, is a dangerous and potentially destructive thing: the individual who confronts it without any recourse to evasion faces the possibility of going mad (as we witness in characters like Benito Cereno and Darl Bundren). An author’s fictional characters, or narrative voices, permit unfiltered “flashings forth of the occasional truth,” no matter how damning the truth may be in this world of lies. As Edgar Dryden sees it, the realm of fiction lets the writer “approach the ‘axis of reality’ without being destroyed or driven mad. Fiction, paradoxically, puts man in touch with Truth while protecting him from it” (26).¹ The American writers examined in this dissertation have all created characters and narrators who, not unlike

¹ For Dryden, Melville’s “great Art of Telling the Truth” “implies that an essential part of the career of any writer is his search for a form which will allow him safely to explore and reveal a destructive and maddening truth” (viii). See Dryden’s *Melville’s Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth*. For his close reading of “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” see pages 21-29.

King Lear, speak “the sane madness of vital truth,” but they do so within the affirmative confines of fictional form.²

Aldous Huxley’s essay “Tragedy and the Whole Truth” is worth thinking about in connection with American tragic fiction. Huxley believes that tragedy, particularly in its Greek and Shakespearean incarnations, is a pure and partial art, illuminating only a portion of human experience. The circumscribed nature of the genre, according to Huxley, limits the scope available to writers as they depict the human condition: “To make a tragedy the artist must isolate a single element out of the totality of human experience and use that exclusively as his material. Tragedy is something that is separated from the Whole Truth, distilled from it, so to speak, as an essence is distilled from the living flower. Tragedy is chemically pure” (100).³ By contrast, “Wholly-Truthful art overflows the limits of tragedy” (101). Whereas partially truthful tragedy “is an arbitrarily isolated eddy on the surface of a vast river that flows on majestically, irresistibly, around, beneath, and to either side of it,” wholly truthful literature “contrives to imply the existence of the entire river as well as of the eddy” (101).

Huxley’s distinction seems based on an oversimplification of tragedy that cannot separate the genre from its classical models. While his understanding of tragedy as “chemically pure” may

² The idea of literary form as providing a soothing conduit—which assists in a process of *catharsis*—for the conveyance of the “sane madness of vital truth” lends some credence to Murray Krieger’s theory, previously mentioned in a footnote in the introduction. While I think Krieger’s scheme is, in the end, too constricting to account for the attitudinal and formal variety of tragedy as a mode, it does have its applications. See *The Tragic Vision: The Confrontation of Extremity*, particularly pages 1-21.

³ Huxley claims that “[t]here are certain things which even the best, even Shakespearean tragedy, cannot absorb into itself” (100). I am not so sure Melville would agree, and certainly Dr. Johnson would not. The latter discerned Shakespeare’s resistance to and transcendence of strict generic categorization: “Shakespeare’s plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination” (423). Shakespeare conceived of modal tragedy centuries ago. His plays are as far from “the literature of Partial Truth” as are the fictions of those artists whom Huxley celebrates as “Wholly-Truthful”—Homer, Henry Fielding, Proust, Kafka, and others (Huxley 103).

characterize particular Greek plays, it fails to account for the hybridity of tragedy since at least the end of the eighteenth century (and prefigured by Shakespearean tragedy in the seventeenth). What is more, the wholly-truthful authors Huxley champions are themselves, in certain moods, tragic artists of the first rank: Proust, Kafka, Lawrence, etc. Huxley is forced to admit that literature in the whole-truth vein, while taking in a wider swath of humanity than absolute tragedy, “may contain, among other constituents, all the elements from which tragedy is made” (101). Melville would not share Huxley’s view that tragedy is incompatible with the telling of “the whole truth.” American tragic fiction, like Huxley’s literature of the “whole truth,” presents a world that involves much more than sorrow and suffering. All authors must, to be sure, focus on a subject, selecting and delimiting materials carefully. But our tragedians often strive to tell the whole truth, insofar as it is within their imaginative powers, by refusing to “shirk the irrelevancies which, in actual life, always temper the situations and characters” that absolute tragedies “insist on keeping chemically pure” (Huxley 98). In many of the tragedies of evasion we have examined, “pure” scenes of tragic action and suffering tend to be offset by little moments of observation and intimacy, by comedy and even farce, and by a character’s occasional expression of longing for community, sympathy, and love. American tragedians boldly confront the darkness, speaking Melville’s sane madness of vital truth. But they do not mistake the darkness for the whole truth: they would aspire, with Melville and Ellison, to soar like the Catskill eagle and acquire a more complete view of the landscape (even if they fail to reach such lofty heights in every instance).

The American tragedian will always have to make peace with Emerson, the great anti-tragic counterforce in American letters, just as Emerson had to make peace with tragic experience. As he declares in the opening sentence of his lecture “The Tragic,” “He has seen but half the universe who has never been shown the House of Pain” (1289). “In the dark hours,” says Emerson, “our existence seems to be a defensive war, a struggle against the encroaching All, which threatens surely to engulf us soon, and is impatient of our short reprieve” (1289). He

concedes that “no theory of life can have any right, which leaves out of account the values of vice, pain, disease, poverty, insecurity, disunion, fear, and death” (1289). The gulf between the ideal and the real had forced Emerson to qualify his overwhelming optimism.⁴ Yet, even in this lecture, Emerson tries to turn the tragic into something else—an error, an absence, a mere form of ignorance. This is possibly because his view of evil and sin was, as Newton Arvin has shown, a peculiar mixture of Eastern religious philosophy, Neo-Platonism, and the Christian thought of St. Augustine.⁵ Whatever criticisms we might make of Emerson’s limited tragic vision, a tempered version of his optimism—as suggested in the previous chapter on Ralph Ellison—seems crucial even to those tragedians who would awaken us to the tears of things (*lacrimae rerum*).

In exposing tragic evasion, these writers do not sink into a morass of nihilistic despair, even if they at times come dangerously close (as Melville does in *Benito Cereno*). Hyatt Waggoner’s description of Faulkner’s tragic vision could justifiably describe the visions of all the writers we have investigated. Their collective sense of tragedy “does not deny democracy but sustains it. Nor does it suggest that we try to escape the world; rather, that we do what we can to transform it, and be prepared to endure it” (266). Nor yet does their sense of tragedy “deny or restrict freedom, it demands and magnifies it, but recognizes the forces that limit it” (266). To put it another way, American tragic writers, for all their emphasis on sorrow and suffering, devote

⁴ For an older essay that remains a fair and insightful account of Emerson’s reflections on the tragic, see Newton Arvin’s “The House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense.” Arvin reminds us that “[n]either suffering nor wickedness is [Emerson’s] primary theme; they are not even secondary; in his work as a whole they are tiny patches of grayness or blackness in a composition that is flooded with light and high color” (45). But there were times when Emerson could be as much a tragic and moral realist as Melville or Hawthorne: “[W]hen he was really deeply stirred by the spectacle of systemic cruelty and injustice, as he was during the long anguish of the anti-slavery struggle, he could wrench off certain specious masks and disguises as unsparingly, as realistically, as any of his Calvinist ancestors could have done” (45). Yet Emerson’s ultimately affirmative vision—and, indeed, Whitman’s and Thoreau’s—is vital to American life and literature (as someone like Ralph Ellison understood). Once “we have cleared our minds of the cant of pessimism,” writes Arvin, Emerson’s work offers us “perhaps the fullest and most authentic expression in modern literature of the more-than-tragic emotion of thankfulness” (53).

⁵ As Arvin explains, Emerson’s conception of evil and sin is related to “the theory that identifies Evil with non-existence, with negation, with the absence of positive Being” (46). For more on Emerson’s attempt to absorb the tragic into his more optimistic philosophy, see Arvin, especially pages 46-50.

themselves to something like “the whole truth,” attending to the Yea and Nay of American life. As Harold Kaplan asserts, “The drama of personal moral freedom develops its dialectic of negation and affirmation, self-destruction and intrinsic faith, and there is the profoundest relationship between this quality of experience and tragic literature” (xxx1).

These American tragedians advocate, if only tacitly, a tragic humanism. Tragic humanism involves “a wisdom that is woe,” allowing the writer to speak the sane madness of vital truth without extinguishing faith in the American experiment, or in human civilization itself. I use the term “tragic humanism” as it is defined by William Brashear: “Tragic humanism is the humanism that recognizes [humanity’s] ostensible insignificance, but also the necessity of preceding as if it were not so, and of willfully nourishing and sustaining the underlying illusions of value and order” (96). At first glance, tragic humanism appears to conflict with the truth-telling function of tragedy by lending support to “the underlying illusions of value and order.” But in its effort to conserve these life-sustaining fictions of civilization—among which we must include the valuable and ordering activities of literature and the other arts—tragic humanism resists any temptation to evade the perduring facts of death, guilt, moral ambiguity, injustice, and suffering. For without an abiding and realistic sense of the agonies to which the flesh is heir, or of the injustices which some people perpetually seek to impose on others, tragic humanism is no longer tragic. Although it never denies free will or the possibility of moral and social change, it wisely abstains from surrendering “the experienced realization”—to borrow a wonderful phrase from F. O. Matthiessen—that ironic twists of fate can often leave our best laid plans and noblest intentions in ruins (180). Tragic humanism disallows tragic evasion, for it “never confounds illusions for reality and, accordingly, strives for what it does not believe” (96). Indeed, it is skeptical of all “fragmentary, programmed lines of thought that promote extremism and imbalance” (96). Tragic humanism, like an individual author’s tragic vision, is an attitude of

attentiveness, “more a stance than a program or ideology” (96).⁶ America’s greatest tragic writers are, as I hope this dissertation has illustrated, tragic humanists of a very high caliber. Perhaps they, more than anyone, have helped to keep us honest in this world of lies.

⁶ Irvin Stock’s words capture the anti-ideological spirit of America’s tragic humanists: “To know, as it is one function of literature to help us know, that experience is the touchstone of ideas, is to be on guard against all the theories that presume to tell us finally what man is and how—and sometimes whether—he ought to live” (4).

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