

ROMANTICISM AND STOICISM IN
THE AMERICAN NOVEL: FROM
MELVILLE TO HEMINGWAY,
AND AFTER

The origins of the American mentality bear the imprint of a “tabula rasa pattern” which the *Mayflower’s* Pilgrim Fathers brought with them to the shores of Massachusetts. To the Puritan conscience, the founding of English colonies on the virgin soil of North America seemed a complete departure, the first step in the establishment of a new society. It was an incredible experience, marked by infinite hope, and one toward which, according to one American historiographer, “the eyes of God, of the world, and of posterity were turned.” The dream and the hope recurred from generation to generation; during the course of the centuries millions of emigrants, settling between the Atlantic and the Pacific, sought a better world than they had known.

Hope abounding with optimism, an infinity of aspiration, dreams of perfection—such was the romantic principle that animated the spirit of these people so readily accused of materialism. For the paradox is ap-

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

parent. The European intellectual has mocked the American way of life frequently enough; one detects an element of envy in his sarcasm. It would be only fair to acknowledge that this prosperous, comfortable, and deliberately ostentatious way of life (or, if you prefer, this lack of style) is the most palpable and also the most vulgar materialization of a dream which the ragged, the persecuted, the "have-nots" from Ireland, Italy, Poland, or other centers of European poverty cannot be blamed for sharing. With the poverty went also oppression. In the minds of those who founded and then peopled it, America had to be the anti-Europe. A new society had to be built upon the virgin continent, one that would not only be generally prosperous but also perfectly free, perfectly happy, perfectly democratic—a society which would embody the City of God as modified by the contributions of the Enlightenment. This dream of moral and social perfection is a distinctly American utopia. Its vitality can be measured by the violence of the reaction that invariably followed the impact which actual experience of human limitations has had on the naïveté of this romantic hope.

Political and social criticism in the American novel has become a constant whose beginnings go back to Fenimore Cooper. At one time United States consul at Lyon, the creator of Natty Leatherstocking and of so many heroes of our young years signalized the plain and virile virtues of the pioneers; he praised the republican spirit and the democratic institutions of his country. After a seven-year absence he observed that in its daily reality the star-spangled republic did not correspond exactly to the ideal image he had formed of it. Between 1834 and 1838 he published six books in which he vituperated against American society and the American mentality with as much vigor as he had formerly employed to exalt it.

But this tendency toward excessive denunciation is principally apparent in the American novel of the twentieth century. It is hardly necessary to remind the reader of the works of Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and many others. By comparison with these vitriolic books, Ilya Ehrenburg's *Le Dégel* is about as virulent as the *Adventures of Telemachus*. It would be a grievous error to see in this passionate self-criticism an indication of Communist orientation. Although writers themselves occasionally shared this delusion, their protest was always essentially libertarian. A dictatorship of the proletariat has never been part of the American dream, which reposes, above all, upon freedom and justice.

However, this dream of perfection has a third, more noble, and more

individualist dimension which transcends the domain of material and social life and elevates one to an ethical and metaphysical view of man's condition and his destiny. In contrast to the heritage that extends from the later novels of Fenimore Cooper to the first works of John Steinbeck, there is another which, stretching from Herman Melville to Robert Penn Warren, also illustrates, although in a different sphere, the process of action and reaction that derives from the American romantic principle.

To be sure, this third current springs from the deepest proclivities of the American soul. But it also has literary sources. We must remember that during the second quarter of the last century American literature was formed under the aegis of European romanticism. Fenimore Cooper embarked upon his literary career with the ambition of becoming the American Walter Scott. But Scott's exoticism is but an adventitious and superficial aspect of the romantic inspiration. In its highest manifestations romanticism is the result of a metaphysical need, marked by a firm resolution to abolish the narrow limits which the rationalist and empiricist eighteenth century had assigned to human experience. At the core of romanticism is *Sehnsucht*, the spiritual yearning for the plenitude of the absolute.

The works of Herman Melville are connected with this romanticism. It is true that his first novels are clearly part of the heritage of the exotic adventure popularized by Scott and Cooper. But already, in a tale that seems as simple and pleasant as *Typee* (1846), analysis uncovers a basic ambiguity that reveals the metaphysical anguish. If we recall the odyssey of the hero-narrator who deserts his whaler in order to seek refuge in a paradisaic island, peopled by gentle cannibals, and if we dwell on the bewitching descriptions of nature and society intimately harmonized in an Edenic way of life, we might find illogical and contradictory the horror and contempt of the hero and his companions for the white man who deliberately adapted himself to this life—the “renegado from Christendom and humanity.” And we remain perplexed when the hero flees again. He leaves the island and all its seductions in order to resume service on board another whaler which is probably no different from the first. This strange alternation between enthusiasm and repulsion can scarcely be explained by the duality of inspiration and aspiration that was to mark all of Melville's work. To use the Nietzschean vocabulary, the writer is obviously divided between an Apollonian impulse which attracts him to the fulness of nature provided by the island and a Dionysian impulse that

pulls him toward a world of uncertainty, struggle, and grandeur represented by his destiny as a traveler on the high seas.

Melville was aware of the profound symbolism of this duality, and he knew the danger of this Dionysian *Sehnsucht* to which, however, his hero yields. He wrote:

Consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return.¹

Perhaps this inner Tahiti is what we might today call the American way of life. In any case it represents the comfortable life and the sweetest peace of mind. It embodies all the pleasures that Melville has enumerated elsewhere: "security, comfort, hearth, supper, warm blankets, and also all that is sweet to mortal minds." The paradox is this: although praising an existence replete with small pleasures, Melville did not fail to realize that the "peace" and "joy" of this life are of inferior quality. And so he chose to explore the immensity of the "appalling ocean," of a "half-known life," the perilous immensity of moral and spiritual life. And the maritime exoticism of pursuing the whale soon became for him merely a means of symbolizing a different kind of quest, one far more important and dangerous.

Perhaps without knowing it, Melville was here undertaking a voyage to the outer edge of the night. In the two great novels of his mature years, *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), he has left us two accounts of it, one symbolical, the other realistic.

Whatever the precise nature of the internal adventure symbolized by Captain Ahab's expedition (and we know that *Moby Dick* is so complex a book, so rich, so profound, and so obscure that it has proved to be almost as fertile in possible explanations as life itself), it is nonetheless clear that Melville attempted to incarnate in it a spiritual and moral yearning that transcends the powers of man. To the extent that this novel can be viewed as a tragedy, Ahab's tragic defect is a *hubris* that impels him to offend against his own nature in order to undertake a superhuman task; this is the Aristotelian *ἀμαρτία*, the essential element of tragedy which springs from a disproportion between man's desires and his means. Ahab's desire seems to be both supernatural, because of its object, and demoniacal, because of

1. Quoted in W. E. Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945), p. 33.

the insane pride which it evidences. And the drama of human nature is this: that the will to struggle without compromise against absolute evil should harbor in itself something satanic.

This pathetic awareness of the limitations of our human condition is more clearly apparent in *Pierre*. Perhaps too clearly, for the melodramatic intrigue of this not too well-known book does not measure up to the high requirements of the moral theme. The hero, Pierre Glendinning, is the spoiled and only son of a rich widow; he is engaged to marry a young girl of excellent family. One day he makes the acquaintance of another young girl, Isabelle, and discovers that she is his illegitimate half-sister. Convinced that it is his duty to protect Isabelle without bringing dishonor upon his father's memory, Pierre marries her and seeks refuge in New York. Pursued by the festering rage of his family, he kills his cousin; his mother and ex-fiancée are brokenhearted and die; Pierre and Isabelle, having fallen in love with each other, commit suicide in their prison.

It would be well not to dwell upon the somewhat Elizabethan aspect of this somber tale. At any rate it serves the purpose of casting a useful light upon the total significance of Melville's work. The element in *Pierre* which corresponds to the dominant hope that governs Captain Ahab's odyssey is an ardent thirst for absolute justice. They both seek, each in his own way, the absolute—an absolute which perhaps cannot be found. Melville says this plainly in *Pierre*:

In those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light. Viewed through that rarefied atmosphere the most immemorably admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted. . . .

But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those teacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike.²

Melville's heroes, who serve as his spokesmen, are divided between an attainable perfection but one without value because it is to be found solely at the level of nature and a perfection that is sound because it belongs to a moral and spiritual order but which man cannot achieve because of his essentially imperfect and limited nature.

2. Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 184.

Romanticism and Stoicism in the American Novel

Thus Melville's probing results, first of all, in the rediscovery of the fundamental paradox of man's condition. But it is not limited to this. Just as the apprehension of a necessarily imperfect reality engenders a spirit of virulent, even of excessive criticism among social novelists, so, in Melville, the metaphysical novelist, idealism is transmuted into nihilism under the impact of a truth which defies his efforts. Bitterly disappointed, frustrated in the hope that sustained him, his initial *Sehnsucht* fades away in the conviction that life is a story full of sound and fury and devoid of meaning:

What man who carries a heavenly soul in him, has not groaned to perceive, that unless he committed a sort of suicide as to the practical things of this world, he never can hope to regulate his earthly conduct by that same heavenly soul? . . .

And where is the earnest and righteous philosopher, gentlemen, who looking right and left, and up and down, through all the ages of the world, the present included; where is there such an one who has not a thousand times been struck with a sort of infidel idea, that whatever other worlds God may be Lord of, he is not the Lord of this.³

If we have lingered somewhat over Melville, it is, first of all, because he deserves it; his work is America's first serious contribution to universal literature. But we have also done so because he sheds light on the genesis of a nihilism that is today widespread in the American novel and that is frequently mistaken to be something original, whereas, in reality, it springs from a terribly disillusioned idealism.

The first works of novelists in whom the authentic tradition of Melvilian nihilism is revived—William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Penn Warren—impressed both the public and the critics with their negative aspects: an obsession with horror and violence, a rejection of all the commonly accepted values, a sense of chaos, a predilection for brutal and stupefying sensations which obliterate conscience and will. One can even go so far as to say that for many years nothing more was to be found in Faulkner's and Hemingway's novels and short stories.

But the time is past when Faulkner can be considered the leader of a "school of cruelty," of gratuitous obscenity and horror, or when Hemingway's writings can be classified under the heading of "alcoholic novels," as Coindreau has done. An important article published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1939 established without question that Faulkner "is really a traditional moralist, in the best sense," and that Hemingway's writings during the course of the last years place his inspiration in a similar light.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Of course one cannot deny that Faulkner and Hemingway present us with the image of a world plunged into neglect and spiritual destitution, given over to the forces of evil. They stress the most repugnant aspects of the real and display an endless cynicism and an absolute pessimism. Never was nihilism expressed with as much force or talent. But what matters is that these authors do not wallow in mud for the perverse pleasure of it; their nihilism is not the primary element. It is—and all the contemporary critics concur in this—the result of a psychological traumatization—the clash between naïveté and experience, the destruction of the ideal by the real.

We must also concede that the ideal is hardly perceptible in their works. This is because its evolution took place according to the crazy rhythm that characterizes our times. While Melville, during the course of a long and painful intellectual odyssey, had come to adopt a dark vision of the world, the twentieth-century novelists seem to have been sensitized to violence and corruption even before they began to write. Recollections of the Civil War, the accelerated industrialization of the country, the spread of a mercantile spirit, the injustices of hypercapitalism and the two world wars—all these destroyed the hope of someday realizing the old American dream of a perfect society. This dream has persisted in the hearts of men, nonetheless, like a standard ruler with which to measure reality. The permanence of the romantic principle manifests itself solely in frenzy or bitterness, which, to European wisdom, often seems excessive; or it is evident in some minor aspect of the works themselves: particularly, in Faulkner, in certain idealized evocations of the South before the Civil War or during the initial stages of the evolution of a Hemingway character who, before becoming a disillusioned dypsomaniac, had been an intelligent and sensitive young man, capable of deep feelings and unselfish idealism.

This aspect of contemporary nihilism—with its origins in an integral idealism—is far more perceptible in the best novelist of the generation that followed Faulkner and Hemingway, Robert Penn Warren. *World Enough and Time*, one of Warren's most ambitious books, contains fundamental analogies with Melville's *Pierre*. Here, too, we have to do with a generous man of uncompromising idealism who would like to become the instrument of absolute justice by re-establishing his wife's honor. Like Pierre Glendinning, he is drawn by that superhuman *hubris* into a horrible vortex of lies, intrigues, and moral degradation. Impelled by the highest aspirations, he is gradually pushed toward the most disillusioned

conclusions: the conviction that the primary crime "is the crime of self, the crime of life. The crime is I."

A century separates *Pierre* and *World Enough and Time*. But, despite the extraordinary evolution of thought and society that has taken place during this period, there is a striking similarity between the two books. Both of them dramatize an agonizing awareness of man's fate. Both begin with the noblest ideal only to end in total negation. Both illustrate the same thesis: hope and ambition beyond the bounds of human possibilities, the clash with the real against which the ideal is shattered, the pitiless logic of internal disintegration. An obvious correlation exists between the insane morbidity of *Pierre* and the most striking, and also the most contagious, aspects of the contemporary novel. In both instances the point of departure is the romantic principle of the dream of perfection; and the clash between the ideal and the real, instead of giving rise to a compromise based upon the actual possibilities of human nature, disintegrates into despair and nihilism.

Nihilism is not a rule of life. It is a rule of death—and not only in fiction. Pierre Glendinning's suicide foreshadows the self-destructive gestures of so many overly sensitive and overly intelligent young Americans like Harry Crosby, the poet Hart Crane, and Kenneth Raibeck, who inspired Thomas Wolfe in *You Can't Go Home Again*; it reminds us of Scott Fitzgerald, who deliberately precipitated his own disintegration by alcoholism, or of people closer to us in time, like Virginia Woolf, Stefan Zweig, and F. O. Matthiessen, who could not stand to go on living in a world that so cruelly displayed its absence of meaning. On the other hand, if Faulkner, Hemingway, and Warren are still alive, if Melville did not commit suicide, it is because nihilism is no more their final word than it was their initial stage. And here again Melville's inner evolution is unquestionably valuable as a prototype.

After a serious moral and intellectual depression following the publication of *Pierre*, Melville wrote a series of short stories which offer invaluable indications of his desire to find a meaning in life. Most of these stories have been exhumed recently from the dusty archives into which Melville had relegated them. He did not prize them, and he was not mistaken. Their artistic worth, save for a few exceptions, is very slight. Nevertheless, as documents, they are not without interest. They show us a Melville at grips with so urgent and complex an intellectual problem that he is unable to give these stories satisfactory form.

This problem is formulated in an allegorical and perfectly clear manner in a series of sketches which Melville was inspired to write by a visit he paid to the Galapagos Islands more than ten years earlier. Wild and solitary, these islands, which Melville ironically calls the “enchanted isles,” are like the forlorn world into which the author feels he is plunged. “In no world but a fallen one,” he wrote, “could such lands exist.” In the Encantadas the sterility of life, the failure of the world and of man, are made palpable. And with pitiless clarity we are faced with the question of whether life on this vast earth can have any value or significance.

In a revealing sketch about the tortoises, almost the only inhabitants of these desolate islands, Melville gives us his answer, albeit in an indirect and oblique manner. In the Melvillian symbolism, these tortoises are curiously related to the heroes of the great novels, Captain Ahab and Pierre Glendinning. This is apparent in the following passage. Melville meditates as he listens to the movements of three giant tortoises that were captured by the crew and are crawling along the bridge above his head:

Their stupidity or their resolution was so great, that they never went aside for any impediment. One ceased his movements altogether just before the mid-watch. At sunrise I found him butted like a battering-ram against the immovable foot of the foremast, and still striving, tooth and nail, to force the impossible passage. That these tortoises are the victims of a penal, or malignant, or perhaps a downright diabolical enchanter, seems in nothing more likely than in that strange infatuation of hopeless toil which so often possesses them. I have known them in their journeyings ram themselves heroically against rocks, and long abide there, nudging, wriggling, wedging, in order to displace them, and so hold on their inflexible path. Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world.⁴

Obviously, the last sentence is the key to the symbol. But what should be noted here, and, furthermore, what impressed Melville, was that this “impulse to straightforwardness,” in which we recognize the “curse” that was Ahab’s and Pierre’s undoing, does not impel the tortoises toward destruction. On the contrary, one might say that in Melville’s eyes this obstinacy, however vain it might be as regards its own finality, enabled them to transcend time:

The great feeling inspired by these creatures was that of age:—dateless, indefinite endurance. And in fact that any other creature can live and breathe as long as the tortoise of the Encantadas, I will not readily believe. Not to hint of their known

4. *The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles*, in Herman Melville, *Selected Tales and Poems*, ed. Richard Chase (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1950), p. 238.

Romanticism and Stoicism in the American Novel

capacity of sustaining life, while going without food for an entire year, consider that impregnable armor of their living mail. What other bodily being possesses such a citadel wherein to resist the assaults of Time?⁵

One can almost say, if such a comparison is possible, that the tortoises of Galapagos are also the exact opposite of Ahab and Pierre. What constitutes the grandeur of these two Melvillian heroes is their unrelenting aggressiveness: Ahab pursues Moby Dick, Pierre defies society. But the tortoises are content to “resist the assaults of Time”; it is their “indefinite endurance” that constitutes their grandeur.

In another story Melville gives us an idea of what this signifies on the human plane. He tells how, in the course of his travels, he found a woman who had been left on an island with her husband and brother by a French whaler that was supposed to pick them up a few months later. The captain forgot his promise, the two men died, and Hunilla lived alone for three months on the chalky island crags. The victim of a “feline Fate” that crushed her beneath the weight of deceit and false hopes, Hunilla nonetheless maintained her courage, her will to subsist—in short, her “endurance.” And this is what Melville admires. He exclaims: “Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee, not in the laureled victor, but in this vanquished one.”⁶

This exclamation enables us to measure the distance traversed by the author from *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. The old dream of perfection is no longer what attracts him: he has seen through its ambiguity and emptiness. He is seeking to evaluate the true stature of a human being rather than to attain an ideal grandeur. He finds true grandeur in the principle of immortality that is essentially a capacity to resist the assaults of time and destiny. People like Hunilla are similar to the tortoises of the Galapagos Islands in several significant respects. To begin with, we might say that their condition is rudimentary. In addition, they are abandoned and solitary; they are stripped of everything that man traditionally glories in; they subsist in utter destitution and neglect. But they do subsist. Their primary, fundamental, and, in a way, unique quality is obstinacy, endurance, an indomitable and unconscious will not to abdicate in the face of malediction. This new conception of human dignity is quite different from the proud *hubris* which Ahab and Pierre represent. The new Melvillian hero is not valued for the magnitude of his purpose or the superhuman greatness of his aims. He is worthy and human to the extent that he does

5. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

not allow himself to be carried away by chimerical aspirations and to the extent that he accepts his destiny without ever despairing. It is stoicism, but an altogether American stoicism, modified by the virile contributions of pioneer frontiersmen. Because what the new Melvillian hero attains is not that *ataraxia* of the Stoics—invulnerability through detachment. He suffers, but he persists. In frivolous terms one might say that what makes him distinctive is his capacity “to take it.”

It could be that the twentieth-century conscience, as expressed in the novel, feels the need, as did Melville, of removing itself from the deadly maelstrom of nihilism. Surrounded by forces which man himself has loosed and which he is not sure of being able to control, once again he feels weak, delicate, and powerless, just as he did in the days when he wandered half-naked and defenseless in the hostile forests of prehistory. Threatened on all sides, skeptical and unhappy, he is concerned with finding a remedy, or at least a palliative, for the altogether too obvious precariousness of his fate. For a quarter of a century writers like Charles Morgan and Aldous Huxley have pictured contemporary man in quest of some impenetrable refuge in the upper zones of an ethereal and, at times, nebulous spirituality.

However, the second World War seems to have dealt a deathblow to this desire for an internal invulnerability rooted in detachment. The modern hero no longer has anything in common with the highly cultivated and comfortably frugal apprentice-teachers that Morgan and Huxley described. Like Hunilla, he is an elemental human being, abandoned, despoiled, and crushed. And the novel of today is peopled with characters like these, stripped of the graciousness of heart and adornments of the mind that used to proclaim man's superior position. The modern hero is the unworthy priest of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* or Hemingway's reviled war veteran, or Faulkner's idiot. On the screen he is Gelsomina in *La Strada*.

Yet, though our contemporary novel is deliberately centered in characters such as these, the purpose is not at all to reduce humanity to the level of the beast. It would be a mistake to believe that the contemporary novelist, impelled by heavens knows what *Schadenfreude*, delights in illustrating the fragility of human vanities or the degradation of which man is capable. Actually, the opposite is true. If nowadays the novelist denudes man of the adventitious finery on which was formerly based an awareness of his nobility, he does so in order to find something more dependable, to discover the solid pedestal on which the sentiment of human dignity can be

established without any uncertainty, to discern some modicum of inalienable and secure value in even the roughest, lowest, and most neglected areas of humanity.

The despair and disgust that abound in parts of the works of the two greatest American novelists of this century, Faulkner and Hemingway, manifest the violence of their disappointment when the dream and reality meet. But in the writings of their second period, during the last fifteen years or so, this negative note has gradually diminished and given way to a fresh manner of looking at man and life.

During an interval of about twenty-five years, Faulkner published a novel, *Sanctuary* (1929), and a play, *Requiem for a Nun* (1953), that center in two phases of the career of an identical character. But each of these works also illustrates a stage in the career of the writer. *Sanctuary* traces the moral disintegration of an eighteen-year-old college girl, Temple Drake. It is hardly necessary to give a detailed analysis of this well-known novel, which springs in part from all the currents of disillusionment and morbidity that constitute contemporary nihilism. In *Requiem for a Nun* we encounter Temple again, now a wife and the mother of a family, but still corrupt. It is significant that the instrument of her salvation is an old Negro prostitute, Nancy Mannigoe, to whom Temple has attached herself. Temple's redemption is accomplished in two stages: first, in order to prevent the young woman from abandoning her family and returning to a life of debauchery, Nancy resorts to the only efficacious remedy because it is the worst: she kills Temple's child. Then, having inflicted this horrible trauma upon the young woman and forced her thus to see things in a new perspective, Nancy completely accepts the punishment inflicted upon her for her crime. At the end of the play this acceptance and the extraordinary spirit of sacrifice which it attests cause Temple to turn to Nancy. As the old Negress readies herself for the hanging, Temple humbly asks her what she should do in order to recover peace of mind.

Robert Penn Warren has remarked that "the actual role of the Negro in Faulkner's fiction is consistently one of pathos or heroism." We wonder if it is not even more than this; if, in fact, the Negro might not be the true Faulknerian hero. What the writer says of Sam Fathers in his short story entitled "The Bear" applies to all the Negro characters in his books: he is "the descendant of a long line of people who learned humility through suffering and pride through endurance that survived suffering." The verb "to endure," which means both to suffer and to last, is a key word in Faulkner precisely because of this double meaning. And these

Negroes are among “the humble and the invincible of the earth,” as the author’s spokesman, the lawyer Gavin Stevens, says. In another short story he meditatively adds: “to endure and endure and then endure, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” This capacity to last by enduring, to accept suffering patiently and thus to conquer resentment while never ceasing to feel it, is the essential characteristic of the dignity of these Negro heroes. They are bound to the soil of the South by this trait. Faulkner has a veritable cult for the South—“God’s long fecund, remorseless acres which would outlast any corruption and injustice.” This trait makes his Negro heroes a model for all humanity. And if we should need an explicit statement on the universal significance of the Negro characters in Faulkner’s works, we need only recall these few words of the message from Stockholm: “Man is immortal because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, of sacrifice and of *endurance*.” Compassion and sacrifice are already superior values, but the primary one is endurance, that stoic confrontation of destiny in which Faulkner’s Negroes so often remind us of Hunilla and of Melville’s tortoises.

In a sense Hemingway is even closer to Melville than Faulkner because his heroes, too, are solitary people. It is curious that Hemingway also published two works during a twenty-five-year interval that lend themselves admirably to comparison. The American critic Delmore Schwartz observed recently that “Hemingway’s sixth novel [*The Old Man and the Sea*] contains almost the same thesis as *The Undeclared* (1927) . . . and the old fisherman who hasn’t caught anything for eighty-four days is in the same situation as the aging matador of that story.” Yet the two works leave the reader with diametrically opposite impressions. The story of the matador, Manuel, is pathetic and depressing: it narrates the finish of a man; it is the symbol of the ineluctable decline of human things. As for *A Farewell to Arms*, it is an illustration of the bitterness with which Hemingway judged life. He wrote:

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. . . . It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.⁷

Manuel is precisely one of the “very brave.” The *corrida* is his *raison d’être*, the meaning of his life. He dies because he refuses to abdicate. But his stoical heroism is placed within the usual context of Hemingway’s

7. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), p. 267.

Romanticism and Stoicism in the American Novel

nihilism: the selfish cynicism of those who organize the *corrida*, the sly cruelty of the crowd, the frightfulness of an unequal contest—all this makes the story an imaginative illustration of the futility of heroism, the uselessness of human courage. Therefore the title, *The Undefeated*, is ambiguous, if not plainly ironic.

The story of Santiago, the fisherman, is pathetic, too, but it is also strangely exciting. Perhaps the reason for this is the extreme bareness of both the story and the character. Like Melville's heroes, Santiago is solitary: alone in confronting nature, alone in confronting his destiny, alone in his misfortune. He exists on the most elementary level: he owns almost nothing, he scarcely eats. Above all, he has no illusions. Having none, he does not yield to despair. Living on hope, he says: "It is silly not to hope. Besides I believe it is a sin." He simply does his duty, a duty that corresponds to his nature as a fisherman. "It is better to be lucky," he says, "But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready." This constitutes his hope: to conquer misfortune and the malignity of fate by the elementary strength of patience and endurance.

Santiago's eminent dignity resides in these strengths and in his courageous acceptance and refusal to despair or recriminate. In this he is akin to Faulkner's Negroes and to Melville's abandoned characters. He is one of those "vanquished ones" in whom it is possible to "worship" the "strength" of humanity.

We see in Faulkner, in Hemingway, and in Melville an evolution whose point of departure is an impossible dream of moral and spiritual perfection. This evolution traverses a period of violent despair and morbid nihilism to culminate in a stoical wisdom marked by a positive and manly acceptance of reality. Delmore Schwartz, speaking of Hemingway, writes that "the transition from illusion to steadfast hope, while passing through various stages of disillusion, represents the profound affective and spiritual progress accomplished by the novelist during the thirty years of his career." This is also true of Melville; it is incontrovertible that the inner experience of the author of *Moby Dick* was to foreshadow that of Faulkner and Hemingway. All three incarnate a kind of archetype, and such a parallelism certainly justifies one in asking another question: Does this remarkable similarity embrace these individuals alone, or is it related in some way to their common nationality? It is perhaps no exaggeration to hold that their inner evolution is representative and corresponds to an evolution of American sensitivity, insofar as this can be reflected in a novel.

The typical novel of the twenties is probably the thick, verbose, and not quite first-rate book by Theodore Dreiser, significantly entitled *The American Tragedy* (1925). It dramatizes the most superficial form of the American dream of perfection—the road to success and wealth. What Dreiser stresses is the power of this derisive dream that leads the hero to commit a crime and causes his downfall.

It is too soon to claim that the typical novel of the fifties has already been written, but we can envisage a kind of composite image of it by juxtaposing a few recent works that are supposed to portray contemporary American life. For example, we might compare books like the war story *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones, which won the National Book Award in 1952, with Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, which won the same award for 1953; and the recent novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, written by Herman Wouk, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1952 for his *Caine Mutiny*. These books, and others that we might enumerate, have many traits in common. Not only are they very thick—one might almost say cubic—but they deal with comparable experiences and are similarly oriented.

To begin with, we always find the American dream in its most superficial form: a dream of wealth and success, of independence and happiness. Then comes contact with reality, with cruelty, horror, and violence—favorite themes of the American novel. Thirty years ago Hemingway's characters rejected life because of such a clash. The new American hero reacts in quite a different way. At the end of the book, with a unanimity that is as revealing as it is monotonous, he becomes aware of his true nature and his limitations, and he accepts life with all its imperfections. The soldier whom James Jones describes in *From Here to Eternity* has experienced the worst horrors of military life; but, at the end of the novel, he goes back into service. Augie March, Saul Bellow's hero, accepts his failures without bitterness and ends his story with this consoling thought: "I may well be a flop. . . . Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."⁸ As for Marjorie Morgenstern, Herman Wouk's heroine, she is not going to become Marjorie Morningstar, a Broadway success; she will be Mrs. Schwartz, a true Jewish-American bourgeoisie, pious, full of good works, a good mother; she will forget her adolescent dream, and in her simple happiness she will be the envy of those who achieved the hollow success to which she had aspired.

8. Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 536.

Romanticism and Stoicism in the American Novel

In 1927 André Siegfried published an important cultural study entitled *America Comes of Age*. The title echoes that of a pamphlet published by Van Wyck Brooks in 1915, *America's Coming of Age*, which, and this is curious, has just been reprinted in a popular collection. Such titles show that those who are concerned with the essence of American civilization realize very clearly that the United States is in the process of traversing a decisive stage in its spiritual development. The novels we have mentioned are, of course, works of paltry quality; but their popularity is most instructive. It suggests America's awareness that it is emerging from the frothy illusions of its collective adolescence.

One can assume that this is a form of moral progress. Nonetheless, the European intellectual would be quite wrong to lean upon his seniority and, with a protective and indulgent air, to look down upon this offshoot of European culture transplanted to the other side of the ocean. There are signs that seem to indicate that, in a great many domains, America is, in fact, coming of age and is reaching the maturity that our ancient Europe has known for many centuries. But we must not forget that maturity is the biological moment when growth ceases. Whatever course American literature might follow tomorrow, we will always remember with gratitude that, thanks to spokesmen like Melville, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Warren, it made a contribution to Western civilization that only adolescence, fresh to life, can make: a concern for moral and spiritual integrity, enthusiasm, a total revulsion in the face of evil and corruption, and a sharp feeling for the real, essential problems of life—problems that “maturity” often prefers to forget in the illusion of having transcended them.