

The American Epic: A Divided Stream

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The American Epic: A Divided Stream

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Abstract

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Classical epic models remind the reader of the sadness, futility, and sterility of living in the past; chapter one of this study illustrates, however, that from Cotton Mather to Walt Whitman, American history is celebrated in epic as an anthropomorphism of the mind of God. Further, classical poets who knew the glories of Troy also knew that its fate is inexorable to all in the future; from Whitman to Steinbeck, however, there are American epics such as The Octopus and The Grapes of Wrath that fly in the face of that knowledge.

Chapter two argues that Moby Dick provides an alternative epic polemic to that which follows in the wake of Whitman. Whitman's adherence to optimism and absolutes is the dominant strain up to the modernist period; Melville's darker vision--one with no allowance for absolutes--is the model for post modernism. Gaddis and Barth, for example, create an existential mythology and its corollary, an anti-historic paradigm, that, taken together, reflect the sterility of the twentieth century.

John Gardner's fiction, on the other hand, while often identified with the existential message of other post-modernists, carries on instead a running warfare with

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Satrean intellectualism. This warfare, outlined in chapter three, is seen most clearly in Gardner's epic fiction, Grendel and Jason and Medeia.

Following Gardner's lead, John Kennedy Toole and Michael Malone have both made the attempt to deal with adult fiction, to help establish what has been labeled as the "Mid-Life Progress Novel." As much as these epics are about quest, they are about exile. The quest is really one's search for where one began. Chapter four traces this phenomenon. In these mid-life quest tales, woman is always central to the way back.

The epilogue, therefore, anticipates a return to the classical epic model, one in which woman is arguably once again central to the story line. For example, the protagonists in the works of Berry Morgan and Anne Tyler--like those of Hawthorne--flourish when they remain at home, but here home is a central location to which there is a deep, abiding link to a matriarchal, mythopoeic heritage.

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Chapter I

Of Absolutes and Optimism

R. W. B. Lewis, in Trials of the Word, makes the observation that American literature has "an extravagant appetite for the whole range of Western literature, philosophy, and theology, and for seizing again upon the archetypal human dilemmas" (ix). This voracious syncretism is explicable, in part, by an early impetus to the literature: a self-conscious desire on the part of American writers to replicate Old World grandeur. Leonard Lutwack notes that "[t]o be fitted out as soon as possible with the accoutrements of Western civilization was an American desire from the very beginning of the colonial settlements" (1). At the heart of that desire was a call for an American epic, a call that was first successfully answered by Cotton Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana (1702). It is a work filled with epic characteristics: nostalgic history (including the westward progress of civilization motif), jeremiads, catalogues (in this case, of saints' lives), and so forth. In Mather's work, the Holy Spirit is invoked as the Muse; the Aeneid is paraphrased to draw parallels between American Puritans and the heroes of ancient Rome; the Indian Wars are juxtaposed to Milton's war in heaven in Paradise Lost; and New England undergoes an apotheosis into a New Jerusalem, a new Canaan land, a fulfillment of the millenarian expectation of a new

heaven and new earth, and a new Garden of Eden. John Greenleaf Whittier, in his essay "The Agency of Evil" (1843), gives a tongue-in-cheek retrospective of the possibilities for epic grandeur within this new Garden:

Perilous and glorious was it . . . for such men as Mather . . . to gird up . . . stout loins and do battle with the unmeasured, all-surrounding terror. All about him was enchanted ground; devils glared on him in his "closet wrestlings"; portents blazed in the heavens above him; while he, commissioned and set apart as the watcher, and warder, and spiritual champion of "the chosen people," stood ever ready for battle, with open eye and quick ear for the subtle approaches of the enemy. (258-59)

Here, the American Adam is on his way to epic adventure, despite Whittier's caution that Magnalia is a disjointed collection of "strange and marvellous things, heaped up huge and undigested" ("American Writers" 3).

This penchant of the American Muse to serve up huge and indigestible portions of Old World similes, motifs, and myths had humorous and satiric potential--an insight that would later energize twentieth-century fiction, but one also that was not lost upon Washington Irving. In 1813, in his Analectic Magazine, he described the American Muse as "a pawn-broker's widow, with rings on every finger,

and loaded with borrowed and heterogeneous finery" (248). Almost eighty years after the publication of Magnalia, there was a growing number of writers in America who were embarrassed by that Muse. They looked askance at any literature which was not subsumed by the democratic-humanitarian spirit of the New World. In 1807, the poet Joel Barlow said of even Homer, for example, that his work is "a serious misfortune to the human race" for it is incendiary writing:

[The Iliad's] obvious tendency was to inflame the minds of young readers with an enthusiastic ardor for military fame; to inculcate the pernicious doctrine of the divine right of kings; to teach both prince and people that military plunder was the most honorable mode of acquiring property; and that conquest, violence and war were the best employment of nations, the most glorious prerogative of bodily strength and cultivated mind. (378-79)

Benjamin Rush was concerned that study of the classics, apart from the moral problems that could engender, would stifle the creativity of American writers (Spencer 31). A large company shared his concern. Essayists in such authoritative journals as The Massachusetts Magazine and the Monthly Anthology--Charles Ingersoll, Noah Webster, and the anonymous essayist called "The Friend" were among

the more prolific--established a new base for criticism a generation before Emerson's "The American Scholar" (1837).¹ They propounded that progress was applicable to art as well as to science and that, therefore, new views of the objects of poetry require new perspectives.

To counter these Old World influences, Barlow donned the sobriquet of "America's Homer" (Ford 74) and attempted to write the Great American Epic:²

My goal is altogether of a moral and political nature. I wish to encourage and strengthen, in the rising generation, a sense of the importance of republican institutions; as being the great foundation of public and private happiness. . . . That true and useful ideas of glory may be implanted in the minds of men here, to take the place of the false and destructive ones that have degraded the species in other countries. . . .

(390)

To that end, he borrowed copiously from Pope's translations of Homer, the Latin Aeneid, Milton's Paradise Lost, Voltaire's Essay on Epic Poetry, William Robertson's The History of America,³ Pope's Messiah, Juvenal's Satires, Garcilaso de la Vega's The Royal Commentaries of Peru, Juan Francisco Marmontel's The Incas, and anything else that he could buy or borrow. The result, The Vision of Columbus (1793), later revised and expanded to The Columbiad (1807), was

disastrous. The first five books of The Columbiad attempt to describe America through its history--from the Inca Empire to 1790. For a Miltonic angel, Barlow substitutes a mythological "Hesper"--the spirit of the Western world--who transports Columbus to a mountaintop and there displays to him the panorama of American history. The next three books of the poem attempt to make the Revolutionary War an epic arena: Washington struts throughout the American colonies as a grim, hyperbolic parody of Milton's Michael leading the armies of heaven against Satan. The traditional supernatural machinery of the epic becomes cardboard in the hands of Barlow. Washington's army, for example, crosses the Delaware because Hesper overcomes an evil spirit, Frost. The remaining books of the poem are polemical, espousing the glories of Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of utilitarian rationalism and the manifest destiny of America. The work is festooned with pompous absurdities and the allegories are so overdone that they are without interest. Theodore Zunder is kind to remark that "one concludes, after carefully studying [the poem], that it is neither great nor good" (218).

George Washington sent a copy of The Vision of Columbus to a friend, and admitted in a cover letter that he had never read it (Ford 64). Evidently, this was a common reaction to the poem (Ford 65). Much like its twentieth-century heir, John Barth's Giles Goat Boy (1966), the book sold well and

was a financial success, but very few actually read the work.⁴ James Woodress, Barlow's biographer, calls the poem "a dinosaur in the clay pits of history" (86). Like its predecessor, Magnalia, however, it countermands the classical use of history in epic narrative. In the third book of The Aeneid, for example, Aeneas relates the fall of Troy and how he had retreated with his men to Buthrotum. This was a Greek city under the matriarchal rule of Andromache, Hector's widow. It was to have been a detailed replica of Troy, but the brook that replicates the Trojan Simois has dried up. The tomb of Hector, where Andromache worships, is empty. Aeneas gives a picture of the sadness, futility, and sterility of living off the past. Virgil's polemic here is that one must rid himself of the past in order to build for the future. Conversely, Mather and Barlow teach that the history of the New World proceeded according to divine plan. As the story of human history before Christ could be interpreted as a record of how the way was prepared for Him, so the history of America portended its manifest destiny. Such puritanical bones rest peacefully until they are exhumed and reconstructed into the repository of themes and motifs for twentieth-century absurdist epics. In Barth's Sot-Weed Factor (1960), for example, Ebenezer Cooke, an American poet and kindred spirit to Barlow in the desire to produce a panegyric epic out of American history, is the protagonist. Cooke never composes his proposed Marylandiad,

however, because at every turn he finds his concepts of God and of linear history undercut. He is forced to accept, finally, "the philosophic liberty . . . that comes from want of history" (181). This freedom "throws one on one's own resources . . . makes every man an orphan . . . and can as well demoralize as elevate" (181). After Barlow's Columbiad, no American epic will celebrate history as an immutable proceeding of the divine plan. Walt Whitman, the first producer of American epic to recognize "the philosophic liberty that comes from a want of history," however, leaves little room for the notion that "being thrown on one's own resources" can "demoralize."

The first American epic poem to gain popularity among posterity was penned by a man who declared that "no man can rise to the proportions of an epic hero in his country except he be the reflection of the spirit of the average masses of his day," and then who celebrated himself as that man (Spencer 223). Whitman's attempt in Leaves of Grass (1855) to celebrate not only himself as an epic hero, but more so America--"the amplest poem" (II.110.10), a "teeming Nation of Nations" (II.110.11) populated with "magnificent masses" (II.110.13)--adumbrated the possibility of a national literature as myth:

Whitman envisioned each future democrat becoming his own priest and the great poem becoming the oracle of composite Man. All past days, he

asserted, "were what they must have been," and those days had their myths, gods, and demigods and hence their bibles. Today and America consequently seemed to him what they are destined to be, and the full autochthonous American poem will be as mythically reflective of the Personalism (sic)⁵ of the New World as the Old World bibles have been of their respective cultures. (Spencer 224)

Asia and Europe could continue to sing of the past, but it was America's Manifest Destiny to proclaim both what is and is to come. Whereas Mather's Magnalia and Barlow's Columbiad conceived of America as a city set upon a hill, as Zion, the city of God, to unite all nations under God in the great Puritan hope, Whitman places the American Adam in a "new garden of the west" (I.131.18) wherein the secular city had its part.

Malcolm Cowley is correct in his assertion that Whitman celebrates "his own Manhattan and Long Island as no other poet has ever done" (38). In "Song of the Universal," Whitman scuttles the ideas of evil and original sin: "only the good is universal" (28); therefore, he can approach the city "As Adam early in the morning, / Walking forth from the bower refreshed with sleep" ("As Adam Early in the Morning" 1-2). The city in which he strolls is described in "Mannahatta" as "splendidly uprising toward clear skies"

(7), with "summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft" (14). It is a city of "A million people--manners free and superb--open voices-- / hospitality--the most courageous and friendly young men, / City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts! / City rested in bays! my city!" (29-32). It is a "City of the world! (for all races are here, / all the lands of the earth make contributions here;)" ("City of Ships" 4-5). No one in the nineteenth century loved such syncretism more than Whitman; therefore, he and his city have a symbiotic love affair:

City of orgies, walks and joys,
 City of whom that I have lived and sung in your
 midst will one day make you illustrious,
 Not the pageants of you, not your shifting
 tableaus, your spectacles repay me,
 Not the interminable rows of your houses, nor
 the ships at the wharves,
 Nor the processions in the streets, nor the
 bright windows with goods in them
 Nor to converse with learn'd persons, or bear
 my share in the soiree or feast;
 Not these, but as I pass, O Manhattan, your fre-
 quent and swift flash of eyes offering me love,
 Offering response to my own--these repay me,
 Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me.

("City of Orgies" 1-15)

This optimistic, carnal delight in the new city gives only one side of the classical model. With Aeneas, Whitman looks forward, not back. There is new hope, not for another Troy, but for Rome. Aeneas's father, Anchises, tells Aeneas that the fine arts will congregate in the new city and that their purpose will be "to rule nations, to crown peace with law / And to spare the conquered and to conquer the proud" (VI 851-53). This is also Whitman's vision. Charles R. Metzger concludes, "Along with Emerson [Whitman] chose to extend radical Protestant religion till it embraced art and the artist; and like Thoreau, he judged art and the artist as . . . instrumental in achieving salvation here [as opposed to in an afterlife]" (40). The secular city, from this one-sided perspective, is the seat of the salvation of mankind.

It ignores the other view of Aeneas, however, the view that glances back to the ruined city of Troy. There is a constant sense in classical epic poetry that whatever man creates, whatever he builds, will fall under its own weight. Every epic poet who knew the glories of Troy also knew that its demise was inexorable. This view is one that contrasts greatly with Whitman and is much more in tune with that of the late twentieth-century absurdist epics. There, the cities are analogous to those of Eliot's poetry and Manhattan is a Wasteland where, rather than staging "A Broadway Pageant" (Whitman, Leaves 242-46), people purposelessly roam

from one meaningless gallery to another. This depiction of Manhattan is especially poignant in William Gaddis's The Recognitions (1952) and JR (1971). There, Whitmanesque optimism is to be replaced with cynicism, Transcendentalism by entropy, and the grand American Adam by a parade of bungling schlemiels. What remains, according to Elaine B. Safer, is "a nostalgia for myth, particularly of the Whitmanesque view of innocence, which, when sought after to no avail, informs the absurd vision of contemporary American novels" (43).

Whitman's view of the American city is one of the more glaring exemplars of his optimistic American epic vision, but it is by no means the only one. In retrospect of his own work, Whitman clearly states in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1888) that he had abandoned classical epic themes for new ones, themes more appropriate to a New World epic:

none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high exceptional personages of Old-World song; nothing . . . for beauty's sake-- no legend, or myth, or romance, nor euphemism, nor rhyme. But the broadest average of humanity and its identities in the now ripening Nineteenth Century, and especially in each of their countless examples and practical occupations in the United States today. (445)

The hero of American epic from this point on--at least in the optimistic school that follows Whitman--is "average." He is not one who has undergone apotheosis, but is rather one who, ironically, is closer to the classical hero of "Old World Song"; he can save society because he transcends himself, not because he is supernatural.

The hero of Whitman's American epic becomes a corporate hero, those multiplied thousands of the "broadest average of humanity," for example, who proved their mettle in the epic arena of the Civil War. In "Drum-Taps," "the mechanics" (23), the "lawyer leaving his office" (24), the "driver deserting his wagon" (25), "the salesman . . . the boss, the book-keeper, porter" (26) all converge, young and old, into heroic regiments. Their trial of strength, their epic war of national destiny, however, also produces Whitman's quintessential individual hero, Abraham Lincoln. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Lincoln is a "powerful western fallen star" (II.1), but also "the sweetest wisest soul of all my days and lands" (XVI.20). In "O Captain! My Captain!," he is the fallen captain of a ship, the fallen patriarch--"Captain! dear father!" (13)-- whose death is swallowed up in victory. "Hush'd Be the Camps To-Day" mourns him as the "dear commander" (4) of an army. He is, more than all of these, however, the departed "comrade" ("When Lilacs" XVI.2), the beloved brother.

Miller notes that even the gods of Whitman's epic are depicted in terms of this brotherly camaraderie (64). In "Passage to India," for example, Whitman declares:

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time
 achiev'd,
 The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes,
 the voyage done,
 Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest,
 the aim attain'd,
 As fill'd with friendship, love complete, the
 Elder Brother found,
 The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

(VIII.45-49)

God, whoever or whatever He may be in Whitman's Transcendental schema, is the ultimate comrade: "The relationship to God is not the relationship of a subject to his superior but the relationship of an ideal brotherhood, the perfectly fulfilled comradeship" (Miller 64).

This epic companionship of the gods and transcendent man is the core of Whitman's American epic. From the first two poems of Leaves of Grass--"I Sing" and "As I Ponder'd in Silence"--Whitman not only introduces his epic themes in characteristically epic fashion, he also invokes the Muse to aid him. Initially, the Muse is skeptical of Whitman's subject matter; by the time he pens "By Blue Ontario's Shore," however, she is won over. She is overwhelmed:

Chant me the poem, it [the Muse] said, that
 comes from the soul of America,
 Chant to me the carol of victory,
 And strike up the marches of Libertad, marches
 more powerful yet,
 And sing me before you go the song of the throes
 of Democracy. (II.107)

Whitman, of course, being who he was, had to reverse the classical model here. Instead of the poet's invoking the Muse for help, the Muse is pleading with the poet to continue. He happily obliges.

But while he had apparently little trouble continuing, he had an insurmountable problem at coming to closure. From 1855, when the first edition of Leaves of Grass was released, until 1881, when Whitman finally arrived at a form for the volume which has since remained largely unchanged, he fiddled with it. And while he fiddled, an event greater than the burning of Rome occurred. An obituary of greater import than that of Lincoln hit the presses.

In February 1861, the Revue des Deux Mondes in Paris published an essay by Edmond Scherer that proclaimed--nearly twenty years before Nietzsche's announcement--the death of God: "The absolute is dead in the souls of men: who will bring it back to life?" (855). Ambrose Bierce certainly could not. He, instead, confessed in his essay "Visions of

the Night" (1905) to a recurring nightmare. In it, he found himself on an endless plain that was being destroyed in an apocalyptic fire. The flames enveloped a huge silent castle that was silhouetted against a black, vacuous, sterile sky. Inside the castle lay a blackened, shriveled corpse upon a bed. When it opened its eyes, he realized that he was himself the corpse. More horrific to Bierce than the self-recognition, however, was the revelation that the universe was now a meaningless void because God was dead: "That hateful and abhorrent scrap of mortality, still sentient after the death of God and the angels, was I!" (131). Whitman had a hard go of it in hawking his absolutist, optimistic Transcendentalism to an increasingly skeptical public, for Bierce was not alone with his nightmare.

Whitman was certainly disappointed by the poor general reception of Leaves of Grass; it never attracted wide, popular audiences during his lifetime. Among the literati, the attention was often negative. Whereas Cotton Mather was the epicist/preacher whom Whittier loved to hate and whom he often lampooned, the gentle Quaker thrust Leaves of Grass into his hearth fire (Scherman 65). Emily Dickenson refused to read it, having been warned in 1862 that the work was "disgraceful" (Johnson 404). Much later, T. S. Eliot declared that a large part of Leaves of Grass is "clap-trap" and that he had to "conquer an aversion to [Whitman's] form, as well as to much of his matter" to get through the book (xi).

By 1914, the rumblings of World War I were about to awaken an entire world to the realization of Bierce's dream as a living nightmare. It would take just over five years of global conflict for the habitation of God--the human heart, soul, spirit, imagination--to be vacated. The caissons that had gone rolling along rolled back to the cemeteries of Westminster and Arlington, on ghastly parade before the disenchanted eyes of a vast global community. Among the deceased in that cavalcade of gore was God, and this is a central fact of modern Western culture, despite the fact that a few years ago in America (c. 1900-1950) there was, from time to time, considerable attention paid to Christian "revival": a returning Golden Age, or at least a second Great Awakening. Life magazine, for example, devoted a section of its July 25, 1949, issue to the meteoric rise of the Akron Baptist Temple in Akron, Ohio. Collier's gave a section of its November 18, 1950, issue to the same phenomenon.

By now, however, much to the chagrin of such anachronisms as the Reverend Jerry Falwell, that kind of talk has died down and such movements swallowed by their true progenitor, Madison Avenue.⁶ When Life magazine promotes a revival, when a pastor admonishes an architect to "design a temple halfway between a church and a theatre and throw in a little of the factory for size" (Battdorf 32), it is obvious that religion has been overwhelmed by national and economic

interests--that "the nation-state thoroughly outranks any church" (Barrett 24). Falwell himself, for example, declares, "Moral Majority is not a religious organization, it's political. There is no theological agreement in Moral Majority" ("An Interview" 24). Television preachers are forthright about their use of modern marketing methods and how they control their sermon content to maximize television ratings. The Executive Director of the National Religious Broadcasters' Association summarizes what he calls "the unwritten law of all television preachers" by stating, "You can get your share of the audience only by offering people something they want" (Armstrong 137).

This decline of the theological absolutes of the Christian religion, this death of God in modern times, goes beyond the laments of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867) or of Tennyson's "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" (1842)--laments of the intellectual change in modern man, his loss of belief due to science. It changes man's total psyche: spirit and soul, as well as mind. (This Nietzsche quickly saw, and it is this that quickly drove him mad.) This gradual waning of religion provides the major building blocks of man's psychic evolution from medieval man to now.

William Barrett, in Irrational Man, summarizes the dilemma:

Religion to medieval man was not so much a theological system as a solid psychological matrix

surrounding the individual's life from birth to death, sanctifying and enclosing all its ordinary and extraordinary occasions in sacrament and ritual. In losing religion [i.e., a sense of absolutes], man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity

. . . To lose one's psychic container is to be set adrift, to become a wanderer upon the face of the earth. Henceforth, in seeking his own human completeness man would have to do for himself what he once had done for him. (24-25)

Twentieth-century American epic literature largely chronicles the experiences of such psychic wanderers upon the earth.

And if heaven, hell, the devil, God and Judgement Day are passé, mythical products of human imagination, they have to be replaced by other myths. Whitman, of course, held to "the existence of a transcendent ideal truth" (Spengemann 198). His optimism, steeped in New England Transcendentalism, could not be more clearly stated. In his wake, Frank Norris in The Octopus (1901) and John Steinbeck in The Grapes of Wrath (1939) will combine with Whitman to form what can be described as a parenthetical break from traditional form and as variations on the theme of Emersonian optimism in the American epic. Both Norris and Steinbeck attempt to impose optimistic meaning upon the grim, tragic situations of their

characters. Both The Octopus and The Grapes of Wrath have conclusions that have been "regarded universally as the nadir of bad" Steinbeck and Norris (Levant 58); like Whitman, who spent his entire adult life making editorial emendations on Leaves of Grass, they had difficulty crafting conclusions wherein their optimism would seem neither artificial nor obtrusive. After Steinbeck, William Gaddis in The Recognitions (1955) and JR (1976) and John Barth in The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) and Giles Goat-Boy (1966) link back with Melville in recognizing "the probable non-existence of absolutes" and "attempting to devise forms of belief that can do without them" (Spengemann 198). The American epic writers to follow Gaddis and Barth--John Gardner in Grendel (1971) and Jason and Medeia (1973), John Kennedy Toole in A Confederacy of Dunces (1980), and Michael Malone in Handling Sin (1986)--react against the bleakness of Gaddis and Barth's vision and attempt in various ways a dialectic between Melville and Whitman.

Although Whitman declared in an early notebook, his Manuscript Notebook for 1847, "I will not be a great philosopher, and found any school, and build it with iron pillars, and gather the young men around me, and make them my disciples, that new and superior churches and politics shall come" (66), he did indeed provide a replacement mythic paradigm for the old myths of Western civilization. He also provided a replacement god. In the 1855 Preface to Leaves

of Grass, Whitman proclaimed that "The poets of the kosmos [i.e., himself] advance through all interpositions and coverings and turmoils and strategems to first principles"; they advance to absolutes. One of those absolutes is articulated clearly in his "Passage to India" (1871): "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more, / The true son of God [i.e., the poet] shall absolutely fuse them" (V.34-35). Dr. R. M. Bucke, a Canadian psychologist and intimate friend of Whitman, labels this absolute as "Cosmic Consciousness":

This consciousness shows the cosmos to consist not of dead matter governed by unconscious, rigid, and unintending law; it shows it on the contrary as entirely immaterial, entirely spiritual, and entirely alive; it shows that death is an absurdity, that everyone and everything has eternal life; it shows that the universe is God and that God is the universe, and that no evil ever did or ever will enter into it. . . . (17-18)

This creed of Whitman's has within it Bertrand Russell's four observations about mysticism: epistemology is experientially based (knowledge and insight are obtained by intuition); plurality and divisions are illusory (unity is reality); history, time, and space are illusory; evil is merely appearance rather than real (1-18). Henri Bergson

noted that there are "two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first implies that we move around the object; the second that we enter into it" (1). Whitman's new mythic paradigm is based upon the latter; it is to be apprehended experientially. The problem here, of course, is the interpretation of experiences. Christian absolutes had provided an all-encompassing system of dogma, rites, symbols, and mythos, which had provided psychological validity to an individual's immediate experience and had encased the collective psyche of Western man in a predictable paradigm. As the twentieth century rapidly approached, however, all bets had to be hedged. Multitudes now refused to believe that God was real; equally, as Derek Jarrett points out, they now also refused to believe that Tinkerbell and Sherlock Holmes were fictions (4).

In the twenty-third installment of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales (Dec. 1893), Doyle rids himself of the super sleuth of whom he had tired. He wrote Holmes's death scene, casting him over a waterfall in the death grip of his enemy Moriarty. However, as in the case of Tinkerbell with every staging of J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan (1904), the audience refused to let him die. Doyle was forced by public outrage to resurrect Holmes, but Holmes was no resurrected God. Instead, he stood at the vanguard of the phenomenal growth of the popularity of short, pulp fiction. This fiction injected new life into the classical concept of

the hero: the archetypal figure who could save society not because he was supernatural, but because he had transcended himself. Odysseus, the quintessential classical hero, for example, does not look godlike; he has short legs and a long torso (Iliad 3:190-200). He is gluttonous (Iliad 4.343-46; Odyssey 6.250; 7.215-18; 9.15; 15.344-45; 17.286-89). He makes a name for himself because he is a deceitful trickster who engages in inveterate scheming--his dealings with Cyclops, Penelope's suitors, and the Trojan horse are among the more notable examples--not for his physical prowess or pristine character. He is one of the very few classical heroes who stoops to chemical warfare; he resorts to poison arrows (Odyssey 1.260-61). He engages in extra-marital affairs with Circe and Calypso during his wanderings and does not give these relationships the legitimacy of concubinage. (The scurrilous Jason, at least, had given that much respect to Medea.) When Nestor, Palamedes, and Menelaus arrive in Ithaca to recruit an army, Odysseus feigns madness to avoid conscription into the expeditionary forces against Troy (Hesiodus 493). If the Cypria fragment is given credence, Odysseus even commits murder by treachery against Palamedes (Hesiodus 505). Athena chooses Odysseus as her favorite; therefore, not because he is virtuous, good, or truthful in any sense, nor because she wished him to be so, she chooses him because he can overthrow Troy, and because she is as wily as he is. Odysseus finds absolution

within himself for any and all of his actions under the utilitarian banner of the common good.

Holmes has his own set of shortcomings. In The Sign of Four (1890), he cries out in despair about the "dreary, dismal, unprofitable world" and its values (615). He challenges Watson to read Winwood Reade's The Martyrdom of Man (1872), declaring it to be "the most remarkable book ever written" (619). In Martyrdom of Man, Reade describes a world that is void of meaning. It is a world that has lost its faith:

A season of mental anguish is at hand, and through this we must pass in order that our posterity may rise. The soul must be sacrificed; the hope of immortality must die. A sweet and charming illusion must be taken from the human race, as youth and beauty vanish never to return.
(447)

Holmes not only is an apostle of Reade, he also declares himself to be a disciple of Jean Paul Richter ("The Sign of Four" 648), a German writer who had great vogue in the nineteenth century, and who had declared in his best-selling Herbst-Blumine (1820) that God is dead and mankind is orphaned. Added to the London 1867 edition of DeQuincy's Confessions of an Opium Eater (Holmes confesses his own opium addiction in the opening paragraph of "The Sign of Four") is the Analects of Jean Paul Richter. Among the

analects is one on "The Grandeur of Man in His Littleness," to which Holmes refers in "The Sign of Four": "[Richter] makes one curious but profound remark. It is that the chief proof of man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness" (178). Again, heroes are no longer supernatural beings; they are those who can transcend their smallness. In "The Final Problem" (1893), Holmes studies the occult for two years in Tibet, even spending a few days with the Dalai Lama. Holmes, like Odysseus, is a man who has little time for conventional religion or established morality. He flaunts, for example, his cocaine, morphine, and opium addictions and fully expects Watson to be his accomplice in law-breaking whenever Holmes deems it necessary for the common good.

When the death of God becomes a given, the archetypal hero is not supernatural. Holmes seemingly dies in a waterfall and comes back to life, but he is no risen god. He is, instead, a fictional embodiment of Whitman and Whitman's dictum that "No man can rise to the proportion of an epic hero . . . except he be the reflection of the spirit of the average masses of his day" (Spencer 223).

William Butler Yeats noted the shift: "In 1900, everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic Church, or if they did, I have forgotten" (xi). The long epoch of

error was at last to have ceased and the new age could begin. James Thomson, an atheist poet, declared:

Now it is full time to talk about the death of the great god Christ. Fate, in the form of science, has decreed the extinction of the gods. . . . Pan lives, not as a God, but as the All . . . now that the oppression of the Supernatural is removed. (108)

Carl A. Rashke, in the Preface to Thomas Altizer's Deconstruction and Theology (1982), offers advice to those in our own day who would maintain their psychological equilibrium at the death of God and the rebirth of Pan:

Perhaps we have genuinely arrived at the era that will be remembered as "the end of theology." Such a recognition should in itself be a cause for rejoicing, as, at the close of graduation day when one pulls off one's cap and gown. Distress, anxiety and malaise can only be interpreted during such an epochal transition as psychosomatic repercussions felt by those who have not learned to draw a candid distinction between loyalty to a field on a "tradition" and professional self-interest. An effective equilibrium is best struck by a therapeutic delight in abetting the necessary, historical demolition. (vii)

It is difficult to praise the immediacy of this advice, however, for there were many who were already swinging their therapeutic wrecking balls at least 135 years before Altizer's work was printed. As early as 1847, Theodore Park, a Boston clergyman who rejected orthodox Christianity but prefigured Jung in seeing all the world's myths as the embodiment of the truth,⁷ joined with Emerson in editing the Massachusetts Quarterly Review, a periodical preoccupied with Greek mythology. James Fergusson's Tree and Serpent Worship (1868) and Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough (1890) gave impetus to the neo-pagan movement. Nietzsche's The Gay Science (1882, rev. 1887) provided a transcript of God's funeral elegy; his Beyond Good and Evil (1886), along with G. B. Shaw's Man and Superman (1903) provided a template for resurrecting the classical concept of the hero.

It would be the work of twentieth-century fiction, however, to popularize this neo-paganism, to do the yeoman's work of "abetting the necessary, historical demolition" of the old order and ushering in the new. Whitman's early attempt to use the vehicle of poetry to do that work proved to be abortive. The attitude of Oliver Wendell Holmes, a formidable contemporary of Whitman, typifies the reason for the popular failure of Leaves of Grass: "[Whitman] takes into his hospitable vocabulary words which no English dictionary recognizes as belonging to the language. . . . He accepts as poetical subjects all things alike, common

and unclean, without discrimination . . ." (234). In England, Swinburne's poetic tribute to neo-paganism, Poems and Ballads (1866), had also proven to be unsuccessful. He resurrected the old gods, but his bacchanalian invocations of them were more than the reading public could bear (or bare). The work is a cornucopia of adultery, incest, bisexuality, and sadism. His poem "Delores," for example, is an invocation to a pagan goddess whom he addresses as "Our Lady of Pain." The pleading prayer is for her to "come down and redeem us from virtue" (l. 279).

Neither the reviewers nor the reading public on either side of the ocean was ready for Pan, for the return of a god who would preside over such overt, hot-blooded paganism as Swinburne and Whitman were advocating. According to Swinburne, an Irish reader threatened to castrate him if the poems were not withdrawn from the market (127). While Swinburne, in a letter to Charles Augustus Howell (August 14, 1866), poo-pooed the threat, the work was, indeed, recalled in both Great Britain and America, and Swinburne lost money in both publishing ventures (Gosse 162). John Morley, among a host of critics who decried the volume and demanded its repression, labeled Swinburne as the "laureate of libinousness" (Baugh 1440). Whitman's Leaves of Grass was under similar attack in America. While the two poets might have been in agreement as to appropriate subject matter, they did not agree upon how to defend their material.

Swinburne, in Notes on Poems and Reviews (1866), his carping apologia for Poems and Ballads, coined the phrase "Art for Art's Sake" (Baugh 1441). The reading public, however, was evidently ill-prepared for such an aesthetic, notwithstanding the role of Moby Dick (1851) as a forerunner to it. In speaking of art-for-art's-sake, Whitman declared in 1888:

Let a man really accept that--let that really be his ruling thought--and he is lost . . . politics for politics' sake, church for church's sake, government for government's sake: state it any way you choose, it becomes offensive: it's all out of the same pit. Instead of regarding literature only as a weapon, an instrument in the service of something larger than itself, it looks upon itself as an end--as a fact to be finally worshipped and adored. To me that's all a horrible blasphemy--a bad smelling apostasy.

(With Walt 121)

Whitman taught that art was rather "something to serve the people--the mass: when it fails to do that it's false to its promise" (With Walt 4). He proposed to include "nothing" in his art "solely for beauty's sake" (The Complete 66). He refused to raise art above man himself, i.e., to give it autonomy, being, or identity. While he promoted a new mythology, he held, then, to the old Puritan aesthetic.

Literature, to him, was:

not merely to copy and reflect existing surfaces,
or pander to what is called taste--not only to
amuse, pass away time, celebrate the beautiful,
the refined, the past, or exhibit technical,
rhythmic, or grammatical dexterity--but a litera-
ture underlying life, religions. . . . (The
Complete 66)

It was to serve didactic functions. The American writer of epic at the turn of the century would have a difficult time articulating and selling the new morality of the new paganism, especially as long as it remained wed to the old aesthetic.

Whitman should have anticipated the poor initial critical and popular reception to Leaves of Grass. Swinburne might have anticipated the castration threat. In July 1860, Thackeray's Cornhill Magazine had already castrated Pan. A full-page illustration of an emasculated Pan accompanies Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "A Musical Instrument" in that issue (84). It is significant, of course, that Pan should make an appearance in her poetry at all, given the gloating tone of her earlier poem, "The Dead Pan" (1844):

Earth outgrows the mythic fancies
Sung beside her in her youth;
And those debonnaire romances
Sound but dull beside the truth.

Phoebus' chariot course is run!

Look up poets, to the sun!

Pan, Pan is dead. (XXXIV.1-7)

She has resurrected Pan in "A Musical Instrument," but he is emasculated. In the poem, he is a rather benign Muse, certainly not the classical portrait of one who is "playful, lascivious, unpredictable, always lecherous" (Zimmerman 190). In the accompanying illustration, Pan's legs are furry and hooved, but his genitalia--archetypically of mythic proportions and almost always depicted as fully erect--are completely missing. How could such a Pan represent the unconscious mind (a la Jung and Freud) or function as one who "embodies the uncivilized power of procreation" (Burkett 172) as a harbinger of pagan ecstasy? How could he preside over the sexual romps of Swinburne and Whitman? That was the problem facing American fiction writers at the turn of the century, especially in light of public sentiment and recent scandals. Edward Carpenter, in his Days with Walt Whitman, correctly identified it: at the dawn of the twentieth century, if there is a god, he is "the goat-legged God peering over the tops of the clouds, shameless, lusty, unpresentable" (6, emphasis added). Swinburne's attempted representation was summarily dispatched to an under-the-counter market. Whitman's work was largely ignored. Howard Sturgis's novel *Tim* (1891), however, an American panegyric of schoolboy homosexual love, was a best-seller. Oscar

Wilde's Picture of Dorian Gray appeared in Lippincott's Magazine in 1890. By the time it was released as a book (1891), the reviewers had denounced it as immoral; one decried it as a "thinly disguised account of the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889," a scandal in which disclosures by telegram delivery boys uncovered a male brothel frequented by socialites, nobility, and the royal family (Smith, Love 13, 27).⁸ Wilde was accused of "peddling moral putrescence" (Smith, Love 27).

Wilde defended himself much as Swinburne had, declaring that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all" (69). Whether well-written or not, fiction at the turn of the century, in a trend that followed Whitman and Swinburne, was dominated by male characters, and sexual inversion was the social issue of the day. In 1885, Dr. Clement Dukes, for example, published a paper in England on masturbation. He was alarmed at his finding that "ninety to ninety-five percent of all boys at boarding schools" participated in the practice, and he demanded a remedy (150). Dr. William Acton's The Function and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs--a work that went through six editions between 1857 and 1875--declared the practice to be willful self-destruction that was to be avoided at all costs. As early as 1834, Sylvester Graham, an American, had postulated a connection between food and male sexual inversion. He

created Graham crackers to decrease sexual desires in young men (Highwater 164). In 1884, John Harvey Kellogg "devised a breakfast cereal that was supposed to curtail the inclination of boys to masturbate" (Highwater 164). Dukes, however, posited that at least part of the cure would be found in "the elevation of women" (155), though this would be difficult when "the demand for them for base purposes is so great" (161).

It was in the light of these religious and social dilemmas--the death of God, the emergence of a new mythos with its concomitant inverted hedonism--that Frank Norris answered his own call, as Joel Barlow had done before him, for the writing the great American epic. He had complained in "A Neglected Epic" (1902), in bloated rhetoric reminiscent of Barlow, that "the plain truth of the matter" is that America had spurned her true Muse (47). Her writers who had been contemporaneous to the drama of the winning of the West had been seduced to look "eastward to the Old World" (47). The American literati were a "cult" in the hands of "well-bred gentlemen in New England"--obviously William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Oliver Wendell Holmes--who neglected the "great, strong, honest, fearless, resolute deeds" of men such as these at the Alamo, allowing those true epic heroes to be "defamed and defaced by nameless hacks" (47). Compared to the Alamo, the battle of Thermopylae Pass "was less glorious"; the siege of Troy pales in the same

comparison, reduced to that of "mere wanton riot" (48). When compared to Jim Bowie, a hero "perpetuated only in the designation of a knife," Achilles fades into a "murderer, egoist, ruffian, and liar" (48).

Norris, who had said that the highest type of novel "draws conclusions from a whole congeries of forces" ("The Novel" 22), aims high in The Octopus (1901). It is an enormous canvas of epic proportions. Among its initial reviews, William Dean Howells labeled The Octopus as a "big, epic dramatic thing" (Life II, 102-03) and a "prodigious epic" ("Editors" 824). The unifying element of the huge, sprawling, disparate elements of Norris's epic is the character Presley, a rather pusilanimous poet who carries in his pocket a "little tree-calf edition of the Odyssey" (42), who is "in search of a subject; something magnificent, he did not know exactly what; some vast, tremendous theme, heroic, terrible, to be unrolled in all the thundering progression of hexameters" (7), who wants to chronicle the "primeval, epic life" (38) of California. It is significant that Norris failed in his epic to provide a pivotal character who meets his own criteria for an epic hero. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that this hero was spawned out of an epic call that ignored Dr. Clement Dukes's warning about the "elevation of women." In Norris's essay "The

Neglected Epic," women are not elevated; they are not even mentioned.

According to Franklin Walker, Norris's biographer, the novelist sensed early in life the domination of women.⁹ He was deeply ashamed as a small child, for example, when his mother forced his attendance at Bonique's Dancing Academy while his classmates engaged in hunting. Later, when he had to choose, however, between the rugged Presbyterianism of his father--a free-market, male-chauvinistic brand of Christianity that was under the purview of D. L. Moody--and the much more effete, drawing room Episcopalianism of his mother, he chose the latter. At age twenty-seven (1897), he was still living with his mother in San Francisco, attending her teas, dressing and socializing to her tastes. In Vandover and the Brute (1914), a novel preceding The Octopus, Norris "presents a youth of artistic, sensitive nature allowing himself to drift, failing to exert the purposeful aim that would create a masterpiece, softening under continual surrenders" (Walker 146). Norris feared that softening within himself.

Presley, the writer in search of a grand epic in The Octopus, is also a softened writer. While Annixter rides a wild, buckskin stallion which only he could tame, Presley rides either a bicycle or, as he draws closer to the men on the ranches, a rather plodding, short-winded, stumbling pony. His room, apart from his own charcoal sketch of a

mission and a "reproduction of the Reading from Homer," is decorated only with "half-finished manuscripts" and "half-smoked cigarettes" (II, 84). He has by now abandoned his epic and has no resolve to finish anything. He watches a gun battle between the ranchers and railroad workers from afar. Immediately upon declaring himself "the champion of the People . . . an apostle, a prophet, a martyr of Freedom," "[he] hesitated to act . . . and while he hesitated, other affairs near at hand began to absorb his attention" (II, 109). He does nothing to support himself. One morning, "he hastened to get up and dress" for "there was much to be done that day" (II, 174), yet all he had to do was mail a manuscript! Even after his impassioned speech to the ranchers at the opera house, "he knew that, after all, he had not once held the hearts of his audience. He had talked as he would have written. . . ." (II, 262). He then heads to San Francisco to help the widowed family of Bismark Hooven, but he is too irresolute and too late. Mrs. Hooven dies of starvation, Minna becomes a prostitute, and Hilda is taken in by strangers. The narrator of The Octopus belabors the obvious:

[Presley's] constitutional irresoluteness obstructed his path continually; brain-sick, weak of will, emotional, timid even, he temporized, procrastinated, brooded; came to decisions in the dark hours of the night, only to abandon them in the morning. (II, 275)

"Once only had he acted" (II, 275). This was his attempt to kill S. Behrman with a pipe bomb--and he fails. After this,

[T]here had come to Presley a deep-rooted suspicion that he was--of all human beings, the most wretched--a failure. Everything to which he had set his mind failed--his great epic, his efforts to help the people that surrounded him, even his attempted destruction of the enemy, all these had come to nothing. (II, 276)

He is faced with the void, the abyss.

Early in the novel, his friend Vanamee, a mystic and shepherd, had offered him a seeming alternative to failure: "Well, yes, it is there--your epic. . . . But why write? Why not live in it?" (I, 39). But Vanamee also "comes to nothing." Although he is described as a "young seer," as one of the "beholders of visions, having their existence in a continual dream, talkers with God, gifted with strange powers" (I, 30), his vision reveals to him that "There is no God. . . . The Heaven you pray to is only a joke, a wretched trick, a delusion" (I, 140). Faced with the abyss, a motif that later becomes central to the black comic epics of Barth and Gaddis, Vanamee nightly throws himself into trances, "beg[ging] pitifully for the illusion; anything rather than the empty, tenantless night, the voiceless silence, the vast loneliness of the overspanning arc of the heavens" (I, 145). Whether one acts or does not act, one must face, as Annie

Derrick recognizes intuitively, "the colossal indifference of nature," the fact that nature is

a gigantic engine, a vast power, huge, terrible; a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom with soundless calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never the faintest tremor through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs. (I, 174)

There is no room for Emerson or Whitman's optimism about nature here. In The Octopus, Nature and the railroad are both referred to as Leviathan.

With a Homeric touch of using cross-references, epic similes, and repeated epithets, Norris brings Presley, much later, to the same conclusion. After his meeting with Shelgrim, the president of the railroad, Presley understands the workings of Nature:

Forces, conditions, laws of supply and demand-- were these then the enemies after all? Not enemies--there was no malevolence in Nature. Colossal indifference only, a vast trend toward appointed goals. Nature was, then, a gigantic engine, a vast Cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom standing in its way

with nirvanic calm, the agony of destruction
 sending never a jar, never the faintest tremor
 through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels
 and cogs. (II, 286)

This is the "Failure is Pass/Pass is Failure" epiphany that will occur later for Barth's Goat-Boy. Nature is indifferent, and behind the screen of leviathan, as had been the case in Moby Dick and will continue to be the case in the American epic tradition, there is nothing. Father Sarria, who, as a churchman, is a "relic of a departed regime" (I, 204), illustrates, as pictured against the backdrop of the "fecundated earth" at sunset, the attempt to arrive at some sort of balance in the face of the possibility of the abyss: he is shown "hurrying away in confusion and discomfiture, carrying in one hand the vessels of the Holy Communion and in the other a basket of game cocks" (I, 204).

No other characters in the novel are given the accoutrements to attempt such a balance. Norris gives precious little anthropomorphic detail to the heroes of the new paganism of his century. With the exception of Hilma Tree, upon whom Norris devotes repeated Homeric epithets running several pages in length (for example, I.78-80), detailing her eyes, lips, breasts, and hips with voyeuristic glee, his characters are not fleshed out. As nearly all his critics point out, they tend to be cardboard. He balks even more, however, at detailing their hedonism. The title page of

William Sharp's Pagan Review (1892) had carried the motto Sic Transit Gloria Grundi: the age of Mrs. Grundy, of Victorian prudery, had passed. In 1894, Grant Alton had proclaimed in "The New Hedonism" that "everything high and ennobling in our nature springs out of the sexual instinct" and that society could be regenerated only when this truth replaced Christian asceticism (384). In The Octopus, however, the only scene of "the most desperate love-making" occurs in the "deep recesses" of the cattle stalls at Annixter's barn party (I, 242). The scene proves to be anticlimactic, indeed: "the young man, his hair neatly parted, leaning with great solicitation over the girl, his 'partner' for the moment, fanning her conscientiously, his arm carefully laid along the back of her chair" (I, 242-243).

The sexual act is never detailed in The Octopus except in relation to the land. The earth is often depicted as a Titan goddess "offering herself to the caress of the plough" (I, 122). As "the hundred iron teeth bit into the Titan's flesh," she "quiver[ed] with the prolonged thrill" (I, 123):

. . . underfoot, the land was alive; aroused at last from its sleep, palpitating with the desire of reproduction . . . the great heart throbbed once more, thrilling with passion, vibrating with desire . . . insistent, eager, imperious. Dimly one felt the deep-seated trouble of the earth, the uneasy agitation of its members, the hidden tumult

of its womb, demanding to be made fruitful, to reproduce, to disengage the eternal renascent germ of Life that stirred and struggled in its loins.¹⁰

In this passage and many others like it, Norris maintains a Whitmanesque tie to nature. While such passages undoubtedly shed further light upon Norris's attitudes toward women, they also--despite the blustering melodrama that "degenerates colossally into bombast" (Hartwick 64)--attempt to provide the epic motif of the fabulous to the novel.

The characters who inhabit that land are as grandiose as the nature passages. Collectively, they provide the elements of Homeric epic society. At their feasts, "the table was taken as if by assault. . . . [T]hey rinsed their throats with great draughts of wine. . . . It was no longer supper. It was . . . a crude and primitive feasting, barbaric, homeric" (I, 127). The second feast, a part of the jack-rabbit drive, again gives an epic catalogue of fare with the obligatory "barrels of wine" that "went down the dry and dusty throats," and this time Norris adds olympic games of track, field and wrestling as an after-dinner event: "It was Homeric, this feasting, this vast consuming of meat and bread and wine, followed now by games of strength. An epic simplicity and directness . . . commended it" (II, 216). At the festival of Annixter's barn-raising, Annixter defeats the villainous Delaney in a "duel" (I, 252) and is dubbed "the Hero"--"Lancelot after the tournament,

Bayard receiving felicitations after the battle" (I, 256-57). The newlywed shopping spree of Annixter and Hilma becomes an epic catalogue of household effects (II, 235).

The conflicts between the ranchers and the railroad provide the essentials of the epic battle. The economic, socialist conflict is reduced to strategies, councils of war, bribes, betrayals, and preparations for battle. Each rancher is a chieftain. The most fully developed chieftain in The Octopus is Annixter, who is an Achilles of the Wild West. He sulks. His actions are motivated by anger. He is self-centered and hypochondriacal. Finally, he puts aside his sulking and takes action. It is not the love of a friend that brings him to bear his responsibility, however, for Presley is certainly no Patroclus. His love for Hilma transforms him into a champion of the people, and he becomes a socialist predecessor to Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath:

And I began to see that a fellow can't live for himself any more than he can live by himself. He's got to think of others. If he's got brains, he's got to think for the poor ducks that haven't got 'em, and not give 'em a boot in the backsides because they happen to be stupid; and if he's got money, he's got to help those that are busted, and if he's got a house, he's got to think of those that ain't got anywhere to go. I've got

a whole lot of ideas since I began to love Hilma, and just as soon as I can, I'm going to get in and help people, and I'm going to keep to that idea the rest of my natural life. That ain't much of a religion, but it's the best I've got, and Henry Ward Beecher couldn't do any more than that. (II, 180)

Nor could Whitman. Annixter's anger, like that of Achilles, is transmuted into optimism and compassion. Osterman, a rancher whose description is that of a "goat" having a "serio-comic face," "stiff red ears" and a "bald forehead," is a Thersites figure: "gesticulating, clamorous,¹¹ full of noise." W. B. Stanford, using his material on Ulysses as being the grandson of the Wily Lad figure Autolyeus, could argue that Osterman is Ulysses, for he is a "poser," who is "glib, voluble, dexterous, ubiquitous, a teller of funny stories, a cracker of jokes" (I, 96), and one who consorts with the enemy--here, S. Behrman, the railroad croney--in order to practice treachery upon him (I, 97). Magnus Derrick is Agamemnon, the patriarchal leader of the ranchers in the tradition of the tragic hero as king. The other ranchers confess that there is "something Jovian" about him (I, 61). "He loved to do things upon a grand scale, to preside, to dominate," and this, his hubris, causes his ruin: "deserted by his friends, his son murdered, his dishonesty known, an old man, broken, discarded,

discredited, and abandoned" (II, 270). On the other side of the battle, Delaney, a railroad henchman, is Hector, the Tamer of Horses: "when it comes to horse, Delaney can wipe the eye of any cow-puncher in the county" (I, 82). Like Hector, Delaney is killed by the hand of Achilles (Annixter). Running messages between both sides of the war is The Mercury, a local tabloid whose proprietor's stock and trade is deceit, trickery, and blackmail.

Other epic themes appear. Vanamee, "a poet by instinct" (I, 33), is an Orpheus figure. He is in search of his deceased lover, Angele, that is to say, Eurydice. Angele, like Eurydice, meets her end in a garden; she is killed by an "intruding serpent" figure (II, 101). Vanamee searches for Angele in his nightly vigils in a cemetery-- a descent into the land of the dead--where he is aided by his preternatural gift of thought transference, a gift that functions as Orpheus's lyre throughout the novel. This, of course, parallels another myth, that of Demeter and Persephone. A queenly maiden, Angele, is abducted in a garden and carried to the underworld, her grave. She returns to Vanamee in the garden in the person of her daughter on the same night that Annixter has his love epiphany, the same night that the wheat begins to blossom. Annixter and Hilda are, in fact, a parallel manifestation of the same myth. Persephone-Hilda is dragged to the underworld of San Francisco and is brought back by

Demeter-Annixter in time for the harvest of the wheat that has been earmarked to feed "thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India" (II, 360). Minna Hooven is a potential Eurydice-Persephone figure, but Presley fails in his role as Orpheus-Demeter to rescue her.

The grand theme of Western history--the movement from east to west--is yet another operative epic motif that Norris uses. Hooven explains to Annixter his release from the German army and his personal east-to-west exodus:

When I gedt der release, I clair oudt, you
bedt. I come to Emerica. First, New Yor-ruk;
den Milwaukee; den Sbringfieldt, Illinoy; den
Galifornie, und heir I stay. . . . Emerica,
dat's my gountry now and dere . . . dat's my
home. Dat's goot enough Vaterland for me.

(I, 168)

Cedarquist confides in Presley that it is the "manifest destiny" of the Anglo-Saxons to run its civilization full circle: "We must march with the course of empire, not against it" (I, 21-22). "The Anglo-Saxon started from [Asia] at the beginning of everything and it's manifest destiny that he must circle the globe and fetch up where he began his march. . . . Tell the men of the East to look out for the men of the West. . ." (II, 356-57). Caution is advised, for in The Octopus, the Anglo-Saxon, in his east-to-west march, displays a marked superiority

of race. At the slaughter of the jack-rabbits, for example, even the dogs shrink back in revulsion while the Latinos, "Portuguese for the most part," were "eager" to do the work of bludgeoning: "[T]he Anglo-Saxon spectators round about drew back in disgust, but the hot, degenerated blood of Portuguese, Mexican, and mixed Spaniard boiled up in excitement at the wholesale slaughter" (II, 214).

To all these elements of classical myth, Norris adds a smattering of Christian images. Vanamee, for example, is described as one of "the inspired shepherds of the Hebraic legends, living close to nature, the younger prophets of Israel, dwellers in the wilderness, solitary, imaginative. . ." (I, 30). The truth that Vanamee learns from his garden vision of Angele is decoded for him by Father Sarria into the words of St. Paul: "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come? Thou fool! That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die" (I, 139 [I Cor. 15:36]). Sarria compares Vanamee to St. Jerome, Elijah, and the Prodigal Son (I, 40). In his speech at the opera house, Presley builds his diatribe in favor of socialism around the "Let my people go" cry of the book of Exodus (II, 259). Minnie Hooven's death march to starvation is "that via dolorosa of the destitute, that chemin de la croix of the homeless" (II, 303). Magnus Derrick, an Agamemnon figure, is also a type of the patriarch-King David in the Old Testament. Once the man

of impeccable integrity, "a man after God's own heart" (I Sam. 13:14), falls, and senses that "the plague-spot was in himself, knitted to the fabric of his being" (II, 172), his son Lyman, like Absalom, betrays the family and foments rebellion; his son Harran, like Amnon, is killed.

The fall of the house of Derrick is but one note to serve notice that the tone of the American epic remains dark after Melville. The city as an epic motif in myth, for example, continues in The Octopus to drift from the optimistic picture that is given by Whitman. Hilma, the only woman of strength in the novel, cannot bear its atmosphere: "This rude, raw city, with its crowding houses all of wood and tin, its blotting fogs, its uproarious trade winds, disturbed and saddened her. There was no outlook for the future" (II, 116). Presley remarks of Minna Hooven that, ". . . she's too pretty for a poor girl, and too sure of her prettiness besides. That's the kind who would find it pretty easy to go wrong if they lived in a city" (II, 203-04). When Minna is forced to go to San Francisco by her father's death, she does, indeed, resort to prostitution: "I've gone to hell. It was either that or starvation" (II, 298).

David Noble reminds us, though, that in The Octopus "It was only in the seasons of the earth itself that there was significant drama. All human actions, all history was meaningless" (114). This is dark, indeed. In the cosmos of The Octopus, among the "little isolated group of human

insects, misery, death and anguish spun like a wheel of fire"; the abyss, however, remains "untouched, unassailable, undefiled . . . wrapped in nirvanic calm. . ." (II, 360). This dark, absurd vision of history will emerge as the central motif of the epic novels of Barth and Gaddis.

This connection is reinforced by Norris's selection of a central hero. While The Octopus has many of the earmarks of traditional epic (it is encyclopedic; it is a long narrative of elevated style; it alludes to grand themes of history; it uses the epic devices of epithets, epic similes, catalogues and myths), it does make one major departure. The Octopus strives for epic structure in that it is a series of adventures that attempt to form an organic whole through this relationship to one hero, but that hero is not heroic. Presley, the only organizing "hero" of the epic elements, is also the Homer who is to record those elements. He fails as an epic poet--he writes only one short poem, "The Toilers," no lines of which appear in the novel--and in that failure he denies to The Octopus the intertextual interplay that will become central to later American epics. But he is more successful as a Homer than as a hero. He fails to serve as a Patroclus to Annixter's role as Achilles. He fails in his role as Orpheus-Demeter to respond to Minna Hooven's potential role as Eurydice-Persephone. He fails to be a spokesman for the cause of the People. He fails in his attempt to kill Behrman with a pipe bomb. Near the end of

the novel, Presley recognizes that such anarchist violence is important in the abyss: "Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; FORCE only existed--FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation. . ."
(II, 343).

This, of course, corresponds nicely with the element of Fate in classical epics. The vast difference is that "this strong and true" sense of the "explanation of existence" consumes him only for "one instance" (II, 343); and he has no response to it. The insight itself is in the tradition of the great heroes: Ulysses, Jason, Hector, Achilles, and--the most poignant perhaps for modern sensibilities given Camus' interpretation of the myth--Sisyphus. These heroes flew in the face of their awareness of Fate's mockery of human heroism. They recognized that life is without purpose, without design and without hope, and responded heroically anyway. Presley, however, is crushed. He cannot return from his epiphany and act as a hero. Such a hero is a locus for the absurdist epics that follow in Barth and Gaddis's trail.

It should be noted also that the absurdist vision of the abyss in The Octopus is only clearly given to Presley and Annie Derrick, the male and female counterparts of the anti-hero. As is the case in Dostoevsky's narrator in Notes from Underground (1864), truth is here undermined by the

vessel that bears it, a tradition made conspicuous in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (1929) and carried through the postmodernist American epics, especially in such large aberrations as the bumbling Ignatius Reilly in Confederacy of Dunces (1976).¹²

Yet another tie between The Octopus and later American epics is found in Donald Pizer's observation that Norris uses the cycle of the growth of the wheat as a "structural center" to the novel (156). Pizer finds this "an exciting example of how a scientific idea--here that of evolution--can influence not only the theme and subject matter of the novel but also its form" (156). While it is arguable that "the center cannot hold" in The Octopus--the cycles of planting, growing, and harvesting cause severe problems in the development of theme and characters--it is clear that the attempt is made. Each American epic to follow will take shape on the basis of the dominant scientific-philosophic idea of its time.

A final connection of The Octopus and the American epic novels to follow it is the critical indictment of being amorphous, disjointed, sprawling, and prolix. A. C. Ward, for instance, has decided that "The Octopus . . . sprawl[s] wastefully and lose[s] the effect [it] would have gained from coherent design. [It] reveal[s] the hand of Norris the journalist, interested in everything about him . . ." (88); that is to say, he tried to do too much. The novel has

grandiose designs and lofty aims, to be sure. Norris, with characteristic pomposity, believed that a novelist fulfills his responsibilities only when he devotes himself to a high purpose:

[A novel is] a great force, that works together with the pulpit and the universities for the good of the people, fearlessly proving that power is abused, that the strong grind the faces of the weak, that an evil tree is still growing in the midst of the garden, that undoing falls hard upon unrighteousness, that the course of Empire is not yet finished, and that the races of man have yet to work out their destiny in these great and terrible movements that crush and grind and rend asunder the pillars of the house of the nations.
 ("The Novel" 26)

His words here, published in 1903, are strangely prophetic of The War to End All Wars, that great and terrible movement that was so soon to "rend asunder the pillars of the house of the nations." And his panegyric of the Wheat at the conclusion of The Octopus--"Men, notes in the sunshine--perished, were shot down in the very noon of life. . . . But the WHEAT remained" (II, 364)--prefigures the conclusion of the war.

According to The (London) Times (June 4, 1919), Arnold Bennett, early in the war, had seen "wheat absolutely

growing out of a German" (11); by the end of the war, the Imperial War Graves Commission found that "vegetation is fast covering up all the traces of the dead" (11). The Times observed that "there are more dead soldiers lying in isolated areas than constituted the whole Expeditionary Forces of 1914. . . . The French peasant is not going to allow these vast areas to remain uncultivated" (11). When the armies finished planting their corpses, the peasants returned to plant and to seek a more hopeful harvest. T. S. Eliot, in "Burial of the Dead," the opening section of "The Wasteland" (1922), asks Stetson, a war veteran: "'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?'" (I, 71-72).

But while Norris and Eliot share the same Whitmanesque vision here, Eliot's "The Wasteland" has become one of the most important poems of the twentieth century and Norris's The Octopus is now a largely forgotten and neglected work. In 1935, Granville Hicks grudgingly remarked in The Great American Tradition that "The Octopus is not wholly unworthy of the name epic," conceding that Norris had one quality of greatness: ". . . he could seize upon the central issues of his time and create people in whose lives those issues were reflected" (171-72). The Octopus should, therefore, be one of the greatest socialist "work" novels ever written; it fails, however, because Norris could not stay focused on that object. The energy of the struggle

of "the People" is dissipated into a myriad of side issues. The story of Vanamee, for example, adds little to the struggle-of-the-workers motif. His acceptance of Angele's daughter as a symbol of the continuity of life detracts, for the reader is forced to accept that Vanamee's obsession with Angele's death, an obsession aided by an unexplained sixth sense, somehow overlooked the detail that she died giving birth to a daughter who lived.

The most glaring problem of the novel, however, may be Norris's inability to control the style and diction. On at least two occasions, at the conclusion of the first and last chapters, the railroad is depicted simultaneously as an octopus that rapaciously grasps and devours and as a one-eyed, bellowing, galloping, charging monster-horse--a rather strange mixed metaphor. One of the oft-repeated epithets for Magnus Derrick is that he is "one of the last of the followers of the old school of orators," but Norris can give no evidence of this in any of Magnus's many speeches. When Norris does attempt rhetorical flourish--the descriptions of the land and of the railroad symbolism, the wheat panegyrics, or the "hushed poetic tones of the romance of Vanamee" (Lutwack 44), for example--his reputation for austere American realism and naturalism crumbles into overt melodrama, into ludicrous bombast.

This failure is exacerbated by his use of the growth cycle to shape the novel. It forces climactic moments to

occur early in the novel. The character development of both Annixter and Vanamee ends, for instance, early in volume II when they have their simultaneous epiphanies. Also, Norris infuses so much tension and emotion into the gun battle at the irrigation ditch that the 150 pages which follow are decidedly anticlimactic. The anticlimax becomes most troubling at Presley's "all things . . . work together for good" rhapsody on the final page. Granville Hicks presses the point: "As a theory it is ridiculous, and it destroys the emotional effect of the book" (173). It does, however, illustrate how quickly Whitman's Transcendental optimism can be brought to the end of its tether. Appended to the last paragraph of the novel, it is an obtrusive, laughable, vestigial organ. For all his stumbling, however, Norris did pave the way for a work that does stand as a classic of the "work" novel--an epic that provides the last gasp to Whitmanesque optimism--John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath.

Lutwack comments that "the line of descent from The Octopus to The Grapes of Wrath is as direct as any that can be found in American literature" (47). His reasons for drawing that line are simply that Steinbeck uses what Norris "identified as productive epic writing," the journey from East to West (47), and that both novels "have a universalizing tendency in that they create from a local situation a synecdoche of worldwide import" (47). Beyond this, however, Norris and Steinbeck connect because, in attempting

to follow Whitman, they aspire beyond their aesthetic means. They fall into bathos. They project optimism onto a New World that was growing older and more skeptical.

In America in 1939, as David Wyatt reminds us, the world was within reach. Germany had not yet invaded Poland. Transatlantic commercial flight was first offered. Commercial television was first broadcast. In Pasadena, the ground was broken for the country's first freeway. A food-stamp program for the hungry had begun in New York. Bird's Eye Corporation had introduced prepackaged, precooked frozen food. Hollywood hit an all-time high mark, producing almost 500 movies, including Gone With the Wind and The Wizard of Oz (1). That world was also about to fall apart. Albert Einstein wrote a warning to President Roosevelt about the imminent, destructive potential of uranium. Race and class relations were straining and breaking. Alfred Kazin recalls that the Great Depression "was an education by shock" (283-84). The door of American Optimism was suddenly slammed shut: "Because Americans had long been materialistic, they tended to lose hope when they lost things" (Bogardus 1). The American dream was being seriously questioned. Nineteen hundred thirty-nine ended "the only decade--other than the 1860s . . . when it became disquietingly clear to Americans that things do not always work, that human designs have limits" (Bogardus 1). There was no need for literature to announce the emergence of a wasteland; writers simply

reported it. Art was becoming subservient to radical politics. While Whitman's epistemology and optimism had become increasingly anachronistic, artists were sorely tempted to embrace *carte blanche* his aesthetic theory, that is to say, to judge art according to correct ideological standards and didactic impact rather than on purely aesthetic grounds.

Despite Steinbeck's withholding of L'Affaire Lettuceberg (1938) from publication on the grounds that he had "slipped badly," declaring "[L'Affaire] is bad because it isn't honest" (Lisca 147), one should not conclude too quickly that Steinbeck was maturing into an Art-for-Art's-Sake artist. He still bought into Whitman's aesthetic theory of didacticism, as had his precursor, Norris. He also followed Whitman in bearing a standard for that didacticism; he picked up and carried Whitman's colors for the American migrant workers. Whitman had thundered in "Notes Left Over" that "If the United States, like the countries of the Old World, are also to grow vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations . . . then our republic experiment, notwithstanding all its surface success, is at heart an unhealthy failure" (286).¹³ It was this failure of the republic that haunted Steinbeck and shaped his thinking and writing. Undergirding Steinbeck's social concern, Frederick Carpenter has observed three roots:

The Grapes of Wrath . . . begins with the transcendental oversoul, Emerson's faith in the common man, and his Protestant self-reliance. To this it joins Whitman's religion of the love of all man and his mass democracy. And it combines these mystical and poetic ideas with the realistic philosophy of pragmatism and its emphasis on effective action. (324-25)

When mined at this level, The Grapes of Wrath begins to seem a thoroughly didactic epic novel.

Placing the displaced Okies into the mythic tradition of migrations--specifically, the exodus from Egypt of the Israelites in the Old Testament and the migration of the Trojans in the Aeneid--allows Steinbeck both to dignify his subject matter and to give shape to their story. As there were twelve tribes of Israel, so there are twelve Joads. Their migration is tri-partite: Oklahoma being Egypt, Route 66 corresponding to the path of the wilderness journey, and California posing as the Promised Land. This, of course, also corresponds to the shape of the Aeneid: the Trojans lose their homeland and make a dangerous exodus to a new land, only to find that there they must fight again for even a chance to begin anew.

This tri-partite structure keeps at all times the focus upon "the tragic attrition of the Joads as a family unit" (Taylor 137) as well as upon the tragedy of the whole race

of Okies. The book is overt in its own declaration of intention; it is disclosing a crime: "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all of our successes" (477). This crime takes on mythic, epic proportions, in part by Steinbeck's melding of his tale with biblical myth. Eric Carlson sees only "a few loose biblical analogies" (172). T. F. Dunn, however, compares Tom Joad to Moses (566). H. K. Crockett dogmatically asserts that "the parallels of Tom and [St.] Peter are as strongly evident" (567). Theodore Ziolkowski devotes a chapter of his Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus to a discussion of Jim Casey as "Comrade Jesus" (182-224). If Casey is Jesus, then Gerard Cannon insists that "Tom is unmistakably to Casey as St. Paul is to Christ" (222). Whatever specific parallels one may cull from the myriad of possibilities, Harry T. Moore is certainly correct in insisting that there is a biblical "grimness" found within The Grapes of Wrath (71). A story meant to disclose a crime, especially a story that resonates with mythic biblical grimness, is going to be a parable. This particular parable also echoes motifs from classical epics. Grandpa, for example, is forced from home, must be carried, and dies in a strange land. His funeral is accompanied by a feast and rituals. His widow is consoled by a granddaughter who rests "beside the old woman [while] the murmur of their

soft voices drifted to the fire" (199) where the men were stationed. This parallels the death of Aeneas's father. Tom must go to a junkyard for truck parts, where he encounters a "one-eyed spectre of a man" (242). Moore states that this scene "floats in the mind like a piece of epic" (71). Of course, the "piece" is Odysseus's meeting with Polyphemus. At a campsite along Route 66, the Joads meet a "ragged man" (257), a Teiresias figure who accurately predicts what happens in the second half of the book.

Without resorting to the heavy-handed similes and metaphors of The Octopus, The Grapes of Wrath presents ceremonies and rituals that carry epic flavor. There are many family councils. There are ritual animal slaughterings and feasts. There is precise protocol, ritual and chivalric code for all tribal events from births to deaths:

In the evening, a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. . . . The golden time in the West was one dream. . . . The families learned what rights must be observed . . . the right of son to court and daughter to be courted; the right of the hungry to be fed; the rights of the pregnant and sick to transcend all other rights. . . . (264-65)

These rituals are often introduced through a modest use of an intertextual device. There are sixteen interchapters

within The Grapes of Wrath in which none of the personae of the main story appears. Instead, these sections provide social and historical background. These interchapters are often assimilated into the text by a device used earlier by Melville, the play within the play:

There are no more than a half-dozen paragraphs in the book which are aimed directly at the reader or delivered by the author. The general conflict between small farmers and the banks, for example, is presented as an imaginary dialogue, each speaker personifying the sentiments of his group. And although neither speaker is a "real" person, they [sic] are dramatically differentiated and their [sic] arguments embody details particular to the specific social condition. Each speaker is like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. (Lisca 160)

While Lisca insists that this technique is "greatly implemented by a masterful prose style" (160), Lutwack is closer to the truth in noting that Steinbeck "occasionally comes to hear a burlesque tone," that his "seriousness becomes excessive," and that "he commits the prime error of many writers who attempt the epic, swelling and grandioseness" (50).

At its worst, however, The Grapes of Wrath remains above the excesses of bathos to be found in The Octopus.

This is especially true in regards to the novel's moral vision. Steinbeck's work is an American epic that finally celebrates Whitman's moral code, the new hedonism of the new paganism. According to Casey, "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do" (32). Ma Joad echoes, "What people does is right to do" (289). The novel sanctions natural indulgence. It is Casey's new resolve to "cuss" and to "lay in the grass, open an' honest" (128) with anyone who will oblige him. "The people" find corporate pleasure in storytelling, dancing, occasional movies, bouts of benign drunkenness, or in relatively responsibility-free sex. Grandpa's brother, for example, suffers no reprisals even though, if he fathered "any kids, [he] cuckoo'd 'em and somebody else is a-raisin' 'em" (126). Aggie suffers no stigma or consequences for engaging nightly in pre-marital sex with Al Joad: "It ain't Aggie's fault," declares her father, because "she's grow'd up" (576).

Norris's prudery in The Octopus had taken sex from the people and transplanted it--literally--into the land. Very early in The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck addresses that stilted burlesque of Norris's land-loving, providing its converse: "if a seed dropped and did not germinate, it was nothing. Behind the harrows, the long seeders--twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion. . ." (48-49). Passion is returned to the people. Despite all

of Steinbeck's Jeffersonian agrarianism, for him the Titans are the people, not the land. Their passion, however, is purely an animal one. Tom Joad, for example, leaves prison "smokin'," "finds a hoar girl," and "runs her down like she was a rabbit" (233). Muley describes his "fust time" with a girl as "Me fourteen an' stampin' an' jerkin' an' snortin' like a buck deer, randy as a billygoat" (69). Sex in The Grapes of Wrath moves beyond the rascalities of the picaresque novel to present a non-teleological epistemology that will become stock trade in early post-modernism: "the only values lie in the experiences of the moment, the only valid end of living in the continued renewing of . . . life" (Taylor 138). This, of course, is the creed of existentialism. Toward the end of the novel, Pa makes the mistake of "spen' all my time a-thinkin' how it use' to be . . . diggin' back to a ol' time to keep from thinkin'" (577). Ma understands, however, the importance of divorcing oneself from the misleading sense of security of history, from its false sense of teleology. An interchapter declares, "How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past? No. Leave it. Burn it" (120). This will be Barth's approach to history; it is also Ma's. It is Ma who burns the family photos and letters (148). As the family leaves Uncle John's yard, "Ma tried to look back, but the body of the load cut off her view" (156). She never tries to look back again.

With her inner strength, Ma follows Hilma Tree in The Octopus as a rare treatment in American epic of female power. She is not, however, nearly so cardboard as Hilma. She and the other characters in The Grapes of Wrath, nonetheless, function not so much as individuals but as types, much like the personae in medieval morality plays. They are the stock figures of parable. Ma Joad is "in the ancient tradition of the kare-goddess protecting her hero-son and her people" (Lutwack 54). Her dea certe occurs when Tom returns to her from prison:

Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and super-human understanding . . . her position, the citadel of the family. . . . She had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goddess.
(100)

Tom and Ma never embrace. Only twice in the novel do they touch--Ma touches her hand to his face. Lutwack sees in this the same gulf that exists between the goddess mother Venus and her human son Aeneas in book one of the Aeneid (55). Throughout the novel, she exercises preternatural strength to hold the family together.

Whereas Ma Joad is an earth-mother goddess, Jim Casey--note his initials--is a Christ figure. Casey has twelve spiritual disciples with him when he begins his

journey. He first appears by coming out of the hills, "almost you might say like Jesus went into the wilderness to think his way out of a mess of troubles. I ain't sayin' I'm like Jesus, but I got tired like Him . . . an' I went into the wilderness like Him, without no campin' stuff" (110). He descends from the mountains with a revelation: "I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing an' mankind was holy when it was one thing" (110); he preaches Whitman's Transcendental optimism. While trying to organize the laborers, he is recognized as "that shiny bastard" (587) and is killed while pronouncing words from the cross: "You don't know what you're a-doin" (527). Tom, his closest disciple, retreats and must momentarily deny Casey, whereupon "at last the roosters crowed" (530).

Tom Joad, the self-sufficient, retiring individual at the beginning of the novel, becomes toward its close the symbol of resistance to injustice and human suffering. Casey has disciplined Tom into the apprehension of a Whitmanesque epiphany:

. . . a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one. . . . I'll be around in the dark. I'll be ever'where--wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. . . . I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an'

they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build--why, I'll be there. (572)

Tom has emerged from a series of caves before undergoing this apotheosis into a transfigured Whitman. He leaves his prison cave with the nickname "Jesus Meek" (35), even though he had once killed a man. He hides with Muley in a cave to avoid fighting with a sheriff (81). Later, he hides in a cave with Casey to avoid a hostile confrontation with authority (526). He makes a cave in the load of the family truck so that he can avoid a fight with the guards at the peach ranch (549). Finally, he hides in the cave near the cotton patch, is visited by Ma, and emerges with his epiphany (568).

With a Christ figure for a mentor and a strong, goddess mother, Tom resurrects from his caves and is translated by his vision into a far different hero than Presley had been after his moment of revelation in The Octopus. Will Presley return from India and act upon his insight? Perhaps, but the evidence is very inconclusive. Tom, however, after conferring with his earth-mother goddess in a cave, is truly resurrected. As such, he is not only himself a Christ figure but his parting with Ma also echoes the last meeting of Thetis and Achilles. The biblical and epic myths merge here to create a proletarian hero. Before his spiritual

pilgrimage, Tom had killed a man in a personal brawl in a barroom; now he is a defender of the people.

The Grapes of Wrath begins with a draught that destroys the land, breaks up homes, and creates a diaspora. It ends with a flood that produces the same results. Nature and a free-market economy conspire to wreak havoc upon the Okies, but Steinbeck maintains Whitmanesque optimism in the resulting individual rebirths. The most dramatic is in the final chapter: Rosasharn, the most selfish of the Joads, surrenders life-giving milk from her own breasts to a starving stranger. She, at some level, has finally devoted herself, as Tom has done, to working for mankind and accepting the Whitmanesque vision of Jim Casey: "it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Speret--the human speret--the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of" (32-33). Rosasharn and Tom learn "the lesson essential for survival, the necessity of sustaining not only one's self, or one's husband, or child . . . but the whole of mankind" (Cox 76).

While Rosasharn's rebirth into altruism could be argued a technical accomplishment--it parallels the change in Tom--it also goes beyond simply bathos. Steinbeck mars The Grapes of Wrath exactly as Norris did The Octopus, by transforming a major character's credo in the final paragraphs with no credible or literary justification for that transformation.

Tom, like Ma, has undergone a long process of transformation. Rosasharn, on the other hand, remains absolutely static--a thoughtless, whining child--throughout the work, until the last page. Upon nearly every page upon which Rosasharn makes an appearance, even a cameo, she is crying (175, 176, 177, 193, 224, 290, 344, 366, 378, 419, 461, 484, 539, 548). In the first full description of her, she "complained about things that didn't matter," demanded services "that were silly" and placed herself "in the center of [the Joad's] own world" (175-76). When the Joad's dog is killed by a passing car (177) and when Rosasharn sees her first dead Okie (193), she expresses no remorse and is only solicitous about her own health. Throughout the novel, she divorces herself from reality and lives in a dream world; when her grandmother is dying in front of her, for example, Rosasharn is dreaming of having a new ice box (290). In her last speech before the concluding scene, she summarizes her persona throughout the novel: "Feel bad all the time. Wish't I could sit still in a nice place. Wish't we was home and never come" (548). Her transformation on the last page is a shameless authorial manipulation. Levant is correct in lamenting, "The novel is made to close with a forced image of optimism and brotherhood, with an audacious upbeat that cries out in the wilderness" (59). Here, Steinbeck stretches the tether of Whitman's optimism until it snaps. He imposes an unsupported (perhaps unsupportable)

conclusion upon material that has already been manipulated by heavy didacticism. The increasingly grotesque episodes of this novel, however, manipulated as they might be, nonetheless resist the conclusion of fraternal optimism that had been authorially foreordained for them. Steinbeck's apologia for his attempt to foist this ideology upon his readers is editorialized in chapter 14:

This you may say of man--when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back. . . . And this you can know--fear the time when Manself will not suffer and die for a concept, for this one quality is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe. (204-05).

This credo finds its final embodiment in Steinbeck's Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature" (207). The post-modernist American epics, particularly the works of Barth and Gaddis, stand as a grotesque monument to Steinbeck's being wrong: there are those dedicated to the craft

of writing, who maintain their membership in literature, yet who see the perfectibility of man as a naive anachronism. He may, however, have been right on one count: it may, indeed, be a time for fear. The polemics of the American epic are about to take a rather dramatic turn.

Chapter II

No Longer Avoiding the Void: The American Epic Peers into the Abyss

The American epic does, indeed, take a dramatic turn at the hands of post-modernists, but this turn, however, is not without its own precedent. A steppingstone toward the post-modern vision of the epic is Melville's Moby Dick (1851). Leonard Lutwack addresses the importance of this novel to the epic genre:

Melville's great masterpiece undoubtedly lies behind . . . the American epic novels of the twentieth century. It did introduce unequivocally the spirit of the epic to American fiction by daring to endow native materials with qualities of the heroic past, thus fulfilling specifically Emerson's proud assertion that "our fisheries . . . rest on the same foundation of wonder as the town of Troy." And Moby Dick does fall in even with Whitman's hope for "an epic of Democracy" to the extent that Melville sees egalitarianism as a distinguishing feature of his book. Once the Pequod is under way, in chapter 26, and Melville has begun to take the full measure of his task, the narrator asks "the great democratic God," the "just spirit of

Equality, which has spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind," to bear him out for ascribing heroic qualities to "meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways." (9)

This, however, greatly misstates the case for Moby Dick's impact upon the American epic. Melville was by no means the first American to attempt to "endow native materials with qualities of the heroic past," and there is far more here than a foreshadowing of Whitman's egalitarianism. Somewhere between this invocation in chapter 26 and the emergence of Ahab in chapter 29, via stage directions, the stage is set for an epoch-making mutation in the American epic to begin to occur, one that is so radical that it cannot be accommodated again until after 1950.

By titling chapter 29 with the stage direction: "ENTER AHAB; TO HIM, STUBB," Melville identifies the action to follow as dramatic. It is, however, a different drama than the one which begins Moby Dick. Melville switches texts--from a comedy to a tragedy, then back to a comedy--in mid-stream. In chapter 1, a narrator chooses a part for himself ("Call me Ishmael") in a drama--a drama that is to use standard conventions. Ishmael catalogues these in a soliloquy:

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for the shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were

set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces--though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgement. (5-6)

This extended (epic) metaphor defines the stage-world of the events on the Pequod. The protagonist here invokes a force external to man to infuse the actions of man with meaning. This world is one that is decreed by preordained fiat of the Fates of classical epic lore, that is to say, by determinism. By careful scrutiny, the hero can divine the "springs and motives" of man and nature.

Further, the reader can infer from this passage that the actors in Moby Dick will follow conventional patterns of dramatic and epic behavior. This expectation holds true. The myriad of biblical and classical allusions that follow in the text (Gail Coffler lists 562 classical allusions alone in Moby Dick [24-26]) give a pattern to the plots of the epic-drama; literary devices of the epic and the drama combine to give these plots their form.

Of course, twentieth-century American epic novels continue to use these shaping devices; what is more significant here is that there are two plays--that is to say, two texts--at work in Moby Dick, and that one of the actors (Ishmael) in one of the plays (a comedy starring himself) is also the dramatist of both of them. "The tragic play [starring Ahab]," as Leslie Fiedler suggests, "is encysted, enclosed in a comic . . . frame" (386). Chapters 29-135 contain the text of that tragedy. The comic frame is a bildungsroman that stars Ishmael. Added to these texts are the cetological essays in which an outside narrative voice intrudes. This inter- and intra-textuality of texts, this referentiality between texts (by way of the use of myths and archetypes) and within texts, will become a playground for the modern epic writer. Barth and Gaddis, for example, use textual interplays self-referentially.¹⁴

Another obvious shift which Moby Dick provides for the American epic is the darker, more gothic tone of Melville's epos. A simple illustration of this darker tone can be found by juxtaposing Whitman's vision of the city to Melville's. The appearance of the ocean-front city in Melville is, indeed, brief; in Whitman, it is a major motif. In Whitman, the city is a paradise. In Melville, the city is a stultifying wasteland in which "men are tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks" (12-13).

As Junis Stout notes of the opening setting of Moby Dick, "[Americans'] yearning for the unlimited appears in their lining the shore to gaze out at the ocean. It is from this city of constraint that the bold mariner in man launches out on the voyage of discovery" (122).

This darker tone is also seen in the novel's undercutting of the settings and trappings of traditional epic myth. For instance, in Moby Dick this "launching out" by Americans for a "voyage of discovery" is a movement from West to East. This flies in the face of at least six thousand years of travel in myth. In the Old Testament, for example, when God's chosen people--from the time of their expulsion from the Garden--moved East to West, they were blessed. The first time the traffic pattern changes, chaos erupts at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). This pattern continues without exception throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament. At the birth of Jesus, for example, "there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem" in the West (Matt. 2:1). Much later in the New Testament, St. Paul was successful on his three missionary journeys until he changed his east-to-west course and backtracked to Rome--by going west to east--where he was summarily beheaded. In American epic tradition, spanning from Cotton Mather to Frank Norris and John Steinbeck, the injunction is to "go West, young man." The contrary west-to-east pattern initiated by Melville emerges again in modern American absurdist epics

as a vehicle for satire. In The Recognitions, for example, the movement is West to East: Americans in despair migrate back to Europe in their searches for meaning; in The Sot-Weed Factor, the east-to-west myth is exploded as a sham.

Another epic tradition that is undercut in Moby Dick is the invocation to the muse. In chapter 26, Ishmael uses the form of invocation, but the content is radically different:

If then, to the 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! who didst not refuse to the swart convict,
Bunyan, the pale, poetic pearl; thou who didst
clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest
gold, the stumped and paupered arms of old
Cervantes. . . . (104-05)

Through the convention of this invocation to the Muse, Ishmael boldly announces that all the characters of the novel are his own creation. He, not God, creates rainbows and administers the fiat, "let there be light." Throughout Moby Dick, Ishmael reminds the reader that it is he who breathes the breath of life into such as the carpenter, who "now comes in person on this stage" (387). Edgar Dryden is correct for asserting that, for Ishmael, the universe is a void:

There is no theatre standing behind and supporting his fictional stage but merely a white emptiness. The democratic God to whom he calls is "a circle whose center . . . is every where, but his circumference . . . is no [sic]¹⁵ where" or in other words a naught or a no thing. Like the "Pequod's" "omnitooled" carpenter who is His portrait, Ishmael's God is a "stript abstract; an unfractured integral." For this reason his call for inspiration is an ironic shout into emptiness and his art, necessarily, a creation ex nihilo. (89)

Such an artist issuing such a call stands as a model for the narrators of twentieth-century American epic. The precedent is established here for referring to revered values and traditions, and then turning these upon themselves to give an immediacy to the absurdist vision of American society.

Such an implosion of the sacrosanct strikes at the very root of Western epic structure. No less an authority than Aristotle had concluded that an epic must be a piece that is "elaborate above all others" and that produces a grandeur of effect by selecting as its objects for imitation that which "ought to be" (xxiv.9; xxv.13). Moby Dick certainly maintains the earmark of elaboration; it is elaborate to a fault. Much like Whittier's complaint about Mather's Magnalia, Lewis warns in The American Adam that in Moby Dick "the traditional materials appear raggedly, they are lumpy and not altogether digested" (144). Melville's elaborate, encyclopedic labyrinth becomes a standard for twentieth-century American epics and becomes as well a stock point for critical attack in American fiction since the 1940s. Walter Harding laments regarding Giles Goat-Boy, for example, that "unfortunately, what would have made a good novella has been stretched out over 700 pages and falls of its own weight" (3762); this could be proven to echo almost endlessly in the criticisms of not only Barth's work, but also of the novels of William Gaddis, John Gardner, and Michael Malone.

While Melville stretches to the extreme Aristotle's dictum that an epic be "elaborate," he turns the rubric that an epic should present "that which ought to be" on its head. Not only does he undercut the settings for traditional myths, he undermines the myths themselves

by striking at the sine qua non of each myth. The Faust myth is one from among dozens that becomes transmuted. In chapter 48, the Faust theme begins to develop. Ahab, a stock-gothic hero-villain, makes a pact with Fedallah, a Satan figure. In a scene reminiscent of "Young Goodman Brown," Fedallah and his demonic companions make their entrance: "With a start all glared at dark Ahab, who was surrounded by fine dusky phantoms that seemed fresh formed of air" (187, emphasis added).¹⁶ Ahab's conversation with his harpoon crew is veiled in secrecy; it is glossed in a most melodramatic fashion:

But what that inscrutable Ahab said to that tiger-yellow crew of his--these were words best omitted here; for you live under the light of the evangelical land. Only the infidel sharks in the audacious sea may give ear to such words, when, with tornado brow and eyes of red murder, and foam-glued lips, Ahab leaped after his prey.
(192-93)

That this conversation is a Faustian pact is made clear only through an exchange between the crewmen Stubb and Flask, stock comic characters:

Flask, I take that Fedallah to be the devil in disguise . . . the reason why you don't see his tail is because he tucks it up out of sight, carries it coiled away in his pocket, I guess

. . . the devil there is trying to come round him and get him to swap away his silver watch or his soul, or something of that sort and he'll surrender Moby Dick. . . . (275)

Why is this pact with the devil presented both elliptically and comically?

This presentation seems especially odd given the precision with which Melville relates Ahab's Faustian life. Ahab has pressed the limits of knowledge. In science, he has mastered oceanography, cartography, cetology, and meteorology. Ultimately, however, he rejects rational epistemology (for example, he smashes his quadrant in chapter 118) to rely upon magic. Captain Peleg, a Quaker, reminds us that:

He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man. . . .
Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges as well as among the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales. (76)

In chapter 36, Ahab binds his men slavishly to his quest by the use of something like a black mass. In chapter 113, he blasphemously consecrates his harpoon in the blood of his pagan harpoon crew, chanting, "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli" (404). Ahab dies a Faustian death. He exits by kicking defiantly to the last:

Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I
 feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost
 grief. . . . Towards thee I roll, thou all-
 destroying but unconquering whale, to the last
 I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab
 at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath
 at thee. . . . (468)

The life and death are presented with precision; the pact
 which infuses them with meaning is left to comic hypotheses
 or melodramatic vagueness. It is not weighted with meaning,
 for Melville would not pander to pat answers. He was ahead
 of his time. In Moby Dick, he prefigures the modern novel's
 dilemma of attempting to project meaning into an absurd
 universe. Ishmael speaks as a forebear of modern narrators:

There are certain queer times and occasions
 in this strange mixed affair we call life when
 a man takes this whole universe for a vast
 practical joke. . . . That odd sort of wayward
 mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only
 in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes
 in the very midst of his earnestness, so that
 what just before might have seemed to him a
 thing most momentous, now seems but a part of
 the general joke. (195)

Ahab and Ishmael's dilemmas contain the essence of the
 cosmic joke, but no one is laughing.

Other characters in Moby Dick carry this modern refrain. Richard Hauk points to Starbuck as an example (100). Rather than carrying the dilemma of his Faustian captain, Starbuck finds his lot to be that of Hamlet or Oedipus. He levels a musket at the head of a sleeping Captain Ahab and cries out, "Great God, where art thou? Shall I? Shall I?" (422). If Ahab lives, the ship and crew will be destroyed. If Ahab dies, then the law of God--"Thou shalt not kill (Ex. 20) and "let every soul be subject to civil authority" (Rom. 8)--is obviated. Starbuck does not kill Ahab, but only because, in seeing both sides of the issue, he cannot make a decision. It is the dilemma addressed by John A. Kouwenhaven in his Half a Truth is Better Than None. He states there that "nothing is true or even half true except from the point of view where it appears so" (x). He likens one's perception of truth to his perception of the moon: what appears to be a "full and shining truth" is, like a full moon, only half of the picture (xii). What would appear to be a partial illumination of the truth--a building block to one's epistemological paradigm--is "really only one quarter of a sphere whose dark side is absolutely invisible from the world [he] live[s] in" (xiii). A penchant toward a mono-maniacal world view, that is to say, selecting one half-truth over another, is a constant motif throughout Moby Dick, and one that resonates later in modern American epics.

Whether within the individual characters or within the juxtaposition of paired characters (for example, Ahab and Ishmael, Queequeg and Fedallah), men are left to themselves to choose actions on partial vision:

it is quite impossible for him attentively, and completely, to examine any two things--however large or however small--at one and the same instant of time; never mind if they lay side by side and touch each other. But if you now come to separate these two objects, and surround each by a circle of profound darkness, in such a manner as to bring your mind to bear on it, the other will be utterly excluded from your contemporary consciousness. (Moby Dick 279-80)

Starbuck's dilemma, one that will recur throughout modern fiction, is that, normally, one cannot see all sides of an issue concurrently. When one is, like the whale, infused with true sight, even momentarily, and possesses "divided and diametrically opposite powers of vision" so that he can "at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction" (Moby Dick 280), then he cannot act. The alternative is to act upon half-truths, that is to say, to err.

By pressing this point, Melville again displays keen prophetic foresight. He is a harbinger of the wrenching

of epistemology and aesthetics that will take place in the twentieth century. He recognizes that errors, these half-truths, collect and codify into the only truth that will be apprehensible by man--or palatable to him--in future generations. In Moby Dick, it is Stubb who identifies this paradigm for the future: "there's another rendering now, but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see" (362). There are no longer any absolutes. (It is significant that just ten years after the publication of Moby Dick, Scherér, followed by Nietzsche, declares God to be dead.) This text, this world, this whale, this corpus of truth announced here by Stubb is contingent upon and defined by those who pursue it. The medium is now the message. Moby Dick suggests to all American epics to follow that "the truth is coterminous with artistic expression" (Spengemann 198). Art, then, can be considered "the final solution of the inner contradictions of the philosophical systems designed to form an integrated understanding of reality" (Rookmaaker 10).

Just how clearly art has usurped religion in Moby Dick can be seen in Ahab's abhorrence of cosmological masks. In his monomaniacal quest, his method is to destroy all facades. The novel provides a cornucopia of potential masks: Christian and non-Christian ritual and worship, combined with all manner of legends, myths, superstitions, and beliefs. Ahab the iconoclast declares, "All visible

objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. . . . If man will strike, [he must] strike through the mask!" (144). It is Ishmael, Ahab's counterpart, who is afforded a view behind such a pasteboard mask. His room at the Spouter Inn contained a "papered fireboard representing a man striking a whale" (27). Queequeg enters the room, removes the screen, and places among the ashes a black idol named Yojo. Man must place his own god behind the facade; there is nothing behind the pasteboard mask that man has not himself put there.

After this, American epic literature could never be the same. William Spengemann articulates the change that occurs:

. . . before Moby Dick, most American literature assumes the existence of a transcendent ideal truth and attempts either to illustrate this truth, if it is foreknown, or to discover it, if it is not. After Moby Dick, one main line of American literature recognizes the probable non-existence of absolutes and attempts to devise forms of belief that can do without them. This is not to say that Moby Dick alone turned American literature away from belief in absolutes, or that traditionally idealistic works ceased to be written after 1851. Still, Melville's novel does provide an early and dramatic example of this major shift in the American literary sensibility. (198)

This shift, as bombastic as it was inexorable, changed forever the landscape of the modern American epic.

Whitman, publishing Leaves of Grass four years after Melville released Moby Dick, holds to an optimistic, transcendental form of absolute truth, and, as noted in chapter one, Norris and Steinbeck follow in his wake. They create a parenthetical variation of Emersonian optimism into the line of the American epic, but by 1950, this optimism and clinging to absolutes seemed anachronistic and dishonest. By 1950, the conventional wisdom was that truth is relative. The more thoughtful pluralists of our day--among them the writers of American epics--push their conclusion to its logical end: to complete skepticism that ends in despair. If there is not truth, or if truth is inaccessible or irrelevant, then there is no meaning. Life is futile, a cruel joke, a pointless interlude between non-existence. In the post-World War II epics, for example, it is clear that any courting of absolutes is nostalgic more than a reaffirmation of an older order. The modern dictum is not "truth is beauty" as George Herbert (a devout Christian) had declared in the seventeenth-century in his poem "Jordan I" (ii-v), but rather that beauty is truth.

From the time of the Puritanism of Mather's Magnalia to the pluralism of the post-modernists (a phenomenon that is presaged by Melville), there are three aesthetic positions that pave the way for this equation that literary

form is literary truth. These positions can be easily illustrated in examples of boat-rhapsodizing, a common enough currency in American literature. The first aesthetic position, from the Puritans, is that art must be the handmaiden to the absolute, immutable truth of Scripture. It was not lost on them, for example, that on Mt. Sinai, God simultaneously gave the Ten Commandments and commanded Moses to fashion a tabernacle involving almost every form of representational art that man has ever known. Also, apart from writing psalms, King David was a poet of secular odes (for example, II Sam. 1:19-27) as well as a musician (II Sam. 23:1-2). Exodus 15 is a record of Ishmael's antiphonal song of deliverance from Egypt. The prophet Ezekiel performed drama (Ezek. 4:1-3). Dance is encouraged throughout the Old Testament (for example, Ps. 150:4-5; Ex. 15:20; II Sam. 6:14-16). In all these examples and hundreds more, however, the Puritans understood that art must be used to the glory of God--not only as tracts, but as beauty that glorifies God. The closest that a Puritan could come to an understanding of the dictum "art for art's sake" would be that a work of art could stand as a doxology in and of itself. Thus, when William Bradford, for example, settles into boat rhapsodizing in the History of Plimoth Plantation (1650), his ultimate concern is that of rhapsodizing God's providence. Of ultimate concern to Bradford, as it was to Cotton Mather and to any other Puritan

narrator, was to make clear that the primary value of epic narrative is its disclosure of the power of holiness unto the Lord, that is to say, of the triumphs of the righteous and the obliteration of the wicked:

. . . they put to sea againe with a prosperous winde, which continued diuerce days together. . . . I may not omit here a spetiall worke of Gods providence. Ther was a proud and very profane yonge man, one of the sea-men, of a lustie, able body, which made him the more hauty; he would allway be contemning the poore people in their sicknes, and cursing them dayly with greevous execrations, and did not let to tell them, that he hoped to help to cast halfe of them over board before they came to their jurneys end, and to make mery with what they had; and if he were by any gently reprov'd, he would curse and swear most bitterly. But it plased God before they came halfe seas over, to smite this young man with a greeveous disease, of which he dyed in a desperate manner, and so was him selfe the first that was throwne overbord. Thus his curses light on his owne head; and it was an astonishement to all his fellows, for they noted it to be the just hand of God upon him.

. . . in a mighty storme, a lustie young man . . . was . . . throwne into [the] sea; but it

pleased God that he caught hould of the topsaile
halliards . . . he lived many years after; and
became a profitable member both in church and
commone wealthe. (58-59)

In this aesthetic position, art is useful only insofar as its didacticism can "shape man's spirit to a better understanding of divine purpose" (Miller 64). That understanding, of course, focused upon predestination. This doctrine was the motive for a striving for righteousness, for spiritual battle. Life itself became an epic for Puritan men and women, and their literature and other art are expressions of it.

The second aesthetic position is that, following the lead of the Enlightenment, art should serve universal laws as they are revealed in nature; that is to say, the natural law of jurisprudence. In one of the most famous boat rhapsodies in all of American fiction, this aesthetic comes to the fore. As Huckleberry Finn and Jim, the runaway slave, float on their raft down the Mississippi River in Huckleberry Finn (1885), they look up at the moon and stars and speculate about cosmogony and cosmology:

It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they were made or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I

allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say anything against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

(Clemens 97)

By this time, Scripture as an authority was waning in America. In the days of slavery, Christianity and reform had often walked hand in hand; by 1885, they were drifting apart and not even D. L. Moody could reconcile them. Revivalism was taking on the trappings of vaudeville. The literati had been pulled from orthodoxy by science and the promulgations of Higher Criticism. Even the most idealistic of middle and lower class Americans were realizing that the problems of modern life were labyrinthine, and were inextricably bound to a world of cities and factories that produced those problems--that perhaps the kingdom was not, indeed, "a-comin'." Millenarian colonies such as Shiloh, Massachusetts, for example, were being abandoned. The "faithful" who did remain in churches "to watch and wait" were of a different ilk than their pre-Civil War forebears:

Once, the crowd had flung itself literally, body and soul, into the excitement of the struggle

with the Devil. . . . Now, the audience, consisting mostly of church members who had learned to live vicariously in public amusements, sat passively while jovial and expensive choristers expertly wrung laughs or sobs. [The church service] was not even so much of a ritual as a spectator sport with religious overtones.

(Weisberger 272)

The Bible was rapidly becoming a dead book in America. Membership in denominations was lagging behind a soaring population curve. Seminaries were attempting to accommodate old theologies to new discoveries about society and science. Ministers were increasingly leaning toward humane and flexible interpretations of their creeds. Art, which had once been the handmaiden to scriptural truth, was now the servant to truth found in nature. Gradually, any concept of an absolute was moved from the mind of God to the minds of individuals. It followed--and certainly Whitman would concur--that any individual's apprehension of truth would be as valid as anyone else's. From that, truth became inextricably bound with the warp and woof of each individual's collection of experiences.

This, of course, leads to confusion. Melville addresses the potential shortcomings of this epistemology in chapter 35 of Moby Dick, "The Masthead." Having said in chapter 1 that "meditation and water are wedded forever" (13), he here

details the pitfall of one's allowing those meditations to become Transcendental:

And let me in this place movingly admonish you, ye ship-owners of Nantucket! Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditative-ness. . . . Your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer. . . . Lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absentminded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding beautiful thing that eludes him, every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the

round globe over. . . . But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices [the "brute, material, and often evil facts of life" (Vincent 157)] you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever.

Heed it well, ye Pantheists! (139-140)

The satire here is obviously directed specifically at the transcendental notion of the Over-Soul. Transcendental harmony--personal identity being lost in vaporous infinity--is, apparently to Melville, both deceitful and seductive. It does not account for evil in life. The sharks in the sea of life (the "uprising fin" [139] are more than "elusive thoughts that only people the soul" [139]). The danger to a Panglossian Transcendentalist is that of forgetting or ignoring the Many by his reverie of the One. The converse danger that is implicit here, of course, is that focusing totally on the Many does not allow one to order his life; evil is seen manifest in so many forms that the mind can be destroyed. Chapter 34, a detailed description of Ahab brooding in his cabin, corroborates this. Melville's notion of a healthy mind is one that is neither that of a Pantheistic dreamer nor

that of an Ahab, fallen into Cartesian vortices. At the same time that one maintains a sharp look-out for whales and fins, he should be enjoying the ride of his life while up in the masthead.

American writers of epic who followed Melville were left with two choices. They could become card-carrying members of new systems of seemingly authoritarian belief--Emerson, Freud, Marx and Engels, Spencer and Darwin, Joseph Campbell and Robert Bly, for example--to satisfy the desire for absolutes and sublimate their confusion. Whitman took this course. The alternative is to explore uses of form and expression, as well as invent new ones, as Melville had done. From among the writers of twentieth-century American epics, Frank Norris and John Steinbeck chose the first route. William Gaddis and John Barth chose the latter, albeit ignoring Melville's warnings about becoming preoccupied with the vortices of life. John Gardner, John Kennedy Toole, and Michael Malone also chose the latter, but chose as well to try to enjoy the ride.

In the twentieth century, none of these choices is easy, for by then, the third shift in aesthetic positions will have occurred. By the time, for example, that William Styron's Nat Turner is floating downstream in Confessions of Nat Turner (1966), man will have long been denuded of even Nature as his guide. Nat's journey takes place in a recurring dream, rather than in a physical world, a dream

in which nature is largely absent. The air is "seasonless--benign and neutral, windless, devoid of heat or cold" (1). There are no animals or birds. The world of this dream is an absolutely desolate one, and it is in a closed, uniformitarian cosmology, "to exist forever unchanged" (1). Nat does not have Nature to rely upon for revelation. This dream is not the culmination of emotions collected in tranquility. What is prominent in the dream is a "stark white" building that "possesses neither doors nor windows" (2):

it seems to have no purpose, resembling . . .
 a temple--yet a temple in which no one worships,
 or a sarcophagus in which no one lies buried, or
 a monument to something mysterious, ineffable,
 and without name. . . . I don't dwell upon
 the meaning of the strange building standing
 so lonely and remote . . . for it seems by its
 very purposelessness to be endowed with a pro-
 found mystery which to explore would yield only
 a profusion of darker and perhaps more troubling
 mysteries, as in a maze. (2)

To "dwell upon the meaning" would be an invitation to Ahab's cabin in chapter 24 of Moby Dick, an invitation to madness.

Once the absolutes of scripture or even of nature are eliminated as possibilities, man is left completely to his own experience. The temples, even the sarcophagi, are uninhabited. The tomb is empty, but there is no Easter

celebration. The tomb was always empty. F. Scott Fitzgerald reflects upon this in The Crack-Up:

So there was not an "I" anymore--not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect. . . . It was strange to have no self--to be like a little boy left alone in a big house, who knew that now he could do anything he wanted to do, but found that there was nothing that he wanted to do. (79)

The choices of artists in the twentieth century will be choices that are an attempt to satisfy this schizophrenia, to address the dilemma that is typified by Starbuck's taking aim at the sleeping Ahab. This schizophrenia illustrates the inexorable draw of the twentieth century's non-ontological, non-teological wasteland. Wylie Sypher traces this phenomenon in Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art (1962). Put simply, he argues that there has been a devolution of the self from the Romantic period to the present. Romanticism emphasized "the self as a means of encountering the abuses" of the Enlightenment with "its mechanical impersonal order" which had preached the inferiority of the self, "the world of feelings, impressions, and sensibilities" (19-21). Those who sought to free the self and, thus, free society, however, began to rely upon institutions: institutions which "finally negated the significance of the person" (26). The focus shifts from the self to the self in relations to others. This condition

is exacerbated in that, according to the psychologist R. D. Laing, something "dreadful" has happened even to the epistemological touchstone of experience: "behavior and experience have been bifurcated by societal demands for normality" (33). John Z. Guzowski notes that man, therefore, is "estranged from his experience to such a degree that he believes either that it does not exist or that, if it does exist, it no longer matters" (201). Man has replaced experience with a vapid, social identity that Laing describes as an "illusion, a veil, a film of maya . . . a state of sleep, of death, of socially accepted madness" (96). The modern Everyman, then, according to Laing, is "a shriveled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be" (10), "a bemused and crazed" phantasm who is a "stranger" to his own self (xv).

In the opening of Part II of The Recognitions, Mr. Pivner--a shriveled, desiccated office manager--typifies the vast catalogue of characters paraded through Gaddis's novel; he is the quintessence of Laing's modern Everyman:

[His] small apartment was as inoffensive as himself. Like the defiantly patternless botch of colors he wore upon his necktie, signal of his individuality to the neckties that he met screaming the same claim of independence from the innominate morass of their wearers, the apartment's claims to distinction were mass-

produced flower and hunting prints, filling a need they had manufactured themselves. . . . [His library contained] treatises on the cultivation of the individual self, prescriptions of superficial alterations in vulgarity read with excruciating eagerness by men alone in big chairs . . . as they fingered those desperate blazons of individuality tied in mean knots at their throats, fastened monogrammed tie-clasps the more firmly, swung keys on gold-plated monogram-bearing ("Individualized") key-chains, tightened their arms against wallets in inside pockets which held papers proving their identity beyond doubt to others and in moments of Doubt to themselves, papers in such variety that the bearer himself became the appurtenance, each one contemplating over words in a book (which had sold four-million copies: How to Speak Effectively; Conquer Fear; Increase Your Income; Develop Self-Confidence; "Sell" Yourself and Your Ideas; Win More Friends; Improve Your Personality; Prepare for Leadership) the Self which had ceased to exist the day they stopped seeking it alone. (285-86)

Pivner's non-existence is absolute. The only way he can even assure himself that he has read his newspaper is to turn to the comic strips. If he recognizes these, then

he knows he has read the entire paper "closely and avidly" for while "nothing evade[s] his eye," neither does anything "penetrate to his heart round which he had built that wall. . . ." (288).

Charles Walcutt, in Man's Changing Mask, finds such characters--and the works in which they appear--"boring" (340), "unknowable" (347) and "nonsensical" (348). John Stark, however, in The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth, understands that such characters are "pawns in the battle against reality" (10). A century earlier, Melville's Ahab had declared, "All visible objects . . . are but pasteboard masks. . . . If man will strike, [he must] strike through the mask!" (144). Gaddis's The Recognitions (1955) deals primarily with the surface of reality, with masks. The opening paragraph, a description of Camilla's funeral, highlights this concern:

Even Camilla enjoyed masquerades, of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality. But that procession up the foreign hill, bounded by cypress trees, impelled by the monotonous chanting of the priest and retarded by hesitations at the fourteen stations of the Cross (not to speak of the funeral carriage in which she was riding, a white horse-drawn vehicle which resembles a baroque confectionary stand),

might have ruffled the shy countenance of her soul, if it had been discernible. (3)

As Camilla's soul is not (nor had it ever been) discernible, neither are the selves of virtually any of the other characters in The Recognitions: to themselves, to other characters, or to the reader. At the end of the novel, Stanley peers into "the depths" of his own personality which are "made real to him for the first time" (950-51). Even these "depths," however, reveal "conflicts he did not yet understand . . . questions he could not answer now, and he sensed, might never" (951). The surety of one's inability to know oneself is testified by all in the novel. Reverend Gwyon, upon resolving to "make full proof of his ministry" by leading his congregation in a Mithros ceremony, falters:

I hardly know myself, except . . . I hardly believe it now [. . . .] here to go on from where reality left off [. . . .] what was it? What am I supposed to ask? Am I the . . . Homocousian or the Homiousian? Am I the man that . . . what holds me back? . . . for whom . . . what was it? . . . what holds me back? (427)¹⁷

He does not answer the questions he raises, nor are they answered for him. Wyatt, his son, admits,

"I don't live, I'm . . . I am lived [. . . .]
But do you know how I feel sometimes? [. . . .]
Like . . . as though I were reading a novel

[. . . .] but the hero fails to appear, fails to be working out some plan of comedy or, disaster? [. . . .] while I wait. I wait. Where is he?" (262-63)¹⁸

The Recognitions thus presents a world in which the artist Wyatt is continually searching for meaning. Elaine Safer correctly asserts that he is seeking a "lost paradise," "a sign that God is watching" ("The Allusive Mode" 115). Instead, he sees only randomness everywhere:

People are recognized by surface details of trivia: a green scarf, a fedora hat, a gold signet ring or gold cigarette case, a large diamond ring, an unusual pronunciation like Chr-ah-st," a propensity to make counterfeit twenty dollar bills. Such a flattening of human beings is a reducio ad absurdum of the dignity of man." ("The Allusive Mode" 115)

Wyatt's uncle, the Town Carpenter, declares to Wyatt, "I live surrounded by people who've no idea what a hero is. And do you know why? Why, because they've no idea what they are doing themselves" (408). Hannah says of Herschel, "He's not sure who he is anymore, whether he's anyone at all for that matter. That's why he wants a tattoo, of course, simply a matter of ego identification" (181). Esme, "fearing close scrutiny," tries to hide her face: "she had behaved as if someone from outside

might discover something in her she did not know about herself" (270). When she attempts introspection, her self-ignorance is, indeed, vast:

How were they all so certain? calling her "Esme": they knew she was Esme when she did not know, who she was or who was Esme, if both were the same, every moment, when they were there, or when she was alone, both she. But she could not deny that they were right, for who could not be no one, it must be Esme. (276)

Dr. Laing's belief that man is separated from his own experience could not be more poignantly illustrated.

John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) also places heavy emphasis upon man's inability to know his self. In The Politics of Experience, Laing declares that, since man is separated from his true self, he assumes "a persona," "a mask," "a part being played" (8). In The Divided Self, Laing provides an illustration: a case study in which a man who enjoyed cross-dressing came to believe that he was, in fact, a woman (72-73). Such adoption of masks is common currency in Barth's Sot-Weed Factor. Eben, the central character, cannot decide who or what he is; all occupations and roles appear as equally inviting. Joan Toast, a whore, "inspires" him to declare himself a poet--despite his poetic ineptitude--and to revel in his virginity: "I prize [virginity] not as a virtue, but as the very emblem of myself, and

when I call me virgin and poet 'tis not more boast than who should say I'm male and English" (172).

Upon his arrival to the New World from England, Eben meets up with Peter Sayer, who turns out to be Henry Burlingame, who had been Eben's childhood tutor. Eben exclaims, "Is't once, or twice, or thrice I am deceived?" (The same deception had occurred early in the novel just prior to Eben's departure from England.)

Burlingame responds "with a smile" that "the world's a happy climate for imposture" and explains to Eben again that:

'Tis but to say what oft I've said to you ere now, Eben: your true and constant Burlingame lives only in your face, as doth the pointed order of the world. In fact, you see heraclitean flux: whether 'tis we who shift and alter and dissolve; or you whose lens changes color, field, and focus; or both together. The upshot is the same, and you may take it or reject it. . . . If you'd live in the world, my friend, you must dance to some other fellow's tune or call your own and try to make the whole world step to it. (349-50)

Burlingame attempts to call the tunes and play all the parts: Peter Sayer, Nicholas Lowe, Monsieur Casteene, Tim Mitchell, Charles Calvert, and Lord Baltimore, to name a few. Eben proves to be a slow study, but does, at one point, change places with Bertrand, his valet.

In both The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) and Giles Goat-Boy (1966), Barth makes it painfully obvious that his characters are fictive. As John Stark points out in The Literature of Exhaustion, they are "flat and stereotyped, especially those from minorities, like Indians, Blacks and Jews" (160). Robert Scholes in The Fabulators puts it another way:

characters are closer to pre-novelistic kinds of characterization than to the deep individuality of the realists" (160). Often, Barth's characters announce their fictiveness so loudly that even the most obtuse reader cannot miss it. George, one of the two claimants to Grand Tutorhead in Giles Goat-Boy, declares, "a fact . . . even an autobiographical fact, was not something I perceived and acknowledged, but a detail of the general Conceit, to be accepted or rejected" (81):

Indeed, if I never came truly to despair at the awful arbitrariness of Facts, it was because I never more than notionally accepted them. The Encyclopedia Tammanica I read from Aardvark to Zymurgy in quite the same spirit as I read The Old School Tales, my fancy prefacing each entry "Once upon a time. . . ."

Especially did I consider in this manner the facts of my own existence and nature. There was no birthplace, or ancestry to define me. . . . I looked upon my life and the lives of others as

a kind of theatrical impromptu, self-knowledge as a matter of improvisation, and moral injunctions, such as those of the Fables, whether high-minded or wicked, as so many stage directions. . . . Spectator, critic, and occasional member of the troupe, I approached the script . . . in a spirit of utter freedom. (81)

In like manner, in The Sot-Weed Factor, the characters draw the appropriate conclusions for the reader. Burlingame, for example, declares, "all assertions of thee and me, e'en to oneself, are acts of faith, impossible to verify" (143).

Gaddis's JR (1976) invokes a writing style that will take such devolution of the self even a step further. Intermixed with a writing strategy of incomplete and withheld information (for example, there are virtually no conventional authorial interruptions to identify locale or to explain the passage of time), there is a rather Faulknerian use of unidentified speakers. The beginning of JR is one of the most confusing in all of American literature:

--Money. . . ? in a voice that rustled.
 --Paper, yes.
 --And we'd never saw paper money till we came east.
 --It looked so strange the first time we saw it.
 Lifeless. (3)

This continues for 726 pages, with names occasionally slipped in that mean nothing to the reader. The reader struggles for

identification of the speakers or for any information or thread of argument by which to make connections. With scenes and characters constantly shifting unannounced, the words and voices--that is to say, the characters--seem disembodied.

This, of course, flies in the face of traditional definitions of psychologically realistic fictional characters. In The Rise of the Novel, for example, Ian Watt reminds us that "many novelists, from Sterne to Proust, have made their subject the exploration of the personality as it is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness" (21). Such traditional notions of character development rest upon the premise that the self, that is to say, one's essence, is a reality and is knowable. W. J. Harvey, in Character and the Novel (1968), underscores this: "we can have what may be called intrinsic knowledge of ourselves" (31), and that this is the "prime reason for our enjoyment of fiction" (32). Charles Walcutt concurs with this as an aesthetic requisite, stating that a "gifted writer" provides his reader with a "detached, aesthetic, and intellectual . . . knowledge-experience" of a character (7-8). All of this, of course, is subsumed under what E. M. Forster had defined earlier in Aspects of the Novel (1954) as "roundness" (65-78) in a character.

These traditional approaches to character--approaches that emphasize motivation, conflict, change--are largely useless in any attempt to deal with the characters in much

of modern fiction, including the post-modernist American epics of Gaddis and Barth. Walcutt, therefore, dismisses all such works as "boring" (340), "unknowable" (347), and "non-sensical" (348). He declares, "The diminished man is unsatisfactory to me and he is a dead end for the novelist" (346).

While these traditional approaches are inadequate to deal with the fiction of Gaddis and Barth, it is equally lame to hail such works as masterpieces simply because they are new and enigmatic. Bruce Bawer complains, for example, that, often, contemporary critics believe that "the more impenetrable a novel is, the greater likelihood that it's real literature. . . . The novelist who writes something that puzzles the bejesus out of everybody is a hero, and the one who writes something lucid and lovely and moving is a viper" (21). Frederick R. Karl, in his American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation (1983), is a case in point. William Gaddis's epics The Recognitions and JR are hailed by Karl as "inaccessible triumph" because Gaddis's style "is one of the most confusing in literature" (187). Karl praises Gaddis and Barth for their insistence upon talking to themselves instead of their audiences: "Gaddis is so unbending, and, one must add, obsessive, that the reader is forgotten" (188); John Barth is a premier "maker of literature" because of his "self-indulgence" and penchant to "probe new methods of perception, however tedious the process" (457).

To applaud the experimentation of post-modernist writers is one thing; to laud incoherence is quite another matter. If Gaddis and Barth are great writers, it is not because of their obfuscation. Bawer is, of course, correct: "Great works succeed by rising above the impediments to comprehension that the composition of a deeply and comprehensively conceived work has forced upon them; they do not succeed as a result of those impediments" (23).

Like its forebear Moby Dick, the epic fiction of William Gaddis and John Barth has many impediments to comprehension to overcome. Gaddis, for example, by bringing forward The Recognitions in 1955, seized the epic building blocks that had been left by Melville and achieved similar results. Moby Dick and The Recognitions had both received mixed reviews. Melville did not write any fictional prose between The Confidence Man (1857) and Billy Budd (1891), declaring to his friend Hawthorne after finishing The Confidence Man that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated" (Spiller 464). Gaddis experienced a similar publishing hiatus between The Recognitions (1955) and JR (1976), declaring himself to have been "posthumous for twenty years" (Kuehl ix). Melville's most ponderous work, Moby Dick, did not become critically acclaimed until the 1920s; critics and reviewers were likewise intolerant of the labyrinthine complexity and sheer mass of The Recognitions. It is a huge, parodic pastiche of quotations and parodied

texts--the Bible, the Faust legends, The Golden Bough (1890), and The Recognitions of Clement (c. 200-300) among the more obvious--that are encysted within conversations.

It is, of course, stock trade for a writer of epic to enrich his own work by evoking the literature of the past, to echo or borrow copiously from earlier works to give context to the one under construction. Virgil connected The Aeneid to Homer's Iliad and Odyssey in this fashion. Milton used allusions to connect Paradise Lost with both Homer and Virgil. Cotton Mather later connected Magnalia to Paradise Lost. From Virgil to Whitman, such intertextuality in epics has been used to "evoke traditional moral and aesthetic values into the later piece" (Safer, "The Allusive Mode" 103). The attempt, at least partially, is to bestow weight and respectability to the didacticism at hand: Virgil's nationalism, Milton's Christian world view, Mather's rather obsessive Chiliastic purview of the New World, or Whitman's Transcendentalism, for example. Mock epics (Gulliver's Travels, Candide, Don Quixote, Tom Jones, and a host of others), on the other hand, present an inglorious present that is treated ironically in juxtaposition to a glorious past. Here, in the epics of Gaddis and Barth, however, the past and present are also juxtaposed, but what results is the notion that heroic values of the past are actually pernicious and that, in the words of Deborah Charnley Fort, "these values have survived in the present, thus interfering

with contemporary man's attempts to deal with the moral evils he is forced to confront" (151-52).

To this end, the elements of Gaddis's The Recognitions are often self-consciously mythic. His heavy-handed uses of anthropological material and comparative mythologies are so pervasive and blatant that they outweigh, perhaps even obviate, the narrative element. One of the characters, in describing Spain, correctly describes the narrative collapse of the novel--"a whole Odyssey within its boundaries, a whole Odyssey without Ulysses" (816)--because Wyatt, the protagonist, disappears for hundreds of pages. The scores of inferences to myths and the belabored, extended parodies (especially of the Faust legend) seem superficial and posed. The novel often reads as a compendium of pedantry.¹⁹ Collectively, however, the allusions are evocative of the entropic crumbling of the foundations of Western Civilization.

Gaddis thus moves here into a tradition of dark cynicism in American fiction that begins with Melville's Ahab. The heavily reticulated network of allusions in The Recognitions is comparable to those found in Melville's Moby Dick and The Confidence Man. The Mephistopheles-Faust element (and its concomitant system of masquerades and betrayals) resembles closely a motif of Moby Dick and the method of The Confidence Man. The Recognitions also parallels these two works by Melville in that its central theme is that of a questioning search (in this case, the picaresque search of two sons, Otto Pynner and Wyatt Gwyon, for their fathers).

The images in the final pages of The Recognitions include an incoherent Wyatt, an Otto who has become a lunatic, and a counterfeiter named Sinisterra who is hawking a counterfeit Egyptian mummy. They are all represented by the novel's final scene. Stanley, a composer of counterfeit, imitational music, enters a church in Fenestrula, sees a huge pipe organ, and begins to play. He pulls out two bass organ stops and a priest pushes them back in, warning him in Italian that the vibrations could destroy the old church. Stanley understands no Italian, and plays on:

. . . even as he saw his thumb and last finger come down time after time with three black keys between them, wringing out fourths, the work he had copied . . . wringing that chord of the devil's interval from the full length of the thirty-foot bass pipes, he did not stop. The walls quivered, still he did not hesitate. Everything moved. . . . He was the only person caught in the collapse. . . . (956)

It is ironic that Stanley and Wyatt, the other artist in the novel, never meet. At the end of the novel, Wyatt is psychologically destroyed. He finds himself, at age thirty-three, sequestered in a monastery. He spends his time scraping the paint off of original master works, working with razor blades until the canvases are returned to their original white void (864-74). There is no redemption, not even in art. Man is at the abyss.

It is fitting, therefore, that Gaddis's second novel, JR (1976), should be one in which, as Steven Weisenburger states, "Richard Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen serves as mythic sub-text to the fictional plot. . ." (95). Unfortunately, such an assertion allows for superficial readings of JR that focus upon establishing one-to-one correspondences between Der Ring and JR. There is more to be said than Thomas Sawyer's simply declaring that Wall Street is Valhalla, Governor Cates is Wotan, and Bast and Stella are Siegmund and Sieglinda (117-18). Frederick Karl understates the case as well in "A Tribute of the Fifties" by saying, "Gaddis' Wagnerian model does not lead to the death of the gods or to human love, but to another kind of god, which is high finance. . ." (187). Der Ring is not a gratuitous choice by Gaddis simply to supply a convenient template for an anti-capitalist novel. Rather, Wagner and Gaddis seem to me to be soul-mates, for Wagner, too, had questioned the redemptive efficiency of art. In his essay "German Art and German Policy," he states,

If we enter a theatre with any power of insight, we look straight into a daemonic abyss of possibilities, the lowest as the loftiest. . . . In Church the higher self may collect its thoughts to rapt devotion, but here in the Theater the whole man, with his lowest and his highest passions, is placed in terrifying nakedness before

himself. . . . In awe and shuddering have the greatest poets of all nations and all times approached this terrible abyss. . . . If it be possible that for modern Life, reshaped through Art's renaissance, there shall arise a Theatre in equal answer to the inmost motive of its culture as the Grecian Theatre answered to the Greek Religion, then plastic art, and every other art, will at last have reached once more the quickening fountain whence it fed among the Greeks; if this be not possible, then reborn art itself has had its day. (69-70)

Both Gaddis and Wagner seem to be concerned with only one problem (albeit one with endless ramifications): can art, through the artist, be the source of human value?

Much like its contemporary, Goethe's Faust, Wagner's Der Ring defies not only staging, but also interpretation. Yet, some salient observations are inarguable. In Der Ring, Wagner used convenient German and Scandanavian mythologies to the same end for which he had used Christian mythology in Tannhauser and Lohengrin. He sees no mythology as valid; between Paganism and Christianity there is no difference. Both are merely instruments by which control can be exerted over individuals. Here Wagner concurs with Melville and Gaddis. In Moby Dick, the only god who is behind the screen is the one placed there by man. In JR, the protagonist

speaks of there being no inside: "How could I be inside, there isn't any inside!" (644). Early in the novel, Mr. Gibbs, a frustrated teacher and struggling writer, emphasizes the artificiality of any mythology or any system that imposes order:

[H]as it ever occurred to any of you that all this is simply one grand misunderstanding? Since you're not here to learn anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests, knowledge has to be organized so it can be taught, and it has to be reduced to information so it can be organized do you follow that? In other words this leads you to assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forces that threaten it from outside. In fact it's exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos. . . . (20)

In both Wagner's Der Ring and Gaddis's fiction, whoever controls this shaping of man's rather artificial orientations controls society.

In Der Ring, there are two possibilities for the role of the transcendental artist-hero: Siegfried and Wotan. Ernest Newman says repeatedly of Siegfried, "Still he does not understand" (273). Siegfried can be dismissed as a

transcendental hero, for as Morse Peckham states, "Siegfried is unselfconscious, unable to use the sudden insights he occasionally has, fearless only because he is ignorant and stupid" (250). Wotan emerges as the true transcendental artist-hero who attempts to control the ash tree that supports the world, that is to say, to control man's imagination.

This he cannot do, for there are two powers: imagination and the treasure of gold guarded by the daughters of the river Rhine. Early in JR, Gaddis presents a school production of Der Ring with JR himself--a shadowy sixth-grader--playing the part of the hairy, uncouth, dwarfish Alberich. The Rhinemaidens in Der Ring taunt Alberich, explaining to him that, "the world's wealth would be won by the master who from the Rhinegold fashioned the Ring that measureless might would confer" (Newman 163). Since Alberich's love for the Rhinemaidens is scorned, he forswears love and chooses power, the gold with which he can master the world. In JR's role as Alberich the dwarf, he "comes first seeking love" but only gets contempt from the tall maidens (the older school girls): "Who would want to love this here lousy little dwarf?" (32) He reacts in the only way he can, stealing the Rheingold, and is "lost forever" (36).

He is indeed lost. For while he is the titular figure of the novel, he is not really a character in it. A sixth-

grade latch-key urchin who disguises his voice over the phone with a filthy handkerchief, he is the catalyst for the financial empire that develops around a mail drop on Ninety-sixth Street in Manhattan, but the novel functions almost entirely without his appearance. He is seduced out of any kind of personal existence by society's sirens of money and power, and no schooling, culture, or shards of humanity interfere with that seduction. The lesson here is the lesson of Wagner's Der Ring: power cannot be made morally responsible.

The artists in JR--all of them--are unable to portray friendship, family life, worship, love, or altruism. These characteristics fail in the world of JR. The artists are also unable to make their art accessible to society or have any salutary effect within it. Bast and Gibbs try to teach in the public school, but Bast is fired and Gibbs quits. While employed, neither of them establish bonds with the schoolchildren. They especially reject JR, the only student who asks questions. Even when JR cons Bast into being a corporate executive so that Bast will be able to underwrite his own music compositions, Bast avoids talking with JR and does nothing to help him. Schramm cannot overcome his depression and suicidal tendencies long enough to complete anything. Eigen and Gibbs, roommates at Harvard, are sophisticated equivalents to JR. They create a fictional student, Grynszpan, to be the repository for their gambling

debts, junk mail, and taxes. At the end of JR, Schlepperman finishes a painting only to have the ceiling collapse on it. Much like the conclusion to The Recognitions (and reminiscent of Joyce Cary's conclusion to The Horse's Mouth), the ending of JR shouts that art does not transcend the chaos of life.²⁰

By the end of Der Ring, as Peckham points out, "There is no redemption of society, no reconciliation between Wotan and Siegfried, no afterlife for Siegfried and Brunnhilde in Valhalla; Valhalla itself is destroyed. . ." (250). Moreover, Wotan is destroyed along with Valhalla. The gods are dead. By the end of Der Ring, man is already at the point of Nat Turner's boat rhapsody and is ready to enter the world of The Recognitions and JR. Society and nature are placed in the same category; they are value-less and unredeemable, even by art. The gods are dead.

If Marcus Klein is to be believed, the novels of Barth are shrouded in darkness as well. He asserts:

In all of Barth's fiction, existence--nothing less--is the enemy. Existence is ambiguous, contradictory, meaningless, and it is also foul. It is antagonistic to all symmetrical, ideal constructions. More and more apparently as the fictions have grown larger, it is the world-at-large that is the protagonist's opposite number, a world-at-large that is represented as diseased,

perverted, malodorous, gummy with the detritus of ordinary human lives. It is Chaos and it is the Pit. (62)

As dark as this is, the problem is compounded exponentially in that the "world-at-large" is all there is. The problem is compounded further in that there can be no interpreting of this world-that-is based upon the world-that-was. At every possible turn, Barth undercuts history.

Traditionally, epics have used history to ennoble their subjects; Barth uses history to de-bunk the notion of history. In The Sot-Weed Factor, for example, there are long discussions regarding the struggle between Lord Calvert and the British Crown for control of the Maryland province. Historical figures people the text--William Penn, Lord Baltimore, Governor Andros, Governor Nicholson, Captain John Smith, for example--but Barth's vision of history is that of Thomas Mann's "Descent Into Hell," the prelude to Joseph and His Brothers:

Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless? Bottomless indeed, if--and perhaps only if--the past we mean is the past merely of the life of mankind, that riddling essence of which our own normally unsatisfied and quite wretched existences form a part; whose mystery, of course, includes our own and is the alpha and omega of all our questions, lending

burning immediacy to all we say, and significance to all our striving. For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable. No matter to what hazardous lengths we let our line. . . . (3)

The metaphor changes here from a well, to an unfathomable sea, to a ship with a plumb-line upon that sea. Mann's trope is shifty because he found history to be an evasive notion to grasp. He discovered, when he attempted to lurch backward to the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers and even beyond that to the garden of Eden, that perhaps the past does not exist at all. Morse Peckham, in Beyond the Tragic Vision, provides a clever illustration of this notion:

I write this page; it is late at night; I go to bed, confidently predicting that when I return to my study tomorrow morning the page will still be here in the typewriter, waiting for me. By the analogies built into my memory, into the circuits of my brain cells, I know how that tomorrow I can, if I wish, resume; for the study and the paper and the typewriter will be here. I know this about the future. What do I know about the past?

Nothing--only I know that tomorrow morning I must assume, on the evidence of the type-written document before me, that there was a past. Every morning, consciously and unconsciously I create myself a past, and every morning, indeed every second, or that fraction of a second which is the span of mental activity, I recreate the past. And it is always different. (15)

Clio, the Muse of History, comes in the twentieth century wearing the steel armor of science and declares: "This is how it was." Mann, Barth, and Peckham are among those who are indelicate enough to ask: "Why should I believe you?"²¹

In Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor, the recurring use of Burlingame's disguises and the liberties taken with Captain John Smith's Secret Historie throw all accounts of the past into doubt. Richard Kostelanetz remarks:

[Barth] doubts our standard version of the past; and . . . systematically distorts, mostly debunks, traditional accounts of history to create versions that are just as probable as those in textbooks.

In Barth's narrative, Sir Isaac Newton and Henry More, the Cambridge neoplatonist, emerge as lubricious pederasts who provide refuge for orphan boys. (28)

In this, and scores of other examples, Barth is mocking history. He continues to do so in Giles Goat-Boy.

In an interview for Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, John Barth has confessed that one of his goals as a novelist is to "reinvent the world" (Enck 8) and to "make up [his] own whole history of [that] world" (8). In Giles Goat-Boy, one of the accomplishments of his heavy-handed and highly syncretic parody is to speak such a world into existence and to order the historical evolution of its epistemology. The major parodies--classical art and mythology, the Judeo-Christian economy, Eastern mysticism, Communism and capitalism, pop psychology, and the twentieth-century Western gods of sex, materialism, and education--all converge in Book two of Goat-Boy to provide a history which parallels and parodies the history of Western thought.

In the generality of Western thought prior to the eighteenth century, man's morals, values, epistemology, and the meaning of his existence were deeply rooted in rationalism. For example, even if rationalist men were not always optimistic, they were usually hopeful: everything in the universe, even ideas and ideals, had an explanation somewhere. Through induction and deduction, finite man was confident of gathering enough particulars to formulate universal truths. Antitheses (A does not equal A) was taken seriously. The first reel of book two in Goat-Boy parodies this rationalism. Dr. Sears's advice at the parody-tragedy in the Amphitheatre is that "while Commencement no doubt involved vision, it had nothing to do with illusions, which

must be got rid of absolutely" (427, emphasis added). George reasons from this that "making clear distinctions must be the first step to Graduation: not confusing one thing with another, especially the passed with the flunked" (444). This insistence upon pristine antitheses ("An arch won't do between True and False; they've got to be cut with an edge as sharp as the Infinite Divisor, and separated" [449]) leads George to flunk Stoker, Ira, Max, Greene, Eierkopf, Lucky, and Croaker on grounds of equivocation and hypocrisy (447). It leads Sears to pronounce his hapless, debauched marriage as "the only authentic and meaningful kind" because it is based on "no illusions whatever" (473). Also, it is no coincidence that at this stage of development in the epistemology of the University that Greene and Alexander--men from both sides of the parodied political-ideological boundary--have an inexplicable antipathy to mirrors. There is little room in rationalism for the solipsistic excesses of twentieth-century pop psychology.

From here, Barth parodies Western man's escape from reason. The shifts in philosophy promoted by Rousseau ([1712-1778] noble savage, Bohemian Ideal, natural law of jurisprudence), and embodied in de Sade ([1740-1814] "As nature has made [men] strongest, we can do with [woman] whatever we please" [64]), Kant's dichotomy of knowledge ([1724-1804] synthesis replaces antithesis, bifurcation of Noumenal World/Phenomenal World), and Kierkegaard's

leap of faith ([1813-1855] reason and values are separate, man must try to find meaning without reason) find their parallels in the black-humor parody characters of Croaker, Stoker, Sears, and Giles. Sears's soliloquy on his cancer (476) and his declaration of "the general absurdity of existence" (478), for example, help Giles to repudiate reason: "Forget what I said last time! . . . I've got to start from scratch!" (553). His new doctrine of "Embrace!" (552), of true and false or pass and fail being one and the same (551, 554), appears to open doors for him. He is able to literally pass through locked prison doors unawares, but upon rational reflection he is no longer able to do so (550, compare 557). He admonishes Eierkopf to "forget about logic! Go out and live!" (586). When Eierkopf suggests that Giles has lost his mind, Giles responds: "'Only my Reason!' [He has lost] the flunking Reason that distinguished him from Croaker, and denied that contradictions could both be passed at the same time" (586). He advises Mas to "choose . . . without considering the purity of his motives" (572). To escape his prison, Leonid need only to "shut his eye to Reason and stride forth" (565). Reason also fails Lucky: "But while he prided himself on having achieved perfect reasonableness and self-control, he did not feel Commenced" (592). Giles's advice to Lucky is that "it was a mistake to be absolutely reasonable" (594) and that Lucky should rather "Embrace nonsense!" (595). This escape

from reason enervates the Beists (parodied existentialists; for example, 580-581) to espouse "Carte-blanchisme" (577). It gives Giles the insight that "Studentdom was hobbled by false distinction and crippled by categories!" (597). This leads him into solipsistic introspection and the initial flutterings of existential awareness: "my infirmity was that I had thought myself first goat, then wholly human boy, when in fact I was a goat-boy, both and neither: a walking refutation of such false conceits" (597). This introspection is mirrored in the parodied laymen, Greene and Leonid, in that their "aversion to mirrors had changed into gloomy fascination" (566).

Such gloomy introspection in the Goat-Boy leads him to full existential awareness. Again, he must declare to his tutees that "once more I'd been all wrong. . ." (641). He has reached the plateau of Sartre's nausea in his perception of Being: he is suddenly troubled by "the insufficiency of any notion I entertained of [Anastasia]. I was reminded . . . when Max, more familiar to me than my own face, had seemed suddenly, unbearably other than myself: a stranger, alien and distinct; as who should find that his arm or leg has a will not his, a personality of its own" (609). Shortly after this, he feels the same "queer strangership" (614) toward himself. At Anastasia's declaration of love, he cries out, "I'm not anything to love. . . . I don't even know what I am. . . . I'm not anybody!" (615). He has

become a grim parody of Kant's bifurcation of man, and, like Kierkegaard, he has repudiated the noumenal half.²² He cannot deal with Anastasia's love ("I don't understand anything!" [616]), nor can he explain his own hate: "I could not have explained my fury, or told why, when it occurred to me that Love and Hate must be in truth distinctions as false as True and False. . ." (623). He is troubled that Anastasia, "a slender bag of . . . pulsing, squirting . . . meaty pipes and pouches" could dream of love (616). He begins "to feel desolate" (625), nearly commits suicide (641), and finally resigns himself to emptiness: "my heart was so entirely spent . . . [that] I felt no further pain . . . nor chagrin . . . nor pleasure . . . nor concern . . . I felt nothing; was full of that positive sensation" (645). This view of emptiness as a "positive sensation,"²³ coupled with Giles's advice "not to die for studentdom's sake, but to take their failings upon oneself and live" (677), would perhaps approach Barth's point behind all of the syncretic parody: "Late or soon we lose" (707), but we must continue.

Although the message is post-modern, the structure of The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy is traditional. The novels are in the mock-epic tradition. Like Swift's Gulliver's Travels, they attempt to use comic situations to present serious statements about man in society. Ebenezer Cooke, the protagonist of The Sot-Weed Factor, decides

upon a career as a virgin-poet and attempts to write The Marylandiad, "an epic to out-epic epics: the history of the princely house of Charles Calvert, Lord Baltimore and Lord Proprietary of the Province of Maryland, relating the heroic finding of that province! . . . the whole done into heroic couplets. . ." (87-88). Russell Miller has catalogued hundreds of classical references and allusions in The Sot-Weed Factor, including a list of sixteen direct parallels between Homer's Odyssey and The Sot-Weed Factor. For the more obtuse reader, Eben himself refers to his journeys as an Odyssey (162, 248) or an Iliad (23, 394, 613). One of Ebenezer's favorite books is Hudibras: "Paradise Lost he knew inside out; Hudibras upside down" (20). He uses both Milton and Butler's Hudibras as reference works when he composes his own poetry (247).

Bludgeoned by typical Barthian heavy-handedness, the reader is, early in The Sot-Weed Factor, hit over the head with Barth's intentions regarding style: "a clever author may, by the most delicate adjustments, make a ridiculous parody of a beautiful style" (18). The entire novel is, as Russell Miller testifies, "written in imitation Restoration English; the text is full of sententia, classical allusions, epigrams, apostrophes, biblical references--all elements . . . in an eighteenth-century epic" (93). This epic style, however, is constantly undercut by the subject matter. Chapter Six of Part 1, for example, is epic in style, but

the conversation takes place in a tavern and is a debate over who is the better lover; the fat or the thin, the poet or the saint.

Another mock-epic device in the novel is the detailed parody of the hero arming himself for battle. Eben is preparing to call upon Lord Baltimore to ask for a commission as Poet Laureate of Maryland:

"Action be my sanctuary; initiative my shield!
I shall smite ere I am smitten; clutch life by his horns!" . . . Not bothering to trouble his skin with water, he slipped on his best linen drawers, short ones without stirrups, heavily perfumed, and a clean white day-shirt of good grieze holland, voluminous and soft, with a narrow neckband, full sleeves caught at the wrist with black satin ribbon, and small modestly frilled cuffs. (82)

Other mock-epic catalogues in the novel include a fight between Eben and barn-yard animals (342-43), the selection of a king among the Ahatchwood Indians (595-97), and the menu to follow that contest (598).

Barth's Giles Goat-Boy (1966) is parodistic as well. Robert Garis dismisses it as a "710-page pseudo-adaptation of the Swift of Gulliver's Travels and the narrative sections of A Tale of a Tub (extended political, social, and religious allegory with a science-fiction twist)" (89). With these parallels as well as scores of others to both the

Oedipus myth and the Life of Christ, Giles determines to prove his claim to being the Grand Tutor of the university (the world) who will lead all students (mankind) to the Grand Commencement. He must, along the way, perform--like Hercules--seven baffling tasks set before him.

Much of this mock-epic material in The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy is, indeed, humorous. Leslie Fiedler goes so far as to call Barth an "Existential comedian" ("Existentialist" 109). However, Barth's similarity to, say, a writer like Ionesco--who embodied in his work his own dictum that "to become fully conscious of the atrocious and to laugh at it is to master the atrocious" (143-44)--may be a facile comparison. The point to Barth's mock-epic constructions should not be missed. Again, the heroic values of the past are here juxtaposed with the present in order to point out that those values are a pernicious hindrance. In The Sot-Weed Factor, Ebenezer is a funny, ingenuous idealist who "refuses to accept reality" but who "page by page has his nose rubbed into the stuff" (Klein 62). In the novel's conclusion, he takes a syphilitic whore for his wife, contracts the disease himself, becomes a writer of satire, and, much like Candide, hoes his beans in submission. Such ghastly submission elicits reader sympathy.

Giles Goat-Boy sets forth reconciliation which is also one of submission. In both Giles Goat-Boy and Sot-Weed

Factor, however, Barth's problem is, as Denis Donoghue explains, "to hold his comic perspective. He is remarkably gifted in the word, the phrase, the line, but often insecure in the large economy" (26). In Giles Goat-Boy (as he did in The Sot-Weed Factor), Barth seems to sustain pathos for his main character, even in the midst of absurd chaos. Even with the undermining of the narrative's veracity (and thus, again, undermining the notion of history) by way of the parody on textual criticism, for example, the reader finds himself sympathetic to the Goat-Boy--indeed, finds him well-wishing for the hero. Feeling for tone or pathos in a work is, admittedly, dangerous critical ground, but this does, nonetheless, establish an important departure from Ionesco's humor. There is much of the comic in Goat Boy, but not at the end of the hero's quest. The change in tone is so abrupt in the conclusion that Barth imposes textual criticism on his own work by suggesting a deuterio-Goat-Boy authorship. Upon Goat-Boy's arrival at a Sisyphus level of awareness of his condition, the laughter dies. Sears's death-bed revelation of maintaining "energy, even at the end" (691) foreshadows the Goat-Boy's final awareness. Goat-Boy realizes at last that life is simply "Unwind, rewind, replay" (699). He rejects the notion that bestial obtuseness is superior to human awareness (704), but he also realizes at last that "the pans remained balanced . . . always for worse. Late or soon, we lose, Sudden or slow,

we lose . . . I . . . shall fail" (707). For Barth, the best one can do once his "understanding glow[s]" (677) is to accept "true scapegoatery"--"not to die for studentdom's sake, but to take their failings upon himself and live" (677). The admonition seems to be that of the example of Camus' Sisyphus: to bear up under the "dreadful punishment" of "futile and hopeless labor" (88).

Thus, John Barth and William Gaddis, following Melville's lead, would concur with Alan Bloom in The Closing of the American Mind (1987) that "the quest begun by Odysseus and continued over three millennia has come to an end with the observation that there is nothing to seek" (143). From Melville on, there is a strand of the American epic (represented here by Barth and Gaddis) that is increasingly an iconoclastic demystification of nature and the self. In fact, in these writings any statement that cannot be reduced to empirical observation becomes meaningless (a conundrum, indeed, in that this statement of their position, therefore, must also be meaningless). The stark, material universe is not only devoid of God, it becomes devoid of humanity as well. Personality, relationships, and human values have no real basis. Motifs such as the alienated hero emerge: aloof and isolated, the hero is on a quest to give his life meaning. This literature is also a quest for new forms. (If there is no omniscient God, how can a writer employ an omniscient narrator? If history is not logical, perhaps

not even existent, how can a plot be logical or historical?) Faced with the chaos of modern life, these writers turn to myth as a way of giving order to their writing. In The Recognitions (as in Moby Dick), the Faust legend is altered. In both Gaddis's JR and Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor, as in Moby Dick, the myth of America as a new Garden of Eden is stood on its head. These writers thus transmute mythology and its corollary: a new historic paradigm and new history. Taken together, these modifications reflect the randomness, fraud, sterility, and entropy of the modern world.

Whereas Nietzsche, with utmost gravity, warned modern man that man runs tumbling into the free-fall abyss of nihilism, these writers warn us that modern America is a place in which "Nobody really believes in anything anymore, and everyone spends his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face that fact, so as not to look into the abyss" (Bloom 143). In the fiction of this strand of the American epic, these writers create an endless and seemingly aimless accumulation that not only creates a monomaniacal reminder of this frenetic sterility, but also forces the reader to stop and peer into the abyss for himself.

Chapter III

Existing Without Existentialism:

The Epics of John Gardner

The dark vision of Melville, Gaddis, and Barth is not essentially different from the biblical account of Adam in at least one important respect. As Richard Hauck states in chapter one of A Cheerful Nihilism (1971), Adam, in innocence, had no reason to doubt that there is an ultimate meaning in life. In a pre-lapsarian Paradise, Adam supposedly would have gradually gained keener insights as God revealed them to him. Unfallen reason would have led to infallible insight; eyes undimmed by tears could have decoded the particulars into correct universals. In our post-lapsarian world, however, we are seemingly left with two alternatives: either innocence that is ignorance (a position which Milton found repulsive), or, as Hauck states, "a disturbing awareness characterized by a sense of displacement, an alienation from the source of organized explanation, a detachment from hope, and a lack of confidence that meaning exists at all" (5). Camus insists in "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) that man intends to find meaning--hoping that it exists--but is only able to discover "nonmeaning" (22). This, to Camus and the existentialist camp, is the state of absurdity: "To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason" ("The Myth"

27). The epic novels of Gaddis and Barth illustrate this absurd point of view. Henry Burlingame's advice to Ebenezer in The Sot-Weed Factor, for example, is representative:

"My dear fellow . . . we sit here on a blind rock careening through space; we are all of us rushing headlong to the grave. Think you the worms will care, when anon they make a meal of you, whether you spent your moment sighing wigless in your chamber, or sacked the golden towns of Montezuma. Lookee, the day's night spent; 'tis gone careening into time forever. Not a tail's length past we lined our bowels with dinner, and already they growl for more. We are dying men, Ebenezer: i' faith, there's time for naught but bold resolves." (25)

This is quintessential existentialist theory: it does not matter what a man does as long as he does something. The implications of such a non-creed are frightening. Any action becomes justifiable to a Burlingame. John Barth and William Gaddis, following Melville's lead, would, it seems, concur with Allan Bloom that "the quest begun by Odysseus and continued over three millennia has come to an end with the observation that there is nothing to seek" (143).

Burlingame admits as much: "Whoever saw an odyssey bear fruit?" (146). There are, indeed, no final facts in The Sot-Weed Factor. Burlingame preaches that "'Tis our fate

to search and seek our soul" though we know we will only find "a piece of that black Cosmos whence we sprang and through which we fall. . ." (345). He admonishes Ebenezer:

"A man must needs make and seize his soul, and then cleave fast to it, or go babbling in the corner; one must choose his gods and devils on the run, quill his own name upon the universe, and declare, "'Tis I, and the world stands such-a way°' One must assert, assert, assert, or go screaming mad. What other course remains?" (345)

Providing an answer to that question, charting an alternative course to existentialism, became the quest of the novelist John Gardner.

On the surface, the converse would seem to be true. In The Wreckage of Agathon (1970), for example, a drunken seer totters off to his death "filled with an overwhelming sense of the boundless stupidity of things" and declaring that "THE WORLD IS A SHRIVELED PUMPKIN" (29). In The Sunlight Dialogues (1972), a befuddled old chief of police who believes in absolute truth and justice attempts to apprehend and then understand a strange magician--the Sunlight Man--who believes in absolute existential freedom. The Sunlight Man declares: "There can be no fiddle-faddle about Absolute Truth" (67); "when it got fashionable to speak of the death of God, people began to talk as though Beauty, Goodness, and Truth were psychological effects--probably base ones" (239);

"We have to stay awake, as best we can, and be ready to obey the laws as best we're able to see them. That's it. That's the whole thing" (424). Millie Hodge, a cunning old woman in The Sunlight Dialogues, repeatedly declares, "I exist. No one else. You will not find me sitting around on my can. . ." (181). A later Gardner novel, October Light (1986), highlights a septagenarian brother-sister team who discover separately through their sibling warfare that "all life . . . is a brief and hopeless struggle against the pull of the earth" and that "capitulation" to that pull leaves one with "a life not worth living . . . plain and dreary as a plank in the barn" (454). As with Barth and Gaddis, art here seems to be no longer redemptive: "It was covering, all covering, mere bright paint over rotting barn walls" (October 454). Gardner's most critically acclaimed novel, Grendel (1971), is an epic that presents a monster who entertains himself in arbitrary bloodshed, declaring:

The world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. . . . Finally and absolutely, I alone exist. All the rest . . . is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly-- as blindly as all that is not myself pushes back.

I create the whole universe, blink by blink. (16)

It is ironic that Gardner's most neglected work is his other epic²⁴--this time an epic poem, Jason and Medeia (1973)--in

which ancient Amykos declares, "The world's insane. . . .
 Whatever direction I looked, / the world was a bucket of
 worms: squirming, / directionless--it was nauseating! /
 . . . I exist!" (186). Lord Jason's theory is that
 "existence precedes essence" (440):

"Since my consciousness depends upon words, formal
 structures, the reality outside me is what it is
 because of the words I frame it in--in other
 words, there's no possibility whatsoever of per-
 ceiving the objective truth of anything, there
 is only my truth: my understanding of what words
 and the objects they grope toward mean." (441)

This echoes, nearly word-for-word, the existential world
 view of John Horne, an attorney in Gardner's first novel,
The Resurrection (1966):

Reality, as we all know, has nothing whatever
 to do with philosophy or law--or science, for
 that matter. No man can reason about things
 . . . but only about the names of things, which
 is to say, words, air, the arbitrary selective
 attention of a given culture at a given time and
 place. Which makes us completely ludicrous and
 drives us to art and religion. (146)

It would seem that the message of Gardner's epics (his
 later works) is the same as that of his earliest work; that
 message seems to be existential.

Indeed, the standard reading of Grendel, for example, assumes that Gardner chose to retell the story of Beowulf because he wanted to champion Grendel's post-modern point of view. Jay Ruud's insistent reading is typical:

If the traditional hero is insane, then, who becomes the modern hero? As John Gardner realizes, it must be Grendel--the monster who rejects all traditional values of his world needs only a few slight alterations to become a perfect absurd hero. Gardner's novel fits neatly into the category of contemporary absurdist literature. (14)

W. P. Fitzpatrick echoes the charge of Grendel as an "absurdist hero" and states, "Not only does Grendel challenge our perspective of medieval heroism, but it destroys whatever wisp of the 19th century visionary gleams might remain" (5). Michael Ackland declares, ". . . by the end of the narrative [of Grendel], the reader shares the deterministic insight that marked Grendel's opening reference to life as being 'locked in the deadly progression of moon and stars'" (58). Bruce Allen insists that this same theme "floods" Jason and Medeia:

Jason and Medeia is an epic poem, a retelling in twenty-four "books" of a story pieced together from Euripedes' Medea, the Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes, and several other

sources. It is a tragedy of betrayed faith and deluded idealism, heavily weighted with satirical gibes against the virtues which epics are wont to celebrate. Jason is a cold-blooded careerist; the Golden Fleece is a worthless trifle,²⁵ the Argo is a ghost-ship embarked on a mission distinguished for its strategic blunders and wavering futility. Vividly etched characters loom before us, only to pronounce variations on the poem's relentless central theme: "the gods' deep scorn of man," the heroes' realization that "all our convictions, all our faith in each other, [are] an illusion."
(527-28)

The ambitions of heroes here seem to be reduced to non-sensical games.

This notion is reinforced by the relation in Gardner's fiction between an apparently mechanical universe and what appears to be a universe locked up by determinism.²⁶ This notion of mechanical men in a deterministic, closed universe has been captured by Alan W. Watts in a limerick:

There was a young man who said, "damn!"
For it certainly seems that I am
a creature that moves
in determinate grooves:
[I'm] not even a bus, I'm a tram. (16)

Through his fiction, Gardner brings to light this mechanical behavior of modern, alienated man. In Grendel (1971), for example, Leonard Casper notes that Gardner "has reversed traditional roles . . . robotizing the celebrated hero" (41). Earlier, in The Resurrection (1966), John Horne sits down "abruptly, like something mechanical" (114). In the "Prologue" to The Sunlight Dialogues (1972), Clumly nods in his sleep, "mechanical as an old German clockmaker's doll" (3). In the same novel, "patrolmen grow increasingly mechanical" (234), Arthur Hodge has "turned his sons into robots" (286), and Kathleen Paxton "touched her hair . . . the hand moving . . . like a machine" (256). In Nickel Mountain (1973), Henry Soames's "voice was mechanical, like his words. Even his eating looked mechanical. . ." (212). In October Light (1986), Peter Wagner's view of the universe could serve as a summary statement of the view of determinism in Gardner's fiction: "the structure of the universe: waves, particles in random collision [making him and his love, Jane] two brute mechanisms" (192-93). Another character in October Light, Captain Fist, "has discovered beyond any shadow of doubt that all life is mechanics. . . . All men . . . are victims, objects in fact no more rational than planets" (32). Here, as Rudy Spraycar notes, "it seems that the status of men in a modern deterministic universe is associated with the planets that rule men's fate in ancient astronomy" (142). Barrie Fawcett and Elizabeth Jones, in "The Twelve Traps

of Gardner's Grendel,²⁷ meticulously catalogue the structure of Grendel: the meaning of the twelve chapters is tied to the twelve astrological signs of the zodiac, and, therefore, it would seem, to Captain Fist's discovery in October Light. In chapter eleven of Grendel, the monster has an epiphany that not only parallels that of Captain Fist, but that of Captain Ahab of Moby Dick as well: "All order is a harmless mask men slide between the two great dark realities, the self and the world" (138). Grendel concurs with Captain Ahab's pronouncement: "if man will strike, [he must] strike through the mask!" (Moby Dick 144). Part of this "mask of order" that falls to Grendel's iconoclasm when he loses the influence of the Shaper is history:

. . . because the Shaper is dead, strange thoughts come over me. I think of the pastness of the past: how the moment I am alive in, prisoned in, moves like a slowly tumbling form through darkness, the underground river. Not only ancient history . . . but my own history one second ago, has vanished utterly, dropped out of existence. King Scyld's great deeds do not exist "back there" in Time. "Back there in Time" is an allusion [illusion?] of language. They do not exist at all. My wickedness five years ago, or six, or twelve, has no existence except as now, mumbling,

mumbling, sacrificing the slain world to the omnipotence of words, I strain my memory to retain it. . . . I snatch a time when I crouched outside the meadhall hearing the first strange hymns of the Shaper. Beauty! Holiness! How my heart rocked! He is dead. . . . (128)

As Peggy Knapp notes in her article, "Alienated Majesty" (1988):

Having cut himself off from natural instinct and inoculated himself against the fictions of civilization--two of the reasons why actions are taken--Grendel is left with life as violence. . . . Without the mask, Grendel's only act can be to defend and define himself by attacking the world--Beowulf. (12)

In Grendel, the monster is a misfit who seeks a sense of identity in a hostile world.

Such a preponderance of evidence would lead one to believe that Gardner's novels have much in common with those of the post-modernists such as Gaddis and Barth. Further parallels could be drawn in that he seems to be like Gaddis and Barth in his use of innovations of traditional form, his reliance upon heavily reticulated allusions, and his use of irony and parody. There is, indeed, a chapter devoted to Gardner in Joe David Bellamy's The New Fiction: Interviews With Innovative

Writers (1974), a work that focuses not only upon Gardner but also upon Gaddis, Barth, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, and others, who are all labeled as post-modernists.

In On Moral Fiction (1978), however, John Gardner has strongly stated his objections to what William Gass has labeled "metafiction" (Scholes, Fabulation 4), Barth has called "irrealism" ("The Literature" 29), Robert Scholes has called "fabulation" (Structural 1), and Bellamy has called "superfiction" (ii). The writers of these forms question the efficacy of traditional forms or even of language itself to present a sense of reality to a reader. Rather, these writers, as Angela Rapkin states, create works that are "a reflection of . . . uncertainty, a presentation of highly fragmented worlds, a denial of order, and a belief that language does not have the ability to either recreate or explain the absence of order" (1). The fiction of Barth and Gaddis illustrates repeatedly that language and literature are not able to express the world; the relationship between life and art is a tenuous one. In Barth's Lost in the Funhouse (1968), for example, a short-story narrator cannot bring the story to a close because conventional dramatic narrative cannot contain his insights. He decides, therefore, that it is his destiny to proliferate open-ended verbal constructions which he calls "funhouses" (72-97). Words, in the works of Gaddis and Barth, simply construct

fables--funhouses--that have no necessary connection to the outside world. In Barth's Chimera (1972), the characters are brought to an awareness that they are just words and do not actually exist. Their meaning (as with many of the characters in the novels of Barth and Gaddis) lies solely within the stories that contain them, much like the family of Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921). In the novels of Gaddis and Barth, the reader is left with what Angela Rapkin refers to as "the experience of a literary game which comments only on itself" (4). As early as "The King's Indian" (1974), Gardner began to answer these games which, to him, were immoral--a form of art-for-art's sake, a way of playing with words simply for the sake of playing. Near the conclusion of "The King's Indian," Gardner interrupts his narrator in order to editorialize:

The end is upon us; I admit it, honest reader.
The inexhaustible supply of tricks is exhausted--
almost. . . .

But I haven't interrupted this flow of things imagined for mere chat about the plot. This house we're in is a strange one, reader. . . . Take my word, in any case, that I haven't built it as a cynical trick, one more bad joke of exhausted art. [Compare this to Barth's "Literature of Exhaustion."] The sculptor-turned-painter that I name, and what I said of him, is true. And you are

real, reader, and so am I, John Gardner, the man that, with the help of Poe and Melville and many another man wrote this book. And this book, this book is no child's toy either--though I write--more than usual--filled with doubts. Not a toy but a queer, cranky instrument, a collage: a celebration of all literature and life, an environmental sculpture, a funeral crypt. (316)

This affirmation of art, this escape from the fun-house, is further developed in the epics of Gardner. In an interview with John Askins, John Gardner declares that his own fiction is of a different kind than that of the metafictionists: "I have a single philosophical question that I'm working on in all the books. . . . The question is about the nature of human experience in the 20th century and what's wrong and how it can be fixed"²⁸ (20). The search for the answer to that question becomes the quest for Gardner's heroes.

One finds such a questing hero in most of Gardner's fiction. In October Light, the questers are an aging brother and sister who constantly quarrel. In The Sunlight Dialogues, the quest belongs to Police Chief Clumly, who tries to understand the Sunlight Man. In Freddy's Book (1980), it is found in the mythic: Lars-Goren, the protagonist, does battle with the devil. In Nickel Mountain, Henry Soames, the grossly fat, middle-aged owner of a

greasy-spoon diner, sets out on a kind of grail quest in an attempt to find what separates man from animals. In Grendel, the monster is a converted existentialist on a quest for meaning; Jason faces a similar quest in Jason and Medeia.

The standard meaning of Grendel--an existential interpretation--assumes that Gardner chose to re-tell the Beowulf myth because he wanted to preach Grendel's modern point-of-view, his sense of the meaninglessness of life. W. P. Fitzpatrick insists that Gardner "inverts the perspective of the heroic Beowulf" by Grendel's humiliation of Unferth, the Shaper's (the poet-artist's) collusion with an anarchist, and the hypocrisy of the priesthood (5). Robert Detweiler refers to Grendel as a "cold-blooded fanatic" (61). Bruce Allen insists that Grendel is "a hired mercenary" (527). These critics assume that the Beowulf of legend is inconceivable to a modern reader; the hero instead is now the rather nasty Grendel. This reading begs the assumptions that Grendel is not only a reliable narrator, but also that Gardner shares the presuppositions of such writers as Barth, Gaddis, Beckett, and Sartre. Gardner, however, dismisses Gaddis as "pure meanness" (Karl 62). In On Moral Fiction, he describes Barth's Giles Goat-Boy as "all but unreadable--arch, extravagantly self-indulgent, clumsily allegorical, pedantic, tiresomely and pretentiously advance guard, and like much of our 'new fiction' puerilely

obscene" (95). He has said that Beckett is "wrong" (Ferguson et al. 71) and that Sartre is "a handy symbol of what has gone wrong in modern thinking" (On Moral Fiction 25).

Throughout On Moral Fiction, Gardner constantly attacks the very writers with whom he is often associated. He labels the work of writers such as Barth and Gaddis as "art which tends toward destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes . . . not properly art at all" (6), and brands such writers as a "cult of cynicism and despair" (126). Of the critics who viewed Grendel as an existential treatise, he remarked, in a letter to the editor of The American Scholar:

Those who have read Grendel will recognize, I hope, that [those critics] are quite wrong about the book. My monstrous central character, Grendel, will believe in nothing he cannot logically justify. Scorning the Anglo-Saxon scop who reshapes reality into noble ideals, scorning the great Anglo-Saxon values, he grows more and more vicious, more and more helpless, more and more existential until he commits a kind of suicide. . . . I have been as faithful as possible to the Christian spirit of the epic. (340-41)

This is consistent with Gardner's creed for art in On Moral Fiction. There, he insists that art is good "when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for

imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue" (18). Primarily for this reason, Gardner's bias is that "again and again the ancient poets seem right, and 'modern sensibility' seems a fool's illusion" (125).

Because of this bias, I have found Grendel to be an excellent novel to teach in various twentieth-century world literature courses, especially in conjunction with Albert Camus' The Stranger (1946) or Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea (1938). Grendel forces students to examine critically the presuppositions of existentialism before embracing them carte-blanche. Here, closer scrutiny reveals, as it almost always does, that the first wave of critics was wrong. Grendel, rather than being an existential work, is (as is the entire body of Gardner's fiction) a polemic against the wave of existential works that has flooded the West. In an interview which appeared in the PBS series, The Originals: The Writer in America (1978), Gardner states, "In Grendel I was interested in . . . the implications of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy which I think is paranoid and loveless and faithless and egoistic and other nasty things. . . ." In an interview with Esquire magazine (1971), Gardner is even more blunt: "I hate existentialism" ("Backstage" 56). Michael Segedy's assessment, therefore, accounts not only for the events in Grendel, but for Gardner's glosses about them:

Grendel is a satiric protest against Sartrean nihilism in contemporary literature and a declaration of the need of art to become, as in the past, model art, and art that holds the ugly, evil, and debased up to ridicule and praises the beautiful, good, and just. . . . (108)

Gardner affirms that it is the moral responsibility of an artist to proclaim and assert values that will nurture and sustain civilization rather than expedite its collapse; true art creates and promotes myths that are edifying for society. On Moral Fiction declares that moral art must be "life giving" or at least "life affirming" (19).

Gardner, therefore, rejects categorically modern literature that espouses an existential purview, for it is a celebration of the sterile, the ugly, and the futile. As the fiction of Gaddis and Barth has demonstrated, existential characters stare into the abyss of nihilism and perceive that their world is meaningless. These characters must, therefore, create their own meaning and values, and must do so arbitrarily. Gardner creates such characters in his own fiction to serve as a foil to his tenets of moral fiction, and to illustrate the moral bankruptcy of existentialism. The problem for Gardner with existential characters, Gardner's own included, is that they operate in an absolutely amoral world. Freedom of the will becomes the only absolute; "why" becomes a "ridiculous

question" (Grendel 62). For example, when Grendel commits murder, he does so simply for the joy of it:

Casually, in plain sight of them all, I bit [the guard's] head off, crunched through the helmet and skull with my teeth and, holding the jerking, blood-slippery body in two hands, sucked the blood that sprayed like a hot, thick geyser from his neck. It got all over me. Women fainted, men backed toward the hall. I fled with the body to the woods, heart churning--boiling like a flooded ditch--with glee. (68-69)

There is no motive that is ulterior to Grendel's "glee." Life, death, and all actions that surround them are meaningless. Murder quickly becomes Grendel's existential self-assertion amid the absurd:

Some three or four nights later I launched my first raid. I burst in when they were all asleep, snatched seven from their beds, and slit them open and devoured them on the spot. I felt a strange, unearthly joy. It was as if I'd made some incredible discovery. . . . I was transformed. I was a new focus for the clutter of space I stood in. . . . I had become something, as if born again. (69)

This confession of the self by Grendel is very much like that of Mathieu, a character in Sartre's Road to Freedom

III: Troubled Sleep (1951) who chooses to murder to assert himself:

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself--bang!
 In that bastard's face--Thou shalt not kill--
 bang! . . . He was firing on his fellowmen,
 on virtue, on the whole world. He looked at
 his watch . . . just enough time to fire at
 that smart officer, at all the beauty of the
 Earth, at the street, at the flowers, at the
 gardens, at everything he had loved. . . .
 He fired; he was cleansed; he was all-powerful;
 he was free. (200)

This freedom is Grendel's freedom; it is sordid acts of anarchy from a sordid mind.²⁹ It is mayhem. Life, whether examined or unexamined, is pointless.

Grendel opens in the middle of the story. In the opening paragraphs, Grendel has already been at war with Hrothgar for twelve years. Nearly the entire narrative of Grendel is a flashback that explains Grendel's embracing of Sartrean existentialism. Chapter five, Grendel's descent into a cave for a conversation with the dragon, is pivotal. It can be read as an ironic rendering of the mythical hero's enlightening descent into the Underworld as well as an ironic counterpart of the hero's trial by ordeal. The dragon parrots Sartre at great length, and is only certain of one truth: ultimately, nothing matters. The dragon

accepts this as truth because he can see all of time at once, and sees no reason for hope. His catechism is brief: "Ashes to ashes, slime to slime, amen" (73) for life is "a brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity" (74). The dragon gains Grendel as his convert; Grendel leaves the dragon's cave and notices that "futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire" (75).

Here, Grendel's cave experience is far from a Platonic one. This cave experience and one that Grendel can recollect from when he was very young both illustrate Grendel's predisposition to reject rationalism. In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," a novice of Truth ascends from darkness to light as he exits the cave. Later, this seeker of truth can descend back into the cave with a missionary zeal about his enlightenment. Grendel leaves caves, on the other hand, only to discover darkness on a larger scale. He reminisces that, as a very young child,

I nosed out in my childish games, every last shark-toothed chamber and hall, every black tentacle of my mother's cave, and so came at last, adventure by adventure, to the pool of the firesnakes. . . . And so I discovered the sunken door, and so came up, for the first time to the moonlight. I went no farther, that first night. But I came out again inevitably.

I played my way further out into the world, vast cave above ground, cautiously darting from tree to tree and challenging the terrible forces of night on tip-toes. At dawn I fled back. (12)

When Grendel leaves caves there is, instead of Plato's illuminating sun or Tom Joad's apotheosis, only moonlight and more darkness. Instead of finding understanding, Grendel benightedly plays hide-and-seek. Instead of returning with missionary zeal to share truth, Grendel returns with a haunting notion of reality: there is no truth in the "vast cave above ground" to be discovered.

Upon leaving the dragon's cave, Grendel begins a war with Hrothgar, a war that is fed by Grendel's conversion to dragon truth. Robert Merrill defines the message of the dragon: "[H]uman values are insubstantial myths designed to get us through the night" (167). Gardner, however, finds dragon truth to be despicable:

The dragon looks like an oracle, but he doesn't lay down truth. . . . He tells the truth as it appears to a dragon--that nothing in the world is connected with anything. It's all meaningless and stupid, and since nothing is connected with anything the highest value in life is to seek out gold and sit on it. . . . My view is that this is a dragonish way to behave, and it ain't the truth. The Shaper [the artist-poet in Grendel] tells the truth. . . . (Bellamy 185)

When faced, then, with "the alternative visions of the blind old poets and dragons" (Grendel 90), Grendel makes the wrong choice. The dragon hates mankind for living according to comforting myths:

[the Shaper] provides an allusion of reality-- puts together all the facts with a gluey whine of connectedness. Mere tripe, believe me. Mere slight of wits. He knows no more than they do about total reality--less, if anything: works with the same old clutter of atoms, the givens of his time and place and tongue. But he spins it all together with harp runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, think Heaven loves them. It keeps them going--for what that's worth. As for myself, I can hardly bear to look. (Grendel 55-56)

Grendel goes on to mock Unferth the warrior's belief in heroic values; Wealtheow the queen's beauty, personal ethics, and integrity; and Oark the priest's religious theories. The critics who give Grendel an existential reading, of course, interpret these mockeries as an exposé of man's penchant for imposing upon himself with comforting illusions. They can also be read, however, as Grendel's coffin nails, as a snowballing of the disaster that comes from accepting the dragon's world view. At the Shaper's funeral, for example, the poet's passing is mourned.

Grendel's response, however, is to mourn over having never abused the Shaper: "I should have cracked his skull mid-song and sent his blood spraying out wet through the mead-hall like a shocking change of key" (146). Had he done this, would he have demonstrated that the dragon is right-- that all actions are devoid of value, that nothing matters? Perhaps he would, rather, have proven how damning the seduction of the dragon's dogma is. Robert Merrill states, "From his encounter with the dragon to his death at the hands of Beowulf, Grendel acts very much like one of those contemporary writers Gardner has condemned for celebrating ugliness and futility" (168).

Gardner, on the other hand, states that "real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths" (On Moral Fiction 126). The figure of the Shaper in Grendel is, as Joyce Quiring Erickson states, representative of the "poets and priests as legislators, through art, for society" (75). The fables, the myths, the epic components of Grendel are the embodiment of the salient points of On Moral Fiction. Gardner has a penchant for using these mythic elements because, as he stated in an interview with Don Edward and Carol Polsgrove for the Atlantic Monthly, he likes "the way archaic forms provide a pair of spectacles for looking at things" (46). Angela A. Rapkin summarizes the effect:

Gardner seeks to both meditate on the possibilities of art and to demonstrate what they are. As such, each of his works represents a different set of conventions used in an innovative way. Grendel, for example, as the name suggests, represents the use of Anglo-Saxon conventions. There are more than one hundred and fifty kennings in the short novel, and the prose is poetically rich with the rhythms and alliteration of Anglo-Saxon verse. In addition, the novel reflects the plot structure, character, and setting of the Anglo-Saxon epic. At the same time, the re-telling of the epic tale is not Gardner's purpose. Instead, he uses this fictive setting and characters as a means of exploring his concern with the impact of existential thinking on modern man. The structure assists him, for his intent is to show an ordered universe, and the epic conventions and twelve chapters based on the signs of the zodiac provide a highly ordered novel. This is in contrast to the absence of order implied by the Sartrian view of the universe which Gardner so adamantly opposes. His departure from realism, his uses and distortions of traditional conventions of the novel and of the epic, and his use of the self-conscious mode in Grendel are all comparable to techniques

characteristic of post-modern writers; however, Gardner's intent with Grendel distinguishes him from those writers. Grendel was meant to say "to hell with existentialist nausea,"³⁰ and thus provide an alternative way of seeing the world, on which is more productive and affirmative than is the existential view. (5-6)

In Beowulf, the monster attacks Heorot because the music and singing of the meade hall angers him. This recurs in Grendel, but now the motivation is much more complex: in Grendel, the monster is puzzled because he has been deeply touched by not only the songs, but also by the response of humans to that art: "What was [the Shaper]? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots, and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way--and so did I" (36).

Such descriptions by Grendel of the efficacy of art parallel Gardner's discussion of art in On Moral Fiction; art must always transform events into something that will drive man to heroic deeds: "whereas the hero's function . . . is to set the standard in action, the business of the poet . . . is to celebrate the work of the hero, pass the image on, keep the moral model of behavior fresh, generation on generation" (29).

When still very young, Grendel had already decided, as Gardner relates in his interview with Bellamy, that the

world is "a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears" (12). Later, however, as Grendel discovers people, whom he refers to as "pattern makers" (128), he observes that the base greed and animal passions of man are enobled by myth, that art provides man with lofty goals and creates ideals. The Shaper, a blind court poet, provides man with a cosmogony, a pattern for the world that admits the possibility of goodness. Into this pattern merge the figures of myth:³¹ Beowulf, the monster-slayer, Unferth, the warrior who struggles in vain to be a hero; Wealtheow, the Queen (who fulfills, as Elzbieta Foeller notes, the myth roles of virgin, mother, temptress, and paragon of Beauty and Love [193]); Hrothgar, a wise, heroic king, and the Shaper, the creator of myths. They all become players in a struggle--one in which, as Foeller remarks, all find significance: "Whatever the actual condition of the universe, man can only touch it through ordering the seeming chaos. Even if there is no ultimate pattern, man can only function by living as if there were one" (193).

Grendel gives the view of myth and epic motifs through the eyes of a monster; Jason and Medeia is myth and epic motifs as viewed directly by twentieth-century man. A contemporary poet (Gardner himself?) nods to sleep while reading an old book and dreams a version of the Jason and Medea story. Jeff Henderson indicates the circumstances

that led Gardner to produce this epic: "He had long contemplated a book on epic poetry, to be called The Epic Conversation, the title suggesting a dialogue of epic poets spanning millennia, each one commenting on and redefining the genre from the perspective of his own age" (77).

Gardner found it irresistible and inevitable, evidently, to make his own contribution to that dialogue. In selecting the Jason and Medea story for his contribution, Gardner not only selected a personal favorite--in an interview, he describes The Argonautica as "one of the greatest books ever written" ("Interview" 103)--but also a work that has a rich history of poetic mutations over millennia. The Argonaut legend is at least as old as the Odyssey, which refers to Hera helping Jason and "the celebrated Argo" through the Wandering Rocks (XII.69-72). According to Michael Grant in Myths of the Greeks and the Romans (1962), nearly every culture has had "stories like Jason's, in which the hero is sent on a dangerous journey to get rid of him, and, when he arrives at his destination, is confronted with tasks and helped in them by the daughter of the ferocious local ruler; the Norse Mastermaid and Gaelic Battle of the Birds are related to the same themes" (259). During the Classical period, Pindar--most notably in the Fourth Pythian Ode (his longest poem)--attempted to codify the legends of the voyages of the Argo (as Euripedes's play Medea also does) and labeled its crew as "Argonauts" (Pythian iv.69). Before, through the seventh

and early into the sixth century BC, every Greek colony on the Black Sea had claimed a crewman from the Argo "to justify its trading rights in the Black Sea" (Grant 259), and each colony embellished the Argo myth with its own political-religious slant. Apollonius's epic, the Argonautica (like Pindar's version) emphasizes Jason's successful capture of the Golden Fleece. Grant attributes to Apollonius the creation of "the new Romantic Epic" (261). It follows the Homeric traditions of length and form, but also "infuses the traditional myths with something unfamiliar to the world's [classical] poetry--romantic love. His Medea's character has a psychological subtlety far from the simple extroversion of a Homeric heroine. . ." (Grant 261). Euripedes and Apollonius both present modifications upon classical character: Medea is a woman in love who is also a witch; Jason is an incredibly unresourceful hero who must constantly be bailed out by others, especially his wife. Grant goes so far as to say that Jason is "one of the first of many ordinary men to play the hero's part in European literature" (262). Later, Ovid's Heroides discloses psychological insight into the distress of Hypsipyle and Medea, both women who were abandoned by Jason (Heroides VI). In the later stages of the first century AD, Valerius Flaccus wrote an eight-book epic titled Argonautica. The myths of the Argonauts were a staple of the Renaissance. Edmund Spenser, for example, makes note of the "famous

history" of "Jason and Medaea" and "the wondred Argo" in Faerie Queene ([1589-1596] II.12.44-45) and Virgil's Gnat ([1591] 209-16). Much later, Pope, in his "Ode on St. Celia's Day" (1709), celebrates the launching of the ship Argo and the power of the music of Orpheus:

So when the first bold Vessel dar'd the Seas,
High on the Stern the Thracian [Orpheus] rais'd
his Strain,
While Argo saw her kindred Trees
Descend from Pelion to the Main.
Transported DemiGods stood round,
And Men grew heroes at the Sound. (38-43)

The story came to the fore again in the revival of Hellenism in the romanticism of the nineteenth century. Leigh Hunt, for example, declared classical myths to be "elevations of the external world and of accomplished humanity to the highest pitch of the graceful, and embodied essences of all the grand and lovely qualities of nature" and the epic to be "undoubtedly the highest class of poetry" (721). A German poet, Franz Grillparzer, in his Golden Fleece (1820), was followed by Nathaniel Hawthorne's Wonderbook and Tanglewood Tales (1851) in America and Charles Kingsley's Heroes (1856) in England, both of which provide a version of the Jason and Medea myth. All three were best-sellers, and all call for a return to the social uses and bearings of literature. Herbert Muller reminds us in The Uses of the Past (1952)

that the classical writers were not embarrassed, as we have become since the advent of New Criticism, by explicit moralizing or philosophizing. Moreover, today, artists are suspicious of the kind of literary nationalism that inspired classical art (124). The current literati considers it a "kind of prostitution" when a poet enters public life; the Greek poets all felt at home in politics (Muller 124). Today's literati "preaches an art-for-art's-sake doctrine" that would have shocked even the most artistic Greeks (Muller 124). Lacking post-modernist abhorrence of the marriage of art and morals, Kingsley declared in his introduction to Heroes that "There are no fairy-tales like these old Greek ones, for beauty and wisdom and truth, and for making children love noble deeds and trust in God to help them through" (1). Indeed, Hawthorne introduced his Wonderbook and Tanglewood Tales by stating:

A great freedom of treatment [in reworking classical myth into moral lessons for children] was necessary to [the author's] plan; but it will be observed by everyone who attempts to render these legends malleable in his intellectual furnace, that they are marvellously independent of all temporary modes and circumstances. They remain essentially the same, after changes that would affect the identity of almost anything else.

He does not, therefore, plead guilty to a sacrilege in having sometimes shaped anew, as his fancy dictated, the forms that have been hallowed by an antiquity of two or three thousand years. No epoch of time can claim a copyright in the immortal fables. They seem never to have been made; and certainly, so long as man exists, they can never perish; but by their indestructibility itself, they are legitimate subjects for every age to clothe with its own garniture of manners and sentiment, and to imbue with its own morality. In the present version they may have lost much of their classical aspect (or at all events, the author has not been careful to preserve it). . . . (5)

Rather than being an existentialist, Gardner is instead a throw-back to Kingsley and Hawthorne.³² These nineteenth-century re-castings of the classical myths, garnering moral aphorisms and emphasizing character development, are perhaps, until Gardner, the most drastic mutations in the lineage of these stories. In 1867, William Morris (as Gardner would do one hundred years later) attempted to return to neglected aesthetic values--to form and technique--as well as to focus upon the moral tone of classical literature. He created what was, until 1973,

the longest mythological poem in modern English literature; The Life and Death of Jason is 7,500 lines long. Joseph Auslander and Frank Ernest Hill record that "while [Morris] worked on painting glass and designing wallpaper, he shaped the poem in his mind. 'If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving a tapestry,' he said once, 'he'd better shut up, he'll never do any good at all'" (377).

In 1973, Gardner wove no tapestry; neither did he shut up. But he was good, in spite of a reluctance by critics to accept Jason and Medeia for what it is: an epic poem. David Cowart's Arches and Light (1983), the first book-length criticism of Gardner's work, simply mentions that the work exists (6). In Morris's A World of Order and Light (1984), the second critical work on Gardner, the only mention of the poem is in a cross-reference to Gardner's "The King's Indian." Very few articles have been published on the work, and much of the material that does exist has caused Robert Morace in "John Gardner and His Reviewers" (1983) to brand it as a "disaster" (30). At the end of our century, there are no heroes, nor are there values or absolutes for heroes to uphold. Jeff Henderson is correct: "values are exhausted, attenuated past belief" (77). A modern moral epic makes no more sense to many modern readers than a modern-classical drama (complete with chorus and adherence to the unities) would. Our time is not a propitious one for moral epics, but as Henderson asserts, Gardner was up to the task:

Gardner had the tools and skills as a writer requisite to the attempt. And he had comfortable access to that which failed modern epic poets had not: the antique sources. Beyond that, he had the synthesizing, transmuting power of a Chaucer or a Shakespeare to take those sources-- good, old stories--and blend, alter, amplify, and embellish them, filtering their potential meanings through his own consciousness, and producing a poem of power, grandeur, and moral profluence unrivaled in the modern age, worthy to stand with its great predecessors. . . . Gardner did what Homer did, what Virgil, the Beowulf poet, and Milton did. He wrote the epic poem possible in his age, and in so doing resurrected, extended, and redefined the genre. (77-78)

The epic tradition, from Gilgamesh on, presents stories of humans at cross purposes and the action is within linear history: cities are raised, then razed. Combat and exploits come down to us under the umbrella of Western culture; history makes heroes immortal. When Gardner taps into this keg, even at the end of the twentieth century, chords are struck. With Gardner's Jason and Medeia, as John Trimbur states, "we feel the unrelenting pressure of history animate the epic, a groundswell of actuality in which the actions of epic . . . define a human scale that locates pattern and

meaning in life and death" (71). Gardner blends the events of the epic Argonautica by Apollonius of Rhodes and the classical tragedy The Medea by Euripedes--keeping close to the originals--with the framework of his own addition: the story of a twentieth-century poet's vision within a dream. These are blended together in a free-verse narrative poem of novel length--over 12,250 lines--that incorporates many elements of epic.

The basic story of Gardner's Jason and Medeia is that of the Argonauts' attempt to get the Golden Fleece. The story, as with Grendel, begins in the middle: Jason attending several nights of banqueting at the Corinthian palace and Medeia brooding in nightly remembrances of things past. Jason, as mythic hero, undergoes the hero's requisite trials, gains the Fleece (and a new princess), clears his name of crimes, and returns home to rule. (The pattern is very much the heroic pattern that is outlined by Joseph Campbell or Lord Raglan, and, therefore, is the pattern of the narratives of Barth's Giles Goat-Boy and The Sot-Weed Factor.)³³ Gardner's Jason is middle-aged, as are the main characters in Barth and Gaddis's fiction, and he is experiencing--as they do--a mid-life crisis; he is overwhelmed with doubts and restlessness. He is an exile in Corinth who wants a better life. His unsettled state causes him to neglect Medeia, whose devotion, love, and magic have made him a hero.

Gardner's point of departure with the traditional Jason and Medeia myth is at the next point of the narrative. Jason sets out to win the hand of the princess of Corinth and, thus, a new throne and new life for himself, but here, and then throughout the poem-novel, his battles are all battles of words. The basic conflict in Gardner's account is not the would-be hero's efforts to achieve the status of hero (as it was for Unferth and Beowulf in Grendel), but a clash of words. The combined length of the Argonautica and Medea is about 7,250 lines; Jason and Medeia runs about 12,250 lines. The expanded length is largely due to Jason; his best weapon is his gift of gab. On his quest for the Golden Fleece, for example, he is always able to sway his crew, and anyone they meet, with his words. It is Jason's words, not his deeds, that win Medeia in their first meeting. He wins a new queen and throne in the same manner. David Cowart, in "The Poetry of John Gardner" points out that "[l]ike Othello, he goes courting with a tale of his adventures, and his narrative of the exploits of the Argonauts, told to King Kreon and the other suitors, is a masterful deployment of verbal resources, the chief means by which he succeeds as a suitor himself" (66).

Perhaps the beauty of Jason's oratory is best captured in his narration of the Siren incident. In Apollonius's version of the Argonauts and the Sirens, the scene runs only twenty or thirty lines, and the reader is given nothing of

the Siren's song itself. Gardner's Jason gives an account that is twice as long; he describes the song and provides his own commentary:

"I heard it well enough: music peeling away like
a gull
from Orpheus' jazz. Dark cavern music, the music
of silent
pools where no moon shines: the music of death as
secret
hunger. What can I say? They were not innocents,
those sirens: it was not peace they sang, fulfill-
ment in joy.
Who'd have been sucked to his death by that?--by
holy dreams
of isles forever green. . . . It wasn't gentleness,
goodness, the sweetness of age those sirens
sang:
the warmth of a family well provided for, a wife
grown old without a slip from perfect faithfulness.
.
. . . that was not the unthinkable hope they lured
us with.
They sang of known and possible evils driven beyond
all bounds, slammed home like crowbars driven to
the neck in great, thick
abdomens of rock. . . .

.
 . . . at least,
 . . . They did not sing to us of love. They sang
 . . .
 terrible things. No generous seaport prostitute,
 whispering, screaming--whatever her tricks--could
 satisfy
 our murderous, suicidal lust from that day on.
 Nothing
 (by no means islands forever green) could quench,
 burn out
 our need beyond that day. It was pain and death
 they sang
 terrible rages of sex beyond the orgasm,
 blindness, drunkenness bursting the walls of
 unconsciousness,
 the murderer's sword plunged in beyond the
 life-lock, down
 to life renewed, midnight black, imperishable.
 Such was the song, cold-blooded lure, of those
 cunning sly-
 eyed bitches. . . .

 . . . We strained at our shackles and raged; we
 frothed at the mouth;

the Argo sailed on, and Orpheus played, immune
to our wrath.

as he was to their song. . . .

.

. . . Orpheus

sighed, endured by his harp-playing.

Which was well enough for him, but what of the
rest of us?" (358-360)

When his new life at Corinth collapses around him due to Medeia's revenge, it is most significant that Jason suffers from self-imposed muteness. He then visits the aged (and, of course blind) Oidipus. The experiences of these two, of course, mirror one another. Oidipus, who in the Sophocles account prides himself in his insight and wisdom ("I'll bring it all to light myself!" [149]), gains true sight, of course, only after he blinds himself and abdicates his throne. He confesses to Jason, "I've lost my reason at last: gone sane" (203). Jason's muteness and loss of the throne also lead to classical anagnorisis. Gardner's poem concludes with Jason returning to the sea to search for Medeia. Ida, Jason's companion, insists: ". . . it's not for revenge that he hunts Medeia" (527-528); rather, he is driven by "maniac love: his will is dead. . . . He has no fear any more / of total destructions, for only the man destroyed utterly-- / only the palace destroyed to its very foundation grits-- / is freed to the state of indifferent good":

Life Is a Dream Poem

. . . mercy without hope,
 power to be just. No matter any more, that life
 is a dream.

Let those who wish back off, seek their virtuous
 nothingness;

the man broken by the gods--if he's still alive--
 is free even of the gods. (528)

Many critics have observed that until his moment of anagnorisis, Gardner's Jason had been a calculating man who always stayed under control by keeping his head separated from his heart, and always made decisions based upon his head. Medeia, on the other hand, is described by Gardner as "passionate, mystical, seismic in love and wrath" (280). A witch granddaughter of Helios--the hot, fiery Sun god--she is all heart. Jason is doomed when he ignores her.

In Gardner's Jason myth, Jason has a long history of playing head-over-heart, of relying upon rationalized expedients. He fails to rescue Amekhenos, whose father had helped the Argonauts. He is late in his rescue of Idas, who had tried to save Amekhenos. He abandons Queen Hypsipyle when Medeia's witchcraft becomes expedient. He also abandons Herakles. From Gardner's viewpoint, Jason is wrong each time he surrenders heart to head, even though each time Jason is able to convince himself that he is surrendering to a higher good. Cowart is correct in asserting that Jason

violates the core precept of Gardner's On Moral Fiction when he becomes a story-teller--an artist--who conjures stories that rationalize his rapaciousness (67). Like the dragon holding his gold in Grendel, and like Grendel himself, he adopts an artistic stance that is cynical and existential.

Jason is a flawed hero-artist, just as Unferth is in Grendel. Unferth despises uplifting art and prides himself on being a realist: "Poetry's trash, mere cloud of words, comfort to the hopeless. But this is no cloud, no syllabled phantom that stands here shaking his sword at you. . . . A hero is not afraid to face cruel truth" (76). Jason only creates art that either is self-serving (for example, gaining Medeia's aid in stealing the Fleece or gaining Kreon's trust to win the Corinthian throne), or that is an Unferthian expose of the sordidness of life: "As for myself, I must track mere truth / to whatever lair it haunts . . . down in the dump, where half-starved rats scratch by as they can" (181).

As Grendel had the dragon to discipline him, so Jason, too, has his teacher. In book 9 of Jason and Medeia, the Argonauts meet King Amykos. Again, the outline is from Apollonius's account of the myth, but here, Amykos is a parody of Jean Paul Sartre (as Grendel is) and is as personally ugly as is his philosophy: he is a "gibbeous" old man who is "hunchbacked / bristled and warted like an ogre's

child leering and drooling in his beard" (189). Amykos declares that as a young man, he was nauseated by the "obscene stupidity" and "terrible objectness" of the phenomenal world: "My youthful heart cried out for sense--some signpost, / general purpose--but whatever direction I looked, / the world was a bucket of worms: squirming, / directionless--it was nauseating!" (186). His next step was to surrender to hedonism:

. . . pow! there I was, eating. Absurd!

But after my first amazement, I saw the
significance of it.

The universe had within it at least one
principle:

survival! I leaped from my stool, half mad with
joy, ran howling
out to the light from my cave, leading all my
followers.

I exist!" I bellowed. "Us too!" they bellowed.

We ate like pigs. (186)

The parody of anti-enlightenment from within Plato's cave is short-lived. In only three weeks, Amykos has become Grendel: "It came to be. My own existence / was my first and only principle. Any further step / must be posited on that" (186). Upon examining his history "for signs, some hint / of pattern," it occurs to him that, "I had killed four men / with my fists" (186-187). Although these had

been accidental deaths, he begins to kill, as Grendel did, to assert his existential freedom.

Koprophoros, whose name literally means "dung-carrier" but who is revealed at the end of Jason and Medeia as Harmonia, Queen of the Dead, nearly equal in power to Zeus (468-69), accuses Jason of being a disciple of Amykos, "the punch-addled King of the Bebrykes," and of embracing the "opinion that existence precedes essence" (440). Koprophoros's discourse, "The Obliging Stranger,"³⁴ runs for six pages (one of only two prose breaks in the entire work) and is a homiletic against existentialism. He declares such philosophy to be a "deep-seated lie" (441), and insists that such "mistaken opinions which time can easily unmask, can turn to devouring dragons if released on the world" (441). Of course, the dragon in Grendel is the embodiment of Koprophoros's concern. Koprophoros "celebrates," as Gardner himself does, "dancing and the creation of images and uplifting fictions" (442). In one of many banquet-hall debates in the poem, Koprophoros gives a discourse on artists that is the pith of all of Gardner's work:

. . . there are artists and artists.

One kind

pulls strings, manipulates the minds of his

hearers, indifferent to truth,

delighting solely in his power: a man who exploits

without shame,

snatches men's words, thoughts, gestures and turns
 them to his purpose--attacks
like a thief, a fratricide, and makes himself
 rich, feels no remorse:
lampoons good men out of envy, to avenge some
 trivial slight,
or merely from whim, as a proof of his godlike
 omnipotence.
His mind skims over the surface of dread like
 a waterbug,
floats on logic like a seagull asleep on a dark
 unrippled
sea. But the sea is alive, we suddenly remember!
 The mind
shorn free of its own green deeps of love and
 hate, desire
and will--the mind detached from the dark of
 tentacles
mournfully groping toward light--is a mind that
 will ruin us:
thought begins in the blood--and comprehends the
 blood.

The true artist, who speaks with justice,
who rules words in the fear of God,
is like morning light at sunrise filling a
cloudless sky,

making the grass of the earth sparkle after rain.
But false artists are like desert thorns
whose fruit no man gathers with his hand;
no man touches them
unless it's with iron or the shaft of a spear,
and then they are burnt in the fire. (255-56)

This poem contains the whole of Gardner's On Moral Fiction. After reciting his poem, Koprochoros clearly states that Jason is the false artist and that Orpheus is the true artist. In Grendel, we are told that the monster is "spinning a web of words" (4); Jason, who holds to the monster's existential philosophy, is also constructing verbal traps, "spinning his web of words" (252). His thoughts are recognized by the others in the banquet hall as "dangerous," as though "one / by the moving / of his sleeve, / reveals a scorpion" (252). Part of the danger is that, like Grendel, Jason hates mankind for living according to comforting myths. Even when he is re-counting his own adventures, the banquet guests are astounded at Jason's equivocating version of the legends:

The story was not what they'd hoped
for at all,
this version turbulent with unresolved doubts, key
changes not
familiar, chords that clashed, a version of well-
known tales

gone crooked, quisquous, trifling matters better
 off forgotten
 blown up out of proportion, and matters of the
 keenest interest
 dropped, passed over in silence as if from
 obsessive concern
 with moments that made no sense. (194)

Aphrodite is moved to tears for a hero who had to "tease the story of his life for meaning" (194). As Grendel hates the Shaper for melding "the same old clutter of atoms" into a glorious history (55), Jason, "filled with a dangerous weariness" (385), cannot countenance life-giving, life-affirming art:

"'The Golden Age,' men will call it. They'll
 honey it with lies
 and hone for it, with languishing looks, and
 bemoan their fall
 and curse my name and treason. . . . Their curses
 will not much stir
 my dust. I was there; I saw the truth. A childish
 age of easy glory in petty marauding. . . ."
 (375)

Earlier, the seer Phineas, in a cave, had warned Jason that any quest for absolutes, ethics, love, or justice was "futile" and that one must maintain a "dead-set refusal to accept some compromise, / some sugared illusion" (207). At

this moment, when Jason is taught to denigrate art and love, "The stink in the room was suddenly thick as a / dragon's stench" (207). Jason, like Grendel, embraces dragon-truth. Another seer, Argus, explains to Jason that "there are no explanations, only structures. . . . / A structured clutter of adventures. . ." (239). In a dream, Jason is warned by Death: "Fool, you are caught in / irrelevant forms: existence as comedy, tragedy, epic" (208).

Jason comes to the conclusion that literary forms and other constructs, such as history, by which man orders his life (as Grendel says, "It keeps them going--for what that's worth" [56]) are not real. Given this, however, Jason is lost in an existential abyss. This, of course, is the game of Gaddis and Barth: literary characters go about their existence acknowledging that they are literary characters.³⁵ Cowart states,

Jason approaches an awareness of his existence as a literary character--a threatened species of literary character [for he is in an anachronistic literary form: epic]. . . . If he attempts to opt out of the "irrelevant form" in which he finds himself, he will discover a route to the abyss. Without a form, genre, or "structure" to give meaning to his existence, he faces oblivion as unconditional as that attendant on simple irrelevancy. (70-71)

Jason is lost in the funhouse.

However, as is the case in Grendel, the witness from a "good artist" in the periphery negates the witness of the "bad artist's" soliloquies from center stage. Orpheus matches Jason tit for tat, craft for craft; he substitutes "magical song" for the empty rhetoric of Jason's disenchantment, asserts that "the world is more than mechanics," and thus saves the Argonauts from destruction at the channel of the wandering rocks (364). Suzanne Kistler is one of the few critics to emphasize this juxtaposition of artists: "Orpheus in Jason consistently refutes the philosophies of negation preached by Phineus, Amykos, Kreon, Argus, and Jason himself, time and again through his songs bringing the Argo miracles" (63).

Jason relates the descent of Orpheus into what Jason labels the "Funhouse" (225). It is the "Cavern of Hades." Orpheus descends into Hell "in search of his love" as Theseus had done before him (223). This descent occurs shortly after even Jason is forced to admit that Orpheus is correct in saying that "art may also serve / morale" (218). Jason realizes that Orpheus's art, unlike his own, discovers "harmony" that makes "all the world" a reflection of "forms / to be juxtaposed, proved beautiful. . ." (218). Moreover, for Orpheus, love is supreme; his heroism and art are subservient to his love.³⁶ Orpheus willingly confronts and moves past "Briareos, with his hundred / whirling arms," the "nine-headed Hydra," "the great flame-breathing dragon"

[Grendel's tutor?], and Tityus the giant "whose great, black, bloated body sprawled across nine / full acres" until he comes at last to the "midnight palace" of Lord Dionysos himself, the "prince of terror" (223). Kadmos the Dark grants Orpheus's request; Orpheus may lead his love, Euridike (a timid wood-nymph), out of Hell on the condition that Orpheus "never look back" (223). Orpheus leads the way past sulphurous snake pits, past terrors "to make a man sick--much less a nymph coming after him" (223). Through "shrieks, screams, cackles, / flashes of light, sudden forms, quick wings, sharp hisses / of air, bright skulls," he is solemn in the Funhouse [emphasis added]" (223). This is not a hopeless, self-reflexive Barthian artist. He leads the way for his love past the "indecent allegories" of Grief, Avenging Care, Pale Disease, Melancholy Age, Hunger, Fear, Pain, Poverty, and Death (224-225). At last, they break free from the underworld and enter the light:

. . . He turned.

She ran toward him . . . and vanished. He stared
in grief and rage
and then, with a groan, remembered. And so he
left the Funhouse,
walked out into the light. He died soon after, a
wreck.

Go there now and you'll see two shades together,
alone on a flat rock ledge, holding hands.

(225)

He may lose the battle in this life, but his affirmations of love and moral art are the stuff of eternity. In Gardner's work, a "good artist" does not become lost in the funhouse. In fact, an Orpheus can even lead other artists out. Jason spends hundreds of pages in a back-and-forth movement between assurance and doubt, acceptance and rejection of the message of Orpheus. This is not, however, the sadism--the toying with both fictional characters and readers--that one finds in the fiction of Barth and Gaddis. Gardner does not drive both characters and readers, finally exhausted, into the abyss, despairing of any answers. Neither, however, are his answers simplistic. Andre Gide, for example, declares that "Hercules, of all the demigods, is the only moral hero of antiquity, the one who, before setting forth, finds himself momentarily hesitating between 'vice and virtue' . . ."

(232). Gide attributes this to the fact that Hercules "is the one child of Jupiter whose birth is not the result of a victory of instinct over modesty and propriety. . ."

(232-33). The Herakles of Gardner's Jason and Medeia, is, according to Cowart, "serenely confident that Zeus, allegedly his father, is always with him, always ordering the world Something of a good-natured lout, Herakles is kind of a proto-Christian. . ." ("The Poetry" 71-72). For all the other characters in Jason and Medeia, however, this certitude of divine purpose is beyond their grasp. Answers are not that easy to come by. In fact, Oidipus's story of Aeneas to

Jason reveals the inadequacies of Herakles's simplistic world view and call to duty. Instead (and, as noted above, this is the point of Jason's anagnorisis), the Aeneas story emphasizes that Oidipus, Aeneas, and Jason all made the same mistake; they denigrated love. While this may sound at first like a simplistic, contrived solution such as the one often attributed to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, love in Gardner's Jason provides no guarantees. Hector, too, for example, is guided by love of justice, love of his family, and love of country. All this gets him, however, is between a rock and a hard place. Either he "fight[s] / for an evil cause or abandon[s] loved ones. . . . So goes the universe, / disaster on this side, same on that. . ." (523). Jason's anagnorisis is not simple; it is not complete until love combines with art. Jason dies aboard the Argo as he sets sail to search for Medeia, but at the point of death, he regains his voice. Gardner, in the persona of the narrator, hears:

At once--creation ex nihilo, bold leap of Art,
 My childhood's hope--the base of the tree shot
 infinitely downward
 and the top upward, and the central branches shot
 infinitely left
 and right, to the ends of darkness, and everything
 was firm again,

everything still. A voice that filled all the
 depth and breadth
 of the universe said: Nothing is impossible!
Nothing is definite!
Be calm! Be brave! But I knew the voice,
 Jason's. . . . (530)

Cowart declares that "the narrator's oak tree, perched over the abyss, becomes the axis mundi [as it is in Norse mythology and Wagner's Ring], stable and secure, for he has won through to a redemptive vision that can order all, a vision of love and art" ("The Poetry" 73).

This hopeful ending is, of course, Gardner's own invention. It is foreshadowed in Jason by the vision that the narrator has in book xxi. Three goddesses--Athene, Aphrodite, and Hera--sing and dance in disguise: Athene is Vision, wearing a robe of Light; Aphrodite is Love, wearing a robe of gentleness; and Hera is Life, wearing a robe of Work. They sing "Give," "Sympathize," and "Control," while the galaxies become a back-drop choir "rumbling with the thunder" (454). According to Foeller, "Give-Sympathize-Control is a direct translation of the injunction Datta-Dayadhvam-Damyatta from the sacred Indian texts of the Upanishads, quoted by T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land" (196). In itself a life-giving, life-affirming act of art, this vision (sung to the background music of thunder, that is to say, the harbinger of rain and fertility) pre-figures--

if Sir James Frazer's definitive studies in The Golden Bough (1890, rev. 1915) on the oak tree in mythology can be trusted at all--the hope at the end of the poem.

Thus, while Gaddis, Barth, and Gardner all utilize myth, and all expand that myth to include the mythic heroes in middle-age, and all focus on incidents not covered fully in traditional myth, and all stress the humanity of their heroes, they do not all reach the same ends. Barth and Gaddis invest none of their characters with a sense of worth; they are all doubters who stumble through life painfully and who grope, fruitlessly, for meaning. Gardner, however, always presents a redemptive artist--one who can cling to mythic patterns as a guide--who can both perceive and communicate significant patterns and hope, and who can, indeed, be life-affirming and life-giving. Gaddis and Barth, by returning to myth, transmute it into an ironic commentary in which they wallow, fixated on contemporary man's plight. Gardner returns to myth for sources of affirmative literature, stressing the role of the artist as a creator of life-affirming, life-giving patterns.

Chapter IV

Paradise Regained in the Old South:

The Epics of Toole and Malone

The literature of any age undoubtedly has its diversity--different kinds of writers doing very different things concurrently. Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery note in Anything Can Happen (1983) that now, however, American writers--especially novelists--have been "shifting among different modes, merging traditional forms and experimental energies, redefining the methods we've used to keep them separate. Fiction is not only alive; it's mutating" (2). It is odd and rather cryptic, however, that LeClair and McCaffery should proclaim in Anything Can Happen that such mutation is new. The position of this paper is that American literature has, from the beginning, mutated the epic model.

There have always been American writers creating works that are encyclopedic in scope and that use epic motifs: long narratives in an elevated style that detail the history of a nation or race; long series of adventures that form an organic whole through their relationship to a hero; allusions to the grand themes of history; the profligate use of epic devices such as epithets, epic similes, catalogues, multiple cross-references, and myths. Since it would be silly, however, for one age to slavishly replicate the epos

from another, these works, while borrowing some of the same alphabet--the use of catalogues, myths, and so on--declare completely different messages. These writers have attempted what Shakespeare could do better than anyone else in the language: take good, old stories and blend them to produce new works. While these works are the resurrection of a genre, the reemergence of the epic, it is an apocalyptic resurrection. The message changes each time the epic model asserts itself in American literature.

From its beginnings, American literature declares a departure from the classical polemic of epic. Everywhere in the classical models the reader is reminded, for example, of the sadness, futility, and sterility of living in the past or, even worse, attempting to live off of the past. From Cotton Mather to Walt Whitman, however, American history is celebrated as an anthropomorphism of the mind of God. While Whitman jettisons the past to celebrate America's future, the classical polemic is mutated on other fronts. Classical epic poets who knew the glories of Troy also knew that its fate inexorably will come to all in the future. From Whitman to Steinbeck, the main-line American epics fly in the face of that knowledge.

Herman Melville's Moby Dick provides a template for an alternative epic polemic to that which follows in the wake of Whitman. Whitman's adherence to optimism and absolutes is the dominant strain through the modernist

period; Melville's darker vision--one with no allowances for absolutes--is the model for post-modernism. In Giles Goat-Boy (1966), Barth alters Bible legend; in The Recognitions (1955), Gaddis alters the Faust legend. In both Gaddis's JR (1976) and Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor (1960), the myth of America as the new Garden of Eden is stood on its head. Gaddis and Barth create an existential mythology and its corollary new anti-historic paradigm that, taken together, reflect the randomness, fraud, sterility, and entropy of the twentieth century.

John Gardner's fiction, on the other hand, while often identified with the existential message of post-modernists such as Barth and Gaddis, carries on a running warfare with Sartrean existentialism. This warfare is seen most clearly in Gardner's epic fiction, Grendel (1971) and Jason and Medeia (1973). Gardner uses epic features as a protest against the West's inundation by existential literature. Whereas existential writers, as Gardner laments in On Moral Fiction (1978), are obsessed with staring into the black abyss, and the characters of Barth and Gaddis frenetically struggle to ignore it, Gardner seeks to create an answer: a "moral" art that will shut the gaping maw of existentialist nihilism by using the motifs of epic. In Jason and Medeia, the repellently ugly King Amykos and, for a time, Jason himself are the embodiments of existentialism; King Kaprophoros and Orpheus offer an antidote to this poison: art

wedded to love. In Grendel, the monster is the Sartrean hero, in opposition to the values of Beowulf and the efficacious artwork of the Shaper. These epic works are at the core of Gardner's notion that some classical values may maintain their efficacy, even given the post-modernist's absence of absolutes.

Because, however, all of the above examples of American epic have indeed, as LeClair and McCaffery assert, merged "traditional forms and experimental energies, redefining the methods we've used to keep them separate" (2), few critics have dealt with the mutations. The temptation is strong to simply label modern American writers as omni-syncretists and let them go--especially writers of the formidable (and often arcane) mega-novels. Early reviewers of such works did, indeed, have a hard go of it. Robert Morace, for example, in his article "John Gardner and His Reviewers" (1985) summarizes the early reception of readers to Jason and Medeia and labels the piece as a "disaster" (30). One of the first book-length studies of Gardner's fiction, Arches and Light (1983), ignores the work. The follow-up study, A World of Order and Light (1984), refers to the work only twice, and then only to underscore a point made about one of Gardner's novellas. Bruce Allen dismisses it as "the darkest of all Gardner's fictions" and says that in it, "all our convictions, all our faith in others" are an "illusion" (528). William Gaddis's first novel, The

Recognitions (1955), also received critical disdain from early reviewers. The book was widely critiqued--at least fifty-five early reviews appeared--and was widely rejected. With varying intensity of vitriol, the work was dismissed, usually due to its sheer bulk and its labyrinthine narrative technique. Citing similar evidence, John Leonard concludes that John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor (1960) and Giles Goat-Boy (1966) seem to be written for "graduate students and other masochists" (15). Earl Rovit decries these works as "shallow parody" and "intellectual gymnastics" (78). Gore Vidal finds The Sot-Weed Factor to be "English-teacher-writing at a pretty low level" ("American" 113) and Giles Goat-Boy to be "a very bad prose work" ("The Hacks" 97) and "another 800 pages of . . . school-teacher writing: a book to be taught rather than read" ("American" 113). Albert Goldman takes the "school-teacher writing" slam a step further; he finds the novels to be an "egghead omnibus":

An indigestible farrago of Black Humour, Science Fiction, Pornographic Fantasy, and Comic Strip Caricature, laced heavily with portentous Myths, Metaphors, and Symbols garnered from professional studies of the classics. [The novels] seem compounded in equal proportions of puerility and academicism. (51)

Hugh Lifson, in a North American Review criticism titled "Giles Goat Bore," finds Giles Goat-Boy is not "worth

mention" and "does not have the good sense to be short" (41). Arthur D. Casciato, writing Barth's biographical sketch for Gale's Dictionary of Literary Biography, summarizes the critical reaction to Sot-Weed and Goat-Boy by referring to the works as "pedantic puppetry" and "epic snooze" (29). Campbell Tatham chastises the two novels for being inaccessible and for subordinating human problems to "aesthetic implications of the basic form" (70). (Whatever that means. Sometimes the critics become as inaccessible as the works they denounce as inaccessible.)

Among more recent American fiction, some mega-novels have fared much better in their early reception. Handling Sin by Michael Malone, for example, is declared by Gene Lyons of Newsweek to be "terribly funny, emotionally engaging, and almost impossible to set aside" (74). This, in spite of his observation that it is "digressive, repetitious, too long by half and positively aswarm with improbable characters, unlikely situations and preposterous coincidences" (74). The spectre of sheer bulk that is interwoven with disparate element emerges, therefore, even in "a heart-warming tour-de-force" (Lyons 74), as a damning trait. A. C. Greene, writing for the New York Times Book Review, however, is not put off by the work's bulk: "Mr. Malone's twists and turns and surprises are down-right phenomenal, verging on genius. There are entire chapters in this book that are funny, sentence by sentence" (11). John Kennedy

Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces (1980) also seems to stand apart from other twentieth-century epics, for while it is praised as "a novel of high hilarity" (Clark 269), it is also respected as an "elaborately designed work of fiction" (Patteson 77)--all that in spite of its bulk. Greil Marcus in Rolling Stone magazine declares, "A Confederacy of Dunces has been reviewed almost everywhere, and every reviewer has loved it. For once, everyone is right" (25).

Something must be evident as to the form and texture of Confederacy and Handling Sin that is not so conspicuous in the other late twentieth-century epic works. Coinciding with Confederacy's obvious place as a picaresque novel is the notion that, according to Elizabeth Bell:

Its tie to the medieval world links the novel with a compendium of medieval types--the pilgrimage, the quest, in strange ways the romance, the anatomy--and it does so in the most medieval of ways: the allegory. . . . (15)

Exactly. But unlike most other post-modern, omni-syncretic American epics, Confederacy is also very funny. Much the same could be said for Handling Sin. In fact, a book review in the Chicago Tribune says Handling Sin is: "Reminiscent of A Confederacy of Dunces in its brilliance and wry humor" (40). A. C. Greene of the New York Times states, in fact, that "While comparisons will be made to A Confederacy of

Dunces because of its Southern setting and bizarre plot, the humor of Handling Sin is superior to that by now assumed classic" (11). It, too, is a pilgrimage and quest, a romance and allegory, for the protagonist's father, a defrocked and seemingly demented Episcopal priest, has run off to New Orleans in a yellow Cadillac convertible with a young, black exotic dancer, leading his son into adventure. A Tom Jones kind of Table of Contents in Handling Sin is preceded by a page which states, "This book is cald Handlyng Synne. It contains Tales and Marvels." The work is a "head-long picaresque" and "populist epic" (Rafferty 860). In the acknowledgments, Malone declares:

There are three people without whose friendship, nudges, winks, and wise teaching I never could have written Handling Sin. They are Miguel Cervantes, Henry Fielding, and Charles Dickens.

I owe them more than I can say, and a lot of what I've said. (xiv)

Toole and Malone are, indeed, kindred spirits. Like Barth, Gaddis, and Gardner, Toole and Malone have written modern American novels that are encyclopedic in scope and use epic motifs, including allegory and satire. The cosmology within which they all work is Hobbesian rather than Panglossian. This is unavoidable, for Raleigh Hayes of Handling Sin and Ignatius Reilly of Confederacy are both twentieth-century picaros, and the picaresque world is one that is always on

the verge of chaos. This is certainly the perspective of the protagonists. Early on in Handling Sin, before the chaos erupts full-force, the best that Raleigh can do is to hang on: "He'd always known chaos was out there lurking, and he could see now how vast the abyss was, but he still clung by his nails to an edge of the cliffs of reason, in the uncrumbled faith that the cliff was there" (Malone 123). Early in Confederacy, Ignatius has seemingly surrendered all hope: "With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the Gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy" (Toole 40). The rapidly repeated roles in both novels of coincidence, accident and fate--Ignatius is constantly praying to Fortuna and her wheel of fortune and Migo Sheffield, Raleigh's sidekick, has an epiphany at a fairgrounds that God "feels about the whole world like Somebody on a universal Ferris wheel" (283)--as well as the rapidity with which plans and order fall apart, re-inforce the picaresque chaos. Stuart Miller, in The Picaresque Novel, reminds us that, in the picaresque, society is corrupt and that the picaro is inherently anti-social while assuming "the social disguise of every profession and vocation" (70). In Confederacy, Ignatius is variously an art and social critic, teacher, domestic who dusts and makes cheese dip, crime-fighter, political-rights activist, file clerk, and hot-dog vendor. In Handling Sin, Raleigh is an insurance salesman, philosopher and theologian, psycho-analyst, Marine, nun,

murder suspect, jazz musician, and swashbuckler. In such chaos, neither hero can ever assume that all "will work for the best in the best of all possible worlds" (Pangloss in Voltaire's Candide); he must rather assume a Hobbesian purview: "war of everyone against every-one . . . continual fear and danger . . . and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Harrison 44). Following Gardner's lead, however, Toole and Malone depart from the post-modernist pre-occupation with the abyss and utilize epic motifs in a comic fashion. They both heed the warning given in Moby Dick: they watch out for sharks, but at the same time, they are bent on having the ride of their lives.

When on a mission from God, the characters of Handling Sin and Confederacy are more akin to the Blues Brothers than to Milton. Walker Percy describes Ignatius Reilly, the protagonist of A Confederacy of Dunces, in the Preface:

. . . an intellectual, ideologue, dead-beat, goof-off, glutton, who should repel the reader with his gargantuan bloats, his thunderous contempt and one-man war against everybody--Freud, homosexuals, heterosexuals, Protestants, and the assorted excesses of modern times. Imagine an Aquinas gone to pot, transported to New Orleans. . . . His pyloric valve periodically closes in response to the lack of a "proper geometry and theology" in the modern world. (9)

Ignatius Reilly is arguably a reemodiment of Piers Plowman, a medieval man given to "invective in a vigorous vernacular language that conveys a satirist's indignation at the degree to which [his] particular City of Man has fallen away from or has failed to achieve, a conformity to the City of God" (Scholes Fabulators 144). Confederacy offers a point-counterpoint clash of modern and medieval world views. In the end, Reilly escapes, but if he clings to his medievalism, he is escaping to an outer world of chaos. He will have to surrender his world view to gain salvation. Raleigh Hayes of Handling Sin--"reliable Raleigh, hardworking Raleigh, fair-and-square Raleigh, and in general, respectable, smart, steady, honest, punctual, decent Raleigh Hayes" (1)--obviously from the opposite end of the spectrum as Ignatius--must make the same surrender. The motifs of the epic are used by Toole and Malone to prophesy a completion of the unfinished work of Reconstruction in the South.

In "Feed Me! Feed Me!" a review of Leon Rooke's Fat Woman, Malone gives his own insight into a "Southern novel":

Our literature has always been rooted in region and not nation, which may mean we will never get our Great American Novel, in the way that War and Peace is the great Russian novel. That region called "The South" is one of the great glories of our literary landscape, Rome to New England's

Athens. Its capital is usually located along the Mississippi-Georgia line of Faulkner, Wright, Caldwell, McCullers, O'Connor, Welty, Capote. [Confederacy fits in here.] But there's always been an illustrious group of mid-Atlantic kin, and it is to this Carolina/Tennessee/Kentucky branch that Rooke belongs. (766)

Handling Sin borrows from both regional traditions. Malone also remarks here that "our literary heritage of the Southern landscape and Southern experience is a fictional construct of whole cloth, whose map is--and has always been since Twain and Poe--other Southern fictions" (766).

One obvious and important link to Southern literature can be found, then, in comparing the main characters of Confederacy and Handling Sin to those other works. Neither Ignatius J. Reilly, hero of Confederacy, nor Raleigh Hayes, hero of Handling Sin, however, seems hardly to be a typical Southern protagonist. Reilly is a thirty-year-old obese slob who constantly wears a green hunter's cap and, because he is too lazy to work, relies on his mother for support. He holds a master's degree in medieval literature from Louisiana State University and sprawls for hours on his bed scribbling obscurely in Big Chief notebook tablets about his medieval world view and his hero Boethius. He perceives American Bandstand as the benchmark of cultural decay, yet faithfully watches every segment. Raleigh Whittier Hayes of

Handling Sin, on the other hand, is a sober, responsible, prosperous, middle-aged insurance agent and family man, a straight-arrow Baptist deacon in the nondescript hometown of Thermopolae, North Carolina. Hugh Ruppensburg points out that Ignatius, "ridiculous deluded though he is . . . believes in tradition, morality, and human dignity. He commits himself to preserving these virtues by trying to punish, in his own fashion, the wicked and hypocritical" (118). Raleigh Hayes, full of exasperation and indignation at every turn, accepts the same quest. As such, they are in the tradition of what Ruppensburg labels "comic Southern fool-killers" (118): characters such as Faulkner's V. K. Ratliff in The Mansion (1959), George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood in Sut Lovingood's Yarns (1867), Jane Elizabeth Firesheets in T. R. Pearson's Off for the Sweet Hereafter (1986), Mattie Rigsbee in Clyde Edgerton's wonderful and hilarious Walking Across Egypt (1987), or Myrtle of Lee Smith's Family Linen (1985). The characters mentioned here, however, differ from Ignatius in that they succeed in their fool-killer pranks because they are fundamentally moral souls who understand hypocrisy, greed, and corruption quite well. Sut Lovingood, for example, admits in the title of his yarns to be "a nat'ral born durn'd fool"; he recognizes not only the moral shortcomings of his victims, but his own as well.

Ignatius and Raleigh, acting upon the premise of their own moral superiority, turn this fool-killer Southern tradition on its head. Ignatius fails to recognize that he is more corrupt than his victims. In chapter eleven of Confederacy, for example, he praises (because it depicts a naked woman holding Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy) the "good taste" of a pornographic photograph being sold to minors (300). He is oblivious to the fact that a high school pornography ring is the epitome of the social corruption that he says he despises. Raleigh, too, suffers from his own pretensions:

He did believe in God, but, frankly, he didn't trust Him, and saw no reason in the world why he should. If God's idea of salvation was Jesus Christ, God was too eccentric to rely on. Mr. Hayes was a churchgoer (indeed, a deacon), but he considered his religion a civic duty, a moral discipline, a social obligation and (he was honest) a business asset. That's why as an adult he attended not the small Episcopal church where his father had once been rector, but the large Baptist church across the street, where most of his clients went. Hayes was a Christian, but if the truth be known, Christ irritated him to death. With the army . . . he'd read the Gospels while cooped up in the infirmary, and

he'd argued by pencil in the margins against the Savior. In his personal opinion, Christ's advice sounded like civil sabotage, moral lunacy, social anarchy, and business disaster. Hayes had been a serious young man, and he still believed in virtue, which he suspected Christ of ridiculing by making up stories in which decent people were cheated by wastrels and the deserving blithely passed over in favor of bums, like Raleigh's own younger half-brother Gates, who'd actually served time in jail, and now, thank goodness, had disappeared.

Hayes believed in virtues like fortitude. . . .

(20)

This self-righteous indignation works as blinders on Raleigh and must eventually be stripped away. It is far from tedious, however. Terrence Rafferty claims, "His exasperation [caused by his sense of moral superiority] has an explosive quality that's rather engaging and that suggests the livelier, more expansive spirit that's been buttoned into his solid-citizen disguise" (860). Hayes is put through a great deal in learning the words of the fourteenth-century poet Robert of Brunne--who supplies the epigram for the novel--that "handlyng synne . . . ys a skyl"; along the way of finding his father, he is set upon by Hell's Angels, renegade nuns, the KKK, and a master gangster. Raleigh is

a middle-aged picaro whose self-righteousness comes across as a kind of innocence. Rafferty suggests:

His unsought adventures outside Thermopylae, North Carolina, are like a kid's first experiences away from home, strange and unnerving and finally liberating. The best and most moving comedy in Handling Sin is the spectacle of this earnest middle-aged man growing up by letting himself have some fun. He's born-again to be wild. (260)

Both Handling Sin and Confederacy are often compared to Fielding's The History of Tom Jones. When Fielding refers to Tom Jones as "this rogue, whom we have unfortunately made our hero" (23), the reader recognizes immediately that irony is at work, that Jones appears to be a rogue, but is actually, as William Nelson reminds us, superior to his critics who "get by [in life] with astounding hypocrisy" (164). In like manner, the more rogue-ish Raleigh becomes, the closer he is to redemption. It is Raleigh's hubris that first must be acknowledged and stripped away. He is full of pride even in his self-effacement:

Not only had no heroic role been written for Raleigh W. Hayes, he was the most minor of minor characters in the epic of his age; in all likelihood, he would never be noticed beyond the limits of Thermopylae, and, except possibly by his descendants, would soon be only a vague memory there. (208)

This sounds like humility, but he also admits in the same breath that the world's great heroes--"the Caesars and Christs" were no more important than he: ". . . he could still, he would still, take pride that among the microscopic scintillas called man, he, Raleigh W. Hayes, was a virtuous specimen" (208). He is bothered terribly by Sister Joe's notion (she leads a gang of renegade nuns) that "pride should fling someone into Hell's lowest depths" (207):

Why should pride like his be a sin worse than hoggish gluttony, worse than bestial lust, worse than improvidence! It was utterly infuriating that he should be made to feel guilty for feeling a little proud that within the puny borders of his admittedly insignificant life, he had done nothing to disgrace himself or injure others.

(207)

His redemption--his being stripped of pride and his embracing of community--is complete at the novel's conclusion. Ignatius has the same opportunity for redemption by surrendering his hypocrisy, but Confederacy does not consummate the deal; the conclusion is open-ended.

A stronger link to Southern literature than character development can be found in the local color of both novels. New Orleans, a center of local color in the nineteenth century (thanks largely to the writing of George Washington Cable), figures prominently in both novels. One of the

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epigrams, in fact, to Confederacy is taken from A. J. Leibling's The Earl of Louisiana, emphasizing local-color characteristics:

There is a New Orleans city accent . . . associated with downtown New Orleans, particularly with the German and Irish Third Ward, that is hard to distinguish from the accent of Hoboken, New Jersey City, and Astoria, Long Island, where the Al Smith inflection, extinct in Manhattan, has taken refuge. The reason, as you might expect, is that the same stocks that brought the accent to Manhattan imposed it on New Orleans. . . . Like Havanna and Port-au-Prince, New Orleans is within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic. The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico form a homogeneous, though interrupted, sea. (11)

The dialects of Mrs. Reilly, Burma Jones, Patrolman Mancuso, Mr. Robichaux, Santa Battaglia, and many others in Confederacy, evoke the locale. In Handling Sin, Raleigh's aunts (Victoria, Reba, and Lovie), Elwood Bragg (a man in his thirties who repeatedly pilfers the "voluminous undergarments that an elderly widow hung on a line in her backyard" [136]), Mingo Sheffield (Raleigh's neighbor and a reincarnation of Sancho Panza) and scores of other local-color grotesques serve the same purpose.

According to Richard F. Patteson of Mississippi State University, "A Confederacy of Dunces achieves a high degree of geographical and chronological specificity" (n.p.). That is, the novel is anchored to a particular time (the early 1960s) and a particular place (New Orleans). Ruppensburg concurs:

He describes the city exactly as it existed in the early 1960s, with no apparent embellishment of the facts. The street names and places described actually exist. Dr. Nut cola, the D. H. Holmes department store, hand-pushed hotdog carts, the Prytania Theatre, and the French Quarter are only a few of the elements which would seem familiar to residents of New Orleans but strange or even foreign to most other readers. (119)

One of the principal anchors to hold all of the New Orleans allusions to a particular time frame is the precise descriptions of the films that Ignatius attends. He spends much of his time watching TV programs and bad movies with morbid delight:

When Fortuna spins you downward, go out to a movie and get more out of life. Ignatius was about to say this to himself; then he remembered that he went to the movies almost every night, no matter which way Fortuna was spinning. . . . One of the films looked bad enough to bring him back . . . in a few days. (67)

The first film mentioned in Confederacy is a "circus musical, a heralded excess" (68), an MGM production (a lion roars at the beginning) starring Doris Day and a trained elephant. The film is, of course, Jumbo, and, according to Richard Patteson, it played the Prytania Theatre (where Ignatius views all his films) from February 22 to February 28, 1963. Other specific films that Ignatius mentions are Beach Party, starring Annette Funicello, and That Touch of Mink, with Doris Day and Cary Grant (305). According to Patteson, these films played the Prytania the same year.

Malone's Handling Sin is also replete with such specifics. It is a world of Goody headache powders and Tuberosa snuff (216); a world of "the huddled cluster[s] of McDonald's, K-Mart's and Pizza Huts that were now nourished by even the small Southern hamlets" (220); a world of old, flaking "Impeach Earl Warren" signs (180); a world of Carolina Pottery outlets (252) and bumper-sticker theology. While Thermopylae, North Carolina, itself cannot be found in an atlas, the other towns in Handling Sin, such as Goldsboro and Mt. Olive, can be, and Malone is punctilious in his recording of actual geographical and cultural details. And while Raleigh does not literally march into a movie as Ignatius does, spreading himself and his candy bars and his popcorn boxes across a front row and shouting his disapprobation at the screen ("What degenerate produced this abortion" [Confederacy 69]), he does display utter

incredulity that he would find the porn film, Debbie Does Dallas, in his cousin's borrowed car (181), that Mingo could find On the Beach, a Gregory Peck film, engaging (94), or that Shirley MacClaine and Audrey Hepburn in The Children's Hour could have any correlation to the reality of the situation confronting Mingo and himself (407). He cannot tolerate the pulp espionage novels which his wife loves (124). He blanches, albeit in ignorance, at his daughter's absorption of the music of the rock group Toto. He is drawn out of a motel room to face danger and adventure because he cannot tolerate facing "a Little House on the Prairie episode for the fifth time" (562). The tawdriness of his own existence is driven home when he calls his insurance office to reinforce that he is indispensable, only to find that Betty Hemans, his secretary of twenty years, can not only "run this office blindfold" without him, but can do it while writing a scrofulous romance novel and "listening to Frank Sinatra warbling" (227).

Despite their connections to the South, however, Handling Sin and Confederacy are not Southern in the sense of Faulkner's novels, "set [entirely] with recognizable Southern characters, employing innately regional themes for the more general human condition" (Ruppersburg 119). Both novels present, instead, protagonists who are middle-aged, city-dwelling, quasi-intellectuals who see agrarian life as beneath them. The focus of action, certainly the

climax of both novels, is in New Orleans, a cosmopolitan, heterogeneous anomaly in the South. Traditionally, Southern fiction had portrayed cities in a negative light; Southern novels had been romanticized diatribes (for example, Robert Penn Warren's All King's Men [1946]) on the greed, corruption, and false ambitions within the city. Somewhat superficially, both Handling Sin and Confederacy give lip-service to this theme. Malone's description of New Orleans is standard Southern fare:

On Bourbon Street and Royal Street, on Rampart and Toulouse, neon winked behind lace-iron fans as the merchants of dreams for night people peddled their old attractions, wine, women, and all kinds of songs. They peddled inflatable lovers in store windows, and roses in the cobble streets. Tired waiters swept the evening out of restaurants. Tired strippers walked, invisible in clothes, past the drunks who had hooted and snatched at them an hour earlier. (565)

Ignatius, in Confederacy, plays the same old saw in describing New Orleans:

This city is a flagrant vice capital of the civilized world . . . famous for its gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christis, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, and

lesbians, all of whom are only too well protected
by graft. (15)

For both writers, New Orleans--keeping in line with Southern tradition--becomes a microcosm of society's tawdriness, a place of meaningless, frenetic action and shattered Southern traditions, a place where corruption can thrive. It is also where one sells his soul in a Faustian pact for the tinsel and glitz of empty, modern living. Malone's description of Atlanta, for example, is instructive:

Atlanta was the "Terminus" of the Old South. . . .
But, of the New South, she was the young Atlanta,
racer after golden apples! She was Atlantis, new
found city of gold, as she burst from the sea of
Sherman's whirlwind, reborn on geysers of millions
upon millions of gallons of Coca-Cola. And now
all underpasses and overpasses, all beltways and
throughways, all cloverleafs, all trains, planes,
buses, trucks, all roads led to Atlanta. On them,
half-a-million new people a year hummed like wasps
in their Audis and Peugeotts to her hive of money.
She was a new home. Home of the new Braves, new
Hawks, new Falcons, new industry, new symphony,
new art and new cuisine. The new California
calling the high-tech, hi-rise, hi-fi, hi-energy,
lo-cal, lo-mein, and torellini primavera lifestyle
people. . . . Bulldozers scooping red clay day

and night couldn't keep up with her appetite for malls and condominiums and subdivisions and more, more roads. She manufactured a million products, the best known of which were Scarlett O'Hara and Coca-Cola, the Real Thing, the Pause that Refreshes. But Atlanta herself never paused; she picked up the golden apples on the run, and faster coke came not in bottles but in packets.

(487-488)

Ignatius, in Confederacy, concurs with this cheeky appraisal of cities and their corollary: what Lloyd M. Daigrepoint labels "the tawdriness of those classes who, though economically deprived, once possessed a spiritual and psychological soundness now degraded by values of the marketplace" (77). Ignatius speaks with utterly lucid reason, for example, when he defends those whom our acquisitive society labels mad:

The only problem that those people have anyway is that they don't like new cars and hair sprays. That's why they are put away. They make the other members of society fearful. Every asylum in this nation is filled with poor souls who simply cannot stand lanolin, cellophane, plastic, television and subdivisions. (317)

In both novels, cities are places where marriages are made (or not made) upon rationalizations for economic security, where success is only defined as an amoral making good

financially, where characters become paranoiac defenders of economic systems they do not understand, and where characters have either no connection with their histories and family members or have only connections that are mere bathos and empty sentimentality. However, for both writers, the city is not the heart of darkness. The most frightening memory that Ignatius has, in fact, is that of leaving New Orleans: "Outside of the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins. . . . Speeding along in that bus was like hurtling into the abyss" (23). Raleigh's most frightening childhood memory is also an agrarian one. As he hides among the cornstalks in a field, he watches in horror as Flonnie Rogers, an old, black domestic, butchers a chicken. She then turns on the startled child and threatens him with country life:

"Now go scuffle and pick me some collards 'fore I pack you in a crate, put you on a train and . . . [an old slave master], he'll have you cutting cane sunup to sundown till your fingers bleeds and your bones crook. Till you're knee-bent and body bowed. Then he put you on the block and make you look spry, he lay it on and then rub pepper in your sores. . . ." (134)

While I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930) declares in its preface that "the culture of the soil . . . is the best and most sensitive of

vocations," the only one that allows man a "natural existence" (Rubin xlvi), neither Ignatius nor Raleigh desire connections with soil. Ignatius, in fact, declares in his Journal of a Working Boy, or Up From Sloth,

New Orleans is . . . a comfortable metropolis which has a certain apathy and stagnation which I find inoffensive. . . . It is here in the Crescent City that I am assured of having a roof over my head and a Dr. Nut in my stomach.

(131)

In an attempt to be published in "the Sunday supplement market," he has written an essay on "New Orleans, City of Romance and Culture" (110). In Handling Sin, New Orleans is "the land of dreams" (565), the place of Raleigh's redemption. In Malone's description of Atlanta, he has written cheek, but his tongue is in it. Atlanta is "the new California," but it has nothing like the siren call of the old California in Grapes of Wrath. Here, "She was the new Liberty, lifting the light of her revolving skyscraper tops to all those Northerners tired of being mugged, poor from being taxed, wretched from being cold huddled masses on dirty snowy streets" (487). In a tone of admiration, Malone admits that Atlanta is "a place to start over, and at her center soar[s] a high bronze statue of a bare-breasted woman raising aloft a phoenix. She [is] a place to think big" (487).

While this equivocation toward the city on the part of both Malone and Toole suggests a repudiation of the stock Southern tradition, it also suggests a far more wide-sweeping repudiation. In "Tough Puppies," Malone's review of the novels of S. E. Hinton, he notes that in her works "the fabric is mythic" for there are no "verisimilar settings," "the city is bacchanalian," and "the country is pastoral" (277). Confederacy and Handling Sin offer the antithesis to these three elements. Malone chides the novels of Hinton, for their easy mythic formula allows the works to slide into bathos, to become romances with prose that "can be as fervid, mawkish and ornate as nineteenth-century romance" (277). What is worse, according to Malone, is that the door is now open for "sententious moralizing" to "coat the pages"; "lyricism, the lack of novelistic detail, the static iconography . . . rapid action (mostly violent) unfettered by the demands of a plot, . . . intense emotions (mostly heavy) and . . . clear-cut moral maps" create a fictional universe that "is as black-and-white as an old Cowboy film" (277). What Toole and Malone do that is so refreshing--Confederacy won the Pulitzer for fiction in 1981 and the New York Times Book Review insists that Handling Sin is superior to Confederacy--is to borrow some of the forms and techniques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, without wallowing in moral bathos.

In a review of T. Coraghessan Boyle's Water Music, Michael Malone confesses--two years before his Handling Sin went to press--that "the tumbling exuberance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century picaresque novels has lured many a modern novelist down the Pickwick path" (310); that lure proved to be inexorable for both Toole and Malone. It granted both authors an effective tool to allow them to repudiate both romantic bathos and Barth-Gaddis notions of post-modernism concurrently. Gene Lyons sees clearly the attempt in his review of Handling Sin:

For a contemporary novelist to invoke as his mentors Cervantes, Fielding and Dickens is something of a declaration of independence. Fie upon modernism! it's not tenure he's after, but that mythic figure the common reader--less a seeker of intellectual refinement than of diversion and energetic storytelling. (74)

In the essay "On One Who Wrote Not Wisely But to Sell" (1977), Malone reminds us that Dr. Johnson, "who hated to get out of his bed to work on his dictionary," once remarked to Boswell that "No one but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money" (597), and that "prostitution is a skilled profession, as anyone who has postponed writing the greatamericanovel to try to sell a script to Bionic Woman already knows" (597).

The target of both Toole and Malone is the common reader (and both writers do hit the bullseye), but not necessarily the adolescent reader. Malone laments in "Tough Puppies":

There is no sweeter sorrow than the self-pity of our teens, no pain more rhapsodized than our adolescent anguish; adults simply lose the will to sustain such Sturm und Drang. Like the protagonists of all Bildungsromans, Hinton's leather-jacketed young Werthers are lyrical on the subject of their psychic aches and pains. . . . They share with . . . their readers that most profound pubescent emotion: "I don't belong."

(278)

What Malone and Toole have done is to give a comic presentation of middle-aged Bildungsromans, to re-introduce Don Quixote as modern American mock-epic, to make "the classic apprenticeship novel" (Malone "Tough" 278) into a classic middle-age-crisis novel. Neither is there ever any undercutting of the narrative voice in either Handling Sin or Confederacy as there constantly is in the fiction of Gardner. There are hyperbolic descriptions from the narrators, such as the epic catalogues of Ignatius's description--his "paws," the "Smithfield hams that were his thighs" (224)--but both narrators present each of the characters accurately and fairly.

Toole and Malone tell their stories by means of omniscient narrators (ones much like the narrative voice in either Thackeray or Fielding) who record dialogue and occasionally--and briefly--enter the minds of characters. These mind probes give insight to the narratives, but they are not the heavy probings of Dostoevsky, Woolf, or Joyce. Handling Sin and Confederacy are not psychological, stream-of-consciousness novels, nor are they among the experimental novels of writers such as Gass or Barthelme. They do not present self-reflexive fiction as Barth does. Toole and Malone utterly reject the modernist and post-modernist traditions³⁷ of form in favor of the form and techniques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Both novels are utterly and absolutely linearly chronological. No flashbacks occur, even though Ignatius's reminiscences of college or Raleigh's increasingly frequent remembrances of things past open the door for the technique. (Ignatius threatens to compose a work that will be a series of flashbacks, but he never begins the work.) Keith Miller observes that in Confederacy, "the novel takes place within the compass of a small number of weeks. Nothing happens three years later or even three months later, a fact that is highly unusual in a book of over four hundred pages" (30-31). The same can be said of Handling Sin, a 656-page book. These novels, therefore, offer continuity: an echo of the linear, cause-effect orderly worlds of the narrations of the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries. Also, in Handling Sin, Raleigh's quest for his father is dependent upon the clues which his father sends to him in letters. In Confederacy, the relationship between Ignatius and his girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff, is developed and disclosed largely through letters. This echoes, of course, Samuel Richardson and many others in the tradition of the epistolary novel.

Ruppersburg points out that Confederacy also contains characteristics that are common to early seventeenth-century English drama, to what Alexander Leggatt labels as "citizen comedy":³⁸

[S]uch drama typically deals with middle-class situations and characters, is set mainly in the city, explores domestic themes (especially money and sex), and is always moralistic in tone, with the restoration of order occurring in some form. It is usually infused with a satirical spirit aware of class distinctions and conflicts, and of the "knavery of the world, an awareness in which there is often as much relish as criticism."

(126)

This, of course, reads like a plot summary of either Handling Sin or Confederacy. Further, both works fit nicely into Northrop Frye's definition of Old Comedy in his Anatomy of Criticism:

In Aristophanes, there is usually a central figure who constructs his (or her) own society in the teeth of strong opposition, driving off one after another all the people who come to prevent or exploit him, and eventually achieving a heroic triumphs, complete with mistresses, in which he is sometimes assigned the honors of a reborn god.

(43)

Ignatius's ordered world is disrupted by his mother's forcing him to go to work; Raleigh's extreme orderliness is crashed by his father's departure. Order is restored for Ignatius (at least potentially) when he escapes with Myrna from New Orleans and incarceration in an insane asylum; order is restored in Raleigh's world in the concluding scene, the family reunion jazz jam-session in New Orleans.

These correspondences of Confederacy and Handling Sin to classical and Elizabethan drama and to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels make it clear that Toole and Malone reject the formal techniques of the modernists and post-modernists; they reject the notion of sacerdotalist artists, that artists possess--as a kind of arcane priesthood--wisdom that most commoners cannot apprehend. Toole and Malone choose to affirm what people do understand (and, therefore, as Miller suggests of Toole, to bring audience and writer together [31]). What Malone has declared as

"that most profound pubescent emotion: 'I don't belong'" ("Tough" 278), both Confederacy and Handling Sin explore from within the arena of middle-age.

In the opening sentence of Handling Sin, "on the Ides of March in his forty-fifth year, the neutral if not cooperative world turned on Mr. Raleigh W. Hayes as sharply as if it had stabbed him with a knife" (5). From the opening line, Raleigh is a loner who views the entire cosmos, his family included, as being against him: "Within a week his eyes were saying narrowly to everything they saw, Et tu, Brute?" (5). Until the novel's denouement, he rules his life completely by reason, divorcing himself from emotional attachments to others. His mother and father had divorced in his early childhood, and by age seven he "was already concluding that life was not the bowl of cherries his uncle Hackney kept strumming about" and "God didn't care who won or how" (135). As early as age four, before the divorce, "Raleigh worried . . . he brooded on his weakness" (471). He grew up estranged from his parents. His memory of his father is reduced to an inability to forgive him:

"I'm real sorry you're hurting, Little Fellow," his father kept saying. "I'm sorry I've caused you even a minute of hurt." But what good was that? Absolutely none. Not even God could wave His hand and wipe away the past. (252)

Throughout his childhood, he industriously applies himself to odd jobs that he finds for himself, so that "he could buy what he would not accept from his father as a gift" (252). During times that he does spend with his father, if he ever forgets to be "angry at the injustice done his mother," or that "he disapproved of his father and didn't like spending time with him," then "guilt would rush over him and send him sullen off by himself" (253). For seven years after the divorce, Raleigh lived alone with his mother" (252) but he has no relationship with her. Other than eating breakfast and dinner together,

. . . they otherwise went their own ways, off to their own work and their own rooms. They each had two private rooms, a bedroom and a study. Neither entered the others without knocking, and only then for a significant reason. Raleigh spent a great deal of those seven years in the room he called his workroom. (252)

As Ignatius does in Confederacy, young Raleigh spends much of his time alone in his room, writing and "copying . . . into thick neat notebooks" (252).

He has only one sibling, a younger half-brother named Gates: "No two men, bound by blood, tied by upbringing, could be more dissimilar. They had nothing in common but a father, blue eyes, and curly hair" (247). Raleigh had resented Gates since birth, had tried to tolerate him as a

toddler, and tried to reform him as a teen-ager. He finally washes his hands of Gates, utterly convinced of the finality of the move, declaring him to be "an irresponsible, destructive, dishonest, shameless embarrassment; a profligate otter, tumbling avalanches in his careless path" (247). By age twelve, on the other hand, Gates had grown to view Raleigh as "simply a churlish, niggardly, self-righteous, pompous square object to be maneuvered; a dull, smug beaver to be weaseled. . ." (247). It is no wonder that, as Raleigh reflects upon his past during his epic quest--one that demands the performance of herculean feats given him by his father--"these hallucinations from the past were unnerving Raleigh" (157).

His adult life has been fraught with the same loneliness. He dislikes Oriental cuisine simply because "so many vegetables, meats, and noodles heaped commonally together violated his sense of privacy" (6). He is married to a woman whom he had dated for only two weeks, and--even years later--he knows little about her: "Raleigh's intimate companion for twenty years monstrously revealed herself a total stranger" (22). He is embarrassed, even though he has twin daughters in high school, when his wife stumbles upon him changing clothes in the bathroom, for "he doubted he had ever stood before her naked, under a bright light, in casual conversation" (45). He cannot bring himself to tell his wife during their long-distance telephone conversations

that he loves her (195). He does not recognize one of his daughters as she and her boyfriend, Booger, pass him on the road, for he does not realize his daughters are dating (18). He does not recognize his other daughter standing in the front yard, for he does not know that she is a cheerleader (25-26). He is incredulous to find her smoking (27). He is completely out of touch with even his immediate family.

This is no surprise, for when Raleigh was a boy, "the world beyond his ken stayed shadowy, and he was as indifferent to it as it was to him" (454) and "like everybody else, age did not entirely enlarge the young Raleigh's point of view" (455). He assumed into adulthood, that: ". . . the world around him was, simultaneously, unremittingly engrossed in Raleigh Hayes, while remaining utterly incapable of penetrating his secrets or understanding his unique personality. . ." (456).

While a preoccupation with oneself is certainly not unusual, in one of those moments in which the narrator probes inside Raleigh's head, the narrator tells us that Raleigh was never not thinking: "As he ate, bathed, ran, drove, worked, even as he listened to conversations of others, he was carrying on, within, a critical commentary whose purpose was to query, clarify, and otherwise explicate that soliloquy entitled Raleigh W. Hayes" (249).

This continual checking of his reason is used to explain his walking past friends without a word, his

hanging up on phone conversations without a good-bye, and his overlooking of food, clothing, holidays, and changes in weather. In an uncharacteristically self-reflexive, modern moment, in fact, the narrator reminds us why Raleigh cannot tell his own story:

And while he lived inside himself with the blinds drawn, Life walked noisily by the windows, unheard. Had Hayes been allowed to tell his own story, this would have been a very different narrative indeed, and, doubtless, a much more modern one, with scarcely any characters and very little plot. It would have been one long stream of consciousness. (250)

An important key, then, to Raleigh's elaborate heroic quest is his emotional vulnerability, his fear of love.

This fear has disconnected him even from history:

. . . for the past as past, Hayes harbored no nostalgia. . . . He was immune to the Southern homesickness for yesterday. Raleigh didn't know that Henry Ford had said, "History is bunk," but he wouldn't have argued with so successful a man. With America, he was willing to encapsulate decades and forget them, willing to leave behind. . . . His presence [in Thermopylae], initially accidental, was ultimately irrelevant. . . . He could have migrated, and so escaped all of his

relatives, but he had never required space in order to lose touch. (51)

Hayes finds the past embarrassing and distressing. He is convinced that his family tree is full of "hairbrained optimists" leading to his cousin Kenny Leacock (son of Big Em), who'd moved his wife in a Winnebago to Los Angeles, "where they'd spent years trying to get on The Price Is Right, disguised as paper-maché salt and pepper shakers" (53).

Ignatius Reilly of Confederacy, on the other hand, wallows in the nostalgia of history. It is the subject, in fact, of the first of many compositions by Reilly that are shown to the reader:

After a period in which the western world had enjoyed order, tranquility, unity, and oneness with its True God and Trinity, there appeared winds of change which spelled evil days ahead. An ill wind blows no one good. The luminous years of Abelard, Thomas A. Becket, and Everyman dimmed into dross; Fortuna's wheel had turned on humanity, crushing its collarbone, smashing its skull, twisting its torso, puncturing its pelvis, sorrowing its soul. Having once been so high; humanity fell so low. What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale. . . . Merchants and charlatans gained

control of Europe, calling their insidious gospel "The Enlightenment." The day of the locust was at hand, but from the ashes of humanity there arose no Phoenix. The humble and pious peasant, Piers Plowman, went to town to sell his children to the lords of the New Order for purposes that we may call questionable at best. . . . The gyre had widened; the Great Chain of Being had snapped like so many paper clips strung together by some drooling idiot; death, destruction, anarchy, progress, ambition, and self-improvement were to be Pier's new fate. And a vicious fate it was to be: now he was faced with the perversion of having to GO TO WORK. (40-41)

Raleigh, insulated by self-righteousness, hides in his work to avoid dealing with the present. Self-righteous Ignatius, a self-declared Piers Plowman, hides in the past and in adolescent accoutrements to avoid dealing with the present and to avoid work. Daigrepont makes a valid observation, however, that this cliché-ridden paragraph, scribbled as it is in a Big Chief notebook by a childish adult, makes a "valid historical assertion" (75):

The struggle for social justice and religious reformation on the part of men such as Langland-- a struggle warranted by the corruptions of the medieval Church and State--facilitated a social

and economic revolution in which spiritual concerns were often cast aside or made to accommodate economic goals. Puritans, for example, modified Luther's teaching on the sanctity of the layman's calling so that the acquisition of wealth became a sign of God's favor, evidence of God's election.³⁹ (75)

While Daigrepoint badly misreads Puritan theology (no doubt, with the help of Max Weber or R. H. Tawney), he does helpfully emphasize the self-righteous, crusading spirit of Ignatius. Ignatius has a good mind for the work of iconoclasm. While Ignatius and Raleigh are at opposite poles regarding personal hygiene, they are much like one another, especially in their loneliness and in their self-righteous appraisals of their worlds. Each views himself as a solitary genius surrounded by lesser beings. Ignatius writes in his journal, "since I have no peers, I mingle with no one" (134).

Ignatius is a son who, like Raleigh, has lost his father. Ignatius informs us that Mr. Reilly left only an "inconsequential" impression on his son, that his father was, in fact, a "rather inconsequential human" (60). The only other mention by Ignatius of his father in the entire novel is his lament: "I suspect that I am the result of a particularly weak conception on the part of my father. His sperm was probably emitted in a rather offhand manner"

(241). Like Raleigh, Ignatius has, from his childhood, been a slave to reason, to reality as constructed in his interior monologues: "The nation as a whole has no contact with reality. This is only one of the reasons I have always been forced to exist on the fringes of its society, consigned to the Limbo reserved for those who do know reality when they see it" (131). Like Raleigh, he denigrates emotional and physical attachments, especially sexual ones: "I did, however, succeed in thwarting [Myrna Mynkoff's] every attempt to assail the castle of my body and mind" (137). Like Raleigh, his memories of childhood are a pastiche of painful isolation. At the close of the novel, while packing for his escape from incarceration at a mental institution, he recalls "a disastrous one-day stay at a boy's camp when he was eleven" (400). Earlier, in the middle of a party, Ignatius felt as alone as he had felt on that dark day in high school when in a chemistry laboratory his experiment had exploded, burning his eyebrows off and frightening him. The shock and terror had made him wet his pants, and no one in the laboratory would notice him, not even the instructor, who hated him sincerely for similar explosions in the past. For the remainder of that day, as he walked soggily around the school, everyone pretended that he was invisible. (333-334)

He has become too close to his mother and has used her for insulation from the world. William Bedford Clark states that "Ignatius, like some parodic Stephen Daedalus, is caught up in a Telemachean quest for a suitable paternal figure in his life. By default, the dominant figure in determining who and what he is has been his mother, for all her own bewilderment in dealing with the real world" (275). Until the closing chapters of the novel when she finally rebukes him, he remains her "baby." As the narrative progresses, he becomes disenfranchised even by her. Mid-way through the novel, she admits to her friends, "Personally, I'm getting kinda fed up on Ignatius, even if he is my own child" (205). By the end of that conversation she declares, "Somebody oughta punch him in the mouth" (216). By chapter twelve, she is trying to convince him that "maybe you'd be happy if you went and took a little rest at Charity," the local mental hospital (317). In the conclusion, she delivers to Ignatius the most stinging indictment in the novel: "You learnt everything, Ignatius, except how to be a human being" (375). He has spent eight years in college to delay his entry into adulthood, and then has simply returned to his room to read Batman comics and to write in thick notebooks.

Ignatius, a self-appointed "profound thinker who has a certain perspective on the world's cultural development" (264), gives his preferred reading list in chapter ten. He "recommend[s] Batman, especially" as reading material for

the contemporary period, "for [Batman] tends to transcend the abysmal society in which he's found himself" and "his morality is rather rigid" (266-67). As does the Caped Crusader, Batman, Ignatius has his own costume: a green hunting cap with visor and earflaps, desert boots, and "voluminous tweed trousers [that] were durable and permitted unusually free locomotion. Their pleats and nooks contained pockets of warm, stale air that soothed [him]. The plaid flannel shirt made a jacket unnecessary while the muffler guarded exposed Reilly skin. . . ." (13). Later, while employed as a curbside hotdog vendor, he adds a pirate scarf, a cape, a gold earring, and a plastic cutlass to his costume because he, too, feels "rather like a Crusader" (239-40). Earlier, in an invective note that he had scribbled in red crayon to Dr. Talc, his college professor, he signs his name as "Zorro" and draws a sword on the last page (140). Edward C. Reilly notes that "just as Batman appears when Gotham City needs him, so does Ignatius" (10). Burma Jones, for example, when he finally sees Ignatius for himself, exclaims, "Ooo-wee! The green cap mother. In person. Live. . . . This was luck. . . . The fat mother dropped out of the sky just when we needed him most" (306-07). However, while Batman and Zorro leave their isolation to battle for society's reform, Ignatius spends almost his entire life in isolated enclosure: his mother's small house is referred to as a "dollhouse," "the

tinest structure on the block, aside from the carports, a Lilliput of the eighties" (48). He sits for hours in his dark room, filling Big Chief tablets with scribbling; he sits for hours in the bathtub, he nightly attends a dark moviehouse populated by a clientele of children.

Nearly every critic who deals with Confederacy emphasizes that Ignatius is himself a child. Clark, for example, reminds us,

He is addicted to junk food and sucks out the contents of jelly doughnuts before returning them to their box. He wears a Mickey Mouse wristwatch and delights in cartoons. He takes pleasure in donning costumes and otherwise assuming roles--poignantly, at times as when he betrays his secret longing for normalcy by assuming the personae of "Lance" or "Darryl" in his journal entries. (275)

In these journal entries, the child-man Ignatius, unlike Toole or Malone, writes much like many of the modernists and postmodernists. He certainly writes for a small audience. He and his girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff, are the only two who pay any attention to what he has written. His own mother laments to her friends that "he's sitting in his room right now writing some foolishness" (206) and that it is "foolishness no one will read" (213). Ignatius, therefore, is a rather large embodiment of a bone of contention of both

Toole and Malone: that modern writers and writing are so self-contained that they have no value to the community.

Keith Miller contends that it is this community--not the solitary explorer--who is "the ultimate arbiter of values for Toole" (31). So, too, with Malone. It is important to note that both Ignatius and Raleigh are failed, solitary reformers. "All his life, [Raleigh had] clung to reason like a parachute" (255), and he attempts to reform his father, his brother, his Ignatius-like neighbor Mingo, his wife, his children, and many of the grotesques whom he meets in his wanderings. He accepts an agenda and quest itinerary that parallel the trials of Hercules. He descends to the underworld when he meets a student ballet tour performing Orpheus in the Underworld. He engages a mafioso in a sword duel. During his second herculean trial, he wrestles with a cellar door, and looks like "a medieval illustration of Atlas supporting a flat world" (98). Exactly. As a smug reformer and self-appointed arbiter of values, he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. Other potential reformers in Handling Sin are Raleigh's Aunt Victoria Anna (a missionary), and Mingo Sheffield, Raleigh's "Gargantuan cherub, born-again-and-again Southern Baptist" neighbor (198).

In Confederacy, Ignatius views himself as a cultural reformer whose major goal in making "a lengthy indictment against our century" (18) is to get the world to embrace

his sense of "theology and geometry" (13): "What I want is a good, strong monarchy with a tasteful and decent king who has some knowledge of theology and geometry and to cultivate a Rich Inner Life" (224). He, as does Raleigh, engages in a sword battle, declaring himself to be "the avenging sword of taste and decency" (260). He is what the Black culture in American labels a Wannabe, an ostracized white who wishes to be black in order to have a sense of community: "I should have been a Negro. . . . I have always felt something of a kinship with the colored race because its position is the same as mine: we both exist outside the inner realm of American society" (134). As such, he attempts to organize a labor revolt, the Crusaders for Moorish Dignity (147-155). He also concocts a plan to infiltrate the presidency and the military with moral degenerates in a reform labeled Save the World Through Degeneracy (280). Other crusading reformers in Confederacy are Ignatius's girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff, an itinerate Freudian lecturer on the topic of "Sex in Politics: Erotic Liberty as a Weapon" (188), and Mrs. Levy, a self-taught pop psychologist and indefatigable meddler, founder of the Leon Levy foundation (293).

All these reformers from both novels--those who seek to impose their own sense of order upon society--fail abysmally. In Confederacy, Mrs. Levy fails in her advocacy efforts for Miss Trixie, whom Mrs. Levy mistakenly believes to be wronged by society. Myrna fails as a prototype Dr.

Ruth; no one attends her lectures and she cannot put more sex into people's lives, not even her boyfriend's. Ignatius's attempts at political and labor reform are fiascos. His over-riding desire--to impose his sense of theology and geometry upon the world--yields nothing but the harshest calumny. Robert Coles declares, "Ignatius is an odd one, if not the biggest of all the 'dunces.' He is sexually irregular, to say the least. He is an occupational misfit. He belongs, it seems, to no community whatsoever. His life is a messy, hapless one, a dead end" (8). In Handling Sin, Raleigh's childhood soul-mate as a reformer had been his Aunt Victoria: "The two talked together daily . . . like doctors in a lunatic asylum, like Puritans at a Roman carnival, to reassure one another that they were separate from their surroundings, and that the world in which they found themselves was not the world as it was meant to be" (80). Aunt Victoria, however, is forced into retirement and admits to Raleigh as he begins his quest that "I've got no use for Christianity. Love's not enough and never was" (90). Her life service to World Missions Company is exposed as thinly veiled self-serving rapaciousness. She has a child out of wedlock to a black day-laborer and jazz musician, and turns her back on both lover and child. Neither can Raleigh sway anyone into his parallel universe, his view of "the world as it was meant to be." His brother's reaction is typical: "Why don't you

go sit down and ask yourself why you don't get off my back?" (249). The other potential reformers, the religious Sheffields, can start no reform because they are written off as "religious maniac[s] and lewd joker[s] at the same time" and "fat, born-again loudmouth[s]" (9).

Toole and Malone are thus entrenched in a tradition within American literature, one that abounds in warnings against excessive individualism. Hawthorne delivered clearly the message that one must maintain normal relationships with the community; Faulkner codified that message. In Confederacy, those characters who are striving (in the face of rather severe idiosyncrasies) to achieve communal norms, enjoy a comic denouement. Mancuso, who has endured humiliations galore at the hands of his precinct officer, finally uncovers Miss Lee's pornography ring, is given a promotion, and finally enjoys the approbation of his family. Burma Jones, who has come forward with the key evidence, receives a civic award and, much more importantly, a good job from Mr. Levy. Mr. Levy begins to take charge of his own affairs and to lead the pants factory to prosperity, thus rescuing both himself and poor Miss Trixie from the dominance of his wife. The publicity surrounding the crime ring at the Night of Joy Club proves to be Darlene's show business break. Mrs. Reilly nets a husband (Claude Robichaux) and rids herself of Ignatius. Santa Battaglia can finally rejoice that her family has attained success

in the New World and that she herself is a successful matchmaker.

With Myrna's help, Ignatius also escapes; his liberation is from the Charity Mental Hospital ambulance crew. Stuffed in Myrna's sportscar along with Myrna's guitar and his own plastic sword and mountain of Big Chief tablets, he finally--in the last line of the novel--displays his first moment of gratefulness, his first move toward a sense of community: "Gratefully. . . . Taking [Myrna's] pigtail in one of his paws, he pressed it warmly to his wet moustache" (405). This act, however, is open-ended. Coles asks, "Ignatius is sprung, but where is he headed? Does grace appear, of all ironies, in the person of Myra [sic]?" (8). Patteson and Sauret emphasize that in his escape into the heart of darkness (the industrial Northern wasteland of New York), "he still clings to his tablets and his sword, which remain essential props in the psycho-drama of his worldview" (87). If he continues to cling to this view, he is simply escaping to more intense chaos. He will have to surrender his self-aggrandizing self-righteousness to gain salvation.

Raleigh of Handling Sin must make the same surrender. Raleigh's father, Early, has concocted a plan "to shake Raleigh out of his prudent stodginess" (Taliaferro 13). Raleigh receives an initial set of taped instructions from his father, ordering him to bring a list of people and

things to New Orleans by Good Friday. The tape ends with the admonition: "I want you to enjoy yourself for once, Specs. I want you to think of this as a holy adventure, by God" (32). In this holy adventure of several hundred pages encompassing dozens of adventures and scores of "throwaway characters" (Taliaferro's label for "quirky souls who add nothing to the plot and everything to the texture of the novel" [13]), Raleigh's re-education from that of a self-righteous, dutiful prig to that of communal human being is traced. Thomas D'Evelyn, in "Adventures of Modern-Day Odysseus," notes that "the trip does for Hayes what the Odyssey did for Odysseus: It makes a much-thinking man humble. Gradually, Raleigh opens up to the color and form of the world" (21). He begins to understand, little by little, why his father often lamented that he was "uptight" and "shriveling in virtue" (591). Raleigh begins to discover parts of himself in those whom he collects--much as Jason collected his Argonauts--during his quest: his half-brother Gates Sheffield, Simon "Weeper" Berg (his brother's gangster business associate), and a black saxophonist named Toutant Kingstree.

Amidst the hilarious cacophony of the picaresque chaos of the novel, Raleigh, the inveterate worrier, begins to learn to laugh. Notes of serious intent, however, also intrude. D'Evelyn emphasizes these "quiet moments":

On the road, Raleigh has time to think about the fact that his ruling virtue, indifference to the world and the concerns of other people (except when it involves insurance), is really a kind of vice. Malone suggests that it is a form of the deadly sin of acedia, or spiritual sloth. Hence the value of laughter. . . . (21)

This underscores, by the way, the novel's kinship to Confederacy, for Ignatius also is forced to face the sin of sloth within himself:

The last time [Mrs. Reilly] forced [Ignatius] to accompany her to mass on Sunday he had collapsed twice on the way to church and had collapsed once again during the sermon about sloth, reeling out of the pew and creating an embarrassing disturbance. (20)

Again, it is obvious that Raleigh's chances of redemption appear to be better, however, than those of Ignatius. Both Raleigh and Ignatius, moreover, receive their strongest lessons on the redemptive value of community from strong black characters. Burma Jones of Confederacy (of whom Kaiser Bill of Handling Sin is a mirror image), provides a running commentary that, as Coles states, is "strangely sane, earthy, shrewd and knowing" (4). Coles also notes that in Confederacy:

The whites, all of them so much "better off" supposedly, than Jones, by virtue of their skin color, turn out to be collectively out of their minds, and especially incapable of sensible, pointed, and appropriate social and psychological judgments. But he is down-to-earth, clear-headed, and above all, attentive. (5)

Flannery O'Connor had provided similar clear-headed input in her own fiction through Astor and Sulk, the two black handymen of "The Displaced Person" (1954). Faulkner had earlier established the use of a strong, black, moral voice as a motif of Southern fiction through the character of Dilsey. As the powerful Compson family dissolved in The Sound and the Fury (1929), for example, Dilsey stands firm in moral and physical strength and in dignity. In Handling Sin, as in Confederacy and much of Southern fiction from Faulkner to Berry Morgan, it is "the strong, vital black characters" who, as D'Evelyn notes, "prepare Raleigh for his final discovery of his own capacity for laughter and for 'listening'" (21).

By the time of his first stop at a major city, Charleston (where, as Rafferty reminds us, "Raleigh stumbles into some wonderful Tom Jones-style bedroom chaos at an inn" [862]), the tone of the novel shifts momentarily to that of beautiful poetry. The reader, as well as Raleigh, is inundated with the beauty of Charleston in the moonlight,

and the beauty of the love that can grow (even if heretofore unnoticed) in a marriage of twenty years. Later, in the more antiseptic, modern Atlanta (where Raleigh engages in a duel and a chase through an amusement park under the watchful features of Mt. Rushmore-sized sculptures of Jeff Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and Robert E. Lee), race relations and the motif of jazz music begin to become dominant elements. By the time Raleigh gets to New Orleans, which Rafferty calls "that over-flowing jambalaya of music, Christianity, Old South beauty and the pleasures of the flesh" (862), he has become a changed man. Toward the end of the novel, but well before the last line as in Confederacy, the protagonist has a change of heart:

He didn't feel triumphant or relieved or righteous. He felt almost sad, almost lonely, almost sorry. What an incredible joke. Here he was with four men, not one of whom he'd originally wanted to bring along, all of whom had caused him endless trouble and worry; none of whom bore the vaguest resemblance to his own "type of person." And now, when he could already see the lights of the city where all their travels together would end, and their separate lives begin, all he could think was that he was going to miss them. (563)

The work of Reconstruction in the South is renewed here. According to Rafferty, Malone "sees his native region as a

paradise lost, and his fellow Southerners as people whose virtues--grace, courage and boundless appetite for living--have been spoiled. . ." (862). Failure to step out of one's self to embrace community (racism is only one of the more obvious lapses, one that is redolent of all kinds of provincialism and smugness) appears to be the original sin. Rafferty correctly identifies jazz--"the common ground of blacks and whites, a traditional music that's bent on keeping itself new, refreshing itself every time a player picks up his instrument and blows his own experience through it" (862)--as the element that illustrates the Reconstruction in the novel's conclusion. In a New Orleans dive called "The Cave" (reminiscent of Plato's place of enlightenment and redemption?), all the principal players of the quest join together on stage. Raleigh, the son, is re-united, not only with his father and half-brother, but with his Aunt Victoria (the old maid missionary), her granddaughter from a tryst with Jubal Rogers (Billie Rogers, the girl with whom Raleigh's father fled Thermopylae), and the host of characters who have been collected along the quest. The first song they performed is "Way down yonder in New Orleans / In the land of dreamy dreams / There's a garden of Eden. . . . That's what I mean. . . ." (604). The scene is indeed, Edenic: "as song follows song, family members reunite, whites and blacks pick up cues from one another and harmonize, and all the players surpass themselves in

the making of a wild but elegant music. . ." (Rafferty 862). Raleigh has, indeed, had a "holy adventure" (32). By the time he has his adventures at the amusement park in Atlanta, he has abdicated his existentialism: twenty-five years prior, in college, "he'd leaned toward a nihilistic angst flavored with a dash of French absurdist existentialism. But now, on reflection, he found he'd changed" (539). John Gardner would have loved Raleigh, who, toward the end of his Jason-Herculean quest can admit:

Now, his ultimate conclusion was that while the world might well be a transitory vale of tears, or the pale reflection of an Idea, or a causeless purposeless hodgepodge of matter, or the world might not even exist at all--still, he didn't want to leave it behind. (539)

Within the next thirty pages, Raleigh comes a giant step closer to redemption; he jettisons the notion that he, in his own self-righteousness, has deserved good things in life. In doing so, he also trades a fuzzy Neo-Platonism for a notion of Judeo-Christian theism:

Some rare, fragile, lucky--unparalleled lucky--fluke or grace had given him, for no earthly reason, like surprise presents, everything, absolutely everything, he'd thought he earned, and sustained by his own will, and deserved more. Whereas, in fact, the world, or its creator, had

not the slightest obligation to him at all. . . .
It was not obliged to put the much-remarked petals
on the lilies, nor keep its famous eye on the
sparrow, nor reward Raleigh W. Hayes for his
virtue, nor punish sinners for their vice. . . .
It was not obliged to nourish or even preserve
at all any of its creatures, species, planets,
or galaxies. Given that this was so . . . the
truth was, it's possible, one might say, assuming
creation owed him no more debt than it owed the
dinosaur, than the artist owed a doodle, then,
all things considered, he, Raleigh Hayes, with
his wife and children and health and house, had
been an extremely lucky man. (567-68)

Raleigh, here, is not far from the kingdom. He has traded
self-righteousness for grace. Within another thirty pages,
he becomes more like, of all people, Mingo Sheffield, who
has been described as "not an analytical man" but rather a
"man of faith" (264). Raleigh is opening himself to love
as he surrenders his rational self-righteousness.⁴⁰ Just
before his reunion with his father in New Orleans, he
recalls a childhood memory in which he had discussed with
his father, after his grandfather's funeral, the two great
commandments of Jesus, "Love God with all your heart and
love your neighbor as yourself," and the one great sin,
"Not loving them" (572). As a disenchanting child, he had

agreed with his father that "God stinks. His rules aren't fair" (571). Now, after his "holy adventure," he is able to call his wife to tell her that he loves and misses her. He is able even to face his father and admit:

"Momma never stopped loving you. Vicky [Aunt Victoria] never stopped loving you. And, Daddy-- despite the fact that you couldn't figure out any better plan to keep me from being a pompous ass than the insanity you put me through the last few weeks--I never stopped loving you." (591)

This admission occurs just before midnight on March 31, and thus ushers in April Fool's Day. The significance of this is not lost upon Raleigh's father:

"April's Fool's? . . . Now there's a Jesus joke for you. What I mean was, it's Good Friday. Now, that's funny, Raleigh. Old Jesus is hanging there, they're jabbing swords in Him and shoving vinegar at Him, and He flops over dead, then He winks open one eye, see, and says 'April Fool's.'" (609)

When Raleigh attempts to upbraid his father with the observation that "a lot of people don't find the crucifixion a comic matter," Early simply retorts, "Well, the joke's on them" (609). Throughout Handling Sin, it certainly is. D'Evelyn's reading correctly emphasizes the comic influence of the resurrection in the novel: "Laughter pervades

Handling Sin, but it ends on a quietly paradoxical note and in silent contemplation of the strange happiness of being human and in love on Easter" (21). After the laughter has subsided, the reader faces that this work is "pretty much the story of the Prodigal Son turned inside out, seen from the point of view of the stuffy, resentful 'good' brother who stayed behind" (Taliaferro 13). It is a parable of love and reconciliation; it is, as Taliaferro states, "a celebration of plain old fun as one of God's great pedagogical devices" (13). It is the celebration of a middle-age homecoming of epic proportions, and perhaps the harbinger of the future for the American epic.

Epilogue

You Can (You Must) Go Home Again

In "A Planetary Patriot," Michael Malone's review of Kurt Vonnegut's Palm Sunday, Malone laments the restricted audience of not only Vonnegut, but of American fiction as a whole:

That Vonnegut's books seem written for a largely male adolescent audience only places him, of course, in a line extending from James Fenimore Cooper to fellow Hoosier Booth Tarkington all the way to Fitzgerald and Salinger. (The question for our fiction has always been, "Who's writing for the adults?") (346)

John Kennedy Toole and Michael Malone have both made the attempt--along with such writers as Berry Morgan, Anne Tyler, and Lee Smith--to deal with adult fiction, to help establish what has been labeled by Margaret Gullette as the "Midlife Progress Novel":⁴¹

Especially in the past decade and a half [c. 1970-1988], a number of fiction writers have been offering Anglo-American culture new heroines and heroes in their middle years; new plots of recovery and development in those years; and favorable views of midlife looks and midlife outlooks, midlife parenting and childing, midlife subjectivity. (xii)

Characters such as Malone's Raleigh Hayes do, indeed, fly in the face of the negative ideology of the aging process, the idea of most American fiction that growing old is inexorably negative, that one must become a Widow Douglas. Now, novels such as Handling Sin suggest that positive, life-affirming plots can be given to middle-aged characters, that the middle-aged can slay the dragons of adult vicissitudes of life. Aging need not be a no-win proposition; characters such as Raleigh Hayes can face financial struggles, psychological carnage, loss of loved ones and so on and still discover a sense of gain.

Gullette overstates the case, however, by declaring that her book "celebrates a new kind of novel" (xi); such midlife tales are at least as old as Don Quixote or even The Odyssey. The current midlife progress novels do, however, prepare the American epic to return to its classical models. In the Aeneid, for example, Aeneas asks his host Helenus, who is a seer, "By what course can I overcome suffering?" (III, 368). A. Bartlett Giamatti amplifies the translation of suffering (labores) here to mean "labor, effort, work, the expenditure of energy" and he insists that the term "carries a note of travail and weariness" (19). According to Giamatti, Aeneas is, in effect, asking, "What will it cost me in terms of myself? How can I establish stability? How can I get home?" (19). As much as traditional epics are about quest, they are about exile. The quest is really

one's search for where he began. The Odyssey is an exile from Ithaca and Penelope; in the Iliad, from Helen; in Dante's Comedy, from Beatrice and God; in The Fairie Queen, from Elizabeth and her court; in Magnalia, from the Mother Church who had come to be seen by the Puritans as "the great whore that sitteth upon many waters. . . . THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17: 1, 5); in Confederacy of Dunces, from New Orleans and Mrs. Reilly; in Handling Sin, from Thermopolyae, N.C., and Aura Hayes. Woman is always central in the way back. She is both the goal and the obstacle. She is the waiting Penelope and the obfuscating Circe. Perhaps, when epic motifs are injected into midlife progress novels, creating modern epics such as Handling Sin, American epic may be prepared for an about-face, a return full circle to the classical model for epics wherein the focus is Helen or Eve--the one who is the locus of the new homestead, the creator of new fathers.

This feminist element of epic tradition is long overdue in American epic works. From Magnalia to Moby Dick, women are scarcely mentioned. When they do appear in works such as Mather's Magnalia or Barlow's Columbiad, they are sheltered, have no libido, are wispy, and are simply cardboard idealizations of patriarchal notions. In Melville's writing, sexual expression by a female is equated with a flaw in character and is only found in non-Caucasian characters. Anatoos in Mardi (1848) and Fayaway in Typee (1846),

for example, are both sexually playful, but are also south-sea islanders who are beyond the pale of Caucasian civilization. In the epic Moby Dick, women are completely absent. Whitman is sometimes cited as the first American epicist to return to a feminine dimension, for he does strongly affirm in Leaves of Grass that women should enjoy equality with men: "The wife, and she is not one jot less than the husband, / the daughter, and she is just as good as the son, / The mother, and she is every bit as much as the father" ("A Song for Occupations," 33-35). However, this lip-service to equality is tempered by Whitman's life-long conviction that women should remain immersed in the "domestic joys of womanly housework" and "beautiful maternal cares" ("To Think of Time," 58-59). His model is that of "stout, strong, happy and hearty" colonial women who are unafraid of either wild beasts or Indians and who "rose early" and "worked like beavers" (I Sit 116-17). D. H. Lawrence speaks truth when he indicts Whitman's "athletic mothers of these United States" as being merely "faceless muscles and wombs" (167). Richard Chase notes that Whitman's female characters differ from his male characters only by being "procreative machines that exude a divine nimbus" (115). Harold Aspiz summarizes Whitman's depiction of women: he makes "physical fitness, sexual appetite and a capacity for motherhood the criteria of excellence in all women" (212).

This allowance for sexual appetite in women is increasingly being used by Whitman critics to argue that Whitman was on the cutting edge of feminist sensibilities for his day. Whitman does, indeed, declare in volume III of With Walt Whitman in Camden:

They [women] are not quite full--not quite entire:
 --the woman who has denied the best of herself--
 the woman who has discredited the animal want,
 the eager physical hunger, the wish of that which
 though we will not allow it to be freely spoken
 of is still the basis of all that makes life worth
 while and advances the horizon of discovery. Sex:
 sex: sex: whether you sing or make a machine, or
 go to the North Pole, or love your mother, or
 build a house, or black shoes, or anything--
 anything at all--it's sex, sex, sex: sex is the
 root of all: sex--the coming together of men and
 women: sex, sex. (452-53)

Even a cursory reading of Leaves of Grass, however, will reveal that the poet is tepid toward female sexuality and attractions, especially outside of the traditional bounds of motherhood within marriage. For his own companions, Whitman preferred men. According to Aspiz, "Leaves of Grass contains no expression of heterosexual relation to rival 'We Two Boys Together Clinging' and no love lyric as delightful as 'When I Heard at the Close of the Day,' with its address

to the absent male lover" (228). This assertion is corroborated by a fragment from Whitman's hand in Walt Whitman: A Catalog Based Upon the Collection of the Library of Congress (1955):

. . . under present arrangements, the love and comradeship of woman, of his wife, however welcome, however complete, does not and cannot satisfy the high . . . requirements of a manly soul for love and comradeship . . . [because a man is drawn to his male lover] with more passionate attachment than he can bestow on any woman, even his wife. . . . (n.p., item number 61)

Late in Whitman's life, when it was reported to him that some of his British fans claimed him as a fellow homosexual, he, according to Aspiz, "attempted to bolster the myth of his Adamic machismo by inventing the pitiful tale that he had sired six illegitimate children during his lustier days" (217).

This ambivalence, obviously, clouded the feminist issue for the American epic to follow, Frank Norris's The Octopus. America had only recently conquered her frontier. By the 1890s, the Feminist movement was parading for battle and winning concessions. Fiction such as Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898) was lampooning the new dominance of tough American women over men who were growing weak now that there were no more Troys to burn. Oscar Wilde

had done a scandalous lecture tour of America. In England, Kipling had become sickened at Wilde and those of his ilk, as well as of the England that had degenerated in his absence to India to produce such effetes. In "In Partibus," he laments:

Yes, I have sighed for London Town,
 And I have got it now;
 And half of it is fog and filth,
 And half of it is row. . . .
 But I consort with Long-haired things
 In velvet collar-rolls,
 Who talk about the Aims of Art,
 And "theories" and "goals,"
 And moo and coo with womenfolk
 About their blessed souls. . . . (11)

In America, Norris, who had once aspired to be a painter as well as a writer, "lived in constant dread" that he might become such an "effeminate little man" (Dillingham 84). According to Laski, Presley, the protagonist of The Octopus, can be interpreted as a manifestation of Norris's own fear, a fear of going soft while on his search for the American epic (78). Kipling quickly "became Norris's new literary idol" (Walker 67); he referred to Kipling as his "adored and venerated author" (Walker 68).

Norris's personal fear transferred to a vision of the whole country; and, according to William Dillingham, this

theme becomes "his closest tie with recent American writing" (84). Twentieth-century writers, including the writers of epics, do indeed emphasize the emasculation of the American male, often by the scalpel of women-dominated refinement and the absence of strong father figures. Jake Barnes's emasculating wound (much like Ahab's in Moby Dick) is representative of the emasculation of his society. John Barth's Goat-Boy, constantly haunted by an Oedipal complex, cannot act: "I found myself quite stopped and suddenly discouraged" (107). Ignatius Reilly, in Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces, bounces from one job to the next, "only because I would be beaten senseless [by mother] with a baked wine bottle if I dared stay at home" (220). Gaddis's Recognitions is a long parade of male characters who are inert, often because of female dominance. Esther, for example, laments, "[Wyatt] can't paint me, because of [his mother]. We can't travel to Spain because she's there. . ." (128). In Gaddis's JR, all the male characters are broken, most lament their poor relationships with their fathers, and all are dominated by women. John Gardner's monster in Grendel can come to no conclusions--"nothing alive or dead could change my mind! I changed my mind" (94)--and he cries to his mother, "Why are we here?" (6). In Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom, Quentin Compson, in love with his older, domineering sister, is driven to suicide. In Edith Wharton's Age of Innocence, Newland Archer wastes his life in irresoluteness, drifting

from one broken female relationship to another. David, the protagonist of Henry Roth's Call It Sleep, is an indolent elementary school child--"the mere passing of time was a joy . . . that was all the activity he asked" (262)--who lives in an Oedipal dream, in abject fear of his father. T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock measures his life by the teaspoons of sugar from the sugarbowl in the female-dominated drawing room. Raleigh Hayes, in Michael Malone's Handling Sin, must go on a quest to find his father in order to break what he perceives to be the dominance of his wife and daughter. His license plate, "given him by his wife for Christmas," spells out "MUT LIFE" (18). As noted in chapter one of this study, Norris had reason to fear that he himself was succumbing to such a dog's life.

Notwithstanding his fear of women, Norris does, indeed, attempt to elevate the role of women, as Dr. Clement Dukes had urged fifty years earlier. (See chapter one.) His problem is that, as nearly all of his critics have pointed out, his women characters tend to be cardboard; they tend to be over-simplifications of real women. His penchant was to treat his female characters in the way that Whitman had done before him and as Hemingway would do after him--as an alien breed.

When Norris ennobles women characters, he does so following Whitman's lead, by endowing them with masculine qualities and features, sometimes even male names, for

example, the namesake of his novel Moran, and his own daughter, "Billy." Norris invests his perception of the American Muse with such strength:

It [the writing of fiction] is not an affair of women and aesthetes, and the Muse of American fiction is not the chaste, delicate, superfine mademoiselle of delicate poses and "elegant" attitudinizings, but a robust, red-armed bonne femme, who rough-shoulders her way among men and among affairs. . . . Choose her, instead of the sallow, pale-faced statue creature, with the foolish tablets and foolish, upturned eyes, and she will lead you as brave a march as ever drum tapped to. Stay at her elbow and obey her as she tells you to open your eyes and ears and heart, and as you go she will show things wonderful beyond wonder in this great, new, blessed country of ours.

She is a Child of the People, this muse of our fiction of the future, and the wind of a new country, a new heaven and a new earth is in her face and has blown her hair.

Believe me, she will lead you far from the studios and the aesthetes, the velvet jackets and the uncut hair, far from the sexless creatures who cultivated their little art of writing as the

fancier cultivates his orchid. . . . She will lead you . . . straight into a world of Working Men, crude of speech, swift of action, strong of passion, straight to the heart of a new life, on the borders of a new time, and there only you will learn to know the stuff of which must come the American fiction of the future. ("Novelists of the Future" 159-60)

This is a far cry from Irving's lament of the American Muse as "a pawn-broker's widow," and, replete with its fustian, Kiplingesque jabs at Wilde, it sets the tone for the woman whom Norris admires in The Octopus.⁴²

All women in this novel, save one, are flawed by fragmentation. Angele, for example, is needed by Norris to fulfill his depiction of the shepherd Vanamee as an Orpheus figure, but, apart from an oft-repeated Homeric epithet of her "lips of almost Egyptian fullness" (I, 34), nothing is given of her physical characteristics. She is an evanescent, "spiritual" woman who floats in and out of Vanamee's trances. Annie Derrick, wife of Magnus Derrick, on the other hand, is an unflattering manifestation of the female mind. She has a delicate frame that was "not made for the harshness of the world" (I, 55). She withdraws from the "world of Working Man" that is the arena of Norris's Muse. She makes annual requests to Magnus for vacations to the art centers of Rome. She finds in the growing of wheat

something "vaguely indecent" and she "shrank from it"

(I, 57); "she withdraws from the life of man and nature"

(I, 57):

. . . she retired within herself. She surrounded herself with books. Her taste was of the delicacy of point lace. . . . She read poems, essays, the ideas of the seminary at Marysville persisting in her mind. Marius the Epicurean, The Essays of Elia, Sesame and Lilies, and the little toy magazines, full of the flaccid banalities of the "Minor Poets," were continually in her hands.

(I, 57)

Mrs. Derrick repeatedly tries to stifle Magnus's attempts to join the other ranchers in their fight with the railroad; her weakness lies in her constant bleating for security. She is constantly "striving, with vain hands, to draw her husband back with her"; "loneliness beyond words gradually enveloped her. . . . Had she been abandoned in mid-ocean, in an open boat, her terror could hardly have been greater" (I, 173). Her selfish temerity has resulted in actual mental illness: "there seemed to her morbid imagination--diseased and disturbed with long brooding, sick with the monotony of repeated sensation-- . . . a sense of vast oppression, formless, disquieting" (I, 173). She fears the crowd at Annixter's barn dance; she is "frightened by the glare of lights, the hum of talk, and the shifting crowd,

glad to be out of the way . . . willing to obliterate herself" (I, 233).

In his remarkably candid essay, "Why Women Should Write the Best Novels," Norris argues that the dysfunctions caused by Mrs. Derrick's selfishness are the plight of nearly all women. They never have, and never will, write good fiction because of "their nature and character" (180). Women--"even making allowances for the emancipation of the New Woman"--live "secluded lives" and are "shut away from the study of, and the association with, the most important thing for all of them--real life" (180). Beyond these "exterior" causes, Norris cites a flaw that he sees as endemic to the being of woman, that is, to "the make-up of the woman herself": she has a penchant "to 'feel her nerves,' to chafe, to fret . . . then comes fatigue, harassing doubts, a touch of hysteria . . ." (181).

There is, then, to Norris, a destructiveness in women, a selfishness that is entropic. Of the three vestibules for selfishness in The Octopus--the railroad magnates and cronies, those among the wheat growers who do not love the land but simply rape it for profit, and the feminine (be they female or emasculated male aesthetes) introverts--only the third group is indicted by Norris. "You are dealing with forces . . . when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads" (II, 285); they are two amoral forces in a cosmic nihilistic chess match in which men are but pawns. With a decided lack

of conviction in tone, given all that precedes, Norris dismisses, in the final paragraph of the novel, the first two dens of selfishness with a benediction straight from St.

Paul:

Annixter dies, but in a far-distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (II, 361)

Closer scrutiny reveals, however, as it almost always does, a loophole in "the larger view." There is one "sham," one "wickedness" in The Octopus that does not work for good--Norris's indictment of the falseness of introverted, selfish feminism. Mrs. Cedarquist, wife of a wealthy industrialist and a relative of Shelgrim, the railroad president, is a "fashionable woman, the president or chairman of a score of clubs" (II, 28) and the object of Norris's bared scorn. She is forever running after fads, "parading new and astounding proteges" to her coteries at teas and luncheons. These unabashed charlatans "gave readings on obscure questions of art and ethics," "discussed the contra-will and pan-psychic hylozoism," or "bellowed extracts from Goethe and Schiller in the German" (II, 29). The unforgivable sin to Norris is one's selfish withdrawal into such an artificial world:

It was the Fake, the eternal, irrepressible sham; glib, nimble, ubiquitous, tricked out in all the paraphernalia of imposture, an endless defile of charlatans that passed interminably before the gaze of the city, marshalled by "lady presidents," exploited by clubs of women, by literary societies, reading circles, and culture organizations. The attention the fake received, the time devoted to it, the money which it absorbed, were incredible. It was all one that imposter after imposter was exposed; it was all one that the clubs, the circles, the societies were proved beyond doubt to have been swindled. The more the Philistine press of the city railed and gayed, the more the women rallied to the defence of their protege of the hour. That their favorite was persecuted was to them a veritable rapture. Promptly they invested the apostle of culture with the glamour of a martyr. (II, 30)

This world of sham can receive no benediction from Norris, that is, there can be no possibility of this selfish introversion working for good, for it is the cause of male sexual inversion and/or emasculation. There can be no forgiveness for the creator of men like Mrs. Cedarquist's artist friend Hartrath, who exclaims: "I am too sensitive. It is my cross. Beauty . . . beauty unmans me" (II, 32).

There is only one woman in The Octopus who nurtures a man into full manhood and a broadened world-view rather than emasculating him. When Annixter, an obvious Achilles figure in all of his hypochondriacal peevishness, self-centeredness, and surliness, realizes that he has fallen in love with Hilma Tree, a dairy girl on his ranch, he is instantly transformed--in one of the most shameless passages of schmaltz in American literature:

Annixter stood suddenly upright, a mighty tenderness, a gentleness of spirit, such as he had never conceived of, in his heart strained, swelled, and in a moment seemed to burst. Out of the dark furrows of his soul, up from the deep, rugged recesses of his being, something rose, expanding. . . . The little seed, long since planted, gathering strength quietly, had at last germinated. (II, 81-82)

In keeping with the novel's original subtitle, An Epic of the Wheat, Annixter's blossoming while he spends the night sitting in his wheat field is concurrent to the blossoming of the wheat. Never has pathetic fallacy been so pathetic:

There it was, the Wheat, the Wheat! The little seed long planted, germinating in the deep, dark furrows of the soil, straining, swelling, suddenly in one night had burst upward to the light. . . . Once more the Titan, benignant, calm, stirred and

woke, and the morning abruptly blazed into glory upon the spectacle of a man whose heart leaped exuberant with the love of a woman, and an exulting earth gleaming transcendent with the radiant magnificence of an inviolable pledge. (II, 82-83)

Annixter, who had first appeared in the novel as a blustering comic character, marries Hilma and is transformed into a man of heroic proportions--a hero of the new paganism, one who attains heroism by transcending himself.

Of course, to Norris, as to Whitman, the woman who could nurture a hero would herself be rather masculine in outlook and appearance. She is a dairy maid, untainted by the stultifying atmosphere of the feminine drawing room. She warrants the repeated Homeric epithet of hair that is "Medusa-like, thick, glossy, and moist" (I, 80), not because she is a one-eyed monster with fangs, but because she is a preternatural mortal. Far from being a Gorgon, she makes her first appearance in the novel as a goddess-- a Persephone-type Earth-Mother who is worthy of Norris's Muse:

She was a large girl with all the development of a much older woman. There was a certain generous amplitude to the full, round curves of her hips and shoulders that suggested the precocious maturing of a healthy, vigorous animal life passed under the hot southern sun of a half-tropical

tropical country. She was, one knew at a glance, warm-blooded, full-blooded, with an even, comfortable balance of temperament. Her neck was thick, and sloped to her shoulders (I, 78-79)

The complete passage runs for over two pages, and hers is the only female physical description given in a rather prolix, encyclopedic novel, and it is given, not only as an epic catalogue, but frequently. Not only is she the only physical woman, she is also the only woman in the novel who does not succumb, at least not for long, to the feminine temptation of retreating into selfish introversion. All other women in the novel are either weak introverts, or they are dead. When Mrs. Derrick, for example, hears gunfire from the direction of Hooven's ranch, gunfire which kills her son, her reaction is to escape. It is Hilma who must commandeer the wagon and confront the carnage head-on.

This Whitmanesque, masculine (and, as Malone hints in his remarks on Vonnegut, somewhat adolescent) depiction of Hilma is in a tradition of nurturing maternalism that seems to continue with Steinbeck's Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath. Here, Steinbeck has heeded the advice of an elderly Quaker woman in Uncle Tom's Cabin who asks, "So much has been said and sung of beautiful young girls, why don't somebody wake up to the beauty of old women?" (197). Steinbeck's initial description of Ma makes note of that beauty (as Whitman does

in Leaves of Grass in "There Was a Child Went Forth," "A Song of Joys," and "Faces"), and places Ma in a mythic role:

Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with childbearing and work. . . . Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place, that could not be taken. . . . And from her great and humble position . . . as healer . . . as arbiter[,] she had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goddess. (70-80)

Before Ma makes this appearance in the novel, her position has been foreshadowed by those nameless, faceless women who "go on with their work, but all the while [watch] the men squatting in the dust--perplexed and figuring" (36). Throughout the novel, Steinbeck's execution of Ma's character sustains a mythical concept of the Good Mother⁴³ as a nurturing, enduring, unselfish source of strength. Each time she is confronted with the burden of her responsibility that her position entails, Ma, "so great with love" (253) that she frightens those around her, places the needs of others before her own; she never waivers from this humble position. Much of her energy is devoted to the preservation of her immediate family unit--whether it be done by prodding

Pa, worrying about Tom, comforting Grandpa, nursing Grandma, advising Roseasharn, or watching over Ruthie and Winfield. Even her usurpation of Pa's authority, particularly when she threatens him with a jack-handle, is in character. As a mythic "Good Mother," she is responsible for the preservation of family, to do anything within her power--even usurpation beyond her power--to keep the "family unbroke" (186). Ma knows that "woman can change better'n a man [because] woman got all life in her hands" (467), but she also wants to maintain her subservient position to man, who has "got [life] all in his head" (467). Ma never forgets what the traditional gender roles are. When Pa complains about the role reversal, Ma answers, "But you ain't a-doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'. If you was, why you could use your stick, an' women folks'd sniffle their nose an' creepmouse aroun'" (388).

Although Pa falters and Ma appears strong, she never really moves out of her assigned role to displace Pa, nor does she want to. Her hands tremble, for example, when she accosts him with a jack-handle, and when she offers to speak to Al, she immediately apologizes with, "I didn' mean no harm. . ." (467).

Steinbeck has so closely tied Ma to a mythic role that he never moves into her unconscious; he never suggests that she has an identity apart from her assigned role. Even when the family unit is eroded, when he has the chance to imbue

her with the human feelings that must necessarily accompany the disintegration of human spirit, Steinbeck merely shifts and re-defines Ma's role. As each family member leaves--Grandma and Grandpa die; Connie and, later, Noah sneak away; Al leaves to marry; Tom becomes a fugitive--Ma copes. At each of these junctures, she becomes more firmly entrenched in her mythic role, her position as mother of a family merging with her symbolic role as the mother of all men. She insists, for example, on Tom's greater strength "because he [is] a man" (101), and cultivates his development, defined in terms of Whitman-Steinbeck's brotherhood-of-man philosophy:

You got . . . sense, Tom. . . . I got to lean on you. . . . You won't give up, Tom. . . . They's some folks that just theirselves an' nothin' more. There's Al--he's just a young fella after a girl. You wasn't never like that, Tom. . . . You're spoken for. (389)

Later, she tells Mrs. Wainwright: "Use'ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do" (491). Throughout The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck perpetuates the myth that women are created as continuous founts of endurance from which men can draw the strength which will enable them to build a new community of man. This is the closing point of the novel. The Joads and an unidentified starving man are brought together as a

new unit. The sick, malnourished Roseasharn should not have enough milk to nurse the starving man, yet, miraculously, she does. Encouraged only by Ma's looking deep in her eyes, Roseasharn is miraculously transformed into not only shameful bathos but also the ultimate extension of the mother-goddess, the graphic symbol of the highest function woman can perform. She offers her breast to a starving stranger.

The merits of the displacement in Grapes of Wrath from the patriarchal hierarchy of authority to Ma Joad's caring for the family of man, appended by Roseasharn's physical enactment of that care, have been bandied about by the critics, and the jury will undoubtedly remain hung. Much critical ink is being spilled of late in an effort to decide, for example, the importance to Grapes of Wrath if any, of Robert Briffault's anthropological study The Mothers: The Matriarchal Theory of Social Origins (1931).⁴⁴ It is clear (and universally conceded) that Steinbeck modeled Ma Joad upon the findings of Briffault and his thesis of a matriarchal structure that predates the patriarchal one in history. Briffault's matriarchy, rather than being an Amazonian patriarchy in "which women exercise a domination over the men similar or equivalent to that exercised by the men over the women in a patriarchal social order" (179), is a "relationship based on cooperation rather than power" (180).

An American epic that can successfully assimilate such a notion is obviously an open door to a return to the importance of the female element in classical epic. The post-modernist epics of Gaddis and Barth are, however, a regression (alas) from whatever advance The Grapes of Wrath might have made in the return of the American epic to classical sensibilities regarding the role of women characters. The women who populate The Sot-Weed Factor, Giles Goat-Boy, The Recognitions, and JR are nearly all sex objects (the few who are not are comic buffoons), and none of them has the appeal of either a Penelope or Circe.⁴⁵

In Malone's Handling Sin, however, one of the many felicities of Raleigh's midlife quest is that he does, indeed--after meeting his father--arrive safe at last, at home with Aura, in his middle years. Terrence Rafferty correctly asserts that Aura Hayes, Raleigh's wife "is something like the conscience of the book: she's effortlessly sane, has a great sense of humor (she spends most of the novel laughing, affectionately, at her husband's rigidity), likes sex and winds up running for mayor of Thermopylae. . ." (860). Here, an epic's Penelope creates a relationship based on cooperation rather than power, and woman is once again central to the epic story-line.

It certainly is no coincidence that the American writers whose works follow Steinbeck and pre-figure

Malone's epic exercise of establishing matriarchy over patriarchy are women writers. Anne Tyler and Berry Morgan, while not producing encyclopedic novels, certainly do utilize epic motifs, especially the use of the Medusa, Ulysses, and biblical myths. Morgan's protagonists in both Pursuit (1966) and The Mystic Adventures of Roxie Stoner (1974)--like those of Hawthorne--flourish when they remain at home, but their homes are central locations to which there are deep, abiding links to a matriarchal, mythopoeic heritage. It is either a relationship to God (Roxie in Mystic Adventures) or one's family heritage (Ned Ingles in Pursuit) or both (Laurence and Dana Ingles of Pursuit and Mystic) that forms the correct code of conduct, a code which occasionally flies in the face of civil law. Laurence Ingles and Roxie Stoner both spend their lives seeking mates, both become incarcerated in mental institutions for their trouble, yet both make it home.

In Anne Tyler's novels, as in those of Toole's Confederacy and Malone's Handling Sin, the family is the base from which individuals move into society and develop a sense of community. These journeys away from home meld with the journey to return home; walking out a door is no guarantee of freedom. In Tyler's Earthly Possessions (1977), for example, Charlotte flees from her mother into the arms of a man. After marriage and a family, she is kidnapped in a bank robbery when, ironically, she goes to a bank to

withdraw funds with which to leave her husband. During their flight through the South, Charlotte (whom M. Gullette labels "an American Odysseus" [325]) begins to identify, and to deal with, her own restlessness as it is mirrored in Jake the bank-robber and his young pregnant girlfriend whom they pick up along the way. By the end of the novel she is, as Sue Ann Johnston states, "better prepared to accept her emotional connections rather than trying to shrug them off" (18). She is ready to return home to her mother.

In The Accidental Tourist (1985), this epic element is perhaps most pronounced for Tyler. Here, the nostalgic pull toward home is symbiotically connected with the call of the journey. Thus it was for Odysseus, who, it must be remembered, "takes the most roundabout route imaginable back to Ithaca, never missing any booty or amorous adventures which thrust themselves on his attention" (Johnston 10). The Accidental Tourist's protagonist, Macon Leary, is a travel writer whose success is a function of his hatred for travel. He is Homer's Odysseus, always struggling to get home but always the eternal wanderer. William K. Friert notes that "Macon is an elliptical orbit: each homeward plunge propels him farther out on the eternal journey" (73). Caleb searches for reconciliation with his dead son, and longs for reunion with his estranged wife and the psychological comforts of home. In Accidental Tourist, the protagonist learns through his ironic epic quest that the

journey itself is the arrival--as John Updike states in his review of Tourist, "Leaving home can be going home" (112). In like manner, the American epic has finally begun to return to what could be argued as its classical matriarchal forebears.

Notes

¹ In his introduction to The Literary Remains of John G. C. Brainard With a Sketch of His Life (1882), John Greenleaf Whittier, five years before the publication of Emerson's American Scholar, addressed the importance of an American literature that is, indeed, American.

There is one important merit in [Brainard's] poetry which would redeem a thousand faults. It is wholly American. If he "babbles o' green fields" and trees, they are such as of right belong to us. He does not talk of the palms and cypress where he should describe the rough oak and sombre hemlock. He prefers the lowliest blossom of Yankee-land to the gorgeous magnolia and the orange bower of another clime. It is this which has made his poetry popular and his name dear in New England.

It has been often said that the New World is deficient in the elements of poetry and romance; that its bards must of necessity linger over the classic ruins of other lands; and draw their sketches of character from foreign sources, and paint Nature under the soft beauty of an Eastern sky. On the contrary, New England is full of Romance; and her writers would do well to follow

the example of Brainard. The great forest which our fathers penetrated--the red men--their struggle and their disappearance [sic]--the Powwow and the War-dance--the Savage inroad and the English sally--the tale of superstition, and the scenes of witchcraft--all these are rich materials in poetry. We have indeed no classic Vale of Tempe--no haunted Parnassus--no temple, gray with years--and hallowed by the gorgeous pageantry of idol worship--no towers and castles over whose moonlight ruins gathers the green pall of the ivy. But we have mountains pilloring a sky so blue as that which bends over classic Olympus: streams as bright and beautiful as those of Greece or Italy--and forests richer and nobler than those which of old were haunted by Sylph and Dryad.

(35-36)

By 1832, such remarks had become common currency among the literati and had worked to make autochthonism a fixture of American literature before Emerson's celebrated essay appeared.

² He was not alone in the attempt. Ebenezer Cook (The Maryland Muse, 1730), who reemerges in the twentieth century as a narrator in John Barth's Sot-Weed Factor (1960); Jacob Duche, Eliza Bleecker, John Blair Linn, F. L. Humphreys, Richard Snowden (The Columbiad, 1795); and others also failed.

³ Although Barlow had prided himself in emerging from Puritanism into the avant garde, that is to say, into Deism, he retained the Puritan conception of history, especially American history, as an epic adventure, one that is reminiscent of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress (1678)--"a pilgrimage from the darkness to light, a warfare against odds, a spiritual voyage of all sorts of perils to an ultimate safe haven" (Murdock 77). It is ironic, therefore, that the primary historical source for his magnum opus should be William Robertson's History of America (1777), a work written by a Scot who had never visited America and had simply compiled anecdotes, secondhand narratives, and, often, fanciful conjectures.

⁴ In 1968, an obscure journal-newsletter, The Smith, mailed a questionnaire regarding best-sellers in American fiction to 1,000 persons. Of the 229 respondents, 81 had purchased a copy of Giles Goat-Boy--more than any other book on the questionnaire except Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner. Of those 81, however, only seven had finished the novel. Twenty-one others had read an average of 20 pages. Seven of those found it "dull, incomprehensible, or incomprehensibly dull." Fifty-three had never opened the book. None of the readers made any positive comments about the novel (Smith, "Bestsellers" 182-84).

⁵ This rather arcane parenthetical emendation belongs to Mr. Spencer.

..

⁶ The fall of Jim and Tammy Bakker's ecclesiastical empire, PTL, for example, was by no means an anomaly. It is, rather, part of an American tradition. No finer treatment of a single representation of the trafficking of American religion can be found in print, for example, than Shirley Nelson's Fair, Clear and Terrible: The Story of Shiloh, Maine (Latham, N.Y.: British-American 1989). For an overview of the marketing of religion in American culture, see George Marsden's Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925 (New York: Oxford, 1980), Frank Douglas's Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), and Bernard Weisberger's They Gathered at the River (Boston: Little, 1958). For an introduction to American religion on television, see chapter one of Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Penguin, 1986).

⁷ As such, Park also prefigures Rev. Guyan in William Gaddis's The Recognitions.

⁸ See H. Montgomery Hyde's The Cleveland Street Scandal (New York: Coward, 1976) and Colin Simpson, Lewis Chester, and David Leitch's The Cleveland Street Affair (Boston: Little, 1976).

⁹ According to Franklin Walker, Norris's biographer, Norris "preferred the Gibson girl, tall enough to look down on most men, to the smaller demure maiden of Wenzel. 'The

Gibson girl is more serious perhaps, and you must keep keyed pretty high to enjoy her society. But somewhere you feel she's a 'man's woman' and could stand by a fellow if things should happen'" (142).

¹⁰ For other examples, see I. 11, I. 44, I. 56, I. 148, I. 170, and II. 342-43.

¹¹ See chapter two, "The Grandson of Autolykus," in W. B. Stanford's The Ulysses Theme (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1968).

¹² In spite of all the exaggerated pathos, wild paradox and jeering ironies used by such narrative voices, these narrators' self-criticisms and criticisms of society and history must be taken seriously and interpreted patiently if one is to extract meaning from these works.

¹³ Compare this with Whitman's remarks on the labor question in Democratic Vistas (New York: Redfield, 1971), 71-72.

¹⁴ Linda Hutchinson, in Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (1980), prefers the term "formal narcissism" (17) but the idea is the same: "a work is apt to produce within itself a dramatized mirror of its own narrative or linguistic principles" (17-18). It can be argued that a tradition of such literary self-awareness (novels not only about the growth of the novelist, but novels about novels) are in a tradition that runs from writers like Barth and Gaddis, back through the Romantics,

and further back to Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605, 1615). My own bias is that Don Quixote (a work that parodies itself) is the first novel rather than Pamela (1740). In Don Quixote, not only does Cervantes parody El Cid, but Alonzo Guizano parodies Don Quixote. This is not so very different from Melville's parodic use of epic and dramatic motifs in Moby Dick or of the use of Cervantes and the traditions of the eighteenth-century novel in Barth's Sot-Weed Factor. Such novels cynically deny illusion or fiction as an antithesis to truth. As Hutchinson states:

Fiction is obviously fiction; life is fiction, of our making, as well. Man is free [from notions of absolutes] so he too can bear no illusions about his mortality and about the limited nature of his perspective. For real "authenticity" there can be no absolute truths. Similarly, narcissistic fiction can only be judged in terms of its own internal validity: "truth" has no significance in art. (19)

¹⁵ The bracketed emendation belongs to Edgar Dryden.

¹⁶ Another example of the use of Hawthorne's "formula of alternative possibilities" (246) is pointed out by Daniel Hoffman. The oldest man aboard the Pequod, an Indian, asserts that a scar on Ahab was a brand inflicted "in an elemental strife at sea" at age forty. An old Manxman, a soothsayer among the crew, insists that the scar is nothing

but a "birthmark on him from crown to sole." Whatever its origin, it is significant, according to Hoffman, that "the first thing the primitives notice about Ahab is that he is a marked man" (246).

¹⁷ All punctuation here, including the bracketed ellipses, is that of the original text.

¹⁸ All punctuation here, including the bracketed ellipses, is that of the original text.

¹⁹ Because of this, the novel is still branded a "cult" novel by many, as if its concerns were those of only a small band of eccentrics with special tastes. "At one point," according to Dominick Lacapra, "there was a small club in Cleveland that met for the sole purpose of discussing The Recognitions" (33).

²⁰ For more on the limits of art, see also Thomas J. Sawyer, "JR: The Narrative of Entropy," The International Fiction Review 10, No. 2 (1983), 117-122; and Thomas LeClair, "William Gaddis, JR, and the Art of Excess," Modern Fiction Studies 27, No. 4 (Winter 1981-82), 587-600.

²¹ For more on the slippery notion we call history, see also Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (New York: Harper, 1977); William Irwin Thompson, Darkness and Scattered Light (New York: Anchor, 1978), especially chapter three, "The Return of the Past," 107-141; John Lukacs, Historical Consciousness or The Remembered Past (New York: Schocken, 1985); Carl G. Gustavson, A Preface to History (New York:

McGraw-Hill, 1955); J. B. Priestley, Man and Time (New York: Dell, 1964).

²² In Kant's writings, especially in The Critique of Judgement (1790), the hope of a unified knowledge was at the verge of splitting into two parts, with neither part retaining any relationship to the other. The phenomenal world, in Kant's scheme, is the world of physical particulars that can be weighed and measured; it is the external world, the world of the pure sciences. He labeled as the noumenal world the concepts of meaning and value, and the emotions such as love and hate. Kierkegaard, in works such as Either/Or (1843), Philosophical Fragments (1844), and The Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846), brought Kant's division to the point of being an absolutely irreconcilable one. Kierkegaard taught that reason was limited to the arena of Kant's phenomenal world, and that one must make an irrational "leap of faith" to find meaning in the noumenal world. The danger, of course, as Kierkegaard saw it, is that the noumenal world would cease to exist as an operant arena in the minds of men. Tina Turner's hit song that screams the lyrics, "What's love got to do with it? / What's love but a second-hand emotion?" is a case in point. The demise of the noumenal world in the operations of human beings is even more clearly stated by Trevor, the new leader of the Wormsley Common Gang in Graham Greene's "The Destructors" (1954). Here, Trevor is explaining to another

gang member why the gang must tear down an old man's house while that man is away for the weekend:

"We aren't thieves. No one's going to steal anything from this house. . . . I don't hate him [the home-owner]. There'd be no fun if I hated him. All this hate and love [the noumenal], it's soft, it's hooey. There's only things [the phenomenal]." (55-56)

Martin Heidegger, in his essay "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" (1952), interprets Kant as Kierkegaard had done:

It is clear that Nietzsche's pronouncement concerning the death of God means the Christian god. But it is no less certain . . . that the terms "God" and "Christian god" in Nietzsche's thinking are used to designate the suprasensory world in general. God is the name for the realm of Ideas and ideals. This realm of the suprasensory has been considered since Plato, or more strictly speaking, since the late Greek and Christian interpretation of Platonic philosophy, to be the true and genuinely real world. In contrast to it the sensory world is the only world down here, the changeable, and therefore the merely apparent, unreal world. The world down here is the vale of tears in contrast to the mountains of everlasting bliss in the beyond. If, as still happens in

Kant, we name the sensory world the physical [the phenomenal] in the broader sense, then the suprasensory world [the noumenal] is the metaphysical world.

The pronouncement "God is dead" means: the suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life. . . . If God as the suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the suprasensory world of the Ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above all its vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself. . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? The pronouncement "God is dead" contains the confirmation that this Nothing is spreading out. "Nothing" means here: absence of a suprasensory, obligatory world. Nihilism, "the most uncanny of all guests," is standing at the door. (60-62)

When Giles repudiates distinctions such as true and false, and then denies the existence of love and hate, he opens the door to Nihilism.

²³ Milan Kundera expresses this notion beautifully in his novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984). Kundera states in "Dialogue on the Art of the Novel" (1988), "If God is gone and man is no longer master, then who is master?"

The planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being" (63). Kundera's novel depicts characters who want their lives to be "substantially weighted," to have stamina, permanence, and a sense of order. One character, Sabrina, however, embraces instead "the lightness of being." She is open to change. She allows herself to be tied down to nothing. She changes cultures and lifestyles. She becomes sexually promiscuous. She commits herself to nothing and, in fact, repudiates the existence of Kierkegaard's noumenal half of man (the concepts of meanings and values) altogether. After this repudiation, she is pictured as floating blithely through existence. Kundera himself, however, describes this "lightness of being" as ultimately "unbearable" (The Unbearable 5-6). In the novel, he debates the merits of weight as opposed to lightness and is unable to resolve which one is better.

²⁴ It should be noted here that there is a third epic in the list of Gardner's literary accomplishments: his fine translation of the Mesopotamian epic Gilgamesh (1984). It is further evidence of Gardner's intense interest in epic, myth, and legend that is replete in exudes from all of his work. In Gilgamesh, as with Jason and Medeia, Gardner concentrates on the poetry of the piece, rescuing it from pedantic, scientific jargon and restoring aesthetics and lyricism to the piece.

We have very few religious people in the Western world because most people really do not believe in Christianity even though they may be Jehovah's Witnesses. What they feel is what they ought to believe, and they feel very guilty because they don't really believe. So they preach at each other and say, "You really ought to have faith," but don't really believe it because if they did they'd be screaming in the streets. They'd be taking enormous full page ads in the New York Times every day, and having horrendous television programs about the Last Judgment. But even when the Jehovah's Witnesses call at your door, they're quite courteous. They don't really believe it. It's simply become implausible and what everybody does in fact believe is the image of the fully automatic model, that we are chance gyrations in a universe where we are like bacteria inhabiting a rock ball that revolves around the insignificant star on the outer fringes of a minor galaxy. And, after a while, that will be that. When you're dead, you're dead. It'll all be over. (19)

²⁷ For more on the astrological structure of Grendel, see also C. J. Stromme, "The Twelve Chapters of Grendel," Critique 20.1 (1978), 83-92; Peggy A. Knapp, "Alienated Majesty: Grendel and Its Pretexts," The Centennial Review

32.1, 1-18; and Elizabeth Larsen, "The Creative Act: An Analysis of Systems in Grendel," John Gardner: True Art, Moral Art, ed. Beatrice Mendez-Egle (Edinburg: Pan American, 1983).

²⁸ Gardner has spoken often, and quite directly, about the purpose of his own fiction. See for example, John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic, 1978); Joe David Bellamy, "John Gardner," New Fiction (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1974), 169-193; Ed Christian, "An Interview With John Gardner," Prairie Schooner 54 (1980-81), 70-93; C. E. Frazer Clark, "John Gardner," Conversations with Writers, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Detroit: Gale, 1977), 83-103; Marshall L. Harvey, "Where Philosophy and Fiction Meet: An Interview with John Gardner," Chicago Review 29 (1978): 73-87.

Although John Gardner has discussed what he intended to do in writing Grendel and Jason and Medeia in these and perhaps a score of other sources, it would be a mistake, of course, to assume that an author's own interpretation exhausts any book's potential for meaning. This is a truism of literary criticism. It is nonetheless true, however, that an author's statements can keep a reader from misreading. Gardner's comments are instructive.

²⁹ Though Gardner asserts strongly that real art must be moral, he does not imply that real art should be overtly didactic: "Didacticism and true art are immiscible; and in any case, nothing guarantees that didacticism will be moral.

Think of Mein Kampf" (On Moral Fiction 19). To Gardner, true art--instead of falling into didacticism--should pose moral questions that create "trustworthy feelings about the better and worse in human action" (On Moral Fiction 19).

³⁰ This quotation appears in On Moral Fiction (51) and is attributed to John Fowles's Daniel Martin (1977). According to Angela Rapkin, "at the University of South Florida Writers' Conference on January 21, 1980, Gardner said he wanted to 'deal with' Sartre for a long time, so he set his mind to doing so, and six weeks later, he completed Grendel" (12).

³¹ "What Grendel does is to take, one by one, the great heroic ideals of mankind since the beginning and make a case for these values by setting up alternatives in an ironic set of monster values" (John Gardner in "Backstage," Esquire 76 [Oct. 1971], 56).

³² Gardner is not the only modern American voice to adopt this position. A number of educators and psychologists concur with him. Stanley Hauerwas in Vision and Virtue (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1981) and Craig Dykstra, Vision and Character (New York: Paulist, 1981), both advocate that the task of "moral education" is to nourish the imagination of children with the rich and powerful images found in classical stories and myths. Andrew Oldenquist, in the periodical The Public Interest (Spring 1981), declares that failure on our part to include

the "indoctrination" of classical myth into the moral training of our children will result in our "societal suicide" (81). Bruce B. Suttle uses the same argument in "The Need for and Inevitability of Moral Indoctrination," Educational Studies 12.2 (Summer, 1981). See also William K. Kilpatrick's "Storytelling and Virtue" in The Emperor's New Clothes: The Naked Truth About the New Psychology (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1985), 81-94, and Psychological Seduction (Nashville: Nelson, 1983).

³³ See Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (New York: Meridian, 1949), and Lord Raglan, The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama (New York: Oxford UP, 1937), especially pages 180-81. The reliance of Giles Goat-Boy and The Sot-Weed Factor on these texts is established in Campbell Tatham's "The Gilesian Monomyth: Some Remarks on the Structure of Giles Goat-Boy," Genre 3 (1970): 364-75.

³⁴ According to Jeff Henderson, John Gardner "appropriated" the "Obliging Stranger" story from William Gass (89). In the acknowledgements to Jason and Medeia, Gardner thanks Gass for "permission to borrow and twist passages" from his work. According to John Maier, who collaborated with Gardner on a translation of Gilgamesh, such "free play of imagination that both preserved and changed the underlying text (borrowing and twisting) is the most conspicuous mark of Gardner's re-writings" (89). Maier insists that

Jason and Medeia is based upon Gardner's own free translations of Apollonius of Rhodes's Argonautica and Euripides's Medea, and that the work is replete with both medieval and contemporary borrowings (89). He says further:

As a medievalist, Gardner was particularly drawn to the masterworks of that age, the works of Dante and Chaucer, of course, and Beowulf. Where the scholar was, the writer was as well. In one very striking transposition in On Moral Fiction, for example, Gardner appropriated the famous passage from Jean-Paul Sartre on "bad faith"--and inserted Dante and Beatrice. [See On Moral Fiction 49]. He realized that he was not being "scrupulously fair" to Sartre in the transposition, but Gardner's aim was to show the gap between Sartre and Dante--and the inadequacy of Sartre's view of love. . . . Gardner's translations, critical works, and scholarly writings, in short, always reveal the artist. [Emphasis added.] In fact, the past, and the texts of others, come to be handled the more lovingly by the transformations and variations he performed on them. (89-90)

This gives further credence to the instructiveness of Gardner's annotations upon his own fiction.

³⁵ For more on self-referentiality and its ubiquity in pop culture, see Michael Dunne's Metapop: Self-

Referentiality in Contemporary American Fiction (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992). He discusses self-referential fiction by writers such as Barth, William Goldman, and Robert Coover in chapter one.

³⁶ And thus the descent of Gardner's Orpheus into Hell is vastly different from that of Odysseus in the Odyssey:

"But tell me, Circe, who is to guide me on the way? No one has ever sailed a black ship to Hell." "Odysseus," the goddess answered me, "don't think of lingering on shore for lack of a pilot. Set up your mast, spread the white sail, and sit down in the ship. . . ." (x.501-7)

Gardner's account is much more like Dante's descent in the Inferno.

³⁷ While the juxtaposition of tradition with modernist or post-modernist might jar the ear and sound as though it were an unwarranted oxymoron, the phrase is appropriate, if somewhat unwieldy. In 1739, Samuel Richardson was asked to write a self-help book that would illustrate proper form for the writing of letters. By Richardson's own admission, it was to be "a little volume of letters, in common style, on such subjects as might be of use to country leaders who are unable to indite for themselves" (Harvey 694). It was, Richardson said, to help rustics by contributing to their social and moral education by illustrating "how to think and act justly and prudently in the common concerns of human

life" (Harvey 694). A young country girl named Pamela is Richardson's rustic avatar; she is the character who begins writing home. Once Mr. B_____ begins making improper advances on Pamela, however, the stated purpose of a writing model is forgotten and the reader has a conflict, a plot. Ultimately, Mr. B_____ purloins Pamela's letters and reads her account of her trials at his hands. The villain is thus reading the book in which he himself appears, a book that had circulated throughout England. What some people think is the first English novel is thus the first post-modernist novel. The "tradition" established in 1739 continues with works such as Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1760), one of the funniest and weirdest books in English literature. The preface does not appear until after Book III, chapter 20. The hero is not born until the middle of the book. Chapters may be only one-sentence long. Pages may be blank or totally dark. Modern American "experimental novelists," it would seem, have been born over 200 years too late.

³⁸ See Alexander Leggatt, Citizen in the Age of Shakespeare (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973), 1-13. Toole's familiarity with such drama is documented in his Master's thesis on John Lyly, which he completed at Princeton in 1930.

³⁹ Well, there are Puritans and there are Puritans. Seventeenth-century Puritan theologians such as John Flavel, Thomas Manton, Thomas Brooks, Richard Baxter, and John Brown

decried loudly and often the mistake of associating material success with the blessing of God. Max Weber's work on the American-Puritan work ethic, to which everyone refers and no one reads, should be read but with the knowledge that he is dealing with a Puritan world-view that has been bowdlerized and bastardized by the likes of J. C. Penney, P. T. Barnum, Jim and Tammy Bakker, and Jerry Falwell. A true Puritan would never equate mammon with making one's calling and election sure; it would, instead, be a curse or a snare.

⁴⁰ A worthwhile study would be to trace the rise and fall of the workings of reason in both Confederacy and Handling Sin. Both authors seem to indicate that "being reasonable" is not always an efficacious state, that much in life that is salutary transcends the faculty of reason. At this moment of Raleigh's spiritual sojourn, for example, it is surely no accident that, while he had insisted that the score must be written out in order for him to play trumpet in the jazz ensemble, once his eyes well with tears and he "couldn't see the notes at all," he nevertheless "kept on playing, because he could hear them" (615).

⁴¹ Curiously, Gullette's Safe at Last in the Middle Years limits its remarks exclusively to Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, and John Updike.

⁴² As Norris's Octopus gives the fullest treatment to feminist themes and women characters from among the American epic works of this study, it receives the fullest treatment

in this section. Only one female character in The Octopus, however, receives Norris's admiration, and his praise simply parrots Whitman's view of women.

⁴³ See Erich Neumann, The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1955). Neumann's anthropological study suggests a tri-morphic Great Mother figure: the Good Mother (sex object, virgin, wife, mother, wise woman), the Bad Mother (seductress, mistress, whore), and the Earth Mother (a combination of Good and Bad in one figure).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Nellie Y. McKay, "Happy [?]-Wife-and-Motherdom: The Portrayal of Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath," New Essays on the Grapes of Wrath, ed. David Wyatt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 47-69; Warren Motley, "From Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad's Role in The Grapes of Wrath," American Literature 54.3 (October, 1982): 397-412; and John H. Timmerman, "The Squatter's Circle in The Grapes of Wrath," Studies in American Fiction: 203-211.

⁴⁵ Surprisingly, with the release of The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor in 1991, John Barth comes close to a return to the matriarchal element of classical epic. In The Last Voyage, Simon Behler, a modern journalist, is lost overboard while sailing to Sri Lanka in an attempt to retrace the voyages of Sinbad the Sailor. Much like the narrator of Gardner's Jason and Medeia, he finds himself

transported back in time; here, to Sinbad's palace. While Behler is desperate to get back to his own world, his own time, and his own lover (his Penelope), he is captivated and delayed by Sinbad's beautiful daughter, Yasmin (his Circe). Last Voyage, however, is also misogyny at its worst. Mark Edmundson understates the case by saying, "Barth has given up and become a rancorous rather than vital misanthrope, indulging ugly prejudices, racial and sexual" (46). The exploitive sex scenes in Last Voyage are legion, and of them Edmundson remarks:

Barth is borrowing his techniques from pornographic films, which are structured like Gene Kelly musicals, except that people break into sex rather than song. . . . The sex scenes are unmistakably the creations of a man who seems to believe that phallic worship is the true feminine religion. (44-45)

Last Voyage is, indeed, forgettable. For those who insist upon exploring its epic elements, however, see Crystal Gromer, "Sinbad the Sailor II," Commonweal 118 (May 17, 1991): 341-42.

⁴⁶ For more on this in relation to Barth's fiction, see Douglas B. Johnstone, "John Barth and the Healing of the Self," Mosaic 21.1 (Winter, 1988): 67-78, as well as Johnstone's "Myth and Psychology in the Novels of John Barth," Diss. U of Oregon, 1973 [DAI, 34: 5973A].

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