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The Two Faces of Fiction

By John F. McGlynn

IN its gradual emergence as a finished literary type the novel has been chiefly nourished by two tendencies which, when fused together, have produced some of the finest works of the imagination, but which, when opposed or in separate dominion, have spawned at best the ephemeral best-seller or the sterile, studied, pampered desideratum of this or that cult of the *avant garde*. I am speaking of the tendencies towards naturalism and towards "romance," using the latter term in the sense that Hawthorne applies it to his own brand of fiction, with more "latitude both as to . . . fashion and . . . material" than the realistic novel would allow. The strange truth is that both tendencies apparently spring from the same desire, which is at once touchstone and method of the art of fiction. Henry James hit at the heart of the thing when he remarked:

. . . the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits . . . helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there, they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life.

And further in the same essay:

Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet.

To catch the strange irregular rhythm of life: how our naturalist, reading that, fastens on the word *irregular!* and how our romancer is impelled by the word *strange!* The naturalist will often aim at presenting a broad, sprawling, people-studded panorama in which the real protagonist is environment, in which the characters only *respond*, seldom questioning, and never opposing with any very positive strength. Steinbeck has one of his characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* say: "The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't so nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say." This philosophy of determinism seems to be fundamental in such disparate works as Nelson Algren's *The Man With the Golden Arm* and James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*.

It does not require a very sharp eye to locate in the background of Algren's book the awkward shadow of Studs Lonigan, though Algren surely gains something over Farrell in his more elegiac mood. Still, it is the color and clamor and *impersonal* appetite of the Chicago slum setting of the novel, rather than the conflict of will and *personal* appetite of any of its inhabitants, that determines the action. The lives and dreams of Frankie Machine and Zosh and Sparrow and Captain Bednar impinge one on the other with the violent but meaningless importunity of billiard balls. They are all in effect derelicts, and, while the writer compels from

us a fine sympathy, he never makes their plight tragic, only pathetic. More objectively deterministic is *From Here to Eternity*, with its evocation of the pattern of military life, its basic contrast of enlisted men and officers. Like Algren's novel, but to a greater extent, it relies on the raw power of shock treatment and I suppose no valuable criticism of it will come until the shock wears off.

The romancer differs from the naturalist in that he tries to capture the overtones of life. His field of operations is often small, but he probes more deeply, trying to communicate life's rhythm in the subtle interplay of man's inner life and external environment. Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* is this kind of novel, its action always radiating out from, always returning to, Scobie's conflict. It is a tragic action in that, invested with a kind of cosmic pity and ignorant of the final saving grace of Grace itself, Scobie must will self-destruction. He is too strong to be pathetic, as Frankie Machine is pathetic, trapped in circumstance.

Naturalism has been the dominant tendency in the fiction of the present century, even up to the moment, as the *reclamé* attendant on *From Here to Eternity* makes evident. Certainly among the causes of this dominance is the impregnation in all sectors of experience of the method and implications of scientific psychology. The Freudian's attack on the inviolability of personality is reflected in the novelist's distrust of human dignity and his reluctance to motivate behaviour in any but the most elementary way. Furthermore, the naturalistic writer tends to repeat the therapeutic technique of the psychiatrist, wherein the patient is encouraged to bring willy-nilly to the surface of his mind any and all ideas as they appear. Still further, the naturalistic novelist echoes the Freudian accent on sex as the final, infallible skeleton key to behaviour. Granted, sexual promiscuity is a sign of vitality and hence a means of limning character outline; but it is a sign of undirected or uncontrolled vitality, and possibly vitiates more than it reinforces.

And yet, despite the success of Jones and Algren and John Hersey (of *The Wall*, not *Hiroshima*) and Norman Mailer, there seems to be a powerful movement today away from naturalism, away from the determinism of morality and personality in which it is grounded. Philip Rahv, in a remarkably lucid and persuasive essay, characterizes the present debility of naturalism:

What was once a means of treating material truthfully has been turned, through a long process of depreciation, into a mere convention of truthfulness, devoid of any significant or even clearly definable literary purpose or design. The spirit of discovery has withdrawn from naturalism; it has now become the common denominator of realism, available in like measure to the producers of literature and to the producers of *kitsch*.

In a somewhat different spirit, Miss Caroline Gordon finds Hemingway's compass restricted to "a narrow range of experience" which "in our crisis-ridden world is inadequate. We can hardly believe any longer in the

Divinity of Man. We are more concerned today with man's relation to God."

To look into Hemingway's latest novel, *Across the River and into the Trees* is to look at the empty husk of a once fine, vigorous talent. The disillusionment and toughness are here completely synthetic. Reality has given way to stereotype. People respond to stimuli—and almost exclusively conversational stimuli at that—in a way out of all proportion to the causes. The colonel swings from gentleness to harshness with the fluidity and lack of resistance of a stream curving past rocks. The author's purpose is presumably to communicate purposelessness, to voice the utter meaninglessness of human values in our society; the effect is only to divert the characters themselves into meaninglessness. This is *kitsch*, if that word puzzled you—*kitsch*, naked and, alas, unashamed.

Perhaps the most singular evidence of the swing away from naturalism in our fiction is the wealth of symbolism in many contemporary novels. In one sense naturalism may be defined by its desire to make language one-dimensional. It proceeds on the basis that the rhythm of life is best recaptured by an attention not to symbols, but to details. Its sacred trinity of procedure goes this way: a) specificity of detail; b) concentration of detail; c) density of detail. Its practitioner uses symbols as much as possible only as the scientist uses them, as static controls for his ideas. They are nothing more than the most available means of referring to something else and are thus distinguished from the romancer's use of them as the very quickening impulse of his art, wherein they take on what one critic calls "a constantly expanding and reverberating meaning."

The hero of *From Here to Eternity* happens to be a supreme bugler. However, his mastery of this instrument seems to have in the story only the function of accentuating the central irony, the wasteful, unnecessary death of the good soldier, sacrificed to the injustice of the army caste system. One can, of course, impose other meanings; for example, the contrast of Prewitt's skill with the bugle and with his fists can be made to symbolize the contrast of beauty and brutality in the world, with the latter ironically most in demand. But such interpretations seem to be accidents of form and not basic to the writer's intention. Frankie Machine of Algren's prize-winning novel is, like Prewitt, a virtuoso. He is a dealer in a gambling house, a man with a golden arm, and his skill has in general the same relationship to the narrative pattern as Prewitt's. It is true he is a more rootless character than Prewitt, so that his end, a miserably bungled suicide, has more pity than irony attached to it. Not with a bang does he go out but with "one brief strangled whimpering."

However, to turn to a novel written in the other tradition is sometimes to enter a whole world of complicated, interworking symbols. A singular case in point is James Agee's *The Morning Watch*, a very brief novel published early in 1951. The story concerns the efforts of a boy of twelve to participate in the spirit of Good Friday. Fundamentally it

is a story of the distractions which beset him, culminating in his sneaking off with several companions to a swimming hole in the woods nearby. Symbolically, I found it a story contrasting the emotional effects of a sterile, dead dramatic show, Christ's Passion and Crucifixion and Resurrection—with its abstract and undefined cruelties and mysteries, and the effects of Nature's immediate drama of life and death—with its cruelties and mysteries intensely physical, intensely alive, intensely personal to the boy. The symbols are unavoidable and stark. Thus, in his walk through the woods Richard encounters the intact shell of a locust. The boy is much more rapt here than earlier, praying in the chapel towards "a dry chalice, an empty grail."

That whole split back. Bet it doesn't hurt any worse than that to be crucified.
 He crossed himself.
 He sure did hold on hard.
 He tried to imagine gripping hard enough that he broke his back wide open and pulled himself out of each leg and arm and finger and toe so cleanly and completely that the exact shape would be left intact.

Later, after his stolen plunge in the forest pool—which itself is part of the complicated symbolism—he and his companions come across a snake which has just emerged from its last year's skin.

In every wheaten scale and in all his barbaric patterning he was new and clear as gems, so gallant and sporting against the dun, he dazzled, and seeing him, Richard was acutely aware how sensitive, proud and tired he must be in his whole body, for it was clear that he had just struggled out of his old skin and was with his first return of strength, venturing his new one.

The association that this image has with the events commemorated and renewed on this spiritual day of days is expanded by all that follows: by the pride that drives Richard to smash in the snake's head despite his adoration and fascination and fear of it, by his realization that the snake will die slowly, will linger in fact till sunset, by Hobe's tossing the serpent among the hogs which "with snarling squeals, scuffled over the snake, tore it apart at its middle wound and, while the two portions tingled in the muck, gobbled them down."

Unmistakable in this novel, and, indeed, in a whole sector of contemporary fiction (look to novels like Frederick Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying* and Alfred Hayes' *The Girl on the Via Flaminia*), is a lyricism which, it appears to me, is more proper to poetry than to fiction. These writers attempt to extend unduly the modern fictional devices of the interior monologue, the flashback, etc. Such devices, handled with care, serve wonderfully to concentrate the action of the story, but if they do not concentrate it in the characters and in such a way that the characters move more substantially in their own material, time-locked, space-locked background, then the demands of some other art than fiction are being served. Sometimes in Agee's story there is the effect that the boy loses his separate identity, which gives weight to the objection of some critics that these are

not the sensibilities of a boy of twelve—an objection which on the surface might appear to be mere carping.

The poet at the level of apprehension is not much concerned with "the rhythm of life"; his concern is his intuitions about life. He imposes his own rhythm, a formular one, the rhythm of his medium, poetry. His is even a suspensive art to the degree that he progresses by splitting apart the emotion from the experience in which it is contained. He tends to abstract where the novelist tends to only sympathize. The novelist can ill afford poetic abstraction and still preserve that correspondence between his creation and the pattern of life as we know it, that "solidity of specification" which Henry James called the inspiration, despair, reward, torment, and delight of the novelist. He can ill afford to let symbols become their own excuse for being in his composition. This would be extreme romancing, as destructive in its way as the extremes of naturalism in theirs.

The conclusion appears to me unavoidable that the writer who carries his symbolism too far creates at most lifeless parable; equally unavoidable, that the writer who concerns himself solely with swaths of fact creates only case histories. There is a middle channel down which the finest novels sail: such recent works as *The Gallery, 1984, The Heart of the Matter, The Track of the Cat, and The Brave Bulls*. To appreciate them is to appreciate a truth on which they depend, that the romancer, if his work would have richness, must focus his vision in a clear-eyed perception of the solid specifications of reality, that the naturalist, to be likewise successful, must grant his land-locked gaze the mariner's freedom, who steers by both reef and star.

Brief Candle

By Claude F. Koch

The children dance from school; behold, their sun
 Has crossed its nadir and their clock is stopped
 At joy. Their spring unwinds its hours,
 But no time from out each gay face lours.
 Their year is always noon, and no alarm
 Dropped from all the calculating world's bell towers
 Dare second harm upon these sons of ours;
 No tick shall irritate the minute heart,
 And daylight saving is the standard watch
 Apart from us they keep. Oh, we make much
 Of sun and time, behold these sons eclipsing everyone
 In brightness like the sun,
 And, unlike time, in fun.