

Fiction as political prophecy

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The anticipation of crisis in American politics.

What are the prospects today for American democracy? The conventional response to such a question would most likely affirm that America is the last best hope of mankind. Such a response is to be contrasted with the kind of prophecy found in mid-century fiction (1). This literature suggests that we are doing a bad job of delivering on the promise of American life. And yet, America has always been a liberal country, experiencing relatively calm weather (2). Its climate has produced a peculiarly American mood or posture towards life and politics, a mood optimistic and hopeful.

Despite this tradition of optimism and hope, the characteristic quality of American thought at mid-century reflected a sense of malaise. And today the notion is much sharper and widespread that somehow, somewhere, something has gone wrong with the American dream. There seems to be an unbridgable gap between the moral aspirations and pretensions of the American political system and its actual practice. We are in a deep crisis. While there are social, economic and historical causes and contexts for this crisis, I am concerned about the intellectual currents of the crisis as they have found expression in recent fiction. We are a very long way from the traditional American perspective on the world and on ourselves as a « clean well-lighted place ».

Crane Brinton has noted the phenomenon called the « desertion of the intellectuals », which refers to a « challenge to prevailing modes of thought and to the whole perception of the possible causes of and

(1) Mid-century here refers to a period of time including roughly fifteen years on either side of 1950.

(2) Daniel BOORSTIN, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

remedies for human suffering » (3). The political fiction under discussion here anticipates this shift in prevailing modes of thought. It both reflects and diagnoses this shift and prophesies the change in the American mood so clear from the perspective of the seventies.

That mankind might be the subject of some secular redemption in this world through material progress has been a key liberal idea. Insofar as we are willing to take American fiction seriously, we will have to reexamine the prospects for American democracy. Especially under attack are the notions of reason, order and civility, all fundamental to the operations of the American political system. Once reason is challenged, the door is open to question other elements in the democratic imagination, for example the virtues (or likelihood of achieving) rational compromise, the possibility of progress ; indeed, the whole notion of an orderly and predictable world goes up for grabs.

This essay examines a set of literary expressions or metaphors, treating them as part of a context or intellectual climate best understood as a direct challenge to the democratic dogma. Walter Lippmann has identified reason and civility as the twin bases of the institutions upon which American democracy has been built. In his discussion of the public philosophy, he described the « sovereign principle » of the democratic mode as a belief that « we live in a rational order in which by sincere inquiry and rational debate we can distinguish the true and the false, the right and the wrong » (4). One must wonder about the future of America, given the current attack on its intellectual foundations.

There is a long standing concern in political studies with attending to metaphorical thinking that goes back to Plato and his allegories. These days students of American politics rarely pay much attention to fiction, but it may be worthwhile to examine what a group of sensitive and articulate observers have to say about their culture, and to treat statements as a type of social data useful for understanding the larger patterns of thought and behavior. The authors under discussion are : Nelson Algren, James Baldwin, James Gould Cozzens, Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, and Richard Wright. This group admittedly represents no random sample nor is it passed off as an example or « small numbers » research. But they do suggest an intellectual climate. Whatever « bias » exists in the selection of writers is present because these writers help

(3) Quoted by Barrington MOORE Jr., « Revolution in America ? » (*New York Review of Books*, January 30, 1969, p. 6).

(4) Walter LIPPMANN, *The Public Philosophy* (New York : Mentor Books, 1962), p. 103.

make sense of a larger pattern of thought, a pattern of malaise and crisis.

This is not simply a phenomenon associated with protest over the Indo-China war, racism or poverty, though these have exacerbated divisions within the society. But the writers say clearly that these serious tensions and cleavages within American society are of long standing, and they speak of some awful calamity which has overtaken the American dream. Two older writers articulate this current of thought in the twenties: Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* lures her lovers on, like America itself, with a « voice... full of money ». Scott Fitzgerald tells us that both Daisy and her husband « smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money ». And Ernest Hemingway foreshadowed it succinctly: « Long time ago good. Now no good » (5). Thus one finds an uneasiness about the quality of American life long before today's crises. Causes of our « sickness » are to be discovered not only in current policy disputes but also in the nature of our understanding of ourselves, our history, and our place in the world.

At hand as this is written is David Easton's 1969 presidential address to fellow political scientists. Mr. Easton speaks of the « deepest crisis of political authority that the United States has ever suffered » (6). He admits that this crisis of authority was not anticipated by political scientists. Yet this anticipation of crisis is foreshadowed in our fiction. Easton is correct: *the crisis was not expected*. Little in our historical experience prepared us for crisis, our history having been stable, continuous, and « successful ».

Some students of our culture, however, have anticipated and reflected the crisis in their work. As F.O. Matthiesson points out in *American Renaissance*, Emerson, Melville, and others were asking searching questions about the meaning of the American experience through the 1830's, 1840's and 1850's (7). Art forms other than fiction may yield perspectives and insights; work in other areas of art or literature or movies might help confirm the patterns shown here.

I argue that novelists at mid-century are departing from a primary current of American thought: secular and optimistic, incremental liberalism. The ethos of American thought has shifted, from a sense of

(5) See Leslie A. FIEDLER, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1960), p. 312 and p. 317.

(6) David EASTON, « The New Revolution in Political Science », *The American Political Science Review*, 1969, LXIII, p. 1057.

(7) F.O. MATTHIESSON, *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

eager optimism about the future to a new emphasis on the limits and contingencies of history. Such emphasis is to be contrasted to the traditional American view of the near-inevitability of progress. For the American imagination has been characterized by a sense of « making it », by a sense of progress where things were always better (8).

From the beginning, the American lived in a new world and was therefore perceived as a new man, making a new life and new society on a virgin continent (9). Some sort of validating process was associated with images and notions of the land and the frontier, as if these nourished the processes of American democracy. This was expressed persuasively by Frederick Jackson Turner, and more recently examined by Daniel Boorstin and Leo Marx (10). Treatment of land imagery in recent fiction is especially interesting, inasmuch as the land becomes metaphorically hostile to life.

Not only were Americans spared the feudal experiences of an evil and decadent Europe. The American environment itself made the European a new man. Entering the forest a European, he emerged an American. Abundant free land and an open frontier contributed to the mood and outlook of Americans their striking characteristics: optimism, buoyancy, self-reliance, an eager confidence in their future. Such values and perspectives are under sharp attack in these novels.

This happy mood and outlook, often associated with the name and image of Thomas Jefferson, have become the dominant rhetoric in the American political tradition, and are forged in a chain of thought from the *Declaration* through the New Deal. As Max Lerner has said :

It is in the liberal intellectual tradition that American belief has characteristically expressed itself.

« The earth belongs to the living », said Jefferson, striking the grand theme that liberalism has since followed. Its credo has been progress, its mood optimistic, its view of human nature rationalist and plastic... (11).

(8) A good contemporary example uses the phrase in its title: Norman PODHORETZ, *Making It* (New York : Random House, 1967).

(9) The classic essay on this point is « What Is an American ? » by Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer*. See Michael McGIFFERT, *The Character of Americans* (Homewood, Illinois : The Dorsey Press, 1964).

(10) See George Rogers TAYLOR, *The Turner Thesis* (Boston : D.C. Heath and Co., 1956) ; Daniel BOORSTIN, *op. cit.* ; Leo MARX, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1964).

(11) Max LERNER, *America as a Civilization* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 729.

The bedrock of the inherited democratic tradition has been a belief in reason, and through reason, progress. An individual might exercise real control over his own life and personal history. Particularly in America, it seemed, could men « make it ». Anything was possible for men made new. As H.B. Parkes observes :

The main animating principle of American nationality has been the belief that the average man can be trusted with freedom, that he does not require the guidance of an authoritarian church or of a privileged aristocracy or bureaucracy, and that whenever he finds adequate opportunity for exercising initiative, hidden talents and energies will be released for constructive purposes (12).

These notions too are under attack in the novels. If democracy does depend upon reason, the artists' view of the possibilities of reason is indeed harsh. Reason applied to the problems of human society seems to produce a literally absurd world, as in *Catch-22*.

Yet for a long time, experience in America seemed to verify a contrasting angle of vision : if men would persist, adapt, endure, they would be materially rewarded, such reward in its turn being taken as evidence of virtue which was, in its own way, an explanation for material well-being. He who survived and prospered had reason then for hope and confidence ; he could come to see life « not as an attempt to realize an ideal order, but as a struggle between the human will and the environment » (13). The exertion of will would be fruitful ; it would pay off.

With John Dewey and the pragmatists, this idea reached full development (14). The method of intelligence (reason) was reliable, and when connected to scientific method became self-correcting : a fool-proof method for progress. If human problems might not be solved in America, they could at least be ameliorated. Thus the liberal democratic imagination.

Quintessential American characters within this imagination are Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger. The shift I speak of may be measured by comparing their triumphant lives with Moses Herzog and Alexander

(12) Henry Bamford PARKES, *The American Experience* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959), p. 351.

(13) Henry Bamford PARKES, *The American Experience* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959), p. 9.

(14) See particularly Morton White's discussion in *Social Thought in America : The Revolt Against Formalism* (Boston : The Beacon Press, 1957).

Portnoy, both of whom are failures by ordinary standards (15). Franklin was that « specimen American » who would use his intelligence to set the world right and for whom Reason and Work, Discipline and Effort, were handmaids of progress. No one doubts the intelligence of Herzog or Portnoy, but they are caught in a history they never made. In fact they are symbols of that recent fiction which casts harsh doubts on the realism and relevance of the liberal democratic imagination. Heroes in contemporary fiction are not men who make things happen. Rather, things happen to them, and popular commentary often refers to them as non-heroes.

Part of the background tapestry producing these newer patterns of thought in the American imagination are social dislocations and tidal intellectual revolutions. These have affected our understanding of the American political system. Rarely do serious students of American politics talk of implementing the « public interest », for the actual conduct of politics is best understood in terms of conflict resolution. No longer is the notion of the « public philosophy » respectable. Insofar as the concept has merited consideration by professionals, it has been explicated in « process » terms. The processes of decision-making have been regarded as more important than the substance of those decisions. As the authors of a popular government textbook put it, « where a responsible relationship exists (between the government itself and the people), we may say that democracy exists, regardless of the structure of government, *the content of policy*, or the number or quality of the rulers ». [My italics (16).] The pragmatists' revolt against formalism contributed to this new (and yet mainstream) paradigm. So in a larger way have the advance of the behavioral persuasions in sociology and politics. All values would seem to be relative and equally valid. Joseph Heller's world of *Catch-22*, from this perspective, makes perfect sense (17). It is also, *depending upon one's point of view*, a perfectly mad world — yet highly rationalized. The problem is that any interest in the political system, in process terms, seems to have as valid a claim upon resource allocation as any other interest. Any

(15) Saul BELLOW, *Herzog* (New York : The Viking Press, 1964) ; Phillip ROTH, *Portnoy's Complaint*.

(16) Marian D. IRISH and James W. PROTHRO, *The Politics of American Democracy* (4th edit. ; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 66.

(17) Joseph HELLER, *Catch-22* (New York : Dell Publishing Co., 1961).

(18) Theodore J. LOWI uses this phrase in his sub-title to *The End of Liberalism* (New York : W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1969). Lowi expresses the sense of crisis as well as any other number of students and he does it succinctly : « There is serious doubt about efficacy and justice in the agencies of government, the processes of policy-making, leadership selection, and the implementation of decisions », p. XIII.

interest, no matter how mad or bizarre, would deserve consideration. This contributes to the « crisis of public authority » (18).

Yet if all this be true, if there is no « good » which reason may discover — or if the « good » turns out, not to be good at all — what becomes of the inherited democratic tradition with its reliance upon reason and the notion of the public good? For, as Lippmann has pointed out, the American political system is based on the notion that the public good may be discovered by reason and then implemented by men of good will and statesmanlike motives. The « process » analysts have not yet answered this question adequately — at least not without reference to Jefferson's natural law brought in by the back door. But the literary men have dealt with this problem. For them there is neither a natural law which can be known, nor a process that beneficent men can work to serve human purposes. Indeed, the traditional assertion of will tends to work directly against human interests and life.

Research in American politics also contributes to the contemporary sense of crisis. Studies of voting behavior suggest the voter does not weigh candidates' programs against the issues before solemnly and reflectively casting his ballot as part of the « majestic march of majorities » to wise public policy. Relatively few voters have the feeling that the act of voting makes much difference. Finally, political discourse among citizens is desultory with most voters making up their minds before campaigns begin. What then of the classical rational voter? As one student of the problem has concluded :

The « voter » who emerges from the studies... has little of the rationality of the « citizen » of democratic theory... If rationality is defined merely as the possession of the information necessary to make a decision, ratiocination on that information, and the *self-conscious* evolution of a decision, the voter is, by and large, not rational (19).

Work in other disciplines tends to confirm the suspicion that the democrat's estimates of reason and human nature have been excessively optimistic, and further erodes faith in the efficacy of reason as applied to human problems. The point bears repeating.

The key tools and the chief emphases in the liberal imagination have been the efficacy of reason in adjusting the struggle for power which characterizes all politics. The order resulting from the accommodation

(19) Angus CAMPBELL, Gerald GURIN, Warren E. MILLER, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston, Illinois : Row, Peterson and Co., 1954), pp. 138-139.

of conflict was presumed to rest on the reasoned and civil conception of justice. In America all this was true only more so, because America was not simply a place, it was a happy place. It was also a state of mind. « The difficult we do immediately ; the impossible takes a little longer ».

Normative political writing also reflects the crisis of democratic politics. Walter Lippmann struck this theme in 1955 in *The Public Philosophy* where he discussed the decline of the great democracies and of the natural law tradition which supported and informed them. Lippmann wrote that « Something had gone very wrong in the liberal democracies ».

It did not come easily to one who, like myself, had known the soft air of the world before the wars to recognize and acknowledge the sickness of the Western liberal democracies. Yet, as we were being drawn into the second of the great wars, there was no denying, it seemed to me, that there is a deep disorder in our society which comes not from the adversities of the human condition but from within ourselves (20).

It is this all-pervasive sense that something has gone wrong which marks so much of our political discourse today. « Could it be denied », asked Lippmann, that we are « sick with some kind of incapacity to cope with reality... ? (21).

In 1958, Aldous Huxley looked back at his earlier satirical vision of a « brave new world » where « 62.400 repetitions make one truth », and where the only alternatives to an air-conditioned if tranquil nightmare seemed soma or suicide and decided that his earlier view had been if anything too mild. The world, thought Huxley in 1958, was moving even more quickly toward that apocalyptic new vision than he had thought possible only twenty-five years earlier (22).

Other writers with more explicitly political orientations find American society beset too. Hans Morgenthau describes a crisis of perplexity in the « purpose of American politics », declaring that purpose confused if not lost by the crisis in our relations with other countries and by the decline at home of the notions of the *public* (23). This

(20) LIPPMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

(21) LIPPMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

(22) Aldous HUXLEY, *Brave New World* (New York : Harper and Row, 1932) and *Brave New World Revisited* (New York : Harper and Brothers, 1958).

(23) Hans J. MORGENTHAU, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York : Vintage Books, 1964).

decline of the concept of the public seems tied to the larger attack on notions of reason and dialogue. When meanings become « private » and subjective, it is difficult to build a public able to tend to the public business. When this happens, the public business becomes simply concerned with private wants and satisfactions. James Mac Gregor Burns diagnoses American society as dominated by a politics of drift, finding a « vast boredom with politics » (24). On the other side of the analysis, C. Wright Mills agreed that drift was the essential characteristic of American politics, although he saw the drift as a function of an irresponsible government in the hands of a power elite dominated by a military metaphysic. Their thinking, said Mills, was pathological, and their policies were likely to cause World War III (25). One can draw a line connecting these moods and viewpoints to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Crisis of Confidence* written in 1969 (26). By the end of the Sixties our sense of the meaninglessness of dialogue and reason has become more explicit.

This pattern of malaise, made clear in the fiction and reinforced by these political analysts, had a social context. Part of the background tapestry of change in the American perspective were other phenomena as for example the emergence of a mass society in the United States and the rise of the masses to what Ortega had called complete social and political power. These new men were part of a new public, narrowly educated, technically skilled but out of touch with Lippmann's traditions of civility. Concomitant with this were a series of other changes: 1° a kind of worker's capitalism cum welfare developed during the New Deal and was legitimated by the Eisenhower years; 2° the United States by 1945 was a world power of the first magnitude with a strong sense of mission in the world; 3° subsequent crises conjoined with the sense of mission compelled the United States to confront communism, developing nations and nuclear power; 4° the complexity of modern life seemed inexorably to require accretions of power to bureaucracies in and out of government. Here are some of the social changes whose consequences have helped change the American imagination, and which have produced what Tocqueville had foreseen in America: a subtle but effective erosion of man's « uses of himself » (27). The older mood, or imagination, was described by Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote in 1969, « we have enjoyed a placid

(24) James Mac Gregor BURNS, *The Deadlock of Democracy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

(25) C. Wright MILLS, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1958) and *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

(26) Arthur M. SCHLESINGER Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).

faith in our virtue and our invulnerability » (28). The new mood seems clear enough. It is a mood drawn in the markings of helplessness, frustration, drift. An ethos once hopeful, eager and optimistic about the future and the purposes of American politics has become uncertain, anxious, and fearful. This sense is given powerful expression in recent fiction, to which attention is now turned.

American prose fiction.

American democracy having been impressively and obstinately optimistic and hopeful, the emphasis of recent prose fiction is in striking contrast with these dominant images. There is an unexpected stress on violence, alienation, absurdity, paradox and irony, all of which have found expression in contemporary normative writing usually considered under the rubric of the new left.

The progressive liberation and redemption of man through his reason and its extensions, namely science and technology, have characterized the liberal dream and vision. But this is not the vision of recent fiction. If we take our writers seriously, it seems clear that America has no great future. It is certainly not the « last best hope of mankind », and its problems would seem resistant to political resolution. What hope there is seems to turn on a kind of personal search for authenticity and integrity which arises as a function of personal resistance.

It must be admitted that there is a long tradition in American fiction giving expression to themes critical of the inherited democratic imagination, for instance Twain, Dreiser, Lewis and others. Hence, the fiction under discussion here may not be « new ». Nonetheless, it is worth wondering whether the intensity of feeling and sharpness of focus do not at least imply a shift in mood from, say, grey to black. For example, in his recent book *The Crisis of Confidence*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. asks « is one wrong in supposing that pessimism is cutting much closer to the national nerve today than ever before » (29). At any rate, that a group of sensitive observers of America should write such doubt-filled books deserves our attention.

This larger literary tradition has been given detailed attention by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (30). Begin-

(27) Alexis de TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America* (New York : Vintage Books, 1959), vol. II, p. 337.

(28) Arthur M. SCHLESINGER, *op. cit.*, p. IX.

(29) SCHLESINGER, *op. cit.*, p. IX.

(30) Leslie A. FIEDLER, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, *op. cit.*

ning with Rip van Winkle in flight from « drab reality », Fiedler traces themes similar to those recorded here with their images of the « hidden blackness of the human soul and human society ». Such a view should be juxtaposed against the traditional perspective of America as a place where life was always better. One might draw a line connecting Rip with James Baldwin's Rufus Scott (31). Of course Rufus' fate is much harsher than Rip's. For while Rip escapes only to waken later, Rufus runs to suicide, having found his America « another country ». Appropriately, the suicide is staged from the George Washington Bridge.

This contemporary despair is documented by a glance at some representative titles, not all of which are examined here. The United States has become another country, a nation of war lovers, everyone seeking the big money or taking a great notion to jump into the river and drown. Existence in America has become a walk on the wild side, particularly so for native sons who end up as Rufus Scott (32).

In terms of the expectations for the nature and destiny of man, to borrow Reinhold Niebuhr's phrase : the partiality of reason, the moral ambiguity of virtue, the understanding of the American experience, all of these reflect a sense that the American dream is dead. For example, the Turner frontier hypothesis is turned on its head by Ken Kesey in *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Time and space sequences and loci are shifted erratically and abruptly as if to suggest we have no future, or no very happy future. Certainly that is the case for the Stamper family, their home eroded by water despite mighty efforts to shore up its foundations with all the accouterments of an industrial civilization.

Another example may be drawn by considering for a moment the use and meaning of scatological language or of words made to stand for meanings other than those conventionally intended. Baldwin plays this game with Rufus Scott. The balcony scene between Rufus and Leona evokes memories of romantic if tragic love in *Romeo and Juliet*. Counterpoint to the scene is an ironic by-play between the lovers (Leona, the white Southern girl ; Rufus, the big-city black) over Rufus' small genitals. Baldwin's description of the love scene is in the language of hate, not love. Rufus and Leona do not make love, they make

(31) James BALDWIN, *Another Country* (New York : The Dial Press, 1962).

(32) Each of these is of course a book title. In order of listing after Baldwin's *Another Country*, they are : John HERSEY, *The War Lover* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959) ; John Dos PASSOS, *The Big Money* (New York : Washington Square Press, Inc., 1961) ; Ken KESEY, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (New York : the Viking Press, Inc., 1964) ; Nelson ALGREN, *A Walk on the Wild Side* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, Inc.) ; Richard WRIGHT, *Native Son* (New York : Harper and Bros., 1940).

hate. Rufus' semen is referred to as venom. A saxophone in the background wails, « Do you love me? » but its tone is hate, its sounds « assault » the listeners. The saxophonist « humped the air », and while Rufus makes hate, he « cursed the milk white bitch ». At the moment of orgasm, Rufus thinks to himself: now I've shown her real hatred, I've deposited enough venom to make a hundred children of hate.

It is as if language had been destroyed. And this is a crucial point, for without language there can be no humanity in neither civil nor civic sense, no community, no order, no justice. Words lie at the base of the civil order. When our words have no meaning, there can be no meaningful civil order. Order there may be, but it will not be civil. The opposite of civil order might be barbaric order, knowing no law, no restraint. One is reminded of Christopher Lasch's remark that « the language of American politics increasingly resembles an Orwellian monologue » (33).

Within this pattern, mid-century American fiction suggests that the core of existence is finally unknowable and therefore unpredictable. Or, if it is knowable, the know will be inhospitable to life. In this sense, one thinks of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* with its scenes in the military hospital into which Yossarian tries periodically to escape (34). The escape is of no avail, however; the hospital is organized as the larger world is: in a crazy and capricious way. The military censor checks all the mail carefully. To vary routine, one day he crosses out « a », then every « the », then the verbs. Existence is laden with irony and ambiguity. The man in the hospital bed next to Yossarian is encased entirely in a cast, and it is impossible to be sure anyone is really inside that cast.

We have an attack on the liberal's method of « knowing », and on his uses of reason. The liberal democrat's epistemological and ontological tools have been reason and language. If these are destroyed, so is the public and civic realm built reason and dialogue. Another way of illustrating this language destruction through opposites is to consider the patrician, Joe Chapin, and his distant cousin, Bigger Thomas (35). Joe Chapin is part of what we would today call the power structure of the Establishment. Bigger, on the other hand, is in his

(33) Christopher LASCH, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 29.

(34) HELLER, *Catch-22*, op. cit.

(35) Joe Chapin is the hero in John O'HARA, *Ten North Frederick* (New York: Random House, 1955) and Bigger Thomas is the hero in Richard WRIGHT, *Native Son*, op. cit.

own Mother's words, a « no-good nigger ». Each tries to assert his will in a positive way. In each case the assertion of will leads directly to death. This may be viewed as a metaphorical counterpoint to the American notion that all one needs to do to achieve success is to lift himself by his bootstraps, work hard, and persist.

In Bigger's case, his assertion of will produces the murder and furnace-cremation of one who would help him, the communist, Mary. Bigger can accept neither Mary nor her good intentions. Like Rufus Scott and Yossarian, Bigger's life is death-oriented. He is trapped. There is no way out. The case of Joe Chapin is less clear, yet his life too leads to failure and ultimately selfdestruction. Chapin's life style is the opposite of Bigger's. Whereas one lives in a rat-infested Chicago tenement, the other lives in the best part of town in a fine house and aspires to office in the Senate, perhaps higher. But for each, life is a long detour to his own destruction.

Bigger's life in Chicago is so void that it can have meaning only through an act of destruction. Bigger does act : he kills Mary. He says in effect, « I kill, therefore I am ». Rufus Scott says, « I kill myself, therefore I am ». Joe Chapin simply never is. Not coincidentally, *Ten North Frederick* opens with with Joe Chapin's funeral and Chapin himself lying in his coffin.

In a political and philosophical sense, the thrust of this mid-century literature is Niebuhrian. There is a striking congruence between what has been called the « new conservatism » and modern prose. For this new conservatism is marked by « harsh doubt about the goodness and equality of men, the wisdom and possibilities of reform, and the sagacity of themajority — that is to say, about the democratic dogma » (36).

If one assumes the best for human nature and posits progress as (almost) inevitable (which has been the American angle of vision), then there is little cause for worry in a world where anything may happen. But in a world of total organization for total war, in a world of gas ovens, mushroom clouds and napalm, in a world of destroying villages to save them, there seems to be a « banality of evil » (37). Thus there is good cause for concern and fear ; in a world where everything is possible, anything can happen no matter how horrible.

(36) Clinton ROSSITER, *Conservatism in America* (2nd edit. ; New York : Vintage Books, 1962), p. 17.

(37) Cf Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York : The Viking Press, Inc., 1963).

In this brave new world of science and technological expertise, « efficiency » and « organization » are applied not only to work and leisure but also to mass murder and destruction. Something is terribly real and plausible about the world of *Catch-22*. It is a long way from the liberal dream with its expectation of man's progressive liberation by reason. As Leo Marx has pointed out in his discussion of the interplay between garden and machine, the machine was expected to transform the American wilderness in a garden (38). But the writers say that the opposite has occurred. Treatment of machine imagery and of bureaucratic techniques of organization in these books show a world not progressively redeemed but a world gone mad.

Irony has been defined as involving apparently fortuitous situations which, upon closer examination, are discovered to be not fortuitous at all (39). A finely honed statement of this point of view is found in *Catch-22*. Our world seems to be such a world. *Catch-22* opens with the line, « It was love a first sight », but the story is no love story. It is rather a story of the organized pursuit of death ; of human intelligence applied in a total way for total war. All sane people conform to this pursuit, and only as they conform are they regarded as well-adjusted or useful members of their social system — in this case the military. If Heller's way is taken to stand for the world of public affairs, then the « world of public affairs in an absurdity, especially during a war » (40). The world of public affairs, whose original and legitimate purposes are to enhance life, focuses instead on war. Only the « neurotic » have sense enough to try to resist, and, within the context of *Catch-22*, they are crazy. The same point is made by Ken Kesey in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* where Randall P. McMurphy, Jr. is put into an asylum to be made « well » again (41). I will return to *Cuckoo* in a moment.

Here is an excerpt from Joseph Heller's novel which makes the point clear. The minute you start making sense, you are caught up again and therefore cannot make sense. Indeed, the world of public affairs will not permit one to make sense. That's the catch.

(38) Leo MARX, *The Machine in the Garden*, *op. cit.*

(39) See especially Reinhold NIEBUHR, *The Irony of American History* (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952).

(40) David OWEN, « Some American Novels and the World of Public Affairs », *Public Affairs Education and the University* (Syracuse : Syracuse University Press, 1963), p. 50.

(41) Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York : The Viking Press, Inc., 1963).

« Is Orr crazy ? »

« He sure is », Doc Daneeka said.

« Can you ground him ? »

« I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule ».

« Then why doesn't he ask you to ? »

« Because he's crazy », Doc Daneeka said.

« He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to. »

« That's all he has to do to be grounded ? »

« That's all. Let him ask me. »

« And then you can ground him ? » Yossarian asked.

« No. Then I can't ground him. »

« You mean there's a catch ? »

« Sure there's a catch », Doc Daneeka replied.

« Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy. »

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask ; and as soon as he did, he would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to ; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to (42).

The attack here is not on the notion of reason per se. It is rather on the absurd reason which organizes the world in perfectly plausible ways, but in ways leading ineluctably to death and destruction. Yossarian, the hero, is trapped by this mad system until the very end when he attempts escape to Sweden, presumably there to live sanely. The characters in *Catch-22* are Niebuhrian men. They pretend to purity of will and motive ; they pretend to disinterestedness ; they claim virtue. Convinced of their own rectitude, reinforced in their notions of good judgment, treating their critics as what we might today call « freaks » or « crazies », these are captains of public affairs. In reality of course they treat others, not as ends but as means to their own security of position or aggrandizement of reputation. There seems

(42) HELLER, *Catch-22*, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

to be no way out of this crazy world, no escape from the army and yet life in the army is unendurable.

Heller's unexpected alternative at the final impossible moment involves desertion to non-aligned Sweden. If Yossarian does save himself, his resistance is not a public or political act. Yossarian tries, rather, simply to save his own neck. If he is heroic, his heroism is in his resistance to the world of public affairs as opposed to his accommodating or adjusting to it.

Still another theme in mid-century writing involves deliberate confusion of time and space relationships, with abrupt shifts in physical and psychological loci as if to say one can never know truly where or who he is. Kesey, again, in *Sometimes A Great Notion* suggests that man's present consciousness — his entire sense of identity — would seem a precarious kind of construct. For time implies an order and regularity about events, a world predictable and linear. Its blurring may suggest the opposite.

While there is frequent sex, there is little love in these novels. There is much death, little laughter. Human relationships become incredibly tangled in a fog of Oedipal, racial or sexual ambiguities and confusions where what is, is not what seems to be.

The setting for Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side* is a whore house (43). One can hardly find a metaphor less felicitous for the larger society and its social system. What is the psychic and social distance from Algren's whore house to Kesey's mental hospital to Heller's army hospital? Each image of the larger society is scabrous. Algren is saying there is an essential phoniness at the core of respectable middle-class life. It is the same point many young people make today when they talk derisively of « bullshit liberals ». People in this whore house are bought and sold; they are treated as if they were machines. The girls in the house are machine-like. As they sell themselves, so does the larger society compel its citizens to fit themselves to pre-existing standards and measures of the machines, organization charts and communications loops that make that larger society a system. Still the girls do sometimes resist: like men on the assembly line, they never get involved in their work. Finnerty, the pimp, beats his whore when she does get involved.

Dove Linkhorn is the hero of this Algren book. Full of energy and vitality, his very name evokes ironic images of peace and the healing powers of Lincoln. Possessed of great sexual prowess, Dove finds work as a stud. He also works in a contraceptive factory. The job as stud

(43) Nelson ALGREN, *A Walk on the Wild Side*, *op. cit.*

requires that he stage some phony rape scenes. The « dought Daddies », the decision-makers and men of substance, like to see sexual violence. Such a society is clearly antithetical to life, let alone liberal visions of man redeemed or of American men exempt from history.

In James Gould Cozzens' *By Love Possessed*, the opening paragraphs provide images of a foolish old 18th century gilt-edged grandfather clock which does not work (44). A good deal of meaning is packed into these first pages. It is time that « does man in » eventually, despite his efforts (as with Arthur Winner, Jr.) to lead a life of good manners, good sense, common decency, following the rules. This clock is a controlling image in the novel, the story of the way a reasonable man reacts to the business of living. Cozzens puts the question sharply : to what extent is 18th century reason an adequate instrument for dealing with one's world? Our understandings of reason's role in politics have grown out of an 18th century document, the Constitution. Its principles are balanced order and harmony. Its rules established an equilibrium, like that of a parallelogram of forces, through which the political process was to be made predictable and by which it was to be tamed. Nothing should go wrong in this kind of controlled system ; no contingencies should arise for which there were no appropriate responses.

But Cozzens' old clock does not work, as if to say our system does not work any longer either. Here is the hero, Arthur Winner, Jr., a man of the law. His life is calm, mannered, rational, well-ordered, if you will clocklike. Winner is a man trying to show in his own life that the life of the law can be logic. He fails. At book's end, Winner is caught up in protecting and covering up certain financial shenanigans of old Noah Tuttle, his law partner and a supposed pillar of flinty Yankee integrity. He learns that a man can never know enough to get along well in this life, that contingencies inevitably arise to thwart or otherwise alter man's plans or principles.

So it is that experience also precedes knowledge and makes knowledge itself almost irrelevant, and certainly of limited use. Or, to put it more menacingly, knowledge always lags behind time and experience, sometimes fatally. (One thinks of Senator Fulbright's speech on « old myths and new realities ».) Man's burden is that he must act without knowledge or certainty, as if he possessed certain knowledge. This existential dilemma is more acute when the political dimension is added, for as Reinhold Niebuhr has observed, men must at least on occasion

(44) James Gould COZZENS, *By Love Possessed* (New York : Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1959).

act so decisively and with such finality that they would require the certainty denied them.

Not only do Baldwin, Cozzens and the others stress the ambiguity of time and the ironies of knowledge, and vice-versa, but given the Jeffersonian faith in knowledge and reason as arbiters of social conflict, this contemporary literary counterpoint is more poignant. There is also the example of tangled and complicated human relationships whose understanding must be dialectical as opposed to a mental set consistent with the linearity of the world conceived as a « clean well-lighted place ».

In Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, a story of violent homosexuality, the setting is the city (45). Invoking Jeffersonian echoes on cities and the body politic, it is clear the city is not hospitable to life. Here are union leaders who have sold out and become corrupt big-businessmen. Their grassroots membership is no better. They are not an honest and hardworking proletariat but homosexuals who drink too much. The whole notion of urban life is malevolent. Selby's view is also reflected in the novel's structure. Word and sentence structure are run-on ; traditional punctuation is absent. The language is scatological, calculated to offend as if Selby were saying : in this kind of urban and corrupt society, organized as it is, these are the kinds of people who live in it and control it. Hardly representative of a noble working class, they are « shit-kickers ». They would be at home with Colonel Cathcart and Milo Minderbinder in *Catch-22* ; Kesey's Big Nurse, however, could handle them.

The obvious ironic use made of machinery themes need not be belabored. As noted earlier, the machine is partly responsible for modern affluence and man's liberation. Yet the machine is ambiguous. It has its own peculiar demands and standards to which men must submit. In these books machinery is seen not as the savior of man or as the vehicle for transforming the wilderness but as a destroyer.

This treatment of machinery imagery gets powerful expression in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Big Nurse, a very masculine and powerful female, presides over an insane asylum. The asylum itself hums with machinery ; clean, efficient, well-lubricated. While she has big breasts (in ironic play on Americans' fixation with quantification and breast size), these are Big Nurse's only feminine symbols. Her purse holds not the artifacts of women's fashion or cosmetics but machine tools. Since the large breasts bother Big Nurse, she covers them care-

(45) Hubert SELBY, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (New York : Grove Press, 1964).

fully with her starched white uniform. Her gestures are as precise and automatic as a machine's operations. She has established a realm of controlled order in this sterile asylum world where the insae are sent to be made « well » again.

Yet behind all that gleaming white facade of uniform and whirring smooth machinery, there lurks a real world which, in the words of one critic reeks of urine, vaseline and homosexual rape. Big Nurse, ruler of this community, is herself symbolic of a matriarchal, emasculating, machine-dominated life-adjustment system destroying any who resist. Big Nurse *is* a machine, portrayed by Kesey in vivid language :

She listens a minute more to make sure she isn't hearing things ; then she goes to puffing up. Her nostrils flare open, and every breath she draws she gets bigger, as big and tough-looking's I seen her get... She works the hinges in her elbows and fingers. I hear a small squeak. She starts moving, and I get back against the wall, and when she rumbles past she's already big as a truck, trailing that wicker bag behind in her exhaust like a semi behind a Jimmy Diesel. Her lips are parted, and her smile's going out before her like a radiator grill. I can smell the hot oil and magneto spark when she goes past, and every step hits the floor she blows up a size bigger, blowing and puffing roll down anything in her path (46).

This imposing and powerful woman rules absolutely, as machines seem to govern modern man. And she uses the machine technology to maintain her supremacy rather than to liberate her patients. There are no successful rebels in the ward, no choices, no escape. Resistance ultimately fails. Still there is a kind of security in the world of the asylum, but it is an order antithetical to human and humane purposes. Before-breakfast shaves are ordered for the patients by Big Nurse, ostensibly for their own good : a metaphorical preview of the lobotomy awaiting the one who would challenge. To *live* in this system requires resistance, but resistance is as impossible as it is necessary. Again, it is a Niebuhrian kind of world.

In *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Kesey launches still another attack on the abstractions of liberal political democracy and the wilderness-transforming machine mythology supporting liberal democracy. Additionally Kesey shows time and spatial relationships which are as blurred and foggy in *Notion* as are the human relationships. The Oedipal idea

(46) KESEY, *Cuckoo's Nest*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

is worked with a vengeance. Lee Stamper has a real father and what might be called a sociological father. The latter is actually his own brother, Hank. Hank has slept with Father's second wife who is Lee's own Mother. As retribution, Lee determines to seduce brother Hank's wife. Whether the reader can follow these convolutions or not is not crucial but the quality of blurring ordered relationships is clear even if kinship is not. The metaphors suggest the disorder of the world.

As the machine imagery is used as ironic counterpoint in *Cuckoo*, in *Notion* Kesey turns the old frontier hypothesis on its head in a way which connects with Selby's treatment of the city in *Last Exit*. The Stamper land is incessantly eaten away by water. It is shored up against the water's constant erosion by the artifacts of an urban industrial civilization: railroad ties, chunks of concrete, wire. But the land slowly gives way. The frontier process is thus reversed and Turner's implied fears realized.

That which was historically dependent upon the frontier for sustenance, that which energized the American experience, that which made the European into a new man, an American, now is in decline and disappearance. In just this way the Stamper land is eaten away. Can American democracy survive the loss of the frontier? Can the machine be brought under humane control and coerced into serving human purposes? Is there a public, the base of which is some kind of rational order built on authentic and genuine dialogue? Can a community of public meaning be built? To each question, the answer seems no.

The realities of mid-century American life seem inexplicable from the perspective of these novelists. They are prophets. Their prophecy is not a happy one. The meanings of words have been destroyed. Purposive action and assertion of will lead to failure, death and destruction. Knowledge, reason, rationality, dialogue: all these are insufficient to deal in common decency and with good manners with life.

From this literary perspective then, liberal America at mid-century is sick, beaten, impotent. One can draw a connecting line from Dos Passos' trilogy to the Fifties' novels, and perhaps into the public affairs of the Sixties.

They have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with reputations the college-presidents the wardheelers (listen businessmen collegepresidents judges America will not forget her betrayers) they hire the men with guns the uniforms the policecars the patrol wagons all right you have won you will kill the brave men our friends tonight there is nothing left to do we are beaten we the beaten

crowd together in these dingy schoolrooms on Salem Street shuffle up and down the gritty creaking stairs sit hunched with bowed heads on benches and hear the old worlds of the haters of oppression made new in sweat and agony tonight

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul (47).

If there are still possibilities of life, and both Baldwin and Heller seem to suggest there are, they are nonetheless slight. For love and choice tend to be unpredictable, even dangerous. The probabilities are no longer that there is a golden age somewhere off in the future at rainbow's end. The probabilities point rather towards some hollow end, as William Styron has put it so strikingly :

... I knew that I had come to the end of the road and had found there nothing at all. There was nothing. There was a nullity in the universe so great as to encompass and drown the universe itself. The value of a man's life was nothing, and his destiny nothingness (48).

If the world is open, if there are possibilities, novelists in this pattern find the openness and possibilities so frightening and anxiety-producing that their outlook is in sharp contrast with the traditional understandings of America.

(47) John Dos PASSOS, *USA* (New York : Washington Square Press, 1961), p. 520.
 (48) William STYRON, *Set This House on Fire* (New York : Random House, 1959), pp. 465-466.

