Chapter VI

*Mickelsson's Ghosts*

The Making of a Reincarnation
Mickelsson’s Ghosts published in 1981 didn’t go well with the critics. Coming soon after the publication of On Moral Fiction the book was subjected to the litmus test Gardner had constructed in his On Moral Fiction by the virtue of which he had declared many a work by his colleagues as bad fiction. Reviewers spared no pains to establish that by any standards the book was nowhere near what Gardner conceived as good fiction. The ungenerous remarks saddened the writer a great deal. Sadly, but unquestionably, the import of the book remained eclipsed by the acrimony of a literary fight.

Peter Mickelsson the protagonist of Mickelsson’s Ghosts is a professor of Philosophy, an ethicist. He lives in a world totally devoid of all meaning. Life for him has lost all meaning. His dark and dingy apartment in Providence adds to his depression. The ugly sights of the city of Binghamton distress him equally. Quite often “the feeling that his life was hopeless – and his misery to a large extent undeserved (like everyone else’s, he began to fear) – would drive him down to the maple- or oak-lined streets at night, to prowl like a murderer, looking in through strangers’ windows with mixed scorn and envy.” This marks the beginning of Mickelsson’s journey towards bestiality, towards the abyss. He is slowly but certainly sliding into a “shadowy world of withdrawal.”
Mickelsson's marriage had been nothing less than a nightmare. The marriage, before it ended in a divorce, was simply a long contest of "I"s and "You"s:

They'd both been idealists. They'd been brought up, both of them, in families where fidelity was assumed, the marriage bond inviolable; and when they had left that pattern, following the fashion of their friends and time (Ellen smiling, Mickelsson looking dangerously intense), enjoying the usual excitement of the chase and the cheap thrill of liberation, they'd become like lost children. Decency striking back, they'd become anxious. Soiled. (90)

The divorce spelt not just more financial trouble for Mickelsson but also brought along a feeling of remorse and resentment. Mickelsson loves his children, Mark and Leslie, but is now unable to give them what they need. The inadvertent killing of a dog during one of his night walks adds to his misery. He tries telling himself that it was "an act of legitimate self-defense." But that leaves him feeling only guiltier. He now "exists in a world that, for him, has turned disastrously disordered. A professor of philosophy, a teacher of ethics, Mickelsson senses both a personal and universal decline."2 This embitters him and leaves him with a feeling of guilt. He now craves to be reunited with his family.
It is easy for none to act sane when "a dream begins to decay toward nightmare" (10). Mickelsson begins "to lie to himself" in an attempt to keep himself alive. Mickelsson yearns for an escape from the bleakness of Binghamton. His search for a peaceful place takes him to the Bauer place in Susquehanna. The magic of Susquehanna makes him delirious. The Endless Mountains bring him the hope of salvation. Mickelsson finds himself beyond the "perishability of time." He is reminded of his boyhood days on his father's farm. The past and the present come alive all at once. However the joy is short-lived:

The chance of escape from Binghamton's drear bleakness to the otherworld of the "Endless Mountains" teases him with the hope of clarity. What he does not realize is that he is inheriting another collection of metaphysical worries, ghosts, implacable forces that will haunt him even more fiercely than the black sterility of Binghamton.³

Mickelsson's "new" house is haunted by ghosts. One can hear voices in the hallways. However, that there are rattlesnakes around, in a way excites Mickelsson:

Except in zoos, Mickelsson had never seen a rattlesnake. The idea that they were here, all around him in the woods, was interesting, faintly disquieting, nothing more. But no, that was not quite right, he corrected himself. He
was pleased that there were snakes. He'd looked at a house, about a month ago, in a town called Jackson, a few miles south of Susquehanna, where a day or two earlier two large trees beside the road had been torn out by the roots by a twister. It was that, he'd realized when he thought about it, that had led him to consider buying the place. He knew the theory — Nietzsche, Sorel, Karl Jaspers when he spoke of "the abysses which lie on each side of the footpath" — that the human spirit comes alive in the proximity of danger, or perhaps one might better say, with Sartre, the presence of temptation — the temptation to sink back into Nature: bestiality and death.(52-53)

So now what remains to be seen is whether Mickelsson will submit to the "existential temptation to monstrousness," or will he break free from the "ghosts" of his new world? The many ghosts of his world are, "Rattlesnakes, housebreakers, animals in the cellar, big chested big-cocked devils on dirt bikes..." (180).

In Susquehanna, Mickelsson meets Tim Booker, a real estate agent. It is from Booker that Mickelsson buys the Bauer place, his new home in Susquehanna:
From the moment he'd met him Mickelsson had been hard put not to like him. He seemed obviously honest, blessed with the heartiness and dependable gentleness Mickelsson had associated since childhood with dairy farmers.... Tim had been his first real introduction to the character of the people who'd be his neighbours if he managed to get the Bauer place. From the outset the signs had been promising. Even Tim's accent was a pleasure, or anything interesting, a sort of key to the place – a set of clues, if Mickelsson could figure them out, to the ungraspable phantom meaning he'd felt up at the house. The secret of wholeness, perhaps, if he was lucky. His cracked-up life's second chance. (33)

Lives in Susquehanna are quite close knit. Everybody seems to know everybody else. They even know each other's dark secrets. It isn't long before Mickelsson gets acquainted with a lot of people – policemen, farmers, businessmen, and many others. It is not long before Mickelsson begins to get entangled in the new web of relations in the Susquehanna community. Life in Susquehanna seemed to him, in more than one ways, mystical. Even little Lily, Lapatofsky's daughter, "a silent, shyly smiling red-head, something wrong about her eyes – maybe just a dreamer," does not fail to leave an impression on
his mind (69). In fact it is all these simple connections that towards the end save him from damnation.

The Bauer place, Mickelsson’s home in Susquehanna is at the center of the novel. It has many histories. Mickelsson’s friend calls it “...spiritual country – though to my mind it’s downright peculiar, what with the Mormons starting up there and all. Why Peter, you are dwelling on holy land! That’s where Joseph Smith had those divine visitations, where those fabulous tablets were given into his very hands’” (111). Talk about witches and klansmen and secret chemicals adds to the mystery of the place.

Mickelsson is also compelled to make a distinction between love and lust. Mickelsson loves Jessica Stark, a Sociology professor, a widow. She is attractive and at the same time not too easily approachable. In total contrast to Jessica Stark stands Donnie Matthews whom Mickelsson desires physically. Donnie, around twenty years old, is a prostitute by profession. She has plain looks and of course is always willing to be available. Mickelsson first meets Donnie in a bar in Susquehanna:

   Her dress was a light flowerprint, almost transparent, wide open at the throat and plunging; no bra. Her white cleft instantly aroused him. He thought guiltily of Jessica Stark. The girl’s face, in spite of the slight look of
drunkenness, was as innocent and open as a child’s. Compared to Jessica, she was as common as a kitchen sink. (142)

To Mickelsson, Jessica stands for everything that is moral, for everything that is righteous. However, Donnie is for him simply an object of sexual gratification. Mickelsson cannot make up his mind and is torn between these two forms of attraction, one spiritual the other physical, one holy the other lustful. Mickelsson’s encounter with Donnie changes his world:

His visitors were long gone when Mickelsson got home that night, or rather that morning; the sky was already beginning to lighten, and birds were singing in every bush and tree, like poor Mickelsson’s heart. It was not that he’d ceased to feel guilty. Intellectually he had no doubt that what he’d done was very wrong, inexcusable in fact... But when he climbed out of the Jeep... it was not solid ground but dewy air he stepped on. It had of course not escaped his attention that she’d outrageously tricked him.... But the truth was... he liked her sweaty, plump young body, or the way she’d somehow banished from his mind all fear of going limp, or her oral expertise, or her shyness when he’d come out of the bedroom and caught her with her glasses on.(148)
Mickelsson's problems have begun to multiply. This is primarily because his actions have ceased to match his moral beliefs. But he is not ignorant of it either. His desire for Donnie, a girl about the age of his own daughter, makes him feel ashamed of himself. If Mickelsson wishes to save himself from damnation, he must cease to do what he does not think is morally right.

In total contrast to Susquehanna, stands Mickelsson's professional world, the university community. In fact it cannot be called a community. Hard feelings and professional jealousy are all that one encounters here. Mickelsson's biggest rival is his hunchbacked chairman, Tillson. Through Tillson, Mickelsson meets the mysterious Michael Nugent, a student who had more problems than he could handle: "The young man...had such glassy eyes and pallor of skin, color like a dead man's, that Mickelsson was for an instant almost thrown....The leaden skin, the reddened eyelids, the nervous, weak mouth like a child's all gave ominous warning" (11). The death of Warren, a chemistry professor, under mysterious circumstances makes life difficult for Mickelsson. Order shall prevail only if Mickelsson makes sense of all the mystery inside and outside his home, and his life.

Mickelsson's student Nugent shared closeness with Warren. To Nugent, Warren was
...a clown, in a way. The sort of person who liked to go on — you know — intellectual benders...When I say he was a "clown" all I mean is — ...You know how it is in the circus. The acrobat does something, and the clown tries to imitate it, but the clown's not human, like the acrobat, he's just this creature with straw in his head. That's why clowns are at the same time funny and sad: they imitate exactly what human beings do, and if the *Nichomachean Ethics* were right, they really would become human. But no matter what they do they remain just clowns. (223)

Here is a cue for Mickelsson. He must begin to act like a human being. He must shed his monstrousness. He must stop mimicking and behaving, like a clown.

Mickelsson and Nugent share a bonding that adds more mystery to the murder. Earlier it was Mickelsson who had advised Nugent to attend Edward Lawler's class. Lawler discusses Nugent's problems with Mickelsson to finally leave Mickelsson feeling all the more guilty. Mickelsson decides that he "ought to take Michael Nugent aside, have a heart-to-heart talk with him. *Ought.* He brooded. A stupid word, no force. A word for weaklings, Nietzsche would say. A word for survivors, something he apparently was not. No paradox, for Nietzsche. *The*
species does not grow in perfection: the weak are forever prevailing over the strong" (356). If Mickelsson must survive, he ought to act.

Mickelsson cannot act; at least not quick enough. Nugent’s desperate phone call to him leaves him simply paralyzed: “He felt a kind of sickness sweep over him, a strange and baffling feeling like absolute despair, the very soul’s prostration. He knew what he should say.... The boy’s anguish, whatever its cause, was so strong that Mickelsson could feel it himself, a sensation of teetering on the rim of the abyss” (390). Mickelsson does not reach out to Nugent in time. Nugent’s apparent suicide torments him and pushes him closer to the abyss.

Mickelsson is now on the verge of insanity. He sees “frogs falling out of the sky, or blood, or fish...stones” (215). He thinks of witches and superstitions even as his farm house is shrouded with mysteries and confusion. Memories of his grandfather further remind him of his own frailties. He begins to seek diversion. He decides to rebuild his house. Symbolically, this is Mickelsson’s attempt to restructure his own thoughts, his own self. The act helps Mickelsson to let go off his pain, his grief and his guilt. However his constant state of drunkenness does not allow him to fully comprehend his state of mind and body. Mickelsson is still haunted by “ghosts.”
Lost in his world of "ghosts," Mickelsson feels more distanced from his friends. Left all to himself he feels all the more miserable. His condition, physical and mental, goes from bad to worse. When he reads through *The Broken Heart* given to him by Nugent, Mickelsson feels "like a man encountering his own obituary" (213). The book talks about how living without love can ruin the heart and the soul. Mickelsson has been left totally weakened by his various relationships. Even making imaginary love to Jessica Stark does not bring relief to him. On the contrary it only leaves him ashamed of himself: "If any man had ever been truly in love, he thought, he Peter Mickelsson, was in love with Jessica Stark ....But he was thinking: he understood now the agonies of the silly courtly-love poets moaning and groaning over the holy unattainable" (270). To Mickelsson, Jessica stands far, far above the real and the mundane. And in possessing her, Mickelsson himself rises above the ordinary:

Soon a motion he could not control came over him – over her as well – a terrible mechanical power he'd never in all his years been taken by, a mighty and yet effortless rocking that made him feel shaman-like, as if the curtain of illusion had parted and they'd fallen to the beginning of things. Her face shone, her smile wide. When at last the
The sexual act leaves Mickelsson transformed. It transports him into a world where everything is bright and serene.

Physically, however, Mickelsson finds sex with Donnie Matthews more satisfying. According to Leonard Butts, “The comfort of Donnie Matthews’ easy sexuality probably saves Mickelsson from insanity by providing a release for the emotions and physical desires he keeps locked up during his ‘retreat.’” This may be simply because he finds Donnie’s love “uncomplicated.” But the relationship itself leaves him wishing for death: “The sexual coupling of an older man and a younger woman, especially one not his marriage partner, was apparently only a little less deadly than cyanide. In the end, of course, the heart’s real, physical demand for love was not just a matter of sex: the heart – whatever the mind’s objections – demanded company, security, trust” (213-14).

In making love to Donnie, Mickelsson has killed his conscience – killed himself. He is conscious of what is right and what is not. But he is unable to act accordingly:

In his mind Jessie had become for him (though part of him knew that it had nothing to do with reality) a sort of Platonic beacon of immaculacy, secular equivalent to
Luther's "Lord's Supper," the point at which the finite and infinite touch. And Donnie, poor kid, had become for him the soul and vital symbol of all things lubricious and lewd, meretricious, debauched, profligate and goatish – the dark side of Luther's symbolism of the privy in the monastery tower. The more he brooded, self-flagellating, turning his bullish will against itself – striking out in his mind first at Jessie, then at Donnie – the more angry, confused, and anxious he became.(338)

When Mickelsson encounters more serious issues he makes an attempt to hold on to his beliefs and act accordingly. When Donnie tells him that she is pregnant the only solution seems to be abortion but Mickelsson is not all for it. Surely then all hope is not lost for Mickelsson. He is still human enough to distinguish between good and evil, between life and death, between affirmation and denial. Memories of his family and his friends keep him tethered to life.

But Mickelsson, the philosopher, owes allegiance to Luther and Nietzsche. In fact now he begins to see

...similarities between his own personality and Luther's:

Sometimes, brooding as he worked on the house or as he walked the streets of Susquehanna, doing errands, he felt as if the old fiend were right at his shoulder, listening in;
and once, in a drizzling winter rain, just as he was coming out of the hardware store, he actually thought he saw old Dr. Martinus in the flesh....He was dressed in black, as he'd been in life, his back turned to Mickelsson, the coarse hands folded behind his prodigious ass, and instead of coat and hat he wore a hooded sweater, exactly what one might expect of a former monk. Mickelsson froze in his tracks, knowing already that it wasn't really Luther, yet staring on, stupefied, some dim, ancient part of his mind unconvinced. Then the enormous creature turned, as if aware of someone behind him, and Mickelsson saw that it was the fat man from Donnie's apartment building. (337)

The connection that Mickelsson makes between Luther and the fat man he later shocks to death is of significance. Mickelsson has two sides to him – the friendly and the bestial. When this truth dawns upon him he is reminded of

...old Luther's doctrine, and Mickelsson's grandfather's, of all flesh as filth. "The world not only is the devil's, it is the devil." And he understood more clearly than ever before, it came to him – understood in his bowels – Luther's observation that never is God's wrath more terrible than in His silence. Nietzsche's starting point. That once
mankind discovers that it has lost God, the only possible result is universal madness. If God is dead, Nietzsche had claimed, human dignity is gone, all values are gone. Cold and darkness begin to close in.... No alternative now but the old, mad Luther's imperious longing for death, the sad old fiend limping on gouty legs from room to room, shaking his fists, demanding release from this wicked virgin-shit world, and the sooner the better.... It was too late now even to cry out, fervently indignant, for death. Peter Mickelsson was living in the cynical, long-suffering age Nietzsche had foretold. Rhetoric was exposed; and suicide – all human feeling, in fact – was rhetoric. (339)

Gardner is all against the existential dilemma of the twentieth century. Modern man engages in unethical actions without feeling guilty about it. This is the modern day malaise Gardner reiterates must be done away with.

Mickelsson's, moral confusion becomes apparent when he breaks into the fat man's apartment to steal the money he needs to pay for Donnie's abortion:

They stood facing one another in the room's yellowed dimness, clutter all around them, two huge animals squared off, each more frightened than the
other....Mickelsson stood motionless, trapped in a
nightmare, but now the fat man's mouth opened, round as
a fish-mouth, showing blackness within, and he bent a
little...clutching himself, his mouth still open, eyes
narrowing to slits, squeezing out tears. Though
Mickelsson's mind wheeled, one thought came through
clearly, as if someone else were thinking it: he's having a
heart attack. "The broken heart," he remembered, and
felt, along with his own heart's pain, a vast surge of
pity....Again and again Mickelsson told himself that he
must shout for help, and never mind the consequences to
himself – no one knew the arguments better than he – but
each time, he did nothing, mentally begging the man to
die quickly, lose that expression of pain and, worse,
bottomless, childlike disappointment. At last the fat
man's knees buckled, a strained, babyish cry came from
his throat – a cry to Mickelsson for help – and, turning
towards the bed, trying to reach it but too far away, he
tumbled like a load of stones onto the carpet. Mickelsson
bent down for a look at the eyes. They squeezed shut,
dripping tears, then weakly fell open and were still....He
looked in horror at the silver, lioness-headed cane and
imagined it flashing down, sinking into the fat man's temple, "Holy God in Heaven," he whispered, fully understanding at last that, though not with the cane, he had murdered the man.(409-10)

Mickelsson certainly is distanced from life. He certainly is a long way away from life:

It is astonishing in fact: conscious, utterly indefensible falsehood from Mickelsson the moralist, howler in the wilderness of his desiccate age, ranter against sloganeers and simplifiers, both Communists and capitalists, liars and lobsits of every persuasion – Professor Peter Mickelsson, indefatigable shamer of the Shallow-minded, fulminator against the frivolous and false, who had written scornfully of both fundamentalist straight-world bigotry and the latest campus fad, homosexual uncloseting – et cetera, et cetera.(31)

Mickelsson now stands closer to the abyss than ever before. But then "What was one to do if he knew that every movement of the spirit was poisoned at the source, as if by uremia?"(402). He must "act with fully conscious stupidity" (403). This ensures that the conscience does not interfere and the individual is free to do whatever he pleases, yet not "feel especially guilty" about.
Mickelsson has clearly lost control over his life. In fact he believes that “whatever happened to him from this point on was fated, as all things material are. He seemed not his own man, only an agent – the submissive means by which evil powers he could not understand did their work” (413). He ceases to hold himself responsible for his actions, even immoral ones. He certainly stands distanced from life. Life to him now – including Christmas and Santa Claus – is nothing more than a bundle of lies:

Oh, cruel holiday! Infinitely more terrible lie than Santa Claus! Day of agonizing human love, awful promise that God would be equally loving and – against all odds, against all reason – would ultimately make everything all right.... Redemption, resurrection...what ghastly, unspeakable lies, if they were lies! He, Peter Mickelsson, was the frozen, buried world, and the deep snow that buried him and would never be melted was his murder of the fat man, that and much, much more: his swinish misuse of Donnie Matthews, his failure to love his wife as she'd deserved, his betrayal of Jessie – sins, failures, death-stink blossoming on every hand! (436)

Mickelsson’s despair has begun to affect the way he looks at himself and the world outside. His mind is plagued by thoughts of sin
and guilt. He is "Unable to feel, unable to function; living, as if there were nothing more mundane, in a house inhabited by ghosts more vital than himself" (521). Mickelsson shows all signs of losing his sanity: "He was frequented all the time now, which in theory should have convinced him that he was mad, but he could not be sure, turn it over as he might" (449). Mickelsson is slowly but certainly moving away from all that is human and becoming one among the many ghosts that inhabit his house.

Mickelsson’s misery cannot be undone. He is marooned. He has been betrayed by his wife, by his children. Definitely, "...the fidelity the heart required was no longer among the world’s possibilities" (432). Whatever little faith Mickelsson might have had in love and life too breaks down when he discovers that Jessica had been cheating on him, that she had been having an affair with Tillson. According to Jeff Henderson, "Peter Mickelsson is a kind of intellectual’s Everyman who must, like other characters we have seen, work through multiplied sorrows and guilts that push him into madness and despair in order to come to terms with his humanity and with the universe. Indeed, Mickelsson must endure a symbolic death before the rehabilitation of his soul is possible."6

Mickelsson must learn from life. And he makes no mistake: "Shocked by his own senseless brutishness, Mickelsson, like Chandler,
begins a desperate search for some meaning and order in his life.”7 Mickelsson, the philosopher, hopes that the darkness that he has encountered in life might lead him to light, that the great disorder that he has experienced might lead him to clarity, to order: “It was as if all he had been through, these past months, had stripped him of the last vestiges of herd opinion, so that from his dark pit of guilt he saw with eyes like an innocent’s....He’d achieved, perhaps, Nietzsche’s higher consciousness” (473). His faith in his grandfather’s “righteous” ways begins to crumble. He is now inspired by the way his father had lived his life — by “letting the light in.” Somewhere deep inside him Mickelsson believes in “magic,” believes that there is something that kind of links the physical with the spiritual, the human with the divine.

It is this belief that offers hope for Mickelsson, which saves him from final damnation. He begins to believe in the here and the now: “Even now, in his hopelessness and guilt, he could not deny that his knowledge of the house around him, restored by his hands to something like its former beauty, miraculously cleaned up like the world of Noah, gave a kind of security, however tentative; a place to stand” (475). Just as Mickelsson rebuilt the house, he must rebuild his life. The fact that he has been able to resurrect the house is “visible evidence that what he hoped for in his life and character might
perhaps be attainable" (477). All Mickelsson needs to do now is begin, somewhere.

That Mickelsson is determined to rebuild his life becomes apparent from his "psychic cry for help." Lawler tries to talk Mickelsson into giving up on life:

> Your kind of dream is finished, you see, your admirable but deadly liberalism. Life must defend itself against the mad raging horde.... Believe it or not, most people want to give up all traces of their humanness to some authority that frees them to be comfortable, healthy beasts.... We don't make people weaker than they are. We make them profoundly what they are! (543)

But this time even Lawler cannot get him to believe his lies. Mickelsson clings on to his "primal faith in magic" and turns to the gods for help. Even as he swings his pick, as suggested by Lawler, to bring down the house he had reconstructed, a kind of divinity descends upon him:

> Suddenly he was conscious of a headache so fierce he was amazed that he didn't pass out. Almost the same instant he noticed the headache, it was gone – all bodily sensation was gone. He could have been floating a thousand feet above the earth. Help me, please, he
thought, far more clearly than before... he involuntarily bent double, moving his head close to the wall he’d been about to tear out. The sheen of the wallpaper startled him, and — his thought elsewhere — he bent closer. The wallpaper brightened more. He felt alarm — terror — though for a moment he couldn’t tell why. He drew his head back. The light on the wallpaper dimmed. Before he knew what he was testing, he moved his head forward again, and the wallpaper brightened as if a candle had come near. He was thinking all this while, Please, please, please! — pouring the thought out as if it were his life. He turned around to look at Lawler. The man’s eyes were wide, astonished, but there was something else on his face, too: terrible despair. Then, as when one’s ears pop on an airplane, Mickelsson heard the real world’s sounds again. Someone was knocking loudly at the door. (553)

It was Lepatofsky’s daughter, Lily. She had never ever spoken a word before. But she had yelled “Staph! Staph!” as she and her father drove past Mickelsson’s home. The little girl has rescued Mickelsson from Lawler’s evil clutches. The miracle helps Mickelsson make contact with light, with divinity. His soul has been miraculously saved. Unable to think anything he leans over Lawler much like the fat man he
“murdered” some time back. The circle is complete. Mickelsson has finally affirmed life. Anatole Broyard sums it up this way: “Mickelsson, the protagonist, has a romance with a house, rebuilding and redecorating it as a preliminary or a substitute for rebuilding and redecorating himself.”

Now it is time for Mickelsson to set things straight in and around his life. Donnie Matthews, now living in California, calls up Mickelsson. She tells him that she has got her pregnancy terminated. She also tells him that she threw all the money — acquired through unholy means — into the ocean. Mickelsson feels exalted: “Sublimieren. God be with her” (530). The people of Susquehanna help in the healing process too. Lily and Tim Booker are primarily responsible for saving Mickelsson from damnation. The sheriff, Tinklepaugh, saves Mickelsson by brushing aside his involvement in the fat man's death with a simple blink. He explains that people must care for each other:

You'd be surprised how delicate the balance is, place like this. Man runs up a pile of debts, then skips out, or something happens to him — somebody's business could go under. That's how fragile it can get. Everybody knows that, these dying small towns. Different places you live got different ways of being of course. But that's how it is here. People take care of each other, when they're all
living right on the edge — they better, anyway. The worse it gets, the more careful they all got to be. Somebody stops pulling his weight — somebody breaks the agreement, you might say — that’s trouble. Anything can happen.... We just all gotta be careful, I guess, keep things in perspective, watch out for each other...and watch each other. (569)

The sheriff is right. No man can live as an island. Life makes sense only as long as the individual connects with the people around him. When these connections snap all links to life are lost.

Mickelsson has finally made peace with the world. He realizes that one must move on in life, even if it means carrying one’s sins along: “He would not die, that was his decision; in a small way, he would let the world die. Resignation” (577). He lets Nietzsche “die.” The ghosts stop tormenting him. The magic returns: miracles begin to happen. Mark comes back home. At first Mickelsson mistakes him for one of his ghosts:

Yet he felt a strange uneasiness creeping up on him, as if there were something important that he was supposed to do and had not done. Suddenly it came to him that the feeling was not free-floating guilt but fear, increasing by leaps and bounds. He held his breath and confirmed what
a part of him had known for minutes now: he was not the only one breathing in the room....In the doorway between the kitchen and livingroom he stopped, staring in astonishment. His son had arrived. He lay asleep in his rumpled clothes on the couch in the destroyed, now cleaned-up livingroom. Carefully Mickelsson approached and touched him, to see if he was real, then sniffed his hair, as if the sense of smell might be more worthy of trust than touch. (578-79)

Mark's return marks the beginning of the reordering of life for Mickelsson. He sets out to start life afresh, a “more narrowly circumscribed life.”

Mickelsson must now put his past behind him and make the best of the present. He must walk towards light and order. He abandons Nietzsche. He abandons isolation. Mickelsson's reconciliation with life is complete. He must now reintegrate himself with the community. He arrives at Jessica's house dressed almost like a clown. Here he runs into the very people he treated like dirt in the past. But now he is not enraged at their sight. Instead, his heart is filled with love for them: “Sentimental you may say...but perhaps you judge too quickly. These are all we can honestly call our own, these shitty human beings” (582). Mickelsson affirms the world. Like James
Chandler and Henry Soames he affirms “the buzzing, blooming confusion.” He moves “from a life of sterility and despair to one of variety and action.”

In declaring his love for Jessica, Mickelsson makes the ultimate move in the direction of life, in the direction of love, light, and order:

“I’m not crazy.... I’m just faking because I’m scared. I’m not drunk either. Smell my breath.... To make a long story short...I love you....I want to marry you” (585). Mickelsson does not hesitate to lay bare his life before Jessica – his thoughts as well as his deeds: “Jessie...it’s true that the get-up is a fraud. But the craziness is real. You have to help me. If I had my way, I’d come to you as the perfect lover, flawless golden lion.’ ” Jessica is overwhelmed by his unconditional expression of love for her. She is also greatly impressed by the way he expresses his fears and his sins. Now nothing can stop Jessica from reciprocating to his love.

Now it’s time for the final miracle to happen. Mickelsson and Jessica make love. In many ways the act of love is an act of resurrection:

Now the bedroom was packed tight with ghosts, not just people but also animals – minks, lynxes, foxes – more than Mickelsson or Jessica could name, and there were still more at the windows, oblivious to the tumbling,