 CHAPTER I

A TIME FOR RAGE: THE TRAGIC TRADITION IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

Traditionally, tragedy has been considered the noblest of the arts and has through the ages inspired a kind of eloquence in critics little seen elsewhere. If the facts of tragedy have haunted the human spirit in all ages and at all times, this is even more true of modern man who feels dangerously and precariously perched on the "brink of continual disaster."\(^1\) Commenting on the frequency with which we talk of cruelty, violence, and the feelings of guilt and despair, Nathan A. Scott observes:

"Ours is a century of bedlam and extreme peril—an age of anxiety. And since it is the peculiar office of the tragedian to be attentive to the inner and outer insecurities of man's lot and to the background of danger against which the human drama must be enacted, it is not surprising that our generation should have turned to him for assistance in discerning the signs of the time. Over the past two decades, the bite of events and the disorders in the days of our years have been the fundamental cause of the great awakening of interest in the problem of tragedy. Man has become a question to himself and in this icy age of perplexity, he feels the definitive

category of his self interpretation to be that of the tragic.²

Murray Krieger has similarly felt that the tragic vision is "surely the most spectacular, and the most expressive of the crisis-mentality of our times."³ In spite of modern man's obvious leanings towards the tragic, it has become fashionable to deny the possibility of tragedy in our times. In modern American criticism especially, critics have blithely celebrated the death of tragedy. They have insisted that it is modern literature's preoccupation with pessimism that gives it a moral vision quite different from that of traditional tragedy. It has been proclaimed that modern literature expresses a solidarity in extreme pessimism. We have, it seems, a wrong Weltanschauung, a spirit opposed to "composite optimistic vision." To George Steiner, any revival of the tragic in modern times is entirely out of the question. "The classic leads to a dead past. The metaphysics of Christianity and Marxism are anti-tragic. That, in essence, is the dilemma of modern tragedy."⁴


Myers, looking back upon the death of tragic literature in our times, feels that "the times are out of joint, that civilization is disintegrating, and that man in our age, in comparison with man in the great ages of Sophocles and Shakespeare, is enfeebled in spirit."\(^5\) Joseph Wood Krutch announces in no uncertain terms that "the reconciliation to life by means of the tragic spirit is . . . now only a fiction surviving in art."\(^6\) Attacks on tragedy by these critics have therefore resulted in the now widely accepted conclusion that contemporary tragedy is an impossibility, because man has lost his traditional concepts of human dignity and a transcendent moral order. The dominant mood of these critics is both nostalgic and despondent at the same time. Robert W. Corrigan, however, suggests that tragedy has always been both a celebration of and a protest against fate, and is therefore as possible in our time, as it was in the past. If today we no longer speak of tragedy in hushed or reverential tones, we cannot deny that tragedy deals with "the meaning of human suffering"\(^7\)—a fundamental

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problem of human experience which confronts modern man as surely as it did the ancients. The seeds of tragic vision are as universally embedded in the human consciousness today, as in the times of the Greeks: "If only we'd stop looking for another Shakespeare or Sophocles we might discover that mother courage is as much a tragedy as is Coriolanus or Ajax, or that Werrenmann's The Visit of the Old Lady says more to our time about the tragic nature of our existence than Oedipus the King.8

The terms "tragedy" and "tragic" are used so frequently in everyday experience that it is important to distinguish their special meaning in literature. Nathan A. Scott has referred in this context to Roger Hazleton, who in a book entitled and's Way with Man has "inveighed against what he calls the toothache view of tragedy."9 Scott is of the opinion that "we are all incorrigibly habituated in designating as tragic those events and experiences that put us in mind of what Vergil called 'the tears in things'."10 He reminds us that the "primary literature of this subject is marked by certain consistencies which indicate that a measure of preciseness belongs to the concept of tragedy,"

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10 Ibid., p. 122.
and warns us that unless this preciseness is adequately recognized we shall end by viewing tragedy as a "seamless garment and as something coextensive with existence as such." In the first place, following Robert Neillman, we may interpret the word tragedy to involve a type of "catastrophic experience" which can be "differentiated from all others." Tragedy refers not merely to the sad, the pitiful and the pathetic in human life: "it is deplorable, but not tragic, simply to be a victim of circumstances for there is an important distinction between destiny and sheer victimization. Sheer victimization is not an assertion—and it naturally makes not for vision but for frustration." Jewell has observed that,

The tragic vision is in its first phase primal, or primitive, in that it calls up out of the depths the first (and last) of all questions, the question of existence: what does it mean to be? It recalls the original terror, harking back to a world that antedates the conceptions of philosophy, the consolations of the later religions, and whatever constructions the human mind has devised to persuade itself that its universe is secure. It recalls the original un-reason, the terror of the


irrational, it sees man as questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside, and the irreducible facts of suffering and death. 

Tragedy as an art form, though basically presenting a picture of human suffering, makes certain reservations while doing so. A mere projection of fruitless suffering does not entitle a work to be called a "tragedy."

On the tragic hero, suffering is never merely imposed: he incurs it by his own decision, or, at the least, he finally wills to accept it as properly pertaining to the nature of things, including his own deepest nature.

The tragic visionary is not a victim of destiny, but is one who chooses to create his own destiny. He is a man, Kierkegaard would say, who has "chosen himself." Why is the tragic hero impelled to such a choice? Heilman suggests that the tragic character "is essentially a divided character." He may be divided between different imperatives, corresponding to different and perhaps

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14 Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy, pp. 4-5.
15 Brooks, ed., Introduction to Tragic Themes in Western Literature, p. v.
"irreconciliable needs." The tragic hero is confronted by a situation where he must make a choice, when he realizes the "discrepancy between the facts of his situation and what would appear to be the requirements of justice and right reason." As Jewall has rightly reminded us, "the tragic vision impels the man of action to fight against his destiny, kick against the pricks and state his case before God or his fellows. It impels the artist in his fictions towards what Jaspers calls "boundary situations," man at the limits of his sovereignty—Job on the ash-heap, Prometheus on the crag, Oedipus in his moment of self-discovery, Lear on the heath, Ahab on his lonely quarter-deck." Tragedy is essentially a time for rage, "a distillate of the rebellion . . . induced by crisis." The tragic hero who is impelled by rebellion is very close to Camus' "metaphysical rebel," who rebels even in the face of absurdity.

I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my own proclamation and I am compelled to believe, at least in

18 Nathan A. Scott, The Broken Center, p. 123.
19 Jewall, The Vision of Tragedy, p. 5.
my own protest. The first, and only datum, that is furnished me, within absurdist experience, is rebellion. Stripped of all knowledge, driven to commit murder or to consent to it, I possess this single datum which gains great strength from the anguish that I suffer. Rebellion arises from the spectacle of the irrational coupled with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impetus clamors for order in the midst of chaos and for unity in the heart of the ephemeral. 21

Tragedy, then, tells of the man who rebels, and in rebelling chooses his own destiny, a destiny moreover, that leads him to the very depths of suffering. Tragedy speaks of that situation in which the "divided" human being, facing conflicts, makes a choice for good or for evil and must then suffer the consequences of his own choice. The writer with the tragic sense sees "individual choice as the origin of significant action and situation; the strength of the tensions within man; his dividedness, his capacity both for error and for ultimate understanding; his moral substance that rebels against blindness and despair." 22

And yet, having traced the nature of the protagonist in a tragic situation, the circle is as yet incomplete; for it is what happens to the tragic hero that constitutes the

final import of a tragedy. Through suffering the hero arrives at self-knowledge, and this is indeed the essence of all tragedies. The ultimate completion of the tragic rhythm lies in the knowledge of man's weakness, his helplessness in the face of circumstances, and his acceptance of this fact. The fruition of tragic experience may be summed up, says Camus, in knowledge: "Oh light! The cry of all the characters in classical tragedy who come face to face with their destinies."23 Heilman has noted that Auden makes a similar statement when he says: "It is only when he is forced into self-knowledge, compelled to learn that his own rebellion is conditioned by the forces he is rebelling against, so that his most intense desires are untrustworthy, that he becomes a free agent."24 Aristotle was of course, the first to realize this aspect of tragedy. His term ἀναγνώσις, or as Lucas has translated it, "the recognition of the truth," is a factor which probably most determines that the expression of a work of literature is tragic. If a victim of circumstances goes to his death without enlightenment, blind to the real cause and source of his destruction, his defeat is meaningless, devoid of


24 Quoted in Heilman, The Iceman, The Arsonist and The Troubled Agent, p. 34.
what may be termed true "tragic value." There must be some kind of insight or enlightenment in tragedy. John Von Jsseliski has made a telling point in his *Tragedy & Fear*:

"I believe that the final impression of authentic tragedy is a hint of the future and the future's possibility, coloured by the enlightenment gained through the extraordinary interaction of tragic extremes."25

The pattern of tragedy, then, that emerges from the above discussion, and which Kenneth Burke was the first to point out is that the tragic action is meaningful pain, the process from *Poima* to *Pathema* to *Kathema*. According to Burke,

> the initial requirement for a tragedy ... is an action ... which would include three terms *poima*, *pathema*, *kathema*, suggesting that the act organizes the opposition (brings to the fore whatever factors resist or modify the act) that the agent then "suffers" this opposition, and as he learns to take the oppositional motives into account, widening his terminology accordingly, he has arrived at a higher order of understanding.26

This essential pattern may be better understood by a


reference to Francis Fergusson's adaptation of the schema first proposed by Burke. Fergusson very suggestively translates Burke's three designations, as Purpose, Passion, (or suffering) and Perception. In applying this rhythm to Oedipus Rex, Fergusson makes some very interesting observations. The first major incident in Oedipus' tragic fate is dramatized in the scene where Oedipus vows to find Laius' slayer. "But this aim meets unforeseen difficulties, evidences which do not fit, and therefore shake the purpose as it was first understood, and so the character suffers the piteous and terrible sense of the mystery of the human situation. From this suffering, or passion, with its shifting visions, a new perception of the situation emerges."27 The archetypal pattern of tragedy, according to Fergusson then, is the movement from purpose, to passion to perception.

The philosophical implications of tragedy may now be seen quite clearly. In the first place, tragedy is fiction inspired by a serious concern with man's fate. Secondly, although tragedy presents suffering at its most pitiable, it is in essence an optimistic attitude towards life. Arthur Miller has been eloquent on this point:

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal. 28

Herbert J. Muller has felt that the tragic spirit is an affirmation of positive values: "Man retains his dignity in failure and death, whether or not he is to enjoy a life to come. Because of this dignity, all is not vanity." 29

In Western literature, this celebration of the human spirit was first embodied in Homer's Iliad. Homer depicts man as noble and heroic even in the face of disaster, defeat, adversity, and annihilation. Homer's world was dominated by the gods, but in such a world he could glimpse the victory of the human spirit over an irrepressible destiny. Subsequently, the tragic imagination moved into drama in which man once again rose from the debris of his own defeat, purified by the enormity of his rebellion in the face of great adversity. Man's struggle against the order of the


universe was once again projected as heroic. It has been suggested that the tragic impulse, in our time, has migrated to genres other than drama, i.e., to the novel and perhaps even to lyric poetry. Justification for the tragic motif in the novel may be traced to Aristotle, who in Chapter V of the *Poetics*, declared that "tragedy and epic were close in the object of their 'imitation'." Plato similarly associated Homer's epic with tragic art. Clifford Leech points out that Murray Krieger "has indeed argued that true tragedy in our time is to be found only in the novel, because the formality of drama inhibits our full sense of disaster," and the "formlessness' of the novel gives us a 'properer sense of man totally face-to-face with the cosmos.' It could now be said with some measure of confidence that tragedy is not an anachronism in our time, nor is the climate in any way uncongenial for its harvest. But a modern form of the tragic must surely evolve from the fears and perils of our atomic age. Albert Camus has frequently stressed the need for a revival of tragedy, and has continually exhorted the writer to turn to tragic forms:

The public is tired of Atrides, of adaptations from antiquity, of that modern tragic sense which, alas is all too rarely present


in ancient myths however generously they may be stuffed with anachronism. A great modern form of the tragic must and will be born. Certainly, I shall not achieve this, perhaps one of our contemporaries will, but this does not lessen our duty to assist in the work of clearance which is now necessary so as to prepare the ground for it. We must use our limited means to hasten its arrival.32

Styron's effort in this direction constitutes a major achievement. In an age plagued by ontological insecurity, moral ambiguity and loss of faith in the supernatural, Styron, with an almost religious fervour, pleads for the affirmation of humanistic values, and reiterates his faith in man. A tragic writer, Joseph Wood Krutch, says does not have to believe in God, but "he must believe in man."33 What follows is an attempt to demonstrate how Styron draws upon the Southern tragic heritage, and reflects problems and situations that are to be found in the literature of the South.

II

Orrin E. Klapp, in *Tragedy and the American Climate of Opinion* has remarked that "Americans have a kind of armor

against tragic experience. . . . We are not, then (as Edith Hamilton said of the Greeks and Miguel Unamuno of the Spanish) a tragic people." Klapp believes that the main factor in American culture that makes it hard for the tragic hero to succeed is its climate of opinion or its ethos. America believes in "scientific optimism inherited from the eighteenth century. . . . Equally unfavourable to the tragic hero is the naturalism which, developed as an artistic technique by European writers, has become an integral part of the American outlook."  

It is just this ethos—this insularity against "the tragic sense of life" as defined by Unamuno—that the South refuses to share. It is the South's propensity for the tragic which makes its experience so vitally different from that of the rest of America. Unamuno, in speaking of the "tragic sense of life" describes it as a "whole philosophy, more or less formulated, more or less conscious."  

Below are some quotes from Miguel de Unamuno's "Tragic Sense of Life" translated by J.B.C. Flitch in 1954, and a quote from Klapp's "Tragedy and the American Climate of Opinion" published in 1958.


theory, speaks of the tragic sense as the sense of "ancient evil, of the mystery of human suffering, of the gulf between aspiration and achievement. It colours the tragic artist's vision of life (his theoretic form) and gives his works their peculiar shade and tone. It speaks, not the language of systematic thought, but through symbolic action, symbol and figure, diction and image, sound and rhythm."\textsuperscript{37} The tragic sense is essentially a religious state of mind. Unamuno has stressed what he feels to be the distance separating hope from any possibility of its fulfillment, and this frustration is termed "tragio":

\begin{quote}
The philosophy of the soul of my Spanish people appears to me as the expression of an inward tragedy analogous to the tragedy of the soul of Don Quixote, as the expression of a conflict between what the world is as scientific reason shows it to be, and what we wish that it might be, as our religious faith affirms it to be.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

The "constant propositions" of the tragic sense include as Kersten has enumerated: "an acute awareness (1) of the unbridgeable gap between desire and achievement, and (2) of a conflict between the actual material order of the


\textsuperscript{38}Miguel de Unamuno, \textit{Tragic Sense of Life}, p. 321.
world and a preferred ideal order.\textsuperscript{39}

The Southerner, like Unamuno's Spanish people, has been made aware of just this tragic sense of life. The Southern mind has always functioned differently from that of rest of America. The scientific optimism, the belief in progress that has so surely insulated the American against the tragic sense of life, is curiously enough diametrically opposed to the heritage of tragic guilt the Southerner is burdened with. The reasons for this are not only historical, but social and philosophical as well. One important reason for the Southerner's vision of tragedy is to be found in Southern history—the defeat and military occupation that the South, unlike the rest of America, has had to suffer. "He [the Southerner] has had to taste a bitter cup which no American is supposed to know anything about, the cup of defeat... and that as a consequence of that defeat he had to accommodate himself to an unwanted circumstance... and that, of course, is the meaning of failure."\textsuperscript{40}

It is now legend that the South, obsessed with its own past, suffered not only a lack of intellectual fecundity,


but also a crippling stagnation until the turn of the century. This very fact, perhaps, has contributed to the Southern willingness for "tragic" education. "It has been for many decades a widely received belief that the South is the least educated of the sections; yet there is a true and most important sense in which it is the best or the 'most' educated section. I refer here to an education in tragedy, which is the profoundest education of man."\(^{41}\) W.J. Cash in his *The Mind of the South,* speaks of the South as having drawn a ring about itself, as "narrowly coincidental as might be with the past. . . . and on that ring it had erected a rampart, topped in effect with a *chevaux de frise* which barred every fructifying notion from without. The result, in a world of poverty and necessary absorption in material problems, was complete stagnation."\(^{42}\) But as Weaver has pointed out, this poverty, this stagnation, was by itself a lesson in tragedy:

S such is our ambiguous position today that the possession of the greatest wealth in the world is going to require an amplitude of those qualities developed in the school of poverty and deprivation, and in that of rural living. Important among these

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"enforced" virtues are fortitude and the ability to do without, but perhaps most important of all is the Southerner's discipline in tragedy.43

The curious and paradoxical fact is, as Cash has pointed out, that in spite of "rabid stagnation," the South achieved a kind of literary maturity around 1900. Holman stresses the same fact: "the South, however defeated it may feel itself in other areas, has triumphantly taken possession of the American literary world. Literature [of the South]—has solidly established itself as the most important, the most talented, interesting and valuable in the United States."44 If Southern writing is valuable, it is precisely because it has given America the gift of tragedy. Holman observes in this connection:

the way in which the Southern writer has been most significantly of service to his fellow Americans has been as the portrayer of an archetypal man sharply at variance with the standard American view. In holding up this archetypal man, the Southern writer has presented America with a valuable image of the unique Southern experience and at the same time he has offered himself as a scapegoat for the frustration and guilt of modern America.45


Holman goes on to say that in the broadest sense, the supreme achievement of the Southern writer has been to show "man as caught in a tragic dilemma, tragic in the older and traditionally European sense." 46

The answer to this peculiar propensity for the tragic, as has been pointed out earlier, is due in part to some important aspects of Southern history. C. Vann Woodward in his illuminating article *The Irony of Southern History* has suggested an answer:

... the inescapable facts of history were that the South had repeatedly met with frustration and failure. It had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. It had learned to live for long decades in quite American poverty, and it had learned the equally American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America—though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia—the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction. Nothing about this history was conducive to the theory that the South was the darling of divine providence. 47


It was the twentieth century, however, which bore the fruit of the tragic sense inculcated by the facts of Southern history. The full flowering of the "Southern Renaissance" witnessed the growth of William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren. These men remained fundamentally Southern in their basic emotions. Cash has pointed out that "Intense belief in and love for the Southern legend had been bred into them as children and could not be bred out again simply by taking thought."48 Faulkner and Warren, unlike other American writers of the time, viewed man "as a limited creature, with evil as an active force in life."49 Holman reaffirms that "in the Southern writer, by and large, the sense of defeat and of imperfection resulted in a picture rather of tragic strength than of pathetic weakness."50 This proclivity for the tragic, apart from its historical causes, was in part the result of the Southern ethos "intimately connected with a brooding on death and the destiny of the individual soul."51 An essentially religious state of mind is necessary for the tragic sense, and the Southerner is deemed to possess this:

49 Holman, The Roots of Southern Writing, p. 10.
50 Ibid., p. 10.
51 Brereton, Principles of Tragedy, p. 58.
Southern piety is basically an acceptance of the inscrutability of nature. Under its impulse the individual Southerner feels that nature is not something which he is to make over or change; it is rather something for him to come to terms with. The world is God-given; its mysteries are not supposed to be fully revealed; and the only possible course in the long run is to accommodate oneself to its vast pulsations. Thus nature is seen as providential, and even its harsher aspects must be regarded as having ends that we do not fully comprehend. In a word, the Southerner reveres original creation. His willingness to accept some conditions that his more energetic Northern cousin will not put up with is not purely temperamental or climatic; it is religious or philosophical insofar as it stems from this world view.

The Renaissance in Southern literature—geared to a tragic tradition—started with Allen Glasgow in the first decade of this century. Although she dedicated herself to the novel of manners as an art form, and although her sharpest weapon against social inconsistencies was irony, she may be justly linked with the tragic tradition. Henry S. Canby writes: "tragedy for Allen Glasgow is not the American tragedy of youth, ignoble at the beginning and crushed by an ignoble society. Her tragedy is also classic. It is the tragedy of frustration, the waste of life through maladjustment of man to his environment and environment to its man. It is the poignant tragedy of nobility cramped

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by prejudice, or of beauty gone wrong, through inability to adjust to the real." 53 Canby goes on to say that "although tragedies of all kinds are eternal in human history, it is the choice of scene that finally determines their success as art: Mrs. Glasgow's choice, predetermined of course, by her own experiences, has been fortunate." 54 In speaking of Glasgow, Holman similarly suggests that "areek sense of fate hangs over her world, and nobility is the function not of actions or of effective alterations in the world, but of spiritual qualities called forth by the world's hostility." 55 This tragic tradition has continued, mutatis mutandis, in the novels of subsequent practitioners of fiction—Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren. Wolfe is peculiarly southern in the degree to which he sees the darkness, pain, and evil in life and yet "does not succumb to the naturalistic answer of despair." 56 Faulkner's "postage stamp on earth"—his Yoknapatawpha County, "consisting of middle class planters and farmers and storekeepers can body forth man's enduring tragedy." 57

56. Ibid., p. 130.
57. Ibid., p. 176.
These two novelists along with Robert Penn Warren have made adequate use of Southern history for primarily tragic purposes. To quote Holman once again in this connection:

The extensive use of Southern history by serious Southern novelists has been a tragic fable of man's lot in a hostile world. From Poe's damnation to Faulkner's myth of the reduplicating tragic history of Yoknapatawpha County, to Wolfe's half-lugubrious 'lost o lost and by the wind grieved,' to the ambiguous calamity of Robert Penn Warren's Will Stark in all the King's Men and the dark destruction of Peyton Loftis in William Styron's The Confessions of Felix H. Clay, the saga of darkness, Southern writers and their characters have known what it is to surrender their best hopes to the worst disasters, then pick up the pieces with stoic fortitude, and begin to make another dream that though lesser, is equally doomed. Yet man does not lose his tragic stature in the process; he retains, though soiled and common like the Bundrens of Faulkner's The Hamlet, the potential of being challenged by an obligation and of accomplishing the impossible in discharging it. In this world, dark with evil and torn with bloody violence, over and over an idea of human dignity and responsibility comes.

Holman goes on to say that nineteenth century America conceived the "democratic dream" of progress and happiness; and in a country which has always been a land of opportunity and resources, such optimism does not seem unfounded.

58 Holman, The Roots of Southern Writing, p. 11.
However, the Southern writer, who has always acknowledged the evil in man's soul, has never subscribed to such optimism; and this is the well-spring of his tragic art. Holman has suggested that according to the Southern writer, "a commonwealth of mutual respect can be built upon an awareness of our inevitable evil rather than upon the realization of our perfectible selves." His final tribute to the achievement of Southern writing geared to the tragic is conclusive, and well worth noting here:

I believe that the powerful impact which Southern writing has made upon the tormented world of the twentieth century, is a commentary on the painful extent to which our total experience makes the southern experience intelligible, so that the southern writer, who has faced the bitter paradoxes of his world and found in them the element of tragic grandeur, can speak as brother and friend to his troubled nation. . . . Out of the cauldron of the South's experience, the southern writer has fashioned tragic grandeur and given it as a gift to his fellow American. It is possible that no other Southern accomplishment will equal it in enduring importance.

The tragic sense in the South's literature may be further traced back to the southern writer's awareness of guilt, and to his obsession with time. It is these two

59 Holman, The Roots of Southern Writing, p. 12.
60 Ibid., p. 13.
factors, which bring Styron close to the tragic tradition. The Southern writer has been equipped by history to draw the blanket of guilt upon himself. This guilt is inextricably linked up with the fact of Negro slavery, which has ever darkened the Southern conscience. In the earlier writers, up to the twentieth century (with a few exceptions), there is a rationalization of the problem—the view that tends to regard slavery as a "benevolent institution." In later writers, from Ellen Glasgow onwards, for example, the Negro becomes both the cause, and by extension the symbol, of the Southerner's guilt; and in such a manner has the Southern writer used him. Faulkner expresses this poignantly in *Light in August*, a novel which focusses on the problem of miscegenation:

A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. . . . The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born; none can escape it. . . . And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross.61

In a similar way, the Negro symbolizes guilt in all of Styron's fiction. The elder Loftis, Peter Leverett's father, and Judge Cobb curse the day the black man stepped

into Virginia. The black man in bondage becomes a kind of curse responsible for the doom experienced by Virginia, "my poor blighted domain."

The Southern writer's too-intensive obsession with time is another aspect of his tragic art. Most Southern fiction depicts the relentless passage of time—time which leads inexorably to the grave. In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* it is broken time, symbolized by the breaking of the clock, which forms the repetitive motif of tragedy. The effect of time as "erosion or as attrition—the wearing away of life," is most readily to be seen in Styron's first novel, *The Confession.* As a representative southerner, Styron's novels are "deeply concerned with the meaning of the past for the characters, or with the pastness in the very present existence of a central figure or group; . . . time as the essence of all that has happened in Southern history," frequently controls the "shaping of the narrative, the character development, indeed, the pattern of the work."

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63. Ibid., p. 132.
the South. "The true artists among Southern writers of fiction," E. Blair House says, "have realised the meaning of Southern time and place for the people in their stories, have blended the elements of setting with character, have realised that for human beings time and place are significant, and have evoked that significance for their readers." In Styron, it will be seen, "place" is not merely the backdrop against which the action of the fiction occurs, but is organically integrated in the inner structure of his works.

Styron, it will be seen, while definitely adhering to the Southern tragic tradition in many respects, has also exhibited the influence of the French existentialists in his work. His use of the themes of guilt and redemption, definitely link him to the Southern tradition as developed by the Southern writer. However, Styron's tragic spirit is most readily asserted in his attempt to come to terms with the absurdity of human existence and in his efforts to preserve human dignity in the face of a reality that seems paradoxical and senseless. If Styron shares some of his attitudes with southern writers of a past generation like Faulkner or Wolfe, his tragic view also reflects the temper

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of our own age, in which man has become fully and consciously problematic to himself. Styron regards absurdity as a realistic foundation upon which to create a new faith in life and man. He is a "protest" writer whose heroes are essentially tragic rebels. "There is a continual emergence and examination of the rebel figure in Styron's fiction, a subject which is not limited to a particular time or place but to a man's conflict with a system which binds and cripples him."65 Styron's protest, however, is not limited only to protest against society. His protest is a wider one: "protest exemplified by the Southerner's--what I should call a radical protestantism because it is rooted in the sense of totality. It is a philosophical protest against lack of wholeness, against exclusions that restrict human potentiality, against the naturalist closure of other avenues of wisdom."66 Hatner, while tracing the influence of Camus on Styron's work says that,

... he is primarily concerned with the tragic condition of man's ancient feud with his own nature and destiny. Rather than show man as the product of an environment of ancestral guilt and doom against which he heroically casts himself, Styron allows his characters (including the


Leaves in {lie down in darkness) that freedom of choice to continually struggle against their self-indulgent and self-destructive urge to lie down in darkness. The confrontation with self . . . is, at the very least, the beginning of a tragic awareness that man's greatest enemy lies in himself. 67

Styron's rebels who confront the meaninglessness of life, then are typically the products of our own age of anxiety. Charles I. Glicksberg, in speaking of the tragic vision in the twentieth century, has made a very pertinent point which may be justly be applied to the nature of Styron's tragic vision.

The modern hero holds a vision, instinct with irony, of a life that is without meaning and beyond redemption.

This marks at least the starting point of the tragic vision: the recognition of the meaninglessness of life, which is counterbalanced by the ever-present need to affirm the greatness of the human spirit that can face up to its destiny, whatever it be. In thus demonstrating man's capacity to endure with courage the worst that life in its malice can inflict, the tragic vision rises above the vicissitudes of time-bound circumstances and the blind cruelty of fate, rooted as it is in the ambiguity of the human condition, the tragic vision constitutes an affirmation, however "negative" or equivocal in content, of the greatness of man as he confronts the

ultimate meaning of existence, which may be an utter absence of meaning. It is this 'mad' persistence in the impossible quest for meaning that is the vital and enduring element in the tragic vision. 68

In any generalized evaluation of Styron's fiction a few elements prominently present themselves as inescapable fundamentals of his tragic art. The tragic pattern that may be clearly seen in each of his novels consists first of all, of an act of shame, overt or otherwise leading to guilt. This act directly precipitates the suffering of the protagonist. In drama, especially in Greek or Shakespearean drama, it has been pointed out that the act of shame is overt and rather self-evident. In Sibilus Rex, for example, shame and guilt are implicit in parricide, and the subsequent marriage of mother and son. In modern expressions of the tragic, especially in the novel, the act of shame may not always be as overt as this. Dorothea Kroock has pointed out in this connection that the act of shame may even be "suggested, intended or imagined." 69 A clear example of this may be seen says Kroock, in Eliot's The Family Reunion, where the act of adultery is certainly not enacted, but the dramatist's intended projection of it is clear. Likewise in Styron's Lie Down in Darkness, for example, the strongly


suggested Oedipal relationship between Peyton and Milton Loftis is never overtly worked out. The act of shame may also be a highly symbolic gesture. In Styron's third novel, *Jet This House on Fire*, Cass's first sexual experience, the flowing out of the "divine spirit," symbolizes his estrangement from God. Suffering, which results from guilt or the act of shame, is the second element in Styron's tragic fiction. Styron's characters suffer, but their suffering achieves significance only in the light of the consequent knowledge that it generates. Thus, suffering in Styron's novels invariably denotes a sense of insight into or an understanding of the human condition. The nature of suffering in order to lead to knowledge, in Styron's view, must be destructive, sometimes involving death; but at the same time it is conscious. Styron at no time presents blind, inarticulate suffering, which would automatically eschew the tragic vision. As Morris and Malin have pointed out with a great deal of perspicuity:

Styron continually drives his protagonists to the very edge of the abyss, lets them peer into deep, empty, nihilistic spaces before, in tragic recognition of themselves, they pull back renewed, to carry on their search, or ecstatically transformed, embrace their death. . . . They are not impelled by intellectual, physical or even emotional kinesis alone. They are equally galvanized by a higher intuition, by the belief that the abyss, all too ready to claim them, can be transcended and some 'impossible state' (where pride, dignity,
nobility become the final measure of man) achieved. Their quest is nothing less than a kind of grail buried within the darker divisions of a world of conflicting change and lost value, to which they are drawn by its fitful incandescence, as by their own burning, ecstatic and often tragic visions.\footnote{Robert A. Morris and Irving Malin, \textit{The Achievement of William Styron} (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976), pp. 1-24.}

In the last stage of Styron's tragic view of life, the knowledge gleaned from suffering, to be really tragic, must involve some kind of affirmation of the dignity of the human spirit and the value of human life. This is the psychological fact of our final response to Styron's tragic art—our faith in man, in \textit{la condition humaine}, is not destroyed or undermined, but restored, fortified, and reaffirmed. There is a touch of the transcendent in his works, which ultimately saves his characters from the spiritual devastation around them. Though, Styron in his works bodies forth the influences of the European existential thought, his tragic vision of life, of human nature and its destiny, is to a very large extent similar to Faulkner's as expressed in the Stockholm address:

\begin{quote}
\ldots I decline to accept the end of man. \ldots I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures
\end{quote}
has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man; it can be one of the props the pillars to help him endure and prevail.71

To enlarge the implications of this theme of affirmation, Styron has taken recourse to the use of ancient myths in his works. It would be fruitful to examine in brief the contemporary preoccupation with myth.

III

The use of myth in our times is a mode of protest against our highly scientific and rationalized culture. In this age which has witnessed the death of God, the use of myth is the expression of the pattern taken by modern man's quest in search of a God. It has therefore become highly difficult to adequately express the tragic vision by taking recourse to the naturalistic or realistic modes of writing. It is myth which must act as a unifying experience, binding the strident notes of modern civilization into a search for

value. It has been suggested that although the American technological society was denied myth, it has turned out to need myth very badly. America has never paid any attention to myth, because Americans have always believed in history—history in the Hegelian sense—of a linear forward movement towards happiness and freedom. This belief in history and progress has now been exploded, and the return to myth is the writer's means to counteract the disillusionment with the idea of progress. A return to myth is a return to the basic structures of the human imagination.

One cannot fail to agree with Richard Chase when he asserts that "these days the word 'myth' is thrown about as cavalierly as is any word which the cultural climate envelops with glamour and charges with an emotional voltage." In spite of complicated and circumvented definitions of the term given by various scholars, "a myth is a large controlling image . . . which gives philosophic meaning to the facts of ordinary life." Raphael Patai has pointed out that "literature has the power to move us profoundly precisely


73 Mark Schorer, "Mythology (For the Study of William Blake)" Kenyon Review, 4, No. 3 (Autumn 1942), 366-380.
because of its mythical quality, its possession of mana, of the numinous, or because of the mystery in the face of which we feel an awed delight or terror at the world of man. To continue myth's ancient and basic endeavour to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious of his presence—this is the real function of literature in human affairs.74 Myths have fulfilled a great many diverse functions in the past, and this perhaps is the reason why our own age has witnessed a continual interest in the uses of myth, both in life and in literature. The modern dispenser of myth seeks to reinstate some of the ethical and aesthetic assumptions of the western tradition. The rediscovery of the world of myth by modern writers such as Wilde, Joyce or Camus points to a growing interest in the relevance of myth to man in the twentieth century. "Myths are chosen as literary symbols for two purposes: to suggest within a secular setting a timeless perspective of looking upon the human situation, and to convey a sense of continuity and identification with mankind in general. The myth is a 'timeless schema', as Thomas Mann has said. It is timeless in that it is ever present, a constant reminder of the eternal return of the same."75 John B. Vickery has suggested

that "a concern for the emotional patterning resident in myth is peculiarly appropriate to the twentieth century and its struggle to achieve a viable mode of psychic order." 76

Mythic figures such as Prometheus, Theseus, Oedipus, Telemachus, Achilles, Odysseus, Jocasta, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are "timeless prototypes" of human existence, and may be used to unify and to universalize particular human experiences.

Thus it makes sense to return, as did, to Oedipus and Theseus, to rediscover ourselves in the mythical landscape, and to relive the same timeless conflicts and choices imposed upon us by this age and the time of our lives. . . . The ultimate depths of the soul are also the primordial depths of time. And the same perspective is at work in the revival of mythical theories by Giraudoux, Anouilh, Camus, Kafka, Cocteau and other contemporary writers. 77

The modern novel especially in France and Germany, has exhibited a varied and intense use of myth. John J. White, while examining the use of myth in the modern novel in his recent book Mythology in the Modern Novel has observed:


77 Meyerhoff, Time in Literature, p. 81.
a myth introduced by a modern novelist into his work can prefigure and hence anticipate the plot in a number of ways. . . . The myth will offer the novelist a shorthand system of symbolic comment on modern events. "Prefiguration" is a useful word to describe this relationship, since it suggests 'coming before' and hence offering a comparison with a whole configuration of actions or figures.78

Styron has employed this prefigurative technique—in his first three novels—as a means to underscore his tragic themes. He conjures up an older work to lend authenticity and depth to contemporary events. Styron, like Joyce, uses the mythical method, the method of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," as a means of "controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."79 Myth in Styron's novels is similarly used as a controlling device, to lend shape and significance to the protagonist's tragic vision.


Father, O father! what do we here,
In this land of unbelief and fear . . .

William Blake