LAUGHTER IN THE DARK:
THE JESTER GOD IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

MICHAEL WILLIAMS DULA
Los Angeles, California

B.A., Dartmouth College, 1979
M.A., University of Virginia, 1980

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate
Faculty of the University of Virginia
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Virginia

August 1986

Queequeg: "De god what made shark must be one dam Ingin."

Abstract

In the nineteenth century, American writers responded to the lingering mythos of Puritanism by creating a counter-myth of their own: a God who plays cruel or incomprehensible jokes on mankind. The Jester first appears in the works of Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville, but his grin also punctuates the writings of artists as diverse as Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Ambrose Bierce, James Branch Cabell, and William Faulkner. Although the idea of a God who plays tricks on mankind is neither a distinctly modern nor a distinctly American invention, the American Puritan tradition, with its paradoxically tyrannical Judge who is also an omnipotent, benevolent Father, has offered particularly fertile ground for its growth.

From its roots in Dickinson's poems to its more recent mutations in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, the Jester God functions as a reaction against belief in Providence and the genteel tradition of naive optimism. In this private solution to the problem of evil, the misanthropy of the Puritans is directed outward at God himself, and all human institutions become suspect as mirrors of a potentially perverse divine order. The Jester is not merely an anti-religious device; he is in some sense a true God, an Other against whom these writers define themselves. The line between a universe without any order at all and one

ruled by the Jester is fine but significant; it is better to be the butt of a Joke than to be a meaningless part of an absurd cosmos.

The struggle to transform the Calvinist Father into a Jester is a supreme imaginative effort, achieved by turning radical playfulness against a still powerful tradition. By entering wholeheartedly into the game, the artist attains the privileged vantage of the Gamemaster; moreover, writers who invoke the Jester God frequently pass into a final stage where they imaginatively usurp the throne of that God as a conscious creator and puzzle-master. In these final, solipsistic solutions to all paradoxes, the creators of the Jester enter their own projections as God, Jester, and Author of all they survey.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the help and encouragement I have received from Professors Douglas Day and Raymond Nelson of the University of Virginia. I would also like to thank my wife, Alison Sowden, for her careful readings, valued criticism, and unflagging support.

Introduction

A joker is at large in American literature. Now grinning behind the faceless front of a white whale, now laughing ambiguously at five men in a garishly painted hotel, his shadowed face looms behind a century and more of literary history. His trail leads from a town called Hadleyburg to Jefferson, Mississippi, and his sign is left on the walls of Thomas Pynchon's Los Angeles for desperate truth-seekers to find and puzzle over. But when we track this master of disguises into the labyrinth of a work of literature we may emerge at the other end following only the footprints of the author, as if some mysterious metamorphosis has taken place, or a magic trick has been played while we were not looking. This elusive presence, inhabiting a realm which may expand to encompass the universe or contract to the vanishing radius of a single consciousness, I call the Jester God.

The idea of a trickster god is neither distinctly modern nor distinctly American, but the American Puritan tradition has offered particularly fertile ground for its growth. The first traces of the Jester appear in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Emily Dickinson begins her private, tentative rebellion against the local orthodoxy, a rebellion centered on the ambiguous figure of a God who may

play jokes on His followers. Not coincidentally, the Jester also appears at about the same time in the works of Herman Melville--another writer closely associated with the remnants of American Calvinism. Nothing could be more antithetical to the Puritan conception of a Providential deity than a god who subjects mankind to incomprehensible and often cruel jokes; but at the same time, nothing more efficiently resolves the paradox of a loving God who is a tyrannical Judge.[1] In many ways, the Jester God of Melville and Dickinson *is* the Puritan God reinterpreted.

In Dickinson and Melville the Puritan tradition is still strong enough to provoke serious and heartfelt dissent rather than offhand dismissal. Charles Berryman sees Melville's career as an important pivot in the development of the modern attitude toward an arbitrary, unpredictable God: "Whether Melville himself 'quarreled with God' is less important than Melville's historical awareness of how rebellion against divine power came at a strategic moment in the development of the modern imagination" (168). I will deal with Melville's large-scale rebellion at some length, but it is worthwhile first to glance at the quiet revolt of his contemporary, who in some of her most powerful lyrics parallels or even anticipates Melville in positing a divine adversary with a strange sense of humor. Religious poetry which sets up God as an antagonist is conventional enough--one thinks of Donne's Holy Sonnets--but Dickinson,

in a few exceptional lyrics, takes the radical step of making her opponent an untrustworthy one, thus calling into doubt the very possibility of a covenant between man and creator.

Dickinson grew up in a town which was one of the last strongholds of New England Calvinism, and as Richard Sewall has observed, "Her religious anxieties came early and went deep" (*The Life of Emily Dickinson* 2: 328). The Jester God arises in part from the paradoxes inherent in Calvinist thought. In his 1911 essay, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," Santayana examines the strain of craziness at the heart of American Calvinism:

> Calvinism, essentially, asserts three things: that sin exists, that sin is punished, and that it is beautiful that sin should exist to be punished. The heart of the Calvinist is therefore divided between tragic concern at his own miserable condition, and tragic exultation about the universe at large. (*Selected Critical Writings* 87)

An emphasis on predestination contributes to the volatile mix; faced with the impossibility of ascertaining his own election, the Puritan's uncertainty leads to a deep longing for resolution. Joking offers a way of stepping outside the

system and defusing these anxieties. As a doubter in the devotional community, Dickinson's anxiety was especially intense, and in her poems' exploratory confrontations with faith she questions religious practice in Amherst, Massachusetts with imagination and humor.

Dickinson's God is a God of silence and ambiguity. In the poem which begins "Houses--so the Wise Men tell me--" she admits "*I* don't know him" (*Complete Poems* 59; No. 127). Nevertheless, she occasionally suspects the worst; perhaps the deity she addresses whimsically as "Papa above!" (32; No. 61), is actually a "swindler" (229; No. 476). All the promises of the Bible and its interpreters may be only empty words, theological trickery.[2] Unable to clearly discover Providence in the chaos of history, Dickinson can only define the sacred in negative terms: "'Heaven'--is what I cannot reach!" (109; No. 239), and if she fears that "the Savior's face" has turned away from her (117; No. 256) at other times the turning is her own.

When absolute trust in God breaks down, the problem of evil looms large. Edmund Wilson describes the essential difficulty:

> . . . in Calvinism there is no dialectic: no conflict can exist within God, who is infinite, who includes the whole universe and who has not even the dimension of time. But since the Devil

> is one of His aspects, He is bound to seem double-faced. Is the 'angry God' of Jonathan Edwards, in whose hands 'the sinner' is writhing, a God of mercy or an unrestrained fiend? (*Patriotic Gore* 741).

The dual nature of the Puritan God, neither half of which fully explains perceived reality, creates enormous tensions; whatever else the invention of a Jester God accomplishes, it is a way of transcending the bounds of an intractable problem. Dickinson reveals her concern with evil in the well-known poem numbered 1624:

> Apparently with no surprise
> To any happy Flower
> The Frost beheads it at its play--
> In accidental power--
> The blonde Assassin passes on--
> The Sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another Day
> For an Approving God.
>
> (667)

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this evocation of a God who approves of death and destruction lies in the tension between the words "accidental" and "Assassin." The

first describes random, chaotic destruction; the second implies purposeful malevolence. Such a choice between chaos and malice is not a pleasant one, but the presence of a superficially benign "Approving God" favors the second interpretation. Dickinson, like Melville and his heirs, prefers to find some sense of order, even a cruel order, in the universe. Poems like this lead Nina Baym to suggest that, "Like Robert Frost after her, the only design she can make out is sinister" (Elliott, ed. 200).

Dickinson's perception of death as a possible manifestation of divine malice leads her to imagine in one lyric that life itself must be a joke. In the poem numbered 338 Dickinson describes a prototype of the Jester God. Here the jest begins as fun and ends in deadly seriousness:

I know that He exists.
Somewhere--in Silence--
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.
'Tis a fond Ambush--
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!

But--should the play
Prove piercing earnest--
Should the glee--glaze--
In Death's--stiff--stare--

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest--
Have crawled too far!
(160)

In an earlier draft of this poem Dickinson uses the word "Joke" instead of "fun" in the first line of the last stanza, making the Jester God's presence even more explicit (*Poems: Including Variant Readings* 270). By reducing God to a childish joker, she defuses some of the terror of "Death's--stiff-stare." Instead of bowing before the final mystery of death, she wittily overturns conventional expectations and scolds God for going "too far" in his joking. By invoking the Jester God, Dickinson provides a lowered image of the Creator which she can criticize and mock, even as He plays his most deadly jokes.

Dickinson's imaginative audacity allows her to attack traditional notions of God with humor and irreverence. Thus she criticizes God's unjust treatment of Moses as

"tantalizing Play" (293; No. 597).[3] A more extended treatment appears in No. 1461:

"Heavenly Father"--take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid Hand
In a moment contraband--
Though to trust us--seem to us
More respectful--"We are dust"--
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity--
(619)

The daring of a speaker who characterizes herself as a "supreme iniquity" makes this lyric a small masterpiece of condensed irony. Traditional self-abasement parrotted behind those significant quotation marks sets up the sly humor of the last two lines, where Dickinson resembles Twain in her insistence that God is the only Original Sinner. By directing her irony toward the duplicitous God, Dickinson makes His tyranny seem more humorous than painful. The use of humor to displace pain is an important psychological basis for the Jester God; on a more general level, jokes have always exploited cruelty, pain, or embarrassment for comic effect.

Dickinson's characteristic wit permeates the cosmic structure she proposes in the Jester poems, for the design of the Jester God's cosmos is predicated on ironic or black humor. The Jester is anything but benevolent, and his tricks are frequently more savage than funny, but irony is a type of ordering principle, an alternative to a completely nihilistic universe, and even the role of a Jester's victim is preferable to no role at all. Thus the absurd deity posited by Dickinson's idiosyncratic humor becomes in later writers an explanation and justification for a universe of free-play and ambiguity. By exploiting the possibilities inherent in a universe where anything can happen, they make humor possible amid tragedy.

For Dickinson as for Melville, the struggle to transform the Calvinist Father into a Jester is a supreme imaginative effort, achieved by turning her own radical playfulness against a still powerful tradition. Sewall argues that Dickinson's open scorn for doctrine made imaginative compensation all the more necessary: "She took it upon herself to fill the void left by these rejections with all the verbal resources she could muster. She would triumph by the word--her own Word" (*Life of Emily Dickinson* I: 238). Later authors have followed her lead in using the Puritan mythos as a starting point for their own subtle, ironically twisted evocations of the Jester God. While satirizing the myth as it has come down to them, they tread

a narrow edge between the strict but brittle order of the old Puritans and the consuming nihilism of cosmic chaos. Trickster figures are common in American folklore and literature, but for these writers the trickster assumes cosmic proportions as an explanation for the persistence of evil and the unknowableness of God.

Of course, the Puritanism to which nineteenth and twentieth century writers respond is not the Puritanism of Cotton Mather. Sacvan Bercovitch observes in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* that by as early as 1820, "the name of Cotton Mather had become a catchall for Puritan hypocrisy and repression" (87). Even by Melville's time this dismissive interpretation is well-established, and Mather and his compatriots are literary and theological relics, rapidly being subsumed into the national tradition. The belief that material prosperity is a sign of God's favor has shaped the American Dream, and we still hear echoes of the Puritan vision of America as a Promised Land.

As my use of the word "myth" suggests, my concern is more with how American literature has reacted against the common perception of Puritanism than with the nature and history of Puritan ideas. For the many American authors who have joined in the revolt, Puritanism has been a catchword for all that they find odious in traditional American values: materialism, sexual repression, and hypocrisy. The corruption of Puritan ideals in the name of material

well-being and politics makes them an easy target for satire. The Puritan fascination with Providence receives special attention: consider, for example, Increase Mather's 1684 description of special or "Illustrious" Providences:

> Such Divine Judgements, Tempests, Floods, Earth-quakes, Thunders as are unusual, strange Apparitions, or whatever else shall happen that is Prodigious, Witchcrafts, Diabolical Possessions, Remarkable Judgements upon noted Sinners, eminent Delivrances, and Answers of Prayer, are to be reckoned among Illustrious Providences. ("An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences," qtd. in Hoffman, *Form and Fable* 25)

One of the Puritans' most glaring paradoxes was their belief in their own sinful insignificance and unworthiness and simultaneous conviction that everything happening around them was expressly designed by God for their benefit or instruction. Later writers, especially Mark Twain, enjoy satirizing the lingering belief in Special Providences.

The harsher, darker aspects of Puritanism have proven less palatable over the years and have faded from the American mainstream. For most Americans the happy glow of nineteenth-century transcendentalism and the tolerant spirit of Unitarianism eclipsed the stern doctine of man as an

essentially depraved creature. This transmuted faith, which Santayana dubbed the genteel tradition, maintained the "elevation" and "austerity" of Calvinism without the gloom and doom, preferring instead an optimistic belief that the universe exists for man's benefit: "The world, they felt, was a safe place, watched over by a kindly God, who exacted nothing but cheerfulness and goodwill from his children; and the American flag was a sort of rainbow in the sky" (Santayana, *Selected Critical Writings* 34).

American authors have consistently rebelled against both genteel optimism and Puritanical repression, though they have also been attracted by the power of the Puritan vision of sin and guilt. The authors in this study respond to the native myths by positing a counter-myth of their own--a universe ruled by a Jester, where chaos reigns supreme and justice occurs only by divine whim. This opposition is complicated by the fact that several of the writers whom I will discuss retain Puritan misanthropy while sneering at its avowal of redemptive grace; thus Puritanism acts not only as an antagonist but also as an underlying influence behind the impulse which creates the Jester God.

Irony is the governing mode of a universe ruled by a Jester, and these writers follow the master Ironist in creating worlds where events seldom turn out as we would wish them to, though neither do they proceed merely according to chance or strict determinism. Although Twain,

Bierce, and Crane, in particular, are attracted to the scientific determinism of the Naturalists, pure determinism is antithetical to the Jester, who escapes classification and inhabits a universe of free play. The world of the Jester is infinitely multifarious, filled with portents and clues. Like the Puritans, apostles of the Jester view the world as a system of semi-allegorical signs, but the conclusion they draw from these signs is vastly different. In creating the Jester God, American authors turn the Puritan vision against the Puritans, holding up to them a mirror image which is also a devastatingly ironic portrait.

Irony tempers the relationship between author and reader as well, for, like the world, a poem or novel is a network of sometimes ambiguous symbols. To read a work by Melville or Faulkner is to be placed in the situation of one of their characters, striving to make sense of interlaced complexities. Thus the artist becomes a counterpart to the Jester God, toying with the figures he creates and playing tricks on the reader's perceptions. Conversely, in Jung's terms, the Jester is a projection of the artist:

> Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face. . . . they lead to an autoerotic or autistic condition in which one dreams a world whose reality remains forever unattainable. (from *Aion*, *The Essential Jung* 92).

Jung elaborates on the ambiguous relationship between the psyche and God in *Answer to Job*:

> It is only through the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us, but we are unable to distinguish whether these actions emanate from God or from the unconscious. We cannot tell whether God and the unconscious are two different entities. Both are border-line concepts for transcendental contents . . . (329).

In literature that exploits the borderline between God and the artist, it is often difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

In light of the intimate relationship between an artist and the deity he creates, it is not surprising that writers who invoke the Jester God frequently pass into a final stage where they usurp the throne of that God. Emily Dickinson does just that in one of her lyrics, proclaiming confidently,

> Of all the Souls that stand create--
> I have elected--One--

When Sense from Spirit--files away--
And Subterfuge--is done--
When that which is--and that which was--
Apart--intrinsic--stand--
And this brief Drama in the flesh--
Is shifted--like a Sand--
When Figures show their royal Front--
And Mists--are carved away,
Behold the Atom--I preferred--
To all the lists of clay!
(330; No. 664)

Dickinson's appropriation of the power of election marks her as an imaginative god in her own right. In writers like Thomas Pynchon, Faulkner, or the Melville of *The Confidence-Man*, the author becomes a puzzle-master god, delighting in playing jokes on both his fictional characters and his readers. The Twain of *The Mysterious Stranger* goes a step further, merging with his projection and reducing reality itself to a private dream. In these final, solipsistic solutions to all paradoxes, the creators of the Jester enter their own projections as God, Jester, and Author of all they survey.

The kingdom of the Jester is a strange one, and those who enter it have distinctly different visions of just what it means. Perhaps the one thing they have in common is the

desire to make it mean something. As Charles Glicksberg puts it, "The great fear that oppresses the heart of the modern writer is . . . the fear that a huge joke has been perpetuated upon mankind . . ." (29). I propose to follow a group of artistic explorers in their attempts to locate the Jester behind the joke.

Chapter 1

Herman Melville: The Jester Appears

Herman Melville's rebellion against theological tradition was more public than Dickinson's. His attacks on the missionaries in the South Seas in his early novels are well-known and were scandalous in their day, but they are just the surface of a more fundamental revisionism. Melville searched throughout his career for a way to describe a universe that seemed increasingly chaotic and questionable to his unquiet spirit. Beginning as a critic of Christian hypocrisy, he soon came to oppose the dominant world-order of his day: the characteristic post-Puritan belief in a fatherly, providential deity. For Melville, this cheerful faith was inadequate to explain a cosmos laced with evil, and even in his first books we see cracks appearing in the facade of a self-confident young America, cracks which soon widen into the whelming gulfs of *Moby-Dick*. If America's religious heritage in part accounts for that self-confidence, then we should not be surprised that its antithesis appears in anti-Puritan terms.

Dickinson's poems occasionally invoke an ambiguous deity, but Melville's writings go further to suggest that God may be absent from His creation. The biographical link between Melville and Puritanism has been much discussed, and

there is general agreement that he was raised in a strongly Calvinist tradition, but whether or not religion dominated his youth, the theological base of his major fiction reveals a man both fascinated by the Puritan vision and appalled by it.[1] Uncertain about the very possibility of belief, he constructs a fictional universe characterized almost equally by attacks on God and a profound longing for faith. As Lewis Mumford argues, Melville "lives because he grappled with certain great dilemmas in man's spiritual life, and in seeking to answer them, sounded bottom" (5).

Just what "bottom" he found, however, has been subject to an extraordinary amount of critical dispute. Melville's critics run the gamut from Christian apologists who see Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby-Dick* as the normative element in that book to ironists like Lawrance Thompson, who argues in *Melville's Quarrel With God* that Melville's religious references are usually meant ironically, and that he has proclaimed a private war against the tyrannical, Calvinist God of his youth. However, there is no conclusive evidence that Melville actually believed in the god he warred against. The god he attacks so effectively is more a fictional construct than the true ruler of the universe.

As a child of the Puritans, Melville inherits Puritan notions of sin, guilt, and fate, but he swerves dramatically from conventional theology to reinterpret this legacy. In his subversive retelling of old lessons, he uses a variety

of tactics against the traditional perception of God. Sometimes he proposes a form of fatalism that seems frankly pagan; then again, perhaps there is really no such thing as fate: "What we call Fate is even, heartless, and impartial . . . the thing called Fate everlastingly sustains an armed neutrality" (*White-Jacket* 320). More often, he posits a God who is just as heartless as Fate. If such is the case, then conventional religion is reduced to a cruel joke, the swindle suggested by Dickinson in some of her more daring lyrics; Melville turns this insight around to make of the father-god a grinning Joker. In this private solution to the problem of evil, the misanthropy of the Puritans is directed outward at God Himself.

By establishing a Jester God at the center of his cosmos and at the same time acknowledging the fictionality of that cosmos, Melville avoids the twin pitfalls of polemic and despair and opens the way for a rich, tragicomic literature. If God is a Jester, reality becomes ambiguous and suspect; Melville's persistent narrative ambiguity builds on this foundation to create a world of paranoia, where no certain conclusions exist for protagonists or reader. As language falls apart, we enter a terrain of hidden traps and provisional meanings; this is the territory of Melville's Confidence-Man, where the tension between appearances and the underlying Jest ironically undermines all points of view. At the same time, however, a world of

double meanings is an essential part of humor; like the god he envisions, Melville delights in jokes, puns, and tricks that are sometimes funny, sometimes frightening. In such a world the sanest response is laughter: the demonic laughter of Ahab or the more self-deprecating humor of Ishmael. Humorless innocents like Billy Budd are no match for their surroundings.

The Jester God is closely associated with Melville's most consistent theme: the initiation into the reality of evil. In his early works, he wrestles with his growing conviction that the universe is dangerous and unpredictable. Melville was deeply disturbed by the inhumanity of Western Christian civilization; his autobiographical character "Tommo" condemns the horrors of modern warfare which "distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth" (*Typee* 150). As Berryman observes, "His moral and religious sensibility remained outraged by the realization that unending combat is the fundamental law of existence" (148). Thus the hero of *Redburn* witnesses Liverpool's harrowing scenes of poverty and cries out, "Ah! what are our creeds, and how do we hope to be saved?" (184). The tentative questions of Redburn and Tommo mark Melville's developing skepticism and inaugurate his search for a philosophical foundation.

Melville is equally concerned with debunking the glib optimism and affirmations of manifest destiny which

supplanted strict Puritanism in popular culture. Redburn finds in America a hope for the world's future; in characteristic Puritan fashion he foretells a future Paradise for "the estranged children of Adam" (169). Similarly, *White-Jacket* employs popular conceits of America as a promised land: "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people--the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world" (151). But these smug affirmations should not be confused with Melville's own mature views. In *Battle Pieces* (1866) he repeatedly warns against naive optimism; at the end of "Lee in the Capitol" the old soldier's warnings are disregarded because

> Instinct disowns each darkening prophecy:
> Faith in America never dies;
> Heaven shall the end ordained fulfill.
> We march with Providence cheery still.
> (*Poems* 147)

An ironically "cheery" conclusion cannot mask America's tragic failure to learn from the bloody experience of the Civil War.

When cultural platitudes become suspect, the individual is thrown back on his own resources. Melville's heroes strive for self-definition in a cosmos that continually reminds them of their own insignificance. Redburn must make

sense of surroundings newly discovered to be chaotic, fraught with unseen dangers. He faces the difficult task of drawing moral lessons from a world where

> . . . even, as suddenly as the bravest and fleetest ships, while careering in pride of canvas over the sea, have been struck, as by lightning, and quenched out of sight; even so, do some lordly men, with all their plans and prospects gallantly trimmed to the fair, rushing breeze of life, and with no thought of death and disaster, suddenly encounter a shock unforeseen, and go down, foundering, into death. (94)

This is in part an Old Testament vision, a theme at least as old as Ecclesiastes, but Melville uses these images of doom not to encourage repentance but to call into doubt the possibility of grace. Nevertheless, Melville draws back from committing himself to chaos, perhaps because he recognizes in himself man's persistent need to create order. Despite his hostility toward the missionaries, the narrator of *Typee* confirms man's need for something to believe in: ". . . however ignorant man may be, he still feels within him his immortal spirit yearning after the unknown future" (205). The line between a universe without any order at all and one ruled by a Jester is fine but significant.

The early novels establish Melville as an anticleric, deeply concerned with the problem of evil and the need for belief, but with *Mardi* he turns to philosophical romance. *Mardi* is a book Melville had to write; in it he begins to map out the problems with which he will be concerned for the rest of his career. Here we find the first clear evidence of a Jester at the heart of Melville's private mythology.

Mardi is Melville's most curious and, with the exception of *Moby-Dick*, ambitious production. Its hero Taji journeys around the scattered islands of Mardi, each representing a part or aspect of the world, searching for his lost, beloved Yillah. But plot is strictly of secondary importance to the philosophical discussions that take place among Taji's companions: a king, a philosopher, a historian, and a poet. The mythology of Mardi includes a high god, Oro, and a great prophet, Alma, clearly identified with Christ. Taji's companions, however, find it difficult to agree on an interpretation of the universe. *Mardi* is a quest for meaning in a cosmos where old answers no longer suffice; indeed, it is a quest which calls into doubt the very possibility of meaning.

One of the first theories advanced in the novel is a primitive version of the Jester mythos. The inhabitants of the island of Quelquo believe in malicious spirits called Plujii, who are deemed guilty of "whatever evil, the cause of which the Islanders could not directly impute to their

gods, or in their opinion was not referable to themselves" (262). The voyagers all agree that this is a silly superstition, but Babbalanja the philosopher reasons that

> Plujii or no Plujii, it is undeniable, that in ten thousand ways, as if by a malicious agency, we mortals are woefully put out and tormented; and that, too by things in themselves so exceedingly trivial, that it would seem almost impiety to ascribe them to the august gods. (264)

Prodigious events for good or ill may readily be ascribed to divine Judgment, but the traditional Jehovah seems far too dignified to stoop to petty torments. To the Plujii, however, humans are a subject for sport; in their form the Jester god, or in this case gods, first appears as an alternative to orthodoxy. By invoking the Plujii, Melville cleverly belittles the divine role in human affairs. If we follow the Calvinist tradition of ascribing all things to God's will, we find ourselves attributing the most trivial of actions and motives to the Deity.

Taji and his companions are unwilling to believe in the Plujii, so they are left with the paradoxical presence of evil in a universe governed by a timeless, all-encompassing God. They espouse various theories--"evil is the chronic malady of the universe; and checked in one place, breaks

forth in another" (529); "Ofttimes, the right fights single-handed against the world; and Oro champions none" (533); but the lengthiest exposition of the dilemma is made by Babbalanja, on the accidental death of one of their paddlers:

> . . . happiness and misery are so broadly marked, that this Mardi may be the retributive future of some forgotten past.--Yet vain our surmises. Still vainer to say, that all Mardi is but a means to an end; that this life is a state of probation: that evil is but permitted for a term; that for specified ages a rebel angel is viceroy.--Nay, nay. Oro delegates his sceptre to none; in his everlasting reign there are no interregnums; and Time is Eternity; and we live in Eternity now. Yet, some tell of a hereafter, where all the mysteries of life will be over; and the sufferings of the virtuous recompensed. Oro is just, they say.--Then always,--now, and evermore. But to make restitution implies a wrong; and Oro can do no wrong. Yet what seems evil to us, may be good to him. . . . This gloom's enough. (620)

Babbalanja examines Original Sin ("some forgotten past"), the devices of Satan ("a rebel angel"), and the rewards of

heaven ("suffering . . . recompensed") as possible justifications for the evils of life, but all seem inadequate to explain the actions or inaction of the omnipotent Oro. Concluding that all speculation may be vain, the philosopher lapses into fatalistic gloom. Babbalanja's difficulties stem from his two key assumptions--that Oro is omnipotent and that He "can do no wrong." Melville, like Dickinson, exploits such basic Christian paradoxes to call all certitude into doubt.

One alternative to Babbalanja's despair appears when the voyagers reach Serenia (or serenity), an island populated by true followers of Alma (Christ). Here Taji and his friends encounter an ideal Christianity based on love rather than fear. So moving is the description of Serenia that even Lawrance Thompson feels compelled to view *Mardi* as a short-lived affirmation of sorts, an alliance between Christian and Platonic concepts (5, 44). In this utopia the voyagers are converted, and Babbalanja is granted a vision in which an angel shows him the ascending spheres of heaven, all but "the last mystery" of the problem of evil (634). In effect, Babbalanja accepts the paradoxes of Christianity.

If we accept the angel's revelation, then Taji at the end is a standard Romantic rebel, fleeing from God and man alike in his mad quest for Yillah: Taji rejects Serenia to continue his quest alone, Ahab-like, across "the endless sea" (654). The scene, as several critics have noted, is

strongly reminiscent of Shelley's *Alastor*, and H. Bruce Franklin, for example, finds Taji damned but glorious (50). In the religious allegory that *Mardi* becomes, Taji is superfluous except as a reprobate, and he may be judged harshly as a proud solipsist, deserting both friends and God. But Taji's continuing quest also suggests that Melville cannot remain satisfied with the visionary harmony of Serenia, preferring instead the freedom and ambiguity of the open sea.

Melville characterizes man's existence in *Mardi* as an endless quest for meaning in chaos. Any attempt to create order through language is suspect, for *Mardi*'s pilgrims live in a cosmos where "words are but algebraic signs, carrying no meaning except what you please" (269). In such a free-play universe any number of interpretations are possible; the angel's vision has its counterpart in Melville's observation concerning King Bello of Dominora (England): "According to ancient oracle, the humpbacked monarch was but one of the most conspicuous pieces on a board, where the gods played for their own entertainment" (473). By calling into doubt the Word itself, Melville attacks the very basis of Christianity. The Puritans were only able to make their conception of God palatable by contriving explanations for His actions as ultimately beneficial and meaningful; here the actions remain, but man is reduced to an insignificant chess piece. Thus Taji

rushes on, perhaps only a pawn to forces beyond his conception, seeking a truth which can at best prove provisional.

In *Mardi* Melville suggests that the universe may be ultimately inaccessible to man's understanding, and that language itself is a fatally flawed medium. These early speculations about Fate, God, and the nature of the cosmos reach their climax in *Moby-Dick*. *Moby-Dick* is the first of Melville's puzzle novels: just as Ahab, Ishmael, and the crew of the *Pequod* are confronted with a cosmic riddle, the reader is faced with a textual one. In describing a universe where all may be part of a divine Jest, Melville himself becomes a Jester, playing tricks on his characters and his audience alike.

The main characters in *Moby-Dick* must find a basis for belief in the hostile environment acting upon them. At the outset, Ishmael is a solitary consciousness facing images of chaos. Not surprisingly, he prefers to think of himself as an object of divine supervision and imagines that his doom may be foreordained by

> the invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogs me, and influences me in some unaccountable way . . . And, doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of

> Providence that was drawn up a long time ago. (15-16)

Both the classical Fates and Christian Providence are rationalizations to be taken on faith. Ishmael resorts to them in a first attempt to explain the horrific events that form the center of his tale.

The Jester God surfaces when more traditional alternatives fail. Ishmael counters his feelings of paranoia with humor, whimsically describing the Fates as trickster gods who delight in man's self-delusion:

> Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces . . . yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment. (16)

Of course, *Moby-Dick* is a tragedy, with moments of comedy and farce as well. While recognizing that he is helplessly bound to a wheel of destiny and delusion, Ishmael paradoxically reserves the right to joke about the process. The Puritan notion of Providence suffers a severe diminution when its workings are reduced to "springs" and "disguises." By turning the cosmos into a masquerade, Melville opens the possibility of free participation in the game instead of despair over its rigged outcome.

The rigid structure of orthodox religion cannot compass the multitudinous realities of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael explicitly equates religion with entrapment when he searches New Bedford for an inexpensive inn and enters a church by accident. He stumbles over an ash box as he enters; choking on what he imagines are the ashes of Gomorrah, he finds an apocalyptic scene: "a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there" (18). Ishmael appropriately names this place "The Trap" and retreats. "Trap" echoes the "springs" mentioned earlier; apparently religion is just one of God's ways of frightening and tricking man into submission.

The language with which Melville describes "the Trap" is clearly loaded, but usually his methods and conclusions

are ambiguous. As a prophet of the Jester God, Melville is more effective when providing emblems of the Jester's obscure cosmos than when fulminating against religious orthodoxy. Part of Melville's paradigm for self-definition is the willingness to accept ambiguity. Ishmael draws this lesson from Bulkington, who exemplifies

> that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore . . . in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God. (97)

Heaven itself is set against such an independent venture, as the conclusion to *Mardi* implies; the seeker after truth must defy God above all. That defiance alone is enough to make *Moby-Dick* a strongly anti-Puritan book, but even more revolutionary is the nature of what is being defied. God in *Moby-Dick* is "indefinite"--not the omnipotent Father of the Puritans, but an entity of unknown and unknowable attributes. This attack on the very nature of God must have been in Melville's thoughts when he wrote to Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."[2] When God no longer appears amenable to rational analysis, He

is ready to be transformed into a divine anarchist.

In *Moby-Dick* the provisional cosmos hinted at in *Mardi* repeatedly manifests itself in the action. An emblem for this cosmos appears when Ishmael visits the Spouter-Inn. A curious painting hangs there, "Thoroughly be-smoked, and every way defaced," a striking image of chaos:

> Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavoured to delineate chaos bewitched. . . .
>
> But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant.

After further inquiries and study, Ishmael forms a theory as to the picture's meaning:

> The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads. (20-21)

In Ishmael's reading, which can at best be tentative, "chaos bewitched," whaling, and seafaring are one. The painting apparently represents *Moby-Dick* itself, for in this novel Melville looks long and hard at chaos, resolving it at last into a battered ship, the sea, and a whale.

The world evoked by the mysterious painting elicits a number of possible responses, but Melville suggests repeatedly that God may be an amoral Jester, creating puzzles for man to try to interpret. Ishmael, himself a joking, punning narrator, arrives at just that conclusion. For all his irrepressible wit, Ishmael realizes that the joke is on him, especially in that curious chapter, "The Hyena." Rescued only by chance from a lost whale boat, Ishmael speculates at length about the nature of the cosmos:

> There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke,

> though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. . . . And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker. That odd sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke. (195)

God (for who else can this joker be?) not only exists beyond accountability, He has no human compassion. The nearest thing to a human face which Ishmael can ascribe to Him is that of an infantile practical joker, the most odious and anarchistic of jesters. Having reached the conclusion that the voyage of the *Pequod* is one of those "queer times" when reality can only explained as a joke, Ishmael makes out his will and determines to face the rest of the voyage with a light heart. Nowhere does Melville more clearly define the nature of the Jester God, and I would argue that *Moby-Dick* itself is narrated in just this "wayward mood," the mood of

someone who has looked on doom and decided the best response is laughter. The novel's curiously mixed tone springs from Melville's determination to mix tragedy and comedy in unexpected and disconcerting ways, to laugh on the brink of despair.

Ishmael's vision of the Jester God offers a way of systematizing ambiguity. This sounds paradoxical, but the Jester's cosmos is founded on the very paradoxes it explains. In *Moby-Dick*, one can depend on divine unreliability and treachery. Confidence in God is usually misplaced in Melville's works, although postulating a humorous god of limited capability and reliability displaces some of the blame. Queequeg relies upon Yojo's good judgment and considers him "a rather good sort of god, who perhaps meant well enough upon the whole, but in all cases did not succeed in his benevolent designs" (66). Certainly Yojo is either an incompetent or a malicious deity, since Queequeg entrusts him with choosing their ship, and the *Pequod* is the most ill-fated of all whaling vessels. Yojo should not be taken too seriously, but by now we may question whether any god in this novel is serious in a conventional sense.

Nature proves as two-faced and dangerous as any god, as ambiguous as the art of the painting at the Spouter Inn. In Chapter 35, "The Mast Head," Ishmael describes a drowsy "Platonist" on lookout, rocked by "the inscrutable tides of

God." The scene is beautifully painted but filled with treachery, implying that nature at its most benign is but another of God's traps to lull the unwary. Despite the gorgeous scenery, the lookout really rests "over Descartian vortices" (140). Ishmael's phrase "tides of God" suggests that the "Pantheists" may not be entirely wrong in seeing God in nature, but that does not make nature safe.

Although the cosmos in which he finds himself verges on the absurd, man in *Moby-Dick* must strive to define himself in conflict with the natural and supernatural forces that surround him. One response to an absurd environment is simple stoicism, "a stong decoction of Seneca and the stoics," but Ishmael finds that "even this wears off in time" (14-15). Withdrawal into the fortress of the self is a more effective defense. Ishmael suggests that his purpose in going to sea is self-discovery; referring to the myth of Narcissus, who "drowns pursuing his own image," Ishmael notes, ". . . that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life. . . " (14).[3] Solipsism is an inherent risk in the internal quest for self-definition against external chaos, as Taji's fate suggested in *Mardi*. However, this self-absorption allows Ishmael to laugh at death: "take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me. And therefore three cheers for Nantucket; and come a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot"

(41). Ishmael's internal self-sufficiency enables him to deny the tyranny of the external.

Of course, the central symbol for man's conflict with the universe is Moby-Dick himself. The whale's elemental destructive power is a furnace in which all philosophies are tried, whether we regard him as a symbol or avatar of God, an extension of His might, Satan, or simply a natural phenomenon. Richard Slotkin even argues persuasively that the whale represents eroticism, "which the Puritans so feared to release, express, or give opportunity to escape" (23). The very fact that all these views have been espoused by various critics highlights the difficulties faced by the crew of the *Pequod* in attempting to understand and combat the whale. Their problem resembles that of Ishmael before the painting: how to comprehend something which yields impressions at once transcendent and chaotic. In such a moment the religious impulse is born.

When logical thought fails--as when confronted the mysterious and powerful White Whale--mythic thought takes over. Thus Ishmael links the whale with God:

> many a veteran who has freely marched up to a battery, would quickly recoil at the apparition of the sperm whale's vast tail, fanning into eddies the air over his head. For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the

interlinked terrors and wonders of God! (98-99).

Perhaps the most important word here is "comprehensible," which is just what God is not; nevertheless, *Moby-Dick* attempts to comprehend Him, or at least to portray His incomprehensibility. Other well-known passages invite us to consider the whale as omnipresent; some sailors hold "the unearthly conceit that Moby-Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time." Another superstition holds that he is "not only ubiquitous, but immortal," and that "if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be but a ghastly deception" (158). Like Yojo, Moby-Dick may be a deceptive God, and any sign of weakness may be only a cruel ruse. The whale may well be one of Melville's confidence-men.

Moby-Dick contains Melville's fullest description of the cosmic evil to which man is prey, but that evil has comic aspects. Ambiguity and uncertainty are important elements of laughter as well as fear. The horror lurking behind reality is clear enough: in the celebrated chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" Ishmael affirms that "Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright" (169). Ishmael sees in Moby-Dick the paradoxical "dumb blankness, full of meaning" (169) of the color white. The whale's physiognomy

also suggests a double meaning. It has a "high and mighty god-like dignity," so that "gazing on it . . . you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature" (292); but having expressed his awe before the whale's countenance, Ishmael humorously debunks it: "phrenologically the head of this Leviathan . . . is an entire delusion. As for his true brain, you can then see no indications of it, nor feel any. The whale, like all things that are mighty, wears a false brow to the common world" (293). Ishmael recognizes the deceptive nature of the universe and insists on regarding it in the cheerful light of a joke. If the whale represents God, then God's majesty is a fraud.

Not all of the characters in *Moby-Dick* respond to the mysterious, faceless god with Ishmael's aplomb. In hopes of assigning a face to the blankness of God, mortals conventionally pray. But Pip, who prays to the "big white God aloft there somewhere" (155) is driven mad by the inhumanity of the "joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities" (347). Ishmael's solipsism can bring only moments of calm, but it seems preferable to Ahab's violent opposition to the forces around him. Ahab chooses the path of defiance; he must invent a god as his opponent or be driven mad by the meaninglessness of his fate. He avows that the whale is malicious, either the malicious God himself or an agent of that God:

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event--in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's nought beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (144)

Nowhere does Ahab make a distinction between good and evil supernatural agencies. For Ahab, like Melville, the ultimate responsibility for evil lies with the highest power, whether Moby-Dick or something beyond. In his Puritanical obsession with locating divine meaning behind reality, Ahab would agree with the narrator of the late poem "Timoleon": "To you, Arch Principals, I rear / My quarrel, for this quarrel is with gods" (*Poems* 211).

The problem with defiance is that Ahab becomes the reflection of his enemy, equally tyrannical, manipulative, and unyielding.[4] He fights against the Puritan God, but he fights as a Puritan. Only in the moments when Ahab remembers "his humanities" does he become an attractive character, as when he finds in Pip's plight a lesson for the world: "Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude" (428). Battling with God is by definition futile, as Ahab half admits when he asks "Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (445). Although Ahab wishes to drive the whale before him, the whale, finally, drives him.

Ahab's wit is as keen as Ishmael's, and he is more attractive when laughing at the gods than when fighting them at the expense of his crew. But if Ishmael's mild, self-conscious humor strikes a balance point in the novel, Ahab's defines a maniacal extreme: his laughter is a demonic, scornful assault on the creation surrounding him. At the opposite end of the scale is the unthinking laughter of Stubb; when confronted with something beyond his understanding, he finds comfort in humor: "a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer" (149). By reducing matters of life and death to a mere game, Stubb is able to reduce supernature to human terms; he dies as he

lives, with a jest on his lips.[5] When he cries "I grin at thee, thou grinning whale!" (467) he does the utmost possible under the circumstances, turning the Jester's weapon back against Him. Stubb's limited intellect might make any solution of his suspect, but Ishmael has already arrived at a similar conclusion in "The Hyena."

The mocking irony of the divine Jester appears with greatest force in the final chapter of the book as the *Pequod* sinks, Tashtego still nailing its flag to the mast:

> A sky-hawk that *tauntingly* had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home *among the stars*, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that *etherial* thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-grasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of *heaven*, with *archangelic* shrieks, and his *imperial* beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of *heaven* along with her, and helmeted herself with it. (469; my italics)

Melville goes to some pains to identify the skyhawk as heaven's "taunting" representative. Whether ruled by a Jester or not, heaven is not allowed to remain aloof from suffering; as the skyhawk sinks with the ship, God's sphere is brought down to the level of man and entwined in the absurdities of human existence.

The contradictory views of the cosmos expressed in *Moby-Dick* have one thing in common: all are opposed to the paternalistic Puritan vision of the deity. We cannot even be sure whether supernature intrudes on *Moby-Dick* or not. The numerous references to chaos throughout the novel suggest that all such interpretations are arbitrary, and Michael Gilmore argues that "The failure of Ahab's quest for the white whale expressed Melville's conviction that no correct interpretation of the cosmos can ever be found" (1). But Melville acknowledges that man is doomed to search for *provisional* meaning; his favorite organizing image is that of the Jester. In a cosmos ruled by the Jester, perhaps the best emblem for how man should conduct himself is Queequeg, when he holds up a lantern in a lost whale boat: "There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair" (195). We are both amused and moved by Queequeg's existential persistence.

For every evocation of terror and chaos in *Moby-Dick* there are corresponding moments of humor. Like *Hamlet*, *Moby-Dick* is filled with jokes and sexual puns, most notoriously in the chapters, "A Squeeze of the Hand" and "The Cassock," but Melville's vision darkens in his next novel, *Pierre*. Pierre is a naive and idealistic hero, ill-equipped to understand the nature of the forces arrayed against him; he lacks both Ahab's indomitable will and Ishmael's intellectual flexibility. Like Ishmael, he is a kind of philosophical detective, seeking to understand "the unravelable inscrutableness of God" (170). The secrets uncovered by Pierre in the course of the novel prove to be so burdensome that he anticipates some of Twain's late heroes in reducing the painful joke of reality to a mysterious dream.

The characters in *Pierre*, like their counterparts in *Moby-Dick*, are unsure of the forces influencing them. The narrator supplies a possible explanation: "Eternally inexorable and unconcerned is Fate, a mere heartless trader in men's joys and woes" (105). This personalized Fate typifies Melville's need to identify a deity that can be attacked or blamed. That deity may be the silent God of Emily Dickinson: "Silence is at once the most harmless and the most awful thing in all nature. . . . Silence is the only Voice of our God. . . . Silence brooded on the face of the waters" (204). From God's silence it is impossible to

draw any certain conclusions. Pierre is an aspiring poet, but even poetic inspiration can do nothing with such material:

> Not that as yet his young and immature soul had been accosted by the Wonderful Mutes, and through the vast halls of Silent Truth, had been ushered into the full, secret, eternally inviolable Sanhedrim, where the Poetic Magi discuss, in glorious gibberish, the Alpha and Omega of the Universe. (244-45)

This silent agency remains shrouded in mystery, but Pierre comes to suspect that it is characterized by duplicity, ambiguity, and cruel humor--the attributes of the Jester God.

Pierre begins as a Christian, but he quickly discovers the inadequacy of conventional theology:

> . . . how could he fail to acknowledge the existence of that all-controlling and all-permeating wonderfulness, which, when imperfectly and isolatedly recognized by the generality, is so significantly denominated The Finger of God? But it is not merely the Finger, it is the whole outspread Hand of God; for doth not

> Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His hand?--a Hollow, truly! (139)

The same striking pun reappears in *Clarel*: "while unperturbed over deserts riven, / Stretched the clear vault of hollow heaven" (207-8; III. v.). Suddenly the world in which Pierre has placed so much trust gapes as a horror. As Isabel recalls on seeing a tree split by lightning in her childhood: ". . . somehow I felt that all good, harmless men and women were human things, placed at cross-purposes, in a world of snakes and lightnings, in a world of horrible and inscrutable inhumanities" (122). Isabel, like Pierre, refuses to believe in mere chance; God must be responsible for "placing" things as they are. Attributing the events of the novel to divine order is small consolation, however, since only a supremely malicious agency could reduce men and women to "things."

In such an impenetrable universe, it is not surprising that Pierre's tale is subtitled "The Ambiguities." Melville's hero faces the impossible task of drawing clear conclusions from ambiguous evidence. Attempting to understand his feelings for Isabel, he finds only "an ever-creeping and condensing haze of ambiguities" (151), and when he at last grows desperate it is because "ambiguities . . . hemmed him in" (337). Pierre, like Ahab, at last resorts to defiance, but it is an impossible battle: "Now he

began to feel that in him, the thews of a Titan were forestallingly cut by the scissors of Fate. . . . All things that think, or move, or lie still, seemed as created to mock and torment him" (339). Here we see the very genesis of the Jester God, when the awareness of apparently meaningless evil has become so overpowering that no other explanation suffices.

Even more than in *Moby-Dick*, in *Pierre* Melville takes on the role of a jesting creator himself. If God mocks Pierre with ambiguities, Melville plays similar games with the reader, who must decide on the basis of conflicting evidence whether Pierre is an admirable idealist or a slave to foolish ideals. We are told of his early decision to succor Isabel: "Thus, in the Enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born; and will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds" (106), but by the end of the tale Pierre's enthusiasm has destroyed his family, Lucy, Isabel, and the Enthusiast himself. God clearly does not reward Pierre's Christ-like behavior; but then, Melville undermines Pierre's claims to holiness by showing that Pierre's incestuous desire for the beautiful Isabel is as much a factor as Duty in his decision to aid her. Melville teases us further when Pierre discovers the mysterious philosophical pamphlet on "Chronometricals and Horologicals," with its ambiguous advice in favor of "virtuous expediency," for the pamphlet is only a "preamble"

to a philsophy, and Pierre's copy ends in the middle at the word "if" (215). Although a number of critics have found a moral for the novel in this pamphlet, it is clearly a false lead. The pamphlet undermines Christianity without constructing a viable alternative, leaving us with the same questions that torment Pierre: "Is Love a harm? Can Truth betray to pain? Sweet Isabel, how can hurt come in the path to God?" (159-60). In following the path to God as he sees it, Pierre ironically causes infinitely greater pain for all concerned than if he had remained faithful to Lucy and left philosophical speculations alone.

By the end of the novel Pierre has begun to perceive the cosmic darkness which surrounds him. He at last recognizes that reality is even worse in heavenly terms than in earthly, and that "in his infinite comparative minuteness and abjectness, the gods do likewise despise him, and own him not of their clan" (296). As his faith crumbles, so does his sense of self. When Isabel asks him why he torments himself he answers,

> "It is the law."
>
> "What?"
>
> "That a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing. It is all a dream--we dream that we dreamed we dream." (274)

Reality is merging into the dream state so often invoked in late Twain and Cabell. As reality dissolves, so does man himself:

> By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid--and no body is there!--appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man! (285)

Pierre's dream theory allows him to escape from the unbearable universe, but at the cost of existence itself.

Pierre ends as it begins, in ambiguity. After his decisive action, the murder of his treacherous cousin Glen, Pierre understands that ambiguity is the eternal lot of man; he laments in prison:

> It is ambiguous still. Had I been heartless now, disowned, and spurningly portioned off the girl at Saddle Meadows, then had I been happy through a long life on earth, and perchance through a long eternity in heaven! Now, 'tis merely hell in both worlds. Well, be it hell. I will mold a trumpet of the flames, and, with my breath of flame, breathe back my defiance! (360)

The sentiment is worthy of Ahab; the ending, the death of Pierre, Isabel, and Lucy, parallels that of the *Pequod*. We may criticize Pierre for succumbing to despair, but Melville supplies no indication that his hero's growing cosmic paranoia is unjustified. Certainly Pierre's suicide is a logical conclusion to his withdrawal from reality: the last possible act of his collapsing ego.

By the end of *Pierre*, Melville's career has reached a turning point. With the bulk of his prose output behind him, he has established a fictional universe where all meaning is provisional and where the favored interpretation of events suggests that men are pawns of malignant forces that look on in amusement and disdain. His heroes, warped by their struggles with the universe into monomaniacal Ahabs and self-destructive Pierres, go down in defeat, unsure even of their opponent. At best they survive, like Taji and Ishmael, to seek further, but in *Pierre* no significant character survives at all. Melville's art appears to have sounded and struck bottom at last.

After *Pierre* few of Melville's characters renew that ill-fated hero's quest to comprehend his universe. Instead Melville forces the reader to take sole responsibility for that role, to make sense of a chaotic world in which men dupe one another, only to become dupes of God. Melville's short stories are often both humorous and disturbing; divine

justice has little place in them, though his characters invoke it frequently. Instead we become more and more aware in the late fiction of Melville the controlling creator, brooding over the scene as a Jester in his own right.

When the Jester appears explicitly, it is as a clear counterpart to the artist. In "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow," the most interesting of the sketches from "The Encantadas," Melville relates the story of an Indian woman stranded on an island with her husband and brother. The scene in which Hunilla watches the two men drown is painted by an artist-god, "the invisible painter" who portrays "Death in a silent picture" (*GSW* 129). Earlier, Melville had coyly wished for a painter's abilities to portray the widow: "It is not artistic heartlessness, but I wish I could but draw in crayons; for this woman was a most touching sight . . ." (127). The parallel between artist and God is made explicit as Hunilla waits endlessly for rescue, though the narrator protests his innocence:

> Dire sight it is to see some silken beast long dally with a golden lizard ere she devour. More terrible, to see how feline Fate will sometimes dally with a human soul, and by a nameless magic make it repulse a sane despair with a hope which is but mad. Unwittingly I imp this cat-like thing, sporting with the heart of him who reads; for if he

feel not he reads in vain.[6] (132)

Melville admits his own resemblance to the Jester he so vividly portrays. As a creator of creators, he occupies the still lower level that lies behind the fictional "cat-like thing," just as it lies behind Hunilla's reality.

Melville's development into a Jester of Jesters is most apparent in his last full-length novel, *The Confidence-Man*, which turns the quest for faith into a giant game. Even more than *Moby-Dick*, the puzzle of *The Confidence-Man* resists the interpretation it demands. None of Melville's works has sparked more critical dissension, suggesting that at least some of its critics have been taken in as surely as the passengers on the riverboat *Fidele* where the action of the novel takes place. The story runs its course between dawn and midnight of April 1st, All Fool's Day, on a boat packed with a microcosm of American society. On board is a mysterious confidence man who apparently employs a series of disguises in bilking his victims, incidentally revealing their true natures along the way. His activities seem more jest than swindle, since in most cases the effort is disproportionate to the rewards gained. The title character is a virtual enigma, but Bernard Rosenthal offers an intriguing suggestion: "The cosmic joker conjured by Ishmael in "The Hyena" chapter took human form in *The Confidence-Man* and walked among his victims" (169).[7] *The Confidence-Man*

evokes a world where all human institutions are suspected of mirroring a potentially perverse divine order. Melville's anatomy of human faith and gullibility is his most playful work; it is also his most disturbing.

Like Moby-Dick, the Confidence-Man seems more and more supernatural as we learn about him, yet his meaning is elusive: is he Christ, God, Satan, or just a man? We are not even sure that he is a single character, because Melville never allows us to be sure. There have been a number of critical attempts to follow the Confidence-Man through his various guises, but Wadlington notes that "As with metaphysical identification of the White Whale, the problem is one of overdetermination: we are given too many possible 'explanations,' not too few" (169). Because he is a trickster with supernatural overtones, it is tempting to follow Rosenthal and argue that the Confidence-Man is a Jester God incarnate. The text supports such a reading only conditionally, for we are no more privileged to information than the passengers of the *Fidele*, but clearly the title character operates in a cosmos where uncertainty is the rule, where faith is misplaced or absent.

The Jester God is always a shadowy figure, but expecially in this novel, where Melville's language invites almost any meaning we choose to impose upon it. A good example of the ambiguity inherent in the text is the speech by one of the Confidence-Man's apparent avatars, the Black

Rapids man, noteworthy for its almost impenetrable doublespeak:

> And as for the apparent license temporarily permitted sometimes, to the bad over the good . . . it might be injudicious there to lay too much polemic stress upon the doctrine of future retribution as the vindication of present impunity. For though, indeed, to the right-minded that doctrine was true, and of sufficient solace, yet with the perverse the polemic mention of it might but provoke the shallow, though mischievous conceit, that such a doctrine was but tantamount to the one which should affirm that Providence was not now, but was going to be. (66)

I have quoted this passage at some length (though not in full!) in order to give an example of the novel's characteristic self-annihilating prose--circuitous, over-qualified, perhaps signifying nothing. The merchant who listens to this harangue hears what he wants to hear, so he claims to enjoy this gobbledygook as coming from a "ripe pulpit" (67). At the same time, of course, Melville himself is the original purveyor of this language, jesting and playing confidence games with the reader.

We have already seen in *Moby-Dick* the connotations of a hyena's laugh, but the source of the laughter in *The Confidence-Man* is difficult to pin down. The first avatar of the Confidence-Man, the "man in cream-colors," is especially ambiguous (3). Plenty of evidence suggests that he is a Christ figure. Melville compares him to Manco Capac, the Peruvian god who was a child of the sun, but an association with God is not necessarily a recommendation. Then too, his white attire suggests "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter of *Moby-Dick* and the ultimate blankness of a chameleon-god. Described as "in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger" (3), he is an Other against whom the passengers on the *Fidele* must define themselves.

Whether or not this mysterious figure is really a confidence man (or *the* Confidence-Man) is less important than the fact that he prepares the stage for confidence games by encouraging naive belief. His written admonitions to the crowd concerning Charity contain at least one message which is suspect. Such phrases as "Charity thinketh no evil," and "Charity suffereth long, and is kind" seem admirable enough; but when he holds up to the crowd "Charity believeth all things" (4-5) he has clearly gone too far for Melville, and we have entered a world of deception and irony. To believe all things is to become a pawn of the Jester God. At the same time, Melville complicates the issue by repeatedly demonstrating that to believe nothing

may be even worse. The central paradox of the novel is that it may be better to be duped than to believe in nothing.

On board the *Fidele* are a wide range of passengers, some eager to believe and some hardened cynics. Only one man suspects Black Guinea, a possibly phony cripple enticing pennies from the crowd, and calls him "some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (14). Guinea, as Lewis observes, "names the roles he will go on to assume, in a pretense of naming people who know him and will vouch for him" (267), so his exposer appears to be right. This percipient observer resembles a diminished Ahab, stumping along on his wooden leg. When a minister in the crowd angrily shakes him, the doubter limps away, exclaiming, "you flock of fools, under this captain of fools, in this ship of fools!" (15). That a ship called the *Fidele* should be dubbed a ship of fools is suggestive enough; the reference to "this captain" is even more so. The captain of the *Fidele* is not present at the scene, so the word must be meant for someone else. The only possible references are to the clergyman or Black Guinea; the minister is himself a dupe, which leaves the phony cripple as the true captain of the ship. If the cynic is correct, the faithful are captained by an untrustworthy God and led by a duped clergy.

The Confidence-Man is no ordinary riverboat operator. His possibly supernatural powers allow him not only to assume any disguise, they enable him to find the correct

guise for any victim. As the president and transfer agent of the Black Rapids Coal Company he advises a prospective mark: "why not be cheerfully resigned to one's fate, nor peevishly pick holes in the blessed fate of the world" (55). One merchant is apparently conned three times by the same man in different disguises, a feat which seems beyond normal powers of deception. Still more startlingly, an old miser gives up a hundred dollars to a stranger, ironically named Mr. Truman, who promises to invest them and bring a triple return. Even the tough Missouri bachelor, Pitch, rebuffs a charlatan herb-doctor but soon falls prey to the Philosophical Intelligence Office man.

The Confidence-Man's persuasions often have religious overtones. As the Black Rapids man he carries a large black ledger, suggesting a Bible, that is taken on faith by the merchant he sharps. The miser appeals to Mr. Truman in Biblical terms: "help, friend, my distrust!" (76). The miser has second thoughts, but by then Mr. Truman has disappeared. The merchant is victimized as much by his own need for faith as by the Confidence-Man, and he raises a crucial point: how can one infallibly recognize truth?

This thorny ambiguity underlies all the Confidence-Man's machinations. Melville sows plenty of hints implying that the Confidence-Man is in fact the devil--the PIO man, for example, disembarks at a "grotesquely shaped bluff" called "the Devil's Joke"

(128)--but in Melville's mythology the distinction between a Jester god and a Jester devil allowed by God to plague mankind is irrelevant. The PIO man manages to command a fee for finding a boy to work Pitch's farm--despite the fact that he has foresworn boys after thirty-five bad ones. However, no clear moral can be drawn from the transaction. Perhaps we should be glad that Pitch is forced to admit he does not hate all boys, but thirty-five is such an extreme number that we suspect him of being extremely gullible or a terrible master, or both.

Truth is even more difficult to detect in the Confidence-Man's last and greatest avatar as the Cosmopolitan, a self-styled philanthropist whose internationally mixed dress makes him a sort of everyman, capable of playing all roles at once. The Cosmopolitan may not be a man at all; he is clearly associated with the supernatural and has a voice like a "seraph's" (130). A tireless jokester who claims that "nine good jokes should redeem all the wicked thoughts, though plenty as the populace of Sodom" (163), he informs the skeptical Pitch that "one cannot enjoy life with gusto unless he renounce the too-sober view of life" (134). The Cosmopolitan supports faith and good humor; his only fear is irony: "never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony" (136). He apparently wishes to reserve the use of irony for himself, as Melville's own ironic design reveals.[8] The more

closely we examine such apparently innocent statements, the more deeply we find ourselves caught in the author's endless web of ambiguity.

As the Cosmopolitan gains in stature, numerous hints suggest his superhuman nature. He outwits a more ordinary swindler, Charles Noble, by asking him for a loan first, and then forestalls Noble's anger with a strange spell:

> The cosmopolitan rose, the traces of previous feeling vanished; looked steadfastly at his transformed friend a moment, then, taking ten half-eagles from his pocket, stooped down, and laid them, one by one, in a circle round him; and, retiring a pace, waved his long tassled pipe with the air of a necromancer, an air heightened by his costume, accompanying each wave with a solemn murmur of cabalistical words. (180)

By this charm, Noble is "spellbound" and restored to his former friendliness, but as the Cosmopolitan leads inexorably to another request for money, Noble pleads illness and retires "disconcerted" (187), unable to keep up his mask any longer in the presence of his superior. We enjoy seeing a trickster tricked, though the evocation of black magic has sinister as well as comic implications.

The Cosmopolitan reveals his nature even more clearly in a passage where he extolls the beauty of a rattlesnake and takes on its physical characteristics in an echo of Satan in *Paradise Lost*:

> I am pleased to believe that beauty is at bottom incompatible with ill, and therefore am so eccentric as to have confidence in the latent benignity of that beautiful creature, the rattle-snake, whose lithe neck and burnished maze of tawny gold, as he sleekly curls aloft in the sun, who on the prairie can behold without wonder?
>
> As he breathed these words, he seemed so to enter into their spirit--as some earnest descriptive speakers will--as unconsciously to wreathe his form and sidelong crest his head, till he all but seemed the creature described. (190)

The beauty of the language masks the fact that this is a description of a snake about to strike, not just lying harmless in the dust.

The Cosmopolitan suggests that the rattlesnake is not purposelessly malignant, but part of a just universe; however, the core of his argument is couched in such over-qualified terms that it self-destructs: "a proper view of the universe, that view which is suited to breed a proper

confidence, teaches, if I err not, that since all things are justly presided over, not very many living agents but must be some way accountable" (191). This waffling explanation fails to move the chilly transcendentalist, Mark Winsome, or Winsome's even icier disciple, Egbert. Indeed, Egbert is the only character in the novel who proves entirely immune to the Cosmopolitan's blandishments, for the disciple is a practicing idealist, wholly cut off from human emotions. As Hoffman observes, "how can the devil catch a creature who has no soul?" (*Form and Fable* 306). Soullessness may be one defense against the Jester, but the cure seems worse than the disease.

Sometimes the Cosmopolitan uses his persuasive powers in harmless fun. He awakens a napping barber with a voice "not unangelic" which "seemed a sort of spiritual manifestation." When the barber fully awakens to what he observes is only a man, the Cosmopolitan replies mysteriously:

> *Only* a man? As if to be but man were nothing. But don't be too sure what I am. You call me *man*, just as the townsfolk called the angels who, in man's form, came to Lot's house; just as the Jew rustics called the devils who, in man's form, haunted the tombs. You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form, barber. (225-26)

The Cosmopolitan has a long discussion with the canny barber, to the effect that he should take down his sign saying "No Trust," but all ordinary arguments fail. Then, however, he exerts his power,

> addressing the barber in a manner different, singularly so, from his previous one. Hard to say exactly what the manner was, any more than to hint it was a sort of magical; in a benign way, not wholly unlike the manner, fabled or otherwise, of certain creatures in nature, which have the power of persuasive fascination. . . . (234)

This "magical" manner persuades the barber to remove his sign. After signing a contract to reimburse the barber for any losses incurred by this new policy, the Cosmopolitan leaves without paying his bill, in effect having guaranteed his own credit. By the time the barber figures out the joke, tears up the contract, and replaces his sign, his enchanter is long gone. The barber's name is William Cream, a name appropriate to more than his occupation, since he has become the cream of the jest.

The barber section of the novel contains a great deal of good-humored comedy--so many machinations over the price of a shave--and it is easy to see why Gary Lindberg argues

that the novel should be seen as a comedic game, played by "Melville's most devious and beguiling hero" (17). Certainly the barber gets off lightly and takes his fate philosophically, suggesting that one way to deal with the Jester is to join in the laugh at your own expense. But the darker implications of the Confidence-Man's powers remain, and the end of the novel sounds a more somber chord.

The last chapter, entitled "The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness," is an appropriate conclusion for a novel which has been growing steadily more disturbing in its implications. The mood now becomes genuinely apocalyptic as the scene shifts below decks, just before midnight. The gentlemen's cabin is lit by a single, symbolic lamp, "whose shade of ground glass was all round fancifully variegated, in transparency, with the image of a horned altar, from which flames rose, alternate with the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo" (240). Under this lamp, which may represent Christianity--though horns and flames juxtaposed with a halo strike a disturbing chord--sits an old man reading a Bible. The Cosmopolitan enters, "as any bridegroom tripping to the bridal chamber" (241). A demonic parody of Christ, the Confidence-Man discusses misquotations from the Apocrypha with the old man, who agrees that "to distrust the creature, is a kind of distrusting of the Creator" (244). That, of course, is precisely Melville's point. Despite this assurance, the old man is easily

tempted by a sort of boy demon or junior confidence man who appears and sells him a traveller's door lock, a money belt, and a Counterfeit Detector. Oddly enough, the old man does not see the irony of his actions, and still insists that he trusts in "that Power which is alike able and willing to protect us when we cannot ourselves" (250).

After all these avowals, the old man still wishes for a life preserver before going to bed. With sublime irony, the Cosmopolitan hands him a portable commode, adding that "you could have confidence in that stool for a special providence" (251). In the closing paragraphs, Melville destroys any lingering hopes for such a providence:

> "Then, good-night, good-night; and Providence have both of us in its good keeping."
>
> "Be sure it will," eyeing the old man with sympathy, as for the moment he stood, money-belt in hand, and life-preserver under arm, "be sure it will, sir, since *in Providence, as in man, you and I equally put trust.* But, bless me, we are being left in the dark here. Pah! what a smell too."
>
> "Ah, my way now," cried the old man, peering before him, "where lies my way to my state-room?"
>
> "I have indifferent eyes, and will show you; but, first, for the good of all lungs, let me extinguish this lamp."

> The next moment, the waning light expired, and with it the waning flames of the horned altar, and the waning halo round the robed man's brow; while in the darkness which ensued, the cosmopolitan kindly led the old man away. Something further may follow of this Masquerade. (251; my italics)

This is one of the Cosmopolitan's rare moments of self-revelation, giving the lie to his earlier claim to abhor irony. It has become painfully apparent that neither the old man nor the Cosmopolitan have any real trust in man or Providence; when the Confidence-Man leads his last victim away into the darkness we can be sure that his fate will be anything but providential. We are left free to imagine any outcome we like; the only sure thing is that even the single, ambiguous light has gone out, and the novel's growing tendency to apocalyptic, Dantesque imagery has been justified.[9]

The Confidence-Man leaves Melville apparently caught in a double bind. To have faith is often to be tricked or gulled, but to foreswear faith is to become a hopeless misanthrope or a soulless automaton. The most cynical and careful characters--Pitch, Egbert, or the sour-faced limping man for example--are usually the least attractive; we search the novel in vain for a model of normalcy. Perhaps for this reason, R. W. B. Lewis emphasizes the effect of the

Confidence-Man on his fellow passengers: "the Confidence-Man is not the bringer of darkness; he is the one who reveals the darkness in ourselves. Whether this is the action of a devil or an angel may not, when all is said and done, really matter" (276). Often the Jester's tricks reveal the hypocrisy and emptiness of human tricksters, but he also allows the generosity and trust of other victims to shine forth. In Melville's mythology the Confidence-Man takes his place as the source of all trickery and betrayal, yet somehow we prefer the Cosmopolitan to Egbert.

After *The Confidence-Man*, Melville virtually abandoned prose for almost thirty years. Having reduced all human existence to a Masquerade, why bother with it further? The poems written during these years reiterate many of the concerns of Melville's fiction. The final stanza of "The Conflict of Convictions" recapitulates his conclusion that God remains ineffable, impervious to human analysis:

> YEA AND NAY--
> EACH HATH HIS SAY;
> BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.
> NONE WAS BY
> WHEN HE SPREAD THE SKY;
> WISDOM IS VAIN, AND PROPHESY.
>
> (*Poems* 37)

Melville reaches a similar conclusion in *Clarel*, asserting the unknowableness of a universe where "Evil and good they braided play / Into one cord" (29-30; IV. iv.).

Belief of any kind never seems to have come easy to Melville. Even *Clarel*, his long and rather turgid epic of spiritual crisis, comes to no definite conclusion.[10] Melville's journal of his journey to the Middle East in 1856, just after completing *The Confidence-Man*, is more revealing than the poem it eventually fathered. The journal records the spiritual desolation which accompanied his odyssey:

> I shudder at idea of ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehova. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. (*Clarel*, "Introduction" xvii)

> Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the Deity? Hapless are the favorites of heaven. (xx)

Even in his private thoughts, Melville apparently imagined a deity both treacherous and deadly. If the "favorites of heaven" are doomed, we can no longer be surprised at the fate of Pierre and Billy Budd; they take their place in a

long line of characters who are too trusting for their own good.[11] In *Billy Budd* Melville almost runs out of laughter before the human tragicomedy, but the elements of the cosmic Joke remain.

In the end, the purpose of the Jester in Melville's fiction remains as problematic as any attempt to nail down the central meaning of his major novels. Melville's powerful vision of evil does not prevent him from presenting humor as well, along with an assurance that we can never know the truth of either. The Jester God satisfies Melville's need for a true Other, while allowing him free rein to describe a universe where all possibilities of meaning coexist in ironic tension. Paranoia, as Pynchon has since discovered, is a kind of order in itself.

Melville's Jester God defines a universe where all meanings are mutable, all men are victims. In the Jester's cosmos, the only way out of an infinite regress of ironic traps is through the sanative outlet of humor. Ishmael's ability to laugh at his fate parallels Melville's own, for though Melville's abilities as a humorist are often neglected, every dark pronouncement of war on God has its humorous counterpart. Thus the famous sermon of the cook in *Moby-Dick* jokingly applies Christian sermonizing to sharks. *Pierre* carries the game still further as Melville parodies the style of popular romances in telling his melodramatic

story. In *The Confidence-Man*, thematically perhaps the darkest of all Melville's works, he becomes the most persistent Jester of all, a laughing demon bewildering the reader with jokes, puns, and contradictory clues, delighting us with a game which is only serious if we want it to be. In this upside-down cosmos the one undisputed ruler is Melville himself, as he presents his own ironic version of the divine comedy.

Chapter 2

Mark Twain: The Swindle Continues

If Melville is a tragedian with a leavening of humor, Mark Twain is a humorist whose writings, like his life, are laced with tragedy. Twain was born into a conventionally religious family which, like Melville's, experienced financial difficulties. In both men this early exposure to hardship must have helped plant the seeds of irony which would eventually bear such strange fruit. Twain's fruition came late and was half-suppressed, but the heretical bent which led to his version of the Jester God can be detected as early as the 1860's.

Twain was an accomplished jester himself, a writer of burlesques and tall tales and a perpetrator of literary hoaxes. Like Melville, he began as a traveller and adventurer, and his career blossomed when he humorously recounted these adventures in print. Even the effect of the two men's travels appears to have been similar; Everett Emerson observes, "Just as Herman Melville had developed religious skepticism from his Pacific island experience, so did Mark Twain--unless his Hawaiian experience merely enhanced his views" (34). Both writers were appalled by missionary endeavors and found them an easy target for satire; more importantly, both went beyond topical satire to

attack the foundations of Western Christianity.

Twain found conventional Christianity to be tyrannical, narrow, and illogical, and he reviled its corruption along with that of the society which embraced it. Although he was not raised to be a fire-breathing Calvinist--if anything, his religious background was rather mild--the society he grew up in still paid homage to the morals of the Puritans. From a son of pious parents he grew up to be, in his own mind, the chief dissenter of the age, a champion of logic and common sense over superstition. As Allison Ensor notes in her study, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, "There are those who love the Bible, those who hate it, and still others who simply ignore it. Twain raged against it as wicked, obscene and damnatory; but he could never ignore it" (1). Van Wyck Brooks, in his still thought-provoking, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, argues that Twain was locked in a lifelong struggle with "the eternal, instinctive American subservience to what Mr. Santayana calls 'the genteel tradition'" (124). Twain found in that tradition easy targets for his satirical sniping.

Twain's ironic assaults on God are prefigured in his attacks on religious man. Dickinson and Melville sometimes hinted that organized religion might be a hoax, but Twain was certain of it. He especially enjoyed making fun of the belief in miraculous "special providences": "The Second Advent" and "The Holy Children" (collected in *Fables of Man*)

apply scientific logic to miracles, showing, for example, that stopping the sun would cause catastrophic tides. In both stories, people find they are much better off without having their prayers answered, and they finally hunt down and kill the offending miracle-workers. Similarly, in the "Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," Twain carries superstitious notions of a heaven filled with winged souls playing harps to their logical conclusion: most people would not enjoy harp music even if they could play. Huck Finn's naive musings satirize both the institution of prayer and those who pray, demonstrating an innate knowledge of human nature rivalling that of Melville's Confidence-Man:

> I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff-box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it. (635)

Twain's later writings are increasingly direct in their attacks, but Twain becomes more and more uncertain of his opponent: the Church, its slavish followers, or a cruel and flawed God. Gradually he turns his attack from religious institutions to the force behind them; like Melville, he dares to make war on God himself.

Everett Emerson has argued that "Huck's pragmatic skepticism permits Mark Twain to express his own amused attitude toward conventional religion" (129), but there is more to it than that. Twain is not merely a dissenter but a revisionist, a creator of counter-myths to be set against conventional Christianity. Huck believes in Hell--Hell has been drummed into him so thoroughly he cannot help but believe in it--so his famous pronouncement, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" (835), demonstrates at least as much courage as skepticism. Similarly, Twain is too obsessed with heaven and hell to be a complete nonbeliever. Although the roots are hard to see in his most popular works, Twain has a well-developed sense of blackness, of human corruption and the cosmic evil which may be its cause. He envisions man as a lost microbe in the immensities of the universe, only a nuisance to a hostile God; but he cannot help believing in that God.

In "Three Statements of the Eighties" Twain lays down his credo of the day (he was never very consistent in his beliefs, if his writings are any gauge): God exists, but He is eternally unconcerned with the daily affairs of man. Rather the universe is controlled by "strict and immutable laws" (*What is Man?* 56). Twain's manifesto of rational deism continues in *What is Man?*, his philosphical dialogues on determinism. There he proposes that man is no more than a machine, influenced by training and temperament. There is

no such thing as Free Will, and therefore no sin or reprehensibility. Twain distances himself as much as possible from the religious myths of his time, but at the expense of finding himself, for practical purposes, alone in the universe. Out of this loneliness arises the need for an Other; a dominant trope in Twain's fiction is the "Mysterious Stranger," not only in the manuscript of that name, but in "Hadleyburg," "The Great Dark," and "The War-Prayer," to name only the most obvious examples. In these late stories Twain establishes his own myth of the Jester God.

Beginning with the premises that God exists, but that religion is ridiculous, Twain soon reaches the conclusion that God, too, is ridiculous. The Jester God serves as a refuge for the author who delights in attacking established meanings but has difficulty formulating any lasting ones of his own. In grappling with this difficulty, Melville focused on the ambiguity of language and impossibility of certain knowledge; Twain simply observes that all human observations are biased. The solution for an intelligent onlooker is to take nothing seriously; thus Hauck refers to Twain's "sophisticated awareness of the comic ambivalence which characterizes the vision of the perceptive man" (136). This is essentially a definition of irony as comedy; for Twain the two modes are never far apart. Laughter is inspired by a deeper, more multifaceted awareness of

reality, and it also serves as an escape from the consequences of that awareness. Twain's last works complete that escape by turning aside to an extreme solipsistic vision, resolving ambiguity by reducing all to a private dream.

Ambiguity of perception becomes a major theme in Twain's work beginning with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. This entertaining if structurally flawed novel begins as a straightforward satire directed against medieval superstition, the reactionary Roman church, and the modern tendency to romanticize them. But something strange happens when the Yankee attempts to reform Arthurian Britain using modern know-how: the cure turns out to be as bad as the disease. Twain apparently could not resist satirizing industrial society as well, and the result is a novel with no moral center, disintegrating into bloody apocalypse in the end. For this reason Hauck has called Yankee a "masterpiece of the absurd" and marked it as a new type of satire in which all points of view are suspect (133-35). Twain probably had no such intention--*Yankee* is a confused work which he simply lost control of--but absurdity is a necessary result of his unrestrained satirical stance. If all points of view are relative, all become fit butts for jesting, even those with which Twain tends to sympathize. Only a short step separates the world of *Connecticut Yankee* from the fictional universes of Barth and Pynchon.

When all meaning becomes ambiguous or suspect, the stage is set for the Jester. *Yankee* is filled with jokes, some merely amusing, some cruel. Morgan le Fay is a particularly nasty joker, allowing a prisoner in her dungeons to see a number of funeral processions emerge from his distant home over the years. He counts the funerals, which number one less than his family, and spends years agonizing in doubt over which one is left alive. As it turns out, all the funerals were fake, arranged by Morgan le Fay for his benefit. Hauck observes, however, that not all of Twain's jokes can be so easily explained: "Often in Twain's book a joke-maker like Morgan le Fay is not present at all, or at least is not knowable. The joke then has a reality independent of causation. Existence is then a practical joke" (137).

Twain produces this existential anxiety by repeatedly foiling our expectations and ironically subverting every expected happy ending. For example, three unjustly imprisoned sons escape and return to their home, arriving just minutes after the last member of their family dies of smallpox (291). While hardly eliciting laughter, episodes like this seem so maliciously staged that we search in vain for a master ironist or prankster. The bloodbath at the end of the novel is a still more horrible joke, if one definition of a joke is the forced conjunction of disparate elements, as mailed knights die in thousands before dynamite

bombs, gatling guns, and electrified fences. In a final twist, the Yankee's defenses backfire when his own men die from the foul air of thirty thousand dead knights surrounding them. Merlin too, is allowed a last jest as he enchants Morgan, only to fall against an electric wire:

> Then such a delirium of silly laughter overtook him that he reeled about like a drunken man, and presently fetched up against one of our wires. His mouth is spread open yet; apparently he is still laughing. I suppose the face will retain that petrified laugh until the corpse turns to dust. (443)

Merlin's death exposes the nature of reality as a nested series: every laughing joker is the butt of a larger, grimmer joke. Irony appears to be universal and unavoidable. Merlin's end is a fit emblem for a novel that makes us suspect the very structure of the universe; in *Yankee* the cosmos always has the last laugh.

Twain's late fiction defines and elucidates the jest of existence, and the jokes deviate farther and farther from conventional standards of humor. As the humor becomes more grim, Twain finds it necessary to blame an ultimate Jester to restore at least an absurd causation to the chaotic cosmos. In *Yankee*, however, he turns for the first time to

the dream-fiction as an explanation for absurdity. At the end of the novel, when Hank Morgan lies dying, he imagines himself back in the Middle Ages with his wife: "Such strange and awful dreams, Sandy! Dreams that were as real as reality . . ." (446). Interestingly, he denies the reality of not only the modern frame of the story, but also the bloody medieval ending. By reducing all unpleasant parts of his tale to a dream, Morgan manages to die content. Here Twain first suggests what will become a predominant theme: fiction, dream, and reality are interchangeable.

In *Yankee* Twain's art approaches moral apocalypse, but the turning point in his relationship with the deity he could never entirely reject seems to have come with the death of his daughter Suzy on August 18, 1896. A letter to William Dean Howells demonstrates that when confronted with tragedy, Twain sought to blame God: "What a ghastly tragedy it was; how exactly & precisely it was planned; & how remorselessly every detail of the dispensation was carried out" (*Fables of Man* 129). Twain's personal outrage demands a target, so he is forced to contradict his earlier notion of an aloof, detached Deity. A later letter to Howells, who had also lost a daughter, goes further: "It is my quarrel--that traps like that are set. Suzy & Winnie given to us, in miserable sport, & then taken away" (*Fables* 130). Twain's "traps" evoke the paranoid world of *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*, where a cosmic trapper roams at large

through the wilderness of the universe. This anguish over Suzy's death reaches its fullest expression in the short essay "In My Bitterness," where Twain arraigns God as a monster: "He never does a kindness. When He seems to do one, it is a trap which He is setting; you will walk into it some day, then you will understand . . ." (*Fables* 131). God's tactics are a "sorry game" (132); this dark Gamester and his illusions shadow Twain for the rest of his days. Twain's vision of a God who gives pleasures only for the malicious satisfaction of tearing them away is a bleak one, but it appears repeatedly in his late writings.

When Twain abandons his rigorous determinism, God often appears as the source of evil. Tuckey quotes from Twain's notebook of 1903:

> The morals of a God ought to be minutely perfect. I would not worship a God that made the fly.
>
> If God invented the fly, that is enough. It gives us the measure of His character. If a man had invented the fly, we should curse his name forever. And he would deserve it. (*Fables of Man* 110)

Similarly, in the Autobiographical Dictation of June 23, 1906, Twain excoriates the cruelty of God:

> He proves every day that He takes no interest in man, nor in the other animals, further than to torture them, slay them and get out of this pastime such entertainment as it may afford--and do what He can not to get weary of the eternal and changeless monotony of it. (*Fables of Man* 117)

Twain's description of Man as entertainment brings us very close to the Jester indeed, but if anything, Twain preferred harsher titles for the deity. In trying to make sense of the intolerable horrors "emptied upon" us, Twain finally reasons "It seems to me that it proves one thing conclusively: if our Maker is all-powerful for good or evil, He is not in His right mind" (400).

Twain's shift from criticism of the folly of man to direct criticism of God himself lends an uncomfortable ambiguity to the "Letters from the Earth." In these letters from a terrestrially exiled Satan to his friends in heaven, God first appears as a sovereign experimenter, saying "Man is an experiment, the other animals are another experiment. Time will show whether they were worth the trouble" (*What is Man?* 404-5). But Satan the ironist describes man more specifically as "a sarcasm" (405), presumably uttered from the lips of the sarcastic god. When tangible parts of the world become sarcasms, Twain is well on his way to

identifying God as a malicious joker and confusing the world with a fictional creation; "The Great Dark" and *The Mysterious Stranger* represent the working out of these curious, contradictory notions.

Throughout the "Letters" it is difficult to tell whether Satan is describing the Bible's distorted vision of God or a real deity, especially when Satan observes that "It is he whom Church and people call Our Father in Heaven who has invented the fly and sent him to inflict this dreary long misery and melancholy and wretchedness, and decay of body and mind, upon a poor savage who has done the Great Criminal no harm" (434). His description of the origin of sin is especially interesting:

> The fear that if Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge they would "be as gods," so fired his jealousy that his reason was affected, and he could not treat those poor creatures either fairly or charitably, or even refrain from dealing cruelly and criminally with their blameless posterity.
>
> To this day his reason has never recovered from that shock; a wild nightmare of vengefulness has possessed him ever since . . . (426-27)

God appears here in several guises, as the petty revenge-seeker, the insane criminal, and the nightmare; all three are important motifs in late Twain. In reference to Biblical scenes of divine retribution, Satan notes, "What the insane Father required was blood and misery; he was indifferent as to who furnished it" (451). The letters which began as an attack on the Old Testament version of God end with the awareness that there is little difference between the vengeful, tyrannical Jehovah and the distant creator of the disease-carrying fly.

The late fiction reflects his darkening view of the universe and its ruler, but Twain was still inclined to find humor everywhere; in 1903 he called Mary Baker Eddy "the monumental sarcasm of the Ages" and added, "It seems to me that when we contemplate her & what she has achieved, it is blasphemy to longer deny the Supreme Being the possession of a sense of humor" (Emerson 223; quoting a letter to Edward Day, March 21, 1903). In Twain's late writings we see his version of this deity taking shape, a god without remorse, with a ghastly sense of humor.

Twain's philosophical musings appear in numerous fragments and sketches withheld from publication, but only a few finished stories demonstrate the dark side of his genius at its best; of these the most successful is his late masterpiece, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." "Hadleyburg" tells of the downfall of a self-contained,

Puritanical community, and Twain rediscovers all his old delight in exposing Providence as a shallow, egotistical explanation for reality. From the outset the story falls into the comfortable mold of a moral fable, the story of pride taking a fall, but Twain has no intention of merely writing a more sophisticated version of those Sunday School stories he had once parodied. "The Story of the Good Little Boy" and its like were simple inversions of pious expectations; "Hadleyburg" is a much more subtle and demonic parody. Instead of the expected inverted moral we find that Twain has piled irony upon irony, reversal upon reversal, until out of a fog of unintentional wrongs and shattered lives emerges--nothing at all, only a hollow laugh from somewhere offstage.

The town of Hadleyburg is so smugly self-righteous that we anticipate its corruption with glee. The town has attained its reputation for perfect honesty by removing all temptation *from* its environment: "throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people, so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify" (*Stories* 351-52). As we might suspect, "solidified" honesty proves brittle; moreover, Twain has already warned us in "Was it Heaven? Or Hell?" that perfect honesty is humanly unattainable, and those who believe they have achieved it are only fooling themselves. This sort of spiritual pride, which in Twain is always associated with

religious rigor, leads to egotism and ruptures the larger community of mankind. Even Mrs. Richards, a leading citizen, admits that Hadleyburg is "honest, narrow, self-righteous, and stingy" (355); these qualities lead to disaster when "at last, in the drift of time, Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger--possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions" (352). The town's punishment is swift and certain and just--or so it at first seems.

The townspeople of Hadleyburg, like so many of Twain's Puritans, are adept at convincing themselves that Providence is on their side. The sack of gold left by the "mysterious big stranger" (353), which everyone believes could only belong to a man now dead, proves too sore a temptation even for the Richardses, who soon regret turning it over for public trial:

> "But after all, Mary, it must be for the best--it *must* be; we know that. And we must remember that it was so ordered--"
>
> "Ordered! Oh, everything's *ordered*, when a person has to find some way out when he has been stupid. Just the same, it was *ordered* that the money should come to us in this special way, and it was you that must take it on yourself to go

> meddling with the designs of Providence--and who gave you the right? It was wicked, that is what it was--just blasphemous presumption. . . ." (360)

In this humorous passage, Mary Richards accuses her husband of appealing to Providence for his own purposes, then does exactly the same thing in her next breath. Although she has not thought of it in so many words, she invokes Providence to justify stealing a sack of money, simply because she *thinks* the rightful owner is dead. Her logic recalls Puddn'head Wilson's comical explanation of the problem with Providence:

> There is this trouble about special providences--namely, there is so often a doubt as to which party was intended to be the beneficiary. In the case of the children, the bears, and the prophet, the bears got more real satisfaction out of the episode than the prophet did, because they got the children. (*Puddn'head Wilson* 17)

Twain recognized early on the American tendency to connect God with money and to reduce piety to self-interest.

"Hadleyburg" is essentially about a giant practical joke. By the time the stranger's machinations have

concluded, all nineteen of the principal families of Hadleyburg, including the Richardses, have been tricked into placing fraudulent claims for the money. At the public meeting where the claimants are to be anounced, the Reverend Burgess stands over the sack of gold and attests to the significance of the day's events with exquisite irony: "Under my hand, my friends, rests a stranger's eloquent recognition of what we are; through him the world will always henceforth know what we are" (371). Burgess, an innocent victim himself of Hadleyburg's self-righteousness, conducts the proceedings with glee; he at least, enjoys the joke. When the remark which the stranger has invented as his test is read in full--"Go, and reform--or, mark my words--some day, for your sins, you will die and go to hell or Hadleyburg--TRY AND MAKE IT THE FORMER" (375)--the whole house breaks down and laughs uproariously.

The joke is a glorious one for those not directly involved, but the victims understandably feel persecuted; midway through the roll call of dishonor some protest, arguing that "this farce was the work of some abandoned joker, and was an insult to the whole community" (379). True enough, but the insult appears richly deserved, and they are shouted down. Of the nineteen leading families, only the Richardses are preserved from shame; Burgess does not read their envelope because Edward Richards had once warned him of the town's intent to ride him on a rail. Of

course, Burgess does not know that Richards could have cleared him of the town's charges completely but lacked courage to do so, so even that good deed is based on incomplete knowledge.

At least the Richardses realize their shame, and while the rest of the townspeople seem odious, we are at first moved to pity them. However, when the stranger announces his plan to give the Richardses ten thousand dollars in reward for their honesty, they silently accept. At least they can no longer convince themselves with arguments about Providence:

> "We--we couldn't help it, Mary. It--well, it was ordered. *All* things are."
>
> Mary glanced up and looked at him steadily, but he didn't return the look. (387)

When they find themselves receiving over thirty-eight thousand dollars instead of ten thousand, Richards is at first suspicious of checks, thinking that if they come from the stranger they can only be another trap:

> I am resigned to take the $8,500 if it could come in bank-notes--for it does seem that it was so ordered, Mary--but I have never had much courage, and I have not the pluck to try to market a check

> signed with that disastrous name. It would be a trap. (388)

The workings of Providence and the equally subtle machinations of a mysterious jester have become inextricably intertwined in Edward's mind, even as they are in the story itself. The pathetic old couple decide to keep the undeserved checks, since they are signed by a local tycoon; afterwards, however, guilt and fear gnaw at the Richardses, for they have entered the paranoid world of the Jester God and see traps everywhere.

"Hadleyburg" takes on appalling implications on close inspection. The stranger himself is mysterious indeed, one of Twain's many outsiders who enter and disrupt a placid but corrupt community; when he appears at the auction of the phony gold pieces we are told that he "looked like an amateur detective gotten up as an impossible English earl" (385). This is hardly the costume we would expect of someone trying to pass incognito, and it resembles nothing so much as the outlandish garb of Melville's Cosmopolitan in *The Confidence-Man*. Like the Confidence-Man, Twain's stranger performs the function of revealing those he encounters in their true colors. Significantly, Twain's great hoaxer also has supernatural overtones. His final note to the Richardses "seems written with fire" (389) because it burns their consciences so; before Edward dies,

in his final delirium he identifies the fire as that of Hell and tells his nurses why the checks are missing:

> "You will never see them again--they are destroyed. They came from Satan. I saw the hell-brand on them, and I knew they were sent to betray me to sin." Then he fell to gabbling strange and dreadful things which were not clearly understandable . . . (391)

Like Melville's Pip, Edward has looked on the inimical universe which lies beneath surface reality; his madness is heaven's sense.

Hadleyburg is a Puritan community gone sour; the stranger's scheme is predicated on the fact that the community *knows* itself to be stingy and false, otherwise the dead Goodson would not be regarded as the only possible true candidate for the sack of gold. Presumably the whole town is equally corruptible, though only the leading citizens, the so-called "Symbols," are singled out as the reigning hypocrites. But what might at first appear a simple scheme of retribution goes awry. Certainly the town's leading citizens deserved to have their hypocrisy exposed, but the Richardses seem the best of the lot and they are driven to madness and death. The joke has gone too far by reasonable human standards.

Twain's ironic vision prevents "Hadleyburg" from attaining a sensible moral, no matter how hard we try to make it conform to expectations. Harkness, one of the town's most despicable citizens, actually turns a profit from his embarrassment by stamping his political opponent Pinkerton's name on each of the stranger's fake coins and distributing them just before the election. The whole joke is thus concentrated on Pinkerton, and Harkness wins a seat in the legislature and the opportunity to make a vast fortune by influencing railroad rights of way. Even Edward Richards's death-bed confession does more harm than good, for in his paranoia he blames the innocent Burgess for revealing his guilt; thus "the dying man passed away without knowing that once more he had done poor Burgess a wrong" (392). No moral center, no principle of justice lend meaning to the world of "Hadleyburg." As irony undercuts irony, Twain's fictional universe dissolves into a chaos of paranoia and deception. Out of the darkness rings the sardonic laugh of the Jester, but by the end of the story any human laughter is bound to be a bit uneasy and forced. In a world where great transgressions benefit the transgressor and minor ones lead to insanity and death, the joke is on us all.

The shifting ironies of "Hadleyburg" evolve into the dream-like unreality of the late stories. Brooks comments on Twain's late use of the dream motif, "In the Freudian

psychology the dream is an expression of a suppressed wish" (186). In Twain this wish takes the form of an escape from reality; the surreal landscape of a dream supplants the dark chaos of Hadleyburg. A dream has the advantage of being transient; one can always wake up, though this is not as easy as it sounds in the late tales. By turning reality into a dream, Twain internalizes the unbearable joke that is the universe and makes God just a nasty manifestation of the subconscious mind. This solipsistic escape is not the most satisfactory of resolutions, and most of the late stories are unfinished; indeed, Hauck argues that Twain's late stories--*The Mysterious Stranger*, "The Great Dark," and "3000 Years Among the Microbes"-- "are unfinishable stories. They represent a final vision of ambivalence" (157). How can a dream end except in waking, a waking which would only return the sleeper to the world of Hadleyburg?

Ambivalence is central to "The Great Dark," that curious long fragment of 1898. A trick story, along the lines of Ambrose Bierce's "Incident at Owl Creek Bridge," "The Great Dark" quickly became what Twain called a "tragedy-trap," beginning in comedy and ending in ruin. Twain recorded the genesis of the story in his notebook in August 1898: "Last night dreamed of a whaling cruise in a drop of water. Not by microscope, but *actually*. This would mean a reduction of the participants to a minuteness which would make them nearly invisible to God, & he wouldn't be

interested in them any longer" (Emerson 221). The tale begins intriguingly enough as the story of a man taking a dream voyage into a drop of water under a microscope. On board his microscopic ship are the same family that had gathered around the microscope in the house where he lay sleeping. Both the family and the ship's crew, however, regard their voyage as real, and the trip turns deadly serious as microbial monsters attack the ship, and the crew discovers that they are lost in an uncharted and apparently endless sea. Soon even the dreamer is unsure whether he is dreaming or not, and memories of his past life aboard the ship arise to replace his fading land memories. He can no longer be certain which life is real and which is the dream. This intermingling of levels of reality is typical of Twain's late style and appears elsewhere in "Which Was the Dream?" and "3,000 Years Among the Microbes."

Among these late fragments, "The Great Dark" stands out, however, in the power of its imaginative vision and in the subtlety with which Twain manipulates levels so that one imperceptibly fades into another. It also contains his clearest manifestation yet of the Jester God in the person of the "Superintendent of Dreams" who masterminds the action of the story. The increasingly sinister Superintendent, like Ahab's White Whale, represents that lower layer of reality, the cruelly grinning face behind the featureless mask of the quotidian.

The Jester has many guises, and the Superintendent first appears in a jovial light, as the servant of Henry Edwards' whim. Edwards is intrigued by the world in a drop of water, and the Superintendent conveniently appears to assist his desires:

> An ocean in a drop of water--and unknown, uncharted, unexplored by man! By man, who gives all his time to the Africas and the poles, with this unsearched marvelous world right at his elbow. Then the Superintendent of Dreams appeared at my side, and we talked it over. He was willing to provide a ship and crew . . . (*Devil's Race-Track* 82-83)

The Superintendent warns Edwards that the voyage will be "not altogether a holiday excursion" (83), but Edwards unwisely pays no attention. The Superintendent soon begins interfering with the dream, revealing his nature as a practical joker.

The Superintendent's first pranks are harmless enough: appearing to superstitious crew members and then vanishing into thin air. The frightened sailor Turner feels much safer when invited into Henry's cabin for coffee, but the Superintendent is present, invisible to Turner, and proceeds to make more mischief:

> I poured a steaming cup of coffee and handed it to Turner and told him to sit where he pleased and make himself comfortable and at home; and before I could interfere he had sat down in the Superintendent of Dreams' lap!--no, sat down *through* him. It cost me a gasp, but only that, nothing more. The Superintendent of Dreams' head was larger than Turner's, and *surrounded* it, and was a transparent spirit-head fronted with a transparent spirit-face; and this latter smiled at me as much as to say give myself no uneasiness, it is all right. Turner was smiling comfort and contentment at me at the same time, and the double result was very curious, but I could tell the smiles apart without trouble. The Superintendent of Dreams' body enclosed Turner's, but I could see Turner through it, just as one sees objects through thin smoke. It was interesting and pretty. (91-92)

This peculiar double vision is emblematic of the story as a whole: the ordinary reality of a contented sailor, and the penumbrous, ambiguous smile of a more fantastic but perhaps no less real supernature. The very fact that Edwards cares about whether dream characters are bothered illustrates the

blending of levels which makes the story so characteristic of late Twain.

The Superintendent's smile may be either friendly or sinister; it broadens as he begins to amuse himself at Turner's expense. While Turner is telling a story the Superintendent empties his full cup of coffee and replaces it; the result is an even more telling double vision:

> He took up his cup, glanced into it, and it was curious to observe the two faces that were framed in the front of his head. Turner's was long and distressed; the Superintendent of Dreams' was wide, and broken out of all shape with a convulsion of silent laughter. (92)

The laughing figure repeats his trick with Turner's second cup of coffee, refilling it when Turner makes a break for the door. Although Henry calms him, Turner now fully explains the circumstances of their ship, lost in a sea with no Gulf Stream, no Greenland, no sun, moon, or stars; he ends by proclaiming, "The ship's bewitched" (98). The invisible Superintendent then plays his last prank, lifting Turner's coffee before his eyes and drinking it--a cruel joke, but then, the mate is not real, or is he? Real or not, there is something very disturbing about that silently laughing, supernatural face superimposed on the frightened

human one.

The playfulness of the Superintendent of Dreams demonstrates the lighter side of the Jester, but his jokes grow more serious when Henry remonstrates with him for teasing Turner, ordering the phantom to "stop appearing to people--stop it entirely" (102). After a brief argument, Henry learns who is the real god of this dream cosmos:

> ". . . if my style doesn't suit you, you can end the dream as soon as you please--right now, if you like."
>
> He looked me steadily in the eye for a moment, then said, with deliberation--
>
> "The dream? *Are you quite sure it is a dream?*"
>
> It took my breath away.
>
> "What do you mean? *Isn't* it a dream?"
>
> He looked at me in that same way again; and it made my blood chilly, this time. Then he said--
>
> "You have spent your whole life in this ship. And this is *real* life. Your other life was the dream!"
>
> It was as if he had hit me, it stunned me so. Still looking at me, his lip curled itself into a mocking smile, and he wasted away like a mist and

disappeared. (102-103)

This is our last image of the Superintendent of Dreams; as if to confirm his own proclamation that Edwards is now experiencing reality, he disappears. Only that final image of the now clearly mocking smile confirms our suspicions that he is another supernatural jester.

For Twain, the Jester's power lies partly in illusion; elusive as mist, he vanishes behind the scenes when challenged. As events seem to confirm the Superintendent's words, Edwards can no longer tell which world is the dream one. His philosophical agonies are reminiscent of Pierre's: "Damnation! I said to myself, are we creatures in a real world, all of a sudden, and have we been feeding on dreams in an imaginary one since nobody knows when--or how *is* it?" (108). In the fragment as we have it he is never to know, though he spends years on board the dream ship. Twain apparently originally intended for Edwards and his family to live out their lives on board, dying after many hardships, and then for Edwards to awaken, prematurely aged from his dream experiences. Either way a nasty trick is played on Edwards, but the story as it stands is even more inconclusive. After six years of wandering the ship's crew mutinies; the captain puts down the revolt and delivers an inspiring but fatalistic speech:

> *I* don't know where this ship is, but she's in the hands of God, and that's enough for me, it's enough for you, and it's enough for anybody but a carpenter. If it is God's will that we pull through, we pull through--otherwise not. We haven't had an observation for four months, but we are going ahead, and do our best to fetch up somewhere. (128)

In his Introduction to *The Devil's Race-Track*, Tuckey argues that Twain here ends his fragment on a courageous, affirmative note, one which "expresses strength and resoluteness rather than futility and despair" (xiii). But however much we admire the captain for his stoic endurance, the cosmos where Twain has placed him seems hopeless, and the God in which the captain has expressed his trust has been metamorphosed into the grinning Superintendent.

The various versions of *The Mysterious Stranger* offer Twain's last attempts to resolve the issues raised by "Hadleyburg" and "The Great Dark." All three main versions, "The Chronicle of Young Satan" (1897-1900), "Schoolhouse Hill" (1898), and *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (1902-08), display Twain at his most imaginative, grappling with a universe which no longer appears even partially amenable to realistic presentation. Of these, the "Schoolhouse Hill"

fragment is the least interesting and complete, so I shall concentrate on the longer versions. George Pierce Clark, in "The Devil That Corrupted Hadleyburg," has noted the parallels between "Hadleyburg" and the Mysterious Stranger story, observing that both contain the central action of a bag of gold found by a poor, reputable man. Even the phrase "mysterious big stranger" is used of the vaguely Satanic manipulator of events in the earlier story. However, the Mysterious Stranger tales are both more fantastic and lighter in spirit than the grim "Hadleyburg"; by entering into the dream world he portrays Twain becomes party to the cosmic Joke. William Gibson, in his Introduction to *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, comments on the importance of humor in Twain's last major works: "Of all the paradoxes in the three Mysterious Stranger stories, none is more paradoxical, or more sanative, than Twain's demonstrations of the power of laughter--was it *merely* human?--in the empty spaces of the universe" (26). The Jester's weapon has a power even against its master; in his late stories Twain laughs hardest where laughter is most difficult.

Although he had great difficulty settling on a final form for it, the Mysterious Stranger story was obviously important to Twain. He expressed his view of the work in progress in a letter to Howells on May 12, 1899: "What I have been wanting is a chance to write a book without

reserves, a book which should take account of no one's feelings and no one's prejudices, opinions, beliefs, hopes, illusions, delusions, a book which should say my say right out of my heart in the plainest language and without a limitation of any sort" (*Selected Letters* 256). Eight months later he added in another letter to his old literary friend: "Why *was* the human race created? Or at least why wasn't something creditable created in place of it? God had his opportunity. He could have made a reputation. But no, He must commit this grotesque folly--a lark which must have cost him a regret or two when He came to think it over and observe effects" (*Selected Letters* 259).

What Twain most wanted to express was his belief that God, if indeed He exists, has no human sense of morality. The Mysterious Stranger manuscripts all take place in an amoral cosmos, filled with supernatural forces without definition or purpose. Neither cruelty nor kindness have any meaning for the lords of this universe; omnipotence begets indifference, and they exist only to amuse themselves. "The Chronicle of Young Satan," like "The Hyena" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, is a touchstone for this study, demonstrating yet again that when faced with mocking, supernatural laughter, man's best defense is to laugh back.

The Satan of Twain's "Chronicle," although not fallen like his parental namesake, has a most unangelic nature by conventional standards. After molding a town full of

miniature people out of clay for the amusement of his boy observers, he first torments his creations, then destroys them for making too much noise in their grief. The narrator describes the creatures' sorrow as:

> . . . a scene which Satan paid no attention to until the small noise of the weeping began to annoy him, then he reached out and took the heavy board swing out of our swing and brought it down and mashed all those people into the earth just as if they had been flies. (*Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts* 50)

When the children object to this cruelty, Satan remains totally uncaring; the figures' lives mean nothing to him, for, he argues, "we can make more" (52). Young Theodore Fischer, Twain's narrator, begins to learn the true nature of his world under Satan's tutelage. Thus when the conventionally faithful Ursula maintains "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His seeing it," Theodore replies simply "But it falls, just the same. What good is *seeing* it fall?" (65).

Satan sees no evil in the world, only stupidity and inferiority. Humans, for all their witch hunts and cruelties, lack the self-determination to commit real crimes; indeed, their fates are predetermined: "A child's

first act knocks over the initial brick, and the rest will follow inexorably" (115). Interestingly, Satan, like Melville's Confidence-Man, "admires rattlesnakes" (98), a remark which again illustrates the deceptiveness of appearances. It also opens a question of faith: can children trust an angelic visitor who would advise them to admire rattlesnakes, regardless of the reality of their danger?

Young Satan is clearly the God of the boys' universe, at least as long as he remains with them, and as a representative of heaven he must be regarded as a type of any higher god. Bruce Michelson argues that he is "a caricature of a personal God . . . an omnipotent Tom Sawyer on a permanent holiday" (48). This uncomfortably real divinity takes grim pleasure in his earthly pranks. When he shows to the boys a pageant of civilization, demonstrating the follies, absurdities, and cruelties of mankind, he shares none of their sympathy for the victims:

> Then he began to laugh in the most unfeeling way, and make fun of the human race, although he knew that what he had been saying shamed us and wounded us. No one but an angel could have acted so; but suffering is nothing to them, they do not know what it is, except by hearsay. (137)

Elsewhere Young Satan is described as having an "evil chuckle" (138), but after all he is only showing his pupils the way to deal with the universe. At last he points out to them a moral of sorts, one dear to Twain's heart: ". . . your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon--laughter" (165).

Laughter is a weapon against human folly and indifference, one which wounds proud and humble alike. More importantly, laughter is man's one recourse when faced with an indifferent god and a hostile, chaotic universe. David D. Anderson, observing the parallels between the Mysterious Stranger story and Melville's *Confidence-Man*, argues that in both works Man is deluded at every point by his own senses until sanity itself becomes impossible; thus Father Peter becomes a sort of beneficiary of divine wisdom: "Satan . . . causes Peter to be acquitted and also causes him to go insane, thus losing contact with the apparent order of the world and finding real sanity in the chaos of truth" (Anderson 9). At best, however, this is the awful sanity of Pip, or of the Richardses at the end of "Hadleyburg."

If the Young Satan story is "a caricature of a personal God," that God becomes even more personal in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain's final, most complete version of the story. The dream motif suggested by the name Philip Traum in the earlier draft now takes over the narrative,

until the dividing line between dream and reality becomes lost. As the title suggests, this version is more truly mysterious than any of its predecessors; the title character is also vastly more engaging.[1] The narrator, August Feldner, age sixteen, inhabits a town called Eseldorf (Assville), which like Hadleyburg stands for the world at large.

No. 44 begins in standard Twain fashion, attacking organized religion, making fun of superstition, and occasionally demonstrating the pathos of ignorantly worshipping mankind. The God of medieval Eseldorf is the jealous, petty tyrant we have seen in *Letters from the Earth*. Religion merely supports the status quo and encourages injustice: "The priests said that knowledge was not good for the common people, and could make them discontented with the lot which God had appointed for them, and God would not endure discontentment with His plans" (4). Local pieties become butts for joking and a way of demonstrating that heaven is filled with low jokers; the tradition of a pact with the devil for the miraculous building of a bridge becomes in Twain's hands a revelation of what "cheating" the devil really means. The soul of an old monk which was supposed to be payment for the bridge is carried off at the last moment by angels, "laughing and jeering" (8), leaving Satan cheated again. When saving souls is reduced to jeering games, our sympathies turn

toward the underdog Satan, who at least fulfilled his part of the bargain. In Twain's mythology Satan's wiles are no match for the trickiness of heaven and heaven's earthly representatives.

Alongside the good-humored fun of crooked priests and rigged bargains with the devil, *No. 44* contains plenty of conventional Twain anti-pieties blaming God rather than man for guilt; as 44 tells August, "Why do you reproach yourself? You did not make yourself; how then are you to blame?" (32). The power of organized religion is corrosive; when 44 is apparently killed by the magician, Katrina finds comfort in paradoxes which Twain found all too transparent:

> "The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away . . . . . blessed be the name of the Lord!"
>
> It was Katarina; it was the faithful Christian parting with its all, yet still adoring the smiting hand. (91)

The phrase would not be out of place in a tract, but in Twain's hands we see its meaning in a new and frightening light. The early Mark Twain might have made fun of Katarina; here our admiration for her character is not marred. Instead we look in dismay on the "smiting hand" which has brought her low, even though this tragedy turns out to be a hoax.

The Mysterious Stranger tales attack traditional religious doctrines and practices as effectively as anything Twain ever wrote, but *No. 44* is most interesting when Twain abandons his old war with Christianity and turns to the dream landscapes within man. No. 44, who holds the keys to these realms, then ceases to be a representative of heaven and becomes a human avatar of divine disorder, an apostle of anti-seriousness. As Michelson observes, in Twain's new world of celebratory, purposeless fun, "the divine Player becomes a real player" at last, and the ordinary world is overthrown (55). No. 44 can do literally anything--past, present and future are at his command; life forms at his fingertips, and death has no meaning at all. For this reason, Everett Emerson asserts that "'No. 44' shows the old author returning to the motif that makes *Huckleberry Finn* so memorable: the celebration of freedom" (248). Huck's freedom was partly predicated on his physical ability to run away to the river or the territories. *No. 44* celebrates all forms of freedom, but especially the imaginative freedom which allows 44 to overcome the opposition of traditional ways of thought, even in the thoroughly conventional August.

This celebration is closely related to No. 44's creation of the print shop "Duplicates," facsimiles of the print shop workers inhabited by their "Dream-Selves." As 44 explains to August, the Dream-Self represents the wild, unrestrained force of imagination:

> You know, of course, that you are not one person, but two. One is your Workaday-Self, and 'tends to business, the other is your Dream-Self, and has no responsibilities, and cares only for romance and excursions and adventure. It sleeps when your other self is awake; when your other self sleeps, your Dream-Self has full control, and does as it pleases. It has far more imagination than has the Workaday-Self, therefore its pains and pleasures are far more real and intense than are those of the other self, and its adventures correspondingly picturesque and extraordinary. (97)

Later August has a revealing conversation with his own Dream-Self and learns how they live:

> We have no morals; the angels have none; morals are for the impure; we have no principles, those chains are for men. We love the lovely whom we meet in dreams, we forget them the next day, and meet and love their like. They are dream-creatures--no others are real. (152)

The powers of the dream-selves which enable them to inhabit a magical world of wish-fulfillment are shared and multiplied in the character of No. 44. He is their master, but he also shares their ability to laugh at reality. When August sees 44 captured and condemned to the stake, only to vanish at the last moment with a laugh, he is amazed by 44's ability to playact: "manifestly nothing was serious to him; levity was the blood and marrow of him, death was a joke; his ghastly fright, his moving tears, his frenzied supplications--by God, it was all just coarse and vulgar horse-play!" (111). As August soon learns, however, the world itself is a joke, and nothing is more horrifically comical than the medieval justice which condemns whatever it cannot understand to burn alive.

44's imaginative horse-play consistently exposes the brutality and hypocrisy of August's world, but the laughter in the book is gently mocking, not the savage glee of a cruel jester. For if Mark Twain is one of the founders of the anti-religion of the Jester God, surely *No. 44* is his New Testament, where the cruelty of the Jester is displaced by the warm playfulness of his human avatar. As the Jester becomes more human, August becomes more like his mentor, learning to laugh at the improbable pageant of human life. The joke is still on us, but Twain is more resolved than ever to join in the laughter.

No. 44 reaches its fantastic climax when its supernatural protagonist takes his leave of August, who still clings to the remnants of his old faith:

> "We have comraded long together, and it has been pleasant--pleasant for both; but I must go now, and we shall not see each other any more."
>
> "In this life, 44, but in another? We shall meet in another, surely, 44?"
>
> Then all tranquilly and soberly he made the strange answer--
>
> "*There is no other.*"
>
> A subtle influence blew upon my spirit from his, bringing with it a vague, dim, but blessed and hopeful feeling that the incredible words might be true--even *must* be true. (185)

How curious that so devout a worshipper as August should be glad at the prospect of no hereafter; but then again, we have seen the hypocrisy, corruption, and stupidity of the church he follows portrayed at considerable length. August anticipates 44's next utterance, the surprising but at the same time clearly foreshadowed ending of Twain's last major work:

> "*Life itself is only a vision, a dream.*"
>
> It was electrical. By God I had had that very thought a thousand times in my musings!
>
> "*Nothing* exists; all is a dream. God--man--the world,--the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars: a dream, all a dream, they have no existence. *Nothing exists save empty space--and you!*"
>
> "I!"
>
> "And you are not you--you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are but a *thought*. I myself have no existence, I am but a dream--your dream, creature of your imagination. In a moment you will have realized this, then you will banish me from your visions and I shall dissolve into the nothingness out of which you made me . . . . . (186)

As August listens dumbfounded, 44 unveils his true purpose: "I your poor servant have revealed you to yourself and set you free. Dream other dreams, and better!" (186). August, his Dream-Self, and No.44--who apparently was August's creative self or imagination--merge into unity.

Before dissolving his strangest creation, Twain cannot resist returning once more to the absurd reality which made this apocalyptic ending necessary. 44 demonstrates to

August the ridiculousness of his imagined cosmos by describing its religion. The dream or "fiction" of reality is

> . . . frankly and hysterically insane--like all dreams: a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice, and invented hell--mouths mercy, and invented hell--mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people, and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor abused slave to worship him! . . . The dream-marks are all

> present--you should have recognized them earlier . . . . . (186-87)

Twain does much more in this celebrated passage than vilify stupid, finite, human conceptions of God. Indeed he goes much farther than ever before. The God against whom Twain has fulminated for so long is reduced to an absurd fiction, *but He is no more fictional than the rest of the universe.* It is as if Twain could not ultimately rid himself of this demonic deity without sacrificing the whole structure of beliefs that make up reality itself.

44's final words are the culmination of an epic retreat from perceived reality in favor of imaginative truth. The power to "dream other dreams" is a mighty one, but the cost is frightful:

> . . . there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought*--a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!"
>
> He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true. (187)

Certainly this ending is in part a solipsistic escape from reality, from morality, and from God; as Coleman Parsons notes, "Having dethroned God and exalted Satan as a necessitarian, anti-Moral Sense divinity, Clemens then called on Satan to abdicate" (603). All the guilt and anger of Clemens' painful personal life could be channelled away; DeVoto observes in "The Symbols of Despair" that "He could end his contention with the vengeful God and put away remorse forever by reducing all contention, vengeance, pain, degradation, guilt, sin, and panic to a lonely dream" (Tuckey, ed., *Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" and the Critics* 108).

Other critics have found the ending more optimistic, even existentially profound. Pascal Covici, Jr. writes, "The world, then, is a gigantic hoax--it pretends to exist, but it doesn't. If man can bring himself to refrain from taking the world seriously, if, in other words, he can laugh at it and at its manifestations, then he is free" (241). Everett Emerson takes a more psychological approach, apparently drawing on Jungian numerology: "What is not clear but seems to be implied is that No. 44 is a symbol of the whole self, both conscious and unconscious, and that his purpose is to help August Feldner, an ordinary mortal, discover powers that mankind has neglected" (250). At the end of *No. 44*, August must in effect give up the whole world

in order to gain mastery of his own soul. But implicit in this bargain is the power, as an archetypal artist, to create new worlds--"other dreams, and better." Only the delusion is really ended, the delusion of taking the world too seriously.

Like Melville, Twain was a master ironist; both authors clearly perceive that an ironic universe is incompatible with a providential order. God must instead be a Jester like the author himself, but without the saving grace of compassion; Michelson has compared this God with Twain's most famous hero: "Twain was himself a notorious game-player and practical joker . . . and very early on he had comprehended that any God who would bother with the petty affairs of mankind must do so as a cosmic Tom Sawyer, an all-powerful Player who amuses Himself recklessly at the world's expense" (45). A mediocre philosopher at best, Twain never maintains the equilibrium of Melville, but what he lacks in philosophical depth he more than makes up in emotional force and satiric thrust. In numerous prose fragments and private letters we see a Twain deeply concerned with the problem of evil, searching for an artistic solution to the overwhelming horror of human existence. When calling God to account for his crimes is no longer sufficient, Twain, in the persona of August Feldner, takes over and simply imagines his enemy away. As a last resort, the late Twain solipsistically usurps the role of

God, anticipating the provisional cosmos of James Branch Cabell in his final reduction of reality to a dark and mysterious dream. What we perceive as reality is in fact capricious, dream-like, and arbitrary; it is also, as Twain's last works prove, infinitely rich and exciting. By entering wholeheartedly into the game, we attain the privileged vantage of the Gamemaster.

Chapter 3

Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, and James Branch Cabell: The Way of Irony

The careers of Herman Melville and Mark Twain exhibit complex but definite development toward late phases characterized by shifting ironies and dream-like detachment. Melville journeys far, over devious paths, between *Typee* and *The Confidence-Man*, and Twain travels an equally long and tortuous route between *Innocents Abroad* and *The Mysterious Stranger*. But Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, and James Branch Cabell created bodies of work which are of a piece, iconic rather than epic. Crane's writing career was too brief to manifest much development; Bierce and Cabell lived long and wrote widely, but their major works are representative of their total careers in a way that *Moby-Dick* and *Huck Finn* are not. These writers begin at the detached, ironic level where Melville and Twain end, in a world where nothing is as it seems. Bierce, Crane, and Cabell all attack conventional notions of religion, but unlike their predecessors, they *begin* with the supposition that life resembles a joke, and that any god must be an ironic humorist like themselves.

Black humor is the standard mode of Twain's younger contemporaries. The witty cynicism of Bierce's short

stories and *Devil's Dictionary* illuminates a world where all are victims of an incomprehensible and cruel joke. Crane's more realistic fiction only masks with plausibility an equally nightmarish situation, and his poetry explicitly attacks the Puritan God, replacing Him with a deity both uncaring and incompetent. Dickinson found an early disciple in Crane, who heard her poems read aloud by Howells (Beer 97) and drew on them in creating his own idiosyncratic verses. While man's longing for conviction and assurance remains, Crane's best-known lyric explains the truth of the matter:

> A man said to the universe:
> "Sir, I exist!"
> "However," replied the universe,
> "The fact has not created in me
> A sense of obligation."
>
> (*Prose and Poetry* 1335)

Both Crane and Bierce are conscious and undisguised rebels against the values of their society. They begin and end as ironists, sometimes comic but more usually tragic and macabre. Cabell, however, more subtly attacks the genteel tradition from within. Cabell is a black humorist with more emphasis on the humor than the blackness; his comic romances explore a provisional cosmos where all meanings are doubtful

and where that doubtfulness is a cause for celebration.

I.

Ambrose Bierce, who with his disappearance into Mexico in 1914 laid claim to the role of America's Most Mysterious Author (at least until the modern, living disappearance of Thomas Pynchon), delighted in the mysterious throughout his life as well. Born in 1842, Bierce was only seven years younger than Mark Twain, and their careers offer a number of interesting parallels. Like Twain, Bierce vents his feelings most effectively through the medium of humor or satire, and again like Twain, his work has a diabolical interest in the devil and his affairs as a salutory counteragent to the religious fervor of Bierce's countrymen. Bierce lacks the saving humanism of his great contemporary, however, and by concentrating with savage intensity on a bleakly ironic vision becomes the father of black humor in America.

Born into a large, poor family settled in Horse Cave, Ohio, Bierce apparently was at odds with his surroundings from the start. In his Introduction to a recent edition of *The Devil's Dictionary*, Lawrence Suhre describes Bierce's family: "His mother was a strictly religious product of a strictly religious Puritan line. . . . His paternal line, likewise, was openly strict in its Calvinistic and repressive temper" (Suhre vi). Richard O'Connor argues

similarly that "Poverty and religion, both of the extreme variety, were the two chief influences on Ambrose Bierce's childhood" (11). He rebelled against the religion first:

> If there was one circumstance that Ambrose resented more than any other, it was the pervasive religious influence of his home and countryside. . . . The whole Western Reserve, in fact, was gripped by an obsession with religion, with a transplanted Puritanism. Ambrose often had to be switched for sneaking away from home on Sundays . . . (12).

His resistance to home strictures was apparently only exceeded by his aversion to mass religious demonstrations. Bierce had nothing but scorn for what he called the "leathern-lunged elect" (*Satanic Reader* 20).

Like Melville and Twain before him, however, Bierce was strongly influenced by his exposure to Christianity. As Edward Wagenknecht has noted, "his imagination, like Mark Twain's was haunted by the thought of God, angels and the Judgment" (*Stories and Fables of Ambrose Bierce* xvi.). The degree of this early influence appears in the essay entitled "Religion": "This is my ultimate and determining test of right--'What, in the circumstances, would Jesus have done?'--the Jesus of the New Testament, not the Jesus of the

commentators, theologians, priests and parsons" (*CW* 11: 225). Bierce resembles Twain most strongly in his strict moralism, often hidden but always present--a moralism taking Jesus as the Good Example or teacher, not the Son of God. By securing the high moral ground for himself, Bierce can launch his barrages against conventional religion with greater impunity.

Bierce usually regards the religion practiced in his native land as beneath his notice, but occasionally he satirizes its inconsistencies. Like Twain, Bierce particularly enjoys targeting hypocrisy and a spurious belief in Providence. *The Devil's Dictionary* contains his most pithy invective; its affinity with Twain's most rebellious works is apparent in the title. Like the fictional epistler of the *Letters from the Earth*, Bierce's Devil is of the author's party and bears little resemblance to Christian "misrepresentations" of his character. Bierce attacks self-serving notions of Providence by defining "Providential" as "Unexpectedly and conspicuously beneficial to the person so describing it" (*CW* 7: 203). "Air" is defined as "A nutritious substance supplied by a bountiful Providence for the fattening of the poor" (21).

If Providence is so slippery a term that everyone defines it as he will, Christianity as a whole is no better. Bierce defines a "Christian" as "One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited

to the spiritual needs of his neighbor. One who follows the teachings of Christ in so far as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin" (49). Like the Twain of "The War-Prayer," Bierce recognized the massive contradictions at the heart of so-called Christian civilization. In an 1885 essay entitled "Eighteen Centuries of Progress" he blasts the whole notion of civilized enlightenment:

> Stored today in the arsenals of the most enlightened Christian nations are enough bullets to kill every man, woman and child on earth. Let us prate of peace, my brethren--let us exalt our tails, level our ears, drop our jaws and warble a superior quality of pious bosh about the humanizing influence of our blessed religion. Why, there are more Christians killed by Christians in one decade than heathens by heathens in ten. (*Satanic Reader* 24)

No popular fusions of evolution and Christianity for Bierce; Christians had become more efficient at killing, but not more reluctant.

The genteel tradition tended to find a well-ordered, beneficent nature an adequate substitute for an active God, but Bierce countered this supposition with his own vision of a fierce and chaotic universe. In the essay "Natura

Benigna" Bierce observes, "Everywhere death, terror, lamentation and the laughter that is more terrible than tears--the fury and despair of a race hanging on to life by the tips of its fingers!" Out of this desperate struggle for existence man creates religion: "Heaven is a prophecy uttered by the lips of despair, but Hell is an inference from analogy" (*CW* 11: 148-49). Bierce recognizes the psychological need that drives man to create a God, but the God Bierce proposes is anything but a loving Father.

Bierce's perception of the hostile nature of the universe, coupled with his exposure to and antagonism toward repressive Christianity, lead him toward the Jester God as an explanation and scapegoat for creation. His credo is most fully stated in an essay of 1883, "On the Unfriendliness of Creation":

> If there is a God--a proposition that the wise are neither concerned to deny nor hot to affirm--nothing is more obvious than that for some purpose known only to himself he has ordered all the arrangements of this world utterly regardless of the temporal needs of Man. . . . this earth is about the worst that a malevolent ingenuity, an unquickened apathy or an extreme incapacity could have devised. . . . The most habitable portions are scourged by storms, infested by savage animals

> and noxious reptiles and insects, cursed with recurrent plagues, subject to earthquakes, inundations and preachers. A third of the time all are whelmed in darkness, during which a cat is better off than Man.
>
> Man is engaged all his life in bitter warfare with a million energies that conspire to kill him. Let him rest upon his weapons, let him relax his vigilance, let him commit his defence to the Power that has organized the attacking forces, and he is gone. Under the most favorable conditions, and despite the exercise of his wisest prudence, the enemy wears him out; he tumbles wearily into his grave, and above his battered carcass some smirking preacher iterates the offensive platitudes to which the dead man's every experience has appended the comment, *Quid est absurdum.* (*Satanic Reader* 15-16)

Except for the Latin epitaph, this passage could easily have been written by Twain in his later years.

At times, Bierce sounds like a determinist, echoing the Twain of *What is Man?*, but Bierce's determinism is charged with theism. "One of the Missing" parodies what Twain called a "personal god," a Power who meticulously guides and directs lives only to achieve a cruel and pathetic end. In

this tale of the Civil War a young private is sent out on a reconnaissance mission:

> But it was decreed from the beginning of time that Private Searing was not to murder anybody that bright summer morning, nor was the Confederate retreat to be announced by him. . . . Some twenty-five years previously the Power charged with the execution of the work according to the design had provided against that mischance by causing the birth of a certain male child in a little village at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, had carefully reared it, supervised its education, directed its desires into a military channel, and in due time made it an officer of artillery. (*CW* 2: 76)

Searing, who was about to fire at a retreating Confederate column from his vantage point in a deserted building, is instead trapped under the demolished structure when a stray artillery round hits it. In one of Bierce's famous trick endings, Searing goes mad with fear as he is trapped immobile staring down the barrel of his own rifle, cocked and on a hair-trigger at the time of his fall. He works one hand free enough to push a stick against the trigger and end the intolerable suspense--and dies in anticipation of a shot

which never comes, for the gun was discharged in the blast. More interesting than Bierce's psychology of human fear is the irony of Searing's death, killed by an artillery shot which was not even meant for his building, and by a rifle which was not loaded. This sort of cosmic irony--irony that is inherent in the very structure of reality--blended with the abnormal psychology of human beings under extreme stress makes up the typical Bierceian cocktail, repeated in numerous variations in the short stories that make up the bulk of his artistic achievement.

Bierce responds to the enigmatic and dangerous universe around him with dogmatic cynicism, a paradox appropriate to a man so fond of paradox. H. L. Mencken, himself no stranger to the Jester God, found in Bierce a kindred spirit: "So far in this life, indeed, I have encountered no more thorough-going cynic than Bierce was. His disbelief in man went even further than Mark Twain's. . . . Man to him, was the most stupid and ignoble of animals. But at the same time the most amusing. Out of the spectacle of life about him he got an unflagging and Gargantuan joy" (*Chrestomathy* 493-94). It is this joy which creates the remnant of zest even in Bierce's most topical satires, and it is this joy which makes him what O'Connor calls "the first notable exponent of black humor in America" (7). As Bierce's enemy Frank Pixley concluded in a mock epitaph: "He quarreled with God, and found nothing in His creations worthy of the

commendations of Ambrose Bierce" (O'Connor 172). Bierce's conviction of the evil within men must stem in part from the religion of his childhood, but the effrontery with which he challenges God is all his own.

The joy which Mencken detected behind Bierce's cynicism, and which lends a note of humor to all but his grimmest tales, is the joy of an artist determined to interpret the universe as a vast joke, run by the Jester we have already encountered in so many guises. Bierce's fiction is more concerned with situations and gimmicks than with character development, though he often examines abnormal psychology with striking results. Of his mechanical but highly craftsmanlike fiction Edmund Wilson has remarked, "there are no men or women who are interesting as men or women. . . . They figure only as the helpless butts of sadistic practical jokes, and their higher faculties are so little involved that they might almost as well be trapped animals" (*Patriotic Gore* 622). I suspect that Bierce would not argue too strongly with this verdict, but would maintain that all men and women are trapped animals, and interesting for just that reason. As a veteran, Bierce had seen enough of the mischances of war to find the most unlikely occurences probable, especially unfortunate ones, and his stories are filled with nasty coincidences.[1] That these coincidences are sometimes funny as well perfectly matches the philosophy of the Bierce who

writes, "We hold that the true function of wit is not to make one writhe with merriment, but with anguish. . . . Somebody has said that humor was but pathos masquerading. That is our idea of it; it is something to make a man cry" ("The Proper Function of Wit," *Satanic Reader* 24). Humor and wit are not exactly the same thing, but in Bierce they serve the same ends.

As an essayist, Bierce often provides a moral, but it is always an ironically twisted one. His journalism offers a key to his developing sense of the Jester; in a piece from 1898 entitled "A Freak War," Bierce examines the absurdity of the Spanish-American War:

> In the first battle, when a dozen of the enemy's warships and hundreds of their crews were destroyed, not an American was killed. But the pranking gods who composed the piece were not wholly devoid of literary conscience: they mitigated the incredible disparity by so neat a touch of restraint as the wounding of a half-dozen victims by explosion of their own ammunition; the gods thereby securing something of the ludicrous effect natural to one's hoisting with one's own petard." (*Skepticism and Dissent* 91-92)

The Jester is surely present in the macabre humor of the scene; more interestingly, in attributing a "literary conscience" to his gods, Bierce follows his predecessors in merging the role of the Jester with that of the literary artist. As any reader of Bierce's fiction soon realizes, the most consistent practical joker is Bierce himself.

"The Famous Gilson Bequest" is Bierce's answer to Twain's "Hadleyburg." Gilson, formerly of "New Jerusalem" and now a resident of a Western mining town called Mammon Hill, may or may not be a claim-jumper and a horse thief. At any rate, his actions are ambiguous enough to bring down upon him the wrath of the townspeople, leading to his death at their hands. Before he dies, Gilson leaves his entire estate to his chief accuser, Brentshaw, with the stipulation that anyone able to prove within five years that he had been robbed by Gilson must be recompensed by the estate. Surprisingly, Gilson turns out to have been wealthy, and everyone lays claim to part of the money. Brentshaw is forced into the ironic role of Gilson's fervent defender. The ensuing farce of hypocrisy only confuses the original question of Gilson's guilt, as the contesting parties suborn witnesses and alter evidence. The battles over Gilson's money go on seemingly without end, until Brentshaw has exhausted all his funds in the defense. Gilson's bequest corrupts not only Brentshaw, but the entire community; at the end of the five years "the sun went down upon a region

in which the moral sense was dead, the social conscience callous, the intellectual capacity dwarfed, enfeebled, and confused!" (*CW* 2: 275).

Like "Hadleyburg," "The Famous Gilson Bequest" initially resembles a moral fable, but Bierce's irony extends beyond portraying the infinite corruptibility of man. During his years of fighting for Gilson's wealth, Brentshaw becomes a fanatic in the faith which he embraces out of self-interest. Bierce explicitly likens Brentshaw's faith to a religious conversion: Gilson's innocence "had become to him a sort of religious faith. It seemed to him the one great central and basic truth of life--the sole serene verity in a world of lies" (277). His self-delusion is pathetic, especially in light of his final vision of Gilson as a larcenous ghost, sifting the dust of his graveyard companions for gold. Brentshaw dies when faced with this disillusioning scene, and the narrator comments drily, "Perhaps it was a solemn farce enacted by pranking existences that throng the shadows lying along the border of another world" (280). Man as a victim of cosmic pranksters is one of Bierce's more optimistic conclusions.

"Gilson" is a sardonically humorous story, but Bierce's typical efforts turn on more macabre jests. When he is completely serious, a rare occurance, the irony becomes painful. In "A Son of the Gods" a young officer sacrifices himself to prevent the loss of an entire skirmishing party.

While the officer lies dying, his troops charge out into an exposed field in a rage, only to be massacred. The irony is so overwhelming that Bierce looks for someone to blame: "Ah, those many, many needless dead! That great soul whose beautiful body is lying over yonder, so conspicuous against the sere hillside--could it not have been spared the bitter consciousness of a vain devotion? Would one exception have marred too much the pitiless perfection of the divine, eternal plan?" (*CW* 2: 70). "A Son of the Gods" is a more than usually moving example of Bierce's own "pitiless perfection"; the gods have no more compunction about destroying one of their sons than an author about a character.

The horrible twist at the end of "A Son of the Gods" is at least impersonal, part of some vast plan in which man is insignificant. Elsewhere Bierce employs surprise endings to play more intimate practical jokes. In "A Horseman in the Sky" a Union soldier on lookout is forced both by military duty and family honor to kill an enemy on horseback outlined atop a cliff surveying the Union camp. He fires at the horse--both horse and rider plunge over the cliff--and reluctantly explains the circumstance to his sergeant:

> "I order you to report. Was there anybody on the horse?

"Yes."

"Well?"

"My father."

The sergeant rose to his feet and walked away. "Good God!" he said. (*CW* 2: 26)

Since dialogue in Bierce seldom serves merely naturalistic purposes, the sergeant's final comment may well be intended as a crowning irony; *is* God conceivably good in light of such events?

More bitter still is the small masterpiece, "Chickamauga." The lost child who mysteriously sleeps through a great battle and afterwards encounters a strangely silent procession of horribly wounded men is an emblem for all of man's vaunted capacity for innocence. Faced with the horror of men with their jaws shot off, staggering away to die, the child can only look on uncomprehending, even trying to ride on the back of one of the mutilated survivors. Indeed, because the men are pale and blood-streaked, the boy is reminded of "the painted clown whom he had seen last summer in the circus, and he laughed as he watched them." The men themselves are "heedless as he of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity" (*CW* 2: 51-52). Comedy depends on point of view.

Only when faced with a personally meaningful disaster does the child react normally. At the head of his grotesque

procession he finds himself back at home, a home now in flames, where his mother lies dead, her head blasted open by a shell. Only then does he comprehend that something terrible has happened and send up a "series of inarticulate and indescribable cries . . . a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil." Bierce explains the boy's heretofore mysterious behavior in the devastating comment: "The child was a deaf mute" (57). The mystery of the story is made clear, but its haunting power increases with our new knowledge. The gory description of the wounded soldiers, a phenomenon which the child had effortlessly subsumed into its play world, focusses into the icon of the dead mother, where universal chaos and death become personal and immediate. There is no real innocence in "Chickamauga"--the child actually adds to the torment of the wounded by attempting to play with them--there is only uncomprehension, the blankness of the human mind before a spectacle too overwhelmingly horrific to be grasped in more than its personal aspects. We are all deaf to the horror which surrounds us, mute to voice our agony.

After the nightmare of "Chickamauga" it is difficult to imagine Bierce going any further in his explication of the Jest which awaits us all. His only recourse is to turn to the imagery of nightmares, following Twain into the depths of human consciousness and the surreal, irrational world of dreams which offers an analogue and an alternative to a

world ruled by the Jester God.

Bierce's fascination with dreams runs deep; although his career shows no clear chronological development, the dream motif acts throughout as an alternative to the hyper-realism of his best war stories. The Bierce who defined "Existence" as "A transient, horrible, fantastic dream, / Wherein is nothing yet all things do seem . . ." (*CW* 7: 93) has clearly discovered one way to defuse his awareness of the ironies of existence. Many of Bierce's stories that are not directly concerned with dreams hinge on dream-like alterations of perception. Cathy Davidson argues that Bierce is "an author who set out to weigh the limitations of conventional views of reality" (*Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce* 2); certainly a number of his stories turn on the protagonist's misperception of reality. The soldier in "One of the Missing" literally dies of fear. Other Bierce tales tell of men who die from fear of a corpse, a ghost, or even a stuffed snake. In every case the danger is imagined, but when imagination has the power to kill, wherein is it less real than reality?

The most famous example of Bierce's delight in playing with perceptions appears in "An Occurence at Owl Creek Bridge," where the imagination offers life instead of inducing death. The now familiar trick ending, where Peyton Farquhar hangs dead from the bridge after imagining an elaborate escape from a broken rope and the bullets of his

hanging party, is a terrible trick on both the reader and Peyton, who is allowed to imagine his entire escape right up to the point of safety but not beyond. Nowhere is Bierce a more clearly hostile Jester, delighting in his superiority over the reader and aggressively bruising our sensibilities. Dream and reality merge as the sensations of painful death meld into the events of the imagined flight until it is difficult to say what is most striking about the story--the shocking reality of the ending, or the power of Peyton's imagination, which at least allows him a heroic escape instead of merely an ignominious hanging.

Bierce plays even more involved tricks on the reader's perceptions in "The Death of Halpin Frayser," which might be regarded as his condensed version of both *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. In this half-horror tale, half-detective story, reality and dream are almost impossible to separate, and Bierce delights in strewing our path with red herrings. Halpin is apparently killed by the unnaturally animated body of his dead mother, to whose unknown grave he has mysteriously been drawn. But perhaps he only dreams the struggle in which the zombie kills him, for he has lain down to sleep, and in his dream he walks through a malignant, blood-dewed landscape, apparently "in expiation of some crime which, though conscious of his guilt, he could not rightly remember" (*CW* 3: 17). As he walks he is haunted by "a soulless, heartless, and unjoyous laugh, like that of the

loon," emanating from "some supernatural malevolence" (19). The narrator helpfully argues, "what mortal can cope with a creature of his dream? The imagination creating the enemy is already vanquished" (29). Perhaps this is another Bierce story in which a man falls victim to his own imagination. Yet a third possibility exists, however; an insane killer, the murderer of Halpin's mother, stalks the woods where Halpin dies, so perhaps this is simply a murder mystery. The fact that commentators have argued for all these options and more should alert us to the likelihood that Bierce is dealing in the currency of the Confidence-Man. The story contains clues that cannot be explained by any of these explanations, taken individually. Davidson argues that "Instead of gaps, we have a text overloaded with meaning" (113), and links the Bierce of "Halpin Frayser" with later writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar. Frayser dies, and explanations proliferate endlessly.

William Bysshe Stein, whose essay "Bierce's 'The Death of Halpin Frayser': The Poetics of Gothic Consciousness" offers the best full-length explication of the story, argues that the author "deliberately short-circuits any attempt on the part of the reader to set up a consistent train of associations" (Davidson, ed., *Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce* 219). Stein sees the murder-mystery aspect of the story as one of many false leads, and argues that "If there is a criminal at large, he is for Bierce the creator of the

mind of man: the trickster God (Descartes' *Dieu trompeur*) who delights in betraying every aspiration for truth or certitude that the creatures of His creation harbor in their thoughtless thought" (227). The final horrifying laugh that rings out over the murder scene and its incompetent detectives is another manifestation of this trickster: it is

> a low, deliberate, soulless laugh, which had no more of joy than that of a hyena night-prowling in the desert; a laugh that rose by slow gradation, louder and louder, more distinct and terrible, until it seemed barely outside the narrow circle of their vision, a laugh so unnatural, so unhuman, so devilish, that it filled those hardy man-hunters with a sense of dread unspeakable! (43)

As the laugh dies away to "a measureless remove" (43) there can be no doubt that Halpin Frayser has been visited by Ishmael's hyena.

Bierce's dream-imagery achieves its apotheosis in his little-known poetry. "A Vision of Doom," his most ambitious work in verse, chronicles a shadow of a dream, beheld by a ghost--surely as distanced from reality as possible. The speaker, a "ghost forlorn," listens to an equally disembodied voice:

What thou beholdest is as void as thou:
The shadow of a poet's dream--himself
As thou, his soul as thine, long dead,
But not like thou outlasted by its shade.
His dreams alone survive eternity
As pictures in the unsubstantial void.
Excepting thee and me (and we because
The poet wove us in his thought), remains
Of nature and the universe no part
Nor vestige but the poet's dreams . . .
. . .
. . . So long ago
That God and all the angels since have died
That poet lived . . .

(*CW* 5: 47-49)

At the end of the poem the speaker "wept, and woke, and cried aloud to God!" (49), but no answer is forthcoming. In this prophecy of the doom of San Francisco, Bierce takes a great deal of trouble to distance the scene from any objective reality. The speaker's vision is a more pathetic and impotent version of Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*. August gets to be a real God or demiurge, but Bierce's speaker is only a shadow beholding shadows. Even the dreamer is gone, and only his creatures remain.

Ambrose Bierce's literary output in prose and poetry, exclusive of the vast quantities of merely topical satires and journalistic exercises which are now of interest only to specialists, portrays a world filled with traps; ironic, macabre endings; and phantasmagoric, dream-like perceptions. His work as a whole merges the Jester God with a dreamscape of his own devising. Despite the efforts of those who would pin Bierce down as a naturalist, or a writer of mere shock-fiction, Bierce's cosmos is neither simply deterministic nor clearly supernatural; there is always more to the scene than meets the eye. In perhaps his most successful poem, the striking tercet "Creation," Bierce unites his dominant themes into a triumphant whole:

> God dreamed--the suns sprang flaming into place,
> And sailing worlds with many a venturous race!
> He woke--His smile alone illumined space.
>
> (*CW* 4: 374)

God creates, or merely dreams the universe; but the glory of "many a venturous race" is snuffed out as soon as He awakes. The poem invites us to ask, first, whether creation is real at all, or merely a dream like August's in *The Mysterious Stranger*. After God awakens, there is the question of that ambiguous smile; in light of Bierce's career that smile can hardly be benevolent or serene; it is the lingering

amusement from a jest of which we are all the butts. In the end, the universe becomes just the memory of a pointless dream-joke.

II.

Stephen Crane appears to be much more of a realist than Bierce, and his works show more concern for ordinary modes of character development and realistic dialogue and action. But Crane has never fit comfortably into any critical category: he has been called a naturalist, a realist, an impressionist, even something of a modernist or existentialist. Like Bierce, Crane is at his best when employing a sort of heightened realism, rich in allusion and ambiguous symbolism. In his best works--*The Red Badge of Courage*, "The Monster," "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel," and a number of the poems--the cosmos itself plays a role in the action as antagonist and onlooker. Crane's realism masks a nightmarish universe which is as grimly ironic as anything in Bierce. Crane's sympathy for his fictional creations makes them seem more than mere puppets, and the Jester God lurking behind the scenes no longer seems aptly mirrored by the author--all of which is to say that the strings leading to puppet-master Crane are less obtrusive than in the late Twain or Bierce. As Daniel Hoffman argues in his study of Crane's poetry, "Bierce remains the technician of ironic statement, a victim of his own

dehumanized cynicism. Crane, a true idealist, is master of Bierce's technique without becoming the slave of his themes" (*The Poetry of Stephen Crane* 203-4).

Crane's heros frequently encounter meaningless death, their own or another's, and only his insistence on an ironic stance redeems their fates from being blackly nihilistic. Crane's irony is effective partly because it is self-directed; Bierce's bitter corruscations of wit could never have produced a poem like the one beginning "I stood upon a high place," where the speaker looks down on a scene of devils "carousing in sin." One of the grinning demons looks up at his observer and cries "Comrade! Brother!" (*Prose and Poetry* 1301). Crane recognizes his unity with the battered characters he creates in a way which lends poignancy to their plights and adds dignity to his quest to explain the joke of their existence.

As the rebellious scion of an intensely religious family, Crane follows what should by now be a familiar paradigm. While the fanaticism of Crane's parents may have been exaggerated by some commentators, we know that his father, Jonathan Crane, was a Presbyterian-turned-Methodist minister, and Crane observed of his mother: "My mother was a very religious woman but I don't think that she was as narrow as most of her friends or her family--" (Beer 49). Crane's 1968 biographer, R. W. Stallman, makes much of Crane's religious rebellion: "Youngster Stephen heard much

about the fiery pit and a wrathful Jehova not only from his father, but also from his mother whom he described as a single-minded woman who 'lived in and for religion'" (5). There can be little doubt that Crane found his parents' views difficult to swallow; as he told an interviewer in 1899, "when I was thirteen or about that, my brother Will told me not to believe in Hell after my uncle had been boring me about the lake of fire and the rest of the sideshows" (Berryman, "Stephen Crane: The Red Badge of Courage," in Gullason, ed. 367).

The most extreme view of Crane's apostasy is taken by Chester Wolford in his recent study of Crane's fiction. Wolford insists on the Puritan connection: "Crane pursued truth as only an American puritan could, but his search was actively anti-Christian" (Wolford xiv). Wolford then notes that Crane was also in rebellion against the genteel tradition--"Protestantism and patriotism blended into Americanism in the second half of the nineteenth century and for Crane became identified with and personified by 'middle-aged ladies of the most aggressive respectability'" (2)--and concludes that "Crane was always a nihilist" (21). This conclusion is woefully inadequate to the complexity of Crane's response to the strongest part of his background. Crane's most violent attacks on the Christian conception of God are considerably less shocking than Twain's, for like every proponent of the Jester, Crane harbors at some level a

longing for God which even the most absurd aspects of traditional religion cannot destroy.

Crane's most clearly anti-religious works are his first. Especially in *Maggie*, religion provides an ironic counterpoint to reality. In the violent, mechanistic world of *Maggie*, brutality of environment and hypocrisy in religion combine to predetermine a tragic outcome. The inhabitants of Crane's bowery survive on illusion, as in Maggie's awed survey of Pete the bartender, clearly a rather mangy speciman of humanity: "Maggie perceived that here was the ideal man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for far-away lands where the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover" (*Bowery Tales* 26). Maggie admires the semblance of rebellion: "To her the earth was composed of hardships and insults. She felt instant admiration for a man who openly defied it" (28). Against Maggie's romantic illusions Crane sets the grotesque self-deluding Christian hypocrisy of her mother, a horror of a woman who drives Maggie out onto the streets, and in a ghastly parody of piety "forgives" her after she is dead.

In this world religion is simply meaningless, a bit of social conformity like that of the title character in Crane's sketch "Dan Emmonds." Shipwrecked among possibly hostile natives, Dan is willing to conform: "I am a man of great liberality in religious matters, and am willing to

worship anything from fire and the sun to a large stone kitten if it will be a comfort to the people of the country" (*Complete Short Stories and Sketches* 65). Only Crane's satiric assault on the figures that conspire to ruin Maggie saves the novel from bleak determinism. Irony serves the double role of undercutting conventional notions of reality while setting up a counter-order of its own.

Several of Crane's strange, elliptical poems shed a wavering light on his early hostility to religion. The futility of religious hopes in the life of the Bowery finds expression in a short lyric:

> Two or three angels
> Came near to the earth
> They saw a fat church.
> Little black streams of people
> Came and went in continually.
> And the angels were puzzled
> To know why the people went thus,
> And why they stayed so long within.
>
> (*Prose and Poetry* 1309-10)

Even more succinctly, Crane writes: "You tell me this is God? / I tell you this is a printed list, / A burning candle and an ass." (*Prose and Poetry* 1329). In these works Crane does not attempt to define a philosophy or theology; he

merely satirizes and condemns traditional views. He does not deny the existence of God, but he refuses to place Him in a church or traditional text.

When Crane does offer an interpretation of the events of his fiction, he often follows Bierce in defining the action in terms of a joke and a victim. Crane needs a scapegoat for his tragedies, an audience for his satires, or at least a cosmic observer on whom the human comedy will not be entirely lost. Some of his less perceptive characters agonize over the possibility of being objects of a jest--Coleman, the rather humorless hero of *Active Service*, worries that he may be "laughable" to "the gods of the game" (171)--but in his short fiction Crane frequently plays with the idea that everything boils down to a joke. Berryman quotes Crane as having once said "I cannot be shown that God bends upon us any definable stare, and his laughter would be bully to hear out in nothingness" ("Stephen Crane: The Red Badge of Courage," in Gullason, Ed., 368). Even a laugh is preferable to indifference.

Jokes appear in abundance in Crane's stories set in the fictitious town of Whilomville, where humor is usually a saving grace, though the laughter can turn bitter at any time. Crane appears at his most jovial in tales like "Lynx-Hunting," where three small boys embark with a gun on a self-important hunt for a lynx. Instead, they accidentally shoot a cow. The scene in which they are

caught has a kind of apocalyptic splendor: "even as they fled in horror, a gigantic Swedish farmhand came from the heavens and fell upon them shrieking in eerie triumph" (*Tales of Whilomville* 142). The monstrous Swede is deliberately likened to an avenging angel, sent down from the "heavens" to wreak vengeance, and we are prepared for a scene of Old Testament wrath. But instead the Swede and his master are rendered helpless by the humor of the situation; when Jimmie Trescott offers a desparate explanation for his action, "I thought she was a lynx," we find that his opponents "at once lay down in the grass and laughed themselves helpless" (143). For once, then, the joke is just a joke. For the children, being laughed at is better than the beating they were expecting.

Only in "The Monster" does real tragedy invade Whilomville; here indeed the outer chaos intrudes on small town life with indelible results. Henry Johnson, his face burned away by corrosive chemicals and disintegrating fire, stands as a moral test for everyone in the town, a test few can pass. Wolford argues that Johnson is "a metaphor for chaos" (92); none can look on him unchanged. To paraphrase Eliot, after such knowledge, what explanation will suffice? In Crane's one fully successful novel and in his best short fiction, we see him finding his best solution in irony.

Often Crane's characters are aware of an underlying principle of irony in their lives, just as Ishmael

recognizes a great Joke at work in *Moby-Dick*. When Henry Fleming casts off his illusions in *The Red Badge of Courage* it is to become an ironist.[2] Returning in the direction of the battle he had fled in cowardice, Henry imaginatively converts his personal tragedy into a cosmic comedy: "He saw that it was an ironical thing for him to be running thus toward that which he had been at such pains to avoid" (49). As he reflects further he sees "a sort of humor in the point of view of himself and his fellows during the late encounter. They had taken themselves and the enemy very seriously and had imagined that they were deciding the war" (49-50). Henry achieves a moment of equilibrium here, near the center of the book, before embracing a counter-illusion of himself as seasoned and cynical veteran. Henry Fleming is no philosopher; his moment of insight does not last. It does, however, seem to change him into a better man and a better soldier. He encounters chaos in the form of the monster of war, and is humbled by his own insignificance.

Henry Fleming does not feel permanently insignificant; no one can and continue to act effectively in the world. The universe which confronts him is profoundly unintelligible, and the novel is curiously free of religious practice or speculation on his part. Only at the center of the novel stands the death of Jim Conklin, a Christ figure who makes sense only as a devastating parody of Christ. Olav Fryckstedt describes the Conklin episode as a death

which "seems rather to mock religion and reduce its teachings to nonsense; it is religion gone mad" (Bassan, ed., *Stephen Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays* 145). Crane carefully builds up a "ritelike" atmosphere around Conklin's death, but it is as "a devotee of a mad religion, blood-sucking, muscle-wrenching, bone-crushing" (57); Conklin offers no lesson, no inspiration, and no hope; he merely wants a quiet place to die. Crane tempts us to impart some universal meaning to Conklin's death, but Crane realizes better than anyone that such a meaning can only be personal and subjective, a stay against the confusion that buzzes and blooms around Henry Fleming and his fellow soldiers.

If Crane's fiction is in large part about man's illusions, he remains reticent about describing what lies behind those ilusions. One of his lyrics asks that question:

> If I should cast off this tattered coat,
> And go free into the mighty sky;
> If I should find nothing there
> But a vast blue,
> Echoless, ignorant,--
> What then?
>
> (*Prose and Poetry* 1323)

Casting off the coat of illusions is the one thing man cannot do, and Crane never answers that final question. Man must always construct order; even the echo of solipsism is better than silence. In "A man said to the universe" the man receives perhaps not the answer he would like, but at least the universe answers back.

In "The Open Boat," Crane's characters insist on obtaining answers from the universe. Crane's tale of four men adrift on a cruel ocean ranks with "The Blue Hotel" as his most ambitious attempt to expose the monstrous ironies underlying human illusions of safety and self-importance. Against the perils of a small boat on a rough sea Crane sets a frail brotherhood of men, seeking to come to terms with a hostile cosmos that threatens to snuff out their insignificant lives at any moment.

The sufferers in the open boat feel wronged by the universe, observing that "These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall" (*Tales of Adventure* 68). The psychological state of being wronged is infinitely preferable to insignificance, and it is reinforced when they near land and their plight becomes ironic as well as tragic. They ask with humorous egoism,

> If I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed

> to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? . . . If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention. If she has decided to drown me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble. The whole affair is absurd. (77)

The mad sea gods and the personified, incompetent Fate are variations on the theme of the Jester. When reality intrudes itself upon human consciousness as ironic, it is natural to search for the Ironist. The men in the boat have a view of the "absurd" which resembles existentialism, especially when the captain rouses himself from despair to chuckle, "in a way that expressed humor, contempt, tragedy, all in one" (71), but they demand an absurdist author to blame for their woes. In one sense, of course, Crane is that author, but only as an imitator of a hypothetical divine Author.

The invocation of the seven mad gods reappears twice more, with increasing desperation, while the men in the boat progress from despair to hostility. As the narrator observes,

> When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. . . . he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification . . . (84-85)

The answer such a man receives is worse than that of Crane's poetic questioner of the universe: "A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation" (85). The sufferers in the open boat demand a personification which they can blame for their woes, but the universe resists their transparent attempt at self-definition.

James Colvert comments on the sea change Crane's protagonists undergo: "To the men in the boat the universe seems to have shrunk to the horizon and to have concentrated within its narrow limits all the malignant powers of creation; but the longer view of the narrator reveals this as a delusion born in the men's egoistic assumption that they occupy a central position in Nature's hostile regard" (200). Thus the correspondent (Crane's fictional counterpart) sees their struggle as "the plight of the ants" and realizes that nature is not even cruel, "she was

indifferent, flatly indifferent" (88). However, even at this point the correspondent continues to personify nature as "her"; there is still an antagonist, however distant and detached. After their ordeal, the three survivors feel that they can be the sea's "interpreters" (92); presumably the story itself is such an interpretation. But the sea remains uninterpretable; only the subjective reactions of the men who personify her can be chronicled. Their subtle brotherhood and courage in the face of adversity are the backbone of the story. Although the oiler, perhaps the best of them, lies dead on the sand at the end, Crane's praise for their stoic endurance dominates the tale.

Accusing nature of indifference is not quite the same thing as nihilism. Crane still demands at least a hypothetical temple at which to cast his bricks. Thus in a poem which serves as a sort of gloss on "The Open Boat," Crane returns to the refrain "God is cold" ("A man adrift on a slim spar," *Prose and Poetry* 1348). Hardly a spark of defiance remains, but surely an implied accusation lingers in that plaintive cry.

Man is adrift in Crane's cosmos, exposed to the hostility and vagaries of nature, unsure of his place in a universe which may be actively hostile, and which is certainly filled with ironic traps for the unwary. In such a situation, it is no wonder that so many of Crane's protagonists are afraid; fear haunts his soldiers, children,

and castaways. Sometimes the fear turns out to be mistaken or misplaced, as in the Whilomville stories; often it is modified or displaced by an educated awareness of the irony lurking behind the most frightful situations. James Dickey has noted this seeming contradiction in Crane: "The cosmos is filled with the most stupifying fear about which, inexplicably, there is also something funny" (vii). Even "The Open Boat" has a dash of this grim humor in its repeated invocation of the seven mad gods. But Crane's most ambitious and successful fusion of the elements of horror and humor occurs in the strangest of his stories, "The Blue Hotel."

In "The Blue Hotel" Crane approaches modern absurdist drama. A self-deluded Swede arrives in Fort Romper, Nebraska expecting to find the wild frontier of pulp fiction; instead he finds a town concerned with eastern respectability. The ironic story of how the Swede nevertheless manages to turn the town into an image of the dangerous Old West raises unending questions. The atmosphere in which the tale takes place is pure Crane: a garish hotel, ambiguously resembling both an old-time Western saloon and a modern hostelry, surrounded by a howling blizzard. The fury of nature rages around the glowing stove of civilization, but human society turns out to harbor violence equal to anything outside.

Ironies upon ironies interplay in Crane's western tragicomedy. The Swede at first manages to offend everyone because he is terrified and thinks them all a gang of outlaws; when he realizes this is not the case and goes through the initiation of drinking Scully's whiskey, he offends them further by assuming they are all cowards and playing the role of a western bravo. When he accuses Scully's son Johnnie of cheating at cards and they fight it out in the snow, he assumes the role of the western hero who must defeat the card sharp. At first it appears that the Swede has indeed managed to bring his confused perceptions into coherent order, for out of the "confused mingling" of the fight (*Tales of Adventure* 160) he emerges victorious, confirmed in his new high opinion of himself.

However, all of the Swede's victories are heavily undercut; the reader, not knowing the truth of the Swede's accusation of cheating, tends to be on the side of Johnnie. Even the Swede's trek from the hotel to a saloon, accomplished in the teeth of the storm, has an ironic twist:

> One viewed the existence of men then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smote, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One

> was a coxcomb not to die in it. However, the Swede found a saloon. (165)

The humorous turn of that last sentence is worthy of Twain. Is the universe not really as ghastly as Crane paints it, or is the Swede merely a survivor by chance, lured on to a still more ironic fate? Crane retracts the terror imagery only to allow it to creep forward again in new ways. Apparently the Swede's estimation of himself as a western hero is no more accurate than his initial fear, for when he rudely attempts to force an eminently civilized and modern gambler to drink with him, the gambler proves to be dangerous after all. A knife flashes forth, and "a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon" (168-69). The ironic anticlimax of this abrupt ending is reinforced by the fact that the Swede has shown no virtue or wisdom, and precious little power.

We might interpret the death of the Swede as proof that the West is really dangerous after all, beneath its facade of civilization. Crane throws in yet another twist, however, in the "dreadful legend" atop the saloon cash register before the Swede's dead stare: "This registers the amount of your purchase" (169).[3] The Swede has indeed purchased his own death; he has found the West he came looking for. In fact, he has diligently worked to produce

that West when he could not at first locate it. We might even wonder if he dies "content," like the youth in Crane's poem "A youth in apparel that glittered" (*Prose and Poetry* 1307), having found what he searched for. Crane's heros' impose their illusions on their environment in an attempt to make it understandable; the Swede's illusion turns out to be deadly.

Even the power of illusion seems insufficient to explain everything that happens in "The Blue Hotel." The Easterner, who throughout has been an indifferent spectator to the proceedings (his name is Mr. Blanc, connoting at once blankness and the indifferent whiteness of the blizzard), returns in an epilogue to supply one key fact and a "fog of mysterious theory" (170). Apparently Johnnie really was cheating in that card game which started the Swede down the path to his destruction. The Easterner claims that they are all to blame for the murder of the Swede, part of a "collaboration," a "human movement" (170). Whether we believe this or not (the cowboy refuses to), we must again realize that the Swede's initial estimate of the West was accurate; he was cheated by a card sharp and killed by a gambler. William Bysshe Stein, in "Stephen Crane's *Homo Absurdus*," argues that "In this confusion of purposes no one, not even the Easterner, can define the nature of the so-called sin of collaboration. His deterministic ethic is a dream of order in a reality ruled by the forces of chaos"

(Gullason, ed., *Stephen Crane's Career* 234). The Easterner's theories, like the Swede's, are only provisional ways of ordering a universe where causation itself is only a theory. "The Blue Hotel" invites and rewards so many contrary opinions that it takes its place alongside *The Confidence-Man* and Bierce's "Halpin Frayser" as a tale of confusion, filled with red herrings and contradictory clues. What holds this unstable mass together is the irony of a joke that is more than a joke, a joke that is also the sum of human tragedy.

The strained laughter of man confronting ultimate chaos rings through Crane's poems as well. Most critics have chosen to emphasize the bleakly naturalistic or anti-religious aspects of Crane's career, especially in the poems. Edwin H. Cady claims that Crane has "a tragic vision more Calvinistic, in its perceptions of the blasphemy as well as the necessity of man's conceit, than naturalistic. He guessed at an ultimate war with God" (99). Cady notes that Crane's writings suggest that "God, intentionally or not, is playing games with us. The suggestion of King Lear is not out of keeping" (98-99). Hoffman posits a movement from a war on God to an affirmation of "the interior pitying God" (*The Poetry of Stephen Crane* 48), from Crane's mother's narrow God to his father's more liberal theology.[4] However, Crane's essential humor has not gone unremarked. Maurice Bassan observes of the poems, "A spirit of macabre comedy

plays over the surreal desert and mountain scenes, with their pitiful, absurd, doomed figures engaged in dramatic confrontations with a terrible Fate" (Introduction 4). The link between Crane's poetry and prose lies in this black comedy, in the ironic interplay between illusion and reality.

The contradictions in Crane's poems are not unlike Twain's confusion over just what sort of God he was attacking, and whether any God existed to attack. Crane's poems frequently invoke the Old Testament God in scorn, but there are hints of a more sympathetic, personal deity, especially in the poems "The livid lightnings flashed in the clouds" and "A man went before a strange god,--" (*Prose and Poetry* 1312, 1317). Several of Crane's best-known lyrics merely spout defiance at a tyrannical Jehovah. A good example is XII from *The Black Riders*, with its epigraph, "And the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the heads of the children, even unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me":

> Well then, I hate Thee, unrighteous picture;
> Wicked image, I hate thee;
> So, strike with Thy vengeance
> The heads of those little men
> Who come blindly.

It will be a brave thing.

(*Prose and Poetry* 1302)

Crane issues a similar challenge in the poem which begins "Blustering god," with its refrain "I fear you not" (*Prose and Poetry* 1318). This cowardly, puffing braggart of a god makes an easy target. The effect of Crane's lyrics taken as a whole, however, is not one of progression or consistency, but of a multitude of gods, all cancelling one another out.

Out of the haze of conflicting theories embodied in the poems emerges at last only a sense of Crane's ever-present irony, and again the Jester God looms as a unifying theme. Crane is a reticent author, and the Jester God is usually an implied presence rather than an active character. However, a group of poems confirms the Jester's lurking presence; these poems resonate strangely with Crane's other works and with those of Melville, Twain, and Bierce.

Several of these lyrics are simply ironic. One seems to be about the unattainability of any mystical vision:

There was set before me a mighty hill,
And long days I climbed
Through regions of snow.
When I had before me the summit-view,
It seemed that my labor

Had been to see gardens
Lying at impossible distances.
(1307)

The poem is reminiscent of Crane's story, "The Mesmeric Mountain." In that tale, one of Crane's "little men" feels oppressed by a mountain which seems to be following him: "there's eyes in this mountain! I feel 'em! Eyes!" (*Tales, Sketches, and Reports* 271). The little man conquers his fear by climbing the mountain and exulting over it, but in the poem climbing only leads to confusion and frustration. The enemy has become more distant and difficult to approach. James Colvert, in "Stephen Crane's Magic Mountain," discusses the mountain as a recurring image in Crane's work for nature, God, or a mysterious antagonist. Just what the mountain represents is difficult to say: "Is God dead in heaven, the questioning runs, and man alone in a heedless universe? Or is He terribly alive, breathing malice and hatred on helpless little men? Or is He perhaps a kindly God, screened from the view of man?" (Bassan, ed. 94). Crane does not know, but he suspects the worst:

If there is a witness to my little life,
To my throes and struggles,
He sees a fool;

> And it is not fine for gods to menace fools.
>
> (*Prose and Poetry* 1303)

Crane echoes the sentiments of Ahab, who saw man as foolish but still kinder than the malignant gods.

The God who is somehow both menacing and "not fine" is a god fond of ironic retribution. He deludes man only to punish him for being deluded, as in Crane's poem which begins "A spirit sped," where the spirit seeks throughout the universe for God, finding only emptiness and mocking echoes. When at last he cries out in despair "Ah, there is no God!" his punishment is instant:

> A swift hand,
> A sword from the sky,
> Smote him,
> And he was dead.
>
> (1324)

Like the Swede in "The Blue Hotel," the poem's spirit finds what it is looking for only when it no longer wants it, or only when it has solipsistically denied the thing it fears.

A similar ironic fate overtakes the protagonists of another Crane poem:

Many workmen
Built a huge ball of masonry
Upon a mountain-top.
Then they went to the valley below,
And turned to behold their work.
"It is grand," they said;
They loved the thing.

Of a sudden, it moved:
It came upon them swiftly;
It crushed them all to blood.
But some had opportunity to squeal.

(1309)

The workmen crushed by their illusion resemble the Swede, murdered by his own fantasies. In Crane's universe, worshippers may create the thing they worship and still be destroyed by it, just as Bierce's characters may be destroyed by their own dreams.

Crane's Jester God is usually an unseen character, a suspicion in the minds of characters who seem manipulated into ironic mischances and in the mind of the reader who observes them. Even in the poems and stories that directly confront and attack some version of God, the final joke is usually on man. Crane's ironic cosmos may be bounded only by silence, for although his vision is frequently

apocalyptic, the gods he postulates seem in the end to negate one another. Clearly the universe does not work the way conventional religion would have us believe; things go wrong. But things go wrong in a way that appears to be *ordered*; they go wrong in a way that seems filled with sinister meaning. Crane's irony is never merely that of unexpected meaninglessness; it is the irony of strange and unexpected, but at the same time appropriate, meanings. The jest fits its subject too neatly to be a random event.

While Crane is usually too skeptical to label a God from whom these jests proceed, he suspects a dark Actor behind reality. Perhaps his closest glimpse comes in an uncollected poem; here Crane approaches the horror of Bierce's most frightening visions:

> There is a grey thing that lives in the tree-tops
> None know the horror of its sight
> Save those who meet death in the wilderness
> But one is enabled to see
> To see branches move at its passing
> To hear at times the wail of black laughter
> And to come often upon mystic places
> Places where the thing has just been.
>
> (1346)

The image of a horrible thing which can only be seen in branches moving at its passing parallels the conceit of Bierce's "The Damned Thing," which Crane, an admirer of Bierce, probably read. But Crane's horror is more deeply felt and metaphysical in its implications than Bierce's shocker. This grey thing which can only be perceived indirectly is the deity that haunts Crane's pages; it is the grey thing which appears to the long line of Crane heros who meet, or brush with, "death in the wilderness": Henry Fleming, Maggie, the men in the open boat, and the misguided, belligerent Swede. Its black mirth is the laughter that echoed over the body of Halpin Frayser.

III.

The satirical wit of Ambrose Bierce and the shifting ironies of Stephen Crane reach a culmination which is also something of a diminution in the urbane wits of the twentieth century: H. L. Mencken, who is more honored than read today, and James Branch Cabell, who is neither. Mencken's attacks on Puritanism are well known if rather shallow; he rivals Twain at his most cynical in condemning God and man alike: "All the errors and incompetencies of the Creator reach their climax in man" ("Man's Place in Nature," *A Mencken Chrestomathy* 5). But Mencken is more interesting as a social phenomenon than as a literary figure, and I will be concentrating instead on the career of Cabell. Cabell's

deliquescent ironies have been mostly forgotten, and the decline of his once immense reputation is an interesting topic in itself. His mythical province of Poictesme, with its ultimately meaningless gods behind gods, carries ambiguity to a final extreme and offers a fascinating parallel to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.

If James Branch Cabell is little read today, it is not because he is just another popular author with no staying power. In his day, Cabell was esteemed by important writers and critics alike; although his greatest public fame (and sales) were caused by the trial for obscenity of *Jurgen*, his more thoughtful admirers supported him before and well after that event. Part of his downfall is due to his genre; Cabell writes finely wrought, ironic romances filled with symbols which are sometimes clear, sometimes hidden in anagrams and puns, sometimes hazily allegorical and elusive of definition. I suspect the real problem with Cabell is that he writes comedies--not humor, like the popular works of Twain (who lived long enough to read and enjoy Cabell's early work)--but elaborate metaphysical comedies like *The Mysterious Stranger*, only considerably more polished and with any tragic undercurrents thoroughly subdued. Moreover, Cabellian comedy dares to be about such serious subjects as the origin of religions, the nature of God, and man's place in the universe. Americans in Cabell's day had little regard for this sort of cosmic comedy, so Cabell is

frequently condemned for his exuberent word-play and sexual content as if they were his only themes. Cabell's style distinctively marks him as one of the few American decadents, if a comic decadent is not a contradiction in terms. However, his subject matter made him an anomaly which most commentators have been glad to let slip from sight.

The condemnations have usually been based on suspiciously narrow grounds; Cabell is condemned as obscene, or for writing in a highly "literary" and affected style, or for writing romances. Leslie Fiedler condemns Cabell's works out of hand as "essentially the wet dreams of an eternal fraternity boy, wish-fulfillment fantasies" ("The Return of James Branch Cabell; or, the Cream of the Cream of the Jest," Inge, ed., *Cabell: Centennial Essays* 139). Cabell's fantasies do have a serious side, however; they are about the nature of human wishes in a universe which offers numerous obstacles to their fulfillment, and about the ironic results which come of realized dreams.

Cabell's supporters have at least made some attempts to analyze what Cabell is doing in his strange fiction. Carl Van Doren, in an almost embarrassingly flattering 1932 volume on Cabell, correctly associates Cabell with some obvious forebears: "the only comparable American romancers, Hawthorne and Melville. . . .they are engineers of escape from the universe of compromises and half-measures to the

universe in which both the reason and the imagination would prefer to live" (83). Implicit in this kind of romance is criticism of the world and its divine Author. Van Doren admits that Cabell is less violent and robust than his predecessors, and perceives correctly that Cabell's light touch is possible because he is less restrained by religion and morality. Indeed, there is something funny about finding Cabell, a genteel Virginia Episcopalian, in the company of rebels against Puritanism. We like our rebels to be tortured and heroic, not urbane and witty. Nevertheless, Cabell's literary heirs include not only Faulkner, who took his Puritanism seriously, but contemporary writers like Barth and Pynchon, who have succeeded in making the comic novel respectable in America.

Cabell's most vocal early supporter was H. L. Mencken, who found in the Virginia author an ally in his war against American "booboisie" values. Mencken sounds today much like a modern Ambrose Bierce without the memorable works of fiction. He even authors some definitions worthy of inclusion in the *Devil's Dictionary*, notably his definition of "Creator" as "A comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh" (*Chrestomathy* 624). Most memorable of all is his famous definition of Puritanism as "The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" (*Chrestomathy* 624). Both definitions offer the illuminating conjunction of fear with laughter or happiness: the essential paradox of the Jester

god. In "The Life of Man" Mencken sounds a Twainian note: "Once apparently the chief concern and masterpiece of the gods, the human race now begins to bear the aspect of an accidental by-product of their vast, inscrutable and probably nonsensical operations" (*Chrestomathy* 3). In "The Cosmic Secretariat" he advances still further: "The more, indeed, the theologian seeks to prove the wisdom and omnipotence of God by His works, the more he is dashed by the evidences of divine incompetence and stupidity that the advance of science is constantly turning up" (*Chrestomathy* 67). In "Exeunt Omnes" Mencken calls death "the last and worst of all the practical jokes played upon poor mortals by the gods" (*Chrestomathy* 136). Even Mencken, the great iconoclast, occasionally succumbed to the need for someone to blame.

Mencken's style is relatively unadorned; we read him for his ideas, which once made him a notable gadfly but now seem either commonplace or eccentric. Thus his admiration for Cabell, one of the most ornate of all American writers, is surprising. Mencken praised Cabell as "a scarlet dragon-fly imbedded in opaque amber" ("The Sahara of the Bozart," *Chrestomathy* 186), a compliment which sounds rather backhanded today but which accurately reflects Mencken's somewhat sterile notions of culture. Mencken's comment is apt, for Cabell is certainly a glittering exotic in the more public portions of the literary landscape of his day, a

landscape populated with figures like Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis.

Perhaps what Mencken appreciated in Cabell was the latter's apparent amorality. In Mencken's brief monograph on Cabell, he argues that

> What ails American literature, fundamentally, is what ails the whole of American culture, politely so-called: a delusion of moral duty. It comes down to us, I daresay, from the Puritans who hunted clams and salvation along the miserable New England coast.

Mencken goes on to add, "There is at least one American, however, who stands outside the praying-band, the passion for Service dead in his heart . . . His name is James Branch Cabell" (*James Branch Cabell* 3, 5). For Cabell, conventional religion is just that: a social convention, observed for social reasons.

In Cabell the irony of Bierce and Crane becomes absolute; it is not merely an extra layer to the story, it is the whole point of the story. Although Cabell occasionally attacks American notions of religion and decorum, such attacks are not in any way the point of his work. His novels gleam like finely inlaid veneer, but they are all veneer, or rather, they consist of layers upon

layers of veneer, with no solid wood beneath. His canon is large; most of his major works form a loosely organized structure which Cabell referred to as his Biography of the life of Manuel, fictional lord of a medieval French province. Manuel himself appears in only a few of the principal works, but his comrades and relations appear in others, and their descendents in still others, down to modern times. It is not necesssary to explore the Biography in full to appreciate Cabell; the essentials are present in the six or seven major novels which form the heart of his epic. Of these, the best and most famous, though largely for extra-literary reasons, is *Jurgen*. One other, *The Silver Stallion*, is of particular interest to this study, and I will also examine one of Cabell's late works, *Smire*, the last volume of his dream trilogy *The Nightmare Has Triplets*.

Cabell's works portray three different methods of organizing reality: the gallant, the chivalric, and the poetic. The gallant, best defined by the hero of *The High Place*, takes nothing seriously and leads a life of sensation, seeking meaningless sexual adventures and battles. The chivalric, epitomized in the hero (and heroine) of *Domnei*, makes of his beloved a goddess, and subscribes to the most extreme ideals of courtly love. Perion and Melicent, the heroically loving couple of *Domnei*, endure impossible trials and bitter defeats because their

utter fealty acts as a rock around which their universe is built; only the villain of the novel, a failed gallant named Demetrios, has any need to speculate about meanings: "It is highly probable there are gods of some sort or another, but I do not so far flatter myself as to consider that any possible god would be at all interested in my opinion of him" (72-73). Because Demetrios obsessively loves Melicent but cannot attain the lofty self-sacrificing plane of chivalry, he is trapped between the planes of gallantry and chivalry and becomes the butt rather than a participant in the jest which always, for Cabell, lies at the back of reality.

The chivalric life requires both philsophical naivete and superhuman devotion, and the utterly amoral life of the gallant leads to ennui and satiation. Not surprisingly for a literary artist, Cabell finds the poetic life most interesting, and he returns to it repeatedly; if *Domnei* is his epic of chivalry, then *Jurgen* is his epic of the poetic. It is also his most interesting and rewarding work; all of Cabell's works act as glosses on each other, or as different turnings of the same kaleidoscope, but in *Jurgen* the pattern is at its most brilliant. Poetry, or the power of the imagination, is the best weapon against bland conformity. In the 1926 version of the novel, Cabell adds, in addition to the Foreword, a fragment called The Judging of Jurgen in which his hero undergoes trial by the Philistines for

obscenity, just as the novel had been tried by the forces of Comstockery. In this allegorical episode Cabell places himself on the side of other American literary rebels; as the "tumblebug" who prosecutes Jurgen warns:

> already we of Philistia have been pestered by three of these makers of literature. Yes, there was Edgar, whom I starved and hunted until I was tired of it: then I chased him up a back alley one night, and knocked out those annoying brains of his. And there was Walt, whom I chivied and battered from place to place, and made a paralytic of him: and him, too, I labelled offensive and lewd and lascivious and indecent. Then later there was Mark, whom I frightened into disguising himself in a clown's suit, so that nobody might suspect him to be a maker of literature: indeed, I frightened him so that he hid away the greater part of what he had made until after he was dead, and I could not get at him. (240)

This is a line of rebels and also, with the inclusion of Mark Twain in his clown suit, the beginning of a line of ironists, writers who wear masks and hide multiple meanings behind their words.

Jurgen, like the other most "poetic" works in the Biography, *Figures of Earth*, and *Something About Eve*, is filled with joy in wordplay: puns, anagrams, alliteration. Like Jorge Luis Borges, Cabell delights in inventing fictional "sources" for his narratives, and the 1926 Foreword to *Jurgen* refers to several prior sources for the Jurgen legends, as well as a number of plausibly titled books of commentary on their significance, quoted at some length and cited by volume and page number. Like Borges, Cabell uses these devices to blur the line between fiction and reality, while poking gentle fun at scholarly explications. Cabell himself warns against taking any of the interpretations offered too seriously: "Thus do interpretations throng and clash, and neatly equal the commentators in number. Yet possibly each one of these unriddlings, with no doubt a host of others, is conceivable: so that wisdom will dwell upon none of them very seriously" (xxviii). But then, Cabell himself invented the sources which he quotes and undermines, and the explications he quotes sound not unreasonable.

Ironic contradictions abound in Cabell, and they haunt Jurgen, the hero of an ironic quest-romance. Jurgen himself is a middle-aged pawnbroker in the imaginary medieval French province of Poictesme. One day he whimsically compliments the devil for doing a good job, and the mysterious "black gentleman" who appears is so pleased to encounter candid

recognition of his work that he promises to reward his apologist (5). He removes Jurgen's shrewish wife, Dame Lisa, and Jurgen, driven to do "the manly thing," feels compelled to embark on a quest to rescue her. He enters a mysterious cave on "Walburga's Eve, when almost anything is rather more than likely to happen" (7), and begins a year of heroic adventures in which he regains and relives his lost youth and first love; meets gods and goddesses; enjoys amorous interludes with complaisant princesses, including Guenevere and a fertility goddess named Anaitis; visits Heaven and Hell; and finally meets Koshchei, who may or may not be the supreme God in Cabell's pantheon.

Koshchei is a queer figure; he is apparently the black gentleman involuntarily summoned by Jurgen at the outset when he praises the maker of "all the perilous and lovely snares of this world" (3). But he is not merely Satan, whom Jurgen will also encounter in his travels; in fact, he turns out to be the creator of both Satan and the Christian God, a god beyond gods in the cosmos of *Jurgen.* In *Figures of Earth* he is called "Koshchei the Deathless" (133), and Nessus the Centaur tells Jurgen that "Above all devils and above all gods--they tell me, but certainly above all centaurs--is the power of Koshchei the Deathless, who made things as they are" (9). The last phrase in this definition is the significant one, for Jurgen seeks more than his wife; he seeks to know why things are as they are; he seeks, in a

word, justice.

The idealistic dream of justice, or of some form of ideal world, is the way of the poet, for Jurgen is a poet, although a semi-retired one. As he jauntily points out, "Why, for any law to be meaningless would not be fair" (33). Even when Jurgen meets the great god Pan, who shows him the ultimate horror that is the universe, Jurgen keeps his eqilibrium. Pan observes in advance that Jurgen will survive the experience because he is a poet: "you will presently forget that which you are about to see, or at worst you will tell pleasant lies about it" (134). Jurgen is shaken by what Pan shows him, but he simply refuses to believe it:

> Were there a bit of truth in your silly puppetry this world of time and space and consciousness would be a bubble, a bubble which contained the sun and moon and the high stars, and still was but a bubble in fermenting swill! . . . You would have me believe that men, that all men who have ever lived or shall ever live hereafter, that even I am of no importance! Why, there would be no justice in any such arrangement, no justice anywhere! (134)

Even when Pan threatens to kill him, Jurgen replies, "Yes, you can kill me if you choose, but it is beyond your power to make me believe that there is no justice anywhere, and that I am unimportant" (135). Jurgen's ability to disregard reality is a trait of which even the gods are envious, but it is as necessary to him as to Crane's Maggie or Henry Fleming.

Rejecting Pan's naturalistic vision, Jurgen continues in his search for justice, but instead he encounters jests and nonsense. Merlin Ambrosius recognizes Jurgen's very existence in his world as an obscure joke: "Aderes has loosed a new jest into the world" (127) (Sereda, or Aderes spelled backwards, is a minor goddess who has given Jurgen back his youth during his year of wanderings). A similar interpretation is offered when Jurgen encounters Perion, the hero of *Domnei*, and Horvendile, the wandering demiurge who reappears throughout the Biography, who may be Koshchei in disguise, or even Cabell himself. Horvendile posits a controlling author:

> ". . .we three have met like characters out of three separate romances which the Author has composed in different styles."
>
> "That also," Jurgen submitted, "would be nonsense."

> "Ah, but perhaps the Author very often perpetrates nonsense. . . . what is there in you or me to attest that our Author has not composed our romances with his tongue in his cheek?" (217)

Jurgen refuses to believe Horvendile's theory, but he is hard put to explain this impossible meeting of three old acquaintances until Horvendile pushes him over and he wakes up to find the whole episode is a dream. Jurgen suspects but cannot be sure that the nonsensical nature of the dream is a paradigm for life. To the reader the problem is even more confused, for the dream has been no more surreal than any of Jurgen's other escapades.

The by now familiar dream motif dominates *Jurgen* from this point on. Horvendile asks Jurgen, "how do you know that I am not Koshchei, who made all things as they are?" Jurgen's only reply to a suggestion which would reduce his existence to absurdity is to say that their encounter then becomes "a very foolish dream . . . a dream that had no sense to it. But indeed it would be strange if that were the whole point of it, and if living, too, were such a dream" (218-19). Jurgen crosses the border between dream and reality so many times that he can no longer tell where it lies.

The satire becomes more pointed when Jurgen is tried and condemned by the Philistines to die and be relegated to

Hell. Hell turns out to be an invention of his ancestors; as the devils there explain it: "your forefathers builded it in dreams . . . out of the pride which led them to believe that what they did was of sufficient importance to merit punishment" (253). The devils are grateful that Jurgen does not have such a troublesome conscience and will not be pestering them to devise suitable torments. Clearly, though, Jurgen's ancestors' self-conceit is not unlike his own; they demand to believe in their own importance just as he does, though in a less intelligent and more painful manner. Cabell has fun satirizing Puritanical consciences which insist on being punished, but the impulse is common to all his heroes. The creation of Hell turns out to be another ironic joke on man; as Satan explains to Jurgen:

> Koshchei happened to notice Earth once upon a time, with your forefathers walking about it exultant in the enormity of their sins and in the terrible punishments they expected in requital. . . . So he was pleased, oh, very much pleased: and after he had had his laugh out, he created Hell extempore, and made it just such a place as your forefathers imagined it ought to be . . ." (257)

Twain imagined man to be cursed with the Moral Sense; to have a conscience in *Jurgen* is to be cursed literally with the pangs of self-inflicted Hell.

When Jurgen escapes and tricks his way into Heaven, he finds it just as illusory as Hell. He had always considered Heaven to be "a delusion of old women" (295); in fact, it turns out to be the invention of his grandmother, whose love, like the pride of his fathers, was humoured by Koshchei and granted the Heaven it demanded. The God of Jurgen's grandmother turns out to be just as glorious a creation as Hell was perverse; at the sight of Him Jurgen stands motionless with awe for thirty-seven days. But even so, Jurgen cannot quite believe in this God: "God of my grandmother, I cannot quite believe in You; but remembering the sum of love and faith that has been given You, I tremble" (305).

Realizing that he was right all along about God being a delusion of his grandmother, for God Himself admits as much, but observing that his grandmother was right too, inasmuch as God exists by the decree of Koshchei, Jurgen wonders aloud "if everything is right, in a way? I wonder if that is the large secret of everything? It would not be a bad solution, sir" (306). At this suggestion of a free-play universe God vanishes, and Jurgen ascends His throne in his stead. However, even being a god cannot content Jurgen, and he climbs down, "for I am Jurgen who seeks he knows not

what" (307). Cabell's universe appears to be a place where everything and nothing is true; all meaning is provisional, and the very act of describing something changes it.

Jurgen in the end leaves heaven, where he has found infinite love but no justice, and returns to the heath where he began his quest. He again encounters the mysterious goddess Sereda, whose shadow has haunted him throughout his journeys. This shadow he blames for his inability to enter wholeheartedly into life, and he demands an explanation:

> ". . . I concede the jest, I do not for a moment deny it is a master-stroke of humour. But, after all, just what exactly is the point of it? What does it mean?
>
> "It may be that there is no meaning anywhere. Could you face that interpretation, Jurgen?"
>
> "No," said Jurgen: "I have faced god and devil, but that I will not face."
>
> "No more would I who have so many names face that. You jested with me. So I jest with you. Probably Koshchei jests with all of us. And he, no doubt--even Koshchei who made things as they are,--is in turn the butt of some larger jest." (319)

From dreams to jests and back again; Cabell's explanations for Jurgen's adventures multiply and combine in strange ways. In a passage that calls to mind the ending of Faulkner's *Sartoris*, Sereda adds to her jesting explanation by suggesting a metaphor of a chess game, where "Koshchei who directs the infinite moving of puppets may well be the futile harried king in some yet larger game," and where "All moves uncomprehendingly, and to the sound of laughter. For all moves in consonance with a higher power that understands the meaning of every movement . . . and there is merriment overhead, but it is very far away" (320-21). Hardly a comforting doctrine, but at least it answers Jurgen's question about meaning.

The meaning of the jest becomes, if anything, muddier in the final pages of the book, when Jurgen reenters the cave where he began. This time he finds himself "In the Manager's Office," according to the title of the chapter; here he meets the black gentleman who started him on his journeys, apparently engaged in bookkeeping, surrounded by ambiguous symbols. At last Jurgen knowingly meets Koshchei the Deathless and asks him "why you made things as they are" (331). But Koshchei will not say, and it seems likely that he does not know himself; otherwise, why would he praise Jurgen for having "furnished me with one or two really very acceptable explanations as to why I had created evil" (331). In fact, as Jurgen realizes to his chagrin, Koshchei is "not

particularly intelligent" (334), has not been guiding Jurgen's quest all along, and has no idea what thing Jurgen desires. Koshchei is even astonished when Jurgen asks him for his wife back again.

Koshchei apparently is only an ominpotent beaureaucrat, or as he calls himself, an Economist, concerned with a rather muddled system of celestial accounts. (When Jurgen sees Koshchei's blackboard, filled with not yet added columns, "this blackboard seemed to him the most frightful thing he had faced anywhere" (364).) Koshchei offers Jurgen the beautiful women he has already met and won on his travels, Guenevere and Anaitis, but Jurgen knows he no longer has the passion of youth and rejects the offer. Even Helen, the most perfect of all women, cannot satisfy him, for he knows that he is "not fit to mate with your perfection" (348). Jurgen cries that he has failed his vision, but in choosing to remain apart from its ideal manifestation in Helen he chooses the only wise course; the vision must be kept separate from reality lest it be sullied by it. This is the necessary dichotomy of the poet, who praises and hymns, but must not seek to touch. Helen is the one woman in *Jurgen* whom the hero does not seduce; he knows better than to try, for fear of success.

When Jurgen purchases his old wife back from Koshchei for the price of his shirt of Nessus--the garment of poetry, or genius, or merely the will to know--he implicitly returns

to the everyday world as only the remnant of the poet he was. Koshchei erases from history, though not from Jurgen's memory, the events of the past year, and Jurgen resumes his old life where he had left it. Jurgen accepts this judgment, now saying "I fancy that nobody anywhere cares much for justice" (365). But the questions remain: who or what is Koshchei, and what are his motives? Koshchei only says, "I contemplate the spectacle with appropriate emotions" (365). Jurgen realizes that his entire adventure can once again be explained as a dream, but he chooses to take it as a joke and laughs,

> "Why, but, of course! I may have talked face to face with Koshchei, who made all things as they are; and again, I may not have. That is the whole point of it--the cream, as one might say, of the jest,--that I cannot ever be sure. Well!"--and Jurgen shrugged here--"well, and what could I be expected to do about it?" (366)

Jurgen at the end retains all his old doubts: "Yes, Koshchei--if it was really Koshchei--has dealt with me very justly. And probably his methods are everything they should be; certainly I cannot go so far as to say that they are wrong: but still, at the same time----!" (371). Jurgen now realizes that he has never found any evidence that the

designer of the universe is concerned with justice. This vision has its consolations, since Jurgen can congratulate himself on being more intelligent and clever than Koshchei; as Mencken notes of Cabell, "The butt of his dream, if a dream may be said to have a butt, is not man, but God" (*JBC* 8). Jurgen can imagine superior worlds, and *Jurgen* is such a superior world imagined by the God-baiter, James Branch Cabell.

The vision of *Jurgen* is cryptic; one is never sure whether Cabell is saying more than he means or less than he means. This sense of double, or even triple vision is at the heart of the Cabell style. Arvin Wells, who has written the most useful full-length study of Cabell's work, speaks of "Cabell's vision of man as journeying through an irrational universe in which he blunders from mystery to mystery feeling himself assaulted and moved by strange forces but sustained by faith in his own sanity and cleverness; a universe in which nothing is what it appears . . ." (*Jesting Moses* 66). Certainly this is Jurgen's tactic, and if Cabell's hero is a failed poet, we still admire his resiliancy. Jurgen can always smile and shrug. Wells makes great claims for humor in Cabell: "man, the victim of the cosmic joke, when he laughs at his own predicament may be said to be reconciled and harmonized with his own nature and with the structure of the universe" (47). The ending of *Jurgen* strikes me as more inconclusive than

the whole Manuel legend is founded on Jurgen's fancy, and a foundling religious sect springs up under the supervision of Manuel's wife.

Manuel's followers, whose individual stories make up the novel, react to his elevation in different ways, but ironically there seems to be no doubt that his fictionalized example actually improves his people. Manuel himself, appearing as a ghost to Coth, Jurgen's father, who has stubbornly sought to bring him back to Poictesme and refute the fictions, says that "The dream is better. For man alone of animals plays the ape to his dreams" (127). Another follower, Ninzian, does not believe the new Manuel legend but acknowledges its usefulness; men need to believe in a Redeemer legend, for "it prevents their going mad, to believe that somebody somewhere is looking out for them" (279).

The idea that religion is merely a useful fiction takes yet another surprising twist in the story of Donander, the one follower of Manuel who rather stupidly accepts the new faith wholeheartedly. Through a celestial mistake, Donander at his death is transported to the Norse Asgard rather than the Christian Heaven. From there he is further elevated until he becomes a god above gods, like Koshchei himself, busily playing with manufactured universes until eons later he, like Koshchei, is persuaded by other gods that such play is childish, at which point he destroys all the worlds he

has made. Even then he remains convinced that all is an illusion, and continues to pray for the Second Coming of Manuel! So, the universe is created and run by Koshchei, who created God and Satan to please Jurgen's grandmother and forefathers. But Donander rises from Koshchei's creation to become the equal of Koshchei, while still believing in the God of Jurgen's grandmother. To make matters more confusing, all of these figures may be only creations of the demi-urge, Horvendile.

In *The Cream of the Jest* Horvendile turns out to be the dream-self of a Virginia novelist named Felix Kennaston. Horvendile says of his reality that "This room, this castle, all the broad rolling countryside without, is but a portion of my dream, and these places have no existence save in my fancies" (*Cream of the Jest* 27). He realizes further that "it may be that I, too, am only a figment of some greater dream, in just such case as yours, and that I, too, cannot understand" (27). Even Kennaston himself, the author of Horvendile, and an obvious counterpart to Cabell, believes that God is an Author, and so the cycle continues. Cabell's point, if such a writer can be said to have a point, is not that any of these interpretations is correct, but that there is no final interpretation, only themes, such as that of the dream, the Author, or the jest, which help to make sense of an infinitely diverse and multitudinous reality. Wells defines the nature of Cabellian irony in these terms:

"Irony, then, is not a matter of saying the opposite of what is meant; it is a means of saying more than one thing at a time. It exposes the double value of reality--the dream interpretation and the actual" (43). The vision is double only in a reductive sense, however, for the dreams--and the realities--multiply endlessly.

In Cabell's late dream trilogy, *Smith*, *Smirt*, and *Smire*, Cabell's hero operates in a wholly psychological landscape. Smire is the dream-protagonist who dreams his universe; he begins as a god and is reduced by stages to a poet, maintaining all along the jaunty self-confidence of a Jurgen. Smire imagines the universe as a chess game between Cromwell and King Charles, two archetypal dreamers: "the gaming between Cavalier and Puritan must go on forever . . . and there is no resting for us two who believed, as we still believe, each in his own dream, wholeheartedly" (*Smire* 218). Smire's sympathies, like Cabell's, are with the Cavaliers, but both sides are necessary to the game.

Everyone has a different dream of reality; Smire acknowledges the usefulness of the jester theory, but refuses to commit himself to it:

> many excellent thinkers have come, by-and-by, to regard the entire universe as a large exercise in nonsense, as the fine masterpiece of a supernal W. S. Gilbert. For myself, I adopt a middle

> ground: and it seems to me that since humankind has not anything to do with the conduct of the universe in practice, we would do wisely not to bother about it in thought. (219)

Smire, like Jurgen, is not sure whether existence is a jest or not; he recognizes his illusions as illusions, but treasures them anyway. Branlon, the mythical realm over which he presided as a god, "is a most beautiful and double-edged and wholly glorious dream" (266). Beautiful, because necessary: "No man lives in the external truth . . . for in the warm, phantasmagoric chamber of his brain lives every man vaingloriously, among the painted walls and storied windows. . . . for humankind the dream is the one true reality" (294, 295). The need for belief is simple and fundamental; although at the end of the trilogy Smire must awaken and return to the real world, he remembers his dream reality too. His dual perspective is both necessary and comical; for Cabell, the dream-reality of an individual is preferable to the mass-dream of religion, or what Horvendile calls "the unwillingness of men to face the universe with no better backing than their own resources" (*Silver Stallion* 330). Dreams are stronger than faith; as Satan tells the Archangel Michael in *The High Place*, "Your master is strong, as yet, and I too am strong, but neither of us is strong enough to control men's dreams. . . . this quite insane

aspiring first sets up beautiful and holy gods in heaven, then in the dock; and, judging all by human logic, decrees this god not to be good enough" (280).

Cabell is the first author in this study for whom the Jester God is a real jester, eliciting hearty and wholehearted laughter. Unlike Melville, Twain, Crane, and even Bierce, all of whom took their religion or anti-religion seriously, Cabell chooses the high road, where irony becomes so pervasive it doubles back on itself. It is the method of *The Confidence-Man* and *The Mysterious Stranger* carried to an extreme which always borders on mere frivolity. Cabell has no enemy in the heavens, only divine playmates, fellow Authors and chess players. Cabell takes nothing seriously--he is a willing participant in the jest--but he does have a serious theme: not the nature of God, so endlessly elusive in his works, but the nature of that curious creature man, compelled to create and dethrone gods, dreaming grander realities than those the gods have dreamed up. Dream, jest, and reality, man and god are finally indistinguishable in Cabell, for he insists on having it both ways, on celebrating the imagination and the life which underlies it. If he never reaches the depths of a Twain, neither does he embrace such a final vision of solipsism.

The Jester God is not entirely a humorous subject; nevertheless, the authors in this study find in humor an

effective way of defusing man's anguish when faced with an inhospitable universe. Cabell comes closest of all to entering fully into the spirit of the Jest; he is the Author as Jester, whose ability to conjure up tricks matches that of his opponent. However, the purely witty approach to the problem of man's place in a hostile cosmos has proven less durable than the reflections of writers like Melville and Twain, for whom the tragedy usually outweighs the comedy. Thus just as Bierce's reputation has long been eclipsed by Crane's, so Cabell's once immense repute has vanished before Faulkner's.

Chapter 4

William Faulkner's Desperate Laughter

Faulkner appears more and more to be the central figure in American fiction of this century, and in his works the Jester God reaches its culmination as a serious theme. After Faulkner the Puritan tradition from which the Jester springs is almost wholly degenerate as a subject for serious art, and the Jester reverts to the satirical or comedic device prefigured in Bierce and Cabell. Faulkner takes the religion of his rural folk seriously, though his treatment is seldom without irony as well. Faulkner's protagonists, and by extension Faulkner himself, must try to make sense of a violent, treacherous world. What Wallace Stevens called the "rage for order" is almost impossible to satisfy in Yoknapatawpha County, where crumbling human relationships, hostile nature, and incredible circumstances are the stuff of life. Faulkner frequently characterizes existence as a kind of incomprehensible Game, sometimes dangerous and sometimes just ironically humorous, a Game with rules known only to an unseen Umpire. Faulkner apparently shares Melville's vision of man as a being alienated from his creator, but by reducing Old Testament doom to a game, he manages to attack simultaneously the portentous religious beliefs of his uneducated farmers and shopkeepers and the

genteel optimism of their more sophisticated peers.

Faulkner's founds his counter-myth on the rich symbolic and metaphoric resources of the Christian tradition. Like his predecessors, Faulkner can be regarded as a kind of Calvinist; in "Faulkner and the Calvinist Tradition," J. Robert Barth places Faulkner firmly in the Puritan line:

> . . . the main stream of American literary thought and sensibility flows in a more or less direct line from the crucial age of American Puritanism. . . . Faulkner . . . stands strongly and unmistakably within the Calvinist camp, in a direct line of kinship with Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, with Hawthorne and Melville. (Barth, ed. 11)

Certainly Faulkner was fascinated with dark, doom-ridden novels; as a youth he described *Moby-Dick* as "one of the best books ever written" (Blotner, *Faulkner* 38). Later, in a 1931 interview, he named his favorite novels: *Moby-Dick* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (Blotner 292). The powerful influence of Melville further appears in Faulkner's statement, "Ishmael is the witness in *Moby-Dick* . . . as I am Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*" (Blotner 213). Faulkner's work is filled with such witnesses, from the mad Quentin Compson to the eminently sane V. K. Ratliff.

Faulkner's critics have tended to divide into two camps, one seeing him as a nihilist or pagan stoic and the other as a kind of Christian. In *Theology and Modern Literature* Amos Wilder points to Faulkner's affirmations of faith in the Dilsey section of *The Sound and the Fury* and to such late works as *Requiem for a Nun* and *A Fable* as evidence for Faulkner's Christianity. Randall Stewart goes further, maintaining that Faulkner's strong sense of Original Sin qualifies him as a true southern Puritan, "one of the most profoundly Christian writers in our time" (141-42). But Cleanth Brooks, in "William Faulkner: Vision of Good and Evil," takes strong exception to Stewart's argument. Brooks agrees that Faulkner is deeply concerned with sin and guilt, for how could he not be: "his characters come out of a Christian environment, and represent, whatever their shortcomings and whatever their theological heresies, Christian concerns" (Wagner, ed. 118). As Brooks points out, however, Faulkner lacks any evident concept of grace, and Puritanism without grace is hardly Christian at all. Although Faulkner frequently utilizes Christian iconography in the sacrificial deaths in his late novels, he always bends the myth to his own purposes. The deaths of Nancy in *Requiem For a Nun* and the Corporal in *A Fable* are ambiguous at best; any redemption they achieve is heavily qualified by Faulkner's characteristic irony. If anything, they are more closely related to Faulkner's abiding interest in doom and

Fate than to Christian grace.

As the careers of Melville and Twain demonstrate, an interest in sin, guilt, and the power of "blackness" is by no means enough to make a writer an orthodox Christian. Harold J. Douglas and Robert Daniel, in "Faulkner's Southern Puritanism," observe that "Calvinism is apt to turn up almost anywhere that religious belief impinges upon Southern life" (Barth, ed. 39-40), and argue that Faulkner is both hostile to Calvinism and imbued with it. Whether the Southern fundamentalist Baptists, Methodists, and even Episcopalians who populate Faulkner's fiction can properly be called Puritans is a moot point for my purposes. They fit the Puritan myth: dogmatic rigidity, sexual repression, an emphasis on sin, guilt, and predestination; moreover, Faulkner himself frequently refers to them as Puritans. As representatives of a moralistic social structure, they have a stronger hold on Faulkner's South than any religious synthesis since the New England theocracy, and he delights in exposing their naivete. Faulkner's contemptuous attitude towards backwoods fundamentalism is perhaps best summed up by Chick Mallison's comment in *The Town*: "the very fabric of Baptist and Methodist life is delusion, nothing" (308). Old Testament theology also ignores natural realities. Brooks notes that "Insofar as . . . Calvinism represents a violent repression and constriction of natural impulse, a denial of nature itself, Faulkner tends to regard it as a terrible and

evil thing" (*The Hidden God* 35).

In Faulkner's doom-fraught cosmos, where individuals may be only pawns of forces larger than themselves, almost every novel depicts at least one character searching desperately for order. A long line of ineffectual romantics attempt to make sense out of their ironic present by remembering and organizing their past; a partial list includes Quentin Compson, Ike McCaslin, Horace Benbow, and Gavin Stevens. Not surprisingly, all have been taken to be mouthpieces for Faulkner himself, although corrective commentary points out their weaknesses and the ways in which Faulkner ironically distances himself from them. These characters almost always fail or achieve only partial victories; usually they can only discern that they remain the butts of some larger joke beyond them. Though they may possess many admirable traits, they are as a group noticably humorless; in fact, their lack of humor is what most clearly distances them from Faulkner. A recognition of the role of humor and irony in Faulkner's work is essential to understanding his use of the Jester.

Life in Yoknapatawpha County, with its fires, floods, and lynchings, often resembles a giant game of Russian roulette, and in fact one of Faulkner's favorite devices is the misfiring gun. Faulkner and his characters frequently postulate the existence of a "Player" god or "dark Diceman," for whom the tragedy of men's lives is part of some

incomprehensible Game. As their assumptions about the nature of the world collapse under the pressure of an ironic reality, even the most staunchly Puritan characters find themselves wondering aloud if God knows quite what He is doing. This Gamemaster god serves several functions. Faulkner is so steeped in the Christian tradition that he finds it difficult to do without a God altogether (the same can be said for most of his characters), so he invents one against whom man can define himself by heroical, stoic endurance. Like Melville, he invokes the Jester not only as an adversary but as a means of self-definition; it is better to be the butt of a joke, which makes humor, defiance, and endurance possible, than to be a meaningless part of a meaningless universe.

Perhaps more importantly, the double perspective of a controlling Player contrasted with the delusions of his victims defines a universe based on irony, where human frustration and bafflement are the rule. Whether the game is tragic or comic is partly a matter of degree, partly a matter of point of view. As a Jester himself, Faulkner delights in playing humorous tricks on his characters, from Dewey Dell's seduction by the drug store clerk in *As I Lay Dying* to the convict whose nose is repeatedly bashed in the "Old Man" section of *The Wild Palms*. For Faulkner as for Jurgen, humor offers a way of rolling with the Joker's punches, of delighting in irony rather than suffering from

it.

Faulkner certainly read Cabell, and I suspect that the two authors' common use of the Jester God is a matter of influence rather than coincidence. Blotner's catalogue of Faulkner's library includes several Cabell volumes, including *Jurgen*, *Figures of Earth*, and *The Silver Stallion*, all autographed by Faulkner, an honor he apparently reserved for favorite books (*William Faulkner's Library--A Catalogue* 26). It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Faulkner began his career as a follower of Cabell, especially the Cabell of *Jurgen*. Januarius Jones, the anti-hero of *Soldiers' Pay*, is explicitly likened to Cabell's hero: "'I will try any drink once,' he said, like Jurgen" (67).[1] Yoknapatawpha County itself resembles Cabell's imaginary Poictesme in surprising ways. The few direct connections between the two writers are much less important than the thematic parallels, especially in Faulkner's early works. Both writers are equally unable to accept the optimism implied in the assumption that God watches over every sparrow that falls. Faulkner deals with the consequences of a universe ruled by a Jester more fully and seriously than Cabell, which partly accounts for their relative reputations, but the universe itself is similar. Faulkner found Cabell's vision of an infinitely ironic universe, where there is always one more joke lurking behind the one you just figured out, permanently compelling, though

he soon outgrew Cabell's polished mannerisms in favor of his own mannerist style.

Like Cabell, Faulkner is fascinated with the human need for illusions. The running contrast between chaotic or malevolent reality and illusions of order makes all human actions and beliefs susceptible to ironic interpretation. Man's need for illusion when confronted with a cosmos that seems meaningless appears most clearly in the early manuscript *Mayday*, written for Helen Baird. Carvel Collins, in his introduction to the work, speaks of "an irony that owes much to James Branch Cabell" (15), and certainly this brief, ironic romance borrows heavily from *Jurgen*. Cleanth Brooks acknowledges Faulkner's debt to Cabell still more strongly in *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*.[2] Brooks observes that Faulkner, like Cabell, "regards man as the victim of illusions" (49). However, Brooks curiously fails to comment on the necessity of these illusions, a necessity which makes his choice of the word "victim" questionable.

Mayday is the delicately ironic tale of a young knight named Sir Galwyn who rides forth accompanied by the allegorical figures of Hunger and Pain in search of maidens to rescue, driven by the vision of a beautiful girl he sees reflected in a stream. Since the reflection, in realistic terms, can only be own face, he is a type of Narcissus, questing after his own double. Galwyn's romantic

self-absorption resembles Jurgen's; during a meeting with a third allegorical figure, Time, his companions Hunger and Pain call him "but a handful of damp clay" (57). Galwyn simply refuses to believe such crass realism: "I see that I am but wasting my youth talking with two shadows and a doddering fool who would convince me that I am not even a shadow--a thing which I, who am Sir Galwyn of Arthgyl, know to be false . . ." (58). Like Jurgen in his meeting with the "brown man," Sir Galwyn refuses to believe in his own insignificance; and like the brown man, Time is envious of his interlocutor's illusions:

> what I would not give to be also young and heedless, yet with your sublime faith in your ability to control that destiny which some invisible and rather unimaginative practical joker has devised for you! Ah, but I too would then find this mad world an uncomplex place of light and shadow and good earth on which to disport me . . . (59)

The passage, simultaneously invoking and denigrating the Jester, is pure Cabell--but this Cabellian joker takes on increasing resonance in the great novels soon to follow.

In a condensed version of Jurgen's amorous conquests, Galwyn encounters and seduces three princesses; like

Jurgen's princesses, however, they act like ordinary women, so Galwyn continues on his way. No woman can live up to the ideal Galwyn seeks, the ideal reflected in the stream. As Hunger and Pain wisely comment, "Man is a buzzing fly beneath the inverted glass tumbler of his illusions" (80). Only a cosmic Hand can remove this tumbler, and few men can stand freedom from all illusions.

Galwyn at last meets the "Lord of Sleep," who offers Galwyn a choice between living over a phase of his life as a shadow, remembering his real life only as "a dark dream," or the oblivion of death, where he will remember nothing at all. Galwyn is not sure that a shadow existence will be like his past life, arguing "I was not a shadow then," but the answer he receives evokes the world of *The Mysterious Stranger*: "How do you know you were not a shadow?" (85). Galwyn, like Jurgen, is offered a choice of the three women from his past; unlike Jurgen, he chooses neither them nor ordinary existence, instead embracing a final woman, "Little sister death" (87). Death or illusion: difficult choices indeed, especially if one's past may be only another illusion. Faulkner is crueller to his hero than Cabell, who allows Jurgen to return to a quotidian life with some of his illusions untested. Faulkner's knight lacks the practical wisdom of Jurgen; by forcing the issue to a crisis, Galwyn is left with only the most extreme alternatives of complete delusion or complete dissolution. This choice between

illusion and death haunts Faulkner's fiction; its most obvious victim is Quentin Compson.

No Faulkner character exhibits quite the jaunty self-assurance of a Jurgen; the stakes are too high. Faulkner's seriousness, or what Harry Campbell and Ruel Foster call "intensity," is what prevents his myth from becoming "a Mississippi version of Poictesme" (*William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal* 175). This intensity comes from the dark side of the Calvinist tradition, its emphasis on sin, predestination, and punishment. Faulkner is too preoccupied with man's guilt and depravity, and with the fate or curse which hangs over man's head to follow Cabell cheerfully into the infinite regress of subjectivity. Indeed, at times Faulkner sounds like Twain in his contempt for the human animal: in a letter to Malcolm Cowley in 1944 he states "life is a phenomenon but not a novelty, the same frantic steeplechase toward nothing everywhere and man stinks the same stink no matter where in time" (Blotner, ed. *Selected Letters* 185).

The invisible Joker who plagued poor, unyielding Sir Galwyn nudges the ribs of an equally rigid and idealistic aristocratic family in *Sartoris*. Faulkner's myth-breaking extends to the Civil War itself, which here as in *The Unvanquished* is reduced to a sort of comic opera: gallant soldiers are killed raiding henhouses or capturing Union anchovies, and captured Union soldiers are allowed to escape

because they are too much trouble to keep. By resolving the chaos of the war, the single most significant event in the history of the South, to a vast joke, Faulkner suggests that life itself is best regarded through the lens of humor. Like Cabell, he is both attracted to romantic notions of Southern chivalry and determined to expose their naivete.

As Faulkner undercuts conventional notions of Civil War heroism and gallantry--they still exist, but they do not mean quite what they are supposed to--so he discreetly undermines the faith of his characters. Instead of being blessed by Providence, the Sartoris family is victimized by multiple ironies. The Sartorises believe in facing their fates bravely, but as old Bayard Sartoris learns from a country medicine-man, "Deestruction likes to take a feller in the back" (193). Bayard dies of a heart attack in a car wreck with his reckless nephew, not in the apotheosis of violence he might have desired. Old Miss Jenny speculates on the irony of his life: "and she thought what a joke They had played on him . . ." (298). Even Jenny, the one stable member of the Sartoris family, the faithful matriarch, wonders if life is just a joke; as her family disintegrates around her she falls into doubt: "I reckon the Lord knows His business, but I declare, sometimes . . ." (302; Faulkner's ellipsis). Like many of Faulkner's religious characters, she is wise enough to turn away from the disillusioning vision of truth that suggests that God is

either cruel or incompetent. Even the shrewdest of characters need their illusions; in the story "There Was a Queen" Jenny loses one too many of hers and dies.

In *Sartoris* the gentle music of Narcissa Sartoris soothes Miss Jenny and restores some semblance of order to her troubled mind, but the narrator's voice intrudes for a final verdict:

> The music went on in the dusk softly; the dusk was peopled with ghosts of glamorous and old disastrous things. And if they were just glamorous enough, there was sure to be a Sartoris in them, and then they were sure to be disastrous. Pawns. But the Player, and the game He plays . . . He must have a name for His pawns, though. But perhaps Sartoris is the game itself--a game outmoded and played with pawns shaped too late and to an old dead pattern, and of which the Player Himself is a little wearied. For there is death in the sound of it, and a glamorous fatality, like silver pennons downrushing at sunset, or a dying fall of horns along the road to Roncevaux. (302-303; Faulkner's elipsis)

Even the glamor evoked by Roncevaux is subtly belittled by its inclusion in a game which even the Player god no longer

really cares about. Again and again Faulkner's Puritans are confronted with this game which they cannot win, and which does not follow the theological rules of John Calvin. This Player God resembles both the "gods of the game" evoked in Crane's *Active Service* (171) and the Chessmaster God postulated by Cabell. When the Player returns, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, He becomes still more sinister.

The early Faulkner perceives the cosmic Jest which Cabell found so amusing, but his characters are unable to enter into the spirit of the game. Like Mrs. Powers in *Soldiers' Pay*, they feel embittered, "tricked by a wanton Fate: a joke amusing to no one" (36). In most of the later works on which Faulkner's reputation stands, he recognizes the humor behind even the deadliest jests. Faulkner comes into his own when he begins to use the Jester god to parody conventional beliefs, attacking the genteel tradition while still maintaining the high seriousness which differentiates him from Cabell.

The game itself takes center stage in *As I Lay Dying*, where Faulkner fully develops the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in his conception of the Jester. The tragicomic saga of the improbable Bundren family offers a full-length exposition of the Jester god in action. Most of the characters in the novel are what Faulkner would call Southern Puritans. As such they embody the best and worst features of their sect: they are by turns heroic and

inflexible, honorable and ludicrous, steadfast and hypocritical. *As I Lay Dying* is both more serious and much funnier than *Sartoris*. The double perspective of the reader, who is both entertained and appalled by the trials and actions of the Bundrens, is mirrored in the structure of the novel itself, where the Bundrens and their neighbors strive to make sense of a universe intent on proving them fools.

The Bundrens are Faulkner's most luckless family, battling flood, fire, and the corrupting forces of Nature in their journey to bury Addie. After the central tragedy of Addie's death, obstacles accumulate endlessly--every victory the Bundrens achieve is an opportunity for a further joke at their expense. They begin with established, conventional attitudes. Anse, the shiftless farmer who never sweats, argues, "I know that Old Marster will care for me as for ere a sparrow that falls" (37). Like the other small farmers, Anse is a Christian fatalist; he would agree with the community consensus on the flooded cotton: "The Lord made it to grow. It's Hisn to wash up if He sees it fitten so" (85). Cora Tull, the most stridently vocal Christian character of all, refuses to be shaken in her faith even by the absurd Bundrens: "Sometimes I lose faith in human nature for a time; I am assailed by doubt. But always the Lord restores my faith and reveals to me His bounteous love for His creatures" (23). But Faulkner strongly undercuts our

confidence in Cora by demonstrating her shallowness (Addie devastatingly remarks that her sanctimonious neighbor cannot even cook), and Cora's heroic pastor, Brother Whitfield, is worse: arriving too late to confess his old adultery with Addie, he argues to himself that God will "accept the will for the deed" (171). His smug satisfaction with a confession Providentially deferred (though one wonders why Addie's death should make it unnecessary) would have delighted Twain.

Faulkner's dogmatic Christians repeatedly demonstrate their poverty of imagination when faced with the flux of reality, while the more thoughtful characters in the novel can only speculate about possible meanings. Cora illogically justifies Addie's death, Vardaman's mad reaction, and the impending storm by saying "It's a judgment on Anse Bundren" (69), but her husband Vernon is not so sure: "Now and then a fellow gets to thinking. About all the sorrows and afflictions in this world; how it's liable to strike anywhere, like lightning" (67). When Vardaman accidentally drills holes in his mother's body trying to let air into her coffin, Tull realizes that conventional notions of Providence and judgment are simply insufficient: "If it's a judgment, it aint right. Because the Lord's got more to do than that. He's bound to have" (70).

Even the stolid Anse begins to suspect that his trials are beyond the norm of Christian suffering. When Addie dies

he just looks forward to the trip to Jefferson: "God's will be done. . . . Now I can get them teeth" (51). The prospect of store-bought teeth remains a stronger beacon than his obligation to Addie, but Anse falters in his faith when he finds both bridges across the flooded river are gone: "I am the chosen of the Lord, for who He loveth, so doeth He chastiseth. But I be durn if He dont take some curious ways to show it, seems like" (105). Like most of the characters in the novel, Anse interprets events in terms of the only religion he knows. Dewey Dell, who is even less sentient than Anse, repeats a desperate litany: "I believe in God, God. God, I believe in God" (116).[3] But Dewey Dell protests too much; her chant only reveals the inefficacy of the Logos when confronted with cosmic disorder.

Faulkner follows Melville's lead in projecting a breakdown in language when confronted with chaos. Addie, the dead and decaying center around which the novel revolves (what could be more appropriate than a decaying center for a novel about chaos?), speaks from the past her knowledge of the inadequacy of language. Addie realized early on that "words are no good . . . words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (163). The abstract words of religion are the worst of all:

> . . . I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly

> doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved, nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words. (165-66)

Cora and the Reverend Whitfield are mere word-mongers, and "the high dead words in time seemed to lose even the significance of their dead sound" (167). As Melville recognized, the Jester deals in double-meanings; for a certain type of mind this ambiguity is intolerable, an emblem of the chaos which threatens to envelop us all.

The characters in *As I Lay Dying* respond to the absurd events that surround them in different ways. Cora finds refuge in a rigid, inadequate faith, Anse in bemused stoicism. Vardaman lapses into a form of childish insanity, while Jewel, the man of action, thinks only enough to say at one point, "if there is a God what the hell is He for" (15). Cash, the eldest and in some ways most admirable of the sons, finds a haven in the mathematical simplicity of his carpentering. His analogue is the ship's carpenter in *Moby-Dick* who balks at converting Queequeg's coffin into a life-buoy because it offends his sense of order: "I like to take in hand none but clean, virgin, fair-and-square

mathematical jobs, something that regularly begins at the beginning, and is at the middle when midway, and comes to an end at the conclusion" (*Moby-Dick* 430). Cash is a more fully developed version of this carpenter; his first chapter is a simple list of thirteen points concerning the construction of his mother's coffin. Some of his reasons for constructing the coffin with beveled edges are bizarre ("The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel" (78)), but he is clearly making a desperate attempt to transform the death of his mother into an understandable, logical progression. Cash tries to reduce the world to numbers; when Tull asks him about his fall from a roof, Cash says that he fell "Twenty-eight foot, four and a half inches, about" (85). He emerges from the suffering of the journey, a journey on which he suffers by far the most physical hardship, with his own dignity. Anse's stoicism is based on an irrational faith, inadequate even to its possessor, but Cash's endurance is founded on the human constructs of mathematics and logic. His way of coping with the Jest which surrounds him is to create his own precise version of reality and live in it.

For all of Cash's admirable qualities, however, it is to Darl that we turn for insight and revelation. Darl is the most sensitive character in the novel, the most aware of the possibilities of language; he is also the most frequent

narrator. Interestingly enough, he at first resembles Cash, but cursed with clearer perceptions and keener intelligence. In the first section of the novel, Darl describes the Bundren farm in precise, mathematical terms, sounding remarkably like his carpenter brother:

> The path runs straight as a plumb-line, worn smooth by feet and baked brick-hard by July, between the green rows of laid-by cotton, to the cottonhouse in the center of the field, where it turns and circles the cottonhouse at four soft right angles and goes on across the field again, worn so by feet in fading precision. (3)

Darl's description of an idyllic, pastoral setting continues, filled with circles, squares, and measurements, evoking the quiet order of life on a small farm. His observation of Cash at work adds hypnotic rhythm to the scene:

> A good carpenter. Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort. I go on to the house, followed by the
>
> Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.

of the adze. (4-5)

Although Darl will soon be swept away by the rising flood of irrationality around him, he initially participates in the pastoral order, the rhythmic "Chuck" of the adze.

As the novel progresses, Darl loses his aloof precision and becomes increasingly engulfed by his absurd surroundings. To him belong the wonderful descriptions of the flood which the Bundrens must cross. The flooded river is a fit emblem for universal anarchy; it is "the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice" (139), fraught with doom, destruction, and secret, profound significance. Darl and Cash almost make it safely across the river with Addie's coffin, but the flood has one remaining trick, and they are struck by a log which "*surged up out of the water and stood for an instant upright upon that surging and heaving desolation like Christ*" (141; Faulkner's italics). The log is Christ-like because it appears to walk on the water; it is also Satanic: "Upon the end of it a long gout of foam hangs like the beard of an old man or a goat" (141). Cora Tull, determined to interpret everything as an act of Providence, calls it "the hand of God" (145), and her husband observes that "Soon as the wagon got tilted good, to where the current could finish it, the log went on. . . . It was like it had been sent there to do a job and done it and went on" (146). But if

the log is a manifestation of God then that God is cruel but ineffective; the mules are drowned and the innocent Cash is injured, but the journey goes on. The log, like the Jester Himself, hangs suspended between good and evil; it torments the Bundrens without stopping them.

The ironic force governing events in *As I Lay Dying* can be more clearly glimpsed in Faulkner's other account of a great Mississippi flood, the "Old Man" section of *The Wild Palms*. Unpredictable and violent, the inundation sweeps the convict protagonist backward and forward on flood crests of random destruction. In danger of being washed away yet again when the levees are dynamited to let flood waters back into the river, he recognizes the Joker at last:

> What he declined to accept was the fact that a power, a force such as that which had been consistent enough to concentrate upon him with deadly undeviation for weeks, should with all the wealth of cosmic violence and disaster to draw from, have been so barren of invention and imagination, so lacking in pride of artistry and craftmanship, as to repeat itself twice. Once he had accepted, twice he even forgave, but three times he simply declined to believe, particularly when he was at last persuaded to realise that this third time was to be instigated not by the blind

> potency of volume and motion but by human direction and hands: that now the cosmic joker, foiled twice, had stooped in its vindictive concentration to the employing of dynamite. (264-65)

God is a nasty and unimaginative joker, adding a final indignity when the convict at last manages to return to the prison, only to be comically sentenced for escape. In a 1954 essay entitled "Mississippi" Faulkner describes such a flood as "one vast yellow motionless expanse, out of which projected only the tops of trees and telephone poles and the decapitations of human dwelling-places like enigmatic objects placed by inscrutable and impenetrable design on a dirty mirror" (*Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters* 26). The convict sees this dark "design" in his trials, just as Ahab saw it in the actions of a whale. The fact that he strives heroically to return to prison and is happiest when locked away only makes the joke better.

The Bundrens, like the convict in *The Wild Palms*, are at the mercy of a rampaging nature controlled by the divine Jester. In both novels the only escape is into the artificial safety of a prison or institution. After surviving the flood and failing to destroy Addie's coffin in the barn he sets afire, Darl must follow his family's journey to its end, shadowed by the buzzards who scent

Addie's now putrifying body. As a final indignity, after Addie is buried and life has some chance of returning to normal, his own family turns on him and hands him over to an insane asylum. At this final joke Darl's personality disintegrates entirely and he can only laugh helplessly and hysterically. His repeated "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes" (243-44) is, like Dewey Dell's chant, an affirmation of sorts, but it is an affirmation of absurdity, of insanity as necessity in a mad world. Even the staid Cash, the only family member who regrets sending Darl away, wonders if his brother has a point:

> . . . I aint so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what aint. It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment. (228)

If, as Hauck argues, "His is the laughter of the initiate who has caught and is caught by the cosmic joke" (200), Darl achieves a Pyrrhic victory at the cost of his sanity, laughing at the Joke which has made a butt of him. Darl is the first in a long line of Faulkner's characters who yield to the final Jest of their existence with crazed laughter.

As I Lay Dying is Faulkner's comic Purgatory, where bumbling Puritans face a cosmic disorder which mocks their most cherished beliefs. *Sartoris* gently destroyed aristocratic illusions; here Faulkner even more effectively assaults the world-view of the poor white farmers. Like its protagonists, *As I Lay Dying* continually seeks the form of a tragedy or an epic, and continually is struck down to the level of farce. The only exception to this despairing prognosis is the artist, who can imitate the Player, jesting with his characters and the reader. The linguistic ambiguity and multiple meanings which drive Addie Bundren to despair can also enrich language; in writing *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner enters into the cosmic game himself, mastering the Jester's technique for his own purposes. As Hauck points out, "The exploration of meaninglessness is a grim and hilarious game; the explorer wins when he can laugh and loses when he cannot. Whoever the explorer is--writer, reader, or character--he must, to be the American Sisyphus, have a colossal and cosmic sense of humor" (14). This kind of humor is difficult and painful, but the comic odyssey of the Bundrens demonstrates that Faulkner has it in abundance.

The balance Faulkner achieves in *As I Lay Dying* is a precarious one. In the darker central works of his career, he moves toward a more pessimistic vision, where even the mad laughter of a Darl is difficult to muster. In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner himself seems to be striving for a

tenable order as he multiplies viewpoints in an attempt to get the central story told. The novel's main characters are besieged paranoids, from the hypochondriacal Mrs. Compson to her bibulous, pessimistic husband.

The elder Jason Compson is remembered by his son Quentin as a gloomy misanthrope, given to pronouncements like, "Bad health is the primary reason for all life. Created by disease, within putrefaction, into decay" (53). He is apparently a determinist, believing "no battle is ever won. . . . They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools" (63). But even Mr. Compson looks for some outside agency to blame for his afflictions; man is "A gull on an invisible wire attached through space dragged" (129)--raising the question of what is on the other end of the wire. As in *As I Lay Dying*, events appear too dreadful to be caused by chance; thus "man who is conceived by accident and whose every breath is a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him" must realize at last that "even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman" (220-21). Faulkner's diceman, presumably analagous to the Player in *Sartoris*, combines chance and pessimistic determinism--the universe may operate according to odds, but the odds are against us.

One should not hastily identify Faulkner's views with those of Mr. Compson, but what else is one to make of a life that apparently is a tale told by an idiot? Even Jason, superficially the most normal of the Compsons, suffers from paranoid delusions and envisions himself as the victim of Circumstance; he imagines himself declaring war on God, "his file of soldiers with the manacled sheriff in the rear, dragging Omnipotence down from His throne, if necessary . . . " (382). Every setback in his struggle to maintain the family's respectability appears to him as "another cunning stroke on the part of the foe, the fresh battle toward which he was carrying ancient wounds" (382). The ruthless, hard-driven Jason is as much a victim as any of the more innocent characters around him. He succeeds no better than his idiot brother Benjy in halting the family's decay; Jason will not even marry to perpetuate the family name he claims to represent.

Benjy, who has been called the moral barometer in the novel, detects decay, disorder, and evil wherever he goes. Ironically, he is probably the happiest of the Compsons; at least he is the only Compson aside from Caddy who ever shows any sign of happiness. Benjy too has his rage for order, for the few simple things he clings to out of the confusion surrounding him. Thus in the final scene of the novel he bellows with outrage when Luster drives him around the town square in the wrong direction. He is easily quieted,

however, by turning around:

> The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and facade flowed smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place. (401)

It is a kind of order, albeit a mechanical one, but in a world out of joint it may be the best obtainable. *The Sound and the Fury* is an attempt to capture the cosmic, Heraclitean flux and make it comprehensible, but any such construct can only be as momentary as Benjy's trip around the square, liable to fall apart with a single wrong turn. Faulkner suggests the mechanical absurdity of all attempts to order the world; the best efforts may be no more significant than Benjy's mindless hypnosis, soothed by familiar images.

The moment when someone's world falls apart is of recurring interest to Faulkner, especially the moment of indoctrination into the problem of evil. Cleanth Brooks observes that "A very important theme in his earlier work is the discovery of evil, which is part of man's initiation into the nature of reality" (*The Hidden God* 25). Brooks refers specifically to *Sanctuary*, but the observation applies with equal force to the two other great central

novels of Faulkner's career, *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In what might be called his problem novels, Faulkner examines the resistance of evil to explanation in conventional religious terms. Faulkner's Southern Puritans are faced with a world where, as Campbell and Foster observe, "the indisputably innocent often suffer quite as much as those who might possibly be considered to invite their fate" (130).

Sanctuary has risen steadily in critical esteem since its sensational arrival on the literary scene in 1931. Behind the gothic trappings of a lurid thriller stands the darkest, most pessimistic of Faulkner's works. The bitterness of *Sanctuary* resides not so much in Temple Drake's initiation into evil--though her descent into a modern Hell is horrifying--as in Horace Benbow's growing realization of his own impotence when faced with cosmic corruption.

Faulkner's tale of the shallow but harmless Temple Drake, corrupted by her nightmarish plunge into an underworld of murder, prostitution, and sexual perversity, still shocks today, less because of the subject matter than because of the unrelentingly bleak treatment of it. Poor Horace Benbow, the idealistic, ineffectual attorney, faces not only the palpable, unnatural evil of Popeye and his contagious corruption, but the betrayal of his own sister, Narcissa, in the name of respectability, and the failure of

the justice system in which he puts his faith. *Sanctuary* is in large part a novel about faith--faith undone and faith misplaced.

What little faith the modern world affords proves quickly fallible. When Temple Drake finds herself trapped among bootleggers and criminals, she cannot even remember how to pray: "she could not think of a single designation for the heavenly father, so she began to say 'My father's a judge; my father's a judge' over and over . . ." (50). Her father is no more help than God in preventing her fall into the darkness of her own being.

Horace Benbow, surrounded by evil, does his best to deny and avoid it, claiming that "there's a corruption about even looking upon evil, even by accident" (125). He cannot bear to realize that, as Temple confesses in the sequel, "Temple Drake liked evil" (*Requiem For a Nun* 117). Even as consciousness of corruption presses overwhelmingly upon him, Horace desperately asserts, "God is foolish at times, but at least He's a gentleman" (273). However, we soon realize that there are no gentlemen in *Sanctuary*; even Horace is a poor imitation of one.

Horace, like Jurgen, seeks an abstract notion of "justice" which repeatedly proves too far removed from reality. He idealistically justifies his involvement in Goodwin's trial:

> "I cannot stand idly by and see injustice--"
>
> "You wont ever catch up with injustice, Horace," Miss Jenny said.
>
> "Well, that irony which lurks in events, then." (115)

Horace imagines the world as a battleground between justice and injustice; he is closer to the truth when he takes Miss Jenny's realistic check and proposes irony as a governing force instead. Irony too has a pattern, but it is a demonic anti-pattern, inhuman and, in this novel, terribly cruel. Horace's initiation comes when he hears Temple's story in the Memphis whorehouse and begins to piece together his clues into a deadly design. Still he refuses to believe, protesting, "Perhaps it is upon the instant that we realize, admit, that there is a logical pattern to evil, that we die . . ." (214). Horace suggests that evil is not just a momentary disruption in the divine plan, but a premeditated part of that plan. His reluctant paranoia anticipates Pynchon; it is what Lyall Powers calls "our dim awareness of some organized system of evil looming just beyond our range of vision--the more frightening as it remains vague and unspecified" (*Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Comedy* 86). Horace's spiritual death is completed when he witnesses the lynching of Goodwin for Popeye's crime; ironically, Popeye is hanged

with due process, while Goodwin suffers impalement and burning at the hands of a mob. Horace can only watch the flames, an image of chaos and emptiness, "a voice of fury like in a dream, roaring silently out of a peaceful void" (289). Sound and fury again, without even a Dilsey to offer hope.

At the end of *Sanctuary* Horace has become prematurely old. Reduced to a shell by what he has seen, and by the pattern of which he has been a part, he mutters madly about legislating the weather: "Night is hard on old people . . . Summer nights are hard on them. Something should be done about it. A law" (292). But laws are a joke in *Sanctuary*. In this most horrifying of Faulkner's novels, no human law or faith is proof against the cosmic chaos; the only pattern visible is evil.

The evil pattern of *Sanctuary* arises spontaneously and inexplicably, but in *Light in August* Faulkner examines the Puritan response to evil and the ironic way Puritanism acts as evil's source. With *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August* is Faulkner's most clearly anti-Puritan book. Hyatt Waggoner, in "*Light in August*: Outrage and Compassion," suggests that "'Puritanism,' or punitive religious moralism, is perhaps the chief intended antagonist . . ." (Barth, ed. 121). The novel's religiously inclined characters are fanatical, intolerant, hypocritical and corrupt. Here, if anywhere, despite trading in Calvinistic rumblings about

doom and fate, Faulkner reveals his contempt for the dominant religion of the South.

Puritanism has this much in common with the Jester god: both are attempts to order the universe. But Faulkner's Puritans are both too rigid to encompass reality and too cruel to be humane. More than in any other novel, Faulkner takes great care to draw out the motivations of his anti-hero, Joe Christmas. Christmas's motivations are mixed, but Faulkner painstakingly demonstrates the connections between Christmas's exposure to Puritanical ideals and his development into a violent, ironic parody of Christ.

Christmas is raised and influenced by the most virulent of Calvinists. Doc Hines, in his guise as the janitor of Christmas's orphanage, claims to know the Lord's will (119-20) even as he convicts himself of blasphemy. Hines's eyes are described as "blind, wide open, icecold, fanatical" (120), and his continual refrain concerning "womanfilth and bitchery" marks him as Faulkner's most unnatural character since Popeye. When Hines reappears near the end of the novel he is even worse, but his stare is the same: "coldly and violently fanatical and a little crazed" (322). Hines is a perverse caricature of Southern religion, so crazed by the evil around him that he is its unwitting source.

Christmas fares little better when he is adopted by the grim McEachern, a "ruthless and bigoted man" (155) who

equals Doc Hines in severity if not in madness. Interestingly, though he fails to make Joe religious, McEachern does impart to him the real essence of McEachern's faith, its unbending rigor; as they walk to the crib for an accustomed whipping, their essential identity is apparent: "the two backs in their rigid abnegation of all compromise more alike than actual blood could have made them" (139). The proud inflexibility of Puritanism is as important and as reprehensible as its moral restrictiveness. The effect of Joe's upbringing is to make him as violent and repressed as Hines and McEachern, but without even their restraining sense of order.

In the person of Joe Christmas, Puritanism creates a kind of anti-Christ, deeply influenced by Puritan sexual repression but at the same time opposed to any kind of order, doomed to react against any attempt to define him in relation to his surroundings. The repression which haunts him appears in his first potentially sexual encounter, where he kicks and beats a "womanshenegro" (147), the very language showing his affinity with Doc Hines and his "womanfilth." Part of Christmas's violence stems from his ambiguous blackness, but his deepest hostility springs from religious influences; he exults in killing McEachern, his spiritual tormenter. Given his past, we can hardly be surprised by his brutal murder of Joanna Burden, since she represents a fusion of the women he hates and the faith he

so violently rejects; as Christmas announces after the deed, he kills her "Because she started praying over me" (98). In his flight from justice, Christmas significantly invades a Negro church and occupies the pulpit, "cursing God" (306). Burden is equally warped by her fierce faith, progressing from nymphomania to attempted murder. As Waggoner notes, "she cannot accept a mixed, impure, ambiguous world, any more than Joe himself can, or Hightower before Byron teaches him. Like Melville's Pierre, she finds 'the ambiguities' intolerable, just because she is so much an idealist" (Barth, ed. 132). Idealistic characters, even warped ones like Joanna Burden, fare poorly in the Jester's ironic universe.

Included among these idealists is the Reverend Hightower, for although intellectually much more sophisticated than a Doc Hines, he has a martyr's fatalistic pride. Hightower's God is no more attractive than McEachern's; it is "the final and supreme Face Itself, cold, terrible because of Its omniscient detachment" (463). Hightower, like Horace Benbow, imagines a cosmic system of justice and fitting retribution which unfortunately falls short of explaining the events around him.

Those who do not recognize irony at work in the world are doomed to be its servants and victims. In *Light in August* the ultimate ironist is the Player God first evoked in *Sartoris*, now reappearing with deadly purpose.

Seriousness will not suffice, since even the will to order can ironically lead to disorder; Brooks describes the "utter seriousness and complete dedication to the concept of order" of the unspeakable Percy Grimm (*The Yoknapatawpha Country* 52). Grimm's obsession with order, the skeleton of Puritanism, makes him an ideal tool for Faulkner's Player God; he moves "with that lean, swift, blind obedience to whatever Player moved him on the Board" (437). Faulkner describes the agent of cosmic evil in religious terms: Grimm acts "as though under the protection of a magic or a providence," and is "indefatigable, not flesh and blood, as if the Player who moved him for pawn likewise found him breath" (437). He has a "young voice clear and outraged like that of a young priest" (439); even his brutal mutilation of the dying Christmas is attributed to the sinister chessmaster: "the Player was not done yet" (439). Campbell and Foster recognize the motive behind Faulkner's creation of the Player: "The existence of the Player is inferred, it seems, because the extent of human evil is so great that it could have been produced only by an evil cosmic force . . ." (118). Percy Grimm is even more strongly associated with religion than Joe Christmas--he is correspondingly more evil, less human. Thinking of himself as an agent of law and order, he becomes an apostle of chaos instead.

In a cosmos ruled by an evil Player God, survivors must either simply embrace life, like Lena Grove, or recognize and live with irony, like Byron Bunch. These essentially comic characters offer a needed counterbalance to the world of Doc Hines and Percy Grimm, saving *Light in August* from the hopelessness of *Sanctuary*. Even Lena's runaway lover, Lucas Burch, is a survivor, albeit a paranoid one. Burch (or Brown, as he calls himself), envisions "an Opponent who could read his moves before he made them and who created spontaneous rules which he and not the Opponent, must follow" (414). Burch is a weakling and a criminal, but he recognizes the game of which he is a part; he is spared the brutality of Christmas and Grimm, who are unwitting pawns.

The problem of evil and the nature of the cosmic game give shape to the unfolding design of *Absalom, Absalom!*, a work more unified than *Light in August*, deeper and more complex than *Sanctuary*. As Quentin Compson and his friend Shreve patiently unravel the tale of the rise and fall of the Sutpen family, they are in a sense attempting to move beyond the position of Horace Benbow, who also found himself staring helplessly at death by fire. The fall of Thomas Sutpen's great house is more than a metaphor for the fall of the South; it represents the failure of Puritan ideals to impose order upon the teeming chaos of life itself.

In "Faulkner and the Calvinist Tradition" Barth argues that American Puritanism "contained within itself the seeds

of two contradictory ideologies, determinism and extreme individualism" (Barth, ed. 13). In this novel determinism wins, for Thomas Sutpen is the supreme individualist, allowing nothing to stand in the way of his dynastic designs. The various narrators in the novel repeatedly refer to the Sutpens as "that isolated puritan country household" (93), to Henry Sutpen's "puritan heritage--that heritage peculiarly Anglo-Saxon" (108), and to "Henry's puritan mind" (109). Mr. Compson, in a reprise of his disillusioned role in *The Sound and the Fury*, calls Henry "this grim humorless yokel out of a granite heritage where even the houses, let alone clothing and conduct, are built in the image of a jealous and sadistic Jehovah" (109). Sutpen's failure is a failure of human will to triumph over circumstance; it is equally the failure of his vision of God's will made manifest in man.

Most of the more philosophical reflections on the fate of the Sutpens come from Quentin's father. As an anti-Puritan he recognizes that Sutpen's attempt to wrest order and respectability from the wilderness was doomed even as success seemed certain:

> . . . while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony--the stage manager, call him what you will--was already striking the set and dragging on

> the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one. (72-73)

This stage manager--Shreve prefers to call him "the creditor" (178)--moves Sutpen in the same way the Player moved Percy Grimm. Sutpen's mistake, in Mr. Compson's words, was to believe "there was a limit even to irony beyond which it became either just vicious but not fatal horseplay or harmless coincidence" (266-67). In a world governed by an unseen stage manager there is no such thing as coincidence, and divine "horseplay" can indeed prove fatal.

In examining the theme of rigid Puritans confronted with an ironic fate, orchestrated by some vicious Jester, I have not attempted to engage the complex structure of *Absalom, Absalom!*. The novel itself is Faulkner's most intricate puzzle, a game of ambiguities and hypothetical meanings comparable to *The Confidence-Man*. Shreve, Quentin, and Mr. Compson parallel the reader in their attempts to make sense of the Sutpens' tragedy; in a sense they are attempting to fit a story of decay and dissolution into some classical form complete with rising and falling actions and tragic flaws. (Quentin attempts the same thing in *The Sound and the Fury* with his tale of incest, and Ike McCaslin makes similar use of an almost incomprehensible family history in *Go Down, Moses*.) As most critics of the novel have noted,

any coherent reading rests on unprovable assumptions; even most of the Sutpens' dialogue is imaginatively reconstructed by the Compsons. The meaning they obtain from their search, like the meaning obtained by the reader--like, one is tempted to announce by analogy, *all* meaning--is provisional, ironic, and double-edged. Subjectivity warps all efforts to compress reality into a single mold.

One of the problems with the Sutpens is their humorlessness. Humor is always a saving grace in Faulkner, and his most positive characters have the ability to distance themselves from their surroundings for the sake of a good laugh.[4] The paradigm for this kind of ironic detachment is V. K. Ratliff--travelling salesman, raconteur, and jester in his own right. In this mood, the mood of an Ishmael lost at sea, even the Snopses appear comical, part of some jest at which it is better to laugh than cry. Faulkner's peculiar twin perspective was described by Malcolm Cowley in 1944: "If you imagine Huckleberry Finn living in the House of Usher and telling uproarious stories while the walls crumble about him, that will give you the double quality of Faulkner's work at its best" (qtd. in "Some Uses of Folk Humor by Faulkner" by Otis Wheeler, in Wagner, ed. 4). In novels like *Go Down, Moses*, the Snopes trilogy, and *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner adds comic relief by incorporating humorous folktale material into tragic action.

The many misfiring and malfunctioning guns in Faulkner's novels offer a useful symbol for the Joke that hangs in a delicate balance between comedy and tragedy. In *Go Down, Moses*, when Lucas tries to kill Carothers Edmonds he discovers that men's lives are governed by "the light, dry, incredibly loud click of the miss-fire" (57). This time the tragedy fails to materialize, and the misfire echoes comically in the acount of Ash's point-blank encounter with a bear, using an old gun loaded with four ancient shells. The buckshot round fails to go off, as does a rabbit load and then, as Ike cries "Don't shoot" (325), the first of two shells loaded with bird shot. Only after the bear is gone and the gun is lying against a stump does the last bird shell go off by itself. Ike knows well that birdshot would only infuriate a bear, and the fact that Ash does not try the final, functioning shell makes the harmless joke all the better when it goes off by itself. Then too there is Boon Hoggenbeck, who never hits what he is aiming at, though he may wound an occasional bystander. Only in the hands of Mink Snopes does the joke of the misfire turn serious.

The venial, amoral, and ubiquitous Snopses exist primarily as victims and perpetrators of jokes. In *The Hamlet*, Faulkner's most richly comic novel, they overrun the countryside like a swarm of locusts. Although often predatory or simply mean, they occasionally earn our

sympathy. Ike Snopes appears as the innocent dupe of some cosmic injustice:

> the eyes which at some instant, some second once, had opened upon, been vouchsafed a glimpse of, the Gorgon-face of that primal injustice which man was not intended to look at face to face and had been blasted empty and clean forever of any thought. (*The Hamlet* 85)

This passage, recalling Pip's similar initiation in *Moby-Dick*, establishes the pathetic Ike as a victim. Ratliff and Bookwright look on him and speculate that God is no better:

> "And yet they tell us we was all made in His image," Ratliff said.
>
> "From some of the things I see here and there, maybe he was," Bookwright said.
>
> "I don't know as I would believe that, even if I knowed it was true," Ratliff said. (81)

Ratliff, recognizing his own need for illusions, refuses to embrace such a dark view, but we are left with the suggestion that God is another of Faulkner's Idiots, a Joke creating jokes.

Despite these dark undercurrents, *The Hamlet* resembles *The Confidence-Man* more than *Moby-Dick*. The townspeople of Frenchman's Bend take pride in the larcenous exploits of a Flem Snopes, even as they realize the joke is on them. Lindberg observes that the confidence man is a "covert culture hero" (3) in America, and suggests that in Faulkner, "The model of survival in this more complicated con-game world is V. K. Ratliff" (208). Ratliff scores one of the few victories against Flem Snopes, the soulless sharper, and even when he gets greedy and falls for Flem's salted treasure at the Old Frenchman's Place, Ratliff survives quite well, having gained a little wisdom for his money. In fact, Ratliff gets more enjoyment out of being beaten in the trade than Flem gets as the winner, since Flem is never known to enjoy anything. Like Faulkner in this novel, Ratliff maintains his poise as an ironic observer, even while participating in the action. He is capable of a rueful chuckle in the face of tragedy.

Ratliff's most striking triumph of ironic imagination appears in his fantasy sequence of Flem Snopes in Hell. Blotner compares the episode to Twain's *Mysterious Stranger* (*Biography* 407), but it even more strongly resembles Jurgen's scenes in Heaven and Hell. Like Jurgen, Flem stands by his rights, no matter how ludicrous they seem in the satanic setting. Having sold his soul to Hell, Flem comes to redeem it and take his place among the damned, but

the devils in charge find he has no soul left. So Flem beats the Prince of Hell, who suddenly finds himself looking up at Flem on his throne, "And the Prince scrabbling across the floor, clawing and scrabbling at that locked door, screaming . . . ." (153; Faulkner's elipsis). The scene parallels both Jurgen's legalistic trickery and his ascension to the throne of Heaven. Like most of Flem's actions, the imagined scene is both faintly horrifying and vastly funny. Ratliff's abilities as an ironic storyteller establish him as a Faulkner surrogate in the world of Frenchman's Bend.

Ratliff is also responsible for the humorous episodes which act as a counterweight to the Mink story in *The Mansion*. Whether travelling to the foreign opulence of New York or preventing the election of Clarence Snopes, Ratliff is a model of intelligent, sympathetic action. He is one of Faulkner's natural men, a salty and imperturbable storyteller, opposed to the unnatural strictures of Puritanism. What Gavin Stevens regards as portentous doom, Ratliff steps back from and recognizes as the irony behind all human existence.

Of course, *The Hamlet* is not all comic; the murderous Mink Snopes, who will transform the last volume of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy into something resembling tragedy, also appears on the scene. Mink's murder of Jack Houston is another of Faulkner's Russian roulette sequences:

> He had not fired the gun in four years; he had not even been certain that either two of the five shells he owned would explode. The first one had not; it was the second one--the vain click louder than thunderbolt, the furious need to realign and find the second trigger, then the crash which after the other deafening click he did not hear at all . . . (218)

That unheard blast will resonate through two more novels before finding its final victim.

When Mink returns in *The Mansion* he is the same inflexible, proud little man, determined to revenge himself on his cousin Flem, who Mink believes could have saved him from prison. Mink's motivations are much more clearly drawn here than in *The Hamlet*, leading some critics to praise him as a tragic figure, or even a "comic hero" (Adams 9). But the fact that Flem is inhuman and loathsome does not make Mink any less a nasty little murderer; he is described repeatedly as serpent-like, small but deadly. Even if we accept Mink's belief that Flem could have shielded him from the murder charge for killing Houston, Mink's forty year grudge against Flem while in prison marks him as a Doc Hines character, proud of his own righteous indignation. Brooks calls Mink "one of Faulkner's many 'Calvinists' who do not

believe in a God of love or mercy, but do believe that there is a final justice" (*The Yoknapatawpha Country* 232).

Mink makes a corrupt covenant with God, or what he calls "*them--they--it*, whichever and whatever you wanted to call it, who represented a simple fundamental justice and equity in human affairs" (*The Mansion* 6). He regards all his trials as tests: "it was simply *them* again, still testing, trying him to see just how much he could bear and would stand" (16). Even as he shoots Houston, Mink realizes that his cosmic opponents are not satisfied but have more torments in store:

> . . . he thought *And even now. They still aint satisfied yet* as the first shell clicked dully without exploding, his finger already moving back to the rear trigger, thinking *And even yet* as this one crashed and roared . . . (39)

Mink is in a sense right in his belief that he can wait Them out, winning by sheer perseverance, and there have been those who admire him for it, but in the end his patience yields the grand sum of two murders and his own wrecked, wasted life.

Mink is quite sure during his years in prison that God is ultimately on his side. As he tells the warden, "when a Judgment powerful enough to help you, will help you if all

you got to do is jest take back and accept it, you are a fool not to" (100). As a counterbalance to Mink and his murderous designs, we find Gavin Stevens echoing Horace Benbow's beliefs: "God was anyhow a gentleman" (131). When Mink sets out from prison after forty years to kill Flem, Gavin tries to persuade himself that Mink cannot possibly succeed: "By God, God Himself is not so busy that a homicidal maniac with only ten dollars in the world can hitchhike a hundred miles and buy a gun for ten dollars then hitchhike another hundred and shoot another man with it" (389). But Stevens knows enough of the world so that this avowal must ring false even to his own ears.

As Mink embarks on his journey toward revenge, he no longers refers to an anonymous Them, but to a deity he calls "Old Moster" (403). Perhaps the change occurs because Mink recognizes a personal irony directed toward him in the events of his life, so personal that he must attribute it to a single celestial opponent; indeed he no longer has an adversary, but a "Moster," or Master. He has become a human pawn. When the ancient, rusty pistol which he has bought in Memphis fires only once with two of his three shells, Mink wonders for a moment whether his last bullet will fire, then says to himself, "I dont need to worry. Old Moster jest punishes; He dont play jokes" (407), a phrase he repeats like a litany as he prepares to enter Flem's house (414). Mink's worry is justified, in light of "the infinite

capacity for petty invention of the inimical forces which had always dogged his life" (411), but the joke is more subtle than he knows.

As if the misfire when Mink first fired at Houston, and the second misfire when he tested the rusty revolver were not enough, Mink's final confrontation with Flem borders on the ludicrous. Once again, whatever god governs guns in Yoknapatawpha County teases Mink and his victim. The last round fails to fire; Mink "pulled the trigger and rather felt than heard the dull foolish almost inattentive click" (415). But Flem just sits there while Mink tries the same bullet again, thinking "*Hit'll go this time: Old Moster dont play jokes*" (416). The final joke is on Flem.

Despite Mink's desperate faith that his quest is based on justice rather than a joke, his struggles with a gun which seems to fire at random only underscore the fact that his life is a wasted, murderous chaos, not the cosmic morality play that he and many Faulkner critics would have it. If a God guides the destiny of Mink and Flem Snopes, He must be an exceptionally disorganized or else an exceptionally satirical deity. Flem is almost inhuman, but even his sworn opponent Gavin Stevens tries to prevent the murder. Flem is just a small town sharper; his only real illegality was the theft of brass from the town of Jefferson, and that was a failure. Mink, on the other hand, is a fanatical, self-righteous, pathological murderer; to

make Mink the hero and Flem the villian of a Greek tragedy is to miss Faulkner's irony-laden point. *The Mansion* is an inversion of what Mark Twain called a "tragedy-trap"; where Twain hides tragedy behind a comic surface, Faulkner hides black comedy behind the trappings of tragic drama.

In his late works Faulkner sometimes loses the ironic equilibrium of his central masterpieces. His bold Nobel Prize statement: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail" (*Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters* 120) leads to the even stronger statement in "To the Youth of Japan," where Faulkner asserts his belief that

> . . . nothing--war, grief, hopelessness, despair--can last as long as man himself can last; that man himself will prevail over all his anguishes, provided he will make the effort to; make the effort to believe in man and in hope--to seek not for a mere crutch to lean on, but to stand erect on his own feet by believing in hope and in his own toughness and endurance. (*Essays, Speeches, and Letters* 83)

Probably too much has been made of Faulkner's use of the word "prevail," since it can be applied to his fiction only in a very limited sense. V. K. Ratliff outlasts the Snopeses, but he can hardly be said to prevail over them,

any more than Ike McCaslin prevails over his hereditary guilt. The late novels that apparently strive to portray redemption, *Requiem For a Nun* and *A Fable*, are ultimately unconvincing, confused, and artistically unsuccessful. Faulkner apparently wishes to show the redemptive power of suffering, but in the absence of believable redemption, he instead leaves us with what Campbell and Foster call his "Myth of Cosmic Pessimism" (114). At best, man can strive for a heroic stoicism.[5] His most positive characters are not redeemers but survivors like V. K. Ratliff or Dilsey; their prototype is not Christ but Melville's Ishmael. Faulkner's homage to those who endure recalls Melville's praise for the long-suffering Hunilla in "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow": "Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee, not in the laureled victor, but in this vanquished one" (*GSW* 132).

Faulkner's world is one where, as Cass Edmonds observes, God seems to be "perverse, impotent, or blind: which?" (*Go Down, Moses* 258). The answer to Cass's question is usually some form of the Jester. In *The Wild Palms* Charlotte characterizes evil in a small sculpted figure which might be Ike Snopes in old age: ". . . a little ancient shapeless man with a foolish disorganized face, the face of a harmless imbecile clown." She calls it "a Bad Smell" (95). Her lover Harry imagines man as a victim of "the underlying All-Derisive biding to blast him" (132).

The "Bad Smell" and the "All-Derisive" are different interpretations of the same thing. Charlotte is the stronger of the two lovers; she reduces the cosmic Jester to an imbecilic, putrid clown. Harry imagines a more powerful Joker, capable of not merely souring life as with an unpleasant odor, but blasting man from the blind side, the unknown.

Few of Faulkner's protagonists can bear revelation of the Jester with the equanimity of a Ratliff. Instead we find what appears to be the standard Faulknerian response of a sensitive character confronted by his doom: laughter shading off into hysteria. In the "Pantaloon in Black" section of *Go Down, Moses* the grieving Rider echoes Darl's crazed laughter before the lynch mob arrives: "laughing and laughing and saying, 'Hit look lack Ah just cant quit thinking. Look lack Ah just cant quit'" (159). Even Joe Christmas, the man of pure reaction, apparently recognizes that his existence is somehow a joke. After the climactic murder of McEachern which necessitates his future career as an outlaw, Christmas finds himself "laughing into something that was obliterating him like a picture in chalk being erased from a blackboard" (*Light in August* 195). After the murder of Houston, Mink Snopes's wife laughs bitterly as she leaves him, and Ike McCaslin's wife too, in the moment when their marriage disintegrates, is seen "lying on her side, her back to the empty rented room, laughing and laughing"

(*Go Down, Moses* 315). In novel after novel some character achieves a final realization of his own fate, or of the nature of evil, or of the inexplicable pattern which dogs him--and laughs.

Faulkner is a humorist, not merely in the broad tradition of the tall tale or horse-trading yarn, but in the ironic twists thrown into his cosmology. Hauck's appraisal of Faulkner as "a master of deliberately ambivalent serious humor" (188) is as good a description as any for the author of *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner's universe is not amenable to human order, but his characters, even the lowly Bundrens, have a way of surviving the worst blows of an ironic fate. When blasted by circumstance, more sensitive individuals find refuge in the slightly crazed laughter of men who are the butts of a joke so large that they must laugh or die. Only the cool chuckle of a Ratliff shows that the joke can be enjoyed and turned against the Joker. Almost all of Faulkner's protagonists recognize that they are engaged in a contest against God, Nature, Fate, the Player, or whatever they call the forces that thwart them. None are willing to consider their fate as a random function of cosmic chaos. Any meaning is better than no meaning; as Harry says in *The Wild Palms*, "between grief and nothing I will take grief" (324).[6]

In the end for Faulkner, as for Melville, art becomes the best justification for man, the best defense against a

universe which appears to be a colossal joke. The Jester offers Faulkner a god he can denigrate, combat, and imitate. It would be difficult to say which of these functions is most important. Perhaps the last function encompasses the others, for as a Jesting creator, Faulkner delights in usurping the role of god. Michel Gresset, in "The 'God' of Faulkner's Fiction," argues that "almost by definition, writing is initially an activity stolen from God (Gresset, ed. 52-53), and Blotner records Faulkner's own boast: "He would say that as an artist, he felt he could create better characters than God could . . ." (*Faulkner* 216). In an ironic universe where truth is infinitely elusive and human observations are irredeemably subjective, creation of one's own truth becomes the only redemption possible.

Conclusion

Paranoia and the Jest

The Jester theme reaches its fullest development in Faulkner, but he by no means exhausts its possibilities. More recent writers have made their own versions of the Jester an important motif of post-modernism. While emphasis has shifted from the theological speculation that Dickinson, Melville, and Twain found so compelling, the trickster god remains a focal point for modern examinations of man as persecuted victim. In particular, the strain of paranoia which characterizes Melville's late works and appears again in Faulkner's battered protagonists has become a standard reaction to a universe that seems bent on making man into a hapless dupe.

Dickinson, Melville, and Twain conceived their visions of the Jester primarily as a way of attacking God. Their attacks are correspondingly severe as their longing for God is powerful. Everywhere faced with a cruel reality, they were both drawn to and repelled by the sanctuary of the American religious tradition; although Melville and Twain made their decisions to rebel early, the residual tension reverberates through their greatest works. By the close of the nineteenth century, however, traditional belief was no longer a serious alternative for most American writers, and

the Jester became less of an attack and more of an ironic makeshift, a way of commenting on American traditions while lending structure to a universe that appeared increasingly meaningless. The Jester then serves as a comic device, as in Cabell, or as a more sinister Player, as in Faulkner--a personified Fate to be combatted or endured. In more recent fiction, the comic mode has begun to dominate, perhaps because contemporary authors perceive it as more essentially honest: tragedy is an artificially imposed principle of order, a momentary stay against the arbitrary anarchy which surrounds us. Black humor thrives on anarchy, and any principle or order must be self-created and internal, born out of the victim's sense of persecution.

The clearest contemporary heir to the realm of the Jester is Thomas Pynchon, though analogues to his darkly comic cosmos can be found in the works of writers like Barth, Heller, and Vonnegut. Pynchon goes a step farther than Faulkner, refining the Jester God out of existence and leaving only the Jest--a universe of paranoia, where ambiguous plots and counter-plots surround his solitary truth-seekers. Pynchon's novels all portray the desperate search for a legitimate Other; this search takes place in a society which is paradoxically crowded: nowhere can man escape from man. The universe is crammed to bursting with facts and artifacts, but as it becomes more full it becomes less susceptible to interpretation. As Hauck argues, "*V.*

yields a fine recurring metaphor for the busy meaningless universe: the yo-yo" (243).

Faced with the teeming disorder of human society, Pynchon's characters often seek solitude. But nature proves to contain only a void. The search for V. that occupies his first novel takes place in a world of creeping chaos. The desert of north Africa is a fit emblem, advancing on civilization: "Soon, nothing. Soon only the desert" (*V.* 70). Gebrail, hoping for revelation there, finds only emptiness, but he takes a kind of masochistic delight in disillusionment: "Gebrail enjoyed starless nights. As if a great lie were finally to be exposed . . ." (73; Pynchon's ellipsis). Whether that lie is human or divine in origin is impossible to determine, but the proposed origin for the Koran suggests that it springs from human delusion: "What a joke if all that holy book were only twenty-three years of listening to the desert. A desert which has no voice" (71). The voiceless desert is a contemporary version of Melville's silent God.

The genesis of the Koran is a painful joke, at least to those who wish to believe in revelation, but Pynchon confirms the validity of the paradigm by offering a demonic parody of it. The desert has an even more hostile counterpart in the icy wastes of Antarctica, and the Koran is paralleled by Godolphin's inaccessible realm of Vheissu, an exotic, utterly alien civilization derived from the lost

cities of Poe and Lovecraft. Godolphin paradoxically found both evidence of Vhiessu and only emptiness in Antarctica, admitting "It was Nothing I saw" (188). When faced with absolute negation, human consciousness inhabits its own subjective phantasms, inventing substitutes for the bleak underlying reality. Vheissu may be only Godolphin's imaginary creation, no more real than Poictesme or Eseldorf, but in the spiritual Antarctic of Godolphin's existence, reality and vision become one.

Godolphin's visionary experience offers an interesting gloss on the relationship between the Jester and dreams, for as reality becomes emptied of meaning it comes to resemble dreaming. To Godolphin, it hardly matters whether his imagined Vheissu is real or not; it is "a gaudy dream of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation" (190). The whiteness of snow and ice, like the whiteness of the whale, stands for the final chaos of death, but the unearthly colors of Vhiessu are ultimately the same thing, a gaudy Nothing to set against empty nothingness. In Pynchon's world, however, the forces of Vhiessu are curiously active, and Godolphin finds himself pursued and haunted by what he has seen or imagined. As in Cabell's cosmos, to believe in something is to provide it with a kind of provisional reality.

The Jester God is associated with the gothic, fantastic strain in American fiction, and for all his technological

trappings, Pynchon is a modern gothic, a Frankenstein bent on creating monsters from which to flee. Godolphin's son Stencil finds his own meaning in his quest for V., but his self-definition is predicated on failure; he knows that he is "He Who Looks for V.," seeker of "the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name" (210). Stencil recognizes that "Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic" (423), but he never finds who or what is doing the ordering, and he dies with the revelation still to come. *V.* comes to no conventionally satisfying conclusion; instead we are left with a trail of suspicious circumstances that tends to induce paranoia in the reader as well in Pynchon's protagonists. The hypothetical plots and tenuous clues that make up the web of *V.* become increasingly ominous in the later novels, while the complementary jokes embedded in the text by Pynchon become ever more uproarious. Since joking helps to counteract despair, the relationship is a natural one.

Pynchon's range as a comic novelist runs from satire and black humor to slapstick. The correspondence between paranoia and jesting is one of the many intertwined ambiguities in his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49.* Oedipa Maas cannot decide whether she is the victim of a plot or a joke. She at first suspects that "They, somebody up there, were putting her on" (16), but soon imagines that "it's all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*" (18). Pynchon envisions the Tristero, that shadowy central

character which may or may not exist, as a kind of strip tease performer: "Would it smile, then, be coy . . . Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa's, smile gone malign and pitiless . . ." (36). The question remains unanswered, since we never quite see the Tristero naked; the dance never ends. Neither Oedipa nor the reader can know just how serious her plight really is. Which of the Tristero's imagined smiles is the true one: the jovial or the malicious? They are twin sides of the same coin, since a practical joke is a kind of plot, and a joke that threatens to drive its victim insane is no more funny in the usual sense than Darl Bundren's crazed laughter.

Oedipa devotes herself to tracking down the Tristero because pursuit of the Jester is an ironic substitute for conventional forms of religion, a bitter alternative to worship. Pynchon's seekers resemble traditional pilgrims in their concern for signs and portents. Oedipa knows her Adversary only through indirect "clues," clues which she sees as a diminished substitute for revelation: ". . . she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night." (87). Her loss of the Logos is a dilemma which would appear familiar to Melville, and her resulting paranoia falls in a line that stretches from Ahab and Pierre through Faulkner's

Compsons and Bundrens. Oedipa's desire to abolish the night is a desire to end all confusion and ambiguity, to replace primeval chaos with a luminous cosmos, but she finds only clues to *some* giant joke or trick. Pynchon offers no apocalypse, no sinking ship or burning mansion; the novel ends before an anticipated climax. Oedipa's final vision of the auctioneer as "puppet-master" (138) suggests that her paranoia remains active; it may also be justified.

Gravity's Rainbow extends and refines Pynchon's obsession with paranoia; it also clarifies the connection between modern and Puritan versions of existential anxiety. Pynchon has an abiding interest in Puritanism (see, for example, the Scurvhamite heresy in *Lot 49* 116), and when Tyrone Slothrop begins to see plots surrounding him he attributes his insight to "a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia" (219). That reflex nicely characterizes protagonists like Ahab as well as the authors in this study, all of whom are tempted to find transcendent meaning in the mundane. Slothrop has a peculiar Puritan heritage; an ancestor, William Slothrop, founded a Slothropite heresy which praised the Preterite: "William argued holiness for these 'second Sheep,' without whom there'd be no elect" (647). Tyrone, like most of Pynchon's characters, is of the modern preterite: dispossessed, confused, and manipulated.

Instead of the Puritan Father, Pynchon's seekers find an anonymous trickster. The invisible "They" who control events are in charge of "the game behind the game" (242), which most ordinary players never fathom. In this bleakly modern vision, God has become an anonymous committee, indistinguishable from Pynchon's international corporations and governments that collaborate even as they make war on each other. The powerlessness of solitary man in a corporate world makes paranoia inevitable; Pynchon extends this insight into cosmic significance.

A paranoid vision of the Jest is preferable to no vision at all, as even Slothrop realizes: "If there is something comforting--religious, if you want--about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long." This is the cry of twentieth century man adrift in the cosmos, recalling T. S. Eliot's "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" in *The Waste Land* and E. M. Forster's epigraph to *Howard's End*: "Only connect . . . ." Or as Slothrop puts it to himself, "Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that *reason* . . ." (506; Pynchon's ellipsis). As Slothrop discovers bits and pieces of an emerging pattern, it becomes apparent that the Puritan God has been transformed into a Jester: "The hand of Providence creeps among the stars, giving Slothrop the

finger" (538). The image is both very funny and horrifying.

Since subtlety winds one deeper into the labyrinthine heart of paranoia, the only escape from existential fear is through the anarchic excess of humor. In *Gravity's Rainbow* this takes the form of such radical departures from the norm as Pig Bodine and Roger Mexico at the establishment dinner party, vanquishing "Them" temporarily with an impromptu ode to "snot soup," among other, even less appetizing delights (834). By becoming jesters themselves, they manage to escape the roles of paranoid and victim for a time and participate in the ironic structure of the universe; they become counterparts to Pynchon himself, the irrepressible jesting author.

Pynchon is only the most recent culmination of an important strain of American writing which is obsessed with dissolving or decaying order--the stuff of which jokes are made. In a universe where the old religious syntheses have broken down, only the omnipotent author escapes being the butt of a cosmic Joke--perhaps along with the readers who are in the know. In the modern world, it has become possible to view death as meaningless, or meaningful only in an ironic, cruel way. Thus in his Vietnam novel, *A Rumour of War*, Philip Caputo suggests, "We were all the victims of a great practical joke played on us by God or Nature. Maybe that was why corpses always grinned. They saw the joke at the last moment" (219). But writers from Melville to

Pynchon suggest that it is at least possible to supplant the role of victim with that of a counter-jester, gathering the elusive universe in a net of irony, displacing pain with humor.

Of course the Jester is not strictly confined to the American tradition. Hardy springs immediately to mind in England, and one of Graham Greene's characters observes "You would almost think there was a great joker somewhere who likes to give a twist to things. Perhaps the dark side of God has a sense of humor" (*The Honorary Consul* 272). The best explanation of the cosmic joke belongs to Milan Kundera, who distinguishes between the thin laughter of the angels, which pretends to celebrate the wonder of God's works, and the powerful laughter of the Devil, which "denies all rational meaning to God's world." Demonic laughter stems from paradox or incongruity:

> Things deprived suddenly of their putative meaning, the place assigned them in the ostensible order of things . . . make us laugh. Initially, therefore, laughter is the province of the Devil. It has a certain malice to it (things have turned out differently from the way they tried to seem), but a certain beneficent relief as well (things are looser than they seemed, we have a greater latitude in living with them, their gravity does

> not oppress us). (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* 61)

Kundera nicely explains the demonic element so clearly present in Melville, Twain, Bierce, and Cabell, but the background of American Calvinism adds depth to the counter-myth and to the sense of betrayal that fuels it. The Jester God serves as a reaction against American Calvinism and the genteel tradition and as a way to establish a universal order based on irony and double meanings--sometimes serious, sometimes humorous. It is both a parodic negation of the paternalistic, tyrannical deity of the Puritans, and an ordering principle to set against the perceived threat of cosmic chaos. Even when the older religious tradition is moribund, the Jester retains that secondary function.

At least since Dickinson, American authors have suspected that God and the nature of the universe are unknowable. Their psychological need to put a face to chaos produces a Jester God. Simultaneously, this creation allows man to define himself in relation to the universe and its unreliable ruler. Faced with the problem of how to act ethically and with dignity when he may be only a dupe of forces larger than himself, man can choose to be a stoic, a seeker, a humorist, an artist, or some combination of them all; at any rate, he is faced, like Ahab, with the

difficulty of keeping "his humanities." The danger for these authors along the way is that after a time, as Nietzche observed, the chaos will stare back at them with their own face--thus Narcissism and dreams recur in fiction concerned with the Jester. Prophets of the Jester are finally trapped in a tautology; they seek self-definition in terms of a Jester God--whom they have themselves created. This philosophical trap of solipsism is best avoided by rejoicing in the ambiguity and double vision of the world of the Jester, and in the humor that accompanies it. In this way the writer becomes both a laughing demon and a god creating gods--a puzzle-solver and a creator of puzzles--a jester and a participant in the universal Jest.

Notes

Introduction

[1] Christ might be said to resolve this paradox, but only by substituting another.

[2] Nina Baym, in "God, Father, and Lover in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," argues that Dickinson reacts against lingering Puritan ideas in a group of poems written in the persona of a child addressing the Father above: "As Puritan poems, they record the final dissolution of a bond of love and gratitude between men and God and the perversion of the idea of Covenant into the idea of the confidence game, the swindle" (Elliott, ed., *Puritan Influences in American Literature* 201).

[3] See also "Heaven--is what I cannot reach!" (109; No. 239) and "The nearest Dream recedes--unrealized--" (150; No. 319) for further examples of a taunting God, mocking or teasing His subjects.

[4] The power of this sort of rhetoric even today is evident when President Reagan uses Governor Winthrop's "shining city on a hill" image in his campaign speeches.

Chapter 1

[1] As Daniel Hoffman notes, "Although not a son of the Puritans, Melville was reared in the Dutch Reformed Church of Albany, then the most orthodox Protestant sect in the United States. His pious mother imposed upon her children a Calvinism as predestinatory and unforgiving as that of Hawthorne's colonial ancestors" (*Form and Fable* 223). Thompson argues further that Melville's parents "taught their son to believe that God had created him innately depraved and predestinately damned to eternal Hell; but that he might possibly be saved from such damnation, through divine grace, if he threw himself submissively and abjectly on the mercy of God, as revealed through Jesus Christ" (4).

[2] Letter of Nov. 17, 1851. (qtd. in *Moby-Dick* 566).

[3] See Mumford: "*Moby-Dick* is the story of the eternal Narcissus in man, gazing into all rivers and oceans to grasp the unfathomable phantom of life--perishing in the illusive waters. *Moby-Dick* is a portrait of the whale and a presentation of the demonic energies in the universe that harass and frustrate and extinguish the spirit of man" (158).

[4] A number of critics have explored this paradox. Thompson: "Ahab will fight fire with fire, malice with malice, hate with hate" (232).

Herbert: "Ahab is an accomplice of the divine malice to which he offers the worship of defiance" (157).

Slotkin: "His response to the spirit of nature is that of the Puritan: he is either its captive and victim or the agent of a transcendent power that destroys it. He worships, not the whale or the god, but the wound they gave him . . ." (24).

[5] Stubb actually uses the metaphor of a game when he overhears Ahab: I heard Ahab mutter, 'Here some one thrusts these cards into these old hands of mine; swears that I must play them, and no others.' And damn me, Ahab, but thou actest right; live in the game, and die in it!" (413).

[6] Ahab also compares Fate to a toying cat; the trope appears yet again in *Clarel* (333-36; I. xvii.).

[7] See also Thompson, who reads *The Confidence-Man* allegorically as a fable about God's betrayal of man's faith. Franklin adds that "Melville's mythology converts all gods into the Confidence Man" (187).

[8] See Elizabeth Foster's Introduction to the Hendricks House edition: "Irony is the very stuff of a world where deceit masquerades as faith, misanthropy as universal brotherhood, and cynicism as philanthropy . . ." (xciv).

[9] There have been a number of attempts to "redeem" the novel. Franklin, for example, agrees with Lindberg in claiming that it "turns universal chaos into a comic cosmos" (154). Ray Browne goes further, seeing the Confidence-Man

(along with Bartleby and Billy Budd) as a savior and the ending of the novel as an optimistic one. Hauck makes Melville out to be a sort of Christian existentialist: "The book does see faith in itself as absurd, but that is not to say that the book sees faith as foolish" (115).

[10] Walter Bezanson notes in his Introduction, "The loss of faith is the basic assumed fact of the poem, and its largest problem is how to endure the overwhelming sense of a shattered vision" (cix). God is never clearly present in *Clarel*. The poem is in a sense about those who "Invoke him who returns no call" (194; I. iv.).

[11] *Billy Budd*, like *The Confidence-Man*, remains controversial. Seelye follows Thompson and Franklin in finding it an apocalyptic and dark sacrifice of a pathetic innocent. Mason and Mumford find the book a jubilant affirmation or return to faith on Melville's part.

Chapter 2

[1] Michelson discusses at some length the importance of mystery and play in the last version of "The Mysterious Stranger": "if man's God, as man has conceived him, is truly a gamester and practical joker, then a story about the antics of this Tom Sawyer-God, a story meant to dispel banal imaginings and confront man with the mystery *behind* the

Gamester, should *itself* be an act of celebration of that mystery" (51). Michelson adds, "Through play the world we cannot understand is celebrated in and by the very act of overthrowing the world we thought we knew" (56).

Chapter 3

[1] Jay Martin, in his essay "Ambrose Bierce," argues that Bierce's writing is appropriate for the hardened Civil War veteran: "The terrain of reality which he plotted--he was a topographic officer--he saw filled with traps" (Davidson, ed. *Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce* 114-15).

[2] See also the short story, "Death and the Child," where another character under the stress of battle is forced to wonder "if the universe took cognizance of him to an important degree" (*Complete Short Stories and Sketches* 396); similarly, in "An Episode of War" Crane writes, "the wounded man's hand is upon the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence" (654).

[3] Crane's short tale "Twelve O'Clock" has a similar ending, this time punctuated by the satirical cry of a cuckoo clock.

[4] See also Max Westbrook, "Stephen Crane's Poetry: Perspective and Arrogance": "In Crane's poetic world, however, there are two Gods. One, the Old Testament God, is

portrayed unsympathetically as a God of pride who judges man coldly, even cruelly. Crane associates Him frequently with the conventional church, sometimes with a corrupt morality that ignores human suffering, sometimes with the theme of nature's indifference. The second God is an internal conscience, a God who speaks only to the individual." (Gullason, ed. 300-301)

Chapter 4

[1] See Michael Millgate's *The Achievement of William Faulkner* for an extended analysis of parallels between *Jurgen* and *Soldiers' Pay*. Millgate argues that "The resemblances between *Soldiers' Pay* and *Jurgen* are of so detailed a nature as to suggest that Faulkner intended the presentation of Januarius Jones as a kind of parody of Cabell's presentation of Jurgen . . ." (63-64).

[2] Cleanth Brooks notes that "One finds clear echoes of *Jurgen* in *Mayday* (1926), and borrowings from *Jurgen* recur until almost the end of Faulkner's literary career" (*Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* x). Further, "Faulkner's debt to this book in his early period is immense" (364). Brooks supplies a useful enumeration of Faulkner's direct borrowings from *Jurgen* (364-66), and briefly analyzes the thematic debt: "I concede that *Jurgen* is an unlikely place

in which to find the core of Faulkner's faith in Man's endurance, a trait that he couples with Man's immortality. But here it is . . ." (245).

[3] Philip C. Rule, in "The Old Testament Vision in *As I Lay Dying*" compares the novel to the Book of Job (in Barth, ed.).

[4] Brooks says of Faulkner that "his is never a cynical and nihilistic humor. Its function is to maintain sanity and human perspective in a scene of brutality and horror" (*The Yoknapatawpha Country* 71).

[5] See John W. Hunt, "The Theological Complexity of Faulkner's Fiction": "Faulkner's religious center . . . is best described as a tension between Stoic and Christian visions" (Barth, ed. 82).

[6] Cass also says in *Go Down, Moses*, "even suffering and grieving is better than nothing" (186).

Works Cited

Adams, Richard P. *Faulkner: Myth and Motion.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1968.

Anderson, David D. "Melville and Mark Twain in Rebellion." *Mark Twain Journal* 11.3 (Fall, 1961).

Barth, J. Robert, ed. *Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond.* Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1972.

Bassan, Maurice, ed. *Stephen Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Beer, Thomas. *Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters.* New York: Knopf, 1924.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.

Berryman, Charles. *From Wilderness to Wasteland: The Trial of the Puritan God in the American Imagination.* Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1979.

Bierce, Ambrose. *The Ambrose Bierce Satanic Reader: Selections from the Invective Journalism of the Great Satirist.* Ed. Ernest Jerome Hopkins. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968.

---. *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce.* 12 vols. New York: Neale, 1909-12.

---. *Skepticism and Dissent: Selected Journalism from 1898-1901.* Ed. Lawrance I. Berkove. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Delmas, 1980.

---. *The Stories and Fables of Ambrose Bierce.* Ed. Edward Wagenknecht. Owings Mills, Md.: Stemmer House, 1977.

Blair, Walter. *Mark Twain and Huck Finn.* Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1960.

Blotner, Joseph. *Faulkner: A Biography.* New York: Random House, 1984.

---. *William Faulkner's Library--A Catalogue.* Charlottesville: U of Va. P, 1964.

Bowen, Merlin. *The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960.

Braswell, William. *Melville's Religious Thought.* New York: Octagon, 1943.

Brooks, Cleanth. *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Warren.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

---. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

---. *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1978.

Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Ordeal of Mark Twain.* New York: Dutton, 1920.

Browne, Ray B. *Melville's Drive to Humanism.* Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue Univ. Studies, 1971.

Cabell, James Branch. *Between Friends: Letters of James Branch Cabell and Others.* Ed. Padraic Colum and Margaret Freeman Cabell. New York: Harcourt, 1962.

---. *The Cream of the Jest.* New York: McBride, 1930.

---. *Domnei.* New York: McBride, 1928.

---. *Figures of Earth.* New York: McBride, 1927.

---. *The High Place.* New York: McBride, 1928.

---. *Jurgen.* New York: McBride, 1928.

---. *The Silver Stallion.* New York: McBride, 1926.

---. *Smire: An Acceptance in the Third Person.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1937.

---. *Something About Eve.* New York: McBride, 1929.

Cady, Edwin H. *Stephen Crane.* Boston: Twayne, 1980.

Campbell, Harry Modean, and Foster, Ruel E. *William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal.* New York: Cooper Square, 1970.

Caputo, Philip. *A Rumour of War.* New York: Ballantine, 1977.

Clark, George Pierce. "The Devil That Corrupted Hadleyburg." *Mark Twain Journal* 10.2 (Winter, 1956).

Coffee, Jessie McGuire. *Faulkner's Un-Christlike Christians: Biblical Allusions in the Novels.* Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983.

Colvert, James B. "Structure and Theme in Stephen Crane's Fiction." *Modern Fiction Studies* 5.3 (Autumn, 1959).

Conner, Frederick. *Cosmic Optimism.* New York: Octagon, 1973.

Covici, Pascal Jr. *Mark Twain's Humor: The Image of a World.* Dallas: SMU Press, 1962.

Cowley, Malcolm, ed. *After the Genteel Tradition: American Writers 1910-1930.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1964.

Cox, James M. *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor.* Princeton: Princeton UP 1966.

Crane, Stephen. *Active Service.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va., 1976.

---. *The Complete Short Stories and Sketches of Stephen Crane.* Ed. Thomas A. Gullason. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963.

---. *Bowery Tales.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va., 1969.

---. *The O'Ruddy.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va, 1971.

---. *Prose and Poetry.* New York: Library of America, 1984.

---. *The Red Badge of Courage.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va., 1975 .

---. *Stephen Crane: Letters.* Ed. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes. New York: N.Y. UP, 1960.

---. *Tales of Adventure.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va., 1970.

---. *Tales of Whilomville.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va., 1969.

---. *Tales, Sketches, and Reports.* Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: UP of Va., 1973.

Davidson, Cathy N., ed. *Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce.* Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982.

---. *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce: Structuring the Ineffable.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1984.

Davis, Joe Lee. *James Branch Cabell.* New York: Twayne, 1962.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown, 1960.

---. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts.* 3 vols. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1955.

Dickey, James. "Stephen Crane." *Stephen Crane in Transition: Centenary Essays.* Ed. Joseph Katz. DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Ill. UP, 1972.

Elliott, Emory, ed. *Puritan Influences in American Literature.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979.

Emerson, Everett. *The Authentic Mark Twain: A Literary Biography of Samuel L. Clemens.* Philadelphia: U of Penn. P, 1984.

Ensor, Allison. *Mark Twain and the Bible.* Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1969.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Vintage, 1972.

---. *As I Lay Dying.* New York: Vintage, 1964.

---. *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters.* Ed. James B. Merriwether. New York: Random House, 1965.

---. *A Fable.* New York: Vintage, 1978.

---. *Go Down, Moses.* New York: Vintage, 1973.

---. *The Hamlet.* New York: Vintage, 1956.

---. *Light in August.* New York: Vintage, 1972.

---. *The Mansion.* New York: Vintage, 1965.

---. *Mayday.* Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1978.

---. *Requiem for a Nun.* New York: Vintage, 1951.

---. *Sanctuary.* New York: Vintage, 1958.

---. *Sartoris.* New York: Signet, 1964.

---. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner.* Ed. Joseph Blotner. New York: Random House, 1977.

---. *Soldiers' Pay.* New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926.

---. *The Sound and the Fury.* New York: Modern Library, 1929.

---. *The Town.* New York: Vintage, 1957.

---. *The Unvanquished.* New York: Vintage, 1966.

---. *Wild Palms.* New York: Vintage, 1939.

Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel.* New York: Criterion, 1960.

Fisher, Marvin. *Going Under: Melville's Shorter Fiction and the American 1850's.* LSU Press, 1977.

Foster, Elizabeth S. Introduction. *The Confidence-Man.* By Herman Melville. New York: Hendricks House, 1954.

Franklin, H. Bruce. *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1963.

Frederick, John T. *The Darkened Sky: Nineteenth-Century American Novelists and Religion.* Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1969.

Gilmore, Michael. Introduction. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick.* Ed. Gilmore. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

Glicksberg, Charles I. *Literature and Religion: A Study in Conflict.* Dallas: SMU Press, 1960.

Greene, Graham. *The Honorary Consul.* New York: Pocket Books, 1973.

Grenander, M. E. *Ambrose Bierce.* Boston: Twayne, 1971.

Gresset, Michel, and Samway, Patrick, Ed. *Faulkner and Idealism: Perspectives from Paris.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1983.

Gullason, Thomas A., Ed. *Stephen Crane's Career: Perspectives and Evaluations.* New York: New York UP, 1972.

Gunn, Giles B. *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination.* New York: Oxford UP, 1979.

---, ed. *Literature and Religion.* New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Hauck, Richard. *A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971.

Herbert, T. Walter, Jr. *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled.* Rutgers Press, 1977.

Hill, Hamlin. *Mark Twain: God's Fool.* New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Hoffman, Daniel. *Form and Fable in American Fiction.* New York: Oxford UP, 1965.

---. "Moby-Dick: Jonah's Whale or Job's?" *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick.* Ed. Michael Gilmore. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

---. *The Poetry of Stephen Crane.* New York: Columbia UP, 1957.

Holton, Milne. *Cylinder of Vision: The Fiction and Journalistic Writing of Stephen Crane.* Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1972.

Howard, Leon. *Herman Melville: A Biography.* Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1951.

Hunt, John W. *William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension.* Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1965.

Inge, M. Thomas, and MacDonald, Edgar E., eds. *James Branch Cabell: Centennial Essays.* Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983.

Jones, Howard M. *Belief and Disbelief in American Literature.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967.

Jung, Carl. *The Essential Jung.* Ed. Anthony Storr. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

Kahn, Sholom J. *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger: A Study of the Manuscript Texts.* Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri P, 1978.

Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.* Trans. Michael Henry Heim. New York: Penguin, 1980.

LaFrance, Marston. *A Reading of Stephen Crane.* London: Oxford UP, 1971.

Lewis, R.W.B. Afterword. *The Confidence-Man.* By Herman Melville. New York: Signet, 1979.

Lindberg, Gary. *The Confidence Man in American Literature.* New York: Oxford UP, 1982.

Mason, Ronald. *The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville.* Mamoroneck, N.Y.: Paul P. Appel, 1972.

Melville, Herman. *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land.* Ed. Walter E. Bezanon. New York: Hendricks House, 1960.

---. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1984.

---. *Great Short Works of Herman Melville.* Ed. Warner Berthoff. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

---. *Israel Potter.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1982.

---. *Mardi.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1970.

---. *Moby-Dick.* Ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. New York: Norton, 1967.

---. *Omoo.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1968.

---. *Pierre or The Ambiguities.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1971.

---. *Poems of Herman Melville.* Ed. Douglas Robillard. New Haven, Conn.: College & Univ. Press, 1976.

---. *Redburn.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1969.

---. *Typee.* New York: Library of America, 1982.

---. *White-Jacket.* Chicago: Northwestern-Newberry, 1970.

Mencken, H. L. *James Branch Cabell.* New York: McBride, 1927.

---. *A Mencken Chrestomathy.* New York: Vintage, 1982.

Michelson, Bruce. "Deus Ludens: The Shaping of Mark Twain's 'Mysterious Stranger'." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 14.1 (Fall, 1980).

Millgate, Michael. *The Achievement of William Faulkner.* London: Constable, 1966.

Mumford, Lewis. *Herman Melville.* London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1929.

Murray, Henry A. "In Nomine Diaboli." *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays*. Ed. Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield. Dallas: SMU Press, 1953.

O'Connor, Richard. *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967.

Parsons, Coleman O. "The Devil and Samuel Clemens." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 23 (Autumn, 1947).

Powers, Lyall H. *Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Comedy*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1980.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Bantam, 1966.

---. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Bantam, 1973.

---. *V*. New York: Bantam, 1963.

Rosenthal, Bernard. "Herman Melville's Wandering Jews." *Puritan Influences in American Literature*. Ed. Emory Elliott. Urbana: U of Ill. P, 1979.

Santayana, George. *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1969.

---. *Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana*. Vol. II. Ed. Norman Henfrey. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968.

Seelye, John. "Final Balance: The Prose Fragments and Billy Budd." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd*. Ed. Howard P. Vincent. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Sewall, Richard B., Ed. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

---. *The Life of Emily Dickinson.* 2 vols. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.

Slotkin, Richard. "Moby-Dick: The American National Epic." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick.* Ed. Michael Gilmore. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

Smith, J. Harold. *Mark Twain: Rebel Pilgrim.* New York: Heath Cote, 1973.

Solomon, Eric. *Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1966.

Stallman, R. W. *Stephen Crane: A Biography.* New York: George Braziller, 1968.

Stark, John. *Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information.* Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1980.

Stewart, Randall. *American Literature and Christian Doctrine.* Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1958.

Suhre, Lawrence. Introduction. *The Devil's Dictionary.* By Ambrose Bierce. Owings Mill, Md.: Stemmer House, 1978.

Tarrant, Desmond. *James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality.* Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1967.

Tennyson, G. B., and Ericson, Edward E., Jr., eds. *Religion and Modern Literature.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1975.

Thompson, Lawrance. *Melville's Quarrel With God.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1952.

Tuckey, John S., ed. *Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger and the Critics.* Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1968.

---. *Mark Twain and Little Satan.* West Lafayette: Purdue Univ. Studies, 1963.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* In *Mississippi Writings.* New York: Library of America, 1982.

---. *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain.* Ed. Charles Neider. New York: Bantam, 1957.

---. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1983.

---. *The Devil's Race-Track: Mark Twain's Great Dark Writings.* Ed. John S. Tuckey. Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1980.

---. *Fables of Man.* Ed. John S. Tuckey. Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1972.

---. *Life on the Mississippi.* In *Mississippi Writings.* New York: Library of America, 1982.

---. *Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts.* Ed. William M. Gibson. Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1969.

---. *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.* Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1982.

---. *Pudd'nhead Wilson.* Ed. Sidney E. Berger. New York: Norton, 1980.

---. *The Selected Letters of Mark Twain.* Ed. Charles Neider. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

---. *What is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings.* Ed. Paul Baender. Berkeley: U of Cal. P, 1973.

Van Doren, Carl. *James Branch Cabell.* New York: Literary Guild, 1932.

Wadlington, Warwick. *The Confidence Game in American Literature.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975.

Wagner, Linda, ed. *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism.* Michigan State UP, 1973.

Warren, Robert Penn, ed. *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Wells, Arvin R. *Jesting Moses: A Study in Cabellian Comedy.* Gainesville: U of Fla. P, 1962.

Widmer, Kingsley. *The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Herman Melville's Shorter Novels.* Cal. St. Colleges, 1970.

Wilder, Amos N. *Theology and Modern Literature.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967.

Williams, William Carlos. *In the American Grain.* New York: New Directions, 1933.

Wilson, Edmund. "The James Branch Cabell Case Reopened." *The Bit Between My Teeth: A Literary Chronicle of 1950-1965.* New York: Noonday Press, 1965.

---. *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War.* New York: Oxford UP, 1962.

Wolford, Chester L. *The Anger of Stephen Crane: Fiction and the Epic Tradition.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983.