The Tragic Vision

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Recent Criticism, "Thematics," 
and the Existential Dilemma

[Dostoevski's] rejection of "reason,"—"the stone wall constituted of the laws of nature, of the deductions of learning, and of the science of mathematics,"—is clearly stated very early in his Letters from the Underworld. . . . At a time when the conflict between "life" and "reason"—the reason of the stone wall—was not yet resolved, Dostoevski, with full awareness of what he was doing, threw his lot on the side of life and against the stone wall. Old Karamazov is a depraved buffoon, shameless and corrupt; but there is a tremendous energy in him and love of life—the energy of the Karamazovs—and there is passion; there is something elemental in his sinfulness which flows whence all life, whether good or evil, flows, and which therefore draws our admiration since it is true, as Lise says, that in our secret hearts we all love evil. By contrast Rakitin is a thoroughly depraved and contemptible reptile with nothing to his favor. . . . What Dostoevski could not admit to himself is that the Bernards in the not too long run will win. One may sympathize with the writer of the Letters from the Underworld when he says, "I am not going to accept that wall merely because I have to run up against it, and have no means to knock it down." But one should not forget that the tragic alternative is ineluctable: either accept it or smash your head against it.

Eliseo Vivas, Creation and Discovery
1. Recent Criticism: Formalism and Beyond

All I have done so far and the way in which I have done it seem to me to bear certain essential relations to the poetic theories being expounded these last decades in the purer domain of literary criticism. After all, this has been a criticism that has, like all criticisms, arisen to some extent in response to the demands of the literature that surrounded it and nourished it. The approach of these critics will be seen to have been largely influenced by what the phenomenological data of their moral world revealed to them, as the data was aesthetically grasped in the organized totality of literary creation. Thus the method may work in reverse too, so that studying the criticism may open the way to a new understanding of the data for which it seeks, consciously or unconsciously, to account. It should prove instructive to the thematic study upon which I have been launched to trace the reflection in recent criticism of the existential complexities that have been concerning me, to see the extent to which this criticism has been formed under these other than aesthetic—these thematic—pressures. In order to throw such new light upon our problems, I shall have to digress at some length to examine the theoretical basis of this criticism. It will be worth the effort required to collect the theoretical residuum of the critical revolution of this century if by means of it we can push on to the fresher areas of thematic problems that are more immediately relevant to those I have been grappling with until now.

Many of the critics I have previously called the new apologists for poetry,1 while interesting themselves with endless

1 In my book, The New Apologists for Poetry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956). Most of the points I make in the early and summary portions of this chapter may be found more fully discussed and documented there. Here I want to accomplish the task of summary rather briskly so that I may shortly move on to my central concern. In my haste I may be forced at times to make my remarks too general and inclusive and to do less than justice to the all-important shadings that distinguish a
ingenuity in the complex operations of poetic language, have for the most part—or for the most important part—not done so out of a sterile Alexandrian dilettantism that runs after the verbally precious as a matter of self-congratulation: in order to reveal their powers of infinite division and multiplication. They clearly are not, as many would have them be, just so many deluded refugees from The Dunciad. Far from a barren formalism that in its ascetic purity scorns any interest in the teeming fullness of experience, such critics interest themselves in the poetic behavior of words out of a conviction that this behavior, with all its ambiguities, is reflective of the ambiguities of moral existence below the level of the finally inadequate abstractions which, through systematic discourse, we normally impose upon that existence. They want to restore the world in which the sensitive and fully human being has always found himself, a world never totally unambiguous which cries out for the illumination that the formally controlled literary work can alone bestow. And it can bestow it only through the very manipulations of poetic discourse and its complexities to which these critics must dedicate themselves with a meticulousness their detractors see as pedantic, as a critical ingenuity paraded merely for its own sake.

However, any attempt to reduce the utterances of these critics to pure formalism—that is, to an interest in the "how" rather than the "what" of poetry—must confront their continual and ubiquitous insistence on the indissolubility of form and content in the total poetic context, in our perception of it, and in the rationalization of our perception which we term criticism. The terms form and content, then, in their view mere
hangovers from a tradition of critical discourse that is invariably dualistic, are expressive of an obsolete critical strategy that these critics would discard. In answering a charge of formalism they would have to countercharge that their attackers are themselves so trapped by the form-content dichotomy that once they perceive that a critic does not talk about a separable subject matter—as so-called new critics certainly do not—there is no alternative but to label such a critic a pure formalist. To satisfy such attackers that he is not a formalist, a critic would be required to wrench from the poetic context, however distortedly, meanings which he wishes to relate directly to an extra-aesthetic interest, regardless of the way these are related organically to the other aesthetic elements which make up the poem.2

These critics, having leveled their countercharge, would leave their attackers desperately hugging one of the two poles left to them by their bifurcation of the poem: the untamed stuff of life to the neglect of the thin insignificance of mere design. Having denied the dichotomy, the apologists would address themselves to the more complex task of approaching the poem as aesthetic and yet insisting that, while remaining an aesthetic object, it has the capacity—and a unique capacity—to reveal life. But it can so reveal it only by revealing itself as self-sufficiently aesthetic. They see poetry as intimately related to life, more intimately than if it were related to life more directly—as directly, say, as more immediately referential discourse. Thus they distinguish between the autonomy of poetry in which they believe and poetry for poetry's sake in which they do not, between the enabling powers of poetic form organically conceived and the self-justified parading of poetic form that smacks

2I mean, of course, to use terms like “poem” or “poetry” or “poetic language” or “poetic context” in their broadest sense, Aristotle's sense, as including everything we normally think of as imaginative literature, prose fiction and prose drama as well as verse. If I have done my job at all well in the preceding chapters, I ought to have shown the language of prose fiction capable of developing contextual characteristics comparable to those of verse.
of the sporting aesthete. The autonomy of poetry they must assert since only as autonomous can its revelations be those which poetry can uniquely afford.

It is of course true that these critics seem to isolate poetry, as a unique and self-contained form of discourse, from life by insisting on the poem's independent existence as a world cut off from its author on the one hand and its audience on the other. They see this world as determined by the language context as it evolves partly, of course, under the author's guidance but partly also—and perhaps even more crucially—in response to the demands which the system itself, in developing its own telos, creates. Just as they must resist reducing the meaning of the poem to that intended by its author, so must they resist reducing the operation of the poem in the other direction: to its capacity to affect an audience. In these denials of what they see as reductions, we recognize two "fallacies" they speak of, the "intentional" and the "affective." They must see in such reductions the desecrating hand of positivism, one that would snatch from poetry its responsibility to reveal what can be revealed only through the unlimited sovereignty of a unique reality and would deprive the world of experience of depths which without the eye of poetry would be denied for being unapprehended.

In the organicism of their theoretical framework, these critics replace talk of form and content with talk of context, complexity, tension, texture. Eliot's original interest in the unity of sensibility and Richards' in a "poetry of inclusion" arising from the multivalence of a playful irony never at rest—both are consistent with, as they are derivative from, the all-embracing Coleridgean imagination that for the last century and a half has dominated organic theory as its prime symbol. And from these notions of Eliot and Richards has come most of what passes for the new criticism. And with it comes the notion of poetry as a special form of discourse—or, in its most extreme form, each poem as a unique system of discourse, obedient only to the laws immanently within itself, laws that evolve in ac-
cordance with the telos of the poem. If the context of the poem is to work upon us in the many simultaneous and even contradictory ways that Richards, advocating his poetry of inclusion, would insist upon, then clearly it must be inviolable. It must keep us inside, bouncing from opposition to opposition as we realize the fullness and the complexity of internal relations of the unique contextual system.

In his most distinctive work, Cleanth Brooks carries these notions out of Richards' psychologistic universe into our world of experience, so that he asks us to see in the inclusiveness of the self-complicating poetic context a reflection of the fullness of experience-as-lived. It is this fullness that Brooks would have poetry, as a unique mode of discourse and a unique mode of revelation, substitute for the abstractness, thinness, and incompleteness of experience-as-systematized in referential and propositional discourse, whether scientific or philosophic, and in poetic discourse wrongly pursued. John Crowe Ransom implies much the same thing in his famous metaphor about "the world's body," that which in its textural richness informs poetry even as in the interest of its skeleton it is ignored by other forms of discourse. When Allen Tate derives his term "tension" from the logical terms "extension" and "intension," he does so also to indicate the plenitude that transforms poetry into a special mode of discourse. These critics, then, see poetry as an alternative to the referential characteristic of other discourse in that poetry must multiply meanings within a closed context rather than, like other discourse, allow these meanings to escape one by one and point beyond. They see poetry also as an alternative to the propositional characteristic of other discourse in that poetry is governed, not by logical rules of systematic consistency, but by contextual operations that defy the systematic.

As one would imagine, these critics have little use for poetry of direct statement, for the poetic claim that does not carry its own contradiction within itself. We find Ransom speaking against "Platonic" poetry, that dualistic affair, perhaps sanctioned by an earlier criticism, in which meaning and poem are separate
entities. At much the same time Tate was using the words of Yeats to decry that poetry which reveals "the will trying to do the work of the imagination." And when Brooks speaks about the "heresy of paraphrase," he joins the others in their essential claim: that the poem can mean only in the words that constitute it, that all else is a violation not merely of the poem's aesthetic wholeness but of its full cognitive powers. Even the somewhat unlikely ally, Yvor Winters, affirms that no paraphrase can yield a poem's meaning as he echoes Mallarmé in defining the proper poem as "a new word"—a word, presumably, whose definition can be provided only by its own closed system. Their distinction between a dualistic and a monistic poetry—that is, between a poetry whose meaning is transcendent and one whose meaning is immanent—is in effect a distinction between a poetry that could be exhaustively treated within the familiar confines of the form-content or message-embellishment dichotomy and a poetry that could be treated only in post-Ricardian terms. And yet of course it is a distinction that echoes the Coleridgean distinction between fancy and imagination and the Crocean distinction between allegory and symbol. The latter summarizes the argument in its extreme—if idealistic—form so succinctly that it is worth quoting here.

... the symbol has sometimes been given as the essence of art. Now, if the symbol be conceived as inseparable from the artistic intuition, it is a synonym for the intuition itself, which always has an ideal character. There is no double bottom to art, but one only; in art all is symbolical, because all is ideal. But if the symbol be conceived as separable—if the symbol can be on one side, and on the other the thing symbolized, we fall back again into the intellectualist error: the so-called symbol is the exposition of an abstract concept, an allegory; it is science, or art aping science.¹

But these critics, out of a classical pursuit of order, often retreat from so extreme an organic monism. Eliot and Richards

Recent Criticism, “Thematics,” and Existential Dilemma have much to say on the nature of belief in poetry that would seem to reconstitute the breach between meaning and poetic form. Ransom, in his insistence on logical structure; Tate, in his insistence on the denotative precision he terms “extension”; and Winters, in his insistence on rational motive—all manage to retract much of what makes their criticism distinctive. Apparently afraid of the reckless romanticism and misty idealism at the heart of a theoretical orientation mainly derived from romantic and idealistic sources, these critics as would-be neoclassicists wanted their new critical strategy without paying the theoretical price and at times seemed to be playing both sides of the street.

Only Brooks seemed for a long time to be holding out against any slightest surrender of the inviolable context to the demands of the referential or the propositional. He appeared rightly to understand that, like uniqueness, organicism is an all-or-nothing affair and that to qualify it was, theoretically, to yield completely. And so he held out even under attack by new-critical colleagues like Ransom who found him unmitigatedly romantic. But his recent association with William K. Wimsatt in their Literary Criticism: A Short History seems finally to have brought Brooks around as well. He now speaks of the need for “fixities and definities,” of “the logical, the definite, and the unequivocal,” as the antidote for “incoherence” and “symbolic fluidity.”

These critics, then, have, each in his own way, made their imprint on the history of criticism by asserting the uniqueness and self-containedness of poetic systems of discourse (in the most extreme form a different one for each poem). The internal complications of a poem, while sealing it off and keeping us within it, also serve to reflect as no other discourse can the internal complications of the existential universe, those more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in anyone’s philosophy. Then, having made these daring claims and having in their practical criticism made so much of them, these critics recognized the romantic implications of them: a self-complicating context with no outside check on the multiplication of
complexity heading away from art toward the chaos of romantic obscurantism; an utterly closed contextual system that gives the reader no opening that will allow him to enter it. Further, in the attempt to reproduce those contradictions in experience that defy system, the poetry licensed by organicism, with no limits set upon the desirable extent of inclusiveness, seemed moving toward the self-destructive goal where the disciplined refinement of art is lost to the incomprehensible coarseness of pure experience. Only life itself can afford such infinite variety; and life is hardly poetry, which is probably a blessing for both. So Yvor Winters coined his "fallacy of imitative form" to describe the poet's surrender of formal control to the formless stuff of experience which he wants to capture but comes closer to reproducing. And the group generally reinstates, at least partially, the obligations of poetry to the restrictions of normal discourse—that is, the restrictions of reference and of propositional procedure.

The difficulty of their position arises not so much from their own indifference to theoretical consistency as it does from the very real nature of the dilemma they face. Some considerations demand that the poem be seen as a closed system, some considerations demand with equal persuasiveness that it be seen as opening outward to the world and to externally imposed laws of rational order. Yet it cannot be partly closed, partly open. If we want poetry to be more than a pleasing and pretty version of another form of discourse (one which, if less pretty and less pleasing, is more exacting) then it must have a different way of meaning. And since poetry is distinguished by its highly wrought internal relations and by its powers to do and say so many things at once, it would seem that whatever claims can be made for it as a special form of discourse that has a special way of meaning must be made in consequence of its special contextual characteristics. Organicism and inviolability of context being matters of kind and not of degree, poetry must be seen as a form of discourse in some sense nonreferential even as it must be in some sense referential to be a form of discourse at all. It must be
seen as in some sense a closed world of meaning even as this many-faceted world is created largely to open onto and illuminate the facets we would miss in the outside world of every day.

This dilemma seems to me to represent the crucial point, if not the dead end, reached by modern criticism. We can sympathize with Brooks in his desire to broaden and ease his position by modifying its pure organicism and its unlimitedly romantic consequences. But alas, this is not the way to evade the dilemma; since, much as we would like to, we cannot take organicism by degrees, because this is the way only to an untenable, if seemingly unavoidable, eclecticism. Brooks merely joins his fellows who yielded earlier. With them he must confront the doubt that undermines his claims: however impossible an unqualified organicism may appear to be, a partial organicism is impossible, is in effect no organicism, and the alternative to organicism is destructive of all that recent theory has taught us about poetry.

Future theorists who will want to preserve the gains and the distinctive direction of these critics and who will not want to see them washed away into the common stream of Platonic theory, will have to find a way to keep poetry’s contextual system closed; to have the common materials which enter poetry—conventions of word meaning, of propositional relations, and of literary form—so transmuted in the creative act with its organic demands that they come out utterly unique. The reader will somehow be seen to repeat the procedure: to find his way into the poem by its seeming use of ordinary reference, ordinary propositions, and conventional literary forms, only to find himself suddenly and wonderfully trapped by the transmutations that make these elements most extraordinary. And his explorations through this uniquely paradoxical world—at once so full existentially and so rarefied aesthetically—must be seen to show him what is unique about what before, in his blindness, passed as the ordinary world outside. These future theorists will have to find a way also to keep poetic form as a disciplining force while
at the same time insisting that it is an inward form and that its
disciplinary quality does not lead poetry to abstract from life
as other discourse does. Instead of being ruled by general word
meanings and by a ruthless, universally applied logic, each work
is gently guided by contextual meanings and by a unique form
which it helps to create. On the other hand, in seeing poetry as
life that is formed (rather than as life that is logically system­
atized), they must still recognize that poetry, for all its in­
clusiveness, dare not be as inclusive as life without abdicating
its form to surrender to experience in its unrelieved wholeness.
Somehow the line which separates artful complexity from natural
chaos must be finely drawn.

In the conclusion to their recent history of criticism,
Wimsatt and Brooks try their hand at resolving this dilemma by
suggesting how we may preserve the valuable conclusions recent
critics have reached about the several opposed voices with which
the poem can speak without encouraging aesthetic chaos and
outlawing all moral commitment. While their suggestion is
finally no more than a metaphorical one and is, I suppose, to that
extent unsatisfactory, the metaphor is a most provocative one
—one that will put us a long way toward drawing thematic
implications from the aesthetic we have been examining. They
are again contrasting the Platonic conception of poetry that
sees a single transcendent meaning and the organic conception
that sees an organized and complex opposition of immanent
meanings. They again find both inadequate, the Platonic because
it destroys the role of poetry by thinning it and thus trimming it
down to other discourse, and the organic because it contains no
final return to order, no final affirmation of a cosmic controlling
principle. Indeed, by definition the ironic view can nothing
affirm. Translating these alternatives into theological termi­
nology, the authors believe

that the kind of literary theory which seems . . . to emerge
the most plausibly from the long history of the debates is far
more difficult to orient within any of the Platonic or Gnostic
ideal world views, or within the Manichaean full dualism and strife of principles, than precisely within the vision of suffering, the optimism, the mystery which are embraced in the religious dogma of the Incarnation.4

This soaring notion carries us in the direction of aesthetic order beyond the dramatistic theory of endless struggle, the dualistic or pluralistic—if not chaotic—theory of unresolvable tension most characteristically implied by many of the pronouncements of our critics. It may remind us of Ransom’s earlier postulating of “miraculism”—the physical embodiment of the airy spiritual—as the alternative to the unworldly thinness of what he calls “Platonic Poetry” on the one hand and the unelevated density of what he calls “Physical Poetry” on the other. In Wimsatt and Brooks, too, the leap to the Incarnation represents their rejection of an all-exclusive intellectualism and an all-inclusive density as they embrace the final affirmation that can come as a miraculous, all-reconciling grace only after an almost total abandonment to conflict.

It is clear that in this kind of formulation the final reassertion of aesthetic order becomes a reflection of the reassertion of moral order. After all, we have seen not only that the tensional version of contextualism, in the extreme form that is its only consistent form, seems to forego any aesthetic order externally imposed upon its self-complicating dynamics; but also that this theory, in its ironic posing of counterclaim along with every claim, seems to forbid any final thematic resolution, any final moral commitment, in the name of experiential complexity, which readily supplies the skepticism that comes of a total awareness. Yvor Winters may have been more correct than many of his detractors, in their anti-didacticism, have credited him with being in his insistence that rational poetic form exerted upon recalcitrant materials is a reflection of the poet’s moral control of his disturbing experience: to forego one is to forego the other.

Consequently, we begin to see how completely this aesthetic would seem to depend on a metaphysic or even a theodicy. In a recent essay⁵ that pursues the implications of the concluding chapter of the history of criticism, Wimsatt turns more explicitly in the thematic direction himself. Again he at once attacks the Manichaean implications of unresolved thematic tensions and defends the dramatic need to give full due to the mixed and imperfect nature of the human condition. He ends by exhorting the Christian writer and the Christian critic to recognize the need for a clear moral commitment in literature, but only a commitment that has been earned through an almost total dramatic submission to the forces of opposition.

But can anything be withheld if the test is to be complete, if the ironic, self-contradictory nature of moral experience is to be allowed full sway? Is not even the slight rational, philosophic control of the stuff of drama infringement enough to ensure the stacking of the cards, the intrusion of an abstract order that pre-exists the poem upon thematic oppositions, even as we earlier saw the slight concessions by our critics to referential and propositional discourse to be enough to open the organic context irrevocably? For Wimsatt, and probably Brooks, the need in poetics to find an order that somehow does full justice to the internal complications of the context not only is analogous, but is intimately related, to the need in the realm of theme to find a moral order that somehow does full justice to the fearful paradoxes that inhere in experience. But can the pleasantly eclectic compromise satisfy in the one realm any more than it can in the other?

By shifting, then, from a merely metaphorical to a literal use of the drama which witnesses the Gnostic-Manichaean opposition and witnesses it yielding, through miracle, to the Incarnation, we can discover the unbroken realm that joins the aesthetic to the thematic—the moral-religious—dimension of poetry; and we can manage the tactical movement from one to

the other. In making this movement we must observe an im-
portant peculiarity in the relation of the aesthetic to the thematic,
ap peculiarity that will force us to be careful with our terminol-
oy: What I earlier spoke of as the dualistic aesthetic—that
Platonism, assailed by our critics, which splits poetry into form
and content and sees it as the transparent vehicle of a prior,
separable, indeed transcendent meaning—can obviously provide
only for thematic singularity, for but one propositional system.
On the other hand, the monistic aesthetic—the organicism
which sees the poetic context as bearing immanently within itself
a complex of opposed meanings—just as obviously provides for
an equivocal thematic duality that Wimsatt calls Manichaean.
A very different sort of duality indeed, this latter: one which
can be produced only by a sealed and sovereign poetic context
dedicated to the complexity of its internal relations.

2. "Thematics": A Manichaean Consequence

It is this sort of unresolvable opposition that leads to what
I term the literary discipline of "thematics." I should like to
pause here to say precisely what I mean by this coinage in hopes
that this definition will help us along the road our explorations
ought to follow. From all I have said, it should be at once clear
that I cannot mean to use *thematics* in a way related to the usual
and unsophisticated sense of the term *theme*. Obviously I cannot
mean by it the so-called "philosophy" of a work, that series of
propositions which we supposedly can derive—or, better yet,
extrapolate—from the aesthetic totality that is presented to us.
Since I am moving to the problems of meaning, of the "world"
that is offered us, from a monistic, organic conception of that
aesthetic totality, I can hardly think in terms of a separable
philosophic theme that an author embodies in order to justify
it literally, to put it to the test of drama and its dialectic. (I
might add that it was just this "putting to the test," but little
that was more organic than this, that we saw Wimsatt recom-
mending in his compromise between the "tensional" and
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Christian approaches.) Rather, I must insist, on behalf of recent criticism in its consistently organic moments, that every self is to be confronted with the anti-self, every claim with its antithesis, with no possibility of an all-reconciling synthesis—unless it is one that is accompanied by a newly disruptive anti-synthesis. At least I must insist on all this in the good work, by which I must mean the work that demands the more delicate probings of the literary discipline of thematics since in its complexity it remains disdainfully inaccessible to the vain attempts to empty it by crudely tearing at it here and there to come up with some philosophical generalizations. And again, I suppose, I am allowing a single conception of the phenomenology of our moral life to support a single aesthetic methodology in that I acknowledge that, in support of this view of thematics, I must deny that the existential world—the world of felt human experience—can be anything less than a bewildering complex of seeming contradictions. Given this sort of world, how can any more systematic view of it—the kind of view we get in that dualistically conceived "Platonic" literature whose meaning really is exhausted by the extrapolation of its philosophical theme—how can such a view avoid, in its inadequacy, doing this world a grievous injustice?

Following the more organic aspects of the new-critical poetics, then, we can define thematics as the study of the experiential tensions which, dramatically entangled in the literary work, become an existential reflection of that work's aesthetic complexity. Thematics thus conceived is as much beyond "philosophy"—and in the same way beyond "philosophy"—as, in pure poetics, an organic, contextually responsible form is beyond a logically consistent system. There can be occasions on which the author means to be conceiving his work dualistically, as an embodiment and a demonstration of a "philosophy," except that he has been more faithful—dramatically and existentially faithful—than he knows; so that a fully thematic analysis would reveal that significant opposition is engendered when this philosophy enters the total poetic context, with the consequence
that an objective hierarchy of values and the poet's full sym­pathies are not so easily identified or, thanks to the endless qualifications, perhaps not identifiable at all. I believe these occasions are more numerous than we may at first admit and the more numerous as the literature is more valuable—valuable, of course, in terms of this aesthetic and thus this conception of thematics. I can only hope that the preceding chapters furnish enough persuasive evidence to demonstrate this claim.

This way of conceiving thematics as a literary method, and as the only method capable of dealing with meanings in literature, would seem to predispose the moral-theological—indeed finally the metaphysical—issue toward the irresolution of Manichaeanism. It would seem to argue against any cosmic resolution, however ultimate and however qualified, since this would reduce the complexities of theme (in my sense of the word) to the single-mindedness of "philosophy" and thus reduce poetry to its "Platonic" conception as a form of propositional discourse.

It may, of course, seem at best silly and at worst heretically presumptuous for a critic to argue for an intolerable world view just to satisfy the needs of an aesthetic and a literary method. But what is being insisted upon here as Manichaean is not the ultimate nature of metaphysical or noumenal reality so much as the existential nature of that reality which makes itself dramatically available to the poet whose only commitment as poet is to experience and to the dramatic exigencies of his art. Further, it must be admitted that there is an intimate relation between a man's view of existence and his view of art, that even so precious a fellow as the dedicated literary critic is first a man who has adopted an existential stance toward his reality and whose less basic activities—yes, even his beloved critical method—are finally derivative of this stance rather than in control of it. Of course it works the other way too: in the case of the sensitive literary man, the stance may be largely determined by what literature has revealed about the befuddling nature of existence. Surely this is what literature is for. Without it, with only the
rival claims of neat philosophical systems on the one hand and totally undifferentiated experience on the other, such a man, resisting oversimplifications, may be unable to adopt any stance at all. If, then, this man believes what his experience with literature has revealed to him about his experience with life, he may very well adopt a stance toward moral reality which would lead to conceptions of aesthetics and thematics much as I have been outlining. All of which is perhaps to say only that a literary theory must be adequate to the literary experiences for which it is to account and that we trust our way of experiencing literature only as it is adequate to the life out there, which cries for a way of being organized literarily that will yet leave it preserved intact. And the stance implied by this critical method, the literary experience and the existential ontology that it seeks to account for, is manifestly Manichaean.

It is really a commonplace to say that every poet must, at least provisionally, be something of a Manichaean. This is but a way of our asking him not to stack the cards, but rather to give his drama full sway, always to allow his opposition its argument a fortiori. But if he does no more than this—if, that is, he submits his thesis to the hellfires of antithesis with no doubt of the issue and only to allow this thesis to be earned the hard way—he is no more in danger of heresy than is any profound version of Christianity that is willing to take into account all worldly imperfection without reducing the extent or the goodness of God’s sway. Once more let me repeat that this is Wimsatt’s position in the essay to which I have referred several times; and once more let me repeat also that this position, however mature and qualified, cannot finally make literature more than “Platonic,” bearing its propositional thesis, any more than it can finally allow the dominion of God to be shared.

As we know from Augustine, the attractions of Manichaeism are disarming. For one struck by the ubiquity of evil it can be an assurance that he is not compromising with reality in order to appease an optimistic need for order, for cosmic meaning. A Christian as sensitive and mature as Wimsatt fights this tempta-
tion by distinguishing his view from the Pollyanna view that C. S. Lewis termed "Christianity-and-water" and by accepting the all-affirming grace only after a not quite total submission to the Manichaean face of reality (just as he is willing to have aesthetic reconciliation in literature only after a not quite total submission to contextual tension). It may indeed be more mature to be less rebellious, finally to resign from conflict and to acknowledge grace and the miracle. For this acknowledgment can come only in humility, the humility that calls upon one to accept a single, most crucially chosen paradox of the myriad of paradoxes that fill life, and having chosen, to embrace it to the rejection of all others which consequently must be seen as paradoxical no longer. But even this act of faith need not deny an existential Manichaeism since in it the metaphysical and existential realms do not touch, indeed, logically appear to deny each other. But the desire to have metaphysical order reflect itself on the existential level is more troublesome for being consoling and for limiting the drama of experience. For to him who has not merely tentatively—and in order to prove his faith—half submitted to an existential Manichaeism, but who has irrevocably submerged himself within it, the final affirmation that transforms all is not a humbling act of maturity but a mere yielding to creature comfort. And thus again the attractions of Manichaeism, that does not trust itself to move beyond the equilibrium, indeed the paralysis, induced by the existential absurdities it confronts.

In literature, with its delusions of a self-sufficient world in which the equilibrium of equivocal forces produces such profound aesthetic satisfaction, these attractions are multiplied and deepened; so much so that the sensitive and impressionable reader may return to life from literature newly dismayed by a vision of final cosmic disharmony. Which perhaps persuades us to conclude that Plato was not altogether ill-advised in expelling poetry from his Republic as a dangerously seductive mistress. The reader's awareness of the density of the literary work leads him to recognize the inadequacy of a single set of
propositions to account for it and to recognize also the difference in kind between literature and propositional discourse. If he is persuaded by what he has read so that he believes its complexity to be a measure of the world it reflects and not a self-indulgent mystique of obscurity, then he will recognize finally the equal inadequacy of any set of propositions to account for that world. As he generalized in his aesthetic ramblings, moving from the extra-propositional nature of the work to the extra-propositional nature of literature, so he can generalize now about the extra-propositional nature of reality.

As I theorized in my first chapter and tried to demonstrate in those that followed, under the pressure and shock of an extreme situation, protagonists like those we have been observing are forced to reject forever the intellectual and human comforts of the “ethical,” the deceptively rational life. For writers who deal in extremity, where characters are suddenly and utterly confronted by absurdity, the existential paradoxes are seen to be unresolvable as they point to the inadequacy of any systematically moral disposition. In viewing existential reality as extra-ethical in this sense, I am again reasserting in thematic terms the aesthetic claim that the poetic mode of discourse is extra-propositional. The propositional, then, becomes the discursive equivalent of that “ethical” substitute for existence, moral philosophy; and the poetic, contextually defined, becomes the discursive equivalent of that existential realization into which the extreme situation propels its victim. Where more than in literature can one meet so convincingly with the extreme situation and its existential consequences? Is it not, perhaps, in the very formulation of extremity, with the purification of the casual that extremity brings, that literature can manage formal control over experience even while managing to account for the entire extent of it? Literature in this way too may be seen as persuading its reader toward the Manichaean, the nakedly and unmitigatedly existential, in that the existential, as beyond (or rather prior to) the systematically ethical, sees the absurdity of
unreconcilable opposition everywhere and ultimately. Indeed, with the existential so opposed to philosophy, literature becomes the only possible form of existential philosophy—or must I say existential thematics?—precisely because only within the liberal confines of literary casuistry can the existential be explored. Otherwise it is falsely reduced to just another philosophy, just as literature Platonically considered is reduced to just another mode of prose discourse.

It is, however, not really accurate to speak of the contextually poetic or of the existential as involving self-contradiction. Or rather it is not relevant. For in neither are we dealing with propositions. It has been suggested, for example, that new critics are inconsistent when they speak against the “heresy of paraphrase”; that they actually are not against all paraphrases as being inadequate to the poem but are only against oversimplified paraphrases that do not take into account the nuances and the paradoxes. In this case all one has to do is to elaborate and extend the paraphrase in order to satisfy them and exhaust the poem of its meaning. But I believe one discovers as he elaborates upon the paraphrase that, after a certain point, the work begins to slip through his over-solicitous fingers and to sound like capricious, self-contradictory foolishness. For what is likely is that just as the confining terms of any “ethical” system—the universals of the “ethical” stage itself—are inadequate to the raging existential world; so the world of propositions is simply inappropriate to it, although, viewed from the standpoint of propositional procedures, this existential world and the poetic discourse that reflects it may well seem to be filled with contradiction. This world is not, then, a propositional world with all coherence gone, with all the brakes removed—a self-contradictory propositional world that, through poetic economy, manages, with discursive waywardness, to state several incompatible propositions at once. It is rather an extra-propositional world, of another order, a pre- or post-propositional world—as you will—even if it seems to be contradictory when, using the
only discourse at our disposal as critics, we try to talk logically about it, so that we come out with a confusing proliferation of would-be propositions.

But the dramatic and, as wholeheartedly dramatic, the unreconcilable polarities remain. And in their failure to find a higher peace, they reflect the intransigent dual principle that is Manichaean. Yet for the literary work there is still the need for aesthetic wholeness. Literature may deal with the experientially full in avoiding the single, thin line of system; but to the extent that it remains art it must claim to have some kind of aesthetic system all its own, a system still, though so different from a philosophical system. Can such a system be sustained if there is no final assertion, no single set of affirmations that resolves oppositions in the direction of order? Yet only by turning aside from the demand of aesthetic organicism and from the confrontation of existential absurdity can one so assert and so affirm. In my opening chapter I tried to find for the literature of the tragic vision (a phrase which, obviously, is closely related to the existential and the Manichaeans as I use these terms) an ordering principle to replace the principle of catharsis that brought to a transcendent affirmation the old, full, more than Manichaean, aesthetic form of tragedy, now lost with the civilization that created it. There I said:

... the balance of necessities between the tragic and the ethical must continue as the primary mode of dramatic conflict, with the inherent weaknesses of each—the moral failing of the one and the visionary failing of the other—poised against each other to create the unresolvable tension that must now replace tragedy's more sublime catharsis as the principle of aesthetic control.

Can we not, then, get at all beyond tension? If not, how are we to be assured that the tension, with its unyielding dualism, will hold the work together through the delicate poise it creates among its oppositions and not split it asunder through a tug of war among them?
We are in effect returned to the earlier and more purely aesthetic problem which asked how we were to assure ourselves of enough formal control to shun chaos and produce art when organic theory would allow us no form that was not contextually evolved. But now our thematic explorations should enable us to ask this question in a more useful way. If we grant the unreconcilable oppositions within the phenomenology of the moral life which prevent the literary work from achieving a finally positive thematic resolution, is there yet not some way in which at least an aesthetic resolution may be achieved? Or, to return to an earlier conviction, in part borrowed from Yvor Winters, that aesthetic and moral resolutions are two sides of a single coin—the work by its very aesthetic order attesting to an orderly universe—if we should manage even the merely aesthetic resolution, what transformations might be worked on the moral universe should the slightest touch of aesthetic harmony rub off upon it, as it must?

It is like asking not only whether the humanizing enlighten-ment cast by Ishmael organizes *Moby Dick* as a novel, but whether in so doing it also purges the novel of the demonism of Ahab. *Moby Dick* is ideal for my purposes because Ahab is so obviously, self-consciously, and even literally a Manichaean, while in Ishmael Ahab’s oppositions are to be melted into the unity that joins in brotherhood a most imperfect and often ill-fated humanity. It is clear enough that Ahab, as Zoroastrian and as Puritan, has polarized his moral world, opposing good to evil irrevocably and refusing to see them alloyed in experience. He has worshiped fire so exclusively, rejecting any coarser element, that he has perverted the natural fire of God into the demoniacal hellfires that, consecrated by the black mass, drive the *Pequod* to her doom and even almost betray Ishmael to rudderless destruction by luring him from worldly duty to a contemplative wonder at them. But Ishmael finally resists, though, as always, in full recognition of the lure that has ensnared Ahab. The configuration is constant: Ishmael always makes the final acceptance of a natural order and a human order whose natures are fear-
fully ambiguous, in which the only order seems to be a disorderly confounding of good and evil. He seems able to bear this vision without denying an affirmative power to the universe and its Author, and without rebelling. Thus he understands the moral integrity that prompts Ahab to demand the purity of absolute separation between good and evil—although he understands also the immoral integrity into which this is perverted by the prideful refusal to accept the mixed universe.

There are other oppositions that Ishmael is able to see strangely united, accepting the both-and while the possessed Ahab will have only the either-or, demanding an unstained God-filled universe or worshiping it defiantly as exclusively the devil's. Not only was Ishmael, we must remember, saved from the Pequod, but the Pequod's journey itself saved him, saved him from the "damp, drizzly November" in his soul. And his alien brother Queequeg was a principal agent of his salvation, both figuratively—in the "joint stock company of two" produced by their mutual human dependence as symbolized by "the monkey-rope"—and literally, in Queequeg's "coffin life-buoy" that allowed Ishmael alone to survive the wreck. Even Ahab, as Ishmael would, almost sees in the coffin now weirdly pressed into service as a life buoy, the ambiguous simultaneity, indeed, for the faithful, even the oneness of life and death:

Oh! how immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts? Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death, by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of the help and hope of most endangered life. A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver? I'll think of that. But no. So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me. (520–521) \(^6\)

He must return to the exclusiveness, to the fierce purity of his oppositions. All this Ishmael sees and even at times comes close to sharing, except that the grace of a final cosmic harmony, dearly bought, seems to save him from Ahab even as, after the wreck, it tosses him Queequeg’s coffin and saves him from the sharks—and for the Rachel.

In his famous chapter on “The Whiteness of the Whale” Ishmael shows that he understands only too well Ahab’s vision of Moby Dick as the challenging “pasteboard mask.” He is not going the faithful, but visionless, way of Starbuck, who sees the whale only as natural “dumb brute.” Ishmael too must cut a “little lower layer” and see how the whale can appear as ghostly symbol of the “leper”-universe, but unlike Ahab he must not accept this as his only vision. Instead, he must acknowledge the angelic as well as the demoniacal as being symbolized by whiteness, and he must acknowledge the natural fact of the whale as well as its symbolic purposefulness. So while he comprehends the vision of the “leper”-universe—that blank colorlessness perceptible beneath the “cosmetic” secondary qualities to only “willful travellers”—he at last attributes this vision not to himself, but to “the wretched infidel,” in effect, to Ahab. And in a most crucial passage much later—one that recalls the fullness rather than the emptiness, the glory rather than the mystic malevolence, of whiteness—Ishmael explicitly dissociates himself from the infidel:

And how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor—as you will sometimes see it—glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts. For, d’ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate

\(^7\) Compare this more than tragic (and less than tragic?) envisioning of the snowy phantom with the more exclusively destructive use of snow we found in Gide, Lawrence, and Mann, or of the shimmering infinity in *Victory*. 
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vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye. (371–372)

But this equivocation seems not absolutely noncommittal. Those heavenly intuitions can finally save him from Manichaeism despite his earthly doubts, because they allow him to accept the two, intuitions and doubts—and all oppositions—as coexisting within a sanctioned order. This is reconciliation much in the way recommended by Wimsatt: an almost total submission to Ahab in order that Ishmael may earn his faith and his salvation. Beyond the shallow ethical, mainly represented by Starbuck, Ishmael is yet seen as a force for ultimate affirmation, suggesting to many critics the profound Christian vision that transcends the tragic without superciliously denying it. Is this the way to abandon at last the discomforts of the existential for a return to a higher ethical and a less restricted propositional order?

All this, however, approaches overstatement. It threatens to make Ishmael our protagonist instead of Ahab, and that transfer of roles would obviously distort the novel. For Ishmael is not the actor but our narrator—"the reader's friend" rather than Ahab's, Henry James might say. And his thematic significance is determined—and limited—by his role. M. O. Percival, whose profound study of Moby Dick has influenced these comments extensively, puts the matter brilliantly:

Character is fate, it has been said; and I hope that Ishmael's fate is implicit in his character. The essential thing about that character is its apparently limitless understanding and compassion. Ishmael lends his own identity to others, even to the point of having little or none himself. He pulls an oar in Queequeg's boat when boats are lowered, but he is seldom
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seen in this or any other physical activity. But spiritually he is everywhere and nowhere, observing and comprehending. In a dictator's way it is Ahab's crew; they jump when he commands. In a poet's way the crew is Ishmael's; they are his by assimilation.8

Precisely. They all, and Ahab too, are his by assimilation. Because they all are in him who as our narrator has created them. Let us take seriously the fiction that Ishmael is the author of the tale. On the very first page of his writing and at the outset of the events he is relating, we have already noted, he described the "damp, drizzly November" in his soul which had forced him to take to sea as his therapy. The journey of the Pequod cured him indeed, and it was the cure that saved him for the Rachel, that symbol of a chastened but still warmly responsive humanity. But the journey of the Pequod is also the writing of this book. So is it too much to say that Ishmael is saved also by this creating of Ahab and Ahab's vision, by seeing him through and purging the Ahab within himself through Ahab's necessary death?

Is this not really the way of every sound author? As we saw with Gide, he does not exhaust himself even in his most intensely created character but creates such a character as but one extreme of the dialogue the self conducts with the soul, an extreme that the very act of dialogue—so long as it is a disciplined act—manages partly to tame? The author is more than his creature—like Marlow with Kurtz—and proves it by the mere fact that he has created him, and has created him within a larger aesthetic whole that contains him as but a part of it. The very nature of Ahab's demonism, and, as we have seen, of Manichaeism at large, is destructive of unity through its insistence on irreparable division. Conducive to chaos, it is as inimical to aesthetic order as to cosmic. The author's tactic resembles that of Mann's Leverkühn, who in his final conversion

transcends despair by giving it a voice. In the very act of creating his work the author is asserting his transcendence of the Manichaean, and Ishmael is asserting his transcendence of Ahab. But as author, still responsible for his character who is, as Percival says, “his by assimilation,” it may be only through the painful necessity of aesthetic wholeness—and never through the simple need for outspoken moral judgment—that he does transcend his abandoned creature.

Or is this all, then, aesthetic delusion rather than final thematic salvation? Is Ishmael more a literary device than a final resolver? Speaking of Ishmael’s “apparently limitless understanding and compassion,” Percival, we saw, has significantly noted that in lending “his own identity to others,” he has “little or none himself.” He is, after all, narrator rather than protagonist. His final resolution stems from his need, as fictive author, to absorb all his characters and to transcend them all alike. But it comes at the high existential price of depriving him of an active role involving moral decision, indeed depriving him even of a unique moral identity. Instead, his is a consummate identity: surely wondrous and wondrously filled with the “humanities,” as Peleg termed them, but perhaps in the end less human than even the wild inhumanity that Ahab chooses. As the only one who escaped, Ishmael is in one sense more alone than Ahab, as alone as his biblical namesake. His function is related to the technical device we call “point of view”; it leads us to an aesthetic wholeness rather than to a higher Christianity. As an observer in need of the comprehensive vision, in his final avoidance of extremity he can hardly represent an alternative to Ahab’s way any more than he is a rival protagonist. For Ishmael has never been stricken himself and has only the vicarious experience of Ahab to challenge him; and that is a challenge not to him personally but to him only as consummate author through his creature Ahab, whom he must assimilate aesthetically, but whom he cannot replace existentially.

Some literal-minded commentators and some merely disdainful ones, have suggested that Ishmael was saved from the
catastrophe because there had to be someone left to relate the tale. They have to support them the words from Job that head the Epilogue ("And I only am escaped alone to tell thee"). Normally one does not want to take such a suggestion seriously enough to bother noting that with another point of view Melville could dispense with a narrator. But in a more profound sense this suggestion cannot be so lightly dismissed. We have seen that there is in Moby Dick an unending tension between the ethical and the tragic, what in the terms of the novel Percival has called the humanities and the inhumanities. Ishmael, as pseudo author on both sides of the oppositions, claims a fully human order in which they melt. But we discover that he is indeed the pseudo author and not a character; that, having assimilated his characters, he must create an orderly object out of them and must move beyond the tensions if he is to manage to control them and to avoid their divisive, Manichaean tendencies that threaten to rend the aesthetic quality of his story. So the salvation and the resurrection are uniquely his, but precisely because only he has no role to play, because he is "escaped alone to tell" us. Is it not, then, that the cosmic and moral affirmation we want to attribute to Ishmael is, finally considered, a kind of aesthetic delusion? that, for those who have been stricken and thus thrust into the boundlessness of the existential, the Manichaean opposition is not really dissolved by Ishmael's vision after all? that only the formal oppositions of the novel's poetic context are dissolved by it, and these aesthetically rather than thematically?

But the stricken necessarily finds an extremity that is unique, with none on the side who can compose the issue. So, viewed from beyond him, perhaps the illusion of reconciliation is more than merely persuasive, and aesthetic soundness is symbol of moral and cosmic soundness. After all, in art illusion—what aestheticians used to call Schein—is all. And we may have to rescue the thematic implications of Ishmael's affirmation through an all-restoring grace, even if we can never totally deny the terror and even the validity of Ahab's vision. All of this is
of course not the same as the overt attempt at clean moral resolution that we find in *Billy Budd*, an attempt whose aesthetic honesty I would be forced to deny.

Is not this need to assert the reconciliation along with the unreconcilable precisely the thematic version of the aesthetic need to assert the restrictions of form along with the abandon of contextual tension? And does not the very notion of extremity bear the entire mystery? I have suggested that for the poet to formulate the extreme situation is indeed for him to play the casuist by purifying experience of the casual; that through the narrow intensity of a fortiori controls, the extreme situation can manage to account for the total breadth of experience, for all that is less committed and more compromising—and compromised. This is in effect what Henry James means in speaking of actual life that “persistently blunders and deviates, loses herself in the sand,” in his complaints against the “stupid work” of “clumsy” raw experience which, unpurified, not merely militates against art but obfuscates its own meaning, leaving to art the role of mining this meaning anew. The extreme, then, is both more pure and more inclusive—pure in the adulterations it rejects and inclusive in the range of less complete experiences it illuminates even as it passes them by. Thus at once the rarity and the density, the order and the plenitude. But finally, in retreat as it were, there must be the observer, the more compromised and less committed, the resister of extremity who from his middle existence can place extremity for us. Not fatally challenged, he has yet learned vicariously to see extremity as the necessary and most instructive vision, the illusion—*aesthesis, Schein*—that which creates reality for us by forcing us to see it as we never...

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[^8]: By now it is very likely superfluous to enumerate those who appear elsewhere in our novels in Ishmael’s role of observer-narrator: Michel’s “comforter,” Adrian’s Zeitblom, Kurtz’s or Jim’s Marlow. Where there is no such character combining this technical and thematic function, the novelist’s task of striking his balance between the extreme and the compromised is made infinitely more complicated, as I hope my preceding chapters have shown.
dare to outside of art because in art we think it is appearance only. For secure in what we take to be mere aesthetic illusion, we plunge into the risk of art: we allow the comforting delusions we normally take for reality to trace their path to extremity, there to be given back utter reality, that which terrifies even as it returns us, newly sound and justified, to our middle (and muddled) existences chastened by extremity and taking up the order in our lives with tender hands that now know its delusiveness and its fragile, unsubstantial prospects.

3. A Pseudo-Christian Consequence and the Retreat from Extremity

Let me become more extreme before I become more moderate. Having shown the grounds on which Ishmael may be seen as pointing to a profound Christian affirmation that would take account of Ahab's darker vision even as it swept beyond it in the direction of divine grace, I introduced some formal questions about the conception and the shape of the novel, in order to indicate the grounds on which Ishmael's affirmation could be seen as more aesthetic than thematic in its significance. Thus the fallen and disharmonious world viewed by Ahab was brought to no final resurrection, so that on the thematic level I did not, after all, raise the Manichaean vision from its inconclusive dualism, whatever Melville's aesthetic persuasiveness.

But we can even make the case more negative. In considering Ishmael's role as the comprehensive narrator, we might say that he is fundamentally without a commitment. If we wished to play down the significance of his relations with Queequeg and of other suggestions of a transcendent grace which moves within him, we could travel even further from the direction of affirmation than I did earlier. We could argue that he is saved at the end, not through a grace that his faithfulness has earned, but through the insistence of a demanding God that the Pequod's story be told. And Ishmael is chosen as the one to escape alone to tell us not because of his final affirmative commitment but
because of his unique noncommitment, his powers of universal assimilation.

My earlier discussion implied that Ahab was the unmitigated Manichaean and Ishmael the near-Manichaean who stopped crucially short of Manichaeism or went crucially beyond it, as you please. But I said too that what in Ahab is expressive of a profoundly cleft moral universe perverts in action into the defiant worship, and thus imitation, of the single dark power. His satanic career may have taken rise out of dualism, out of the torments created by the maddening ambiguities of unyielding oppositions; but the word that most obviously describes Ahab's ailment—monomania—makes clear enough the singleness, and even certainty, that now claim exclusive dominion over his world. As with Ivan Karamazov, rebellion may begin out of the unrelenting purity of moral demand that, given this impure world, must lead to Manichaeism; but, again as with Ivan, the self-possessed rebel, once having assigned half of God's realm to the devil, ends by finding in the devil his only God. The Manichaean dualism that has denied the unity of God's world is in its turn transformed into an unequivocal demonism that denies one side of that dualism to assert only the other, the darker side. This is worse than Manichaeism: our hero is no longer a mere heretic but a "wretched infidel."

This view, then, leaves for Ishmael the true, still thriving Manichaeism and with it the noncommittal aesthetic play of counterpositions that recent contextual literary theory calls for. This is a rather different light for us to throw upon Ishmael's uncertainties about the angelic glory and the demoniacal terror of the whiteness of the whale, and under its influence his dissertation becomes quite a different bit of evidence. And so with his other moments of double vision that seem in part calculated to correct and to brighten Ahab's more exclusive vision. Even that all-important passage I quoted earlier—the passage in which Ishmael balances earthly doubts and heavenly intuitions—now reads somewhat differently. And I repeat its close: "... this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man
who regards them both with equal eye" (372). Just the description of the Ishmael who wrote "The Whiteness of the Whale" as the Manichaean's answer to supplement Ahab's demonic assertion of the "pasteboard masks." If I earlier emphasized the divine nature of the intuitions as an intimation of Ishmael's final acceptance of the world, the view I am suggesting now would emphasize the obviously noncommittal and Manichaean nature of the passage. It may be that against the unrelieved darkness of Ahab's vision Ishmael's balanced one appears deceptively bright so that the mere contrast has blinded our judgment of it.

Ishmael, then, may never reach beyond Manichaeism, although in his hands it is not a dangerous position; indeed, since he is inherently an observer and author, it is an aesthetically indispensable position. He can never be stricken but is able to assimilate and yet see around those who are. In this sense too he has escaped only because he alone can tell us; and his solitude may be seen as the inevitable solitude of the poet, inhuman in that he must stand apart from men in their tribulations in order most humanly to live through all of them vicariously—and more important, imaginatively. He has escaped to make his peace, but—perhaps not unlike the Ancient Mariner—he makes aesthetically, by telling, an illusory peace he cannot find by living.

According to this view, we are being even more deluded in our thematic interpretation of Ishmael by his aesthetic function within the novel than I earlier suggested. It is not merely, as I tentatively proposed, that his seeming Christianity may have no existential reality but may serve only to place Ahab's disorderly vision within a broadened aesthetic order; but it is that Ishmael, rather than resolving a Manichaean into a Christian vision, superimposes an inconclusive Manichaeism upon Ahab's exclusive demonism. In never rising beyond Manichaeism, Ishmael becomes a qualified author, with his universal human sympathy—an indispensable literary attitude—providing what, next to Ahab's darkly violent denials, shines like an all-restoring cosmic affirmation.

Moby Dick, then, which thanks to Ishmael at first seemed
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so likely a case, does not finally seem to lead us beyond Manichaeism and to a thorough thematic reconciliation. I have spoken of it at this length and from these two views in order to show how delicate the manipulation must be by which an author can manage to transform his oppositions into an aesthetic whole that affirms order even while maintaining them as thematic oppositions that defy order. Just the final echo of ambiguity in the existence of the work itself.

It may be that in literature of the extreme situation there can be no unqualifiedly Christian vision without the author's superimposition of his theological resolution upon his drama. Of course, many authors have meant to embody this vision in their work, but fortunately the best of these have failed to be as exclusive as their more committed and less aesthetic selves may have wanted, so that a fully thematic study reveals they have strayed beyond their propositional intention. For example, since we are speaking of Melville, I have already indicated that I would dispute the successful Christian reconciliation many claim to find in *Billy Budd*, as they make this work the aged Melville's *Oedipus at Colonus*. That he attempts it I do not doubt: I would not go so far as to say with Lawrance Thompson (in his *Melville's Quarrel with God*) that Melville is being sacrilegiously ironic throughout. But the fact that one may even be tempted to say this is, I think, an indication that Melville has really failed to bring it off, to move to a Christian vision beyond the tragic which his best work revealed. He simply postulates a doctrine which I find unsubstantiated in the drama, since the pure dialectical play of claims and counterclaims is so obviously weakened by it. We are being imposed upon, and we may resent Melville for it almost as much as we resent Captain Vere and Billy. The austerity with which the one holds to code and the other yields to code in the story smacks more of a return to dull conformity, to a most untranscendent, shabbily pragmatic ethical, than a rare rising to any supernal order.

If it is conceded that our profoundest literature cannot reach beyond an existential conviction of dualism any more than
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it can reach to the propositional, what are the moral consequences of confronting and resigning oneself to the Manichaean face of reality? For the self-conscious demon, who from the outset defiantly strives to destroy all ethical ideality—a Michel, a Ch’en, a Leverkühn—this issue does not arise, of course. But—to move from my first to my second group of visionaries—for him who begins by being armed with nothing but good intentions and a fierce devotion to them, there is a most jarring consequence: action becomes impossible for him who would act only in the purity of moral integrity. And in literature that is existential in my sense, except in the case of the self-conscious demon the use of the extreme situation inevitably brings to the fore a protagonist who can act only in the purity of moral integrity—a Kurtz, a Pierre, an Ahab, in a qualified sense a Joseph K. The protagonist can decide on the justness of his action only insofar as it is consistent with his idea of righteousness. But his idea of righteousness is necessarily based on a system of ethical propositions. In acting and in assuring himself of the absolute integrity of his action (without which assurance he would not act), he is making two crucial—and fatal—assumptions: first, that his single ethical set of beliefs is necessarily adequate—that is, totally responsive—to the moral problem at hand in its full complexity and, secondly, that he personally is utterly disinterested and thus capable of utterly selfless action in the service of a universal ethical claim.

In identifying himself wholly with the single ethical set and acting in accordance with its dictates as if it were an unquestionable absolute (and it is impossible for him to undertake decisive moral action otherwise), the protagonist is necessarily insisting on its exclusive rightness, its right to dominate all other sets, to impose itself upon them and demand their capitulation. His ethical set, through its exclusive and absolute rightness, dares through his agency be just as tyrannical over all individuals. They now exist, not as persons, but as things, unindividuated particulars to be subsumed under this or that universal. Their full and dynamic existential reality is reduced to an operational
function to be encouraged, tolerated, or obliterated as the rules of the ethical set dictate. Of course the protagonist has reduced himself as well to thinghood, losing his own individuality in his identification with his ethical universal. Where necessary—and he often enjoys this necessity—he can all too proudly sacrifice himself to his universal at least as easily as he can sacrifice others. In other words, it is no step at all in his beliefs to get from the rightness of the ethical set to his righteousness and then to self-righteousness. The Hegelian god, self-appointed by pride and in pride assuming clean hands, moves inflexibly forward directing the fortunes of his ethical set in the implacable war against absolute evil—as determined of course by his universal principles.

But the Manichaean face of reality stubbornly persists and will present itself. No ethical set is adequate to existential ambiguity, and any pretension to absolute sway—such pretension as is involved in any decisive moral act that claims purity of motive—is doomed to be confronted by its own arrogance, to see the willfulness, the self-aggrandizement, the absolute immorality of it all. Thus the existential takes its revenge by plunging the protagonist into the demonic, by asserting its own extra-ethical catholicity which shocks the ethical man by its seeming contradictions. But now demonic, he will be ethical man no more. Forced to look within himself, he sees his own evil which has been there from the start impurifying every motive and forcing him, through the pretension of disinterested ethical principle, to become the very hated thing he was fighting. And so he can hate himself—and can persevere in making himself worse and more hateful by the now conscious and purposeful pursuit of the evil principle. We have traced similar stages earlier in connection with Ahab. The simple belief in the moral order and action in accordance with it summon the shock that brings chaos and the fearful unveiling of the Manichaean face of reality, that most indestructible sphinx. Despair ensues and with it, in all likelihood, the spite directed at a seemingly spiteful universe and the madness that defiantly worships the
immoral order (and only madness can see order in immorality).

But it is the Manichaean version of existential reality that dooms all action since, were there finally a moral order that was right absolutely, there would be a way, and the actor, in laying claim to being right, might actually be so. Of course, insofar as he is but human, the personal failing that impurifies motive would still be there; but his objective claim to principle would have to be examined as possibly being just. The Manichaean view dooms it sight unseen and absolutely, this negation being all that is absolute in this conception of Manichaeism. Even our final and last possible case, Myshkin, who commits the sin of excess on the side of humility rather than pride—this least daring and least arrogating of all well-intentioned actors—joins the others in their fate and in their destructive power over their fellows.

All action, then, is impossible—even as its impossible existence makes literature possible. To repeat the words of Axel Heyst again, “... all action is bound to be harmful. It is devilish. That is why this world is evil upon the whole.” And Conrad’s later comment in the Heystian spirit: “Action—the first thought, or perhaps the first impulse, on earth! The barbed hook, bated with the illusion of progress, to bring out of the lightless void the shoals of unnumbered generations!” Or there is the simple meditation of the Reverend Hightower, that Heyst-like figure in Faulkner’s *Light in August*: “Man performs, engenders, so much more than he can or should have to bear. That’s how he finds that he can bear anything.” As my brief glance at *Billy Budd* has indicated, I must deny—despite the moving insistence of R. W. B. Lewis—that the transformation...


11 In *The American Adam*, by R. W. B. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 146–152, where he sees *Billy Budd* as the Christian resolution of the thematic indecisions of *Pierre*. As Nietzsche might put it, the resolution is really in the frigidity of the anti-tragic, rational Socratic mode rather than in the sublimity of the Apollonian, however it apes the latter. Mere utilitarian compromise is not enough.
of Adam into Jesus, the second Adam, can be rendered aesthetically believable. For it demands the kind of miracle that resists dramatic categories. As a result of the human and dialogistic limitations that bound existential reality, with or without the author’s invitation parody is always present to subvert the intended parable: it mocks any pretension that “alone” would “save the world” in a way that would leave it worth saving.

The extremity with which literature abounds produces the uncompromising hero who in turn produces an action falsely conceived in purity so that he is compromised utterly. Action presupposes adequacy of ethical belief and personal guiltlessness, while in its extremity it reveals the bankruptcy of system and the inherent vice as well as the folly of him who believed in the perfection of system and the purity of personal motive.

One can multiply fictional examples of these processes indefinitely—far beyond those I have treated in these chapters. Naturally, the procedure varies widely—and in this variation lies their crucial literary, or thematic, interest. But the similarities from stage to stage are striking—or should I say terrifying? If, then, existential ambiguity makes every act an act of self-damnation, what alternative is there? There is, of course, the purely Christian view—or the limited version I have presented as the purely Christian view—that is ethically paralyzed. And, strangely, it is a view that can be held while granting the validity of the Manichaean vision of existential reality. Recognizing the absurd in existence and recognizing the inhuman, anti-person-

Lewis sees that Billy is linked with Isaac. But Kierkegaard, we must remember, tells us that while all highest religionness attests to the absurd, the converse does not hold. More than an absurd requirement is needed, especially when this requirement happens to meet the most ruthless demands of official naval policy. In his more recent volume too (The Picaresque Saint [New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1959]), Lewis finds transcendent optimism where I find ethical inadequacy. For example, compare his essay on Bread and Wine, from which his book’s title is taken (pp. 148-160), with mine in Chapter III, above.

12 The American Adam, p. 152.
alistic cruelty as well as the untenability of any ethical system, one can embrace his irrational conclusions. He can insist upon his own and everyone's sacred uniqueness as person with the consequent fear that subjecting any person to the rationality that plays with universals—a rationality that destroys itself when it collides with intransient reality—is to see him only in the common light of things and thus, in effect, to destroy him. Further, he may have seen the common human weakness in himself early—before a crisis would have forced it upon him all too late. Thus he may have learned the wisdom of self-distrust. Even were an adequate ethical system possible, and his irrationalism may have convinced him it is not; and were it possible to impose it without destroying persons, and he may know it cannot be universal without subsuming particulars; still he would never presume to represent this ethical system himself, since this would be a presumption of a purity of ethical disinterest that he cannot allow human pridefulness to make. For in asserting the person's uniqueness and in refusing to allow so much of him to be emptied in order to make him into a cog in the machine of reason, this Christian would be willing to admit that the person is worse as well as better than the cog: he is just different from it, and fuller. He would be anxious to preserve this worseness too, since personal uniqueness is all and morality is enigmatic; and so he can insist that the impurity of motive that would destroy any bearer of even the most promising ethical vision—were any ultimately promising—betrays the failing variously present in us all that is part of our unique being and that is damning only when, in ignorance or spite of it, we choose to act as if, inhuman and thus bloodlessly ethical, we were unexceptionally straightforward.

Thus acknowledging the inaccessible enigma of reality, this man may be ready to say through faith that behind the Manichaean face there is a deeper reality in God, in Whose eyes all absurdities are miraculously resolved. But this "leap"—the embracing of the one absurdity that explains the rest, or rather that justifies the rest as inexplicable—does not concern us here
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since it cannot be communicated or subjected to dramatic portrayal. What does concern us is his attempt to escape the demonic by fleeing to an extra-ethical, subjective, existential Christianity. By definition, however, this rare and saintlike attitude must reject action, decision, even moral judgment; and, viewed from the ethical sphere, it is paralyzed, useless, and, as subversive, actually dangerous. It was in order to look at this kind of alternative that I examined Conrad’s Lord Jim and found how totally and fatally inaction there served as a most committed form of action, thus discovering the existential trap closing about itself—the same trap that victimized the more overt forms of action that it strangled in horror.

Of course man will—must and even ought to—act, as literary protagonists continually show us—even the most reticent ones like Heyst and Hightower who, despite all that experience has taught them, find their only glory (a destructive glory inevitably) in a final, futile attachment to life and action. And if the extremity encroaches upon him, then so will the Manichaean realization and with it the tragic. For the rest, we can with our Marlows and our Ishmaels turn to the example and the hope of Lena Grove and Byron Bunch in Light in August: the hope of common mankind for a retreat from extremity, from the demands of purity and integrity, to the homely sanctity of the commonplace, where there can be an acceptance of the imperfection of all things, human action chief among them. It is what the Melville of Pierre would term the cultivation of the catnip to the neglect of the amaranth. This is not to deny the Manichaean face of reality so much as to deny the need to confront it. Much in the manner of Wordsworth in his “Elegiac Stanzas,” with “welcome fortitude, and patient cheer” Byron Bunch will bear “what is to be borne.” He bears the truth in Hightower’s ruthless analysis that reveals a questionable morality in his new commitment to action in behalf of Lena, as he bears the biological and moral facts that surround the birth of Lena’s child, and as he will bear much more.
It seems like a man can just about bear anything. He can even bear what he never done. He can even bear the thinking how some things is just more than he can bear. He can even bear it that if he could just give down and cry, he wouldn't do it. He can even bear it to not look back, even when he knows that looking back or not looking back wont do him any good. (New Directions, 1947, p. 401)

A moment later, seeing that looking back upon what he is losing is the more painful alternative, he adds, “... I reckon I might as well have the pleasure of not being able to bear looking back too” (402). And in forcing himself to bear looking back, through what he sees Byron is rewarded by being allowed a final return—after a ritual defeat in battle—to his resolute counterpart, Lena. Neither Byron nor Lena has the vision or even the searching intelligence, but they neither need nor want it. As Hightower sees in the brief regeneration that precedes his death, they are the makers of the race, their energies, unsapped by the past, relentlessly crawling to the future. They can bear any “burden,” unlike Joanna of that name, without resorting to extremity because they must bear those who carry the future of the race; they endure woe so that humanity may endure. They evade, with their continual willingness to relent, the unrelenting and demonic divisiveness of a puritanism that echoes Ahab’s, just as their Christ child, doomed to a mild hopefulness, will evade the lot of Joe Christmas, destroyed by the puritan—the morally overearnest—world of extremity. The child of common humanity, it will, like them, be freed from the perverse burden of an exhausted history that, in imposing fanaticism, has smothered Joanna Burden and Hightower as well as Joe Christmas.

If they persist, Lena and Byron and the fresh Christ, if they are not stricken beyond endurance (and Joseph K. has assured us that only those prepared to recognize trial are tried), they may be able to cultivate a life blessed in the way of what, with Eliot, Lionel Trilling calls “the common routine,” the way
of Melville's homely catnip. For those amaranthine strivers who must at all costs look—and these are perhaps the most rewarding characters in our literature—the Manichean will still be there, unresolvable. These are the cultivators of extremity, that which destroys itself and all it touches. Even Faulkner must dwell upon these too, though he can—with friendly and pleasantly supercilious irony—end with a common human alternative that does not answer them but affirms the simple grace of life in disregard of them or in retreat from them.

We have come a long way—“a fur piece,” the indomitable Lena Grove would say—and I hope over not too disorderly a route, from the purely aesthetic considerations with which I began. But it has been worth it if in the byways we have found, perhaps to our surprise, a rich yield of the illuminating powers of literature and its recent criticism: their powers to illuminate the high existential cost of living and our endless ability to pay, thanks to our not inglorious obligation to vision and our persistence in the common human enterprise that reveals a faith that endures despite all.