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The Old World Journey

National Identity in Four American Novels
from 1960 to 1973
Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English presented at Uppsala University in 2005.

Abstract

A commonly held assumption among literary critics is that the motif of the European journey is exhausted in American literature in the post-World-War-II period. Challenging this view, the present study claims that the Old World journey narrative lives on, but in new guises, and that it continues to be a forum for the discussion of American national identity. Studying four novels about Americans traveling to Europe – William Styron’s *Set This House on Fire* (1960), Mary McCarthy’s *Birds of America* (1971), John A. Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) – this thesis examines the ways in which the European journey is utilized for a questioning of “America.” Informed by the political debates of their time, which, lead, for example, to the displacement of hegemonic ideologies such as nationalism, they share a critical stance vis-à-vis the conventional construction of national identity. They represent, however, different strands of the contemporary political counterculture; while the first two texts view national identity from the center of American society, addressing a moral and an ideological/intellectual critique, respectively, the last two represent marginal perspectives, that of the African American and feminist protest movements. The function of the European setting in the four novels is also scrutinized: in all of them the European setting provides the backdrop for a story that deals, almost exclusively, with American culture; it serves in a variety of ways, for example as a many-facetted stage, an experimental ground, or a zone of liberation. The Coda sketches recent developments in the 1980s and 1990s, finding the theme of initiation and the figure of the independent warm-hearted American girl to persist and the myth of American innocence to continue to be contested.

Keywords: Erica Jong, Mary McCarthy, William Styron, John A. Williams, *Birds of America*, *Fear of Flying*, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, *Set This House on Fire*, “America,” “Europe,” European journey, international novel, journey narrative, nationalism, national identity, Old World


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To Hilda and Astrid
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Although the journey is a cliché metaphor for the writing of a dissertation, it is an apt one; it captures the fundamental nature of the experience, that of the process. In my case it is, of course, doubly appropriate, as my thesis is concerned with journeys. Nevertheless, I find the metaphor flawed because, primarily associated with adventure, even pleasure, it does not account for the fact that research is hard labor, albeit one of love. And, as it calls up the image of the traveler, one conventionally thought of as an individualist, it obscures the community, or communities, that the doctoral student is supported by. To acknowledge these communities, the many people who have toiled with me, or sponsored my work, is essential to me because without them this book would never have been completed.

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INTRODUCTION

Discovering “America” Abroad

The American in Europe is everywhere confronted with the question of his identity, and this may be taken as the key to all the contradictions one encounters when attempting to discuss him.

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

The end of the American artist’s pilgrimage to Europe is the discovery of America.

Leslie Fiedler, *An End to Innocence*

Scholarship on American literature agrees that “the international novel,” dramatizing the cultural clash between America and Europe, between “innocence” and “experience,” and best known from the work of Henry James, practically disappeared in the early twentieth century. Establishing a link between nineteenth-century literature and post-World-War-II novels, the present study, however, proposes instead that this mode of writing, the European/Old World journey narrative, lives on and continues to be a forum for the discussion of American national identity. But the narrative has been transformed in step with historical changes. Studying four novels about

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1 Comparing fiction about Americans in Europe before and after World War I, as well as commenting on that written after World War II, Christof Wegelin writes (in 1964) that, in the twentieth century, “nationalities are no longer thematically significant; the alignments of the dramatis personae, their natures, their conflicts, their friendships, etc, are in no way determined by nationality” (“Image” 88). And he goes on to elaborate: “Sociologically, the world of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, or Styron and Baldwin represent a society in which different national manners have been fused by habitual contact,” adding that what characterizes the post-World-War-II period is “a kind of total cosmopolitanism” (“Image” 88). Malcolm Bradbury’s more recent *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (1995) does not make any such claims regarding literary paradigm shifts but, focusing on the changes that “Europe” has undergone in the American imagination since the early twentieth century, still neglects the persistence of certain literary motifs and national myths throughout history. And in “The European Journey in Postwar American Fiction and Film,” (1999) although she recognizes the persistence of the motif, Kasia Boddy holds that, toward the end of the century, it has virtually been emptied out. Adhering to the idea that, today, western Europe is not essentially different from the United States she claims that most contemporary American writers view “the whole project” of writing about the European journey as “exhausted” and therefore they resort to either repetition or parody (245). As my study argues differently I will engage with Boddy’s argument in the Coda.
Americans traveling to Europe published in the 1960s and early 1970s, a turbulent period that saw a critique and a displacement of hegemonic ideologies such as nationalism, this thesis examines their respective queries of national identity. Informed by the political debates of their time, these novels – William Styron’s *Set This House on Fire* (1960), Mary McCarthy’s *Birds of America* (1971), John A. Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) – utilize the European journey for an interrogation of “America,” the United States as myth and idea.

A look at history reveals that, as a cultural ritual and literary motif, the European journey, what I call the Old World journey, has indeed been important for American self-definition and redefinition, especially as the nation evolved during the nineteenth century. Although the European tour, or journey, lost its status as national ritual in the early twentieth century, as a literary motif it continued to appear in conjunction with the theme of nationality. As I go about researching the survival of this American narrative, I have chosen not to use the rather narrow definition of the “international novel” but the wider concept of an Old World journey narrative. Considering the texts I discuss as products of social and material conditions, such as the changing power relations between Europe and the United States and the growing influence of the American middle class, I attempt to historicize the type of narrative I am interested in. A historicization, I believe, opens up for a problematization of the genre and enables us to approach it as a source of insights into national identity at particular times in history. In addition, it contributes to a demythologization of “America.”

In my endeavor to discover what the four selected post-World-War-II novels say about “America,” I read the protagonists symbolically – as American figures, that is as representatives of a social and/or cultural group. Such a reading is invited, I believe, by the novels’ generic status; not only are they twentieth-century adaptations of the Old World/European journey narrative chronicling the development of protagonists whose geographical

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2 It needs to be pointed out that my use of “nationalism” or “nationalist ideology” is a generous one and that it differs from common usage where these terms are usually only applied to extreme or chauvinist expressions. I only use patriotism (love for or devotion to country) in reference to an individual’s expression of nationalist feeling. My employment of the word therefore differs from widespread American usage where patriotism (a positively loaded word) tends to be considered unrelated to the ideology of nationalism (a negatively loaded one).

3 For a survey of the symbolic function of Europe and the European journey in American literature, see Cushing Strout’s *The American Image of the Old World* (1963), Jean Meral’s *Paris dans la littérature américaine* (1983), Stephen Spender’s *Love-Hate Relations, A Study of Anglo-American Sensibilities* (1987), and Malcolm Bradbury’s *Dangerous Pilgrimages* (1995). Spender and Bradbury are interested in both the European perspective and the interaction between the two cultural spheres. The plot of the young innocent American who goes to Europe “in search of the fabled cultural treasures” is also investigated in Klaus Lanzinger’s *Jason’s Voyage* (1989), a study of a broad range of works by Melville, Hawthorne, James, and Thomas Wolfe (Preface).

4 A contemporary thesis that insists on the necessity of historicizing the international novel is Udo Natterman’s “Culture Clash, Literary Form, and the Historical Moment: Studies in the International Novel” (1993), a book I will have reason to return to in the Coda.
journey structures or frames the narrative, but they also have affinities with both the Bildungsroman and the travelogue, genres historically known as vehicles of nationalism.

For obvious reasons, this engagement with the ideology of nationalism is important to my close readings. Throughout history, American mythology has presented Europe and Europeans as the Other/s of “America” and the Americans. The nature of the European Other has, of course, constantly been mutating, and the threatening and potentially dangerous European Other of the colonial period today has taken on a new significance often incarnating high culture and/or romantic charm. This Othering of Europe and the occasional use of imperialist discourses, evident in fictional as well as factual journey narratives, have made postcolonial perspectives on travel writing germane to my study. Exposing the imperialist fundamentals of the conventions of the genre, texts like Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992) have been useful to my pursuit.

Pratt argues that European travel writing activates imperial discourses and creates imperial subjects, and a basic premise of my own study is that travel writing, most obviously in its traditional form, serves in the formation of a national subjectivity. That American travel writing has actually had this function is demonstrated in James Buzard’s The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture (1993), William W. Stowe’s Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture (1994), and Terry Caesar’s Forgiving the Boundaries: Home as Abroad in American Travel Writing (1995). “American travel writing is a writing of America,” Caesar states outright, calling attention to the fact that the American travel narrative, possibly more than that of other nations, is concerned with national definition (16).

The travel narrative should provide a fruitful object of study in the investigation of cultural and national identity as it is a paradoxical focal point where dominant ideologies are inscribed but also reformulated – and, at certain historical moments, even subverted. The genre has been recognized as a

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5 I capitalize Self and Other to signal my understanding of them as discursive and mythologized constructs.
6 Jopi Nyman’s study Under English Eyes: Constructions of Europe in Early Twentieth-Century British Fiction (2000) applies an analogous approach in its readings of English literary constructions of continental and northern European countries as Others.
7 A work related in approach to this study is Mark Twain, Culture and Gender: Envisioning America Through Europe (1994) by J. D. Stahl, which studies how European culture, signifying a foreign and cultural Other, serves Twain in his investigation of American culture and society. According to Stahl, Twain’s investigations into American culture challenged conventional nineteenth-century understandings of masculinity and national identity.
8 I assume imperialist ideology to be inherent in the American (mainstream) nationalist ideology manifest in American travel writing. By using the term imperialism rather generally, as for example Pratt does, including twentieth-century ideology, discourse, and practice, I want to signal an awareness of the persistence of imperialist ideology in the post-colonial period. In some cases, I will use the qualification “neo-imperialism” to denote imperialism, as an ideology and practice, in the post-World-War-II period. I rely on Raymond Williams’s definition of neo-imperialism as “an economic system of external investment and the penetration and control of markets and sources of raw materials” (159-60).
vehicle of ideologies such as nationalism and imperialism, but also acknowledged as a site where identities constructed as monolithic, transcendent, or “natural” by hegemonic ideologies can be questioned – particularly so toward the end of the twentieth century. James Duncan and Derek Gregory describe travel writing as “an act of translation that constantly works to produce a tense ‘space in-between’”(4), but are careful to point out that it is “not a neutral surface and it is never innocent: it is shot through with relations of power and desire” (5). Typically, the travel text contains moments and passages where powerful ideologies are temporarily put on hold. Such instances occur frequently in connection with the actual, physical, encounter with the Other; these scenes activate a number of discourses, including hegemonic ones, and expose what Homi K. Bhabha has termed the inherent ambivalence of nationalist ideology.

Such ambivalence can be observed particularly well in arrival scenes, which have a prominent place in representations of encounters with foreign cultures, as Pratt recognizes in both “Fieldwork in Common Places” and Imperial Eyes. She identifies arrival scenes as “particularly potent sites for framing relations of contact and setting the terms of its representation” (Eyes 78). Supplying a space for interaction between traveler and natives, the arrival scene may be understood in terms of a dramatization of what Pratt calls “the contact zone,” the space for cultural interaction where cross-cultural relations are established and identities constituted. A crystallization of the encounter with Otherness inherent to the journey, I find the arrival scene to be a very interesting object in the study of a text’s engagement with dominant ideologies.

Representations of acts of seeing often provide keys to an understanding of the ideological positioning of a narrative. Given the prominence of such passages in travel narratives, I think the application of the concept of the gaze to my readings of the motif of the American European journey is justified. In my understanding, the concept of gaze denotes a discursively constructed, visual perspective grounded in ideology. The concept of the gaze provides a useful analytical tool when dealing with issues of identity in literary texts, because it focuses on the act of cognition while foregrounding the importance of ideology. Such a strategy should yield insights into the workings of hegemonic ideologies in the construction of national identity. The varieties of the concept that I find useful – the male, the imperial, the white, and what I call the American gaze – tend to merge and overlap. The last variety mentioned, the American, is a national and nationalist gaze – a way of perceiving visually grounded in a normative, mainstream nationalist ideol-

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9 In his historical survey of a wide range of western narratives of travel, The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism (1991), Eric J. Leed calls attention to the central symbolic importance of the arrival.

10 In Imperial Eyes, Pratt defines the contact zone as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict . . . By using the term ‘contact,’ I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters. A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (6-7).
ogy, embraced by dominant American society. Deployed on domestic objects, the American gaze serves to define “America” through identification. Foreign objects and scenes, however, are Othered – thereby constructed in terms of contrasts, reified opposites, to “America.”

In parts of Chapter One and in Chapter Two I discuss the iconized images of “America” and “Europe,” products of a nationalist imagination, in terms of manifestations of the gaze. In the discussions of the individual novels, the concept of the gaze, in particular the American gaze, is applied to scenes where an American protagonist and viewer constructs her/his Americanness through the objectification/Othering of the European landscape/cityscape, culture or people. In other words, an American perceiving Europe and/or Europeans is not necessarily using an American gaze. In my definition, only when the act of seeing can be deemed to be underwritten by nationalist ideology can it be defined as American. The American gaze can therefore only be used by someone already possessing an American national identity, or possibly a person who has been strongly influenced by American nationalist ideology. As I will attempt to demonstrate, to apply the concept of the American gaze to scenes where American protagonists are confronted with Europe provides a fruitful strategy for determining how the novels position themselves in regard to “America.”

Acts of visual objectification are represented in a variety of ways in the four novels. By exposing the gazes of his protagonists in Set This House on Fire, Styron uncovers the power hierarchy structuring the relationship between Americans and Italians in the immediate post-World-War-II period. McCarthy, in turn, by placing the old-fashioned American innocent of Birds of America in a number of, to him, confusing contexts, reveals the constructedness of the protagonist’s gazes and exposes American myth through the use of irony. And in The Man Who Cried I Am, Williams demonstrates that the American gaze occasionally used by the male African American protagonist is a sign of his entrapment in white mythology. There is little attempt to problematize gazes in Jong’s Fear of Flying, however; they instead function to empower the female protagonist.

The four texts I have selected for discussion thus reflect different aspects of the ideological questioning that took place in the 1960s, ushering in a political and cultural paradigm shift. While sharing a critical stance vis-à-vis the conventional construction of national identity, these four novels represent, however, different strands of the contemporary political counterculture; while the first two view national identity from the center of American society, the last two represent marginal perspectives. Published in 1960 and presenting a largely moral critique of “America,” Set This House on Fire is more a product of the immediate postwar period than of the 1960s. Nevertheless, in its attack on the America of the Eisenhower era, it can be understood as a text foreboding the critique of the United States as a superpower spreading its political, economic, and cultural influence around the globe.

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11 When I discuss American nationalist ideologies other than the mainstream, I qualify them according to the variety they represent, e.g. as white supremacist or civic.
Engaging in a critique of American mythology, *Birds of America*, is an expression of the intellectual reevaluation of the liberal idealist tradition. While the protest against patriarchal structures permeating American society and culture voiced by the "second wave" feminist movement clearly reverberates in *Fear of Flying*, *The Man Who Cried I Am* voices the African American protest movement's indictment of American racism. While all novels oppose nationalist ideology, at least initially, they do so from four different angles. As an analysis of the ideological positions of these novels requires certain basic insights into American nationalism, I will attempt a survey of this broad field in the first two chapters.

Chapter One, "American National Identity," discusses the processes fundamental to the construction of a national identity and, more specifically, of American national identity. The initial section "National Identity: National Self and Other" explicates a basic assumption of the project: that the nation is formed through processes of inclusion as well as exclusion. In other words, in the construction of the United States as a national community, the definitions of what is and what is not us/U.S. are equally important. Processes of constructing the Self and the Other are hence innate to the national project. That power hierarchies (gender, sexuality, race, and class) underpin nationalist ideology is also stressed, as such an insight is necessary for an understanding of the complexities involved in an individual's relationship to her/his national identity. The second section, "Nation/Journey/Gaze," deals with the centrality of the journey and of acts of seeing in the context of the nation-formation process, and it engages critically with the concept of the gaze. Surveying the male, the imperial, the tourist, and the American gazes, this section will propose a dynamic employment of the concept, one that recognizes the frequent merging of powerful gazes. In the third section, "Nation, Narrative and the Story of 'America'," I briefly address the role that literature has played in the history of nationalist ideology and the national project. As has been argued, in different ways, narratives – in images as well as in texts – are instrumental in the process in which the nation is shaped. As these narratives are grounded in American mythology, I next provide a sketch of the "story" of "America." This grand narrative increasingly becomes a target for critique in the 1960s and it is one in which the novels of my study also engage. Since knowledge of American mythology and symbology is necessary for the identification of a nationalist discourse, I survey the grand narrative of "America," with an emphasis on the myths that occur in my primary texts, attempting to uncover the ideological grounding of this meta-narrative.

In Chapter Two, "A History of the Old World Journey," the exploration into American mythology continues; the European journey as social ritual and literary motif is discussed, and I employ a definition of "journey" that spans both temporary visit and expatriation. The emphasis is on the symbolic significance of the European journey as social activity. Writing fiction about American characters traveling to Europe in the post-World-War-II period, American authors have drawn on a rich cultural memory and literary tradition; recognizing intertextual links to previous texts of course adds to our
understanding of what contemporary texts say about American national identity.

Having thus laid the theoretical foundation for my study, I will engage in close readings in the succeeding four chapters. Chapter Three deals with Styron’s novel, one that expresses a liberal disquiet with postwar American materialism and expansive foreign policy. Chapter Four focuses on the exposure of “Europe” as well as “America” in McCarthy’s book. Chapters Five and Six, in turn, study novels critiquing “America” from the perspectives of the two major civil rights movements of the period: the African American in Williams’s text, and the feminist in Jong’s. Finally, the Coda discusses the survival of the Old World journey narrative in American literature, commenting on the persistence as well as transformation of the motifs and themes of this mode of writing in the post-World-War-II period.
CHAPTER ONE

American National Identity

National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.
Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force.
Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*

Central to my project is the definition of national identity in general and American national identity in particular – both on the individual and cultural level. For my definition, I draw on the constructivist schools of nationalism studies represented by, for example, Eric J. Hobsbawn, Benedict Anderson, and Ernest Gellner, who point out that the concepts of the nation and national identity cannot be disengaged from the ideology of nationalism. Indeed, they argue, the objective of forging a nation and a national identity is what defines nationalism. As a consequence, their definition of nationalist ideology is a wide one. Constructivist theories of nationalism understand it as intimately connected to the culturally homogenizing processes of modernity (industrialization, state bureaucracy and control, print-capitalism and mass communications), and individual nations are regarded as products of particular historical and social moments. Although a number of varieties can be identified, western nationalism is generally considered a bourgeois phenomenon. But while scholars agree on the constructed nature of the nation by referring to it as “invented,” “engineered,” or “created,” they differ in their interpretations of the processes and agents which produce it, and consequently differ in their analysis of nationalism as an ideology.12

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12 There exist two varieties of nationalism, according to political scientists, the first being the civic/rational where citizenship is focal (the “Staatsnation”), and the second, the cul-
In his seminal *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson proposes that nationalism is “align[ed]. . . not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being” (12). The nation must be approached in an “anthropological spirit” as related to “kinship” and “religion,” Anderson argues, and, to grasp what distinguishes national communities, the object of study should be their construction, “the style in which they are imagined” (5-6). Anderson proposes his by now well-known concept of “imagined community” as an alternative to the conventional way of understanding how the nation is conceived by its members: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion” (6). And this community is imagined as a positive union: “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7).

National identity is a category of identity which, as critics such as those referred to above have argued, is ideologically constructed and ascribed. In such processes, state authorities, schools, the media, even commercial enterprises, broadly what Louis Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), can easily be identified as active agents, as the instruments of dominant social forces. Of academic disciplines, historiography is often seen to be an example of a field underwritten by nationalist ideology. By way of myth and ritual, nationalism interpellates an individual into national identity, and creates a national subjectivity that is largely unreflected, as Althusser would have it. One such ritual is the veneration of the national flag – the flag being the most illustrative symbol of the notion of unity fundamental to the construct of the nation.

A person’s national identity, experienced as a sense of belonging, may take the form of familiarity with a certain culture, but can also be invested with patriotic feelings, pride or elation. The strong appeal of nationalism to the individual can be explained by drawing on Anderson’s idea of its quasi-religious character. In a secular age, when the world is understood as ruled by contingency, nationalism is a meaning-endowing ideology. Since membership in an “eternal” community such as the nation gives the individual a
cultural/ethnic/linguistic where birth, geographical as well as genealogical, has a greater significance (the “Kultnation”), see, e.g., Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* 8-13. It can be noted that while the United States is one of the most illustrative examples of the “civic/rational” variety, elements from ethnic nationalism have also been imported into American nationalist ideology, as illustrated by the nativist ideology of the 1920s progressive movement. See *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* by Walter Benn Michaels (1995).

13 In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” Althusser defines them as the religious, the educational, the family, the legal, the political, the trade-unions, the communications (the media), and the cultural (143).
sense of purpose and meaning, nationalism and its self-idealizing discourse might serve to strengthen the individual’s self-confidence and her/his sense of being part of a nurturing community. It needs to be stressed, however, that although an individual’s national identity generally is not actively chosen, it is often an intensely personal matter. In evidence of the intimate nature of national identity, the novels of McCarthy and John A. Williams treated in this study, in-depth queries of “America,” are both personal novels.

The ambivalence of the discourse of the nation is appositely described as Janus-faced by Bhabha (Introduction, Nation 3). This contradictory nature of nationalist ideology is well captured in Malene Leerberg’s formulation: “Like the two-faced God the nation possesses an inherent doubleness: It is both communal and authoritarian, friendly and bellicose – and we could add inclusive and exclusive” (10). The complexity of national identity is manifest in narrative, as Bhabha argues. It becomes particularly evident, I believe, in narratives about journeys abroad as these relate the encounter with the foreign Other. Abroad, the American finds herself/himself in a space that has the potential for triggering a reflection on, and questioning of dominant ideologies. Here, identities that have previously seemed “natural” are destabilized. At best, narratives relating the encounter with the Other express what Frantz Fanon envisions as a “national consciousness,” an informed, reflected understanding of national identity.

National Identity: National Self and Other

The individual’s relationship to the imagined community of the nation and the “national Self” is central to my investigation. This is a dimension of national identity both crucial and controversial but still largely unexplored, according to Anthony D. Smith, who claims that “[t]he quest for the national self and the individual’s relationship to it remains the most baffling element in the nationalist project” (17). Acknowledging that this “process of self-definition and location is in many ways the key to national identity,” he stresses that it is also “the element that has attracted most doubt and skepticism” (17 my emphasis). Below, I will argue that this key lies in an analysis of the Self/Other paradigm, where the national Self is constituted through processes of inclusion as well as of exclusion; such an analysis will expose the mechanisms involved in the formation of the nation, on the collective as well as individual level. It is possible that the “doubt and skepticism” which the concept of the national Self has aroused, particularly from a leftist or social minority perspective, can be explained as an expression of dissatisfaction with the polar, hierarchical nature of the nationalist project itself. From the point of view of the marginalized, the nation is exclusive and oppressive rather than inclusive and egalitarian.
The identity of the nation builds on the definition of a national Self, a concept which is closely related to what is often referred to as the “national character,” representing the specificity of the nation’s population, culture, and society. And although nationalism has many manifestations, the construction of this national Self always needs a set of foreign (external) and domestic (internal) Others – the latter being those exposed to the “inequality and exploitation” Anderson considers hidden behind rhetorical notions of the “comradeship” of the national community. These Others are shaped in processes building on dominant, often hegemonic, ideologies.

One of the processes by which national Others are constructed is gender-based. As scholars in the broad field of gender studies have demonstrated, the nation state, usually imagined as a “fraternity,” has a patriarchal foundation. The national Self is male (as well as masculine), and the coding of the nation as such is achieved through the feminization of Others. The gendered coding of national Self and Other, in terms of male and female, explains why foreign countries tend to be exposed to various strategies of feminization in nationalist discourse. Quite commonly, in fiction, a female character comes to symbolize the foreign country – such is, for example, the function of Francesca in Styron’s novel.

On the domestic scene, the figure of the female is, essentially, an Other – though not one which can be equated with, e.g., racial Others. Occasionally, it needs to be stressed, national women are occasionally accepted as subjects in their own right. In Gender & Nation (1997), Nira Yuval-Davis writes that women are “often excluded from the collective ‘we’ of the body politic, and retain an object rather than a subject position” (47). This object position explains the complicated role played by the figure of the female – commonly serving as icon and central symbolic repository for the nation. The virtuous female, often in the role of wife or mother, typically signifies the nation – as is illustrated by the national symbols of Britannia, Mother Russia, la Madeleine, Germania, Mother Svea or, in the American case, Columbia (or even the Statue of Liberty). In Jong’s novel she is referred to as “Mrs. America,” the hallowed housewife. Women, typically, “symbolize the collectivity [sic] unity, honour and the raison d’être of specific national and ethnic projects, like going to war;” Yuval-Davis notes (47). As Jan Jindy Pettman points out, since the image of earth is closely associated with the womb, the female represents the nation as geographical territory (country, earth) while men are its agents (74). According to this patriarchal Self/Other logic, the national symbol of Uncle Sam thus represents America as agent and state.

The central position of the female as national symbol, Yuval-Davis argues, can thus be explained with reference to her reproductive power, in both a biological and cultural sense. Motherhood is understood as a national function and so is the institution of the family. Imagery associated with the family (motherland, kin, home, etc) features prominently in nationalist dis-
course, and the family is a privileged metaphor in the nationalist imagination, one conventionally used to represent the people of a nation. Institutionalized through marriage, the family becomes a public legal affair and the fact that procreation is considered a central national interest signals the privileged status of heterosexuality and marriage. The married female protagonist in Jong’s *Fear of Flying* fulfills the expectations that patriarchal America places on women. However, when she escapes her American husband and embarks on a wild flight through Europe with a foreign lover, she defies the norms of gender and sexuality inherent to American nationalist ideology.

The female body is a signifier of crucial importance, particularly in situations when the nation is perceived to be under threat, such as war. The common equation of country with the female body eroticizes the nation and “leads to [the] associat[ion of] sexual danger with boundary transgressions and boundary defence” (Pettman 188). In conflicts between nations, women thus signify as objects of competition, and to possess and protect the national woman, imagined as beautiful and chaste, reinforces masculinity and consequently boosts national morale. Foreign women, on the other hand, are typically described as “exotic, licentious, tempting, dangerous, inferior” (particularly if they are also racial others) and, in war, the rape of foreign women by national men functions to emasculate foreign men (Pettman 189).

Besides gender, another fundamental process involved in the construction of national Others is race, one of course grounded in imperialist ideology. In the history of the United States, African Americans and Native Americans have served (and still serve) as the nation’s prime racial Others. The primary function of the racial Other is to define and bolster the whiteness of the national Self and to justify and uphold the dominance and privileges of white American society. In the history of colonialism, the construct of the racial Other justified and naturalized the control, exploitation, and, in some cases, annihilation, of non-European peoples. It should be recognized that the construction of racial Others typically intersects with gender-based processes. In the American past, the icon of the white woman functioned to strengthen the image of the black woman as promiscuous; while the white woman was idealized, the black woman was eroticized and vilified – a construct that legitimized, the black woman was eroticized and vilified – a construct that legit-

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14 See also *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (1995) by Anne McClintock, particularly “No Longer in a Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender and Race” (352-89), or Ania Loomba’s *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) (215-30) for a discussion of the position of the female in nationalism.

15 For a discussion of the interconnectedness of nationalism and imperialism, see also Seamus Deane’s “Imperialism/Nationalism.” The fundamental importance of the binary between the white Self and the racialized Other to the Euro-American nation was of course recognized long before the advent of postcolonial theory, for example in the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon. And as the African American civil rights movement grew in force, critical theory on American nationalism was also produced, as in, for example, *The Way of the New World* (1976) by Addison Gayle, Jr. In a chapter entitled “White Nationalism,” Gayle mentions the various ways in which white America places African Americans in a position of inferiority and exposed to exclusion.
mated sexual exploitation of African American women. Such a construct justified the systematic rape of black women by white men during slavery as well as the exploitation to which they continued to be exposed. Veiled in the rhetoric of chivalry, the “defense” of white women, symbolizing the land, white civilization, and racial purity, also amounted to an assault on black men in the South during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. This assault was manifested in the practice of lynching, the most common pretext of which was the alleged rape of a white woman by a black man. Epitomizing the complex interplay of power, race, gender, and sexuality at work in white supremacist ideology, the aim was to safeguard white male supremacy and to bar African American men from access to economic and political power. In other words, it served to prevent black men from acquiring the status of national Self. Simultaneously, it worked to forge bonds between white men. In sum, the white supremacist and masculinist ideology, in which lynching was grounded, hence constructed and naturalized a hierarchical system which structured the community of white males as superior to both African American men and to women in general. The complex consequences that these oppressive structures maintained for African American men in the 1960s are explored in Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am*. This story of the racial discrimination of African American Max Reddick illustrates the fact that the American national Self is based on the distinction from racial and/or ethnic Others and that, in the discourses that construct the national Other, gender and race typically overlap – an issue I will have reason to return to.

If the discursive construction of the American national Self is defined with reference to a number of Others – grounded in a power hierarchy which privileges patriarchy, whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and the middle-class – the ways in which an individual understands her/his national identity should vary significantly depending on collective identity categories such as gender, race, class and sexuality. At close scrutiny, the national identity of domestic Others does prove to be problematic as accessing the position of power which the abstract concept of the national presupposes is difficult, not to say impossible, for them. Of all the various Others of the nation, the racialized Other obviously has most difficulties identifying with

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16 Mason Stokes discusses the implicit centrality of white male bonding in the act of lynching. Basing his study, drawn on queer theory, on the assumption that both whiteness and heterosexuality are underwritten by a homosocial desire, Stokes focuses on the interplay of race, that is whiteness, and sexuality in white supremacist discourses of the late nineteenth century. As mob acts, lynchings validated and strengthened bonds between white male individuals, eradicating class barriers, and, as a consequence, the power of the white male community was reinforced.

17 The interconnections between issues of sexuality and nationalism are recognized in George L. Mosse’s *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (1985), and have been expanded on in gender studies, see, e.g., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (1992), eds. Parker et al.
the national Self: the further away from the center of power, the more contradictory the national identity of the individual. These complexities tend, however, to remain hidden to most people, obscured as they are by myths and rituals that strive to construct unity out of multiplicity. Generally, not until an individual engages intellectually with the ideology of nationalism can s/he gain an awareness of the facts of her/his position in the national community. Challenging and troubling questions regarding national identity, the kind that might lead to a new consciousness, can be provoked by the encounter with an Other; such inquiries may take place as Americans travel to Europe.

**Nation/Journey/Gaze**

Since the age of western colonialism, the journey abroad has been grounded in imperial ideology, and travel narratives have served in the formation of a western Self. In the eighteenth century, the books of traveling naturalists contributed to what Pratt calls a European “planetary consciousness” (*Eyes 15*), and, in the nineteenth century, the great outpouring of journey narratives fed into the development of the *national* consciousness of modern nations such as England, France, and the United States. Indeed, the journey narrative and the practices of travel and tourism were instrumental in the formation of national identities, collective and individual.

In his groundbreaking *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976), Dean MacCannell claims that tourism provides a key to an ethnography of modernity; the study of the figure of the tourist yields insight into the modern world. Given the centrality of the nationalist ideology to modernity, critical attention to tourism should thus also provide an inroad into issues related to national identity. Fundamental to the practice of tourism, MacCannell notes, is the sightseeing tour; it is so well established that it may be considered a secular ritual. The purpose of this ritual is to define modernity, and I would add, nationality, through contrasts represented by “other historical periods and other cultures” signifying “reality and authenticity” (3). The

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19 Commonly, travel and tourism are understood as two distinct forms of journeying, the former an individual and intellectual practice and the latter a consumerist mass phenomenon. Typically, travel is considered superior, a “genuine” form of journeying while tourism is fake and therefore inferior. For a study that defines and subscribes to this polar view of travel and tourism see Paul Fussell’s *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars* (1980). I agree with MacCannell and others, however, that they are essentially the same, both integral to modernity. In the words of Jonathan Culler: “[T]he desire to distinguish between tourists and real travelers is a part of tourism – integral to it rather than outside it or beyond it” (156).
ritual of the tour and its nostalgic attachments, MacCannell suggests, are not innocent but expressions of “the conquering spirit of modernity – the grounds of its unifying consciousness” (3). As we have seen, such a consciousness marks also the ideology of nationalism.

Interested in the function of the tour as discussed by MacCannell, Jonathan Culler considers the attractions of a tour “signs,” and the tourists who seek them “agents of semiotics”: “The tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself, an instance of a typical cultural practice” (155). Traveling at home and abroad, American tourists are on the constant lookout for the typical, for signs of similarity or of difference – signs that will enable them to define “America.” Commenting on early domestic tourism, David E. Nye confirms that it was “not an idle diversion but an act of self-definition” (24), and, on the same note, Brigitte Bailey claims that “[t]ourism was part of the project of forming a national subjectivity through culture” (61). These critics are far from alone in having studied the link between the tour and national identity. A particularly strong case for the central, but neglected, importance of American travel and tourism to Europe in the context of American foreign policy is made by Christopher Endy in “Travel and World Power: Americans in Europe, 1890-1917,” and Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France (2004). In the former work Endy succinctly states that “transatlantic travel and the popular commentary it inspired influenced conceptions of national identity and formed part of a public debate about how the United States should behave in the world,” a debate which eventually led to American intervention in World War I on the Allied side (565).20

The importance of tourism as a road to national identity (British and American) is the concern of Buzard’s The Beaten Track. Of particular interest to him is what he calls “anti-tourism,” a derogatory view of tourism. Like Culler, Buzard considers this snobbish attitude to tourism to be, in fact, inherent to the cultural practice of tourism. He explains that “[s]nobbish ‘anti-tourism,’ an element of modern tourism from the start, has offered an important, even exemplary way of regarding one’s cultural experiences as authentic and unique, setting them against a backdrop of always assumed tourist vulgarity, repetition, and ignorance” (5). His presentation suggests that it was the elitist attitude of travelers or “anti-tourist” tourists that allowed them to affirm their national identity while simultaneously marking their distance to middle- and lower-class compatriots. At bottom, however, as Buzard stresses, the anti-tourist project is embedded in the modern and national institution of tourism: “fuel[ling] tourism’s industry and its coercive constructions of the foreign” (Track 12).

20 Endy agrees with leading historians that the Anglophilia of the elites was a powerful factor in this process – but with an important addition: “[T]ravel can be seen as a chief mechanism by which Americans developed their attachment to Britain as well as to other Allied nations such as France and Italy” (583).
An established practice in modern culture, the tour is a ritual quest for “symbols that would express the essence of ‘whole’ places,” and for Americans these were, for example, “Italy,” “Paris,” or “Europe” (Track 10). Investing scenes with symbolic significance, nineteenth-century tourists “borrowed and extended the concept of the picturesque,” Buzard writes, referring to an eighteenth-century tradition in painting (10). His mention of the picturesque, a set of esthetic conventions, points to the central importance of images in both the context of travel and tourism and for the formation of national identity. Some critics, such as Anne Norton in Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture (1993), even claim that images have played a particularly important role in the history of the United States — more so than in most other nations. To be sure, a staple of the American domestic tour was the visual contemplation and veneration of majestic scenery. Nye adds that spectacular objects invented in America, what he terms the “technological sublime,” were objects of national admiration. The tour was thus organized around the visual contemplation and veneration of national symbols of various kinds. Against this background of the prominence of images and visual experiences in the context of the journey and the American nation-formation process, I find it apposite to employ the concept of the gaze to my readings of the American Old World journey.

There are two strands in the definition and critical practice of the concept of the gaze: one rooted in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, and the other emanating from the work of Michel Foucault, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain in their Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture (2001). In my own application of different varieties of the concept — the imperial, the tourist, and the national American gazes — I will lean toward the latter practice grounded in the history of ideas, anthropology, and sociology. Occasionally, however, I will employ the concept of the “male” gaze introduced by film theorist Laura Mulvey, a critic of a psycho-

21 Since the colonial period, images have had a prominent place in the representation of the journey. During the period of European colonialist expansion, vision becomes the predominant sense not only in science but also in the field of travel and tourism, as Carol Crawshaw and John Urry discuss in “Tourism and the Photographic Eye.” This is in line with the privileging of the visual and private, inner experiences in the Romantic age. When Crawshaw and Urry analyze the rise of the photographic practice in the early 1800s, they find that it coincides with the changing character of the tourist experience. The visual aspects of travel become more important than purely scholarly ones, and individual, esthetic experiences are increasingly privileged. A “discourse of photographic desire” evolving in the late eighteenth century is said to have preceded the invention and practice of photography. The authors note that while, in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the rudiments of photography (the camera obscura) existed, no one had yet sought to fix images permanently (180).

22 Nye defines the sublime as “an essentially religious feeling, aroused by the confrontation with impressive objects” (xiii). The technological sublime, says Nye, is a uniquely American phenomenon, a “central idea” and “defining ideal” (xiii - xiv) which applies both to spectacular natural phenomena, such as Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, and to technological objects, for example (in chronological order) the railroad, bridges, and skyscrapers or spaceships.
analytic slant. The gaze, as I understand it, is a manifestation of discourse, one that is always grounded in a dominant ideology – the shared values and beliefs of a powerful social group. The gazes I have chosen to focus on can all be considered “hegemonic” in that they are founded on ideologies so pervasive, so naturalized, that they appear to belong to “common sense.”

Defining as gaze only those acts of seeing that are grounded in hegemonic ideology, I differ from the general employment of the concept of the gaze found in most contemporary gender and postcolonial studies. Using this concept, feminist and postcolonialist critics, particularly in film studies, have recently started to investigate the visual and ideological perspectives of marginalized groups objectified by imperial and patriarchal gazes, the Other/s of hegemonic gazes. Not grounded in hegemonic ideology, these marginal “gazes” do not qualify as gazes according to my definition. In fact, “female gaze” is increasingly being used by feminist critics to denote a visual perception that does not necessarily objectify but that can be defined through its “difference” from predominant patriarchal gazes. Generally, what feminist and postcolonial critics study is an oppositional, alternative way of seeing that defies dominant gazes. This is a gaze employed by the subordinate and as such a complicated phenomenon, refracted as it is by other controlling gazes, such as, for instance, the eroticizing male gaze.

The concept of the gaze, both the Lacanian and the Foucauldian variety, has been critiqued, justifiably so, for being static, reductive and rigid, and for failing to account for the complexities involved in acts of seeing. Particularly the Lacanian practice, based on psychoanalytic theory, can be deemed static in that it fails to take the historical and social context into account. Quite correctly, it has been deemed reductive in that it presupposes a binary opposition that only allows it to account for one category of oppression at a time; privileging one, it ignores the others. Detractors have also often objected that the gaze can be, and often is, returned or exposed to various strategies of deflation, but, to my mind, such an objection can hardly disqualify the concept per se.

Provided that the pertinent critique that can be launched at the concept of the gaze is taken into account, it remains a useful analytical tool in the exposure of the workings of systems of power; enabling an unveiling of the oppressive values underlying seemingly “objective” authoritative discourses, it may contribute to a recognition, and, by implication, possibly even to a liberation, of the “Other/s” of these discourses. The concept must, however, be applied in a dynamic way that recognizes the complex and palimpsest-like nature of the objectifying act of seeing. Thus applied, it may fruitfully and effectively be employed as an instrument for the purpose of identifying the ideological statements of texts. Manifestations of the gaze should be understood as multifaceted; as ideologies coexist, overlap and intersect, so do different varieties of the gaze. In other words, the complex nature of representations of visual experiences requires a flexible interpretative approach.
Below, I will first give a brief account of Foucault’s theory concerning acts of perception and cognition, and then engage in a discussion of the particular varieties of the gaze that are of relevance for my approach to the four novels under scrutiny: the male, the tourist, the imperial/white, and the nationalist American. As I am interested in nationalist ideology related to national identity, what I refer to as the “American gaze,” a normative national gaze grounded in a nationalist ideology, will be of central interest. The American gaze is not over-arching per se but in the encounter with the foreign, the national gaze has a tendency to frame other gazes. I consider these hegemonic gazes “complicitous” as, in the American encounter with the foreign, they typically overlap and reinforce the national gaze in the construction of a foreign Other.

The concept of the gaze appears in the texts Foucault published in France in the 1960s and 1970s, translated into English in the 1970s, where he analyzes the rise of science and investigates its ambition to map the world. Foucault’s studies show that the early natural sciences, like biology and astronomy, privileged vision. As the heading “The Eye of Power” in *Power/Knowledge* (1980) suggests, a power hierarchy in which the gazer enjoys a position of authority is a prerequisite for the development of the new way of perceiving the world that Foucault calls the gaze. In the logic of this power structure, the observer, or gazer, is not understood as a subjective individual but as an objective judge; as Foucault writes in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (1975), the physician, for example, who gazes at his patient is not merely “anyone” but an authority figure supported by an institution (89). And it is the discourse of the discipline of medicine which determines what the physician perceives. To Foucault, discourse precedes and predetermines vision, and consequently also the representation of visual impressions. In other words, clinical observation could only register what the medical discourse allowed it to express.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, his most explicit investigation of the concept of the gaze, Foucault examines the evolution of the gaze in the medical field. Although here exclusively concerned with one particular field, he claims that the fundamental components of the medical gaze distinguish a typically western strategy of perception which came about in the Enlightenment period. Fundamental to the project of the sciences in the Enlightenment tradition was, as Foucault states in *The Order of Things: The Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1973): “[to] bring language as close as possible to the observing gaze, and the things observed as close as possible to words;” in other words, to translate the visual into discourse, thereby appropriating the object of observation (132).

The gaze aims at “total, exhaustive description,” he writes in *The Birth of the Clinic*, capturing in a phrase three defining traits of the gaze (116). “Total, exhaustive” suggest that the gaze captures everything without discrimination so that what emerges is a complete picture, producing an appar
ent “truth.” No interaction with the object of vision is thus taking place. The purpose of the “description” is to acquire objective “knowledge” of what is observed, a knowledge which can be translated into cataloguing and mapping. Foucault describes the gaze as distanced and detached from its object: “The observing gaze refrains from intervening: it is silent and gestureless. Observation leaves things as they are; there is nothing hidden to it in what is given” (Clinic 107). The final result of this detached gaze is, paradoxically, however, the appropriation of the object of observation. In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1977), and the interview “The Eye of Power” (in Power/Knowledge) Foucault uses the panopticon as an illustration of how this spatialized, powerful, controlling gaze is manifested.23

The dimensions of power and control involved in objectifying, possessive acts of viewing are also addressed by Laura Mulvey – one of the first theorists to apply the concept of the gaze to film – in her definition of the “male” gaze. Drawing on psychoanalysis and the Freudian theory of how the little boy forms a sexual identity, she defines the male gaze of Hollywood movies in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). It can be noted that while patriarchal norms underlie all hegemonic gazes, they are generally not referred to as “male.” The “male” gaze is a concept with predominantly erotic connotations. On the whole, the critics who employ the concept of the male gaze, primarily of a psychoanalytic orientation, appear to follow Mulvey’s example, defining as male gaze that which perceives a woman as erotic object. Although my own approach is not psychoanalytic, I will use the concept of the male eroticizing gaze in my readings. Such an application is germane to my purpose, since the journey narrative, particularly in its foreign variety, typically includes many romantic/erotic scenes where the application of the concept of the male gaze may help to identify oppressive ideologies.

Critics of Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze draw attention to its limitations. As her theory focuses on masculine heterosexuality, she situates the subject and the object in locked positions, Lorrain Gamman and Margaret Marshment note in their introduction to The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture (1988). Founded on the masculinity-femininity binary, assuming heterosexuality as “natural,” the male gaze is inapplicable to situations that cannot be understood in such terms, for example those involving homoeroticism, they point out (5-7). It has also been objected that the position of the male viewer is often occupied by women, but this is a matter of course since the position of the subject is an effect of the film medium – not a description of the visual perception of male individuals. An example of a woman’s appropriation of the male gaze can, for example, be

23 The panopticon, invented by Jeremy Bentham, is an eighteenth-century circular architectural prison design in which uniform prison cells surround an elevated watchtower. Designed to allow the guard complete visual access to all cells while remaining invisible to the prisoner surveyed who, ideally, will internalize the system of control, the panopticon serves Foucault as a metaphor for the ways in which systems of power work in modern society.
found in *Fear of Flying*, in Isadora’s fantasy of the “zipless fuck.” In defense of her theory of the male gaze, Mulvey herself has pointed out that her interest is “the ‘masculinisation’ of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviation) of any real live movie-goer. In-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as ‘point of view’” (Visual Pleasure 29). To my mind, the main problem with Mulvey’s concept is its ahistorical nature, that is, the fact that it neglects the historical context in which the gaze occurs. Undoubtedly, this weakness pertains to the concept’s grounding in psychoanalysis – a science that does not take the mutability of cultures into account. That the male eroticizing gaze does change over time is demonstrated by Sturken and Cartwright; in evidence of its failing hegemonic status, the male gaze is exposed to a wide range of strategies of transformation and deflection in contemporary commercial advertisements.24

The social and historical circumstances of ways of seeing are brought to the fore in John Urry’s sociological study *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (1990),25 which makes the mutations of the gaze its primary focus, and stresses that “[t]here is no single tourist gaze as such. It varies by society, by social group and by historical period” (1). But while Urry’s concept of the tourist gaze does pay attention to the value systems and world views which prestructure the tourist experience, it avoids the associations of power and control inherent in Foucault’s gaze. And since, when identifying varieties of the gaze, Urry concentrates on the object, questions concerning ideology are neglected. He points out, for example, that the picturesque gaze can be considered the precursor of the dominant modern tourist gaze, particularly in what he calls its “Romantic” variety, but refrains from further investigation into the implications of his observation.

To consider tourism against the background of imperialist discourse will, I believe, reveal that the tourist gaze is an inflection of the imperial gaze.26 For an orientation in the agendas of imperialism and tourism we may look back to the Romantic period. The Romantic era sees the emergence of an esthetic movement in painting, the picturesque,27 out of which grew the

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24 For an elaboration on this topic, see Sturken and Cartwright (85-93).
25 To Urry, the tourist gaze should be understood in the context of leisure rather than work: “What makes a particular tourist gaze depends upon what it is contrasted with; what the forms of non-tourist experience happen to be” (2).
26 A number of studies within the fields of sociology, anthropology and literary studies have revealed the imperialist underpinnings of tourism, as an industry as well as practice and discourse. See e.g., Dennison Nash’s “Tourism as a Form of Imperialism,” *Making the World Safe for Tourism* (2001) by Patricia Goldstone, *Writs of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (1999) by James Duncan and Derek Gregory, and *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (1998) by Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan.
27 The Claude glass well illustrates the picturesque gaze. Named after its inventor, the French painter Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), this convex and tinted glass, used by landscape painters as well as many tourists of the picturesque, reflects the landscape in miniature. Reflecting and fusing the wide and complex landscape scenery into a small unified image it objectifies,
practice of picturesque tourism. In the Romantic period experimenters in photography, writers, and artists began to express a desire to capture visual impressions in fixed images. Central to this development was a new way of appreciating (and representing) nature and landscape according to which the sightseer contemplated a specific view while remaining distanced from it. Typically, the photographer/viewer is placed in a high position, above the landscape. Characteristic of this mode of landscape/nature appreciation is that the focus is placed on the agent, the individual who collects visual experiences – hence functioning as a consumer.

Even in its modern forms, the tourist gaze retains similarities to the imperial gaze; the tourist industry perpetuates the stereotypes of imperial discourse by presenting indigenous populations ahistorically as idealized and exotic and disconnected from their wider contemporary socio-economic and socio-historical context. The contemplation of beautiful views of landscapes or cityscapes is central to the tourist practice of sightseeing and can be traced back to the picturesque tours that evolved in the late eighteenth century. Even today, stopping to enjoy magnificent views constitutes the peak moments of a tour. In an analogous fashion, gazing at a vista and perhaps even photographing it becomes a way for the tourist to appropriate and consume a view.

The origins of the imperial gaze have been investigated by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*, though the term gaze is not used. To my mind, the great strength of Pratt’s work is that, besides studying the conscious and unconscious motives of viewers, it also deals with the very act of seeing – examining how objects are conceived and discursively constructed. As it seeks to study the engagement of the primary sources with powerful discourses, her work is valuable to my own project. Pratt bases her study on a wide selection of texts in the genre of travel writing, a genre inseparably linked to European colonialism. In her readings, she pays close attention to how the foreign land and the foreign population are shaped. Her investigation into the dynamics of the European imperial gaze as it was deployed on the non-European Other clearly reveals it as a white gaze – one grounded in

idealizes, totalizes, and appropriates the object of vision. For an initiated introduction to the Claude glass and its employment, see Malcolm Andrews (67-73).

28 The picturesque movement began as a type of landscape art and developed into an art movement. The ideological underpinnings of picturesque esthetics and their relationship to capitalism and colonialism have been discussed by, e.g., Ann Bermingham, Stephen Copley, and Peter Garside.

29 In “Tourism and the Photographic Eye,” Crawshaw and Urry note the connection between photography, on the one hand, and consumerism and the industrialized image-making, on the other. As they conclude, the practice of photography is intimately bound up with modern society, with “the subjectivity of the observer and the extraordinary proliferation of signs and images” (180-82). The connection between photography and modern capitalist society is also dealt with by Urry in *Consuming Places* as he examines the relationship between the various historical forms of capitalism and travel/tourism.
the racial hierarchy between white and non-white peoples.\textsuperscript{30} She stresses the “appropiative dimensions” of the early natural sciences, an aspect she believes Foucault does not give due emphasis (31). To Pratt, these dimensions are at the very heart of the European value system that engendered colonialist projects. Aggressively expansive, European colonialism is found to be grounded in scientific and bureaucratic systems of thought that aim at classifying, ordering, and thus controlling the world. Through the gaze, the unknown and the Other are identified: “The (lettered, male European) eye that held the system could familiarize (‘naturalize’) new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system” (31). She sees an ideological and historical link between the totalizing ambition of descriptive sciences, e.g., the botanical project of Linnaeus, a typically descriptive endeavor with a universal scope, and the commercial thrust of the European powers in the early colonial period.

Pratt’s analysis of the esthetic conventions of travel writing and her reading of the history of its transformations are germane to my own study, as the novels I discuss draw on, or even engage with, the tradition of imperial travel writing. The genre convention of the arrival scene has already been mentioned; another scene that she points out as having a particularly central symbolic significance is the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene – a manifestation of the imperial and white gaze. The verbal vista or “promontory” descriptions, common in the 1860s, which Pratt calls “monarch-of-all-I-survey scenes” constitute “a brand of verbal painting whose highest calling was to produce for the home audience the peak moments at which geographical ‘discoveries’ were ‘won’ for England” (\textit{Eyes} 201). It does not seem far-fetched to assume that this genre convention builds on the picturesque tradition. When it comes to the means by which the exotic scene is made significant, Pratt has identified three: the scene is made to appear esthetically pleasing; it is given a “density of meaning,” that is, made “rich in material and semantic substance” primarily through adjectival modifiers and nominal color expressions; and lastly, the observer is positioned as the master and judge of the esthetic value of the observed (\textit{Eyes} 204). The fact that these foreign and exotic scenes are contrasted to English landscape scenes, and, by comparison, judged as lacking in civilization, and thus in need of colonization, reveals them as the projections of an imperialist as well as nationalist gaze.

\textsuperscript{30} For an investigation into the white and patriarchal nature of the American gaze, see, e.g., Ann E. Kaplan’s \textit{Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze} (1997), a study of American and British cinematic representations of travel, Richard Dyer’s \textit{White: Essays on Race and Culture} (1997), and Maurice O. Wallace’s \textit{Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995} (2002). As these authors hold, mainstream American media use a distinctly white gaze which idealizes white people and objectifies (vilifies, sexualizes, fetishizes, etc) not only the domestic African American population, but also other racial minorities.
Pratt’s account of the transformations of the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene provides a context for its appearance in the works by Styron, McCarthy, and Jong discussed in this study. Styron and McCarthy continue in a tradition in which it has been exposed to critique. As Pratt reveals, the scene became the object of “satire and demystification” in travel writing as early as in the 1860s, and in the era of decolonization it was even exposed to subversion. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Englishwoman Mary Kingsley and a group of writers Pratt designates as “hyphenated white men” (208) critiqued the convention. But although they inverted conventional promontory descriptions, Pratt stresses that these writers did not question the imperial project. Their critique must therefore be considered as “internal” to imperialist ideology (213). Related conclusions are drawn by Sara Mills in *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1991) – a study that demonstrates that although women travelers did tend to share a troubled and critical attitude to dominant (patriarchal) discourses on imperialism and femininity, they cannot be understood as exceptional individualists who could escape the hegemonic ideology of colonialism, as much of feminist criticism has claimed (27-36). Mills’s readings show that while they may have been dissenters of a kind, at bottom they were complicit with the imperial system. Continuing to critique conventions like the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene in the post-World-War-II period, “hyphenated” writers like Richard Wright and Albert Camus now expose the convention to *subversion*, their texts “bear[ing] witness to openings in the structures of western domination and colonialist ideology within the metropolis” (224). What marks the textual examples from Wright and Camus is “permeab[ility]” of psychological and hence also cultural boundaries which erases the Self/Other paradigm (222-23). Pratt contrasts these reworkings with what she calls the examples of the survival of the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene which should be understood in terms of a response to the challenges to Euro-American hegemony voiced by independence and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s.32

As the discussion above of the concept of the gaze has suggested, the male, the imperial and tourist discourses easily take on a *national* inflection.

31 She identifies them as Franco-American Paul Du Chaillu, Anglo-American Henry Morton Stanley, and Anglo-Pole Joseph Conrad. Pratt’s attention to “hyphenated” identities can be considered as related to Bhabha’s focus on the plurality and hybridity of voices engaged in the discussion about national identity (Introduction, *Nation* 1-2). Focusing on marginal and hybrid identities provides an inroad into identifying both hegemonic and oppositional discourses, Bhabha argues, and stresses that only this kind of approach can capture the Janus-faced nature of the ideological construct of the nation.

32 These are, however, characterized by “a different esthetic key” (217) expressing a “white man’s lament” for “the depredations of western-induced dependency” (218). Describing the foreign land as ugly and empty is a way of “dissociat[ing] oneself from the lands once possessed (217). Typically, these scenes occur on hotel balconies overlooking large third-world cities.
Part of the explanation for such a merger can be attributed to the fact that, like all gazes, the American is grounded in an ideology that presupposes a polar and hierarchical relationship between Self and Other. In addition, hegemonic gazes seem to have a tendency to amalgamate. This amalgamation, or overlap, of the American gaze with other hegemonic gazes is what I termed “complicitous” above. Such complicity is further facilitated by the fact that American nationalist ideology is inherently, as well as historically, patriarchal, male, imperial, and white – all these ideologies having a characteristically American inflection. Often, a male, imperial or tourist gaze is framed by a nationalist discourse and hence absorbed into the American gaze. The ease with which the tourist gaze merges with the American gaze can also be explained by the circumstance that, historically, tourism has served an important function in the construction of the American national community. When the American gaze overlaps with these other hegemonic gazes, the Otherness of the foreign is exacerbated and nationalist ideology reinforced. In other words, these gazes tend to render the Other even more Other, thus underscoring the polarities on which ideologies build.

The frequent objectification and eroticization of the gendered Other is one example of how the (eroticizing) male American gaze colludes with a racial, white, imperial gaze. As previously noted, in the national project, the icon of the national woman as well as the domestic female Other serve in the formation of a national Self. In the nineteenth century, the national (white) woman tended to be desexualized, as evidenced in the icon of the Southern Belle, while the African American woman, a racialized domestic Other, was quite clearly a product of the male gaze. Since World War II, however, when pictures of blonde pin-up girls became popular in many western nations and also among American GIs, the American national woman is sometimes portrayed as a sexual object. The eroticized figure of the foreign female Other is equally a projection of the male American gaze. Typically, as exemplified in the figure of the Asian or Oriental woman, it tends to collude with a racial/white gaze.

The images of majestic domestic scenery that abound in American cultural production can be understood as manifesting a convergence of the American and the imperial gaze. Since the 1980s, art historians have paid particular attention to the heyday of American landscape painting between the 1820s and the 1860s, demonstrating how visual representation was used in the nationalist construction of Americanness, and thus placing landscape

33 Ann Kaplan demonstrates how the figure of the foreign female Other is constructed in Tourneur’s film noir Cat People (1942), in the Serbian character of Irena Dubovna. After her marriage to a “normal” solid American, the attractive, sophisticated and exotic Irena turns out to be a monster, a hybrid between a white woman and a black panther. The black animal is a metaphor for her foreignness (which is racialized) and inability to become a “normal” American wife. The example of Irena suggests that the male American gaze tends to collude with a gaze which is white and imperial.
painting in the imperialist tradition of the American nation. Two representative studies, Albert Boime’s *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting* (1991), and Angela Miller’s *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape, Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (1993), may be cited as examples of how the concept of the gaze is fruitfully applied to the relation between painting and early nationalism. An even more suggestive example of the merger of the American gaze with an imperial, scientific, tourist gaze and the interrelatedness of the esthetic and ideological is the nineteenth-century mass medium of the panorama. The American panorama is indicative of the nation’s expansion westward and an example of the American gaze. While European panorama landscape paintings often showed exotic scenery from distant parts of the world, revealing the colonial aspect of the gaze, domestic motifs were favored in the United States (Comment 63, Oettermann 323). That the mass-medium of the panorama was used as an ideological instrument in the dispersion of imperialist and nationalist propaganda is noted by Miller. Panoramic landscape painting is of course no longer an important art form (having practically disappeared in the 1870s) but, as Paula Marantz Cohen demonstrates in *Silent*

34 “It is this systematic projection of the unlimited horizons as a metonymic image of America’s futurity that makes this body of material unique in its geographical, national, and temporal setting,” Boime writes (23, 26). The viewer/painter is placed on a look-out point, above the scenery, and is thereby positioned as master over the landscape depicted in the panorama. Boime explains that this type of view was called a “commanding view” in nineteenth-century literature, his own term being “the magisterial.” He defines this gaze as “the perspective of the American on the heights searching for new worlds to conquer” (21). Boime stresses the national and ideological character of the commanding American gaze and argues that it is unique in its “manifestation as the collective and characteristic expression of the privileged national ideal, the ruling-class aspiration for American society that still endures” (26). While Boime’s claims to the originality of the painterly American gaze of this period on the whole seem somewhat sweeping, his insights into painting as an ideological instrument and his recognition of the central significance of landscape to the American imagination are valuable and illuminating.

35 Miller’s study contests the notion of American landscape painting as a monolithic tradition, considering it instead in terms of a locus of the debate about national identity. Insisting on the regional northeastern bias of its production and criticism, her study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the genre of landscape painting.

36 In special circular buildings the panorama, a number of painted canvases usually showing landscape scenery, decorated the walls. For a well-illustrated study of the history of the panorama, see Oettermann. With its presumption of being all-encompassing, the panorama truly is a manifestation of the Foucauldian gaze of western science, rooted in the Enlightenment. The fact that not only foreign objects, but also people from “exotic” places were sometimes part of the spectacle quite literally exemplifies how people from the colonized world were objectified and rendered Other through an imperial, white, Euro-American gaze. The most spectacular moving panoramas of the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900 that simulated travel (on railroad and ship) well illustrate the close relationship between the colonial and the tourist gazes. The interesting technical and functional similarity between the panopticon and the panorama (invented and named at practically the same time) has been recognized by Oettermann (40-41).

37 See “The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular,” an article that claims the panorama as an antecedent of American cinema.
Film and the Triumph of the American Myth (2001), panoramic views of the American landscape are frequently employed in early twentieth-century movies with a nationalist ethos, particularly the Western, a trend that subsists in contemporary movies and other media, such as, e.g., in advertisements for Marlboro cigarettes.  

In the formation of the Old World, visual imagery has, not surprisingly, played an important role, and should be understood in terms of a national gaze set on Europe. One way of describing these images of not “America,” may be in terms of photographic negatives. Studying Thomas Cole’s 1833 Italian Scene, Composition as an illustrative example, Brigitte Bailey convincingly argues that this depiction of a European rural idyll, complete with antique ruins, constructs a negation of Jacksonian America, and this “double view of the ‘past’ and the present makes up a national gaze available to middle-class spectators through tourism and aesthetic experience” (69). The changing image of the Old World will be dealt with in the next chapter, “A History of the Old World Journey,” as such a background will help contextualize “Europe” as a signifier in the novels discussed in this study. But before going into the topics of “Europe” and European travel, I want to comment on the function of texts in the American process of shaping national particularity, narratives being the building blocks of a continually perpetuated and rearticulated national mythology – what we may call “the story of ‘America’.”

Nation, Narrative, and the Story of “America”

[N]ational literatures exist not because they arise ‘naturally,’ but because they are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations.

Sarah M. Corse, Nationalism and Literature

To generalize, in the first century of the American nation, literature tended to be underwritten by a nationalist agenda. Simultaneously it served as a site for the debate about national identity. In the twentieth century, however, works of fiction cannot be construed as national allegories in the same sense. As Frederic Jameson recognizes, in the twentieth century, there is “a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political”

38 Identifying the recurrent scene of Western movies where a lone cowboy moves through a landscape depicted in sweeping panorama, Cohen claims that early film, that is silent film, provided the perfect medium for representing America’s and the mythological American character’s “dynamic relationship to landscape” (81). She explains this relationship in terms of an “oscillation between the civilized and the primitive” and locates it in the tradition of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis (81).
Nevertheless, previous literary conventions are echoed in modern literature, and, by drawing on the conventions of earlier genres such as the Bildungsroman, the historical novel, the gothic novel, the autobiography or the travelogue (all, indeed, vehicles of nationalist ideology), contemporary authors are able to foreground, interrogate, and expose national themes and motifs. Such strategies are clearly manifest, I believe, in the four novels selected for discussion in this study. This history of the close link between the ideology of nationalism and earlier literary conventions will serve as a backdrop to my readings of four novels from the 1960s and 1970s.

Before the 1990s, the interconnectedness of literary text and the national project was not a frequent issue in the critical debate, but today scholarship is growing. Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities, for instance, discusses the decisive role played by narrative and the printed text in the creation of the national community. Anderson recognizes the important roles played by the newspaper and the early realist novel in bringing about the imaginary construct of the nation: that they replaced the “mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time” with a conception of time as simultaneity-across-time “marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). This perception of time was the “precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (26).

Judging by Anderson’s study, it seems that the early realist novel was a literary genre particularly well suited to representing the nation. Generally revolving around a male protagonist, these texts depict the interaction of an individual with a community, and, set in a contemporary world, they capture the fundamental process of nation-construction whereby national subjects are formed. This nineteenth-century male and, in the Euro-American case, white, middle-class protagonist can be understood as a representative member of the national community – a personification of the abstract idea of the national Self. In the article “The National Longing for Form,” Timothy Brennan extends Anderson’s claim for the realist novel to all subgenres of the novel, implying that practically all early Euro-American novels are national allegories. “The rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature,” he writes, arguing that the novel is rooted

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39 In “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Jameson notes that, like early Euro-American novels, third world texts are crucially concerned with the national question. They may be understood as national allegories, he argues: “the story of the private individual is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69).

40 Often, the journey structures the plot in which the hero is confronted with various aspects of the community. In Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel (1983), Percy G. Adams demonstrates the fundamental importance of the conventions of early journey narratives (such as the picaresque) for the modern novel.
in the ideas of the European Romantic movement and its passion for (cultural) nationalist ideology (49).\footnote{Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, in turn, point to the central importance of the captivity narrative, their chosen example being that of Mary Rowlandson, for the development of the English novel and for the American idea of individualism, see \textit{The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life} (1992).}

In the history of the nation, narrative has always had a given place. But in the formation of the United States, it may be said to have been particularly important since the new nation could not easily define itself in terms of cultural nationalist ideology with its stress on ethnicity and history.\footnote{American nationalism has been described as either a post-colonial or a European, proto-imperial, phenomenon. While I recognize the post-colonial origins of the United States, acknowledged by, e.g., Benedict Anderson, and developed by Lawrence Buell in "American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon," like many other critics, I consider the dominant tradition of American nationalism to be an inflection of the (imperial) nationalism of Great Britain, at least since the mid-nineteenth century.} Hence, narrative as a manifestation of ideology served to define “America.” Terry Caesar’s study \textit{Forgiving the Boundaries} makes a strong case for the travelogue as a literary genre particularly involved in the nation-construction project of the United States. And if a concern with cultural identity is intrinsic to the genre of travel writing, the paramount concern of American travel and travel writing, more than that of any other nation, Caesar claims, was to define national identity. Caesar argues that American travel abroad played a crucial role in the construction of the imagined community of the American nation: “one way in which we have shaped a national identity at all is by traveling abroad, and writing of it” (8). Quite clearly, the American travelogue of the nineteenth century, although proudly patriotic, was also underwritten “by a considerable anxiety about exactly what it meant to be an American” (30). Such anxious desire to define “America” marks the travel narratives also of the twentieth century.

According to the genre conventions that evolved, author and narrator assumed the role of representative American. The convention that positioned the travel writer as symbolic American spilled over to the fictional journey narrative – a state of affairs that has, of course, changed over time. Published travel journals were often not signed with the author’s proper name but signed simply “by ‘an American’” (Caesar 22). This “representative national character” can be identified as an embodiment of the national Self: male, white, and middle- or upper-class American. The position of the national Self could also be accessed by women traveling abroad. As Bailey argues in her article on nineteenth-century journalist and editor Caroline Kirkland, the assumption of this role could work as a strategy of empowerment for a woman of these classes. By writing a travel book about an Old World journey and by using the American tourist gaze, Kirkland “provisionally resolved” the contradictory function of the artistic woman in the national community as both sign and subject, Bailey explains (64). In other words,
the “Othering” of the foreign, which is the result of the use of the national gaze, enables a woman to transcend her position of object and Other in the national community. Bailey claims that Kirkland’s text constitutes an investigation of gaze structures and their ideological underpinnings; *Holidays Abroad* both “consolidates” and “unsettles” the “national tourist gaze” (63). As I will argue below, a similar strategy is used by Jong’s protagonist Isabel as she writes the story of her European adventure.

The American journey narrative underwent radical changes during the twentieth century, particularly in the second half, as the nationalist discourse so fundamental to travel writing has become increasingly scrutinized and exposed. In the modern and contemporary period, as my selection of primary works illustrates, new categories of authors have entered the literary scene. These transformations have resulted in a problematization, or even subversion, of “America.” In their explorations of “America,” journey narratives in the latter half of the twentieth century grapple with the older fictional genres and the nationalist ideology and discourse underpinning them. In the four novels that will be discussed in my study, the protagonists make up a motley group in terms of gender, ethnicity, and religion, and can certainly not be understood as “representative Americans” in the traditional sense. However, they do tend to be employed as what Caesar calls “figures of representation” in that they stand for types of Americans. In their treatment of national identity, the novels I have selected use literary conventions, but, what is more, they also draw on the story of “America,” a complex mythology that serves in the process of defining the United States as a unique nation.

This “story of ‘America’,” as I choose to call it, is an ideological meta-narrative and grand narrative consisting of a complex of myths and images which provide answers to the questions of what “America” and “the Americans” are. A complex of narratives, such as that of a nation’s mythology, is of course never static as the configuration of its elements continually undergoes change having to do with social and historical factors.43 The purpose of the survey below is to provide an orientation in this symbology, such orientation being a prerequisite for identifying and analyzing the ways in which the nationalist ideology, e.g. manifest in the American gaze, is framed in my primary texts. Making this survey, I will stress the particular myths that figure in my primary sources. In the following problematizing presentation of the national grand narrative – revealing it as a construct and product of pow-

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43 Foucault’s notion of the archive in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) might serve to explain the underlying structure of this complex of narratives, or, to use his own term, discursive events. He defines the archive as a “general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (146). In other words, the archive is the system structuring the multitude of combinations of possible statements. Due to its amorphous character, the archive of a specific culture cannot be exhaustively described. Of particular difficulty is the description of the archive of our own moment in history since we are, in turn, structured by it. A historical and ideological distance from the archive of our investigation is thus a precondition for discerning its defining characteristics.
erful ideologies – there will be a focus on literary scholarship in the post-
World-War-II period, a period of intense efforts to construct and sustain
national identity in which literary critics took active part.44

In the story of America there is a protagonist, the American Adam, an ex-
ceptional national subject, invoked, as we shall see, by Styron. This charac-
ter type was first identified by R.W. B. Lewis in The American Adam: Inno-
cence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (1955). Quite in
line with patriarchal norms, the archetypal American is male, the American
Self personified, “a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of
ideal human attributes” (5). Just like the American nation, the New World,
he is envisioned as totally independent, a freedom grounded in separation
from the past and from the continent of the past, Europe. Imagining Europe
as a realm associated with a complex of negative connotations such as social
injustice, stagnation, conventionalism, totalitarianism, and the moral deca-
dence of the city made it possible to construct both the representative
American and the new nation positively – representing nature, innocence,
rural simplicity, morality, freedom, social justice, democracy, futurity, and
progress.45

The American Adam and the American nation are imagined as unique and
as endowed with particular missions. This idea of the uniqueness and superi-
ority of the United States, this exceptionalism is at the very core of the na-
tional self-image. Describing it as an “ideology that selectively defines the
attributes of the nation in order to justify and celebrate it,” Thomas B. Byers
insists on its centrality to American nationalist ideology: “Exceptionalism is
at once the ideology that we are [sic], and the fact that, as a nation, we are an
ideology (rather than simply, for instance, a political entity or a place with a

44 This period can be related to the American Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century, the
most intense period of nation construction, when literature and literary history were inter-
preted as embodying unique national characteristics. (See, e.g., Sarah M. Corse.) It was the
critics of the “myth and symbol school” of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s represented by,
for example, F. O. Matthiessen and Henry Nash Smith, who constructed the postwar Ameri-
can meta-narrative of stories and images which tells a (seemingly) coherent mythological
story about the specificity of the American nation and its history. Largely written in the domi-
nant mainstream liberal tradition, and primarily concerned with nineteenth-century literature,
these works investigate the mythology of the past but also establish a line of continuity of
Americanism into the twentieth century, often including their own contemporary period, thus
reinforcing and perpetuating the grand narrative. But in the 1960s, when this grand narrative
begins to be questioned, a shift takes place, beginning on the arenas of politics and literature
and reaching the academy in the mid-1960s. Since then, scholarship seeks to redefine and
reinscribe the notion of American identity by including categories such as race, gender, and
class. In nationalist discourse the essential elements of American myth do, however, still
persist.

45 In The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination (1961), Charles L.
Sanford argues that the contrast was even starker. From the Puritans onwards, the utopian
ideal has been the guiding American myth. But America as Eden required a polar opposite,
Sanford claims, a hell, in other words, and ever since Puritan times Europe has served this
function in the American imagination.
history)” (87). In American historiography, the creed of exceptionalism is commonly traced back to Puritan John Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” where the role of the new society in New England is envisioned in terms of an ideal: “a city upon a hill” (92). This expansionist thrust of American nationalism, an aspect that will be dealt with below, combined with the exceptionalist idea of the particular superiority and responsibility of America are constituents of the ideology of “messianism.” According to this belief in election, which has been transformed from a religious to a secular one, the United States is a redeemer nation: one that has a universalist mission and fate: to spread the gospel of its fundamental values, bourgeois democracy and liberty, not only across the continent but around the world. When Peter Levi in *Birds of America* sets out on his European journey, he thinks of himself as an instrument of this American mission.

For long periods of the nation’s history, however, liberty was the privilege of white men. The freedom of the white male national Self was not only grounded in his contrast to the white woman, and to European subjects living under monarchy – but also in his fundamental difference from the Native American and the enslaved African. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison argues that the presence of African slaves in the colonies was central to the formulation of liberty and freedom as American ideals, and to the formation of an American national identity. After the abolition of slavery, white supremacist ideology explicitly defined America in racist terms, constructing the African American Other as a national danger. And since the Civil War, the African American minority has only partially been accepted into the national community.

As a “new” man, the archetypal American is of course imagined as morally pure. “[F]undamentally innocent,” he embodies Adam before the fall, Lewis writes, describing “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). The American Adam is the individualist incarnate whose most distinguishing trait is a self-reliance rendering him extraordinarily independent and utterly self-sufficient. His individualism, a celebrated American characteristic, is underscored by his orphanhood, a status which is fortunate as it liberates him from the ties that group belong-

46 For a survey of the debate over “exceptionalism” (covering some twenty years), see Michael Kammen.

47 In *Our America*, Michaels demonstrates how progressivism constructs a black–white opposition in order to unite all white Americans, regardless of ethnicity, cultural origin or religion. Through this strategy, the divisions between whites of Northern and Southern European origin or between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are supposedly erased. An illustrative example is the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith (based on Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel *The Klansman*).
ing inevitably implies. In his ability to name – and consequently invent – the new world around him he is also poet and creator (5). Quite clearly, the American stands at the center of the universe, occupying a position of superiority and control. Here we recognize the colonizer or the colonialist discoverer conquering new worlds. From his superior vantage point he is able to see the land of the North American continent with his American gaze, thereby investing it with national significance.

The new world, the landscape and the nature of the “new” continent, provides the grand setting for the American epic. Described as an open, empty, uncivilized space, it is also the object of the American’s quest. And even more importantly, it supplies the very justification for the American project; the fate of the American nation is inscribed in the scenery. This expansionist fate is known as America’s “Manifest Destiny” – “not merely an apology but an energizing force, for American imperialism,” as Byers writes (89). The natural landscape hence constitutes the central symbolic repository of the American meta-narrative. When Styron invokes this symbolism at the ending of his story about two Americans in Europe, his move carries great significance in the context of the novel’s ideological message. As Bruce Greenfield states, the citizens of the new nation, having liberated themselves from Europe, needed a new basis for their continued expansion on the continent. It seems that they found one such basis in the idea of the place itself, at least once they could conceive of it as natural, empty, uncivilized or virgin. For after America had become “natural,” Euro-Americans were no longer cohabitants of a continent whose peoples they had conquered; instead they could see the primordial land itself as the explanation and justification for their presence in it. (2)

In *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (1986), Myra Jehlen digs deeper yet into how the project of constructing a new society and nation on the North American continent was justified. She argues that, as a physical fact, the landscape provides the key to understanding the originality of American ideology. The landscape itself was understood by the early settlers as embodying, or to use Jehlen’s word, *incarnating*, the new society. Contrary to Europeans, who imagined their societies not divinely sanctioned but the products of men, “Americans saw themselves as building their civilization out of nature itself, as neither the analogue nor the translation of Natural Law but its direct expression” (3). If, as Jehlen writes, “American civilization remained at one with [nature] and embodied nature’s laws organically” (5), then expansion westward was a destiny written into the landscape and therefore unobjectionable.

The plot of nineteenth-century westward expansion is investigated in Henry Nash Smith’s seminal *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), which argues that the pastoral garden is the ruling meta-
phor of how American civilization transforms the “wilderness” of the new continent. This transformation is not envisioned as having been effortless. On the contrary, only thanks to the hard toil of the pioneers – their staunch Protestant work ethic – did the forests become fruitful land. The gendered implications of the phrase “virgin land” is explored by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975), a study that shows that American nature and earth were coded female in early American nationalist ideology. Quite clearly, the phrase illustrates the patriarchal and masculinist underpinnings of the myth of the West. And the protagonist of the American story, the agent who wins and conquers the virgin land, the civilizing agent, is, to be sure, male. 48 When Jong’s heroine, Isadora White Wing speaks of the impossibility for her of undertaking the American westward lone journey, she thus suggests her awareness of the gendered nature of American myth.

Inherent in the idea of the American sublime is the belief in progress and perfectibility and these, as we know, are ingredients in the subtext of the American story. Closely associated is the idea of regeneration: in Leo Marx’s argument, although there is a tragic version of the myth of the frontier, this myth is essentially about regeneration. Americans are imagined as a perfected people, “new, better, happier men,” who may create a world in the image of the garden (228). The expense at which the regeneration celebrated in the Turnerian frontier thesis takes place was, then, largely ignored by the critics of the myth and symbol school. Contemporary critics, on the other hand, like Richard Slotkin and Michael P. Rogin, consider the annihilation of the Native American Other a key to nineteenth-century America. Slotkin reads the rejuvenating function that the appropriation of the wilderness has in frontier mythology as a story about violence, and, fundamentally, as the assertion of the American Self at the expense of Native Americans.

The frontier and pioneering settlements constitute core ingredients of the privileged story of America, the Native American Other ambiguously figuring as both noble and evil, as demonstrated in Rogin’s *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (1975). While the Native American in some contexts is portrayed as the ideal and essential American, s/he is also doomed to annihilation by the advancement of Euro-American society. Idealized and vilified, Native Americans are Oth-

48 That the growth of industrialized society inevitably transformed the pastoral landscape is Leo Marx’s point in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1967) as he shows that, from the beginning, pastoralism, and rural nostalgia served to define America. Foregrounding what he identifies as a recurrent motif in American literature, the intrusion of the technological into a pastoral contemplative mood, e.g., the noise of a train in an otherwise pastoral scene, Marx argues that the fundamentally troubling experience which this encounter constitutes is transformed into a powerful metaphor for progress. What is troubling is thus reconstructed as sublime experience. And the technological objects which are the instruments of the country’s industrialization are coded as sublime.
ers, understood as forming part of the natural wilderness of the unconquered American continent. Imagined as primitive beings, not very different from the beasts of the land, they are not merely dehumanized but, through the appropriating American gaze, rendered invisible. This view of the indigenous population of course paved the ideological way for Euro-American expansion westward across the continent. Signifying a primitive past as well as an aggressive pre-Oedipal child (whose desire for the mother had to be suppressed), the destruction of the Native American was a pre-requisite for the progress of Euro-America. As Rogin argues, the suppression of Native Americans played a crucial part in the creation of “America.”

In the story of “America,” the American Adam is the protagonist and the plot tells of his brave and laborious conquest of an unknown wilderness. Clearly, the expanding frontier and imperialist thrust of national mythology are related to the centrality of the journey motif in American literature, the myth of the open road well illustrating the fundamental importance of movement and progress to American nationalist ideology. And this idea of American society as a haven of progress and endless opportunities in turn underpins that most paramount of American myths: the American Dream. The journey narrative in American literature is thus firmly grounded in national symbology. In American fiction from the late eighteenth century to the 1970s, the journey, Janis P. Stout writes, is a “pervasive . . . thematic concern,” and a “recurrent . . . symbolic action,” but it has not received critical attention in proportion to its prominence (ix). Investigating the largely white, male American canon, Stout identifies the journey westward as the one privileged in the American imagination, the one considered to best reflect the spirit of the American nation. The journey eastward, then, constitutes its opposite. Stout notes that, like the return home, “[e]asterly movement, . . . conveys timidity, constraint, retreat; it is back-trailing, the defeated rebound from the pioneering venture” (66).

In Chapter Two, I will look at a decidedly eastward journey: the European journey. Since, in the American imagination, Europe has been associated with the past, and eastward movement implies retreat, it comes as no surprise that the European journey in American fiction has conventionally figured as a turning away from America and futurity: “Resort to Europe is back-trailing on a grand scale,” Stout writes (67). And Caesar suggests that the fact that foreign travel (particularly to Europe) has, from to time, been problematic, particularly in the lower classes, can be explained by its “align[ment] to back-migration” (10). Hence, in an American culture venerating emigration to the United States and across the continent, travel abroad “runs counter to the national mythology” (10). Generally speaking, while the European journey may be the reverse of the “pioneering” westward movement celebrated in American mythology, it is not a minor category of American journeys: “the fiction of the American’s journey to Europe is a recognizable, distinct form, possessing its own tradition and continuity,”
Stout confirms (72). She concedes, however, that it is a complex genre: “the composite of several clearly distinct patterns of journey narrative – the escape, the pilgrimage, the homecoming, the retreat,” and, in the twentieth century, “directionless wandering” (71). This composite nature of the European journey narrative can be explained if it is placed in its various historical contexts. By historicizing the journey narratives and placing them in the context of the changing symbolic function of “Europe” – the “Old World” – their complexity can, I believe, be understood.
CHAPTER TWO

A History of the Old World Journey

There is a volume of associations with the very name [of Europe]. Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*

An [American’s] background and quality are tested in Europe as they are tested nowhere else; going to Europe thus becomes a cognitive act, an act of re-discovery and re-possessing one’s heritage. Philip Rahv, *Discovery of Europe: The Story of American Experience in the Old World*

The historical survey of the Old World journey in this chapter attempts to outline the many-faceted symbology associated with this journey as both cultural ritual and literary motif. Studying the Old World journey, I am particularly interested in the re-assessment of “America” as it is revealed in representations of the encounter with Europe. As I go about this investigation, the American image of Europe, indicating in turn transformations in the concept of “America,” will be a central concern. Historically, in the context of the formation of the United States as an imagined community, “Europe,” “the Old World,” has served as an Other – an illustration of what is not us/U.S., “the New World.” The prime Other of the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries declines in importance in the twentieth century, and has since World War II played only a minor role – becoming replaced by the Communist, the Asian, the Latin American and the Islamic Other. It is against the backdrop of the Old World Other, the European journey motif, and the history of American travel to the European continent that I will engage in close readings of the four novels by Styron, McCarthy, Williams, and Jong, as such an approach helps to situate their engagement in the debate about “America” in the 1960s and early 1970s.
An Affirmation of Innocence – the Nineteenth Century

It’s a complex fate being an American and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe.

The Letters of Henry James

The Old World symbology which informs the four novels discussed in this study took shape in the nineteenth century, as the dichotomy between European “experience” and American “innocence” developed, and the cherished figure of the American girl became an American icon. As indicated above, travel and tourism were crucial in the formation of the American nation as an imagined community, and the practice of European tourism played an important role in the molding of Europe as “the Old World.” Buzard notes that the American tourist conception of “Europe” was inherited from the British view of “the Continent” – but with the important difference that Great Britain was included (“Continent” 32). In the logic of the Anglo-Saxon gaze, according to Buzard, “the Continent” (in the British case) or “Europe” (in the Old World (in the American case) was perceived as embodying the poetry and authenticity lacking in Britain/America as modern, industrialized countries.

In this process of forming the European Other, guidebooks were instrumental. “[T]he central function” of a guidebook like John Murray’s, Buzard claims, was that of “putting the reader in front of Europe’s ‘poetic,’ its ‘European’ features. These elements make ‘Europe’ what it authentically is; they make ‘Europe’ worth seeing” (“Continent” 31). The circumstance that American tourists tended to complement their Murray or Baedeker with an American guidebook49 suggests that Americans desired an American introduction to Europe. To judge by Stowe’s presentation, these guidebooks did indeed project an American gaze on Europe, for example downplaying its modern aspects, while foregrounding its romantic and picturesque qualities. “From the time of George Putnam . . . and Arthur Frommer,” Buzard writes, “Americans have had access to guides that effectively reinforce the reified unity of ‘Europe’ and put the key to that unity in the carrier’s hand – or on American shelves and coffee tables” (“Continent” 36).

49 Stowe mentions a number of guides, such as George P. Putnam’s The Tourist in Europe, and A Hand-Book for American Travellers in Europe, Collated from the Best Authorities by Roswell Park, D.D. (two guidebooks from the first half of the nineteenth century) and a few others from the latter half of the century, such as Morford’s Short-trip Guide to Europe, William Hemstreet’s The Economical European Tourist: A Journalist Three Months Abroad for $430, and two by and for women: Studying Art Abroad: How to Do It Cheaply (1879) by May Alcott Nieriker, and European Travel for Women (1900) by Mary Cadwalader Jones. Stowe explains that while the early texts consider the American traveler as a student or pilgrim, the latter tend to understand him/her as a consumer (30-37).
Conventionally, Europe, including England, has been associated with romantic nostalgia—sentiments often invoked in the novels discussed in my thesis. Bradbury dates these “[s]toried [a]ssociations,” as he calls them, about England and Europe back to the fiction of Washington Irving, most importantly to The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1820), the collection of stories primarily depicting English country life (53). Bradbury attributes extraordinary importance to Irving’s work in the history of American literature in general and “trans-atlantic” narratives in particular, considering Irving America’s first author, his Sketch Book appreciated and acknowledged in Britain and the United States alike. In fact, as Bradbury points out, Irving’s Sketch Book was not only a publishing success but a diplomatic feat. In its appreciative attitude to England it not only improved the tense Anglo-American relations after the war but simultaneously contributed to shaping “America” and boosted American self-confidence. According to Bradbury, one of Irving’s most significant achievement was that he practically invented the American myth of the Old World which “has had enormous cultural and political meaning ever since” (57).

The title The Sketch Book plays on associations to travel and the picturesque and clearly indicates the significance of tourism in the context of the construction of the Old World. In “The Art of Literary Tourism: An Approach to Washington Irving’s ‘Sketch Book’,” David Seed highlights how the narrative “follows the broad analogy of a tour” or, actually, a guidebook, complete with notes on sea crossing and arrival in Liverpool, as well as “general views of British customs and attitudes,” and essays on excursions to cities and country side. In accordance with the conventions of picturesque tourism, Irving composed a number of fictional sketches presenting English life as if he saw it through the romanticizing lens of a Claude glass. In his tourist gaze, England is firmly located in the past, coming across as a colorful old country steeped in quaint traditions, nice quiet small-town life, and merry John Bulls. Framing these sketches in a discourse which suggests England as the ancestral origin of the United States, the land of the modern, the present and the future, Irving presents England through an American gaze.

In order to fully understand the symbolic significance of the European journey for an American we should remember that, in the nineteenth century, a journey to the Old World was considered an obligatory aspect of the education of cultured Americans, particularly, of course, of young white gentlemen. Ever since the beginning of American history the Old World was seen as the repository of civilization, art, culture, and learning. Nineteenth-century African American writers also considered Europe in terms of “a source of culture,” Brita Lindberg-Seyersted writes in “The Image of Europe in Writings by African-American Women” (37). In these often politically inflected texts, the cliché of the moral superiority of the New World is rejected because Europe, usually England, is presented as a civilization supe-
rior to a “barbarous” United States which practices slavery or, after the Civil War, racial discrimination. While, until the very end of the nineteenth century, going to Europe to study was an impossibility for African Americans, who were still largely barred from education, practically all white writers of the century traveled to Europe, most of them publishing travel journals.

Modeled on the British practice that evolved during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European journey was established as a “Grand Tour” – a sign of privilege – in American upper-class culture in the late eighteenth century, particularly for men. Indicative of the cultural dependence of the United States on Europe, a long row of American scholars, statesmen and artists spent extended periods in Europe where the institutions and milieus of culture and education provided the learning and inspiration America could not yet offer. It needs to be remembered, however, that while the official side of the coin of the Old World journey was concerned with culture and education, there was an unofficial side that spelled pleasure, sex and eroticism. As Ian Littlewood’s study *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex Since the Grand Tour* (2001) amply demonstrates, the English as well as American Grand Tour of the European continent, particularly to the Mediterranean, was intimately connected to romantic and/or sexual adventure and has continued to be so in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The novels of Styron, Williams, and Jong give evidence of this close link between tourism and romance as their protagonists all engage in romantic/sexual relationships with Europeans.

Using anthropologist Victor Turner’s theories, Stowe explains that the European journey in American culture in the nineteenth century was a ritual, an act of symbolic national self-definition on the cultural as well as individual level (21); to make an Old World pilgrimage endowed people with higher status in terms of education and culture.50 In sum, the Grand Tour simultaneously served to confirm the connection to the Old World and to exalt the difference of the young nation. This transformation of the European journey into a national social ritual also functioned to counter the anxiety inherent in it, particularly for the lower classes, Caesar writes (64-65). Previously, the practice of foreign travel had not been a practice generally accepted in all layers of society; it had tended, in fact, to be interpreted as an unpatriotic act, a refutation of America.

50 Henry Adams’s autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), charting the protagonist’s coming to maturity through his Old World experience, exemplifies the importance of the European stay for the American upper classes of the late nineteenth century. The essay “The Dynamo and the Virgin” in the autobiography investigates two opposing forces, rationality and spirituality, representing present and past, and hence America and Europe. And in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, Henry Adams studies cultural treasures of the past, finding sanctity and unity to mark the Medieval period. Adams’s interest in this period should be understood against the background of his discomfort with the secularity and fragmentation of America and the contemporary period.
Typically, the goal of the Grand Tour – beginning in England and including, in succession, Paris, Germany, Switzerland – was Italy and Rome. In the American imagination Italy epitomizes Europe; it is the European country which has been established as the most different, the most Other to America. In the nineteenth century, as Bailey writes, it was “coded as both the most visual and the most feminine” (61). The literary text which has been most influential in the American conception of Italy is undoubtedly Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun: or, the Romance of Monte Beni* (1860). In the Preface, describing the setting as “a sort of poetic or fairy precinct,” Hawthorne reveals an awareness of the imaginary nature of the Italy of his romance. To him, as to many of his compatriots, Rome was the European city most closely associated with the past. In this setting, signifying both pagan pastoral and hell, the contrast between American innocence and European guilt was dramatized in the interplay between the young American artists Kenyon and Hilda, on the one hand, and Europeans Miriam, a cosmopolitan artist, and Donatello, an Italian count resembling the faun of Praxiteles, on the other. The American myth of Italy reverberates strongly in Styron’s *Set This House on Fire*, as I will demonstrate.

*The Marble Faun*, whose table of contents actually suggests the guidebook, often filled the function of travel guide to Americans visiting Rome. In his 1879 study of Hawthorne, Henry James asserts that “[i]t is part of the intellectual equipment of the Anglo-Saxon visitor to Rome, and is read by every English-speaking traveler who arrives there, who has been there, or who expects to go” (131). The text itself is an interesting investigation into the American tourist image of Italy, as Udo Natterman argues in “Dread and Desire: ‘Europe’ in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun.*” In Hawthorne’s story, the European setting is not an authentic place but rather a fantasyland, “a dreamscape, a sheer product of the mind” (57), Hilda and Kenyon’s “perception of Italy. . . the product of their own psychological projections” (55). Ultimately, they leave Rome because their experiences there have not corroborated their image of this city. In an interesting, yet not altogether convincing reading, Natterman argues that the attitude of the implied author toward his characters is ironic, Hawthorne critiquing his characters, exposing them as narrow-minded, dogmatic, conventional and mediocre tourists.

*The Marble Faun* was written at a time which saw a shift in the history of American tourism to Europe, just before mass tourism transformed the Grand Tour into a commodity. Increased wealth and improved means of transportation in the form of railroads and steamships enabled Americans to travel, and as large groups of affluent, middle-class tourists could journey to Europe, their old inferiority complex faded. At this point in history, the national self-confidence of America and Americans appears to have risen in proportion to their economic power and as their national self-image changed, so did their image of the Old World. That, increasingly, the Grand Tour came to confirm the American sense of the superiority of their polit-
cal/social system over Europe, is suggested by Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad or the New Pilgrims’ Progress* (1869). This iconoclastic book is the single most famous one in the context of American travel and tourism to Europe, “fasten[ing] upon Americans overseas a descriptive term they would never again wholly escape,” as Foster Rhea Dulles puts it (109). Twain here stages himself as a representative American, Caesar points out (35). Twain’s view of Europe was endorsed by the growing and increasingly powerful class of bourgeois Americans, as was illustrated by the enormous success of the book, and the gaze of Twain’s persona in *Innocents Abroad* became, I would argue, the normative national gaze, actually persisting in the early twenty-first century.

In the Preface, Twain stresses that his travel account constitutes a break with previous travel writing, being “a record of a pleasure trip” instead of a “solemn scientific expedition,” as he explains, in words suggesting a new kind of American gaze on Europe: “Yet notwithstanding it is only a record of a picnic, it has a purpose, which is to suggest to the reader how he would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him” (xvii). The attitude of learned, upper-class Easterners towards Europe, common to the previous conventional travel genre, is replaced by that of the common, pragmatic, middle-class American with scant regard for antiquity and canonized art. This journey narrative is a complex work which, while engaging in a critique of contemporary American society and of bourgeois Americans, also portrays “America” as a democratic realm through the contrast with a totalitarian Old World. Through the use of comedy and ridicule the supposed cultural superiority of Europe is deflated. Twain consistently reverses the conventional contrast between the two continents – for example by claiming that St Peter’s Basilica in Rome appears less grand than the American Capitol, and that Lake Como is nothing compared to Lake Tahoe. In the logic of this alternative hierarchy, American nature, society, and culture come across as superior by virtue of their grandiosity, democracy, modernity, progressiveness, and, as Stowe demonstrates, their masculinity.51

*Innocents Abroad* hence played a significant part in the paradigm shift in the American gaze – one grounded in a changing American national identity and reflected in the very practice of tourism. The fact that the European sites and objects visited by American tourists were no longer encountered with the same awe and reverence as previously is a sign of how the European sublime is losing its status as America grows as economic power, a change

51 Stowe argues that Europe served Twain as the background against which he could create a masculine identity in an American nineteenth century which coded intellectual and artistic pursuits as feminine. Adopting a casual, humorous attitude to European culture (judged effeminate) and deriding his fellow travelers for their pretension or arrogance, Stowe writes, Twain offers a positive, alternative, masculine role-model which is dignified as well as patriotic (151).
that Twain’s travel narrative well illustrates. In the second half of the nine-
teenth century, the rise of the domestic sublime thus occurs in step with the
decline of the European sublime, a development that parallels the shift from
the previous upper-class American gaze on Old World culture to the new,
self-confident middle-class American gaze.

Twain’s book sets up encounters between Americans and Europe to con-
trast and investigate imagined cultural characteristics. In this respect, *Inno-
cents Abroad* has much in common with what has been defined as the
“international novel.” The interaction between Americans and Europeans
dramatizes the contrast between the mores, traditions, and characteristics of
the two cultural spheres. Generally speaking, the contrast is one between
American “innocence” and European “experience”. The European scene is
not a mere exotic setting or subordinated interest but the contrast between
national differences is “made functional” to the meaning of the story, as
Oscar Cargill writes in 1958 in “The First International Novel” (419).

The designation “international” is actually a misnomer since the genre is
not concerned with the encounter with all foreign countries but almost exclu-
sively with the American encounter with Europe. On closer scrutiny,
“international” refers to the particular relationship between America and
Europe which had come about around the turn of the nineteenth century and
which had created a relationship of relative equality. At this point in history,
in the belle-époque, the transatlantic marriage which provided Henry James
and others with literary material evolved as a new practice. American mil-
lionaires acquired social status by marrying European aristocrats, who, in
turn, gained financially from the union. In other words, the economic power
of the American commercial nobility enabled them, both literally and meta-
phorically, to buy into European social nobility. The “international novel”
generally tells the story of Americans entering the social space of the Euro-
pean upper-class, and thanks to their moral superiority to the decadent Euro-

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52 According to Cargill, the concept of the “international novel” originates in a review by
William Dean Howells where he identified the English novel *The Initials* (1850) by Baroness
Tautphoeus as the first international novel and used it in reference to James’s *Daisy Miller*
(418). In his own very narrow definition, Cargill sees *The American* as the first international
novel and to him there really is no other American writer of international novels besides
James. Other critics, using the term of “international novel,” like Christof Wegelin and con-
temporary critics Janis P. Stout and Malcolm Bradbury, employ wider definitions than Cargill
but are still disinclined to claim that it survives into the twentieth century. Wegelin considers
Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, W. D. Howells’s *A Foregone Conclusion*, and Edith
Wharton’s *Mme de Treymes* as works which can be grouped together. He also brings up other,
seldom recognized, “international” novels such as Longfellow’s *Hyperion*, the historian Mot-
ley’s *Morton’s Hope: The Memoirs of a Provincial*, Francis Parkman’s *Vassall Morton*, and
Nathaniel Parker Willis’s *Paul Fane*. While *The Marble Faun* is the most frequently cited
example, other Hawthorne works like “A Passionate Pilgrim,” and the late, incomplete ro-
rances *The Ancestral Footstep*, *The Dolliver Romance*, and *Dr. Grimshaw’s Secret* have
also been mentioned. Given its theme of an American innocent’s confrontation with European
complexity, Melville’s *Redburn* is sometimes considered an international novel.
peans, they evolve as heroes and heroines. The setting is almost exclusively upper-class Europe where Americans are not only foreign but socially inferior, lacking the education, manners and heritage of the Europeans. In this setting the author stages a clash between cultural spheres, often dramatized in the marriage between an American and a European. The central object of this cross-cultural clash is very often a young American woman, naive and willful but full of vitality, charm, and goodness. The setting and the plot of the international novel enabled the introduction of a new icon: the American girl.

Tracing the development of James’s texts in *The Image of Europe in Henry James* (1958), Christof Wegelin recognizes the centrality of the figure of “the American girl” – who comes to illustrate the increasing complexity of James’s fiction. While James’s early international stories like *Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, or *Daisy Miller* construct the usual opposition between America and Europe, later texts like *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl* problematize it. As James becomes increasingly concerned with the fictional representation of the psychological processes, his depiction of the confrontation with European culture becomes gradually more multifaceted. Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* “stands midway” in this development, Wegelin writes in his monograph (70). Quite in the logic of patriarchal nationalism, “the American girl” is the symbolic repository of American greatness: “[t]he American girl becomes the symbol of American strength, and finally the ‘heiress of all the ages,’ whose virtue is tried and tested and tempered by exposure to the world, and who, like Maggie Verver of *The Golden Bowl*, inherits the world” (70). In other words, if the American girl maintains her integrity, the painful exposure to European culture ennobles and perfects her as personification of the icon of the national woman. In an interesting move, when Erica Jong tells the story of Isadora Wing’s European adventure she uses the figure of the American girl abroad, but by portraying her as *agent* rather than object, she appropriates the patriarchal convention.

The exploration of the American mind (as well as psyche) and the sense of a national self-consciousness characterize not only James’s novels but many other novels using the European journey motif. Against the background of the intense attempts to construct an American national identity in the nineteenth century this hardly seems surprising. Cushing Strout finds this characteristic to mark also *The Marble Faun* and some of James Fenimore Cooper’s work (105). *Redburn* also contains an ingredient of self-

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53 The figure of the American girl abroad can also be found in the works of other authors of the period, like William Dean Howells’s *A Foregone Conclusion* or Edith Wharton’s *Mme de Treymes*.

54 To judge by the novel *Homeward Bound*, for example, telling the story of a transatlantic crossing, Cooper’s relationship to European culture as well as to his native country was ambivalent. In that way he is representative of his generation of educated Americans. While
consciousness, for example in the novel’s exposure of the falsity of the protagonist’s romantic ideas about Europe. But the self-criticism of such nineteenth-century works does not rock the nationalist bias; at the end of the day, these novels extol American democracy, social equality, public morality, and simplicity of life as the heroes and heroines of James’s novels, like Christopher Newman and Isabel Archer, are always American. Buzard even designates Newman as James’s American “tourist-hero” (*Track 270*). In other words, challenging European cultural superiority, the international novel is nationalist since it actually performs the act of “fighting against [the] superstitious valuation of Europe” that Henry James saw as the “fate” of “an American.” But, as we shall see, in the twentieth century, the United States having established itself as a powerful nation, equal and later superior to the European countries, American literature charting the European journey increasingly becomes a site of self-inquiry.

**An End to Innocence? – from 1900 to the 1950s**

Europe is a moment of our self-consciousness. Let the moment endure, and Europe becomes our self-knowledge.

Harold J. Kaplan, *The Plenipotentiaries*

In the twentieth century, the significance of the Old World journey changes – both in terms of social ritual and literary motif. As a social ritual, it is transformed from an exclusive one, a pilgrimage of sorts, to a mass phenomenon undertaken either for work or pleasure. Previously obligatory in the education of a select group of Americans, the Old World journey is now no longer a national cultural ritual. As a literary genre, the journey narrative in the form of the Jamesean “international novel” declines and is replaced by a novel where Old World culture plays a less conspicuous role. These shifts parallel the new political and economic relationship between Europe and America – brought about by the ascendancy of the United States as superpower. As a result of this virtual role reversal, Europe stopped being Amer-

preferring the American political system, he favored the norms of Eastern upper-class culture. In this novel, the heroes are genteel Easterners, and middle-class Mr Dodge, an American newspaper reporter, is ignorance, greed, and vulgarity personified.

55 In Europe, on the other hand, after World War II, a journey to America, a New World journey develops into a cultural practice, not to say ritual. As a consequence, as Bradbury writes, “the [European] mythology of America began to change, and fables of the American voyage started to multiply – Henry James in reverse, post-war European innocence to encounter American experience” (439). The examples Bradbury gives are the writings of Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, and Christopher Isherwood.
ica’s prime external Other, and nineteenth-century Old World symbology lost much of its power. On the whole, as the functions of the Old World journey and of “Europe” mutate, we witness a widening of the gap between, on the one hand, a dominant, rather chauvinist attitude to Europe, marked by a general lack of interest, and, on the other, a marginal one distinctive of an elite culture retaining its reverence for Old World tradition and culture. The reinforced sense of American superiority in the post-World-War-II period is, however, accompanied by a mood of self-consciousness and self-critique, for instance expressed in an investigation into the conventional dichotomy between the New World and the Old, between innocence and experience, liberty and repression, future and past. While this dichotomy had, admittedly, already been questioned in the nineteenth century, such criticism did not become a major trend until after World War II. This new critical trend can be understood as linked to general changes in the fields of politics and literature. In the second half of the twentieth century, the relation of literature to nationalist ideology becomes increasingly complex and, in the last decades of the century, as the upper and middle-class WASP dominance of the literary field is broken, fiction becomes a forum for social and political critique. In sum, a gradual process seems to take place whereby nationalist ideology and discourse are eroded.

According to critical consensus, as noted above, the international novel based on the America/Europe opposition disappeared after World War I. Using a broad definition of the international story we are, however, able to trace the transformation of “Europe” as well as “the international novel.” I argue, however, that even though the modernist European journey novel lost its preoccupation with Old World culture, it continued to engage with the issue of national identity; Fitzgerald’s Tender is the Night, for example, is, according to Caesar, intensely concerned with defining national characteristics: “Nicole [Driver] is . . . imagined more lavishly as an American figure of representation than either a travel or a fiction writer could have anticipated by the turn of the century” (135). Critics like Wegelin and Bradbury hold that, after World War I, American writers abandoned the conventional association of Europe with the past, and instead started to see the continent as a contemporary place (see Wegelin “Image of Europe” (87) and Bradbury (340)). The shattering reality of war (experienced, for example, by Dos Passos, Hemingway, and e.e. cummings) made it impossible to understand

56 Two novels set during the occupation and published in the postwar period, Mario Puzo’s The Dark Arena (1953) and Thomas Berger’s Crazy in Berlin (1955), exemplify the trend of a greater degree of national self-consciousness and self-reflection in fiction using Europe as its mainstay. In these novels, American benevolence is questioned as the exploitation and humiliation of the conquered peoples is revealed. In Berlin, Berger’s protagonist Reinhart, an American innocent, encounters a complex world where binaries such as truth and falsehood, good and evil, victim and perpetrator, non-Jew and Jew are blurred. As a result, his identity is shaken in its foundations, causing mental disorder.
Europe in terms of a zone removed from the present. For modernist artists, America embodied regression and conventionality, while Paris and Europe represented philosophical and artistic pioneering, the future and progress: “Paris was where the twentieth century was,” as Gertrude Stein is supposed to have said (Strout 185). Prominent African American scholars and artists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen who found refuge from racism in Europe were even more enthusiastic than their white countrymen about the freedom they experienced in European cities.  

Although lessons learned from the war complicated the signification of “Europe” in the texts written by Americans after late 1910s, I hold that the well-established Old World clichés did not vanish. After World War I, American fictional travelers to Europe, including the expatriates or “exiles” of the 1920s, can, to an even greater extent than previously, be understood as tourists, generally not confronting European culture but remaining distanced from it. Referring to expatriate writers and the Americans abroad that they portray, Stephen Spender suggests that the “Lost Generation” is an inappropriate designation, and that “isolated” or even “insulated” would be better (205). Although self-chosen, European expatriation has generally been conceived of in terms of “exile” by critics. This “exile” offered a “detachment or ungrounding only available in a foreign place,” a condition which modernist artists tended to consider necessary for artistic creation and self-discovery (Gerald J. Kennedy 26). Differently expressed, expatriation, which places artists in a space outside both America and the European country, seems to have provided them with a space for artistic creation. The expatriate life of experimentation, and sometimes dissipation and leisure, depicted in these novels contributed to the creation of the cliché of

57 See, e.g., Michel Fabre’s From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980 (1991), Tyler Stovall’s Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light (1996) or Eberhard Brüning’s “Stadluft macht frei!: African-American Writers and Berlin (1892-1932).” This overwhelmingly positive image of Europe shifted, however, toward a more complex one after World War II. Both Fabre and Stovall do point out, however, that negative sides of Europe are also revealed in African American writing before World War II, as in Claude McKay’s Banjo (1929). And Lindberg-Seyersted recognizes Nella Larsen’s Quicksand (1928), and Jessie R. Fauset’s Comedy: American Style (1933) as two works that pay attention to European racism (46-47). For a recent study of the symbolic significance of “Europe” in the self-articulation of some Harlem Renaissance writers, see Lena Ahlin’s The “New Negro” in the Old World: Culture and Performance in James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen (2004).

58 In Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement (1996), Caren Kaplan uses these groups of Euro-American middle-class expatriates as examples in her deconstruction of “the binary opposition between exile and tourism in an effort to understand the production of modernisms” (28). She debunks the modernist trope of exile and demonstrates how it is based on “a conflation of various kinds of displacement, including expatriation and tourism” (28). As she writes, “‘exile’... marks a place of mediation in modernity where issues of political conflict, commerce, labor, nationalist realignments, imperialist expansion, structures of gender and sexuality, and many other issues become recoded” (28).
Europe, and Paris, in particular, as a liminal zone of adventure, romance, and eroticism – a Moveable Feast of sorts. Obviously, such a cliché could easily be absorbed into an American mythology. David Goldknopf observes in “Tourism in The Sun Also Rises” that Jake has a “touristic frame of mind,” the novel as a whole amounting to a “financial diary” (5). The fact that these expatriates were actually tourists of sorts explains, Goldknopf argues, why “lives so callous and desultory are nonetheless appealing” (8). The distance that they maintain to the surrounding world mirrors their narcissist melancholy: “They are eternal tourists, aimlessly criss-crossing the landscape of their disenchantment. Who would want to live there? Yet it remains a nice place to visit” (8). In a related comment, Caesar notes the close relationship of Hemingway’s texts to travel writing and, in support of his point, he quotes Dos Passos’s trenchant but crude comment that The Sun Also Rises was “a cock and bull story about a lot of summer tourists getting drunk and making fools out of themselves at a picturesque Iberian folk-festival – write now to Thomas Cook for special rate and full descriptive leaflet” (qtd. in Caesar 130).

The declining status of the European journey is related to the history of American tourism to Europe as, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the European journey becomes increasingly accessible to broader sections of the middle class. As a result of the prosperity of the Coolidge era and the low value of European currencies, American tourism to Europe booms in the 1920s and the Grand Tour loses its status-endowing significance. The idea of the value of extended study in Europe persisted, however, for the rest of the twentieth century, and continues to do so, particularly in the cultural/artistic elite. After World War II, when the United States has confirmed its

59 “Liminality” is the second phase of a ritual experience in Victor Turner’s theory. The first phase is “social and spatial separation from the normal place of residence and conventional social ties; [the] second, liminality, where the individual finds him/herself in an ‘anti-structure . . . out of time and place’ – conventional social ties are suspended, an intensive bonding ‘communitas’ is experienced, and there is a direct experience of the sacred or supernatural; and third, reintegration, where the individual is reintegrated with the previous social group, usually at a higher social status” (Urry, Tourist Gaze 10).

60 A French reaction against the increasing American dominance of Europe (literally manifest in the arrogance and chauvinism of American tourists) was manifested in Paris in 1926, when, as Dulles reports, a mob of several thousand Frenchmen attacked the American Express Company tour buses (157).

61 Sinclair Lewis’s Dodsworth (1929) would seem to constitute an example of these high-brow attitudes according to which the influence of European culture is necessary for an American’s development into a perfected character. Dodsworth, a Newman character, an uncultured but dignified American, successful industrialist and “Nature’s Nobleman,” is transformed into a refined human being under the influence of Europe. Bernard Malamud’s collection of stories, Pictures of Fidelman, an Exhibition (1958), would be another later example. Fidelman undertakes a Bildungsreise to Europe, where he has to face his heritage, his inescapable Jewishness embodied in the figure of Susskind, a sorrowful character who follows him like a shadow. After many a sordid, decadent and semi-criminal adventure, Fidelman returns to America, at peace with himself and the world. “In America he worked as a craftsman in glass and loved men and women,” the last story closes (208). Quite in line with
standing as super power, a great unprecedented migration of Americans to
Europe occurs – the context in which we should locate the protagonists in
the four novels to be discussed. The title of Mary McCarthy’s novel *Birds of
America* actually refers to this new phase in history when many of the
Americans displaced in Europe were not tourists. While many thousands
were sent to Europe on government assignments, as military personnel or
employees of various agencies, others went as American businesses ex-
panded on the European market. At this point, as tourism truly becomes a
mass movement, the Old World journey has definitely been transformed
from an exclusive to a common practice. And as masses of Americans were
able to assume the role of tourist and consumer, the middle-class anxiety
associated with travel abroad is gradually alleviated, Caesar explains, noting
the simultaneous increase of upper-class contempt for tourism and tourists in
high-brow American literature – what Buzard calls anti-tourism (139).

As the documentation presented by Endy shows, the American govern-
ment promoted tourism in various ways, for example through the Economic
Cooperation Administration. Postwar American tourist discourse enabled
tourists to envision themselves as doing Europeans a service – contributing
to the reconstruction of Europe. Indeed, this was how tourism was presented
to the public, as Endy demonstrates. And Patricia Goldstone adds that, after
World War II, also the American Express “sold tourism as an integral exten-
sion of the Marshall Plan”(44).62 Obviously, tourism thus served a vital
function in American European foreign policy: a policy known to have had a
neo-imperialist grounding. The Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer musical *An Ameri-
can in Paris* (1951)63 well exemplifies the interconnectedness of popular
culture and neo-imperialism – a phenomenon manifest in the American gaze
projected on Paris.64 In this film (representative, I think, of the popular image
of the Old World), Europe is depicted as a great theme park with the exotic
flavors of the past, art, and romance. Telling the story of Jerry Mulligan,

Old World mythology, the Europe Fidelman confronts and becomes immersed in is complex
and decadent, and his European experience does indeed function in his *Bildung*, but what
distinguishes Malamud’s book from the nineteenth-century tradition and aligns it with the
postwar trend is the fact that the American protagonist, Fidelman himself, is no longer an
innocent.

62 Probing the interconnectedness of business and politics and exposing the neo-colonialist
underpinnings of twentieth-century tourism, Goldstone writes that the American Express
corporation, having intimate ties with the State Department, served as an “auxiliary embassy”
and “private-sector State Department” (21).

63 One of the most successful *MGM* musicals in the 1950s, it won six Academy Awards in
1951. As the story is most banal, it is quite surprising that it won the award “Best Story and
Screenplay.” It may be explained, however, with reference to the fact that the movie does tell
the success story of how America wins the love of Paris/France.

64 Endy explains that the film musical, an early example of a Hollywood “synergy” product,
was indeed intended to market Paris to American tourists. The film was part of a larger pub-
licity campaign sponsored by the French government seeking to promote tourism, as well as a
variety of export products (*Cold* 108-09).
American ex-GI and dabbling painter (played by Gene Kelly), who falls in love with and finally wins a French girl from a French rival, the musical clearly presents an “American Everyman,” suggested by the film title. The implied viewer is clearly also expected to assume the tourist gaze marking the opening of the film – displaying a panorama of scenic views, establishing Paris as a city of tourist sights. As the movie illustrates, Europe and the European Other are no longer dangerous. Literally constructed in Hollywood, the Paris of the film is the manifestation of a post-war American gaze informed by a new sense of superiority.65

This new self-confident yet self-conscious American attitude towards Europe can also be found in Edmund Wilson’s travelogue, Europe Without Baedeker: Sketches Among the Ruins of Italy, Greece and England (1947). Although the title recalls the classic American Grand Tour, the ruins that Wilson encounters on his tour are not the quaint remnants of a venerable past but the result of a terrifying contemporary war that has destroyed or damaged cities, villages, and infrastructure. Destroyed by its own conflicts, European civilization has proved itself inferior to the new empire, the United States. In this postwar Europe, the reverential gaze of a classic guidebook such as Baedeker’s is obviously outdated and must thus be rejected – just like the “cultural cringe,” the over-respectful attitude to European civilization, has been abandoned.

Central to the self-exploration and critique characterizing the second half of the twentieth century is the questioning of the myth of American innocence. One writer engaging in such an activity is Leslie Fiedler who had gone to Italy after the war. The title of his essay collection An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics (1952) aptly describes the thrust of post-World-War-II literature concerned with the European journey. Like many American intellectuals at the time, Fiedler holds on to his faith in his country, but is painfully struck by the realization that American innocence is

65 By contrasting the American protagonist, significantly named Major Victor (Joppolo), a likable character presented as the ideal representative of a civilization that brings democracy, justice and welfare to an Italian village, to an unsympathetic, brutal and ignorant American commander, John Hersey’s A Bell for Adano (1944) offers comment on how America and its representatives should act in contemporary Italy. The bell referred to in the novel’s title, a replica of the Liberty Bell (presented as a gift to the Italian town), obviously symbolizes the new order to be established after the war.

66 The title of Harold J. Kaplan’s novel The Plenipotentiaries (1950) indicates the ambassadorial status of Americans abroad (257). The insistence on postwar American responsibility in the novel, however, sounds like an American burden of sorts, a suggestion of America’s role in the post-World-War-II world. This novel presents a conventional image of Europe (Paris) as a realm of culture but also of moral decadence and political danger. Kaplan investigates various types of Americans and presents the young American man “Tony” as the ideal modern American. While managing to protect his moral integrity from European corruption, Tony benefits and learns from European culture and art. Kaplan’s vision of the ideal American should thus be placed in a long upper-class American tradition which insists on the importance of Europe in the education of the ideal American.
an obviously antiquated myth. The quote below well expresses the desire of
many postwar writers and artists to simultaneously serve as promoters and
critics of “America”:

[The American artist] is needed in a naked and terrible way, perhaps un-
precedented in Western culture – not as an entertainer, or the sustainer of a
“tradition,” or a recruit to a distinguished guild, but as the recorder of the en-
counter of the dream of innocence and the fact of guilt, in the only part of the
world where the reality of that conflict can still be recognized. If it is a use he
is after and not a reward, there is no better place for the artist than America.
(Fiedler End 128)

A related impulse propels “tourist-poetry” in the postwar period, according
to Robert von Hallberg. Although these poets, Robert Lowell, Richard
Wilbur, Elizabeth Bishop and others, express an awareness of the violence
inherent in the psychology of neo-imperialism and tourism, they still support
the imperial project of the United States. Writing intelligent and sophisti-
cated verses about the treasures of European culture, the poets performed a
“mission,” a “special service for the nation; their efforts show the United
States to be worthy of taking over the imperial cloak from the European
powers.” Hallberg argues (151).

The new historical circumstances are, of course, reflected in American
fiction but they did not cause the “death” of the Old World journey narrative,
as most critics assume. Although it is true that nineteenth-century mythology
had waned in the twentieth century and that the Jamesean international novel
was long gone by then, post-World-War-II fiction continued to draw on the
conventions of the genre. As Wegelin points out, by employing these differ-
ently, postwar literature made a commentary on contemporary society. What
may be achieved through this strategy, according to Wegelin, is to “confirm
the total overturn of [the] nineteenth-century world [of James, Hawthorne,
and Mark Twain]” (“Image” 92). Elaborating somewhat on his observation, I
would add that, in doing so, it also engaged with issues related to national
identity, something American fiction continues to do today.

One example of the appropriation and reinscription of established con-
ventions is Giovanni’s Room (1956), the tragic love story between a white
American and an Italian; James Baldwin places the Jamesean plot in a con-
temporary setting but inverts the conventional dichotomy of American inno-
cence and European experience by contrasting the myth of innocence with
the facts of the new power relations.67 The American David turns out to have
a corrupting influence on his Italian lover, signifying, to Giovanni, a cyni-

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67 In their two respective articles, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Valerie Rohy make the broad
and complex questions of identity raised in this novel the object of their readings, demonstrat-
ing how Baldwin exposes the constructedness of masculinity, race, and nationality.
cally exploitative and patronizing behavior.\textsuperscript{68} You, David, are like all Americans, Giovanni seems to be saying:

\ldots looking at me and looking at all of us and tasting our wine and shitting on us with those empty smiles Americans wear everywhere and driving off with a great roar of the motors and a great sound of tires and telling all the other Americans you meet that they must come and see our village because it is so picturesque. And you will have no idea of the life there, dripping and bursting and beautiful and terrible, as you have no idea of my life now. (203)

David perceives Italy and Italians with an American, and tourist, gaze, objectifying and Othering the foreign country and its inhabitants. The attitude that Giovanni criticizes gains its force from the power hierarchy between America and Italy, exemplified by the Americans’ possession of motorcars. The “empty smiles” reveal exploitation masquerading as benevolence. Quite clearly, establishing a distance between the subject and the object, the gaze thus obstructs an encounter on equal terms between Italians and Americans like Giovanni and David.

Baldwin is probably the American postwar writer who has delved deepest into the complex issue of the significance for Americans of the European encounter. Baldwin was one of a large number of male African American artists and jazz musicians who settled in Europe in the postwar period, fleeing white American racism and political intolerance. Another prominent African American writer who escaped to Europe was Richard Wright. The writings of these two authors share an ambivalent attitude to Europe, Michel Fabre suggests in his articles “James Baldwin in Paris: Hardship and Romance,” and “Richard Wright’s Paris.” While they both found Paris and France to be places where they could create and enjoy a stimulating artistic and scholarly climate, they also reacted to the subterranean racism, primarily directed at Arabs, and the hypocrisy of a French society preaching liberty but exercising surveillance and control.

The nuanced, guarded attitude to France that can be discerned in the works of Baldwin and Wright is illustrative of the African American disillusionment with Europe as a color-blind zone that, as Stovall observes, became a trend in the 1960s. This growing African American skepticism to Europe, manifest, for example, in The Man Who Cried I Am, may be seen in the historical context of the declining magnetic power of European capitals, Paris in particular, over American intellectuals and artists. In the 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States went through a great political and cultural upheaval, the cultural élite engaging in the contemporary debates preferred

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\textsuperscript{68} The exploitation by Americans of Italy and Italians is the subject also of Tennessee Williams’s The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone (1950). Leading a life of luxury, employing young Italians as her lovers, a rich American widow finally destroys herself. It becomes clear that, like previous imperial rulers of Rome, Mrs Stone is doomed.
the domestic scene. American tourists still favored the Old World, however. As Endy explains, in spite of the efforts made by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to discourage American tourism abroad and to encourage it at home, in order to safeguard national economy, Americans did not stop vacationing in Europe. American college students like Peter Levi also continued to go overseas. Their displacement, however, was still sanctioned by the government. Like other Americans encountering Europe, Peter is faced with the implications of being American.

In “A Question of Identity,” an essay in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), referring to the generally bewildering experience of American students in Paris, Baldwin suggests that in order to make sense of it one must confront the issue of American national identity. He points out that although these questions may sound “grandiose and general,” they are in fact intensely “personal,” thus stressing the subjective dimension of national identity (136). He concludes that such a query may result in an individual’s gaining an improved understanding of himself and the society which has formed him: “From the vantage point of Europe he [the American student in Paris] discovers his own country. And this is a discovery which not only brings to an end the alienation of the American from himself, but which also makes clear to him, for the first time, the extent of his involvement in the life of Europe” (137).

The journeys depicted in the four novels of my selection trigger the kind of engagement with American national identity – on the individual as well as the collective level – that Baldwin describes. Ultimately, the encounters with Europe and Europeans that these texts depict constitute inquiries into “America,” inquiries which do not always lead to an increased awareness of the protagonists, but, at best, amount to re-assessments, or “discoveries,” of “America,” allowing the reader greater insight into the complexity of American national identity in the 1960s and early 1970s.

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69 In this quote Baldwin expresses a personal experience. Encountering Europe, he found that he had to accept the fact that, although black, he was inevitably American, that is formed by an American history and society which, in its turn, was rooted in white European ideologies. The insights that Baldwin came to about the significance of this “heritage” are beautifully expressed in “Stranger in the Village” (also in *Notes of a Native Son*). In a remote Swiss village, where no black man had been before him, Baldwin is confronted with the full implications of the racist underpinnings of white European culture in general and American culture in particular where whiteness is the norm.
CHAPTER THREE

Expatriate Innocents?
William Styron’s *Set This House on Fire*

[The American artist] is needed in a naked and terrible way, perhaps unprecedented in Western culture . . . . as the recorder of the encounter of the dream of innocence and the fact of guilt . . . .

Leslie Fiedler, *An End to Innocence*

In this reading, I argue that William Styron’s *Set This House on Fire* can be understood as an attempt to inquire into the myth of American innocence. As I have shown, prominent in American mythology, the conception of the United States as young, pure, benevolent and essentially innocent tends to be activated when America, or Americans, are considered in an international context; the “innocence” of Americans is typically set off against the foil of European “experience.” Using the European and Italian setting as a suggestive arena on which an essentially American drama is played out, *Set This House on Fire*, however, breaks with this convention; attempting to query American innocence it exposes the three main characters, all Americans, as capable of violent, destructive actions and as involved and/or complicit in American neo-imperialism. This questioning of a myth fundamental to the United States as a nation inevitably entails an engagement with ideological and political issues. I am interested in the extension of the social and cultural critique of *Set This House on Fire*, which I read as an allegory about America – where the “house” of the title is taken as a metaphor for the American nation in the post-World-War-II world. As this complex, sprawling, five-hundred-page novel contains several subtexts, it resists totalizing interpretations and cannot be reduced to a clear-cut allegory – but the national di-

70 Read against a standard definition of the origin of allegory, like John MacQueen’s *Allegory*, the mythical ingredients of Styron’s narrative can be identified. It seeks to analyze basic conditions, those of a nation, America, a tribe or sorts, Americans, and a time, the 1950s. Furthermore, through the portrayal of Cass, a tragic anti-hero, the story dramatizes the ancient themes of inadequacy and failure.

71 While many critics choose to ignore the subtexts, focusing on the surface level of the text and reading it in terms of redemption, regained sanity, educating experience etc., a few have recognized the undercurrents, and analyzed the contradictions between surface text and subtext. One of the early critics, Richard Pearce, explains the tension in terms of conflicting
mension is a textual strand that I feel merits closer attention than it has thus far been given. Although Styron has not written a formulaic allegory, he does draw on the genre conventions for his questioning of American innocence, thereby underscoring the national dimension of his drama. And the novel’s investigation contains a measure of social critique; engaging in a political discussion of contemporary political issues, it criticizes the materialism of the Eisenhower era and exposes the neo-imperial character of American postwar policy in Italy, manifest, for example, in the Marshall Plan. This query is, however, eventually abandoned by Styron – a problematic move, as I will argue below. In one broad stroke he liberates the two American protagonists from their guilt and/or complicity in the tragic Sambuco events, thereby undermining his previous criticism.

National Allegory

In introductions to studies of *Set This House on Fire*, the fact that it deals with America in the 1950s is generally referred to merely in passing and only a few critics have noted that it can be understood in terms of allegory. In *The Root of All Evil*, while recognizing Styron’s social critique, John Kenny Crane downplays this issue by arguing, quite erroneously, I believe, that “the novel is pregnant with the suggestion that Italians would have done quite the same thing had they rather than the Americans been favored by Fortune in the twentieth century,” and by concluding that the critique is a general one directed at “the times” and at human weakness (112-13). Marc L. Ratner understands *Set This House on Fire* as an expression of cultural criticism, and characterizes Styron as “a satirist who employs the Gothic and grotesque to attack his subject, [in a] novel . . . as concerned with what is false in American life as it is with its central character” (88).

Clearly, this novel engages in a moral discussion as it attempts to expose the complicity of both America and Americans in the various forms of “evil” depicted – the economic and social problems of Italian society, the car accident, and the rape and slaughter of an Italian girl. These “evils” are closely
linked to the protagonists’ feelings of guilt – and that the theme of guilt is overwhelming, not to say overpowering, is something Samuel Chase Coale recognizes in “Styron’s Choice: Hawthorne’s Guilt in Poe’s Palaces.” Admittedly, the emotional turmoil with which Cass Kinsolving and Peter Leverett wrestle can partly be explained in terms of individual guilt and/or complicity in the violent events (one grave accident, a rape, and two murders) in which they were involved in Europe. Their states of mind, however, do carry overtones of national guilt – by which I mean a guilt experienced on the individual level, for the actions and deeds of one’s native country. Unlike the majority of critics, who have focused on the theme of individual guilt, I am, then, interested in the novel’s treatment of national guilt.

In an early episode foregrounding the novel as a national allegory, Peter’s father delivers a long moralizing sermon on the state of the American nation. This grandiose monologue sets the tone, leading the reader to expect an elaborate dramatization of Leverett Sr’s visions – expectations, which, as we shall see, are not actually met. Representing an older generation of Americans, Alfred Leverett, an old-style liberal, deplores the abandonment of the high ideals of the “Founding Fathers” and a modern leader like Franklin Roosevelt, and their subsequent replacement by selfish materialism and racist oppression.

‘What this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and tragic, like what happened to Jericho or the cities of the plain – something terrible I mean, son, so that when the people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they’ll be men again, human beings, not a bunch of smug content hogs rooting at the trough. Ciphers without mind or soul or heart. Soap peddlers!’ (15).

This is the familiar voice of the Romantic idealist calling for a purgation from commercial culture. Americans must reform, he intimates and this process cannot be smooth as it requires nothing less than an apocalypse – a national experience which would purify and ennoble the American people. Underscoring the national dimension of the vision in his diatribe, Leverett Sr employs the house as a metaphor for the American empire: “’We’ve got to start from scratch again, build from the ground floor up. What has happened to this country would shame the Roman Empire at its lowest ebb’” (15). The house suggested by him clearly links back to the house in novel’s title. The

73 Most critics who discuss individual guilt focus on Cass, and a majority consider his trajectory to be marked by a redemptive pattern, see, e.g., Crane, Galloway, Lewis A. Lawson, Phillip W. Leon, Gunnar Urang, and Dan O.Via, Jr. Peter’s way of handling his sense of guilt is investigated by Cologne-Brookes, who places the emphasis on individual guilt.

74 In an early essay on *Set This House on Fire*, Urang notes the fact that the guilt in Styron’s novel has regional (Southern) as well as national, even universal features, but argues that personal guilt is foregrounded (52, 56). By recognizing the connection between individual guilt, American supremacy, and national guilt, Cologne-Brookes takes a step further but does not delve deeper into the issue.
metaphor of the house is also employed in the epigraph, the Donne poem “To the Earl of Carlile, and his Company, at Sion,” the speaker calling for purification by divine fire. And the agony expressed by this speaker points forward to one central aspect of the text: Cass’s trauma – one that takes on national significance when he is read as a figure in a national allegory.

In line with the narrative conventions of allegory, the characters Peter Leverett, Cass Kinsolving, and Mason Flagg can be read as personifying different social strata of American culture and society in the 1950s. While the names of the three major characters do not directly suggest the groups they represent, as would be the case in a more straightforward allegory, they do, however, provide clues to the symbolic significance of these characters in the national allegory. The similarities between the protagonists, Peter and Cass, make it possible to consider them as varieties of the archetypal figure of the American Adam, marked by rootlessness and orphanhood. While Cass is literally an orphan, having lost his parents in an accident as a child, Peter’s sense of rootlessness makes him an orphan in the metaphorical sense. Orphanhood of course signals isolation and identity quest, and both characters also experience personal identity dilemmas. The type of American Adam Peter Leverett represents is best understood in terms of the American Everyman – the representative American, an embodiment of the national Self of the 1950s. “I am white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon,” he introduces him-

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75 M.H. Abrams’s *Glossary of Literary Terms* states that “[t]he central device in the typical allegory of ideas is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, and types of character; in the more explicit allegories, such reference is specified by the character’s name” (5).

76 Also the names of minor characters give clues to their traits. The name of Cass’s wife, for example, “Poppy,” the name of a common wildflower, suggests childlike simplicity and the endurance typical of wild plants. The name of the owner of the hotel “Bella Vista” in Sambuco, “Fausto Windgasser,” tells us that he is corrupt, and one whose voluble talk is worthless. Although looking into the significance of names in his essay “Mask and Symbol in *Set This House on Fire*,” notably their national significance, Robert Phillips, disappointingly, never fully explores the subject.

77 Generally, critics find fault with the allegorical nature of characters, judging them extreme and exaggerated and, consequently, also “realistically” unconvincing. To my mind, the characterization in *Set This House on Fire* indicates that Styron is actually attempting to combine two incompatible genres. While static, caricatured types meet the demands of the allegory, they are obviously inadequate in a work focusing on the inner psychological state of its central characters. In what I regard as a desire to deny flawed characterization, André Bonnichon claims that as Styron’s characters do not constitute obvious personifications of aspects of American society, the text is therefore neither full-fledged allegory nor flawed novel (95). Admittedly, the allegorical overtones contribute to the fragmentation of the novel as a whole, and it conflicts with other concerns of realistic novels, most importantly the characters’ credibility.

78 Although there are two protagonists in *Set This House on Fire*, the narrator Peter Leverett and Cass Kinsolving (who is usually recognized as the central character) seem to constitute two sides of one character. Their view-points and consciences are welded, as critics have recognized. The result of this unusual narrative strategy is that we read their individual stories as one. As Louis D. Rubin writes, Peter and Cass “are one and the same person” (97). On this subject, see also Michel Butor.
self, enumerating traits which identify him as belonging to the dominant majority in American society (4). This young New York lawyer of Virginian origin appears to personify white middle-class normality. The fact that he is both a southerner and, as a New York resident, a northerner, makes him even more an all-American figure. Even his name, Peter Leverett – which can be translated into Peter Rabbit – suggests his inexperience, an innocence of sorts. Eventually, like the rabbit of Beatrix Potter’s tales, whose adventures in the dangerous world always convey a moral lesson, Styron’s Peter returns to the safe haven of home (in his case the United States) and is reintegrated into the hegemonic order.

Unlike David Galloway, who accepts Peter as an innocent American, labeling him “objective” and “uncorrupted” (53), I find that, in the greater part of the novel, Peter is revealed as being both subjective and corrupt. This fake objectivity is central to Gavin Cologne-Brookes’s discussion of Peter as narrator and character – as the “composer” of the story, a “unifying voice and deliberately problematic figure” (71). Peter controls the narrative, he says, and what appears as Cass’s verbatim narrative is actually an illusion created by Peter who “orchestrates the telling from start to finish and shapes the account to his needs” (Cologne-Brookes 73). But I do not believe that the text’s problematization of Peter is consistent, that it marks the novel in its entirety. As I will argue, the text’s critical stance vis-à-vis Peter (and Cass) is abandoned at the end as the author restores the innocence of his American protagonists: the American Everyman, and the American artist.

The incidents that occur in Italy actually suggest that Peter’s conscience is less than clear. His complicity in the American neo-colonization of Italy is exposed in a variety of ways. Working for the American government relief agency in Europe, as a civil servant, he is one of the many who carry out the American policies locking Italy in a state of dependency. And touring Italy, benefiting from the low prices of a strained economy, he may be considered to be complicit in the exploitation of the country. Peter’s very presence in Italy as administrator and tourist can be explained with reference to the role of the United States in postwar Europe. In hindsight, he himself describes his decision to work abroad as conforming to an established convention for young men who have not yet made decisive career choices – a Grand Tour of sorts: “a traditional move . . . or shiftless youths with murky horizons” (20). And although he provides vaguely idealist reasons as explanation for his desire to work in Europe, to “extend a democratic hand to the war-racked and downtrodden,” his real motivation for going abroad is grounded in a tourist desire for pleasure, as his mention of “travel and excitement” reveals (20). Problematizing Peter’s dual roles in Europe, the text thus from the beginning undermines the idea of the innocent American abroad.

Nor does Cass Kinsolving, the troubled alcoholic and failed artist, correspond to the image of the American innocent abroad. His name suggests his function as an allegorical figure because Cass (short for Cassius) signals the
rebellion which will bring about the apocalypse; in Roman history, Cassius was the leader of the revolt which ended in the death of the dictator. Mason Flagg’s consistent preference for the full name Cassius actually foreshadows the violent end of their relationship. But “Cass Kinsolving” also points forward to the reconciliation he ultimately achieves – the family name Kinsolving being hope-inspiring, suggesting solutions arrived at by cooperation among kin. The kin with whom he eventually, however incompletely, connects are his compatriots.

Unlike Peter, the ordinary American, Cass Kinsolving represents the Romantic artist. His primary characteristics – emotional turmoil, torment, eccentricity, self-chosen isolation, and the quest for inspiration – are necessary ingredients in a character epitomizing the romantic image of the artist: “the sum of all the flaws of men living in a Romantic-Puritan society (self-indulgence, self-pity, guilt obsession),” as Ratner puts it (70). This overwhelming and oppressive sense of guilt, manifest in a many-faceted self-loathing, would seem to be caused by his carrying the entire burden of his country’s wrongdoings. Fundamentally, even Cass’s displacement overseas and his journey around Europe can be understood as a result of his repulsion with contemporary America – a society characterized by materialism, consumerism, superficiality, and chauvinism. But wherever he turns in Europe, he seems to be running into Americans, American tourists in particular, reminding him of his origin.

His attempt to avoid America ultimately leads him to Sambuco and a confrontation with the incarnation of contemporary America, Mason Flagg, the type of American Cass finds the most abhorrent.

‘[T]he man I had come to Europe to escape, the man in all those car advertisements – you know, the young guy waving there – he looks so beautiful and educated and everything, and he’s got it made, Penn State and a blonde there, and a smile as big as a billboard. And he’s going places. I mean electronics. Politics. What they call communications. Advertising. Saleshood. Outer space. God only knows. And he’s as ignorant as an Albanian peasant.’ (392)

Ironically, then, when Cass believes himself to be making the ultimate escape from America, he runs straight into it. Against the background of the important role played by Mason in the novel, it is surprising that he has attracted such scant critical commentary, but the reason for this critical neglect is surely the cardboard nature of his character. Considered as an element of a national allegory, however, his role is significant. A figure such as Mason allows Styron to underscore specific negative aspects of Eisenhower’s America, the Italian environment foregrounding his most characteristic trait:

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79 Applied to House, Robert Phillips points out, Mason Flagg would be Caesar, the ruler, and Peter Leverett can be read as Brutus, Caesar’s friend (197-98).
an obsession with conquest and power, making him easily identifiable as a symbol of exploitation. Too obviously, it can be claimed, Mason represents the American nation gaining political and economic supremacy in Europe in the period succeeding World War II. This one-dimensional character thus embodies all the aspects of the United States critiqued in *Set This House on Fire*: capitalism, consumerism, exploitative tourism, commercial superficiality and pseudo-intellectualism. The very name Mason Flagg cries out his status of allegorical figure, and signals the author’s critical and ironic attitude to nationalist symbols. The family name “Flagg” indicates that he should be read in terms of national symbolism, and his first name suggests stone-layer, someone who builds, possibly someone who is instrumental in constructing an edifice – connoting the building of the “house” of the American nation. That he is a Yankee is signaled by the name Mason which refers to the northern side of the Mason and Dixon line separating the American North and South.

Although Cass, Mason, and Peter initially would seem to embody conflicting social forces in American society, on closer inspection they are actually related in a number of ways. The corruptible force of American capitalism is, for example, illustrated by the fact that both Cass and Peter are attracted to Mason and used by him. As Peter arrives at the castle, he hears Cass playing a record of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* – an incident seemingly suggesting that Mason exercises a seductive power similar to that of Don Juan. All those present in the castle, a space dominated by Mason, have been drawn by the power, money, and glamour of the American millionaire. Remaining loyal to his old school friend despite his dislike, Peter’s friendship with Mason is emblematic of the undeniable but highly problematic relationship between the ordinary middle-class American and American capitalism. Cass’s virtual enslavement to Mason, in turn, is symbolic of the artist’s dependence on the American capitalist society. This enslaved condition is graphically illustrated in the scenes where Mason has him perform obscene songs and jokes in African American vernacular to the movie crowd.

The depiction of the three characters as tourists in Europe further reinforces American national identity as a theme, as, historically, tourism has been central to American nation building. The European journeys of Mason, Cass, and Peter have different motivations but, on the whole, they are all propelled by American notions about the Old World as a realm of Bohemian artistic life and tourist adventure. Preferring to think of Europe as a “‘still-enchanted playground’” (deferring his idea of it as a place of stagnation and death) and going to Italy for the enjoyment of luxury, Mason can most clearly be understood as a tourist(159). There is a sense in which his journey can be read as a bizarre tourist version of that of the expatriate artist – he sees it in terms of a “‘long spell of writing’” (21). Considering the fact that the character of Mason is actually filtered through Peter (who tells his own story and reports that of Cass), it should be remembered that we read Mason
as Peter’s (and to some extent Cass’s) construct. Depicting Mason as a tourist, and even a perverted one, Peter and Cass are able to imagine themselves as entirely different from the type of American he represents. Their narratives, however, reveal that, essentially, they, too, are tourists, and what they express is thus what Buzard refers to as an anti-tourist attitude. Cass’s escape to Europe in some sense replays the Grand Tour or even the “exile” of the American modernist generation of artists – a practice with tourist underpinnings, as Caren Kaplan has demonstrated. What Cass performs is actually the cultural ritual common among American artists and intellectuals before World War II. Peter, in his turn, may be a civil servant working for the American government, but, fundamentally, his decision to work abroad is fueled by a desire for enjoyment. This is the reason for the trip to visit his old friend Mason in Sambuco before returning to America: “I felt foot-loose and adventurous, with no ties at all, and I had my eye cocked for new vistas” (21). As the references to adventure and sight-seeing in this quote illustrate, in conformity with the practice of tourism, Peter has consulted a guidebook before setting out on his trip south.

America’s Italy

Styron’s story opens with an excerpt from Nagel’s Italy, an authentic guidebook:

Sambuco.

Of the drive from Salerno to Sambuco, Nagel’s Italy has this to say: ‘The road is hewn nearly the whole way in the cliffs of the coast. An evervaried panorama unfolds before our eyes, with continual views of an azure sea, imposing cliffs, and deep gorges. We leave Salerno by Via Indipendenza. The road turns toward the sea, looking down on Marina di Vietri. On regaining the coast we enjoy a glorious view of Salerno, Marina di Vietri, the two rocks (Due Fratelli) and Raito. Beyond a side turning we enjoy a sudden view of the colourful village of Cetara (4½ m.). We return to the sea and then make a retour round the grim ravine of Erchie, approaching the sea again at Cape Tomolo. Passing through a defile with high rocky walls, we come in sight of Minori and Atrani with Sambuco high above them. The road diverges beyond Atrani and ascends the Dragone Valley.’

About Sambuco itself Nagel’s is characteristically lyric: ‘(1033 ft.) a little town of unusual appearance in an extremely beautiful landscape; the contrast between its lonely situation and its seductive setting, between the ruin of its ancient palaces and the gaiety of its gardens, is very impressive.’ (3-4)

The first edition of this book dates from 1949 and was published in Paris by Nagel publishers. I have not been able to verify if the passage in Set This House Fire actually does draw on this authentic travel guide.
Through this opening, Styron introduces the reader as if s/he were an (American) tourist, thereby allowing identification with the narrator – a strategy which invites the reader to partake of Peter’s experiences and, possibly, gain analogous insights. The unsettling experience of Peter Leverett’s European journey and his preconceived notions about both “Europe” and “America” should thus also challenge the reader into reconsidering his/her own world view. A study of the extent to which Peter manages to reevaluate his national identity should therefore help gauge the radical potential of the text.

Opening on a guidebook quotation, Styron holds up the American cliché of Italy as Arcadia – an image which will be shattered by the shocking and tragic character of the drama to be presented. The more or less overgrown ruins of Sambuco are reminiscent of a feudal past simultaneously romantically alluring and threatening. Nagel’s description of Sambuco, which Peter finds “characteristically lyric,” twice mentions the existence of beautiful gardens, thus reinforcing the impression of a paradise on earth. The depiction of the town builds on the contrast between “lonely” and “ruin” on the one hand, and “seductive” and “garden” on the other, thus illustrating the contradictory American conception of Italy as both paradise and hell, as Arcadia, yet one with Gothic ingredients.81

Nagel’s Italy well exemplifies the tourist gaze through which both Peter and Cass understand Sambuco, and Italy, upon their arrivals. As I will argue below, although Nagel’s Italy is not an American guidebook, the picture of Italy it presents corroborates the conventional American image of Italy. Its tourist gaze is therefore easily absorbable into an American gaze. The introductory quote evokes the American image of Italy as a realm of pastoral romance, and, in line with the stereotypes constructed in the discourse of tourism, the town very obviously comes across as a place of ancient history, somehow existing outside of time.82 As Peter suggests and the text proceeds amply to illustrate, Sambuco is no timeless Arcadia but a place in time and space. The story of the Sambuco events will reveal this seeming “model of invulnerability” to have been exempted from neither war nor violence (4).

81 In the context of the American (tourist) image of Italy there is an interesting intertextual connection between Set This House on Fire and John Huston’s movie Beat the Devil, partially filmed in Ravello, the Italian town which provided Styron with a model for Sambuco. This American movie was shot by the movie team that Styron and his wife encountered during their year-long (1953-1954) stay in Ravello. Beat the Devil opens on panoramic sweepings of the rugged coastline and a bird’s eye view of the town square. The scenes show a variety of settings (town square, café, hotel, coastline drive) and prominent among these is the ancient palace with the stunning view over the sea. Huston employs the scenery as a mere exotic backdrop, projecting a conventional American, and tourist, gaze on Italy which emphasizes its picturesque traits. As he transforms and exposes these conventions, Styron can be understood as critiquing the tourist perspective on Italy of Huston’s film.

82 Scholars of tourism research have found that certain places are characterized by what Chris Rojek and John Urry term “glacial time” (15). These places appear timeless, in contrast to the rest of society which is perceived as “instantaneous” (15).
One textual strategy through which the contemporaneity of Sambuco is revealed is the drastic contrast between the initial romantic guidebook image of the place and the violent events that take place there; in its insistence on the spectacular character of the landscape, the guidebook quote can be seen to forebode the violent drama about to unfold in Sambuco.

Reading the introductory passage carefully will help explore the novel’s employment of the guidebook quote. Pratt’s identification of the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene, a trademark of late nineteenth-century British travel writing, enables us to pin down the narrative conventions employed in the guidebook. As was explained in Chapter One, the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene which Pratt also calls a “promontory” description, contains three major characteristics. First, the landscape is presented as a painting; in other words, it is made esthetically appealing. The scene depicted is then given “density of meaning,” by which Pratt means “rich in material and semantic substance,” primarily through adjectival modifiers. Second, it is based on a “relation of mastery” between the observer and the place described – the viewer enjoying the position of judge and evaluator. What he (or, more seldom, she) sees is “all there is” (Eyes 205). Since Nagel insists on the beauty of the view, it is clearly involved in an estheticizing project. Density of meaning is here created through the extensive use of adjectives – “evervaried,” “azure,” “imposing,” “deep,” “glorious,” etc. Presenting a totalizing panorama of the entire landscape, Nagel’s guidebook establishes a relation of mastery between observer and Italian landscape.

The monarch-of-all-I-survey scene is a manifestation of a hierarchical relation between traveler and native population, but the arrival scene, as Pratt has demonstrated, is also significant in the context of the relationship between visitor and native, or “traveler” and “travelees” to use Pratt’s own terminology. As we shall see, the respective arrival scenes of Peter and Cass in Sambuco are significant in the context of their relationship to the town and its people, constituting examples of how the text queries their Americanness. To my mind, the scene describing Peter’s arrival in Sambuco problematizes in a very interesting way the American tourist gaze as it is applied to Italy.

Preceding Peter’s arrival in Sambuco, there is the story of his drive down from Rome, a narrative dramatizing an intriguing series of disruptions in his perception of Italy. The ultimate disruption occurs when he arrives in Sambuco. Approaching his destination, as he travels along the stunning Italian coastline, he is charmed by the landscape. In conformity with the conventions of the discourse of tourism, Peter’s depiction of the seascape and landscape conjures up the image of a colorful arcadian place: water “green as clover,” “transparent blue,” “clear sandy bottom,” and sounds, a girl singing in a lemon grove, oars splashing, a radio faintly playing (37). Quite accord-

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83 See “Conventions of Representation,” and Imperial Eyes (204).
ing to the established ritual of tourism, having arrived at the top of the hill he contemplates the dazzling view “so theatrical and romantic” (56). He then makes a symbolically significant entrance into the town via a “dark mildewed archway” (56), a sign of “Europe” in that it suggests the medieval walled town. Depicted in such a way, Peter’s entrance can be understood in terms of the symbolic passage into “the inner sanctum of European ‘otherness’” that Buzard considers fundamental to the ritual of American (and English) tourism – the ritual by which the tourist leaves his own society, understood to be marked by work and business, and enters a world of culture and enjoyment (“Continent” 32).

The succeeding scene, however, comically exposes the falsity of Peter’s tourist mind-set. Emerging on the other side of the archway he immediately stumbles into a café which proves to be fake, a movie set, a bewildering experience which has him briefly objectified by his environment.

I turned to find myself exposed to a battery of cameras and arc lights and reflectors, and now to the pop-eyed rage of a roly-poly little man in Bermuda shorts bearing down upon me, his lips curled around the butt of a cigar. ‘Hey paesan!’ he yelled. ‘Vamoose! Get the hell out of here! Umberto, tell this guy to get out of here! He just killed a hundred feet of film. Vamoose out of here, paesan!’

I felt a multitude of eyes upon me – from the mob of townspeople I saw gathered behind ropes gazing on, from the movie folk clustered beneath the lights, especially from the two people at the table I had blundered into . . . . It was like dwelling in an extremely bad dream. (57)

From having been the gazing subject, Peter instead becomes the object of an American gaze that constructs him as Italian Other. Being pegged as a “paesan” makes him doubly Other, the Italian being an American foreign Other and the peasant, the Other of the townspeople. Fundamentally, this scene illustrates Foucault’s argument that discourse predetermines perception. The Hollywood movie team and Peter both have definite ideas of what distinguishes “Europe” and “Italy” – ideas grounded in American myth rather than in actual encounters with the foreign country. As their respective perceptions clash, their prejudicial images are exposed. Busy constructing their Italy, the Hollywood team mistake an ordinary middle-class American for an Italian peasant. And Peter himself mistakes the inauthentic café Hollywood has constructed for its real Italian counterpart. This mistake is ironic because, like that prototypical tourist identified by MacCannell and Culler, he is on the look-out for signs of “the authentic,” for signs of “Europe.” Obviously, Peter and the movie team, both, are in complete confusion over what is fake and what is authentic.

Like Peter’s arrival scene, the one describing Cass’s initial encounter with Sambuco can be understood in terms of a commentary on the involvement of national power hierarchies in cross-cultural encounters. One way of reading
Cass’s arrival in Sambuco and at the Bella Vista hotel would be to see it as an inversion and a parody of the arrival of a new colonial ruler. The rendition of this undignified arrival in Sambuco (behaving like a tramp, he is arrested for disorderly conduct) foregrounds his refusal to play the role of representative American and to accept American hegemony. That he bribes himself out of an arrest, however, adds an ironic twist since it demonstrates that, as an American, Cass enjoys privileges due to his economic superiority.

The description of the Bella Vista hotel, complete with antique furniture, chandelier, and rubber plants, recalls the Victorian past of British imperialism: “The place smelled of wet wool, old books, fish, and Great Britain” (317). The hotel appears abandoned, filled with a ghostly presence: “grim, cold, deserted, and silent” (317). The end of the age of British supremacy is signaled in the description of the British-style hotel as a “waiting room of a funeral parlor” (317). In the post-World-War-II period, the world has entered a new era, that of American hegemony, in which, as the arrival scenes of Cass and Peter demonstrate, the cross-cultural experiences of Americans traveling in Europe will, inevitably, and in a variety of ways, be influenced by the hierarchical relationship between Italy and the United States. Arriving in Sambuco, neither Cass nor Peter consciously think of themselves as American – Cass even denies his nationality as he is questioned by the police. By foregrounding the central signification of national identity for these encounters, however, the text insists on the prestructuring forces of the new geo-political hierarchies that have turned the United States into a hegemonic power.

American Hegemony

When the Italian policeman Luigi asks why Americans “‘torture [them]selves with so much drinking’” (345), Cass explains, half in earnest and with obvious reference to himself, that this behavior is grounded in American supremacy in the postwar world: “‘They have to drink because drinking drowns their guilt over having more money than anybody in the world’” (345). As I will attempt to demonstrate, there is a clear connection between the conspicuous motif of guilt in Set This House on Fire and the question of American hegemony in the postwar world. The guilt which both Cass and Peter experience is not only related to their complicity in a murder and a rape but has a wider symbolic significance. A study of their respective encounters with Italy and the Italians will, I believe, bring out how the scenes signify in the context of the novel’s query into national identity.

Set This House on Fire evokes a postwar Italy where the power vacuum succeeding the fascist government is being filled by American dominance – politically, economically, and culturally. The trajectories of both Peter and Cass are also accompanied by resplendent images of the American cultural
and economic presence. Peter’s journey to Sambuco, for example, amply illustrates the powerful influence of the United States in Europe. As Romans drink Coca-Cola, Ava Gardner gazes down on the Italian scene from billboards, and the radio plays American music, the reader is consistently reminded of how American dominance is being established in Italy, as in the rest of western Europe. Peter’s tiring and troublesome drive to Sambuco makes a mockery of the leisure trip. At every turn of the road he seems to run into problems which remind him of the here and now, preventing him from envisioning himself in the timeless zone of “authentic” culture and beauty.

His collision with the Italian motorscooter-driver DiLieto, who is seriously injured, symbolizes Peter’s bewildering confrontation with contemporary Italian society. The collision is indeed a sharp one, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Containing overtones that are both comic and tragic, the immediate aftermath to the accident is depicted in a scene centering on the confusion caused by the communication problems arising in the encounter between Peter and the gathering Italian crowd. While he wants matters to be handled expeditiously and rationally, where he will contribute a detailed account of the accident, the Italians around him, including the policemen, are more intent on defining Peter’s identity and in constructing a story of the event. His foreign and tourist appearance resuscitates a range of Italian attitudes and when he reveals himself as American, some respond with curious interest and others with aggression. The injured Italian’s mother calls Peter “Swede!” (33), but his national identity is really irrelevant to her – she does not change her judgment when it is pointed out to her that he is American, quite the opposite. To her, he represents evil, northern barbarity and foreign power in general, and she blames him not only for the traffic accident but for all the harm her own and other Italian families of the region had to suffer during the recent war:

“Evil man! I know you and your kind. Don’t try to hide your face from me . . . . Ha! Now he knows he can’t hide his crime. Speeding through our town, running down innocent people with his machine! (33) . . . . They are all Swedes! They came here during the war . . . . Remember how they came, raping and bombing and destroying?” (34)

While Peter does not explicitly deny the guilt she talks about, he tries to protest his personal innocence as regards both the bombing of her house and the accident. All evidence suggests that he is not to blame for the accident. Eventually, DiLieto is also made accountable. Nevertheless, on a metaphorical level, the incident does problematize Peter’s innocence; he is not completely absolved from the negative influence his very presence in Italy seems to constitute. Admittedly, the accusations of DiLieto’s mother are confused and sweeping, including all northern invaders, but her attacks echo the tex-
tual implications: Peter’s complicity in the northern, contemporary American dominance of Italy. This harmful influence of new imperialists is further underscored by another incident occurring as he arrives in Sambuco; an (American) motorscooter-driver all but runs over one of Cass’s children.

As Peter approaches Sambuco, his confrontation with the contemporary reality of Italy is illustrated by a bold, and, to him, repellent, sign:

BEHOLD ABOVE YOU
THE PALACIAL VILLA OF
EMILIO NARDUZZO
OF
WEST ENGLEWOOD, N.J., U.S.A. (36)

Clearly, the sign manifests the supremacy of the United States in Italy; the sign and the house it announces point to the American omnipresence in the war-ravaged country, the elevated location of the house and the attribution of “palacial” indicating the hierarchical status of America in Italy. The Italian name of the American owner hints at the important role Italian-Americans played in the American ideological postwar campaign in Italy – an issue I will return to. Peter’s ironic tone betrays a critical attitude; instead of the “majestic dwelling place” the sign seems to announce, there is, he reports, “a structure the size and shape of an Esso station, sporting portholes for windows, painted an explosive blue, and flaunting at its proud turreted roof half a dozen American flags” (36). The crudeness of the functional architecture and its resemblance to a gas station signal vulgarity and commercialism and the six flags of course suggest a boisterous, not to say aggressive, patriotism. The foregrounding of the chauvinist celebration of American greatness manifest in this ugly vacation house can, I would argue, be read as a critical comment on the political/ideological campaigns accompanying the economic Marshall Plan. Although concerned with practically all of Europe, one of the most comprehensive and intense campaigns was actually launched in Italy.84 

what made it unique was, as William Blum writes, “the very overtness of the endeavor . . . one might say swagger” (29).85

Something of a snob, Peter reacts with disgust to the house. Naively preferring to understand the American presence in Italy in terms of altruism, he dislikes being reminded of the political, economic, and cultural domination of the United States in Italy. These signs of hegemonic power contradict the reigning self-image according to which involvement in postwar Italy was selfless and idealist. Peter’s reaction to the American vacation house illus-

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84 “The key countries were considered to be France, the Bi-zone and Italy, followed by a second band containing Greece, Turkey, Austria, Trieste and the French Zone of Germany, a third including England and Sweden, and a fourth grouping the rest” (Ellwood “Impact” 107).

85 Ellwood and Blum cite, besides diplomatic efforts, a virtual marketing campaign employing means as varied as letters and pamphlets, radio broadcasts (by public as well as commercial media), film, music events, and charity work.
trates a cultured middle-class American dislike of chauvinist displays, but, as he averts his eyes from the contemporary aspects of the scenery, he also signals a refusal to really confront contemporary life and the implications of the pervasive American presence in Italy. Another, more immediate, reason for his repulsion is the fact that the villa disturbs the tourist perception of the Italian coastline as picturesque and timeless. This American vacation house on the beautiful coastline is an anomaly in an otherwise beautiful Italian landscape.

In another fictional illustration of the American dominance of Italy, Mason Flagg, chauvinist American capitalist, has rented an old Italian palace. The castle and its position high above the sea is, again, an almost too obvious demonstration of the new master status of Americans, successors to previous tyrants. The name of the place, “Palazzo d’Affitto” translates into “Palace to Rent,” a name stressing the irony of the circumstance that aristocratic standing can be bought for money. In the postwar period, then, foreign economic might has replaced domestic inherited power. The old palace provides Mason with a facade of sophistication, one which hides the vulgarity he shares with the Narduzzos. In Set This House on Fire, the old palace becomes the residence of Americans, Cass moving into the small apartment and Mason and the movie crowd occupying the larger one. Mason Flagg’s offering a Hollywood movie team lodging in his palace suggests the interconnectedness between Hollywood, business, and American nation-building, a connection underscored by the fact that the wealth of the Flagg family stems from the movie business. The elegant setting of the palace, recalling an aristocratic past, forms the background to the movie crowd, the “nobility” of the American present. Depicted as petty and pathetic individuals, characterized by shallowness and cruelty rather than by charm and intelligence, their commonness is underscored. Staging Hollywood in the Italian setting and placing it under the roof of a power-obsessed capitalist, the text presents a critique of the postwar American ideological/political campaign, where the “key means of persuasion,” urging, not to say threatening, Italians into rejecting communism/leftist politics and promoting a capitalist system, was, actually, the moving pictures (Ellwood 109).

In Set This House on Fire, the Hollywood industry becomes the primary and obvious target of the novel’s cultural critique – of materialism, commercialism, and media superficiality. The tendency of Hollywood to falsify history and deny tragedy also comes under scrutiny. The movie being shot in

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86 In the immediate postwar period the Hollywood industry launched an aggressive campaign to virtually monopolize the Italian film market, as Gian Piero Brunetta explains in “The Long March of American Cinema in Italy: From Fascism to the Cold War.”

87 Chiefly, the films promoted by the United States Information Service were documentaries, occasionally recounting American-sponsored reconstruction programs in Italy (Ellwood “Impact” 113-14). Hollywood also engaged in the campaign with feature films such as Lubitsch’s anti-communist “Ninotchka.”
Sambuco is a comedy about Beatrice Cenci, the sixteenth-century Roman woman executed for patricide. The moviemakers of the 1950s turn this tragic story into comedy; denying dark, complicated issues and constructing instead a self-image of innocence, they evade the themes of evil and guilt. Such a move seems symptomatic of a culture bent on forgetting and repressing the crimes and traumas of the past. There is also an intertextual connection to Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* here, since it is Guido Reni’s painting of Beatrice Cenci that Hilda is at such great pains to copy – endeavoring to render truly the sadness of the original.

Directing his critique at the Hollywood industry of the 1950s, Styron, however, neglects the fact that the denial of tragedy is nothing new, that it has marked expressions of American culture also in previous periods. Ironically, the attitude of the postwar Hollywood to the story of Beatrice Cenci is not all that different from that of nineteenth-century tourists represented by Hilda; she, too, turns away from the darker aspects of human life by rejecting the foreign Miriam, whose mysterious past suggests a crime analogous to that of Beatrice Cenci. As Natterman notes, Italian Baroque painter Guido Reni was one of the painters most favored by nineteenth-century American tourists who preferred objects of art catering to their taste for the sentimental (“Dread” 59). In other words, the Hollywood industry did not invent the shallow popular attitude to tragedy but actually continues an already well-established tradition of American cultural practice. By limiting his critique to postwar Hollywood, Styron refrains from a more far-ranging investigation of diverse manifestations of American culture. In his depiction of the relationship between Mason, Cass, and Peter and the Italian Other, that is the Sambuco population and the poor peasant population in particular, however, Styron does engage in a discussion of American involvement in Italy after World War II but, as we shall see, avoids making a controversial political comment.

The “Mission”

The nationalist and political dimension of the drama involving the three Americans in Sambuco is recognized by Cologne-Brookes – only to be

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88 The script of *Beat the Devil*, the Huston movie shot in Ravello (for financial reasons), can also be understood as a narrative that deals with highly political and serious issues (decolonization and neo-colonization) but constructs a banal story of adventure with comic ingredients. *In Beat the Devil*, two parties compete for the acquisition of a piece of land in East Africa put up for auction by the British government. Supposedly, this land contains huge resources of uranium. In the end, a band of international criminals is apprehended but an Englishman and his newfound American associate (played by Bogart) manage to acquire the land. The film thus tells us that as the British Empire collapses, the natural resources of the formerly colonized land are transferred into the hands of British and American businessmen – the new colonizers.
quickly dismissed as a “reductio ad absurdum of the conflicts in America’s immediate postwar foreign policy” (96). But however melodramatic the story and exaggerated the characters in *Set This House on Fire*, the comment the novel makes on postwar American involvement in Italy is best understood. I believe, if the drama is read allegorically, in terms of a story about the American Italian policy after World War II – a policy manifest in the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan, and, at the time, referred to as “the Mission.” That the novel is an attempt at allegory is evident in the confrontation which is staged between Peter, Cass, and Mason, on the one hand, and Francesca Ricci and her family, peasants of the poverty-stricken valley of Tramonti, on the other: a confrontation which foregrounds the Americans’ respective images of “Italy,” and, by extension, their ideological positions. The moral lesson that a reader expects in an allegory is, however, never delivered.

Through Peter’s narrative about accompanying Cass to the Ricci family in the farming area of the Tramonti valley, the text reveals the falsity of the American tourist gaze set on the Italian Other; the scenes of this narrative dramatize the clash between the romanticized American image of Italy and the harsh conditions of the miserable Riccis. The encounter scene also overtly critiques the Marshall Plan – the implementation of which has provided Peter with a job in Rome. Prior to their excursion Cass says that the political party in power, the Christian Democrats, neglects the poverty of the Tramonti valley and by emphasizing “the American party,” obviously suggests the responsibility of the American government for the bad state of the Italian countryside (350). Although Peter protests his personal innocence, his complicity is also clearly indicated.

Peter, a former employee of the American relief agency in Rome, here encounters the extreme wretchedness of the Italian countryside. As the lyrical landscape depiction gives way to the dramatic scene inside the Ricci hovel, his romantic image of Italy shatters. Initially, the valley is described in pastoral language, complete with sheep, moonlight, mountains, and waterfall. Not only does the visual beauty of the scene create a striking impression, but pleasant fragrances also contribute to its Arcadian nature: “An odor of clean earth, of lemon blossoms, of pine-scented air from the mountains came over us” (206). In stark contrast to the scents of this pastoral scenery, what first strikes Peter as he enters the farmyard is the “smell of manure” (208). When he approaches the hut, on the dry earth path, the peaceful stillness of the evening is definitely broken and the silvery light of the moonlit valley is contrasted to the darkness of the peasant hut, windowless and lit by “a single dim lamp” (208). Darkness and foul smells characterize the Ricci dwelling:

The stench of the place met me at the door, clamping itself down over my face like a foul green hand. It was an odor of many things – of manure again,
of sourness, of dirt and offal – but mainly it was the odor of disease, a sweet
tainted odor as of meat gone bad which blossomed in the air as vividly as a
color. It was the odor of the morgue. Fumbling my way in the smirchy light, I
blinked and gazed around me. Flies generated a steady buzzing in the still-
ness: they were everywhere – in the air, on the earthen floor, and upon each
inch of the windowless walls. (210)

These invasive smells are described in visual terms, “like a foul green hand
. . . blossom[ing] in the air as vividly as a color” – as oppressive as the dark-
ness which reigns inside. In analogy with the stench and the darkness, the
oppressive presence of flies is equally pervasive; the darkness, the smell, and
the flies are obvious metaphors of the poverty oppressing and imprisoning
the Ricci family. The smell of the Ricci cabin, so repellent and frightening to
Peter, signals the fact that he has made an excursion incompatible with con-
tventional tourist practice. As Rojek and Urry write, tourist sights “are gener-
ally distanced from bad or offensive smells” (8). The entire scene effectively
undermines the tourist attitude Peter has been entertaining toward the Italian
countryside. By demonstrating the extent to which Peter, American relief
administrator and tourist, is ignorant of the facts of Italian conditions, the
text points to the inefficiency of the Marshall Plan. But Cass here also ac-
cuses Communists and Christian Democrats alike for their neglect of the
conditions of the Tramonti valley. At this point in the narrative Peter adds
that, on leaving the Riccis, Cass had “said something which to me seemed at
that moment curiously apt. ‘You can take politics, see,’ he said, ‘and you can
stuff them up your ass’” (215). Ultimately, then, the blame is laid on the
inefficiency of political systems in general, Italian and American, and in a
curious gesture seen repeatedly in the novel, Styron thus refrains from mak-
ing a political statement.89

Despite his rejection of “politics,” the conflict that Cass engages in with
Mason, ultimately resulting in Mason’s death, has decidedly political over-
tones. As David Hadaller argues, this conflict is grounded in a “bizarre
property dispute” where Francesca constitutes the property (82). But while
Hadaller is only concerned with the issue of patriarchal domination, I would
extend the argument by saying that not only are all three major characters
described as guilty of patriarchal exploitation, they are also revealed as in-
volved in the American neo-imperialist exploitation of Italy – the embodi-
ment of which is Francesca, never a character in her own right.

Mason’s comments about Francesca and her petty thefts from his pantry
prove that he considers their relationship in terms of an allegory of the post-

89 In a historical perspective, the ruling Christian Democrats do indeed seem to have been
responsible for the political neglect of the problems of Italian rural areas. According to Blum,
for example, the Italian Left proposed reforms of Italian agriculture and economy. These
urgent structural reforms were not addressed by the ruling Christian Democrats. As a result,
the gap between the wealthy and the poor was further deepened. See Blum (28).
war relationship between Italy and the United States: “‘Everything political can be reduced to human terms, a microcosm, and if it’s not utterly plain that this petty thievery is not the *reductio ad absurdum* of what’s going on, literally, on a higher general level, then we’re blinder than I’d thought’” (410). And “what is going on . . . on a higher level” is, of course, the American Recovery Plan for postwar Italy, a plan Mason claims is exploited by Italy and the Italians.

‘It’s not chauvinism at all,’ Mason was saying, by way of extension upon Francesca, thievery, Italians in general. . . . ‘But it’s a sickening thing when you consider the money the U.S.A. has squandered here . . . . But sometimes I think the greatest disaster that ever happened to America was that fountainhead, or fathead, of good will, General George Catlett Marshall . . . . our whole foreign policy needs a complete overhauling.’ (409-10)

*His* reading of their relationship deviates, however, from that of the text. By exposing Mason’s chauvinism and xenophobia, the text clearly condemns his ideological stance. And although Cass also condemns Mason, he, too, is criticized by the text. The struggle staged between Mason and Cass dramatizes the clash between their positions in the national allegory. The common denominators of their respective ideological mind-sets are here exposed and climax in consumerist fashion in their relationship with Francesca. Mason wants to exploit her sexually, treating her as a potential item to be added to his vast collection of pornographic art; his pursuit of her finally culminates in rape. Cass, too, objectifies Francesca but in a different way. His romanticizing and estheticizing view reduces her to a picturesque, foreign, native Other – her virginity annulling the danger commonly associated with the foreign female Other. Francesca seems the very embodiment of the romantic dream which initially drew Cass to Sambuco, and his daydreams of her crystallize in a pastoral scene – containing wildflowers, summer light, a view of the sea, a brisk wind, and even the ruins of a shepherd’s hut, a vision directly linked to his desire for Francesca: “For a moment he closed his eyes, the flowers’ crushed scent and summer light and ruined hut commingling in one long fluid hot surge of remembrance and desire” (412). Cass’s perception of Francesca as picturesque peasant and native foreign Other thus exposes his American gaze and its convergence with complicitous gazes such as the tourist, the imperialist and the eroticizing male gaze. In gender, nationality, and class, she represents a foreign Other to Cass’s male, American self. Analogous to a patriarchal and imperialist gaze, he identifies Francesca with the valley of Tramonti, a region which he understands in terms of the picturesque and pastoral. In accordance with the tourist image of native peoples as romantic Others, she is beautiful and exotic, her poverty and tattered clothing proof of her simplicity and authenticity. Francesca is exposed to Cass’s eroticizing male gaze also when, conforming to the established pic-
turesque tradition of estheticizing and objectifying nature, he paints her nude against the background of the Italian landscape.

While both men thus subject Francesca to an Othering, Cass seeks to establish a distance between himself and his antagonist by projecting an imperial/white, male fantasy, a perversion of his own desire for Francesca, onto Mason. Immediately preceding the murder, Cass dreams that he hears Mason talking about raping Francesca: “‘I’ve had French stuff and I’ve had Spanish stuff in fact you might say I’ve sampled the whole broad spectrum pole to pole but they say that until you get yourself between the thighs of one of the little guinea girls and by guinea I only mean the joking generic term for... For what? And again the voice disappeared’” [ellipsis in original] (455). The word “guinea” betrays the eroticizing male American gaze constructing Francesca as native Other. This particular word, “guinea,” further underscores the process of Othering at work. While according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), the capitalized word “Guinea” is a denigrating American slang term for “an immigrant of Italian or Spanish origin, or one of similar appearance” (Def.II.b.) it is as well the “European name of a portion of the West Coast of Africa,”(Def.II.a.) and “Guinea bird” is a synonym for “native African,” used “jocularly.” The etymological origin suggests that, in this process of Othering, there is an element of racialization.

Grounded in his overwhelming and many-faceted sense of guilt, Cass’s own “mission” to help the Ricci family can be understood in terms of a defiance of Mason’s exploitative attitudes, and of the chauvinist materialist America that Mason represents, particularly since he actually encourages and aids Francesca in her raids on Mason’s pantry. Most critics have considered Cass’s attempt to help the Riccis a constructive endeavor. Judith Ruderman, for instance, accepts Cass’s own retrospective rationalization claiming that, in his friendship with the Riccis, he “finds a focus for his life and an exit from preoccupation with self” (61). But in so clearly presenting his endeavor as obsessive, manic and inefficient, the text obviously critiques Cass’s project – in a gesture that actually questions the Marshall Plan as an ideological and political program.

I would argue that the relationship between Cass and the Italian peasants parallels that postwar American economic and ideological/political campaign in Italy of which the Marshall Plan was the official manifestation. In his mission to provide the Riccis with food and medicine as well as morale, in the form of American myth, Cass should be understood to personify the Marshall Plan, which combined financial aid with an ideological campaign. Like his patriotic sermons, his attempts to procure expensive American

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90 The OED (1989) explains that the English gold coin (made from African gold) called “Guinea” was specifically manufactured for the English trade with Africa beginning in 1663 (Def. II 3a.). The “merchandise” of the “Guinea trade” was largely African slaves.
drugs are presented as misdirected; the pills and injections he administers, stolen from Mason, prove to be as inefficient in the curing of Francesca’s father as the charms and philters of Maddalena, the nature-healer. By thus suggesting that western medicine can be equated with “primitive” medicine, the text contradicts what Pratt calls “a commonplace of imperial ideology,” that is the idea of the superiority of modern, scientific, medicine (Eyes 83).

Cass’s ideological campaign takes the form of a confirmation and reinforcement of the clichés that Michele formulates: a propaganda campaign which can be understood as analogous to the postwar American one, seeking to convince Italians of the superiority of the American system. What especially marked the campaign targeting Italy was the strategy of involving Americans of Italian extraction. On a large scale, Italian-Americans were encouraged to write to relatives and friends in Italy to warn them of communism, celebrating the American system. As Blum writes, such letters were “mass-produced, pre-written, postage-paid form letters, cablegrams, ‘educational circulars,’ and posters, needing only an address and a signature” (29).

Cass’s acts, including his story-telling, can actually be understood as analogous to his signing one of these pre-produced letters, allowing himself to be used as an instrument of an imperialist ideology aiming to spread American myth. But his stern conviction that an American “wonder drug” will help Francesca’s father, the expression of a faith in scientific solutions, not only reveals his basic western mind-set, but also exposes his faith in American ideology as a panacea for all the world’s problems. Cass’s failed “mission” to help the Riccis actually suggests the misguided nature of the Marshall Plan, building on a set of misconceptions about Italians and their needs.

A Rejection of the Old World

The critical thrust evident in the depiction of the three Americans’ relationship to Italy and Italians is, however, abandoned as the novel comes to a close in a curious ending, one that suggests a regression to the kind of American myth which the text initially seemed to seek to expose as false. It follows that when the author skirts the moral lesson he has been building up to, the allegory also breaks down. In the end, Peter’s project of writing the story of the Sambuco tragedies is merely part of a therapeutic process; the events in Italy are not actually confronted but firmly located in the past, with the result that he rejects the unsettling implications of his experiences. In a problematic gesture, in the aftermath of Cass’s slaying of Mason, the text reneges on its initial promise of social critique. An act of both revenge and rebellion, in itself misguided, this murder constitutes the climax of the story, a horror after which Cass no longer appears lost or confused. By furiously striking out at the aspects of America he hates, he attempted to purge not merely himself but actually also America; hurling Mason off the elevated
cliff at the vista point near the Villa Cardassi, he symbolically overthrows all that Mason represents, all the destructive and corrupt aspects of contemporary America. Cass’s mad and furious murder is clearly meant as an enactment of the purgation of modern American society that Leverett Sr claimed necessary. What happens to Cass is truly, in Leverett Sr’s words, “‘ferocious and tragic’”; he does go through “‘hellfire and the crucible,’” and finally, having “‘suffered agony enough and grief,’” he can become a new person (15). In the view of Leverett Sr, as we saw earlier, only an apocalypse could annihilate the crude materialism and racism, making possible a reconstruction of the America the Founding Fathers once envisioned. Only then would the American people be “‘men again, human beings’” (15). There is thus a sense in which, at the end of the novel, both Cass and, through him, the United States, should be considered to have gone through a process of regeneration and rejuvenation: America’s sins have been expiated and her children reconciled, ready to meet the future as a mature and dignified people. As Cass is “reborn,” casting off his past and his old self, becoming a new man, he is portrayed in terms of the American Adam. In truth, however, in evidence of the inherently flawed and contradictory nature of Set This House on Fire, his apocalyptic experience turns out to be wholly private in nature, affecting only himself, and not really translatable to a national level.

The troubling ideological inconsistency of the novel becomes particularly evident after Cass’s murder of Mason – events that contribute to the reconstruction of the innocence of the three Americans, liberating them from the full consequences of their deeds. This turn in the story comes as a surprise. Coale points out that, like many of Styron’s protagonists, Peter and Cass “all too easily escape and come through” (“Choice” 521). Intervening in deus-ex-machina fashion, Luigi, the Italian policeman friend, frees Cass from suspicion and allows him to escape. In a letter constituting the Epilogue to the novel it is revealed that Luciano diLieto, the motorscooter driver Peter hit on his way to Sambuco, has miraculously awakened from his comatose state. As Peter Leverett, the American Everyman, can go on with his life, his world view essentially unperturbed, the novel confirms the stable position of the representative American, and, as a consequence, the position of the national Self is left unrocked. Even the aggressive American capitalist, Mason, proves not to have been as evil as he seemed, as it is revealed that Francesca was murdered by the town idiot. As a consequence, Eisenhower’s America is substantially liberated from its complicity in the “evil” afflicting Italy. In this

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91 Coale suggests that Styron’s tendency to abandon his dark, nightmarish stories, ending them on rather forced positive notes can be explained by the author’s disinclination to confront the ultimate consequence of his own vision, that evil is inherent in the self and therefore ineradicable: “[t]he root of all evil is us absolutely and the only absolute resolution lies in self-destruction (“Choice” 522). Translated to my reading of Styron’s political position then, the idea that evil is a part of us/U.S. and the national Self would be altogether too troubling to fictionalize.
facile fashion, Styron thus abnegates the individual complicity of his American characters. Having first problematized the innocence of the two expatriate protagonists, he finally restores it. As the issues of national guilt that the text has raised remain unresolved and justice appears to have been done, the critical edge of the text is lost and the allegory fails.

In the context of the novel’s ideology, the panoramic vision of the American landscape which Cass has at the break of dawn is an example of a return to myth. While Styron previously deflated the powerful gazes employed by Peter and Cass, in this instance the vision attributed to Cass obviously constitutes an inscription of the American myth according to which the Old World must be rejected.

‘... something about the dawn made me think of America and how the light would come up slowly over the eastern coast, miles and miles of it, the Atlantic, and the inlets and bays and slow tideland rivers with houses on the shore, all shuttered and sleeping, and this stealthy light coming up over it all, the fish stakes at low tide and the ducks winging through the dawn and a kind of apple-green glow over the swamplands and the white beaches and the bays. I don’t believe it was just because of this at all, but all of a sudden I realized that the anxiety and the anguish – most of it, anyway – had passed. And I kept thinking of the new sun coming up over the coast of Virginia and the Carolinas, and how it must have looked from those galleons, centuries ago, when after black night, dawn broke like a trumpet blast, and there it was, immense and green and glistening against the crashing seas. And suddenly I wanted more than anything in my life to go back there. And I knew I would go . . . .’ [ellipsis in original] (499-500)

The imagery of this vision, the sweeping panorama of the American landscape, the projection of a distinctly American gaze, is a well-established convention, firmly grounded in American nationalist ideology and amply employed in both fiction and film. Symbolically reclaiming the vast virgin land, Cass uses a white American gaze – white since he imagines himself viewing the American landscape from “those galleons centuries ago” – a phrase yet again resonating with the words of Leverett Sr. But while Peter’s father identifies the arrival of Dutch galleons bringing African slaves to his home from Port Warwick, Virginia as one of the most tragic moments in American history, this awareness is missing in Cass’s hopeful vision. The light of dawn coming over the country suggests the conviction that the American landscape embodies a future. Here, the light so passionately invoked in the epigraph from John Donne seems to materialize, and to liberate, America. Leaving the traumatic European experiences and all manner of dark metaphysical guilt behind, Cass is able to envision a new life and a future in America, possibly even for America.

This vision epitomizes Cass’s reconciliation with “America,” a reconciliation which implies the rejection of the Sambuco events, the burden of his entire past – even the Old World. Having put the events that took place in
Europe and Italy behind him, even to some extent repressing his experiences, Cass can recover mentally: in Stout’s words, “project[ing] himself into discovery of a vital and innocent America,” he might find “mellowness and serenity” (83). Cass’s change hinges on a reevaluation of Europe as a cultural sphere; the Old World can be dismissed because it offered neither inspiration nor enlightenment. As Cass’s story proves, Europe can no longer provide the American artist with a space for personal liberation and artistic creation. As he journeyed through Europe, neither Paris, nor the Riviera, nor Rome, nor rural Italy conformed to the idea of modernist “exile.” Finally, when Cass returns to America, giving up his attempts at being a “serious” artist, instead taking up a career as cartoonist, “the American Art Form (not kidding)” (8), his act can be read as symbolic of his rejection of European, high-brow, culture and his new patriotic embrace of “America.” In the end, the message of the novel as regards the role of “Europe” and the Old World journey in the context of American national identity – conveyed through Cass’s trajectory – corroborates the lecture that Mason, American chauvinist and villain of the story, gives on the day of Peter’s departure for Europe. This is yet another example of the pattern of ambivalence that marks the text as a whole: Styron first signals a challenging critique of a nationalist ideology and then suddenly retreats, taking recourse to that same ideology.

‘You won’t find it all pleasant, Peter, it’s still recovering from the war. And there’s a dead, dead feeling everywhere. Art really has come to a finish over there, and that’s why – though I love to travel – I could never live anywhere for very long, except in America. I don’t mean to sound platitudinous, but we are the nation of the future and anybody who cares, really, and who casts his lot with Europe – permanently, that is – is simply missing out, in my opinion. The so-called treasures of the past are all very well – a necessary experience, in fact, for anyone who pretends to culture – but significant form, as Clive Bell calls it, is dependent upon constant change, constant renewal from resources of the present, a perpetual shaking-up and reordering, and this is beyond the powers of Europe ever to do again.’ (159)

Although Set This House on Fire sets out to problematize American mythology in general, and American innocence in particular, the curious split manifest in the narrative undermines this inquiry. As a result, the social critique previously directed at both American myth and Eisenhower’s America is effectively annulled. In depicting Cass’s transformation, the novel thus employs “the historic pairing of Old and New Worlds,” as Stout states (82-83). In the end, Set This House on Fire actually reenacts the conventional opposition of old corrupt Europe and new innocent America. Having America, the New World, reject its Other, the Old World, in order to regain its original innocence, the novel actually reiterates nationalist mythology.

Finally, the novel turns out to be as firmly locked in American mythology as in the melodramatic mode. And the American cliché of Italy as pastoral...
Arcadia that the novel explodes is exchanged for another, equally American, stereotype, that of Italy as hell: “[E]vil in the novel may be more Italian than American,” Coale observes and concludes, quite correctly, that this circumstance leaves America “safe from Manichean dreams” (William Styron 65). As he refrains from seriously challenging the myth of American innocence, Styron’s critique may be understood as internal to American imperialism – a position analogous to that identified by Pratt in the works of those “hyphenated” white travel writers of the late colonial period (like Joseph Conrad). Like these writers, Styron exposes the defects of the imperial project but never questions the project as such. In other words, while pointing to some of the cracks in the American house, he never sets it on fire.
CHAPTER FOUR

Portrait of a Rare American and His Kin:
Mary McCarthy’s *Birds of America*

‘Paris is my chance to test myself, don’t you understand? Have you noticed how many mirrors there are here? Oh yes. It’s fantastic. You should try counting. Frenchmen look at themselves all the time. I feel I was predestined to come to Paris. I have to find myself. Put myself together out of all those bitty reflections I see in their eyes.’

*Birds of America* (321-22)

This chapter claims that McCarthy’s *Birds of America* advances an incisive, yet compassionate, critique of the tradition of American liberal idealism personified by the protagonist Peter Levi, a young but old-fashioned innocent – the author’s alter ego. While previous critical commentary on *Birds of America*, on the whole a neglected novel, tends to revolve around its philosophical discussion, my reading aims to broaden the scope, investigating its engagement with American culture and contemporary society. Such a perspective is motivated, I believe, by the character of the text itself, a *Bildungsroman* of sorts. I argue that it may be understood as a variety of the anti-*Bildungsroman*, as well as a novel of ideas. Hence *Birds of America* is not only a discussion of a variety of topical philosophical, political, cultural, and sociological issues, but also the story of the protagonist’s development as he journeys to Europe. At the time of its publication, critics found fault with the novel’s composite character, finding it to be “a collection of essays rather than a piece of fiction,” as Irvin Stock puts it, proposing instead that its value lies in that it “gives us ideas in their living state” (186-87). In line with such a view, I read the story of Peter Levi as a dramatization of McCarthy’s ideological discussion of American culture.

That American specificity is a major concern is signaled by the title – one which recalls Audubon’s classic work of biology, introducing the master

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92. The first complete edition, “The Double Elephant Folio” of *Birds of America* (published in 1838) by painter John James Audubon (1785-1851), contains 435 life-size, hand-colored, aquatint etched portraits of birds found in the United States. By painting birds in natural positions and in their native habitats, Audubon broke with the previous tradition of drawing stuffed birds, and his work “established the standard for wildlife art” (Publisher’s Preface to
tropes of McCarthy’s narrative: birds. In this biologically inspired novel, bird imagery is consistently applied to the American characters and to the American people. The focus is on those birds who fly to Europe. Placing her specimen, rare but representative of its species, in the turbulent 1960s and confronting him with the perplexities of the times, she foregrounds the anachronistic nature of her protagonist. Following his migration from New England to Europe in the academic year of 1964/1965, McCarthy observes his reactions to the change of habitat and the behavior of other members of his species of Americans traveling eastward, exposing them to the intellectual dissection which is her hallmark. As Edwin Newman observed in a 1966 interview, McCarthy is an author “who strips away legends, who strips away fantasies, strips away fiction” to reveal the truth about people and their values (qtd. in Carol Gelderman Conversations 84).

Europe thus serves as the experimental ground on which the protagonist is put to a variety of tests. The passage quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, in which Peter’s friend Silvanus Platt expresses the significance of his Paris experience, illustrates the function of the foreign settings: as mirrors for representing the various aspects of Peter’s national identity. Like Audubon’s monumental work, McCarthy’s Birds of America contains pictures that are detailed and colorful. But unlike Audubon, whose work helped to shape “America,” McCarthy queries American mythology. Peter’s response to Silvanus’s confession: “That would make you a mosaic, Silly” (322), may be read not only as referring to the composite nature of American identity, but also as a comment on the impossibility of capturing “truth” in representation. It can also be construed as a statement about Birds of America: the

The Complete Audubon). The author’s ambition to paint every bird in the “United States and its Territories,” as the Introductory Notes put it quoting Audubon himself, suggests the affiliation of his work to the nation-construction project (9). The descriptions of personal encounters with the respective birds suggest the work’s affinity to the travelogue – a circumstance that illustrates the nationalist grounding of the descriptive sciences, art, and literature at the time.

That the methodology employed by the natural sciences inspired McCarthy in the creation of her protagonist is evidenced by her comment on how the encounter with a peculiar young American student provided the idea for her story about Peter Levi: “It’s like a little germ culture you put on glass, and then it starts developing” (qtd. in Kufrin 81).

The OED (1989) has a wide variety of explanations for the word “bird,” among them one indicating that it can denote a “cove,” i.e. an odd person (Def. I.1.e.). In American slang, moreover, it can mean “[a]n exceptionally smart or accomplished person [freq. ironical]; a first-rate animal or thing” (Def. I.4.b.). What McCarthy intimates seems to be that American birds, the Americans, are a tribe of original though somewhat peculiar people.

I take the word from Paul Schlueter’s article “The Dissections of Mary McCarthy,” in which he suggests that “dissection” is the most adequate description of her “approach to writing”: “ruthlessly, she cuts beneath the layers of accumulated social pretense and hypocrisy, to the core of contemporary man and woman. Lying thus, naked to the marrow, that man and woman become experiments in which Miss McCarthy attempts to determine why certain patterns of behavior occur” (55).

The arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, representation and “reality,” fiction and “fact,” is an important preoccupation in her autobiography as well as her Vietnam
essays, making up the individual chapters, are the pieces that make up the kaleidoscopic portrait of Peter Levi, one that also reflects the 1960s United States.

Peter Levi, the Endangered American Bird and His Flyways

Concerning Peter Levi’s symbolic significance, there exists no critical consensus, no agreement as to what he represents. While Susan Ashley Gohlman reads him as a “contemporary Bildungsroman hero,” “representative rather than exemplary,” generic “modern man” (167), Willene Schaefer Hardy has him personify the liberal imagination, something that, unfortunately, she refrains from elaborating on (122). To my mind, the full symbolic significance of Peter Levi cannot be grasped without reference to the category of nationality: he is the American “modern man” and the American liberal idealist. Understanding his mind-set as that of an American tourist, ever on the quest for signs of “America” or its negative, “Europe,” helps to bring out what the novel says about his national identity.

The character of Peter Levi, representing the American tradition of liberal idealism, can be understood as a symbolic character in whom McCarthy has invested a great deal of herself, as an individual, and as an American. Interviewed by Joan Kufrin, McCarthy confided that this novel was her most personal book, her “favorite”: “I like the hero. I like the idea, the ideas. Well, it’s close to my heart” (qtd. in Kufrin 82). The standard explanation for McCarthy’s predilection for Birds of America holds that she liked it because it contains a virtual catalogue of her beliefs or “pet crotches,” in the pejorative phrase of her most recent biographer Frances Kiernan (626). But such an explanation seems too facile to me. Instead, the observation that many critics have made, that the scholarly interests of the protagonist in conjunction with his philosophical persuasion recall those of the author herself, provides a clue to why she felt so strongly about this book. Birds of America can, I think, be understood in terms of a self-inquiry – an inquiry into McCarthy’s own values and philosophical persuasion – one supposedly propelled by her engagement against the war in Vietnam. McCarthy’s 1967 and 1968 journeys to Vietnam and her composition of anti-war pamphlets took place parallel to her work on Birds of America, the writing of which took seven years. It was while composing this novel that McCarthy’s sympathy with the dilemmas of the young generation grew, so that she felt compelled to act po-


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politically: “Unless I had done something concrete myself, I didn’t feel I had the right to go on writing about him and his 1960s” (qtd. in Kufrin 84). Peter’s experience of deep disappointment with America parallels the disillusionment McCarthy herself suffered as a result of the Vietnam war.

In his consideration of McCarthy’s work, Stock suggests that her “self-exploration becomes . . . a way of understanding the world” (185); in *Birds of America* this exploration extends, I would add, into a more general investigation of American national identity. Gordon O. Taylor argues along similar lines; in his discussion of McCarthy’s Vietnam writings he claims that they illustrate her “self-portrayal” (“Cast” 103) and the “self-questioning,” aspects he finds also in her other works (“Cast” 104). In the Vietnam texts, Taylor writes, she “negotiate[s] the issue of her own Americanness in relation to the American acts or attitudes she is attacking” (“Cast” 104). In writing up Peter Levi, I would argue, she continues this project of examining both herself and American national identity but this time uses fiction for her purpose. Although McCarthy writes about the young, then, she also writes about herself; onto her protagonist, a nineteen-year-old, she transfers the American, philosophical and humanist values that she herself subscribes to – a tradition of thought as doomed as the endangered rare birds Peter loves. 98

That Peter Levi belongs to an increasingly rare American species is suggested already in the initial scene – where he learns of the death of the Great Horned Owl on a Wild Life Sanctuary in New England – the first of a series of dramatizations of his struggles to make sense of the world according to his old-fashioned idealism. The death of the owl is an ominous sign, and the sense of change and loss colors also other, later scenes involving bird encounters (e.g., the cormorants, and the swans). If the owl, traditional Western symbol of wisdom, has left the world, this would seem to suggest that American wisdom is also threatened. 99 There is also a hint of Peter as the

97 Surprisingly, despite the great critical attention devoted to McCarthy’s life, few scholars have attempted to bring her biography and her work together for study. To date, four biographies, the last three voluminous ones, have appeared: Doris Grumbach’s *The Company She Kept* (1967), Carol Gelderman’s *Mary McCarthy: A Life* (1988), Carol Brightman’s *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (1992), and Frances Kiernan’s *Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy* (2000). On the whole, the dominant strand of scholarship on McCarthy is devoted to either biography or autobiography.

98 The name of Peter recalls another bird lover, Peter Pan, who saw the rescuing of children in need as his mission. We learn that “Peter wanted to grow up; he did not plan to be a Peter Pan,” but in his idealism and naiveté he does resemble this figure (9).

99 Peter associates the three cormorants he sees in Rocky Port to his mother and himself and to their retreat to New England prior to his own departure for Europe. These birds can be understood to portend the destiny of Peter and his mother and the values they represent. The cormorants are winter visitors to the region, just like Peter and his mother. These enigmatic “sacred birds, an unholy trinity,” have an “evil, old Egyptian look; gorged, their black wings spread to dry in the sun” (13). They seem to stand on guard and they are characterized by “[s]tillness and fixity”: Peter’s mother says they remind her of “the three black-cloaked masked revenges at the end of the first act of *Don Giovanni*” (13). Their blackness and their immobility give
first human male as he receives the news of the death of the owl “with a long gulping movement of his prominent Adam’s apple” (my emphasis). His deep attachment to nature is explained when it is revealed that he is “an adept of the Kantian ethic” (2), “Nature” providing the very foundation for the Kantian philosophy. The fact that the object of his adulation is American nature, the native landscape presumably embodying or, to speak with Myra Jehlen, incarnating the nation, marks him as an American. Among the cards in his wallet there is also one saying “‘The Other is always an End; thy Maxim’”– and true to this maxim, Peter Levi strives, as an American liberal idealist, to live according to the ethics of Kant (2). Membership cards to various civil rights organizations give further evidence of his subscription to humanist ideals, and the mention of the trip Peter had planned “to Mississippi with the Students for Civil Rights group” color him as a socially and politically engaged liberal of the 1960s (1). The relevance of the Kantian ethic he subscribes to is tested as he encounters the complexity of the world – particularly when he goes abroad.

Unlike Gohlman, who reads Birds of America as a “contemporary Bildungsroman” – a narrative that “affirms in some way the meaningful and harmonious interplay between the self and the objective world” (135) – I hold that it is actually possible to consider it as related to the anti-Bildungsroman. Such a reading is possible, I believe, because the novel shows how Peter is alienated from his American liberal idealism, how his pilgrimage does not lead to enlightenment but rather to the disintegration of his world-view. According to Gohlman, the novel ends with Peter’s rejection of the values his mother and Kant represent, and with the adoption of his own set of beliefs. There is, however, little to suggest that he actually develops an alternative world-view. As Birds of America reveals the many weaknesses, blanks, and misconceptions of the fundamentally optimistic philosophy of idealism in general, and its American inflection in particular, the novel may be described as something of a modern American Candide. Peter’s similarity to Voltaire’s protagonist has not gone unnoticed. V.S. Pritchett, for instance, calls him a “tame young American Candide” (13), and the blurb of the English 1972 Penguin edition makes a comment to the same the impression of authority, certainty, and seriousness. And the color black suggests death and evil. As the birds resemble “emblems on an escutcheon,” the destiny of Peter and his mother seems inscribed and therefore unavoidable. The swans’ “snake-like” style of swimming recalls the creature that lured man out of paradise (13). Significantly, these birds are also “[t]he last of their race” (14). Peter and his mother apparently belong to a dying and doomed tribe of Americans about to be thrown out of Eden.

That McCarthy was quite aware of the fundamental difficulty, not to say impossibility, of her project – to discuss a philosophical tradition and through a symbolic character at that – is suggested by the dedication “To Hannah,” beyond doubt referring to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who was McCarthy’s close friend and discussion partner. This awareness is also reflected in the epigraph: “‘. . . to attempt to embody the Idea in an example, as one might embody the wise man in a novel, is unseemly . . . for our natural limitations, which persistently interfere with the perfection of the Idea, forbid all illusion about such an attempt . . .’.”
effect. As I discuss the novel’s ending in the closing section, I will return to the implications of this intertext.

The rich intertextual allusions in *Birds of America* contribute to the shaping of Peter Levi as character type. In a variety of ways, McCarthy draws on a range of genres, such as the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque, but also on individual classics like *Don Quixote*, *Candide*, and *As You Like It*. As she creates a bird clearly American yet of marginal stature, one of her strategies is to trace the protagonist’s pedigree and his name, a convention which Pratt has identified in the picaresque and related eighteenth-century genres (“Conventions” 140). The mixed character of Peter’s heritage reflects the multicultural nature of the American population. Composed of elements domestic and foreign, he embodies the composite character of American society: the domestic elements adhering to his mother – Puritans, Revolutionaries, pioneers of the West – and the cosmopolitan ingredients – Jewishness, anarchism, socialism – stemming from the paternal side. Measured against the norms of the mainstream nationalist ideology that privileges WASP culture, Peter does not quite qualify as an all-American character. Although white and male, he cannot be understood as an embodiment of the national Self – his Jewishness, indicated by the family name Levi, marks him as an American Other. As Rhoda Nathan recognizes, although Peter’s Jewish identity has little bearing on the story, it functions “to reinforce the position of outsider, the otherwise ‘nice kid’ who is also an exile, or a marginal figure” (100). Peter himself construes his Jewish heritage as a sign of an exclusiveness of sorts, a trait that, to his mind, signals that he is chosen, someone destined to play a particularly important role in American society. The tension between his self-image and the text’s portrayal of him foregrounds his illusions. He is well aware of the religious connotations of his family name, Levi indicating his belonging to the Jewish tribe of priests. His first name is that of many important figures in the history of Christianity, notably the apostle and martyr of Rome, founder of the Christian Church. As an example of Peter’s self-image as one of the elect, one may mention that when an apple-tree outside his house in Rocky Port suddenly blooms, he reads the incident typologically, as Aaron’s Rod – a sign of his election as a son of Levi.

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101 In “The Uses of Ambivalence: Mary McCarthy’s Jewish Politics,” Nathan comments on the author’s complex attitude to her own Jewish heritage (her maternal grandmother being Jewish, McCarthy was one quarter Jewish): “alternately distancing herself from and identifying with her Jewish roots” (99). But, Nathan points out, McCarthy was also very conscious of this ambivalence and her tendency to prefer to “pass” as a Gentile. Peter Levi, Nathan concludes, must be understood as “a repository of [McCarthy’s] ambivalence” (100).

102 “Leviticus” is the book in the Bible which formulates Jewish religious and ethical laws, and which also includes a “Holiness code” with the fundamental principles of human conduct. The verse inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land and unto all the inhabitants thereof,” is taken from “Leviticus.”
Going abroad, Peter, in his youthful egotism, grandly and absurdly regards himself as an elected missionary: “He was too modest to suppose that he was the Messiah, but he might be a precursor, a sort of pilot-project in the wilderness” (37). His mission seems to involve a kind of war against anti-American sentiments. He “want[s] to give his country a hand abroad,” we learn, and although he knows it sounds “conceited,” he desires to “serv[e] as a sort of whitewash,” trying to improve America’s soiled international reputation (103). His conception of his function is hardly idiosyncratic but can be understood as a manifestation of American messianism, a notion grounded in the American myth of exceptionalism, and, in the postwar context, part of the neo-imperialist project. The ideology Peter desires to spread is the Kantian ethic, but his endeavor clearly also has nationalist overtones as he construes himself a defender of America. Standing in ironic contrast to the consistent uncertainty, lameness, and passivity of his actions, often the consequence of his wanting to act morally “right,” his grand ambition is gradually deflected. Step by step, as we shall see, McCarthy reveals his perception of himself and his “mission” as utterly mistaken – thereby exposing the illusory character of his self-image.

In the identification of the specimen Peter Levi, McCarthy uses a comparative approach by contrasting him to his European counterpart: Bonfante, the socialist and half-Jew whom he meets by chance in a Parisian market. Like Peter, he is an innocent – as his name “bon enfant” suggests. McCarthy’s contrastive approach serves primarily to foreground Peter’s idealism but also to contrast American and European radical intellectual traditions for the purpose of revealing their respective misconceptions. While Peter lays bare the illusory character of Bonfante’s naive faith in technology as the panacea of the future, Bonfante, in turn, exposes as false Peter’s nostalgic notions about the past as a golden age.

McCarthy contrasts her protagonist bird to yet another subspecies of the American family: to Silvanus Platt, whose nick-name “Silly” clearly signals a lack of seriousness or wisdom. Peter and Silvanus represent contrasting American traditions, old-fashioned idealism and conscience, on the one hand, and the America of the future, a pragmatic worldly tradition of “realpolitik,” on the other – an argument I will return to in my discussion of the novel’s ending. This fellow-American student abroad whom Peter meets at a Thanksgiving dinner is his virtual negative; Silvanus is “[a]s he [himself] might be in the fourth dimension, turned inside out. Or reincarnated” (255). Silvanus also comes with a label, and should be read as a representative of an ideology and a social group; as an “ultra-WASP Princetonian” (205), he is firmly grounded in the American establishment. Unlike Peter, “Silly” is a typical picaresque hero, a rogue, a character seeking out adventure. Named for the Roman God of the woods, he is the counterpart of Pan in Greek mythology; part man and part animal, embodying the contradictory traits of innocence and naughtiness, the faun is an amusing figure but also
potentially dangerous. Contrary to Peter, Silvanus does not attempt to act ethically: “Silly’s will, Peter estimated, could not be farther from the moral will of Kant” (321). Silvanus’s manner of dealing with foreigners, one of confrontation, further illustrates his lack of altruism. Refusing to accept the codes of the French culture, he imposes his own. Unlike Peter, he uses “power games” (317) – premeditated, sly, and subversive techniques in his relations with the French with the aim of gaining superiority over them – as illustrated in the “staring match” he likes to engage in, getting the French to lower their eyes (316). To Silly’s superficial, not to say cynical mind, everything, even the Vietnam War, is a game. This opposition between Peter and “Silly” as symbolic characters climaxes in one of the final scenes taking place in the Jardin de Plantes – a significant scene I will return to below.

But no matter how different Peter and “Silly” are as characters, they do belong to the same species of American bird: the kind whose junior year in college is spent abroad. In fact, their displacement to Europe for educational purposes conforms to a common pattern of middle-class behavior in the post-World-War-II generation. As we know, at this point in history, the cultural exchange between the United States and western Europe intensified, one aspect being the increasing popularity of studying in Europe – a practice that had previously been the privilege of the upper classes. Peter himself is actually quite aware of the power of cultural patterns. Reflecting on the geographical movements and career choices of himself and his parents, he understands them as predetermined by “Nature’s schedule for the sub-species they belonged to–white, middle-income intelligentsia,” and the “deep instinctual drive of their class” (50). That Peter acts according to an established cultural practice shows that he is not an exclusive exceptional American but actually a group being whose actions are determined by the class to which he belongs; in itself, his trajectory can thus be understood to problematize the American myth of individualism.

To chart the flyways and the changing behavior of the object of study is of vital importance to McCarthy, as it allows her to identify as well as critique his species and sub-species. Central to this project is also an exploration of the mental structures, the ideas and ideals that propel these birds to a change of habitat. On the whole, Peter’s migration is both a flight away from whatever seems contemporary, and a pilgrimage in quest of places signifying the past. The depiction of these displacements is the “scientific method” McCarthy uses, one that is suited to the purpose of her fictional investigation of national identity.

The first displacement related in the novel takes place in 1960, four years prior to Peter’s European journey; as I see it, this migration should be seen as a symbolic attempt to recapture the past. Moving east from future-oriented California to small, remote, antiquated Rocky Port, on a New England peninsula, a region they perceive as their “real home,” Peter and his mother invert the westward journey coded as progressive and essentially
American in nationalist mythology (10). Their seeking out New England, and “Rocky Port” especially, echoing Plymouth Rock and the first Puritan settlers, suggests a desire to locate American authenticity, New England being considered the origin of the new nation in conventional historiography. As his mother tries to recreate “old America,” she uses Fanny Farmer’s cookbook and bans modern technological inventions such as television. Quite obviously, her attempts are based on a nostalgic vision of the past. Propelled by a desire to escape the present and capture the past, to find a place that corresponds to their image of an authentic, pure and true “America,” Peter and his mother can even be considered American tourists. In fact, in their futile search for signs of “authenticity,” Peter and his mother may actually be seen to engage in something as banal as a sightseeing expedition.

By exposing the futility of the New England move, their attempt to live close to nature and to reconstruct an essential, original “America,” McCarthy critiques the nostalgic, conservative drive at the heart of their endeavor. The regressive undertow of Peter’s desire is captured in the narrator’s comment: “[Peter’s] love for his mother coincided with his love of Nature and of the austere New England landscape” (28), a formulation that illustrates that, in nationalist ideology, the woman, particularly in the figure of the mother, and the landscape – “Nature” – are embodiments of “America.” Quite predictably, Rocky Port and New England do not live up to expectations: Rocky Port proves to be an outdoor museum populated by the rich, fashionable, ultra-conservative New York society. The judgment the text passes on the quest of Peter and his mother is expressed by Peter’s father, “the babbo”: “‘It is no good crawling back into the American womb. It has had a hysterectomy’” (103).

Peter’s migration to Europe – following upon the disappointing Rocky Port experiences – should be read as a flight from an environment that can no longer sustain his brand of old-fashioned idealism. At a time when political and cultural events call out for the attention of intellectuals, he instead goes to Europe to study French culture and ancient art – escaping the complexities of the present, and fleeing the “ugly mirror” of racist America reflected on television, he looks for another mirror: Europe (102). This is where he gazes as he continues to search for “the Past” and for authenticity. His journey to Europe is thus a nostalgic quest for a lost golden age, the vague Arcadian past he dreams of. When he is hit by the news of the escalating Vietnam War, everything that he took flight from in the American present definitely catches up with him, proving his refuge to have failed.

The arrival scene immediately establishes Peter’s position in French society and culture, his style of travel revealing an inflated self-image, exposing the mistaken character of his own view of his journey. In his mind, historical fact, fiction, and myth blur. He associates Europe with a distant and vague
past of myth and fairy-tales, and prefers to think of his journey as a Medieval pilgrimage and of himself as a pilgrim and knight of a pastoral past:

He liked the pious notion of being a pilgrim, sleeping in a monk’s cell and hearing them chant the plain song when he woke up with the birds. He saw himself in some old woodcut with a humble scallop shell – his dinner plate – and a pointed pilgrim hat with another, tiny scallop shell on the crown, hitting the trail of Saint Jacques. Or as a young knight in home-made wattled armor like Sir Percival of Gales . . . . (109)

He planned to go from Le Havre to Paris on his motorbike, his “trusty old steed,” fittingly named Rosinante after Don Quixote’s horse (91). And in the way the original Rosinante was slow and old and not the fiery steed appropriate for a valorous knight, Peter’s motorbike is old and unglamorous. In his leather outfit he comes across as an ancient knight in modern garb, a Don Quixote of sorts, something that is suggested also by his physical appearance, “a tall boy with a long nose and gaunt features” (9). As to the Romantics before him, Don Quixote is an ideal, someone who remains true to his ideas, in the way Peter himself desires. By making him a modern Don Quixote, a parodic figure, McCarthy highlights his naiveté and suggests that he is equally blinded by his illusions, equally lost in the contemporary world, unable to confront the realities of Europe.

Immediately upon his arrival in France, his world-view is thus tested. As mentioned above, Pratt has shown how the arrival scene of travel narratives provides a space for the query of identities perceived as “natural.” In the case of Birds of America, the arrival scene depicting Peter’s confrontation with a conductor who casts him as a foreigner, dramatizes a clash between two nationalist ways of thinking. The national conflict staged in the arrival scene is described in war-like terms; the French are the “enemy” (92), Peter’s bags “captive” (92) and his decision to accept to travel by train referred to as a “capitulation” (94). With characteristic mild irony, the narrator comments that already “on the dock the French scored their first victory over Peter Levi, famed linguist” (94), who, despite his good command of the French language, fails to communicate his wish to check the bags but not the motorbike on which he intends to ride to Paris. The humiliation of having his motorbike led away is tied to the partial loss of a sense of individuality, as he is forced to travel with the other Americans on the train. The experience of his arrival tells him that he is placed in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the culture he visits. His stable sense of identity rocked, a sense of disorientation also marks the letter he writes to his mother on his arrival in Paris: “I feel awfully confused now, as though my mind were a pool that looked transparent till I started stirring up its muddy depths with a stick. This could be the effect of being away from home and becoming a ‘rootless cosmopolitan’” (143). The removal from America has instantly made him aware of the con-

The budding realization of the determining power of heritage triggers a crisis of sorts, expressed in a profound uncertainty of how to behave socially. The most interesting and unusual sign of this crisis is his obsession with cleaning toilets, an obsession that turns into a ritual of cleansing, in what appears to be a symbolic reinstatement of order. His exaggerated reaction to dirty toilets must be considered in the larger context of the identity problems he is experiencing – as a fear of chaos. According to Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), the symbolic significance of pollution and impurity in a given culture is intimately related to its idea of pattern and order, in other words, to its conception of the world at large. That which does not fit into a system or exists on its margins is perceived as dangerous. By analogy, matter that issues from the body, a symbol of society, is considered impure and threatening. Excrement is thus a kind of pollution that constitutes a symbolic danger. This Otherness becomes a threat to Peter’s idealist world-view, his integrity and his national identity. As a Kantian, he worships “Nature” but, as the text illustrates, whenever “real” nature transgresses the boundaries constructed by culture, he perceives it as threatening. It is this cultural management of nature and the past that MacCannell sees as a defining trait both of modernity and the phenomenon of tourism. Needless to say, Peter is part of this phenomenon.

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The Expatriate Community: Migratory American Birds

As the narrative continues to track the foreign journey of the young liberal idealist, it becomes clear that although he belongs to a rare sub-species of American bird, his behavior is in fact quite typical of the family to which his species belongs: the American migratory bird, also known as the American tourist. The staging of a series of confrontations with other American birds of passage, in various environments and chronotopes, allows McCarthy to comment on a number of their distinctive traits, and her double-edged critique targets both Peter and his compatriots. The crossing of the Atlantic by ship and the train ride to Paris, the transitory zone between the United

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103 For two interesting discussions of McCarthy’s double-edged satire and the disparate response it has received, see Mitzi Myers’s “You Can’t Catch Me: Mary McCarthy’s Evasive Comedy,” and Dawn Trouard’s “Mary McCarthy’s Dilemma: The Double Bind of Satiric Elitism.” Protesting against critics, usually male, who find McCarthy egotistic, arrogant, and unfeeling, both point out that her satire is driven by high moral standards, and that it is often also aimed at herself, as a snob of sorts (Trouard) or as a vain feminine woman (Myers). They add that her sharp critical sword seldom inflicts the victim with fatal wounds.
States and Europe, raise questions about Peter’s many-faceted identity. That
he is essentially American is demonstrated by the fact that he is instantly
recognized as such by his compatriots. In his turn, he too “knows” other
Americans – just like a Jew spots other Jews: “Being an American, he was
coming to think, was like being Jewish, only worse: you recognized ‘your
people’ everywhere in their Great Diaspora and you were mortified by them
and mortified by being mortified; you were drawn to them, sorry for them,
amused by them, nauseated by them” (100). But, contrary to Jewishness, an
American identity is not a source of pride to him, because he links Ameri-
canness to crude materialism: “Being a Jew gave you a history of martyrdom
that at least was old and dignified. If you were a Jew, you were ‘one of the
chosen,’ while an American was just a Philistine” (101). As this quote
shows, Peter dislikes other Americans when he meets them outside America,
a reaction of which he is conscious and ashamed, calling it “anti-
Americanism” and “a thing, like malaria in the tropics, that you caught
abroad” (104).

The depiction of Peter as a typical American tourist, albeit of the “anti-
tourist” kind, as Buzard would have it, serves a double purpose: first, it en-
hances his Americanness, and second, it allows McCarthy to expose the
essentially materialist character of tourism as such. Peter’s rather snobbish
attitude, of which he is quite aware, places him in the long line of Americans
who, with Henry James, pronounced American tourists “Vulgar, vulgar,
vulgar” (qtd. in Buzard 217). Peter has the American snob’s distaste for
other Americans on the boat, most of whom, unlike him, travel in groups. He
considers his compatriots uncultured superficial materialists, but it is all too
obvious that he, too, is a materialist. On board the ship, he notes that Ameri-
cans regard Europe as a supermarket, while to him it is a world full of vener-
able culture. Their favorite topic is itineraries and prices, as if travel were a
purchasing of items on a list. But while Peter may not have a detailed itiner-
ary similar to that of his compatriots, he is equipped with a variety of maps
and he does have plans to visit cathedrals on the way. These rather definite
plans can be regarded as an itinerary. Although his journey to Europe is not
openly materialistic, he travels there in order to accumulate a type of capital,
cultural capital, eventually convertible into economic capital.

During his junior year in Paris, Peter is exposed to several troubling en-
counters with different members of the species of Americans abroad. Two
distinctly American gatherings, a Thanksgiving dinner and a Christmas carol
gathering, bring together a motley group of characters, Americans from a
variety of social classes, encounters that serve to foreground Peter’s traits.
Taking place in the camp of conservative Americans abroad, the scenes de-
picting the Thanksgiving dinner not only offer comments on the nationalist
function of this celebration but also a satiric dramatization of the war debate.
The chapter title “Round Table, with the Damsel Parcenet” announces that
we will encounter the knights of Uncle Sam, representatives of America on a
foreign adventure as they gather for the ritual meal. Quite fittingly, in the context of McCarthy’s master trope, they assemble around the “sacrificed traditional bird” (189).

The patriotic significance of the Thanksgiving celebration is spelled out in the hostess’s words: “‘It’s the day when we Americans . . . as we thank God for our blessings try to gather under our roof some of our fellow-countrymen who might be lonely or homesick. And all over the world, Americans are sitting down to the same meal the Pilgrims ate’” (191). Peter reacts to the chauvinism of her words: “As far as he could see, what was happening was that Americans were giving loud thanks for being Americans” (191). The lack of conviction and confidence marking her delivery causes him to reflect, tongue in cheek, that “[s]he had made that awful speech like a nervous recitation; maybe service wives abroad got directives from the Pentagon on what to tell the natives about Thanksgiving” (191).

To Peter, who would rather understand Thanksgiving as “‘just a harvest festival’” (191), the dinner at the general’s seems fake: a “grotesque parody of his mother’s annual bounty” (191). Sharing his mother’s nostalgic and idealized image of an “authentic” American culture grounded in a rural, pre-industrial tradition, he reacts to this commercial, modern variety of Thanksgiving where the turkey has to be thawed, and the various traditional dishes originate from the military PX. But this derogatory attitude that Peter assumes vis-à-vis the way his compatriots celebrate Thanksgiving can actually be understood in analogy with the anti-tourist stance, since, despite his critical attitude, he is not essentially different from them. Also the ideal Thanksgiving dinner he envisions has, of course, a nationalist function – only his nostalgia for the past, it would seem, distinguishes him from other Americans.

Nothing on the dinner table corresponds to Peter’s image of “authentic” American Thanksgiving, so as the young vegetarian Roberta Scott refuses to have any of the “sacred fowl” (194), he interprets her gesture in terms of an “American” act of rebellion against totalitarianism, and construes her as an American heroine.

Peter searched his memory for when or how he had met this dauntless girl before. Maybe in another incarnation. She looked like the title of a book the babbo was fond of recommending: The Protestant Ethic, but with pink cheeks and a shy grin. If he put a tricorn on her head, he could picture her as a revolutionary patriot dumping tea into Boston harbor. He felt sure he had seen her portrait, maybe in male attire, in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum or in some history textbook. (193)

In Peter’s American gaze, tinged with his romantic emotions, Roberta becomes the embodiment of the idealized national woman – a sign of “America”; in his mind she occupies the sanctified position his mother previously had had. As Gohlman writes, she becomes “Rosamund metamor-
phosed” (156). That Weber’s work actually claims the Protestant work ethic to have been crucial to the rise of American capitalism, the effects of which Peter deplores, seems to have escaped him. This naiveté on Peter’s part, his ignorance of the ideological sources of American myth, foreshadows his eventual disillusion with Roberta, as well as with “America.”

The Thanksgiving ritual that once, or so the myth would have it, united Americans here has the opposite effect: becoming divisive, it causes a heated palaver among the Americans around the table. “A parliament of fools was in session,” as the narrator wryly comments (208). This allusion to Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Parliament of Fowls,” which suggests cannibalism as it intimates that the American bird is eaten by other American birds, further enhances the author’s criticism of this gathering (208). Roberta’s refusal to partake of the turkey dampens the atmosphere and when an argument about the American Vietnam policy breaks out following the toast to a Vietnam volunteer, the party is definitely ruined. This character, misunderstanding “Guerrillas” for “gorillas,” illustrates mindless and pathetic belligerence: “[o]n the mental plane, the only message that had got through to him was anti-Communism. He wanted to be able to kill Viet Cong” (205-206). The dinner-table disagreement about the war stages the debate over American involvement in Vietnam, one in which a range of pro-war attitudes are represented: citations of America’s supposed responsibility to counter communism, and calls for pre-emptive violence, backed up by the familiar rehearsal of the “necessity” of the bombings of German cities and the atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Peter stands out from the rest of the party in his vehement protests against the idea of resorting to bombing in Vietnam – but he has difficulties holding his ground. The idealist foundation of his attitude is not shared by the others, and his arguments about land reform and negotiations as alternatives to war are equally lost on them. Slightly drunk, he loses self-control and strikes out against the general in a diatribe which displays both his patriotism and the fear that his America no longer exists. In moral outrage and like a noble knight, Peter draws his sword in defense of the reputation of the lady whose “fair name” he feels should be defended: “You don’t give a damn about your country, you stupid patriot. You don’t care what it does. Or about its fair name. I love America or what I used to think was America. Listening to you, I don’t recognize it anymore” (212).

The succeeding scene, however, balances the previous tension as the party plays softball, “the national sport,” in a spirit of comradeship in the Bois de Boulogne (214). Peter is also “enjoying himself and even enjoying the sense of being an American” (214), and when he is seized by a troublesome attack of hiccups – marking him as a rather pathetic yet also endearing character – he is helped by the least likeable of the guests, the Vietnam war volunteer. In the end, Peter’s faith in the American community is restored, because, from his point of view, it proves to be a supportive and sustaining one – despite the internal differences. By staging him as a character who is first a passion-
ate dissenter, as expressed by his anti-war stance, and then as a good-natured fellow who easily pardons the crude belligerence of his compatriots, McCarthy draws the picture of an uncertain young man deeply ambivalent concerning his compatriots, who has difficulties holding on to the high standards of liberal idealism.

At the Christmas carol gathering, a scene that in certain ways replays the Thanksgiving dinner, Peter is contrasted to yet another species of wandering American birds: this time the wealthy liberal intellectual-artistic camp, the “Americans in Paris for Johnson” (243). Peter notes that this party “seemed just as American, in a sinister way he could not define” (247). Like the previous holiday party, this celebration seems, to him, materialist and fake. The apparently calculated and pretentious high cultural gestures of the host couple make the event seem even “sinister.” They seem to carry on a masquerade of sorts, and the gathering serves as an occasion for them to show off their “sophistication” as they play at being glamorous expatriates; their hospitality is fake, simply a strategy in a personal project of social advancement. When the host confesses that he and his wife are “mad on châteaux,” Peter considers them his opposites as his obsession is churches (248). From his naively snobbish perspective, an interest in castles indicates a materialistic mindset while an interest in churches may be read as indicative of a person’s spiritual orientation. But the text actually lays bare the affinity between Peter and this American couple in that it shows them to be quite similar, equally bent on social climbing.

While, at the Thanksgiving dinner, he had been struck by the ignorance and chauvinism of his compatriots, this time he suffers a loss of illusions regarding their private morality. As the hostess carries on an affair with Silvanus Platt, her conjugal happiness proves a mere front. And that Silvanus accepts the hostess’s double standard suggests that what fuels him and the tradition he represents is self-interest. Peter’s most important discovery, however, deflates his earlier idealization of Roberta Scott as an American figure. His disappointment at her absence changes into shock when he learns that she has gone away with a lover, a French doctor, something that suggests Peter’s naiveté of expecting Roberta to conform to the idealized figure of the virtuous American girl.

Peter’s essentially American and tourist mind-set, evident in the two scenes discussed above, is further exposed in the confrontation with a crowd of students demonstrating for better university dormitories. In this confrontation, he cuts a decidedly odd figure as he is out on a ridiculous walk with his ivy plant, a Fatshedera. Naively idealist, he sees himself as contributing to the cleansing of the polluted Paris air by taking this plant outside to give it light. As Peter perceives the demonstration as a kind of staged performance, he evidently sees it through an American tourist gaze. Not realizing what is actually going on, he thinks it is “a parade,” perhaps for “a national holiday that he had failed to hear about” (168). Even when he understands that it is a
demonstration, he does not consider it an event in the here and now but some quaint folkloric tradition “such as he had read about in history” (169). That the issue of contention is student housing disappoints him, probably because such a trivial materialist concern does not conform to his conception of French history where demonstrations are grand popular revolts against feudal oppression. Nevertheless, to him it is a spectacle: “‘This is great, isn’t it?’ Peter continued, looking around him. ‘Compared to those Cossacks back home, I mean. This is more like a game. Everybody here is having a ball!’” (170). But gradually, as he himself becomes involved, this initial impression is modified. What seemed staged and fun turns out to be real and serious as the elegant capes of the police, containing lead, turn into actual weapons. As a result of the confrontation with the police into which he is drawn trying to help his American friend Makowski, who has been unjustly arrested, Peter’s ankle is hurt. His physical injury should have made it evident to him that he is a participant and not a flaneur, a mere spectator of life in Paris. But too enmeshed in his own preconceived view, he is unable to understand the event as “real” and contemporary.

He escapes to the American Embassy to report the wrongful arrest, a move that may be read as an escape home, to the American community – having been upset by the confusing foreign world. As we shall see, in making this symbolic move to American ground he also resorts to American nationalist ideology. Having filed his report about the conditions surrounding Makowski’s arrest – something that really proves unnecessary as his friend is soon released – Peter lingers a moment outside the Embassy and disposes of the destroyed plant in a waste-paper basket. The crown of new leaves has been broken off so that the plant appears “decapitated” (184). At this point, also his universalist idealism is dealt a fatal blow. After having regained his poise, he pauses in reverence by the statue of Benjamin Franklin where he discovers English ivy climbing up the pedestal. Peter takes some long shoots to bring home to replace his dead plant, feeling like a mythic hero: “Life had to go on. Actually, in the place of one sickly specimen, he could have a whole lusty tribe . . . he felt like Prometheus, with a gift of green fire” (188). The new specimen of ivy, the “green fire,” can be read as a symbol of American democracy, closely related to French civilization but of a sturdier, Anglo-Saxon kind. That Peter thinks of himself as Prometheus, who stole fire from the Gods to give to the humans, as he pinches some evergreen shoots from Benjamin Franklin to pass on – obviously not an analogous deed – gives an ironic color to McCarthy’s depiction. Turning the petty theft of the ivy shoot into an act of idealism and bravery, Peter reconstructs his self-image as mythic hero, liberator, and missionary. This act, as Gohlman argues, may be understood in terms of defiance, the destruction of the Fatshedera bespeaking Peter’s loss of his Aaron’s Rod, the symbol of his election. “[D]eprived of the authority vested in him by the gods,” he sets out on his own and the ideology he resorts to, is, not surprisingly, American
nationalism (154). His perception of the statue of Benjamin Franklin is a manifestation of the American gaze grounded in American nationalistic ideology. He can refer to Franklin by the intimate “Ben,” because Franklin is a member of the horizontal comradeship of the imagined community of America (187). In Peter’s American gaze, the American statue looks “home-made,” and the addition “like the funny Stars and Stripes still waving over the Embassy’s portal” tells us that he perceives the flag similarly (187). The use of the word “home-made” suggests that he understands the statue and the flag as genuine, defining “real” America. As the demonstration incident and its aftermath expose his inability to liberate himself from prestructuring ideologies (manifested in his gaze), he appears to be locked in a world of illusions: his preconceived image of the Parisian environment preventing him from seeing it as “real.” To put it another way, Peter views Europe through an American tourist gaze – a perspective that comes under close scrutiny when he travels to Rome.

Peter Levi, American Tourist Bird

It is especially in the chapters depicting Peter Levi in Rome that McCarthy comments on American postwar travel and tourism – a critique that anticipates the sociological and anthropological studies of tourism that would appear a few years later. Like modern scholarship on tourism, she considers travel a socially and culturally determined ritual typical of modern industrialized society. By placing this American tourist bird in Rome, McCarthy exposes him to an environment that elicits his romantic and nostalgic illusions: her dramatization amounts to a satiric critique of this tourist frame of mind.¹⁰⁴

The imperialist foundation of the discourse of tourism and of American nationalism is suggested in Peter’s explanation of the attraction of travel to the young. Going to Rome is a sort of exploration of an unknown territory, he says:

“Being in one of these old crumbling cities on your own is like being the first white man or whatever to walk in a virgin forest. Or like coming out of your house in the morning after a big snowfall and almost hating to make the first human footprint. My generation doesn’t have experiences like that very often, which is why we come abroad, I guess. There isn’t much unspoiled Nature around anymore, and the places where people like poets used to look for

¹⁰⁴ Undoubtedly, there is an element of self-critique here too. Like Peter, McCarthy loved Italian history and wrote Venice Observed (1956) and The Stones of Florence (1959), two richly illustrated travelogues which discuss the art, architecture, and politics of Renaissance Italy. However learned, in their preoccupation with the past, with esthetics, and with anecdote, these books can be said to exemplify an American tourist attitude to Europe. For a brief treatment of how these texts express McCarthy’s views of America, see Richard Pells 141-46.
it – the mountains and the seashore – are all jammed up with humanity and bottle-caps. So arriving in a strange town by yourself, with just your guidebook for a compass, is the nearest equivalent we can find to being alone with Nature, the way travelers used to be in the Age of Discovery.” (293)

In a remarkable reversal, one illustrative of the Self/Other binary of American nationalism, Rome, the center of Christian civilization, the former capital of an ancient Empire, is imagined as its opposite, nature and the wilderness, as Peter sees himself as the prospective adventurer and conqueror. His migration to Rome is, of course, predetermined by the ritual of the American European tour in which the Italian capital is practically always the final goal. However much he considers himself an individualistic “traveler” rather than a vulgar tourist, his behavior does exemplify tourist practice; instead of going off on his own for solitary activities, he quite literally lets himself be drawn to crowds – flocks of people – guiding him to midnight Mass. Although he distinguishes himself from most contemporary American tourists in not having brought the primary tourist signifier, the camera – in Rome he wishes that he had brought one – this does not prevent him from placing himself in the position of detached gazer. Ironically, although half-Italian, he regards Italy with the eyes of an American tourist, experiencing Italy as linked to two almost contradictory fields of association: the prelapsarian Arcadia and the realm of eternal sacred art. Needless to say, the latter is preferred by the art-lover Peter Levi to whom buildings and monuments are primary and the native population secondary: “Ars longa vita brevis est was a truth that could not be argued with in the Eternal City, where the monuments were big and the inhabitants rather small and grasshopper-like” (265).

The “pretty” view from his hotel, including a church building with antique sculptures and a city of colorful native life, is a projection of the American tourist gaze. It looks out on “red-tiled roofs of Rome and of plants growing in pots on neighboring balconies,” “lines of bright laundry,” and “the pale moth-brown angels with folded wings, like life-jackets, on the strange bell tower of Sant’Andrea delle Fratte” (239). Estheticizing the cityscape, Peter perceives it as a picturesque world of ancient culture, the quintessence of the Old World. Presenting an image of Italy that underscores its loveliness and antique character, that is its difference from contemporary America, it can be squarely placed in the discourse of tourist advertisements. That he dislikes the interest of the inhabitants of Rome for topical issues is typical of a tourist rationalization based on the idea that “native” peoples exist in static pre-modern worlds.

That insane news-hunger was the only side of the Romans with which he could find fault. It continually amazed him that people privileged to live in this wonderful ochre- and tangerine-colored city of cypresses, fairly frequent blue skies, art, and parasol pines should be so concerned with information
feed-in, storage, and retrieval re the darkling plain he had been inhabiting and was fated soon to return to. (267)

In Rome, he exists in a “liminal zone” separate from the prosaic present with all its problems and worries. It would seem to be a symbolic gesture that he removes his watch, turning it in to be cleaned. The “Eternal City” is thus a timeless city in more senses than one – a sphere in which time and place are subordinate to the quasi-religious experience. He even feels invulnerable to sickness there and imagines himself in a safe space, separate from the chaos of the present: “The world’s problems did not clamor at him for solutions here. When he passed the Senate in Palazzo Madama (notoove facciata barocca) or the Chamber of Deputies in Palazzo Montecitorio (iniziato nel 1650 dal Bernini), it was hard to remember that there were legislators inside fighting” (265). As the notes within parentheses indicate, the tourist guide is the medium through which Peter understands Rome. His lack of interest in contemporary Europe is evidenced by his use of a secondhand Italian guidebook published in 1940, one which has not been updated with the paradigm shift that took place in Europe after World War II – altering the relationship between the United States and the European countries. Equally nostalgic, his mother travels in a similar manner, “go[ing] around with a pre-war Baedeker and a guy called Augustus Hare,” a guidebook that was popular among tourists until the beginning of the twentieth century and the works of an upper-class nineteenth-century Englishman who loved the Latin countries (272).

One incident in particular functions as a satirical comment on Peter’s unrealistic world view, taking place in the hotel named “Albergo dei Re Magi” (the inn of the three kings) where he is staying (239). While, as an American making his pilgrimage to the Old World, he may see himself in analogy to one of the kings come to worship at the cradle of Christian civilization, it is obvious that he does not have the kind of wisdom they represent. Learning of the Gothic influence on his favorite sculptor Borromini’s art, he has an epiphanic experience:

The principium individuationis had affirmed itself in the seemingly chaotic perceptions of that flatus voci, Peter Levi. There was a reason underlying his old predilection for Borromini which, independently of any instruction, had brought about an act of recognition . . . His choices were stemming from an inner unity, a Tree of Knowledge branching in him. Contrary to what he always feared, the objective world and Peter Levi were in touch with each other. He existed, he was real. (263)

Gohlman understands this incident to be foreshadowing the climax of the Bildungsprozess” she believes that Peter ultimately completes. Rome is an earthly paradise to him, “the natural and most appropriate laboratory for
Peter to discover certain connections between himself and the external world” (Gohlman 161). But Rome seems “natural” to him because it corresponds to his American image of “Europe” – Rome being “historyland” or “artland,” the very epitome of Europe as a great theme park. The scene is clearly ironic since Peter’s moment of apparent insight does not, as Gohlman claims, affirm the “correspondence” between his “inner form” and “outward reality” (163). Ironically, at this point, when he believes he has reached some fundamental insight regarding himself and the world, he is, actually, even more befuddled by myth than ever. He cannot be understood to have reached insight because the meaning that he construes out of the connections between Gothic art, Borromini, and himself is not grounded in any “outward reality” but only makes sense according to the logic of the idealist and American tourist imagination he subscribes to, one which the text consistently exposes as out of touch with the contemporary world.

One example of Peter’s disconnection from material reality is his blindness to the harsh conditions of Italians, a blindness caused by his preconceived tourist perceptions. To him Italians, idealized and exotic Others, seem to lead carefree lives in a beautiful, timeless, safe realm. In his tourist gaze, the poverty so blatant in the Italian scene seems acceptable – a “natural state of affairs” (237).

In the narrow streets of Vecchia Roma and in Trastevere, he saw scabby palaces and tenements and plenty of poor people, but this did not upset him the way it would have in Paris. On sunny days, caged birds swung from windows, women sat mending in their doorways, workmen making deliveries sang. Watching a handsome woman drawing water from a fountain, he did not stop to think that this meant she had no acqua corrente where she lived. He guessed it was true that poverty seemed more acceptable in warm countries. (264)

The narrator’s observation – “did not stop to think that this meant she had no acqua corrente where she lived” – clearly demonstrates that a tourist gaze that focuses on the picturesque qualities of a scene disregards evidence of deprivation. “Mon cher, il faut toujours se méfier du pittoresque. Ça pue.,” his French-Italian friend Bonfante warns, as he explains that the picture shop signs that Peter finds so quaint date from the period when the poor were illiterate (230).

The magic spell of his enchantment is repeatedly broken, for example by Italians proving to be very much located in the present, eager to discuss topical issues regarding both France and the United States. In order to avoid such continual disruptions, he shies away, ultimately taking refuge in the Sistine Chapel, whose painted, rounded ceiling creates the impression of a separate world. Here, he is “safe from nine until closing-time” (267), finding himself as far from contemporary America and as near the golden past as he can come, using ear-stoppers to keep out the disturbing chat of other tourists.
But in this space of sanctified art, the ultimate haven away from the present, McCarthy has him encounter the embodiment of the contemporary America he abhors: his advisor Mr Small, referred to as “Pangloss.” Although he should surely be considered in terms of the stock character of travel writing, the “teacher-initiator” type identified by Percy Adams (231), he fails miserably as Peter’s initiator. This character represents the older generation’s ignorance of the changes facing American society, persisting in an uncritical belief in American capitalism. Peter clearly sees through the illusions of his compatriot, calling them Mr Small’s “personal plexiglass bell” (301). Peter and Mr Small represent opposing attitudes; to Mr Small, the future is full of opportunities for Americans but to Peter, who worries about being drafted into the army, the choices are limited. As their conversation in Rome makes clear, Mr Small believes in an optimistic philosophy similar to that embraced by Voltaire’s Pangloss though rather more vicious. Mr Small’s American capitalist society, “the best system yet invented” (298), a phrase that rings uncannily of Pangloss’s view of the existent world as “the best of all possible worlds,” an idea originating in the philosophy of Leibniz. The American panacea, Mr Small explains, is called “market mechanism” and it “work[s] (with some correction) like the mills of the gods, to spread the wealth, remedy social injustice, multiply choices, advance basic research, apply technology to formerly insoluble human equations” (298).

Their conversation problematizes Peter’s journey to Rome and the encounter breaks the quasi-religious spell of his experience there. The dialogue also uncovers their respective attitudes: while Mr Small is able to recognize Peter as a snobbish tourist, Peter, in his turn, deflates the objectivity of Mr Small as a scholar. Obviously, neither of them is a detached, unbiased observer of the phenomenon of tourism as they are both tourists. Also Mr Small, studying the contemporary variety, uses the American tourist gaze, and is actually even less self-conscious than Peter. Upon entering a trattoria full of Americans he blurts out: “‘I don’t see anything ‘typical’ about this . . . . I suppose it’s been discovered’” (289), a statement indisputably marking him as a tourist, because seeking out the “typical,” or, as Culler says, the “sign,” is characteristic tourist behavior (155). Peter’s tourist quest for signs of European Otherness has actually led him into the cul-de-sac of his own American mind-set.

The Death of the American Liberal Idealist

The ending of *Birds of America*, Gohlman argues, confirms Peter’s successful completion of the “Bildungsprozess,” since he has “found out exactly who he is by actively testing his beliefs” (167). Such a reading strikes me as unsatisfactory, as the last scene does not quite conform to the convention of
the Bildungsroman; it does not show the happy return of the hero as an enlightened, self-realized, socially integrated character. On the contrary, as the ending of *Birds of America* finds the protagonist lying in a Parisian hospital bed, a sad Jaques figure, Peter is not the pattern of an inverted novel of development: an *anti*-Bildungsroman. But while Peter as a physical being does not die at the end of the book – which indicates the survival of the American – the death of his liberal idealist views is heavily implied. His poor condition, I believe, can be understood metaphorically in terms of a reaction to the disillusioning experiences he has encountered, experiences which amount to losses – depriving him of, to echo Newman, the “illusions . . . legends . . . fantasies . . . fiction[s]” he previously nourished (qtd. in Gelderman *Conversations* 84).

Taking place after his return to Paris, these incidents confirm the ideological losses traced thus far by the text, culminating in crystallized form. As this last scene mirrors that of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, the hero on his sick-bed, the text invites a comparison with that of Cervantes. Like Don Quixote, Peter has been driven by high-flying ideals, which, in his encounters with the world, are exposed as archaic and misguided, but, unlike Don Quixote, he does not regain his “sanity” at the end of the narrative, becoming a wise man. Instead, his view of the world is rendered obscure. As I have attempted to demonstrate, during most of his time in Europe his American tourist gaze is binding: it keeps him inside of nationalist ideology.

An incident involving a “clochard” initiates the series of events that climax as the novel comes to an end. Hindering an escape into the fictional world of ideas, these experiences eventually force Peter to confront reality. On returning from Rome, he can no longer ignore the world around him, the all-too-true, the illusion of the past. Instead, his view of the world is rendered obscure. As I have attempted to demonstrate, during most of his time in Europe his American tourist gaze is binding: it keeps him inside of nationalist ideology.
heavenward, to the home of gods and heroes. Now, the strategy of escape and avoidance no longer holds. The clochards are hard to avoid as they quite literally obstruct his way, but their very existence constitutes a test of his humanitarian ideals. Peter here comes across as a pathetic character – albeit driven by high ideals – when in an act triggered by feelings of guilt and a desire to be virtuous, he provides shelter for a clocharde. This encounter turns into a disillusioning experience undermining his belief in the notion of a common humanity, the basis of the philosophy of Kant: “If it was not the clocharde’s choice that she had got into this grisly state, then there was no freedom of the will, and if it was her choice, of which tonight he felt convinced, then the will’s objects were not the same for everybody. Either way, everything he cared about fell to pieces” (329).

Foreign, female, poor, and dumb, the clocharde is a virtual incarnation of Peter’s Others, the Others of the American middle-class male. Her very existence defies the construct of the universal subject of Enlightenment philosophy. What is threatened is thus the entire structure of his world-view – in other words, his own identity. Not responding verbally, and described as “rolled up in a brown coat resembling a horse’s blanket” (322). . . “bleary eyed” . . . “drunk” . . . “smell[ing] of tobacco and sour stale booze” (324), she seems an anonymous, faceless, formless, smelly bundle of dirty clothes, neither human nor animal. Her deviance actually constitutes a threat toward his self: “The menace was not to his person but to his sovereignty in the little kingdom he had constructed–his nest of Borromini angels, plants, books, espresso pot, student lamp, the drawing he was making, from nature, of a leaf. It was not these things, as things, these bits of organic and inorganic materials, toward which he felt protective” (329). These objects are important to Peter as symbols of his self, of his identity, so that, if they are tampered with, his integrity is violated. When she left his apartment, the clocharde stole the brass doorknob, and with this item gone, he can no longer easily access his apartment – on a metaphorical level, he has thus lost access to his self.

His encounter with the clocharde shatters his belief in a universal humanity, and the following morning, when he is hit by the news that the United States is bombing North Vietnam, also his faith in America receives a deep dent. The headlines, black on white, glare at him: “There was no escaping it, any more than he could have eluded the clocharde once he found her in his path” (330). Discussing the draft with his friend Silvanus, Peter blurts out: “I won’t go”, (331) seeming, for once, to have adopted a firm position because, in response to Silvanus’s skeptical question “But how?” (331), he persists: “I don’t know but I won’t, that’s all” (331). Although there is little textual evidence of Peter’s really having rejected his unconditional belief in America, this incident vaguely suggests that, like other young people of his generation, he may be turning against the establishment, protesting the American involvement in Vietnam.
The issue of America’s war in Vietnam figures more prominently in the scene at the “Jardin de Plantes,” where Silvanus has taken Peter to cheer him up. As the garden is described as “a cemetery,” the setting suggests the loss of “Nature” that Peter experiences in the final scene (332). A sort of museum of “Nature,” the botanical garden recalls the early scene where he learned of the death of the Great Horned Owl, telling of the death of an endangered species – this time the American liberal idealist. That what takes place in this botanical garden is significant, not only in the context of Western but also American history, is illustrated by “a curious exhibit” which the two young Americans come across as they enter the garden:

. . . a cross-section of a giant sequoia, donated by the State of California, through the American Legion, to the Anciens Combattants de France, 1927. Standing on its side, the sequoia slice looked like a ringed target, with shiny copper markers stuck into the widening rings like metal flags, noting mammoth occurrences in world history corresponding with the tree’s age at the time they happened. (332)

Noting that one of these flags marks “the Landing of the Pilgrims,” the beginning of the history of the American nation, Peter laughs “bitterly,” and his comment “‘[t]hey should bring this up to date. February 7, 1965. Uncle Sam bombs small helpless nation,’” along with Silvanus’s addition “‘[m]aybe the start of WW III’” suggest that a watershed has taken place in the history of the United States (332).

The instrumental role played by Silvanus Platt in the scene at the Jardin de Plantes suggests the powerful influence of WASP society in American history. By contrasting Peter with Silvanus, McCarthy is expressing serious doubt about an American society, and possibly foreign policy, which seems to be exchanging its idealism for calculating power politics. Platt, the new representative American, actually provokes the banishment from the Eden which Peter’s world of ideas had constituted for him. True to his bad habit of playing cynical games, Silvanus walks around the park viciously teasing a variety of caged animals and provoking conflict among them – a behavior that repels Peter. At a pond of aquatic birds, he first recognizes some cormorants, the birds with whom he identified in Rocky Port and that seemed to forebode his destiny, and then notices two swans, one white and one black. When Silvanus starts to tease them by staring at them and baiting them with peanuts, Peter tries to counter his nasty behavior.

This scene may be read in terms of a dramatization of their conflicting ideological traditions: idealism versus pragmatism. If the opposition between the white swan and the black, a symbolic illustration of innocence and sin, good and evil, purity and impurity, is read as analogous to the ideological clash between of Peter and Silvanus, then McCarthy’s view of the two characters is quite clear. Since the white swan is also commonly associated with
the Greek god Apollo and the power to prophesy, the fact that it turns away from him can be read as a sign of Peter’s fall from grace. Having been rejected by the white swan, he attempts to share a brioche with the black one – but this well-meaning act provokes an aggressive reaction. Approaching him, the black swan, “slither[ing] its neck along the ground like an uncoiling garden hose,” brings to mind the snake which caused the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Using violence rather than seduction, this snake bites him three times: the first strike hitting his palm, “the part bounded by his life line” (334), and the last two his arm. In this scene, animals, creatures of the “Nature” that he worships, prove dangerous and threatening. As irony would have it, however, it is not the swan bite in itself but the penicillin administered by the American hospital that nearly kills him. It is not “Nature,” then, but actually American civilization that constitutes the primary threat. Not only does the scene confirm the loss of “Nature,” it also confirms Peter’s loss of his youthful idealization of his mother. The Delphic Sybil of his hallucination turns out to be his mother holding a Valentine’s card. In Peter’s life, his mother has previously occupied an authority position similar to that of the Delphic Sybil in ancient Greece. Now all this has changed: “She had no authority for him any more” (338). As she appears at his bedside, demonstrating her love and care for him, she proves to be simply his mother, no icon.

The final deathblow to his convictions is dramatized by a delirious vision of Kant disclaiming the foundation of his own philosophy. Whispering, Kant delivers a message that Peter first understands to be that “God is dead,” something he is reconciled to, but Kant has an even harsher truth to convey: “Perhaps you have guessed it. Nature is dead, mein Kind” (340). If “Nature” is dead, everything he values is revealed as illusion, and his Romantic idea of “Nature” is a construct. Like the lady Dulcinea to Don Quixote, the idea of America, Nature’s Nation, is exposed to Peter as fictional. That nature mainly exists in national parks and botanical gardens shows that not only is it threatened by extinction but that what Peter perceives as “natural” was constructed all along. And if God and Nature are “dead,” i.e., human constructs, it follows that Peter has no pre-ordained function in the world. The appearance of Kant, his household god, his own counterpart to Leibniz, is an example of the classical deus ex machina. But contrary to convention, the intervention of the supreme power in this novel does not set everything in order but instead confirms and reinforces Peter’s chaotic state

106 “[T]he tragedy at the heart of her novel,” Stock writes, “is not only that Nature is dead, but that it has been murdered by an ideal [McCarthy] also values, the ideal of Equality” (189). Stock describes the novel as “a rich study of the contradictions within and between those ideas, Nature and Equality, which we have dreamed we can bring together, and of how Equality, given irresistible power by technology, is destroying the values associated with Nature” (185).
of mind. He is hence left alone to make sense not only of himself but also of “America” and the world. 107

The end of Voltaire’s story finds Candide restored to his garden of Eden, having become aware of the existence of evil in the world and the falsity of the optimistic philosophy of Leibniz. The wisdom he has acquired is crystallized in the final famous sentence that also summarizes the message of Voltaire’s novel, “il faut cultiver notre jardin.” That lesson, as Pangloss confirms in their concluding dialogue, bears out Genesis according to which Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it. To judge by Candide, then, all the absurdity of the world notwithstanding, it is still meaningful to work and build communities.

Like Candide, McCarthy’s hero is cast out of paradise; Peter’s paradise was constituted by his idealized conception of America and his liberal humanist values. As she closes her novel, McCarthy exposes the complexity and the void with which the representative liberal idealist American has to struggle in the 1960s. 108 In Birds of America, it is not the protagonist who voices the message, however. The American Candide has not yet recovered enough to be able to formulate any wisdom he might have drawn. As a whole, however, the novel has demonstrated how maladjusted the old-fashioned American liberal idealist is to the post-World-War-II world. But it needs to be pointed out that despite all his illusions and faults, he has been depicted as someone who is propelled by a moral conscience. Hence, despite her critique of the American tradition he represents, McCarthy does not actually refute the liberal/left tradition but rather suggests that it needs to be reinscribed.

Although Peter is not returned to an alternative “paradise” like Candide, it should be remembered that when he wakes up from his coma on Valentine’s day, the day when Americans offer tokens of love and friendship, he is not alone but surrounded by friends, mostly Americans, concerned about his health. Peter Levi, American liberal idealist, may have been thrown into a hostile world, but in this time of crisis he is not excluded from the American community. And, as in most instances of his confrontations with other Americans, he is, despite the conflict he experiences, still warmed by their

107 To Gohlman, the self’s relation to the world is the very crux of Birds of America, and referring to the title of the chapter “Two-thirds of a Ghost,” she explains that out of the three ideals of reason which Kant postulated, God, Nature, and the Self, the ending of Birds of America spells out the “death” of the two first but foregoes the third. And by this omission, she says, “the author indirectly brings it to our attention, virtually placing it before us as the unspoken last word of the novel” (135). Paraphrasing the message of the novel, as she sees it, Gohlman concludes that “[t]he self remains to assert its existence; the rest is anachronistic” (167).

108 That American foreign policy and liberal ideology were issues that continued to occupy McCarthy’s mind in the 60s and 70s is illustrated by her subsequent book Cannibals and Missionaries (1979), a book that continues the critical inquiry into the ethics of America’s political involvement abroad.
friendship. Although McCarthy critiques American myths and ideas, and criticizes the United States, and American myth, she retains a belief in the American community – the positive, potentially redemptive core of American culture. This positive, not to say idealizing, conception of the republican local American community, the “old neighborhood,” actually forms part of nationalist ideology. Eventually, thus, McCarthy herself has recourse to the nostalgic vision of America that her own dissection of Peter Levi (and his mother) uncovered and criticized. Considered at a remove, the myriad pieces of the mosaic of *Birds of America*, among which the ending is an important one, seem not only to reflect America, but, ultimately, to mirror Mary McCarthy’s own American national identity.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Education of an African American:
John A. Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am*

“I am committed to the search for [America’s] true meaning; I hope what I have found is not it.”
John A. Williams, *This is My Country Too*

“... you goddamn nigger intellectuals and them nigger leaders, soon’s you get two quarters to rub together you got your ass on a ship for Europe. You don’t even know what’s going on here.”
black policeman, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (172)

*The Man Who Cried I Am* is an Old World journey narrative of quite a different kind than the other three discussed in this study. Drawing on the predominantly white motif of the European journey, the story of black male protagonist Max Reddick reveals the complexity of the national identity of an American who is also an African American. As a result, Williams’s text turns American identity inside out, radically problematizing the entire concept. Telling the story of the gradual disillusionment of an African American intellectual with “America,” and his growing awareness of the workings of white American racism, a process that climaxes on a European journey, *The Man Who Cried I Am* is, at once, a tragic Bildungsroman and an Old World journey narrative.

Investigating the novel’s critique of “America,” this chapter focuses on the significance of its framing European setting. It has previously been recognized that the continuous shifts between the three geographical settings in the book, America, Holland/France, and Africa, and between the present and the past, is the narrative strategy used to expose the global spread and conspiratorial nature of white racism in general and American racism in particular. The specific importance of the European setting has, however, been neglected. But the many-facetted stage on which the drama is enacted, is, I hold, of utmost importance for the novel’s effect. To my mind, the signifi-

109 The 1985 Thunder’s Mouth P edition has a relief of a map of northern Europe as cover – a sign of the importance of the Old World setting to the story.
cance of the fact that Max spends his last hours in Europe, in the heart of a
culture of whiteness, a culture that has always excluded African Americans,
bent either on their submission or annihilation, deserves to be taken into
account. It adds an extra dimension to the novel that it is in the Old World
that the horrifying truth about the oppression of African Americans is re-
vealed to Max. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the gradual changes of the
Old World stage parallel the protagonist’s change of political persuasion,
from a moderate integrationist stance to a revolutionary one.

As in the classic novel of initiation, the primary function of the protago-
nist’s life story, his personal and psychological development, is symbolic;
depicting incidents of social exclusion, his life is seen as representative of
the African American predicament, particularly that of male intellectuals.
And as Williams goes about his investigation, beside race, his focus is the
male experience of the protagonist, “manhood” being central to the Black
Nationalist ideology underpinning the novel. The complex interrelations
between nationality, race, gender, sexuality, and power that the history of the
United States has engendered are exposed in Max’s sexual relationships,
especially those with white women, and crystallize in his marriage to Dutch
Margrit. While the patriarchal ideology of the novel does not distinguish it
from the American Old World journey narrative, the circumstance that Max
Reddick is not affirmed as an American does. In a cruel irony, the mental
and moral “growth,” that is maturation, that Max experiences has a physical
parallel in the progression of his fatal cancer.

Querying “America” from the point of view of a domestic Other, African
American John A. Williams’s novel foregrounds the racial foundation of
American identity, a crucial aspect not dealt with in the other novels dis-
cussed in my study. To allude to Toni Morrison, this dimension has tended
to be invisible in American literature. Like Set This House on Fire and Fear
of Flying, this novel protests against a repressive aspect of American society
but the protest here is explicit, not to say raging. The title reflects the pro-
test theme: the African American male’s self-assertive and rebellious claim
to full status as a subject in the national community. And this demand, as
“Man” in the title and the protagonist’s phallic family name Reddick indi-
cate, is primarily made on the grounds of masculinity – a circumstance that

110 Focussing and commenting on both historical and contemporary events and public figures
(such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and John F. Ken-
nedy), The Man Who Cried I Am is an overtly political text. Considering all Williams’s work
to be political, Jerry H. Bryant identifies The Man Who Cried I Am as Williams’s most politi-
cal novel and the one in which he most successfully combines art and a political agenda.
Bryant notes that this is probably also Williams’s most personal novel as there are clear par-
allels between the professional career of Max Reddick and that of Williams himself. Just like
his protagonist, Williams has been deeply engaged with issues of national identity throughout
his career.

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makes Williams’s novel representative of the more militant strands of the African American movement in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{111}

The African American Male and the Bildungsroman

The recognition of Max Reddick as a symbolic character, the African American male intellectual, is fundamental to my reading of the novel. Insight into Max’s character traits is a prerequisite for understanding how his experiences of and reactions to the European encounters signify. If he is understood as a representative African American intellectual, his experiences take on an extended, metaphorical significance. Noting the symbolic function of Max, Gilbert A. Muller considers him “a form of historical man” (74), and William M. Burke explains that Max “has a dual significance: he is a private, fictional character with his own personal drama; and he is a representative figure, a man who is caught in the public drama of our historical era” (5-6).\textsuperscript{112}

As I will argue below, Williams drew, in order to underscore the representative function of his protagonist, on two male ideals: firstly the “Race Man,” a model of the twentieth-century African American intellectual, and secondly the rebel figure of the “Black Macho,” a product of the Black Nationalist movement. These two ideals have been examined by feminists Hazel V. Carby and Michelle Wallace respectively, who stress the centrality of the concept of masculinity to both role models. To my mind, Williams gives Max certain qualities that relate him to these two ideals; initially, Max is depicted as a “Race Man” and, as the novel draws to a close, his actions of defiance confirm him as a “Black Macho.” It should be pointed out, however, that he is not a hero figure; the depiction of his flaws testifies to Williams’s intention to emphasize his human qualities.

The figure of the “Race Man” served African Americans as a ground for their claim to status as American citizens and national subjects, as Carby’s discussion shows. In the black male community, conformation to the “Race Man” ideal is perceived as the royal road to full American citizenship. This

\textsuperscript{111} Many critics have recognized \textit{The Man Who Cried I Am} as a Black Nationalist statement. Addison Gayle Jr. also sees it as an example of the “Black Esthetic” (Way 380). Max’s story fictionally represents an individual’s change of faith from a moderate to a revolutionary position, “accept[ing] the militant program of Minister Q [Malcolm X] over the more moderate one of Paul Durrell [Martin Luther King]” (337). This shift in African American literature toward a revolutionary stance, C.W. E. Bigsby notes, is first evident in James Baldwin’s \textit{The Fire Next Time} (1962), and subsequently in the works of John A. Williams, John Oliver Killens, and William Melvin Kelley.

\textsuperscript{112} Surveying history from the 1940s and onwards and placing it in an international context, \textit{The Man Who Cried I Am} can be aligned with other contemporary African American texts, like Richard Wright’s \textit{White Man, Listen!} (1957), that sought to present history from a black perspective.
representative figure, a “social type,” was a product of the black struggle for “race consciousness, race pride, and race solidarity,” serving to challenge the white conception of the African American as a second-class citizen, according to Carby (4). Typically, the “Race Man” constitutes “an aggressive demonstration of . . . superiority in some field of achievement” (4). Carby reads W.E.B. Du Bois as a prominent example of a self-created “Race Man” and race leader, exceptional yet representative, who devotes himself to furthering the cause of African Americans by offering himself as exemplary, successful intellectual. In this manner, his self-interest serves not only the black community but also the national community, since, to Du Bois, African Americans represent the essence of America. As Max is a man of letters, he is connected to the tradition of Du Bois that emphasizes the importance of intellectual achievement. Ever since Du Bois, Carby says, masculinity has been significant for African American male activists, whether intellectuals or politicians, albeit in a variety of forms. Max is presented as a masculine man of courage, talent, and integrity and, in his capacity of writer and journalist, even a race leader of sorts – one of the “Talented Tenth,” to borrow a concept from Du Bois. While the “Race Man” struggles peacefully, seeking integration into American society, the stance of the Black Macho is one of violent rebellion and separatism. Wallace argues that the insistence on masculinity was particularly strong during the Black Nationalist movements in the 1960s when the civil rights struggle turned militant. The Black Macho is a superman, a physically strong, virile and a potentially violent male who defies white society and dominates women, particularly black women. The gun is the (phallic) symbol of his rebellious power, Wallace writes. At the close of The Man Who Cried I Am, when Max rejects Europe as well as white America, defending himself and his masculinity with a firearm, he conforms to the ideal of the Black Macho.

“[Y]our subject will always be America or Americans’,” Harry Ames, Max’s best friend and fellow African American writer, a European exile, points out (49). Max’s profound preoccupation with “America,” with the advancement of the African American population and with the improvement

113 Du Bois’s insistence on the necessity for the African American male to achieve “manhood” results, according to critics like Carby and Wallace, in the Othering of the African American female – a process which alienates black men from black women. According to Carby, Du Bois explains the inferior status of the black man in America in terms of his emasculation, an effect of his historical lack of control over the sexual reproduction of African American women. Du Bois, Carby says, projects the guilt onto African American women, considering them to have “betrayed” the black man (33) – a conclusion that I personally cannot find sufficient support for in The Souls of Black Folk. In Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1978), Wallace argues that the weaknesses of the militant struggle were this obsession with “manhood” and the sexist attitudes, particularly toward African American women – weaknesses that contributed to its failure. In her 1990 introduction, she adds that the failure and disappearance of the Black Power Movement cannot be explained solely by these weaknesses but also by political repression (xxi).
of American democracy, aligns him with the major trend of the civil rights movement represented by Du Bois. In his devotion to America and in his subscription to liberal ideology and civic/rational nationalism, Max is a patriot. Actually, these traits make Max Reddick the ideal representative of the ideological stance of the black civil rights movement up until the late 1960s. To him, Americanness is tied to a set of ideas of democracy, justice, and equal opportunity whose realization he wants to work for. That the New York African American newspaper he writes for is called *The Harlem Democrat* is a comment on Max’s ambition to improve American society. He channels his progressive drive into his work as a reflecting journalist/novelist devoted to the African American cause. In this capacity and as a commentator on the social effects of white racism, he is reminiscent of the white lawyer named Max in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, defending the prototypical African American male, Bigger Thomas. Unlike the lawyer in Wright’s novel, however, Max is not a Communist, but, like him, he occupies a dissident position vis-à-vis dominant white society. As a journalist, he is particularly well suited to observe and comment. Ames actually recognizes Max as an observer rather than a doer: “That’s what you are, Max, a noticer, a digger of scenes. Max the Digger; Max the man” (229). The significance of “red” in his last name Reddick is not obvious as Max is not a left-wing sympathizer. Possibly, it refers to the radical stance he ultimately adopts. It may also be read as a sign of his energy, his anger and his will to act — traits that make him a recognizably American individualist hero. And Max does channel his energy into his work, attempting, in many ways, to improve “America.”

Serving the African American community is not Max’s sole ambition, however. Like Du Bois in Carby’s reading, he is just as concerned with making a career, with realizing the dream of success so central in American mythology. Measured against the model of the exclusive character of the national community outlined in the first chapter of this study (white, male and middle-class), his efforts at social advancement can be read as grounded in a desire to assume the position of the American Self. As we shall see, these ambitions form part of Max’s consciousness; ultimately, they lead to his destruction. Pursuing a career as college-educated journalist and writer, he aims for the middle-class life: a secure financial situation, a bourgeois nuclear family and political agency.

Quite clearly, the novel presents Max as a masculine character, using a discourse both masculinist and sexist. By depicting him as a good hunter and brave soldier, heavily foregrounding his male gaze, sexist attitudes, and a heterosexual love life described in great detail, Williams underscores this masculinity. Max consistently sets a male gaze onto the women he meets, evaluating them according to looks. That the recurrent listings of various sexual conquests are not exposed as cynical and exploitative but rather pre-
sented as merits reinforces the strongly masculinist stance of the text. To further foreground Max’s masculine qualities he is frequently contrasted to Ames, who is not as good a shot, and who lacks experience of war. “[B]eing a man, was still tied to being at war,” Max concludes, as he reflects on Ames’s envy of his army experience (78). In this way, the text underscores the desirability of Max’s macho style. And the scene in which Max listens to the confessions of a white male colleague with impotence problems fills the same function: to emphasize the protagonist’s virility. There is, however, also a suggestion to the effect that his pursuit of white women is symptomatic of a false consciousness – an issue I will return to below.

Charting Max’s life, Williams demonstrates the injustice of a system that is oppressive and discriminatory, and excludes an individual of superior qualities solely on the basis of race. By portraying an exemplary and worthy male individual and exposing him to injustice and exclusion, Williams inducts the inequity of the American system. Max’s experiences show that he is barred, not merely from realizing the “American Dream,” but from every political agency in American society; at every stage of his career and private life Max is exposed to racial discrimination. In New York, where, in his early career, he works as a journalist and novelist, both his professional and personal life are hampered by discrimination, preventing him from making the brilliant career which would otherwise have been his. Although he is a published writer, his books are compartmentalized as “black fiction”; reviewers never relate them to works by white authors in the larger category of “American” writers. And when he serves in World War II, in Italy, he experiences Army segregation, a form of institutionalized racism based on the assumption that African Americans make second-class soldiers. White society deprives Max not only of a secure financial situation, but also of the family he desires, that white middle-class ideal and social unit symbolizing the nation. At the critical moment when he and his pregnant girlfriend Lillian want a secure middle-class family life, he is, due to the racism of prospective employers, unable to find work. Prompted by Max’s poor prospects, Lillian has an illegal abortion and dies as a consequence. Further on, in the late 1950s/early 1960s, Max benefits from the liberal trend in American society and is offered employment by important magazines. One of the fine opportunities offered him, that he accepts, is work as a correspondent in Africa; another is work as a White House speechwriter in Washington, D.C. In this latter position he finds himself consistently ignored and silenced. The President gives civil rights issues a low priority and, what is worse, in fear of white racism, refrains from enforcing existent anti-discrimination legislation. Having resigned his assignment in protest, Max returns to the magazine but his career advancement is modest compared to that of his white colleagues.

114 The list of Max’s mistresses, their physical attributes and oddities in bed, is a representative example of the misogynist tendency of the text (175).
Max’s experiences, personal as well as professional, amount to a chain of disappointments with white Americans, but it is his final journey to Europe that confirms his alienation from American society. Ironically, not even his various professional successes liberate him from the strangling grasp of white oppression – they merely tighten the noose around his neck. Unlike that of the classic Bildungsheld, Max’s story does not conform to the conventional European/American pattern of an individual’s gradual integration into society; on the contrary, it illustrates the degree of the protagonist’s exclusion from the American national community. In accordance with the basic tragic pattern of circularity that Roger Rosenblatt locates in African American literature, Max’s life story reflects the general African American experience, according to which neither formal education nor a professional career results in liberation from racial oppression (19).

The progress of Max’s cancer parallels his accumulating experiences of racial repression. As Anneliese H. Smith puts it in her article “A Pain in the Ass: Metaphor in John A. Williams’ The Man Who Cried I Am,” throughout his adult life his “rectum absorbs the ache of his experience” (25). And while the development of Max’s rectal cancer is a metaphor for white oppression and exclusion, it also symbolizes his own involvement with the white American system, as David Henderson, for one, has pointed out. At the end of his life, Max has lost his faith in people, in politics, and even in his own work; as he returns to Europe only the cancer from which he suffers remains constant: “He was sure of one thing: that he was; that he existed. The pain in his ass told him so” (18). As this rectal cancer finally deprives him of his potency, it illustrates the “total exploitation of the black man by white society,” to speak with Robert E. Fleming (23). By denying him political agency and status as the head of a family, those fundaments of American “manhood,” dominant society effectively emasculates him. Even the series of medical treatments that he has to undergo constitutes a form of white racist abuse with homosexual overtones, suggesting an attack on his heterosexual masculinity. Despite all the qualities making him a “Race Man,” Max is shown as a character unrightfully disempowered by white American society.

That Max is a traveler would seem to suggest a certain agency, and it also reflects the fact that, in his adult life, he goes back and forth between the African American community and white society. It adds to the built-in irony of the plot that his agency is revealed to have been illusory. Max’s journeys to Europe (and to Africa) allow the author to investigate the origins of the protagonist’s identity – as an American and an African American. Quite in conformity with the Bildungsroman genre, journeys, domestic as well as

115 In the logic of masculinist ideology, the novel contains a fair amount of homophobia, most obviously manifest in the mock-historical anecdote of the extra-terrestrial, and hence non-human, origin of gay men (188-90).
foreign, mark stages in Max’s development; each journey contributes to the novel’s investigation into the workings of racism in American society. The difference is that his experiences form a negative pattern, where romantic dreams turn into nightmares, life is transformed into death, and where, up close, the lofty palaces in the distance prove to be decayed ruins. Max’s trajectory conforms to a pattern of disillusion as regards white culture in general and white American society in particular. When the novel comes to an end in Holland, he has lost all hope regarding the possibility of the integration of black people into European or American society. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the final framing journey epitomizes the pattern of Max’s life. As it leads ever deeper into whiteness, the return to Europe becomes a metaphor for his involvement, and therefore also entrapment, in white American ideology and culture.

The Old World:
A Continent of Liberation or White Power?

When Max arrives in Europe on his final journey, the full extent of the implications of his relation to this continent as an African American has not yet been revealed. Max’s own attitude to Europe is one of ambivalence: on the one hand, to him, as to most of his contemporary fellow African Americans, it is a zone of freedom, a haven away from American racism, but, on the other, he is fully aware of racism there. From his previous experience as an expatriate writer in Paris he also knows that Europe hardly comes up to the idealized and romanticized image African Americans tend to entertain about it. But what he discovers on this particular trip will make it painfully clear that Europe, the cultural origin of the United States, is, essentially, a continent of white power. And if the cultural roots of “America” are in Europe, the Old World, it follows that white power is inherent to “America” too.

That the novel’s opening scene, an arrival scene of sorts, finds the protagonist in Europe, in an outdoor café in Amsterdam, where he awaits his estranged Dutch wife, tells us that the Old World setting will be important for the novel. But this arrival scene differs from most other arrival scenes in the genre of journey narratives. Unlike his literary predecessors and contemporaries who are, practically invariably, young adults, Max is middle-aged and this trip is made at the very end of his life. Max’s European journey, then, is not an adventure that he engages in prior to a professional career and to family-building. And while the other male protagonists discussed in this study go to Europe in search of Bildung, work or pleasure, the conventional motives for going on an Old World journey, Max travels there solely to be reunited with a friend and a lover. Dying from rectal cancer, he has returned
to Europe to say goodbye to his exiled close friend Harry Ames – who turns out to have died suddenly, just before Max got to Paris – and to be reconciled to his wife. In other words, contrary to the protagonists of the other novels of this study, Max does not actively go in search of the Old World. One might say that his ending up in Europe is in line with the life-style of his past, aiming for integration and success in the white world. This journey, which he knows is his last one, triggers his reminiscences of the past. That he is in Europe when thinking back on his life also holds significance because, removed from his home country, his everyday life, he achieves a greater distance to the past than he would have in the United States; this distance allows him to discern the patterns of his life.

Framing a number of flash-backs of Max’s past, the arrival scene not only presents the protagonist but also foregrounds an issue central to my reading: his ambivalence concerning Holland and Europe. Unlike Peter Leverett, Cass Kinsolving or Peter Levi, Max looks at Amsterdam with a certain degree of suspicion. This attitude aligns him with Isadora whose Jewishness makes her relation to the German-speaking countries problematic. As domestic Others, marginalized Americans, they can never be as comfortable in their national identity as can Americans belonging to dominant society. The Dutch setting epitomizes the contradictory associations with which Europe is connected in Max’s mind – the Netherlands being known for a history of liberal political and religious policies, yet also once an important colonial power, and the one that began the slave trade. Discussing the arrival scene, I will consider it a locus of the intersection, as well as conflict, of various discourses, some of which are grounded in dominant ideologies.

When Max identifies himself as the descendant of the first African slaves brought to Virginia and considers his presence in Holland in terms of defiance of the culture responsible for initiating the slave trade, he uses an African American discourse that seeks to counter white perceptions of superiority. While this discourse, which allows Max to view himself as liberated, is empowering, it is not a dominant one: “Ah yes, he thought, you Dutch motherfuckers. I’ve returned. ‘A Dutch man o’warre that sold us twenty negars,’ John Rolfe wrote, Well, you-all, I bring myself. Free! Three hundred and forty-five years after Jamestown. Now . . . how’s that for the circle come full?” (4). Ironically, although his own European journey will actually prove to be the closing of a circle, it is one that will show that he still occupies the oppressed position of his ancestors.

As he sips a Pernod and watches the busy afternoon Amsterdam scene, where business is closing and people are returning home from work, Max

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116 A possible intertext to The Man Who Cried I Am is LeRoi Jones’s play Dutchman (1964) – a title alluding to the Western legacy of slavery. Pivoting on the infected issue of interracial sex and love, it dramatizes the insidious provocation and expulsion of the young intellectual and rebellious African American from American society.
adopts, for a moment, the pose of the American tourist or even expatriate artist, and, at this moment, he does use a hegemonic discourse: that of tourism. The fact that, on this final return to Amsterdam, Max Reddick is staying at the hotel “The American” underscores his nationality (10). This name, the title also of one of Henry James’s international novels, suggests Max’s status as a tourist – albeit quite unlike Christopher Newman, secure in his role as American capitalist. Watching the city, Max makes the following comment to Margrit: “It remains constant, doesn’t it?” (16). Viewed in this way, Amsterdam comes across as belonging to the quaint European past: “He marveled as they sipped their drinks, how in Amsterdam, except when you headed a little south, all that was new had been built around the old, had not overwhelmed the narrow, steeply gabled houses, nor the canals” (16-17). The eternally flowing canals of the city suggest the static character of the European setting, a setting Max links to his Dutch wife Margrit whom he associates with the canals: “He always thought of the canals when he thought of her. Now they would be reflecting with aching clarity the marvelous painter’s sky. The barges and boats would be on the way in, and soon the ducks and swans would be tucking their necks in to sleep” (4). That he should conceive of her in such a way suggests that, in his eyes, she is part of this esthetically pleasing and indeed picturesque foreign and antiquated cityscape; in other words, in this instance, his view of Margrit is a manifestation of an American tourist gaze.

Max the tourist is able to imagine himself as occupying a power position. As he watches the Dutch female bicycle riders passing by the café, he turns on them the (eroticizing) male gaze:

... Max looked appreciatively at the female cyclists. The men were so average. He quickly dismissed them. The girls were something else again, big-legged and big-buttocked. (Very much like African women, Max thought.) They pedaled past, their chins held high, their knees promising for fractions of seconds only, a flash of white above the stockingtops and then, the view imminent, the knees rushed up and obscured all view. (3)

The figure of Margrit, who can be grouped with those sturdy and sensual female Dutch bike riders, embodies the white European culture that both attracts and repels Max as an African American male. Like many other Dutch, Margrit is blond, a characteristic that seems to epitomize white culture to Max: “(How he had hated that robust blondness at first . . . . The blondness had been so much like that of the Swedish blondes, jazz freaks who lived on jazz concerts, who saw the black musicians in their staged cool postures; but how he had been attracted to it as well!)” (5). As the quote illustrates, he entertains an ambivalent attitude to blondness; as a sign of whiteness it both repels him and exercises an irresistible power over him.
The text thus exposes his conflicting feelings about Europe, emotions Max is able to distance himself from by imagining himself an American tourist or expatriate artist in the Old World.

Previously in his life, as he spent a year writing in Paris, Europe had indeed enabled him, at least partially and temporarily, to forget the implications of being black in a white society. He went abroad to join his friend Harry Ames, modeled on exile Richard Wright, who left the United States to escape racism and political intolerance, and found a degree of freedom in Europe. What *The Man Who Cried I Am* says about Max’s expatriate experience may be seen in the context of the history of African Americans in Paris. In the first half of the twentieth century, as Stovall’s historical survey shows, the French environment gave black people a sense of liberation. The seemingly color-blind Paris atmosphere increased their desire for a radical change of racial conditions at home. As the quote below illustrates, Europe seemed to provide a refuge from racism, because social relations between the races were different there.

Gone now was their [white Americans’] self-assurance that an entire nation was behind whatever they chose to do or say to a Negro. If a Negro was with a French woman, the white Americans might glare or ignore them altogether; some rankling embarrassment kept them from seeking any middle ground. White Americans who at home would not be caught dead trying to smile at a Negro, did so in Paris when recognizing a Negro as an American by his dress, and often, very often, they were cut dead. Smile at me at home, the sullen Negroes seemed to be saying, not in Paris. In Paris I don’t have to give a good goddamn about you. (227)

Max recognizes that, in France, where racism is not institutionalized and formalized, white Americans are deprived of the racial superiority the American context gives, and African Americans dare to oppose their gaze, thereby defying their power. While white Americans recognize their African American compatriots abroad, their awkward responses demonstrate that they do not accept them as equal members of the national community: their position is marginal.

As an expatriate writer Max could even enjoy the position of male American tourist. As manifest in the quote below, he appreciated France for what it could offer him in terms of pleasure. Here an American tourist discourse intersects with a male one. As he once thought to himself during his expatriate year in Paris: “Time for hunting in the fall; he would be disappointed if French pheasant and duck were as similar to American pheasant and duck as French women were to American women. A change in locale did not make

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117 The name vaguely suggests Henry James, the American expatriate and literary forefather of the Old World journey narrative.

118 For a history of African Americans in Paris, see Michel Fabre or Tyler Stovall.
Max lose perspective; a woman was not better in bed simply because she was French. The same did not apply to French wines, however; they were better” (225). The metaphor of the hunt and his equation of birds, women, and wines demonstrate that Max approaches women in the way he does with birds and wines, as objects to be captured, possessed, and indeed consumed.

But his view of African American expatriate life in Paris, and Europe, is hardly unequivocally positive. The shift in the African American perception of Europe toward a more negative attitude, taking place in the 1960s, something Stovall describes, is clearly manifest in The Man Who Cried I Am, a product of this decade. At this time the awareness of French racism was growing as a result of the great influx of North African immigrants to France. As he observes African Americans in Paris in the 1950s, Max notes that their lives are difficult, most of them surviving on menial odd jobs. The young, in particular, risk having their romantic illusions of Paris broken.

He admired the youngsters. Starve in Paris first, rather than in New York where you’d starve and get your ass kicked too. He hoped Paris changed very slowly, so the kids wouldn’t see that it was becoming in many ways very much like home. Then they’d do all right, those kids. But none of them would be Josephine Bakers or Redtops; the French were over their black exoticism. (227-28)

As Max’s observations suggest, unlike in the United States, interracial love relationships were tolerated in Europe. This is a significant issue in the context of The Man Who Cried I Am, because, engaging with the American history of white supremacy, the ideological dimension of sexual relationships is inescapable. The complexities of nationality, race, and sex are particularly visible in Max’s marriage to Dutch Margrit. Her womanhood and her Europeanness make her a female and European Other over whom Max has superiority as an American male of the post-World-War-II period. Margrit’s attraction to Max undoubtedly stems from her childhood memories from the war.119 As the liberating allied forces entered the city of Groningen at the end of World War II, Margrit greeted them waving the American flag. In a gesture of benevolence a big black soldier picked her up and gave her candy. This superiority or, otherwise expressed, power status, of the American in

119 During the war, African American soldiers enjoyed a position of power vis-à-vis white Europeans. That the hierarchy between black and white was superseded by that between American and European during World War II is illustrated in one of the most ideologically saturated sexual scenes occurring during the Italian campaign, when Max purchases sexual services from a destitute Italian woman. In this situation Max, as a conquering male American soldier, is superior to a civilian Italian woman (86). The scene also illustrates how war brutalizes even a basically good person like Max. In an act of sublimation, triggered by his guilt, Max, the writer, later transforms this brutal incident into a love story between a black soldier and an innocent Italian peasant girl – one that ends tragically when they are both killed by white American MPs for the racial transgression of their relationship (89).
the eyes of the European also accounts for Margrit’s fascination with Max, which she herself finds a “mystery” (27).

As soon as the married couple encounters Americans, Max’s superiority vis-à-vis Margrit is annulled. Margrit’s whiteness inevitably places him in a position of inferiority and vulnerability, a fact that becomes obvious when, as married and settled in the United States, they become the target of racist attacks. Max’s marriage to Margrit forces him to be on constant guard to defend himself; in other words, it amounts to a declaration of war against white American men who will respond with attacks on his masculinity, his “manhood.”120 Max’s marriage to a white European woman can be read as a sophisticated trap set up by white hegemony because it gives white American men a pretext for attacking him. The fact that Margrit is something of a surrogate for the lost love of his life, Lillian Patch, seems to suggest that a conspiratorial force is somehow involved. Indeed, it is Margrit’s resemblance to the deceased Lillian in both physiognomy and personality that draws Max to her. She seems a “bleached Lillian,” as he remarks (280). To my mind, the affectionate relationship between Max and Margrit that frames the novel is deeply ironic and tragic. Holding this view, I differ from critics like Burke and Anneliese Smith who read it optimistically, in terms of the idea that love can conquer all the violence and cruelty of the world. Instead, I argue that Max’s interaction with white women is symbolic of his involvement in white culture at large: throughout his life, this involvement merely aggravates his containment in white ideology. Viewed against this background, the failure of the interracial marriage between black Max and white Margrit is predetermined – not due to any lack of love but to the forces of white American racism which structure the conditions of life in contemporary society. The failure of their marriage clearly reinforces the novel’s pessimistic exposure of the power of American whiteness as a social force that tragically poisons all aspects of life – including sincere love relationships.

When Max first hears about Harry Ames’s plans to move to Europe, he reacts with immediate scepticism: “‘Why run to Europe? There are more white people there than here. They haven’t built ovens here yet; I keep hearing about concentration camps, but I’ve never seen one here. What is this, with all you niggers running off to Europe? Man, don’t you know they started this shit that we’re stuck in?’” (124). And as Max reads a letter from his friend in Paris, he debates the question of whether Europe may provide a haven away from racist oppression: “Maybe that was the answer, Paris, Europe. White people, sure, but maybe a different kind of white people” (156). He immediately rejects the idea however. “No, don’t believe it. Dump

120 This conflict between black and white men, pivoting on masculinity, is an important theme in The Man Who Cried I Am and it is often connected to the practice of lynching. For a comment on the historical context of this practice, see Chapter One.
five hundred thousand niggers on Paris streets and it’d become just like New York” (156). In the end, the text proves that his reaction against the notion of Europe as a zone of liberation was sound. His comment was perceptive, because Europe turns out to be a continent of latent racism instead of a refuge from American repression. Europeans tolerate black people simply because there are so few of them. In light of what Harry’s files will reveal, however, Max’s rejection of the idea of American concentration camps proves mistaken.

The Closed Road – the Dead End

What Max learns about America in the last hours of his life, as he reads the documents Harry Ames has left for him, definitely deprives him of any “innocence” regarding white racism. These documents prove that Europe and America are both continents of white power. They also show that the power position that he imagined himself to have as he arrived in Holland – manifest in his tourist, American, and male gazes – was illusory.

In describing the structure of the novel, C. Lynn Munro identifies the final, fourth, part as “unravel[ing] Max’s role in history making,” the previous three parts having traced his exposure to racism and his attempts to counter it through writing and political activism (85). Important to this final phase of the story is his discovery of Harry’s documents, proving the existence not only of the worldwide Alliance Blanc, an international white conspiracy to keep colored peoples under Western hegemony, but also of the King Alfred122 plan, a scheme for the incarceration and extermination of the African American population in the event of nationwide racial upheaval.123 The letter

121 Part One depicts, Munro says, “the pervasive racism of America,” and Part Two and Three, Max’s “progressive involvement with American politics, his subsequent disillusionment with democratic processes, and his rejection of the African alternative” (83).
122 Most likely referring to the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred or “Alfred the Great” (849-99), the name of the conspiracy illustrates its grounding in white European history. King Alfred served an important role in the founding of what would become England, in terms of territory, administration, and ideology, and he successfully defended England against Danish conquest. He also promoted academic endeavors and worked for the spread of English literacy, one product of his reign being The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.
123 Suggesting an analogy to the German mass murder of Jews in World War II, the text points to a historical pattern of genocide in the Western world. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin writes that, as an African American with experience of white racism, he was not as astounded by the holocaust in Germany as were white Americans. A similar systematic extermination could take place in America, Baldwin suggests. It would be the logical extension of the contemporary murder of African Americans “little by little and catch-as-catch-can” (75).
also makes it clear that Harry’s sudden death was actually a murder\(^{124}\) and that he was killed for his knowledge of the Alliance and the King Alfred plan. The revelation of these plans, unveiling international conspiracies, may strike the reader as too pat a plot resolution. But, to speak with Robert E. Fleming, the Alliance Blanc and the King Alfred plan can be understood in terms of a “gothic element” in an otherwise realistic novel. Williams employs them,” Fleming explains, to underscore “the frightening social conditions” in America and their psychological effect on African Americans (187).

Max’s discovery of the King Alfred plan, revealing the “truth” about the African American condition, takes place in a Dutch house, a setting that, as we shall see, turns from romantic to gothic. This is the place where Ames’s documents will be handed over to Max by Harry Ames’s French mistress Michelle who has asked him to come see her because she has an urgent message to convey. Max’s arrival at Michelle’s house in Leiden, a carefully depicted scene, emphasizes the antiquity of the setting, reminding the reader that this is the Old World. It may be noted that while the Amsterdam café scene places Max in a public space associated with a degree of freedom, the setting in the Leiden house connotes circumscription and enclosure: a change which parallels Max’s gradually growing awareness of the fact that white society not only excludes him but actually imprisons him. For example, just before identifying Michelle’s house, he passes “a weatherbeaten wooden windmill” (143), a detail signaling the antiquarian character of the Dutch location. Yet the immediate addition “(left for the tourists)” indicates an awareness of the American myth of Europe as a romantic world (143). The emphasis on olfactory and auditory impressions makes Max’s approach to the house particularly vivid: “He breathed the scents of spring, the water in the canals, the fresh blooming trees, the noontime cooking and, faintly, the exhaust fumes of cars. He heard the lock on the garden door snap open and he pushed at the ancient, browned slab of wood” (143-44). The multitude of fragrant bushes and flowers almost obscuring “the old stone house” underscores the picturesque character of the setting as it is reminiscent of ruins overgrown with grass and flowers (144). The proximity of the canal and the age of the house dating from the time of the Napoleonic wars contribute to the depiction of a European scene defined by its timelessness. Only the smell of cars reminds the reader that it is contemporary.

It is in this Old World setting, in the upstairs bedroom of the old Leiden stone house, while he is reading the documents left to him by Ames, that most of the narrative flashbacks take place. These documents emphatically bring home to Max, and to the reader, that as an African American his posi-

\(^{124}\) For a long time, particularly among African Americans, rumor had it that Wright had been murdered by the American government, Stovall writes, adding that, today, critics consider such a scenario unlikely (221).
tion is one of oppression and imprisonment. This insight is accompanied by the transformation of the setting. The house that from the outside had looked both quaint and romantic actually turns out to be claustrophobic. “[S]hut up in an upstairs bedroom that had beams in the ceiling” (273) and an “oaken floor” (204), he finds himself in an old rustic house, in a place in which he feels enclosed. While demonstrating the universality of racial oppression, the nature of American racism comes across as particularly vicious. As Ames writes: “All this Alliance business is pretty pallid shit compared to what the Americans have come up with” (319). Harry’s documents make it obvious that Europe is not, and never was, a refuge from American racism; they demonstrate that the Old World, the cultural origin of the United States, is a continent of white power.

Reading Harry’s papers causes Max to wonder about the forces that have brought him to this Dutch house and placed him in the present predicament; it triggers his reflection on the implications of being African American in a world run by whites.

What was he doing in Leiden, in Holland, a white land eight hours by jet away from that limitless black continent from which his forebears had been dragged centuries ago? Why in this white land east of a white land that could no longer call itself purely white, for in fact it had never been that? And here Harry was, cremated only hours ago, trying to tell him something about color and what it had done and what it was doing. Black Harry who had loved white Charlotte and white Michelle. Why in Leiden? He thought of Margrit, white Margrit and himself, black Max. That was why he was in the Netherlands and, indirectly, why he was in Leiden shut up in an upstairs bedroom that had beams in the ceiling – because Margrit was white and he was black. (273)

As the quote above demonstrates, complexities of race, love, and sex account for his presence in Leiden,125 Holland, Europe. Sitting in that upstairs bedroom, the property of a European woman, Max himself links his entrapment in white culture to his affairs with white women. As he is acutely aware, African American men have tended to internalize the white male idea of blacks as oversexed and obsessively interested in the white woman, coded as sexually pure and passive: “many black men ha[ve] not yet jettisoned what the white man had said about them and the white woman” (340).126 Ironically, for all their consciousness, Max and Harry have walked into the trap. He once conceded to Harry that the bedroom is not the setting where an

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125 Although Williams never alludes to the significance of the Dutch town of Leiden in the early history of the American nation, it may be noted that the “Pilgrim Fathers,” founders of the first settlement in Plymouth, took refuge at the University of Leiden prior to their voyage to America on the “Mayflower.”

126 For a discussion of the complex psychological dimensions for black men of interracial romantic and sexual relationships with white women, see Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1952).
African American learns about politics: “‘[S]leeping with white women isn’t the whole thing. You can learn the men from them, though, but you’ve got to see them in action, the white boys. These guys run the world . . . ’” (212). This comment, which recalls Wallace’s critique of the “Black Macho” ideal,\textsuperscript{127} testifies to his awareness of the fact that the sexual conquest of white European women does not imply the conquest of economic and political power. Ironically, the location in which Max learns the ultimate truth about American politics is, quite literally, a white woman’s bedroom.

Max’s progress from ignorance to knowledge, in a sense from innocence to experience, is dramatically enhanced by changes in the scenery outside. The picturesque Dutch scene seems to turn sinister and intimidating; outside, the canal is “dark green . . . Placid. Ugly anyplace else” (382). The previously pretty surroundings turn ominous: “In the sky, gray cloud tumbled over gray cloud, and small trees bent before the rising wind, and flapped their leaves” (394). The look of the eternal, slowly flowing canals suggests the static character of Europe, and the darkening skies and windy weather foreboding a storm indicate the coming of sinister events. And as Max prepares to leave Leiden, what he sees, “star[ing] out at the canal – the waters were now black,” provides the setting of what will, inevitably, follow from his reading of the documents left by Ames (394).

Ironically, although he has inverted the triangle of the slave trade by coming to Holland, Europe, it becomes obvious to Max that he is still confined within white hegemony, symbolized by the ancient Dutch house. This Dutch attic-like room situated on a canal recalls the Amsterdam house in which the young Jewish girl Anne Frank hid from the Nazis. That building, misspelled the “Anna” Frank house (30, 342), is mentioned twice as having a depressing effect on Max.\textsuperscript{128} Metaphorically speaking, he has never been let out of the old house of white racism – but at this point the imprisonment that the black individual suffers in white society takes a decidedly concrete form. Max’s experiences bear out what he has actually known for a long time: that American democracy is flawed and based on the consistent exclusion of African Americans. Now, however, he is not only able to confront the truth about the white American conspiracy but, finally, to take action.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Deluded by white supremacist ideology, Wallace says, black men have actually internalized its understanding of power – having adopted the idea that the possession of the white woman is synonymous with the appropriation of power (24-26). In other words, by conflating the symbol of white power, the white woman, with the actual possession of economic and political power, black men are victims of fallacious reasoning.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Throughout \textit{The Man Who Cried I Am}, an analogy is established between the fate of Jews in Europe and African Americans in the United States, particularly well exemplified by the American King Alfred plan aiming at the imprisoning and extermination of the black American population. Significantly, two of Max’s best friends are Jewish: his one-time lover Regina and the critic Zutkin whose idealist engagement in the work of African American writers is motivated by the conviction that two minorities, both exposed to the threat of Anglo-Saxon culture, must support each other.
\end{itemize}
And Max had known this for the better part of his life; but it was only now, no longer vulnerable to the dangers of that life, that he not only saw it quite visibly, but could act on it because King Alfred and Alliance Blanc had form and face and projection. Before, all was nebulous; there were few names and places and the form was so all-pervading that it seemed formless. But now the truth literally had been placed in Max’s lap. That truth told him that change could no longer be imperceptible, without cataclysm. Permanence was imperfection. (386)

Remembering the exhortation to violent resistance he has heard voiced by Minister Q, clearly modeled on Malcolm X, he decides to relay the content of the documents in his possession to this same minister – convinced that this will start a racial war: “Lie about it. Cry about it. I know the truth and can do something about it” (388). He debates the issue with himself and decides: “Yes, it is right, he told himself. What choice is there? None. He was putting an end to the peace in which Negroes died one at a time in Southern swamps or by taking cops’ bullets, the dying from overwork and underpay, praying all the while, looking to the heavens” (389).

Here, in the resolution of the novel, the ideological positions represented by Max and his African American acquaintance, Alfonse Edwards, a government employee, are contrasted. And that of Edwards is clearly condemned by the text. A minor figure in the novel, he serves as an example of someone who has allowed himself to be corrupted by white American supremacist values into betraying the African American community. It may be noted that it was he who performed the execution of Harry Ames. While Max, in different ways, has assumed an oppositional stance vis-à-vis white America, Edwards, as a secret service agent, has adopted the Cold War logic according to which America is best defended by the persecution of dissenters: “The new assignment would be another of what the people back home called dirty, filthy jobs. But those jobs protected America in ways Americans were too childish to realize” (396). In other words, Edwards has opted for blind American patriotism, an ideology coded white.

The scene of Max’s murder is a violent dramatization of the contrast between him and Edwards, assisted by Roger Wilkinson, another African American writer portrayed as a failure and a morally weak character. As Max says: “Roger’s Negro anger was ersatz; ersatz but useful. If he hadn’t been Negro he would have had no reason on earth to raise his voice, or want to write” (29). Having trailed Max on his way back to Amsterdam from Leiden they attack him – on the order of the CIA. This climactic scene takes place beside the road where Max has pulled off to rest, near a turnoff for “Buitenkaag” (400). As “buiten” means “outside,” the name hints at the out-
sider position in which American society puts an African American. But Max has turned this position into a rebellious stance.129

Max’s murderers being African Americans epitomizes the pervasiveness of white American society, permeating and exploding the African American community from within. The moment he realizes the intention of his pursuers he thinks: “This is the final irony. The coming of age, Negro set at Negro in the name of God and Country. Or was it the ultimate trap?” (401). His observation explains the significance of a scene staging both “the final irony” and “the ultimate trap” of the destiny of Max Reddick. His “coming of age” brings home a hard lesson: that not only is white American society set on eliminating African Americans, it also infiltrates deeply into the black community, using credulous black men as instruments.

The significance of the Dutch setting of Max’s murder by two compatriots may not be immediately obvious. It is, however, quite consistent with the logic of the ideology of the text, one that stresses the universal omnipresence of white racism and its origin in Europe. Noting the significance of Max’s dying outside Amsterdam, Priscilla R. Ramsey reads the incident as ironic. Cities and particularly European cities are freedom zones to Max, she says, adding that “what is most ironic about Max and his perceptions of European cities is that he will die in one, not because European authorities kill him but because it is the very historical legacy of slavery and its aftermath which destroy him” (217). As I have attempted to demonstrate, Max’s attitude to Europe has actually always been ambivalent, as he has sensed the racism beneath the liberal surfaces. The end, however, finds him definitely stripped of whatever romantic notions he once entertained.

At the point of his death, Max has lost all faith in white America – a loss which the text has gradually traced; he has found that America’s “true meaning” is neither equal opportunity, freedom, nor democracy, but instead oppression, racism, and totalitarianism. When he is murdered beside a Dutch road by other African Americans on account of his knowledge of the white American conspiracy against colored peoples, his American dream of endless opportunity, of the “open road,” is long gone. To an African American, all roads toward integration into society are closed. Staged on the European scene, Max’s death confirms that a life led according to the norms of dominant American society only takes a black individual to a dead end. As Muller notes, in the winter of his life, “Max Reddick discovers that he has been

129 The struggle that ensues, ending with the murder of Max, through a deadly dose of morphine, pivots around the issue of masculinity. As Edwards probes Max’s rectum for microfilm – yet another act informed by an intention to emasculate the antagonist – his act, a rape of sorts, is a symbolic attack on Max’s “manhood.” Quite predictably, in Gayle’s reading, the final revolt against white America proves Max to be a model African American male character and the novel an example of a Black Esthetic: “For one’s manhood depends, not so much upon success, but upon how tenaciously one wages the fight in behalf of that manhood” (Way 347).
disinherited and that he has no true country” (75). *The Man Who Cried I Am* thus turns out to question the idea of America as a country of the future, of democracy, and progress.\footnote{Thematically, Williams’s documentary reportage of a journey through America, *This Is My Country Too*, made for *Holiday* magazine in 1963, is closely related to *The Man Who Cried I Am*. Recognizing himself as American, Williams “set[s] out in search of an old dream . . . for my America,” but is, particularly in the South, confronted with racial discrimination and harassment. But unlike *The Man Who Cried I Am*, this narrative ends on a hopeful patriotic note: “I am committed to the search, the hope, the challenge, whether I want to be or not, for America has yet to sing its greatest songs” (153). The afterword, written a year later after the murder of civil rights workers in Mississippi, however, suggests a shift toward a more guarded attitude: “Yes it is true that America has yet to sing its greatest songs, but it had better hurry up and find the key to the tunes” (158).}\footnote{\textit{Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light: A Novel of Some Probability} (1969), the novel Williams wrote after *The Man Who Cried I Am*, continues this theme. Set in the near future of 1973, it is an apocalyptic tale ending with race war in America but with the suggestion of a new beginning for the survivors, and, by extension, for a new American nation.} Max’s tragic destiny demonstrates the lack of prospects for a peaceful development of racial relations; the final scenes set in Europe relating his murder instead suggest the inevitability of race war, in one form or another.\footnote{Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light: A Novel of Some Probability (1969), the novel Williams wrote after *The Man Who Cried I Am*, continues this theme. Set in the near future of 1973, it is an apocalyptic tale ending with race war in America but with the suggestion of a new beginning for the survivors, and, by extension, for a new American nation.} Although years before, witnessing murder trials connected to Southern lynchings, Max had concluded that only violent resistance could counter white supremacy, he has not entirely internalized the idea that he formulated then: “[y]ou had to win the way they had won – with blood. Words, petitions, laws, ideas, were not going to be enough” (208).

Ultimately obstructed by American agents, Max’s attempt to spread knowledge about the Alliance Blanc and the King Alfred plan is a futile one – contained in the omnipotent white power structure. The futility of his resistance contributes to the tragic irony of the novel. But Max’s act sets an example. In the logic of the ideology of the text, resistance is the only viable response to oppression. To respond in any other way would be to compromise the human, and male, dignity of the individual African American and his community. Primarily addressed to black male readers, Williams’s story of the plight of the black man seeks to awaken African American readers not only to the necessity of racial awareness, solidarity and unity, but to liberation from the racist norms of white American culture and society. The novel is specific as concerns the identity of its antagonist. As Max concludes: “The enemy today is the believer in Anglo-Saxon updated racial mythology” (387).

Williams’s primary intention is, undoubtedly, to expose the pervasiveness of white hegemony and to present, through Max’s final rebellion, an example of an act of heroic resistance. Chronicling the Bildung of an African American male intellectual, one that slowly and inevitably eats his heart, balls and guts – but also dramatizing his defense of his dignity through an act of revolt – *The Man Who Cried I Am* may be understood in terms of an attempt to convey a lesson: to contribute to the education of the reader, black or white. Fundamental to this education is the rejection of the Old World.
Both literally and symbolically, Max’s final journey to Europe is a dead end. *The Man Who Cried I Am* shows that the European road, that is white culture, leads nowhere, that it is a closed road. But it also suggests, by implication, that an open road, one leading to black empowerment, might be paved if the white road, the one that originates in Europe, is abandoned.

**Turning Away from Europe**

Max’s change of political position, from liberalism to rebellion, illustrates the new direction that the African American political movement took in the late 1960s. Gayle argues, as previously noted, that *The Man Who Cried I Am* exemplifies, through the development of the protagonist, the paradigm shift toward a separatist stance that the black civil rights movement underwent in the late 1960s. The stance Max finally adopts may also be described in terms of a rejection of “whiteness,” that is, white norms and values, and a turn toward the African American alternative of “blackness.” Important to the novel’s protest against white American norms, I argue, is its turn away from Europe. Max’s experience of Europe has proved that racism is built into European and American culture. The conclusion that might be drawn is that as long as American national identity maintains its European connection, that is, its grounding in white culture, African Americans will continue to be oppressed and excluded from the national community.

Analogous to Max’s rejection of Europe is the transformation of Europe as signifier. In the arrival scene on which the novel opens, Max views Holland/Europe with a degree of romantic nostalgia—an attitude that stems from the American myth of Europe. As the novel closes, however, the Old World has taken on overwhelmingly negative connotations. The old buildings that previously had something quaint, almost romantic, about them have now become symbols of a powerful oppressive white order; the Old World ruins that had a picturesque quality now instead signify war and death. And

132 As critics have recognized, Eugene Browning, the protagonist of *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, a black professor of political history, undergoes a similar shift of political persuasion, one catalyzed by a white policeman’s slaughter of a black youth. As revenge, the professor arranges the policeman’s assassination. As the novel closes, his act has provoked a race war where the black American population (the sons of light) struggle against white society (the sons of darkness). However, by making an analogy to Israel, the novel also warns that an oppressed people’s progressive strivings for independence and nation building risks repeating old forms of racial and religious intolerance.

133 Williams’s œuvre follows an analogous pattern, as Gayle writes, moving, “from protest to assertion, from a feeble optimism to a hard-learned reality” (*Way* 336). *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* seems to mark a point where Williams had become pessimistic regarding the peaceful progress of race relations. Munro traces this change of attitude, not only in the novels, but in a number of articles written in 1967 where Williams speaks of the possibility of a devastating civil war, a war which he views apocalyptically: “War will clear our eyes” (qtd. in Munro 84).
the timeless quality of Amsterdam at which Max marveled at the beginning of the text is now read as a sign of its rigid and static character.

As the quote below illustrates, Europe is imagined as a world that does not progress and where there is no room for either ideals or idealism. It is a defeatist approach to life that is described here, one that combines cynicism with the mentality of the victim.

She [Michelle] was European and dying violently was a European habit. All other deaths were commonplace. A European learned by his condition to expect catastrophe and invariably that was exactly what he received. In Europe, a winner was one who bested those common deaths arbitrarily assigned to others. You crawled, kissed behinds, ate merde, and grinned like you loved it. Living was everything. The final fact of death was of no consequence; it was the living while everyone around died that counted. (384-85)

The quote suggests that life in Europe is regressive – a conception that conforms well to a mainstream American cliché regarding the Old World. But, as argued above, the image of Europe presented in the novel is ambivalent – something that is illustrated in the quote below. Here, a black perspective on the white world intersects with an American nationalist ideology. Taken together, these quotes illustrate the complexity of the novel’s image of Europe.

He had come to it [Africa] via Europe, passing from one ancient ruin to the next in growing, ill-concealed irritation, yet drawn inexplicably to the best of the white man in the past. So there were Roman roads, arches, aqueducts and stadia; so there were Greek arches and shattered yellow pillars, sensual religious art and golden ages and statues. What about now, baby, now, while you noble Romans are sitting squat in Fiats and you Greeks have left the Aegean for Brooklyn! (273-74)

As he moves “from one ancient ruin to the next,” Max’s journey from the United States to Europe and then to Africa symbolizes his pilgrimage back in history. “[D]rawn inexplicably to the best of the white man in the past.” Max’s attraction to the Old World is, of course, highly explicable as these signify white power. Yet, as the text suggests, this world has lost its former vitality, power having shifted to a different quarter – to the United States. Today, or so the text says, many Europeans have left for America, which, in the logic of the opposition between the continents, is the site of contemporary life. As modern Italians are described as “sitting squat in Fiats” and contemporary Greeks as caught in Brooklyn, the superior and expansive Europeans of past empires have lost their former power and have, too, been reduced to passivity and inferiority. In the end, Europe (just like Africa) comes across as marked by war, chaos, disease, and decay.

Demonstrating Max’s initial ideological position to be untenable, the novel claims that he must reject the illusion of himself as primarily Ameri-
can, and recognize, first and foremost, his blackness. C.W.E. Bigsby presents a related reading but understands the target of Williams’s critique more narrowly, as a self-ironic comment on the ambiguous role of the black writer in American society. In Bigsby’s words, it is “a mea culpa disguised as militant prophesy” (163). But if Max is understood as a symbolic character, the African American male intellectual, as I hold he should be, Williams’s critique has a general application. I believe he criticizes the life-style of the class of African Americans that Max represents, those who strive for integration into white middle-class society and therefore neglect their black origin.

In the end, the European journey in The Man Who Cried I Am is coded as an act of at least partial disloyalty to African American culture. Throughout Max’s life, his foreign journeys, particularly those to Europe, form part of his striving for a bourgeois life constructed according to white American values. In his study of whiteness and sexuality, Stokes observes that “whiteness isn’t so much the normative structure of racial power as it is the abject, barren, and impotent mark of racial death” (191), and finds, interestingly, this to mark as widely disparate writers as Eldridge Cleaver and nineteenth-century white supremacists. Whiteness has no future, he concludes. It is, in effect, “a dead end” (191). We might conclude that Max Reddick’s Old World journey constitutes the opposite of that regenerating African American journey identified by Jerome E. Thornton, the “paradoxical” one, whereby blacks may find sustenance through immersion in “the Bottom,” the both literal and symbolic space constituted by the African American community and culture. Hence, what Max needs to do is to subordinate his American identity to his African one, taking a separatist stance. Then, he may be able to resolve the conflict inherent in the double-consciousness of African Americans once identified by Du Bois.

The ultimate stance of the novel is hence that rebellion, and complete rejection of white American norms is the only viable option. In other words, The Man Who Cried I Am says that African Americans should not go to

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134 “The Bottom” is the term Thornton uses for this space, a term borrowed from Amiri Baraka (735). This symbolic journey is “paradoxical” because it implies the shedding of one identity for another.

135 African American scholars, writers and artists have frequently given expression to the double nature of the African American experience stemming from their presence in, yet exclusion from, the imagined community of the American nation. Most famously, Du Bois formulated the concept of “double-consciousness,” interestingly enough using the trope of the gaze: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideas in one dark body” (The Souls of Black Folk 45). It follows that any African American treatment of America and American mythology will be fraught by tension. It should be pointed out, however, as does Carby, that Du Bois is referring to the African American male (37). Undoubtedly, the self-consciousness of the African American female is equally complex.
Europe but stay at home participating in the political struggle and in the building of the black community. This view is indeed representative of the dominant African American view at the time of the book’s publication. At one point, when Max’s Dutch wife Margrit suggests they move back to Holland from New York, he formulates the view that the novel eventually also conveys: “I’m not Dutch, baby, I’m an American. What business do I have in Holland with Negroes who won’t face up to what’s really happening here?” (356).
CHAPTER SIX

Mrs. America Abroad:
Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*

I understood then why it is that Paris attracts the tortured, the hallucinated, the great maniacs of love. I understood why it is that here, at the very hub of the wheel, one can embrace the most fantastic, the most impossible theories, without finding them in the least strange; it is here that one reads again the books of his [sic] youth and the enigmas take on new meanings, one for every white hair.

Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

Impressed by the attention of her English lover, the narrator-protagonist Isadora White Wing of *Fear of Flying* exclaims “I feel like Mrs. America at the Congress of Dreams” (78), and in this ironic fashion conjures up an icon in nationalist ideology: the wife. When Isadora takes off in search of self-realization, it may be understood in terms of a rebellion against this oppressive role – and against the circumscriptions of American notions of femininity in general. Her flight culminates in a recognition of herself as an American writer, and she confirms this identity by writing an autobiographical novel about her journey, a travelogue of sorts. To my mind, Isadora’s employment of the journey narrative is instrumental in her progress towards, at least a relative empowerment. Grounded in the Othering of the foreign, most obviously manifest in the use of the gaze, the genre of travel writing enables the female writer to assert herself as a subject and thereby transcend her own Otherhood in the national community, as critics like Mills and Bailey have recognized.

As I argue that the European setting has a crucial symbolic function, I disagree with previous commentary on *Fear of Flying* which tends to either ignore the European setting or to consider it of marginal significance; Gayle Greene, for instance, finds it to be a mere “an exotic backdrop” (88). I believe that the primary function of Isadora’s journey to Europe, the frame for a series of flashbacks into her past, is that it transports the protagonist to a space associated with romanticism, eroticism, and artistic creation. Traveling in Europe, she thus finds herself in a fabled place in American mythology.
and, as tourist, she enters the “liminal zone” where she enjoys a degree of freedom from American society. Running away from her husband, rebelling against the restraints of her ordinary life in America, by temporarily exiting the national community, she is able to define a more independent self – a development which is catalyzed by Adrian Goodlove, the disappointing English lover, a European Other of sorts.

In *Fear of Flying* Jong appropriates the male genre of the Old World journey narrative – particularly the way it was employed by contemporary male authors such as Henry Miller, John Updike, and Philip Roth – and gives it a female inflection. By inserting a woman into the kind of story thus far reserved for male Americans, transposing the figure of the American female from her conventional object position to a subject position, she not only exposes the exclusion of the female from the national Self but also claims space for her. That the idea of a reinscription of the male narrative, its candid treatment of sexuality, did indeed motivate Jong’s writing of *Fear of Flying* is demonstrated in the 1994 introduction where she recalls having been inspired by *Portnoy’s Complaint* (published six years earlier, in 1967). Her turn of phrase testifies to a radical desire to appropriate male literary domains: “It remained for a woman to expose female fantasy with as much frankness. I wanted to *claim that territory*” (xiv, emphasis mine). Miller’s hailing of *Fear of Flying* as a counterpart to his own iconoclastic

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136 Although *Tropic of Cancer* was first published in Paris in 1934, it can be considered “contemporary” with *Fear of Flying* because it was not published in the United States until 1961, due to a ban for obscenity.

137 In “The Woman Writer as American Picaro: Open Journeying in Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*,” Robert J. Butler recognizes Isadora’s resemblance to “scores of other American picaresque heroes,” but neglects the, to me, crucial dimension of gender and does not acknowledge Jong’s attempt to transform a male genre (329). Butler’s reading of Isadora’s trajectory in terms of successful self-realization and his claim that it is the story of an “open” expansive journey are, to my mind, mistaken and, at bottom, grounded in a desire to read the novel as a celebration and validation of American myth.

138 As first-person narratives relating a self-quest, and involving a European journey, Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* and Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* are the two most closely related. Superficially, the similarities between *Fear of Flying* and *Portnoy’s Complaint* are more than striking – the very concept of Jong’s novel actually appears appropriated. *Fear of Flying* was even marketed as a response to *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Both confessions are made on the return to New York after a European journey involving erotic experiences and fantasies, triggering the remembrance of past inner traumas and conflicts. Like Jong’s novel, *Portnoy’s Complaint* is a self-conscious, self-ironic, first-person narrative, using a language mixing obscenities and Yiddish vocabulary and expressions. Portnoy (like Isadora) relates memories of growing up in a Jewish family and his/her seeking integration into American WASP society by way of an academic career. When it comes to identity, however, the two novels differ. Although using the concept of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Jong does not stress Jewish ethnicity in the way that Roth does, but instead adds and foregrounds the important gender dimension. That the obstacles barring Isadora’s access to the American Self are primarily gender-related has a bearing also on the function of sexuality. For Portnoy, as a man, active heterosexuality is socially accepted and forms part of his development into that masculinity intrinsic to the national Self. For Isadora, however, being sexually active implies transgression and a revolt against reigning social conceptions of femininity.
Tropic of Cancer further underlines the rebellious thrust of Jong’s text and its desire to break taboos and boldly assert female sexuality. At the time of its publication in 1973, this violation of established norms for female characters and woman-authored narratives, for example manifest in its flaunting of obscene vocabulary, caused a divided response and engendered a polarized debate. Jong’s play with male genres and discourse shocked and repelled the establishment but her move pleased feminists. But even within the community of feminist literary critics the novel is controversial; while some accept it as a feminist text, others completely dismiss the idea that it questions patriarchal structures.

I am interested in the potential of Fear of Flying to subvert patriarchal ideology, but, as my particular focus is national identity, the primary interest of my reading is the novel’s relation to nationalist ideology, an issue which so far has not been discussed. While Jong’s transposition and problematization of the figure of Mrs. America, placing her in an Old World journey narrative, are radical moves, in the final analysis, her text is actually contained within the discourses that it sets out to disrupt. By turning this silent, passive, idealized icon into a provocatively speaking subject, who claims recognition, Jong mocks the image of the dignified national woman. Yet, as I will attempt to demonstrate, because her text is marred by too many ambiguities

139 In Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation (1995), Charlotte Templin explains both the critical neglect and misogynist response as a consequence of Jong’s reputation as best-selling writer and media celebrity. Templin’s reception study, the underlying ambition of which seems to be the vindication of Jong’s reputation as a writer, strives to unveil the sexist attitudes which color the reception of Jong’s work. Templin claims that “attacks on Jong over aesthetic matters were . . . really conflicts over cultural authority” (66). An aspect which Templin does not address but which should provide an interesting topic for further study is Jong’s relationship to the media concerning the construction of her author image. By letting the sequels to Fear of Flying (How to Save Your Own Life and Parachutes and Kisses) about Isadora mirror her own biographical life, she seems to be consciously complicit in the media conflation of Isadora Wing and Erica Jong.

140 While many early critics regarded the novel as a straightforward feminist text, in the late 1980s and early 1990s feminist critics like Greene and Rita Felski considered its attempts at critique of patriarchy merely empty gestures. In Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (1989), Felski explicitly excludes Jong: “[t]he novels of Erica Jong . . . do not seem to me to reveal any serious questioning of the existing basis of male-female relations or any sustained refusal of the failures of a male-dominated society” (14-15). Greene gives a similar evaluation in Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition (1991): “[T]here are wonderfully quotable bits in Fear of Flying . . . but they are suspiciously excerptable, on the surface, as is the feminism of the novel. The novel does not, finally, challenge ‘the old story’ at the level of plot, language, or meaning” (91). More recently, since the middle of the 1990s, the feminist aspects have, however, received new attention as woman-centered and woman-authored novels of the 70s are being reinvestigated. In their largely reader-oriented readings, Maria Lauret’s Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America (1994) and Lisa Maria Hogeland’s Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women’s Liberation Movement (1998) reclaim the feminist power of a text like Jong’s, arguing that, in their historical context, these novels were instrumental in the readers’ process of consciousness-raising and liberation.
and contradictions, manifest, for example, in the infamous ‘zipless fuck’ scene, it ultimately fails to subvert both patriarchal and nationalist ideology.

The Modern American Girl
and Her European Adventure

The heroine of Jong’s novel can be viewed as an icon of Americanness, as yet another of the American girls, earlier idealized in Old World novels by Hawthorne, James, and Howells, as discussed in Chapter Two, because she is a young, casual, unaffected character who cares little for social conventions and has a healthy appetite for life. She is a “natural,” “innocent,” American girl – although of quite a brazen variety. Even her name, Isadora, vaguely suggests James’s heroine Isabel Archer. Like the American girls in the works of James who are confronted with the complex and deceitful world of Europe, personified by a European male or Europeanized Americans, Isadora meets the Englishman Adrian Goodlove, with whom she runs away. Taking her along on an adventure and introducing her to his version of European existentialism, he presents an alternative to the work ethic of American ideology. The symbolic and narrative significance of Adrian will be further elaborated below. But allowing herself to be seduced by a European rascal does not lead to the heroine’s destruction. Unlike her female predecessor, the American girl of the 1960s is no victim but a survivor, and, as Jong casts her in the standard mold of the Bildungsheld, she is someone who even matures thanks to her escapades.

By invoking “Mrs. America,” as Isadora engages in an extra-marital affair, Jong is of course provocatively parodying the national icon. Superficially, Isadora actually conforms to the icon of the national woman: a young, attractive, blue-eyed blonde. But this WASP appearance, a surface suggesting an unproblematic identity, clashes with the complex realities of the identity revealed in her narrative. At the heart of Isadora’s dilemma lies the classic female one: the contrast between how she is perceived and how she understands herself, between social expectations and the failure really to comply. Her name, Isadora Zelda Wing, née White, intimates the composite nature of her character and the problems and dangers confronting a creative, intellectual, American woman in her struggle to reconcile an artist’s career with the private life of a sexually active woman. As her first names, Isadora Zelda, recall Isadora Duncan and Zelda Fitzgerald, two women artists who were also American expatriates in Europe, they signal the importance, but also the potential danger, of the European journey in the context of the protagonist’s development. Her maiden family name, White, not only defines her as ethnically “white,” and as innocent, it also suggests the tabula rasa she was at birth, before American society gendered her. Interestingly, Isadora
adds that she was “(née Weiss – my father had bleached it to ‘White’ shortly after my birth)” (29). His translation of the family name into English, “bleaching it” is obviously a strategy for integration into a dominant society that codes non-WASPs as non-white. Taken together, her surnames “White” and “Wing” even recall the angelic heroine Millie Theale of James’s The Wings of the Dove. Wing, the name of Isadora’s second husband, suggests her ambivalence: her desire, but also her fear, of being independent of a man, of being in charge of her own life – of trusting her own wings, in other words. Isadora’s fears, and the general insecurity that burdens her, are linked, so the text makes clear, to growing up in an American society that teaches girls that they are incomplete without a man, a husband.

The prime target of the feminist critique in Fear of Flying is the romantic mythology spawned by patriarchal ideology. And the main textual strategy used for this purpose is irony. The narrator’s self-ironic tone suggests self-criticism, particularly targeting her younger self, and the consistency of this tone makes it possible to read it as a strategy for pointing to her entrapment in the myth of romance. Although the fact that the story is a retrospective first-person narrative means that Isadora the narrator is distanced from Isadora the protagonist, the difference between the perspectives of narrator and protagonist is, actually, not great. The fact that the narrator’s frequent self-ironic comments are not only directed at her younger self but also often at her narrating self, suggests that she has not actually freed herself from the dilemmas of her past. In conversation with Adrian about her own futile search for love she asks: “Why doesn’t my knowing ever change anything?” (250).

Isadora is quite conscious of the impact of the romance myths that she has been exposed to: “And the crazy part of it was that even if you were clever . . . still had a mind full of all the soupy longings that every high-school girl was awash in. It didn’t matter, you see, whether you had an IQ of 170 or an IQ of 70, you were brainwashed all the same” (9-10). Throughout, the text ironically dramatizes this tension between her struggle for selfhood and her inability to rid herself of the romance myths that abound in American culture – the last name of her English lover, Goodlove, for example, as well

141 In Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women (1990), Nancy A. Walker identifies Jong’s irony as related to that employed in other women’s novels of the late 1960s/early 1970s, e.g., in works by Margaret Drabble and Fay Weldon. She describes the strategy favored by Jong as “double narrative perspectives that challenge the immutability of perceived reality” (24). The “perceived reality” is exposed as a patriarchal construct, and the narrator presents an alternative perception of reality based in female experience. When Isadora, in revealing her failure to overcome her fear of flying, for instance ironically refers to “the shrinks’ ineptitude or my own glorious unanalyzability,” Walker claims that the narrator questions the male authority that would blame her for her shortcomings and instead suggests that “autonomy arises from the self rather than being conferred by an outside agency” (25). This strategy of irony, Walker says, gains force from the fact that it involves the reader.
as the car they travel in, a “Triumph,” provide ironic asides on Isadora’s quest for fulfillment. The problem with the narrator’s double-edged self-irony is that it undercuts the power of irony as a distancing device. As a consequence, the narrator’s authority when explicating her own experience is undermined.

Contrasting American and European norms, Isadora explicitly identifies the romance myth as American: “Growing up female in America. What a liability!” she exclaims, explaining that a girl learns early on that marriage is the goal of her life and that a husband will satisfy all her needs (9). “You weren’t even provided, like European girls, with a philosophy of cynicism and practicality,” she adds (10). In fiction, these myths are translated into what Janice Radway calls “the Romance plot,” according to which a woman’s royal road to happiness is the love of a man and union with him in marriage. Romance plots, Hogeland explains, are “conspiracy plots, plots created, as Isadora comes to understand, by a wide-ranging conspiracy of men, women, institutions, texts – by everyone and everything in culture” (71).

That some American dreams are reserved for men is not a novel idea to Isadora. As the novel opens, we learn that, for a long time prior to the European journey, she held two forbidden desires, both surely rooted in her drive for independence. In a sense, she gives in to these two desires when she runs away with her English lover. The first, having affairs with men other than her husband, is an expression of her need to assert herself as a sexual subject, and the second has to do with an existential kind of freedom, of “hit[ting] the open road from time to time, to discover whether you could still live alone inside your own head, to discover whether you could manage to survive in a cabin in the woods without going mad” (10). That she considers her “itches” – her dreams of self-reliance, independence, and liberation – “un-American” (10) may, at first, strike one as surprising because her dreams seem to fall within the American mythological tradition – the lone hero in frontier land as iconic ideal. But since these ideals have always been a male privilege, in a woman they are, by definition, “un-American.” In the national community, the role of the female is not to be self-reliant and individualistic, but to complement her mate as wife or mother; a woman’s “husbandlessness” and/or “childlessness” is synonymous with “selfishness” (11). Being an unmarried female, Isadora explains, is socially stigmatizing, “a reproach to the American way of life” – a critique which gives evidence of her awareness of the patriarchal grounding of American nationalist ideology (11).

Isadora is also conscious of the power which American mythology of the Old World has over her. “My superego is soluble in Europe” (268), she responds with self-irony to Adrian’s comment: “‘The superego is soluble in alcohol!’” (268). In Paris, the setting and the beers she drinks place her in a dreamland far from the drudgery of ordinary American working life: “I feel
that I am living in the midst of a romantic movie. I feel so relaxed and loose and giddy. New York is farther away than the moon” (268-69). Not surprisingly, given the romantic/erotic associations of Europe in American mythology, it is on a tourist journey to Europe, leaving her habitual existence in America, that she involves herself in an affair. “Ah travel, adventure, romance,” Isadora writes with reference to the delusions of her younger self (127). In her satiric description of the gigantic reception at the Rathaus of Vienna where “schmaltzy violins” play in the ballroom, and “[t]he pseudo-Gothic arches of the high ceilings . . . illumined by thousands of pseudocandles” create the illusion of a grand fairy-tale ball, she plays with the romantic and “storied” associations that “Europe” holds for American tourists (127).

The note of “liberation” associated with Isadora’s foreign journey is amplified by the fact that, at the moment of her departure from America, she is out of therapy, having recently broken with her analyst; this is a major change in her life since she has been in psychoanalysis since adolescence. Caused by a dawning awareness of her male analyst’s ignorance of the subordination of American women in general, and of gender oppression as a major source of women’s psychological problems in particular, this act has feminist implications. “Dr Kolner,” Isadora says, “could only see anything which vaguely smacked of Women’s Lib as a neurotic problem. Any protestation against conventional female behavior had to be ‘phallic’ and ‘aggressive’” (18). Revolting against her psychoanalyst’s perception of female “normality,” which she sees as patriarchal and oppressive, she bursts out:

‘Don’t you see that men have always defined femininity as a means of keeping women in line? Why should I listen to you about what it means to be a woman? Are you a woman? Why shouldn’t I listen to myself for once? And to other women? I talk to them. They tell me about themselves – and a damned lot of them feel exactly the way I do – even if it doesn’t get the Good Housekeeping Seal of the American Psychoanalytic.’ (18)

This can be considered a manifesto of sorts. What she proposes is, in fact, an alternative method of psychological therapy: self-help through the sharing of experiences with other women. This is a feminist idea, not only because it is grounded in an opposition to the patriarchal values underlying psychoanalysis, but because it suggests the building of a community of women. As Isadora writes about her European experience, addressing her narrative to a female readership, she should thus be understood as participating in the feminist project of unveiling patriarchal myth. As a spin-off effect, the text that comes out of her effort of self-expression and assertion may serve in the feminist consciousness-raising process of her readers. And a sense of community between author and (female) reader is indeed created, as Nancy A. Walker points out, by the narrator’s colloquial, self-ironic style, appealing to a shared experience among American women. As I will argue below, writing
has a significance beyond the therapeutic for Isadora, who is a published poet. Ultimately, I hold, it is her identification of herself as an American writer and artist, as an exceptional and “honorary” woman, that provides the road to empowerment – a problematic move from a feminist perspective as it implies a rejection of a female community.

That Isadora turns to autobiographical writing as a form of therapy after having dismissed her psychoanalyst is an act of feminist defiance. Psychoanalysis, severely satirized in the novel, is presented as one of the scripts by which Isadora has been entrapped in patriarchal America. Even her own husband uses psychoanalysis to control her. Typically, when he notices Isadora’s infatuation with Adrian, he insists she go home and reenter therapy. Although of Chinese origin, her husband Bennett Wing, a Freudian psychoanalyst, comes across as a patriarchal and conventional American. His opposite is incarnated by the Englishman Adrian Goodlove, a hippie-style character who propagates the radical Laingian approach that finds the nuclear family basically unsound. As Isadora says, Adrian serves as a prop, “an instrument of [her] freedom,” enabling her to escape, at least temporarily, the dominance of her American husband.

By frequently commenting on Adrian’s British accent and vocabulary, Isadora underscores his Englishness and hence his Otherness – undoubtedly this is precisely what makes him so interesting. Adrian’s Englishness gives him the Old World attraction implying elegance, learning, and class, and when these traits are coupled with sandals, loose shirt and pipe, and a habit of cooking for his kids, he becomes irresistible. His entire character connoting opposition to dominant society appeals to Isadora. Believing the English Adrian to be an incarnation of the ideal lover, she takes up with him. He fails to meet her expectations, however; his impotence and refusal to play the role of knight in shining armor expose the hollowness of Isadora’s romantic dream of complete fulfillment through a man. Her fantasies of the “zipless fuck” (10), “the man under the bed” (101), and the faceless lover all turn out to be pure illusions. But although Adrian fails as a lover, he serves another and more important function by confronting her with the emptiness of the American myth according to which Europe is a space of romance. As they part in Paris, a European city closely associated with romance in American mythology, Adrian, who previously kindled Isadora’s fantasies, now tries to persuade her to drop romance: “‘Look – why don’t you just stop looking for love and try to live your own life?’” (250). “‘You have your work, your writing, your teaching, your friends . . . .’,” he argues [ellipsis in original] (250). This turnabout, made in the Paris setting, has a shock effect on Isadora. At this point, the spell of her love dreams is definitely broken.

Quite clearly, the reputation of this novel as celebrating female heterosexual adventure as a road to liberation is based on a misreading. Disillusioned, Isadora concludes that her dream lover was pure illusion: “‘The man under the bed can never be the man over the bed,’ I said. ‘They’re mutually
exclusive. Once the man comes up from under he’s no longer the man you desired’’ (260). In the end, her European affair with Adrian only confirms what she in fact knew all along – that men and sexual adventures do not provide the road to fulfillment and salvation. Toward the end of her tour with Adrian she formulates the matter quite succinctly: “The point is that fantasies are fantasies and you can’t live in ecstasy every day of the year. Even if you slam the door and walk out, even if you fuck everyone in sight, you don’t necessarily get closer to freedom” (258). Continuing, she even dismisses the value of their elopement, to Adrian’s annoyance: “It’s all desperation and depression masquerading as freedom. It isn’t even pleasurable. It’s pathetic. Even this trip is pathetic”(259).

To put it differently, *Fear of Flying* demonstrates that the dream of liberation through erotic adventure is only a variety of the romance plot. With Hogeland, we may conclude that “Isadora discovers the limitations of the picaresque plot for women, and even the limitations of sexual freedom for women if that freedom must take place in a grossly unequal world” (71). Admittedly, *Fear of Flying* does not present an alternative to the romance plot, but, as Hogeland correctly observes, it is exposed as a plot. I might qualify this by adding that while it shows the *Old World* journey to be a false road to romantic fulfillment, it does not reject it as a road to personal and artistic fulfillment, a matter I will return to below. Clearly, as Hogeland points out, there is no complete rejection of the romance plot in *Fear of Flying*. Although Isadora seems to accept the possibility of being alone and single and learns to see herself as an independent individual, the narrator intimates that she is still enmeshed in romance myth. Self-ironic remarks such as “When the chips are down and I’m alone with a man for days on...

142 Hogeland dwells on the puzzling fact that the ambiguity of the message generally has not been noted by reviewers and critics. Offering an explanation, she says that the paradoxical statement of the novel, “its argument about the inadequacy of sexuality as an arena for women’s freedom,” combined with its claim for female access to this same arena mirror what she calls the “stereographic” view of sexuality that the women’s rights movement had in the 1960s and early 70s (73). Even after that period, she adds, the women’s rights movement has been unable to confront sexuality as a complex and problematic field. It might be added, however, that such an evaluation hardly holds true in the early twenty-first century, as queer theory has contributed to a broadening and complication of the feminist debate.

143 A look at the sequels, *How to Save Your Own Life* and *Parachutes and Kisses*, written in the standard formula of the (sexual) romance, suggests that Jong’s ideological position is ambiguous because these novels do not problematize the romance plot. Isadora keeps falling into the romance trap – despite her awareness of the impermanence of romantic love. A more extensive quote from *Parachutes and Kisses* clearly illustrates the position of both Isadora and the text: “Sometimes it struck her as ironic that after having fought so hard for feminism, she had come to this – the humbling acceptance of love as the only life-giver. Not that she expected it to last. She expected her child and her work to last and this love to go the way of all loves. And yet she knew that without this renewal nothing was worthwhile. Let cynics doubt it. Let the anti-sex league denounce it, this linkage of lovers alone defeated hopelessness, defeated death, defeated defeatism” (407). The perception of romantic and heterosexual love as the privileged road to a woman’s happiness in this quote locks the novel into the romance plot.
end, then I realize more than ever how unliberated I am,” show her not to be “liberated” but definitely aware of her own predicament (177). As we have seen, she also has a certain degree of awareness of the falseness of the image of the Old World as a realm of romance and fairy-tales. Yet, for all her awareness of their falsity, Isadora enjoys her romantic fantasies: they provide a temporary, enjoyable escape from the restrictions of ordinary life. Some of the pleasure she gains from dreaming stems from the visual sense – a circumstance that, sometimes, makes it possible to understand her as a “voyeur,” or as I prefer to see her, a gazer.

American Gazer

The magazine for which Isadora is expected to write an article while in Europe is entitled *Voyeur* (6). Poking fun at psychoanalytic jargon, Jong’s naming of the journal actually also suggests one of the strategies she uses to assert subjethood: empowerment via visual objectification. In the “zipless fuck” scene, she may be identified as a voyeur because she uses the eroticizing male gaze as defined by Mulvey. In most other cases, the visual objectification that takes place in *Fear of Flying* can be identified as imperial, tourist or American gazes.

That the tourist gaze should be one of the gazes Isadora uses is a matter of course, as she comes to Europe as a tourist. Arriving in Vienna, the American party of psychoanalysts and their spouses, to which Isadora and her husband belong, are described as “carrying expensive cameras” – a description that makes it possible to identify them as upper-middle-class tourists (17). And Isadora’s “History of the World Through Toilets” (22), sketching the national characteristics of foreign countries based on her evaluation of each country’s typical public bathroom, is of course based on the tourist experience. Even when she and Adrian run off on their wild tour, despite the seeming intention to break with bourgeois habits of touring, they end up enacting them – a fact noted by Isadora the narrator. Cameras are conspicuously absent in their baggage, and they do not care about making an itinerary for their tour. The facts of their actual movements, however, going back and forth and around in “the labyrinth of Old Europe,” visiting the countries, cities and points of interest usually included in an American tour of Europe (except Rome), and looking at ruins, churches, museums and castles testify to the tourist character of their journey (178).

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144 An awareness, though faint, of the constructedness of the American myth of “Europe” surfaces at a visit to King Ludwig’s Neuschwanstein. Isadora realizes that this famous castle is merely “a phony nineteenth-century evocation of a Middle Ages that never existed,” a circumstance that makes the castle in Disneyland modeled on it “a phony of a phony” (182).
Isadora’s status as an American tourist traveling in Europe is established already in the first chapter entitled “En Route to the Congress of Dreams or the Zipless Fuck” (10). This chapter also sets the keynote for the novel, introducing her desire for independence, and liberation from the structures that oppress an American woman. By juxtaposing Isadora’s airplane flight to Europe with her favorite erotic fantasy, the title suggests a relationship between them; the conjunction “or” even signals interchangeability. Littlewood captures well the significance of this combination of travel and sexual daydreaming when, in reference to the “zipless fuck” scene, he comments that it testifies to the “basic affinity between travel and rebellion. The moment of illicit sexual satisfaction is a brief erotic victory over the rest of the world, a successful raid on the kingdom of propriety” (136). The first chapter thus introduces transgressive sexuality as a means of expressing dissent with national moral norms as the theme of Fear of Flying. Describing herself as a traveling sexual rebel of sorts, Isadora cuts a romantic rebel figure. The epigraph from Don Juan about “the love of women” ending with the line “Some play the devil, and then write a novel,” suggests the influence of Byron. These intertextual echoes of Byron’s rebellion, one which, as Littlewood points out, had decidedly anti-nationalist overtones (116-18), function to reinforce Jong’s critique of the sexual morality prescribed for American women by dominant society.

That Isadora’s style of travel abroad has Byronic overtones is also evident in one of the flashback narratives. When in their early twenties, Isadora and her friend Pia had promiscuous adventures in Italy, seducing men “principally to boast to each other about the number of scalps on [their] belts” (99), they reenacted a northern European male practice that goes back at least to the English Grand Tour, and defied American norms by acting in a way that is unacceptable in the United States, particularly for women. That the romantic location in a foreign country such as Italy was a prerequisite for their escapades is illustrated by Isadora’s reaction when a former lover looks her up in America. Her comment on his looks establishes a contrast between America and Italy, between “real life” and romance: he looked terrible in “the polluted sunlight of New York . . . . the brown and amber shades of Florence had done wonders for him – as any E. M. Forster fan can readily understand” (246). Isadora’s observation that “Gradually, the men were reduced to sex objects” signals that, in hindsight, she is critical of her own behavior (100).

Taking Littlewood’s observation of the close relation between travel, sex, liberation and rebellion as my cue, I want to look more closely at Isadora’s fantasy of the “zipless fuck.” This fantasy, Isadora explains, was something she indulged as an alternative to “hav[ing] an affair and . . . hit[ting] the open road” – that archetypal masculine privilege (11). “Zipless” refers to the idea in which the fantasy is grounded, a neither physical nor material but rather abstract, or as the narrator has it, “platonic ideal” (11). “Zipless, be-
cause when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff. Tongues intertwined and turned liquid. Your whole soul flowed out through your tongue and into the mouth of your lover” (11). To my mind, Isadora’s statement “You are what you dream. You are what you daydream . . . . Because sex is all in the head,” stressing the symbolic significance of fantasies and dreams, signals the central importance of this scene (34). The attraction of this fantasy for Isadora is that it allows her to escape the inferior position she occupies as a woman; in the position of the gazer, she is a powerful subject. Understood in terms of American mythology, the idea of “hitting the road” is related to westward expansion, a conquest grounded in an imperialist ideology based on a Self/Other hierarchy whereby the power of the American Self was imposed on an Othered and objectified indigenous population. The sense of empowerment which the gazer experiences is thus the key to understanding Isadora’s obsession with the zipless fuck; to objectify other people gives her a sense of power and control – one she otherwise does not have.

Isadora describes her ideal sexual union as free from gender hierarchy: “There is no power game. The man is not ‘taking’ and the woman is not ‘giving’” (14). The scene is no “alternative” to patriarchal male gazes but a virtual enactment of the American gaze by which the foreign setting and the foreign characters are “Othered.” Although described as outside “the power game,” the zipless fuck scene actually builds on power hierarchies, playing on a series of conventional binaries (American/foreign, male/female, colonizer/colonized). As a woman, Isadora is barred from “hit[ting] the open road,” that masculine privilege, but she is free to fantasize. Her fantasy of the zipless fuck reenacts the conventions of pornographic film and male conceptions of sexuality. The desire for sexuality in a “pure” form – characterized by anonymity and brevity and thus disconnected from social conven-

145 The question of how to read this well-known scene has been an issue of some contention. According to some, Fear of Flying, including the zipless fuck, offers an empowering alternative vision. In “Rewriting the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism,” Susan Suleiman presents a more sophisticated reading of Fear of Flying and the zipless fuck, finding that the novel’s treatment of sexuality (including the use of “bold” or “coarse” language) must be read as parody, as a critique of male, misogynist texts. She describes Jong’s strategy as “a reversal of roles and of language, in which the docile . . . silent, objectified woman suddenly usurps both the pornographer’s language and his way of looking at the opposite sex” (9). She concedes, however, that reversal is insufficient in the struggle for equality between men and women. The next step must be the “inventing of new structures, new words, a new syntax that will shake up and transform old habits of thought and old ways of seeing” (12). Suleiman’s contention that the scene is a parody of male pornography is not convincing, however, because she neglects its contradictory aspects. The irony of the passage is directed at male sexual fantasy as well as at Isadora’s own attempt to invent an alternative. The critique is flawed because the objectifying gaze is turned on both of them – not only on the male.
tions and commitments – mirrors “male” sexuality as it has stereotypically been conceived.

The lure of this fantasy is that it takes place in a romantic setting. “[P]erhaps inspired by an Italian movie,” Isadora recalls before relating the fantasy scene, thereby suggesting the significance not merely of the foreign setting, but the film medium, and, by consequence, then, the eroticizing male gaze. She describes the setting as “[a] grimy European train compartment,” and later qualifies it as Italian (12). That the characters in her voyeuristic fantasy are not only European but Italian underscores the exotic quality of the scene. The two characters of Isadora’s sexual fantasy are clearly cardboard types straight out of a banal pornographic movie. While the man is “[a] tall languid-looking soldier, unshaven, but with a beautiful mop of hair, a cleft chin, and somewhat devilish, lazy eyes,” traits that suggest a forceful, untamed and potentially aggressive masculinity, a patriarchal masculinity type in other words, the woman, carrying a gold cross, is a “pretty young widow in a heavy black veil and tight black dress which reveals her voluptuous figure” (12). Quite in the logic of the imperial and male gaze, of these two, the woman is most heavily marked as exotic Other, her veil, black dress and gold cross suggesting the sensuality associated with Oriental and Latin cultural spheres. The veil seems a play on the imperialist desire to uncover, and consequently possess the foreign Other, the black dress and the gold cross working similarly, as symbols of a cultural female Other, in this case, the Mediterranean, Catholic, and Latin woman. The allusion to nun and widow, stereotypes in the erotic romance, adds to the cliché nature of the scene. And the fact that it is the man who takes the sexual initiative, the woman merely acquiescing, thereby confirming the gender power hierarchy and the patriarchal conception of female sexuality as passive, further emphasizes the conventionality of the scenario.

The complex irony with which the scene is told, however, makes it quite difficult to pin down. While the inherent banality suggests a critique of (male) pornography, the narrator’s self-irony undercuts any feminist thrust, targeting Isadora’s own inability to liberate herself from patriarchal conceptions of sexuality. The very scene, then, that many commentators perceive as the novel’s most rebellious instead actually proves to be conventional. This is not a scene that uncovers the repressive forces underpinning conventional pornography. Nor it is one that offers a female alternative. Ultimately, nationalist, patriarchal and masculinist discourses are not disrupted but rather function as strategies for Isadora’s empowerment.

The banality of the scenario of the zipless fuck clashes with the complexity of the scenes describing her arrival in Europe. Juxtaposed, they illustrate Isadora’s ambivalent attitude to Europe: on the one hand it is a liminal zone, a dream-world of romance and eroticism, primarily represented by the Mediterranean countries, and on the other it is a source of anti-semitism, represented by the German-speaking countries. This seeming contradiction
can be explained as rooted in a combination of mainstream American myth about the Old World and the associations which Germany inevitably holds for an American Jew. Isadora’s relationship to Europe proves to be quite problematic; unlike WASP Americans, as a Jew she cannot disregard the terrifying complexity of the recent past.\textsuperscript{146}

That Germany is intimately connected to the holocaust in Isadora’s mind is suggested by her immediate reaction to the brand-new Frankfurt airport: it reminds her of “death camps and deportations” (17). The ensuing description of arriving in Vienna, construed as yet another German city, is related to the first arrival scene. It is depicted in equally negative words: “Vienna. The very name is like a waltz. But I never could stand the place. It seemed dead to me. Embalmed” (20). Instead of the generally grand and romantic associations of Vienna, she links the city to death because it is spotless and well organized, and contrasts it to the vital, bustling New York characterized by “disorder, dirt, and chaos” (20). She perceives Vienna as marked by artificiality: “unnaturally clean . . . unnaturally full of unvandalized” parks (20), “public flowerbeds . . . unnaturally tidy” (21). Conflating Austrians and Germans, she comments on “the illusion of cleanliness,” a feature she insists on by adding “[i]llusion, mind you, because Germans are really not clean” (21). While order, sterility, fakery, and death thus mark Vienna, the counterpart New York signifies authenticity and fertile chaos. Isadora does not hold back her gut-reaction to Germans. Bluntly, she states: “I hated them” (21).\textsuperscript{147}

The difficulties involved in an American Jew’s relationship to Europe and to Germany in particular, is the concern of the chapter entitled “Near the Black Forest,” a flash-back narrative dealing with the years she lived in Germany with her husband (Bennett) who had been drafted for service in the army.\textsuperscript{148} Elaborating on Isadora’s identity as American Jew, writer, and woman this chapter delves deep into her life, exposing her various fears and pains. “Before I lived in Heidelberg, I was not particularly self-conscious about being Jewish” the first lines of the chapter read, and the narrator explains how the encounter with Germany forced a confrontation with her

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Fear of Flying} tells us that Isadora’s own Jewish American mother tended to ignore the violence of the recent past and the present and to project barbarity onto a distant past. When, on a visit to London as a child, Isadora was appalled by the bloody history of England, her mother attempted to console her by explaining that torture devices were things of the past: “They only used them in the olden days when people were more barbaric. Civilization has progressed since then” (279).

\textsuperscript{147} As we have seen, Germans are indeed Others to Isadora’s Jewish American identity. Quite clearly, she also constructs Arabs as Others. “Arabs & Other Animals” is the telling title of the chapter where she relates how, on a journey to Lebanon to visit her sister, she is exposed to an attempted seduction by her brother-in-law, a Catholic Arab (228). So utterly Other to her Jewish American self are Arabs that she describes them as “animals.” The insertion of an epigraph from “The Sheik of Araby” by Ted Snyder, Francis Wheeler, and Harry B. Smith makes it obvious that Jong employs the old stereotype of the lecherous Arab.

\textsuperscript{148} Recalling \textit{Innocents Abroad}, the name of the residential area, Mark Twain village, suggests the tourist and middle-class status of the inhabitants.
Jewishness (53). In America, although she was never allowed to forget her origin, she was still able to imagine herself as socially integrated. Brought up in a secularized family striving hard for acceptance by dominant American society, she had rarely reflected on the implications of her origin. In Germany, however, she is conscious of finding herself in a country where, a mere two decades previously, millions of people sharing her cultural heritage were exterminated. That the forces of racism are blind and brutal strikes her with full force in Germany. Here, her fear of Nazism haunts her to the point of paranoia.\(^{149}\) Although she does not practice Judaism at all, she realizes that Nazi Germany would still define her as Jewish: “beneath my paganism, pantheism and pedantic knowledge of English poetry, I was every bit as Jewish as Anne Frank” (55).

Isadora’s many-facetted feelings about Germany and sensitive political issues are unraveled in the narrative relating her involvement as “American editor,” submitting a weekly column in English to Heidelberg Alt und Neu, a newsletter promoting tourism in the area. (62). To my mind, the tension unveiled in this section, between Isadora’s desire to engage with difficult issues and her inclination to resort to strategies of avoidance, mirrors the ambiguity of Fear of Flying as a whole, oscillating between bold rhetoric and conservative clichés. In her capacity as journalist she initially writes not about recent German history, as she would like to do, but about “‘safe’ subjects – ruined castles, wine festivals, historic restaurants, odds and ends of Heidelberg history and apocrypha” (62). As she researches an abandoned Nazi amphitheater in the vicinity – censored in old guidebooks – she is inclined to put on American tourist glasses. Looking down at the town from a tower at the top of a mountain, Isadora admires the view, “the gleaming river, the dappled woods, the pinkish hulk of the castle,” and wonders, “Why did chroniclers of the Third Reich say everything about Germany except that it was beautiful?” (64). She perceives the town and its vicinity as a picturesque fairy-tale world; her references to German folk tales underscore the nature of her gaze, one both tourist and American. Although painfully aware of the hell of the recent Nazi past, she here projects a romanticizing American tourist gaze on the landscape, viewing it in terms of a picturesque storied past. This resort to an American stereotype of the Old World allows her, at least temporarily, to suppress not only the complex issues that German history and society raise but also the implications of her own Jewish identity.\(^{150}\)

\(^{149}\) For an exploration of the significance of Jewishness in Jong’s life and work, see “Erica Jong: Becoming a Jewish writer,” where Templin argues that Jong’s search and gradual discovery of herself as an American Jew “became an integral part of her writing” (138).

\(^{150}\) After a period of anxiety about her own silence about Nazi history, Isadora does, however, voice her critique in an angry column, calling for truth and honesty in German historiography. The article published, she has a conversation with the German publisher, once a press correspondent in Nazi Germany, which causes her to be self-critical and to realize that complete honesty in writing is practically an impossibility: “Even without fascism, I was dishonest. Even without fascism, I censored myself. I refused to let myself write about what really
While Isadora’s confrontation with her Jewish American identity and her personal encounter with a German were eye-openers at the time, they did not lead to any significant change in her identity as a writer.

As the German interlude suggests, her struggle to find her identity as a writer, an American writer, is a major theme in the novel. Coded male, the role of the American writer is not easily assumed by a woman who is not expected to act as a subject but to perform a role that is secondary. Throughout her life, Isadora has had an aversion to the figures of the housewife and the secretary, two female roles sanctioned by American patriarchal society. Refusing to learn to type was, she explains, a form of defiance against the secretary label, and her reluctance to have children can be understood as tied to her fear of the role of the housewife, the Mrs. America figure above all others. That the secretary and the housewife are Isadora’s “Others,” the figures against whom she defines herself as a writer and exceptional woman, is evidenced by a passage in which she thinks about joining Adrian on the tour through Europe. At this point she identifies herself with a long row of (primarily male) writers and protagonists who abandoned their social positions for love and adventure. In evidence of her rejection of the Mrs. America role, the passage ends with the line: “No scared housewife, I. I was flying” (171).

Camping with Adrian beside a French road one night, she actually contemplates accepting the role she abhors, as a strategy of escape. Giving in to social pressure she would avoid all the pain and trouble that comes with occupying a dissident position:

To be that good little housewife, that glorified American mother . . . . That was the solution! To be ordinary! To be unexotic! . . . . A fantasy straight out of an adman’s little brain. Me in apron and gingham shirtwaist waiting on my husband and kiddies while the omnipresent TV set sings out the virtues of the American home and the American slave-wife with her tiny befuddled brain. (253)

Although Isadora does not act out this fantasy, about which she is ambivalent, finding it both attractive and repulsive, she does reach a kind of compromise with the expectations of American society. After she has reaffirmed herself as a writer, and an American writer more specifically, she returns to resume her place as an American wife – hoping to be able to reconcile the two identities.
Return to “America”

“Adrian was a dream. Bennett was my reality,” Isadora says, in a comment that underscores the Europe/America binary at work in the novel (130). After Adrian’s return to his family she begins the return to “reality,” to Bennett and America. The final short but central chapters recount Isadora’s return from the liminal zone of the journey in Europe and her reentry into ordinary time, that is America, a gradual process beginning one tormented, lonely night in a Paris hotel. That the novel ends in this way, in accordance with the pattern of the traditional Bildungsroman, telling the story of the protagonist’s development through conflict with society and final reintegration, is significant in the context of Isadora’s national identity.

Following a night of crisis after the end of the affair, Isadora is able to take new control of her life. By placing her existential crisis and (relative) transformation in the European city which, in American mythology, is “a scene of metamorphosis,” as Kennedy puts it (4), Jong alludes to the famous artistic “exile” of the modernist expatriate generation. As Kennedy observes, the (usually voluntary) refuge abroad which came to be known as “exile” was associated with both renewal and danger: “Exile affords the opportunity for change, growth, and insight as well as the possibility of alienation, confusion, and corruption” (37). By having the Paris setting function as a zone of transformation, Jong builds on a well-known pattern, not to say cliché, familiar from the texts of modernist expatriate writers such as Gertrude Stein, Anaïs Nin, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Djuna Barnes, and Henry Miller.

As she finds herself alone in a hotel in the romantic Latin Quarter, memories, stories and images from the past crowd in on Isadora. Cultural images of the city of light invade her mind and intermingle with private memories of previous visits.

All sorts of images rushed into my mind: . . . the seedy hotel room in the movie, *Breathless*; my father warning me gravely before my first unescorted trip to Europe at nineteen that he had seen *Breathless* and knew what happened to American girls in Europe; Bennett and I fighting bitterly in Paris five Christmases ago; Pia and I staying in this same hotel when we were both twenty-three; my first trip to Paris at thirteen (a posh suite at the Georges V with my parents and sisters, and all of us brushing our teeth with Perrier); my grandfather’s stories about living on bananas in Paris as a penniless art student; my mother dancing naked in the Bois de Boulogne (she said) . . . . [ellipsis in original] (275)

As the quote above suggests, Paris has somehow always coincided with transitional periods in Isadora’s life – as in the lives of her parents and grandparents. These periods include her teenage period (her first menstruation, the biological sign of entrance into womanhood, occurred on the ship Île de
France as she returned to America), a tumultuous early adulthood when she was recently divorced from her first husband, and the first period of her second marriage. In Paris, as the quote suggests, she finds herself in a vacuum, in a space associated with change, with dangers as well as possibilities.

As Isadora confronts and conquers her fear of being alone in her imposed loneliness in the Parisian hotel room, she is able to identify herself as a writer. By having her go through her crisis and transformation process in Paris, invoking the experiences of a long row of American expatriate writers, Jong clearly attempts to endow her heroine’s story with weight and seriousness. Expatriation and exile provide a “potential transformation of perspective and sensibility” which may result in a “discovery of an alternate self” to the American writer (Kennedy 36). Isadora’s lonely night in that hotel room is related intertextually to Henry Miller’s torment in the Paris of *Tropic of Cancer*. Although Isadora is not an expatriate writer but a mere temporary visitor, her European/Parisian interlude works similarly, as a “neutral space” allowing her to accept herself as a writer.

This identification enables Isadora to see herself as an “honorary” woman of sorts, someone who does not belong to the mass of ordinary American women. Having parted from Adrian, she self-critically comments on having dragged copies of her published book around Europe: “They were designed to prove that I was not just an ordinary woman. They were designed to prove that I was exceptional. They were designed to prove that I was to be given safe conduct. I clung pitifully to my status as an exception, because without it, I would be just another lonely female on the prowl” (272). As we shall see, it is exactly this identity of *exceptional* woman that Isadora formulates that night in Paris.

The self-confidence that this identification provides is empowering. Contemplating her body in the mirror and perusing her manuscripts, she manages to regain her balance and, as a result, acquires an identity that consists

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151 Visiting the pension Orfila where the Swedish writer Strindberg suffered from the psychosis described in his *Inferno*, Henry Miller realizes why he is attracted to Paris. To him, Paris, the goal of a pilgrimage, “the very hub of the wheel,” but also a hell of sorts, provides the site where the artist may arrive at insights both personal and general (185).

152 As in Miller’s novel, the European journey serves Isadora in her transformation process. As concerns national identity, however, these two novels and the two protagonists could hardly be more different because they represent opposing attitudes to America: an embrace, albeit with certain reservations in Jong’s, and complete rejection in Miller’s case. Miller’s autobiographical narrator/protagonist explicitly rejects not merely his American identity but actually any national, social or religious “allegiance,” defining himself instead as “neutral” (156). In Jong’s novel, the questioning of “America” is not explicitly voiced by the protagonist but is rather expressed through her rebellion. Isadora finally accepts her place as an American wife as her return to America suggests at the close of the book. At the end of *Tropic of Cancer*, however, the protagonist helps a friend who longs for America to return, but elects to stay in Europe himself. To him, the idea of America is pure mythology: “What we call life is a five-and-ten-cent store romance. That enthusiasm underneath – what is it? That cheap enthusiasm which turns the stomach of any ordinary European? It’s illusion. No, illusion’s too good a word for it. Illusion means something. No, it’s not that – it’s delusion” (310).
of both body and mind. As she rereads her journals she is also able to see that her marriage had been unhappy: "I knew I did not want to return to the marriage described in that notebook. If Bennett and I got back together again, it would have to be under very different circumstances. And if we did not, I knew I would survive" (288).

Her dreams reflect this progress towards a new sense of self. Like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, which serves as an intertext of sorts,\(^\text{153}\) she ascends from hell, in her case the hell is her own despair, and is returned to the world – which, in the end, proves to be the imagined community of America. But the dreams do not only remove Isadora from the "hell" in which her elopement has placed her, they actually foreshadow her future career as a significant public personality. That these dreams symbolically express what, deep down, she wants to do with her future life is suggested by her remark: "I had some vague sense that I was assigning myself dreams as a sort of cure" (289). That her life is a difficult balance act, where a mistake might send her into the abyss, is illustrated by the fact that she must avoid tripping and falling as she moves ahead: "Full of elevators, platforms in space, enormously steep and slippery staircases, zigurat temples I had to climb, mountains, towers, ruins . . . " [ellipsis in original] (289).

The scenes that her dreams narrate lead up to the revelation of her calling. In her first vision she discovers that her diaphragm is a contact lens and the cervix an eye: "Womb with a view" (289). This dream seems to stress the importance of a woman’s point of view, a perspective on the world based on female experience. Then, she is back in college, in a graduation ceremony, climbing stairs to receive a diploma. The formality and solemnity of that situation suggest that she should take her work seriously. Surprisingly, the college degree is associated with a special honor, “the right to have three husbands simultaneously . . . Bennett, Adrian, and some other man whose face was not clear” (289). Isadora’s prominent status as an academic seems to give her an erotic license, one the establishment dislikes: “‘Only your high academic achievement makes it impossible for us to withhold this honor,’ Mrs. McIntosh said, ‘but the faculty hopes you will decline of your own volition’” (289). Isadora claims her honor, however, protesting that she is an exceptional woman, “a poet not a secretary” – but then she forfeits her right by forgetting to pick up the scroll (290). Finally, “a book with my name on the cover” is handed to her by Colette, her favorite female writer, who comments that it was “‘a very shaky beginning . . . but at least you made a be-

\(^{153}\) The allusions to *The Divine Comedy* (e.g., her comment that the discotheque she visits with Adrian might have been called the Seventh Circle, and the reference to Adrian and herself as Paolo and Francesca) establish an analogy, albeit ironic, between Isadora’s story and that of Dante. This ironic twist functions to downplay the seriousness of her trajectory, a gesture whereby the author seems to signal an awareness of the danger of making pretentious allusions to the Western canon – as male writers tend do in order to appear learned.
ginning” (290). As Isadora understands that “making love to her in public was the real graduation,” the dream suggests that she will become a rebel writer, one who continues the outsider tradition of Colette (290).

Although Isadora’s identity as a specifically American writer is not highlighted in this dream, the context of the dream and of her transformation process do define her national identity. As she wakes up, she discovers that her menstrual period has begun – something that alleviates her fear of pregnancy. In a metaphorical sense, as the womb of the national woman is a metonym for the physical land of the nation, her menstruation may be read as a call back to her American existence in time and space – waking her up from the European dream and relocating her in American reality. The title of the chapter “Blood Weddings or Sic Transit” testifies to the significance of her menstruation also in terms of her return to the role of Mrs. America. Stumbling into the hall in search of a toilet, she realizes that she cannot venture back into the world without the purse containing three important documents, all linking her to America: “Then suddenly I remember that everything which stands between me and destitution is in my handbag: passport, American Express card, traveler’s checks” (294). As she tries the door of the toilet, a confused and embarrassing exchange between her and another hotel guest ensues:

‘Un moment, s’il vous plaît,’ comes an embarrassed male voice. American accent. It’s August, after all, and there probably aren’t any French people within miles of Paris.
‘It’s ok,’ I say, holding my diaper in place with my thighs.
‘Pardon?’ He hasn’t heard me. He’s still trying to come up with French phrases as he squeezes out the last dollop of shit.
‘It’s ok, I yell, ‘I’m American.’
‘Je viens, je viens’, he mutters.
‘Je suis Americaine!’
‘Pardon?’ (294)

The first person Isadora encounters that morning is thus a compatriot with whom she tries to communicate. The fact that she has to reiterate her nationality to an uncomprehending countryman emphasizes and defines her identity – to herself as well as to her reader. The scene constitutes, I believe, a stage in her return to the national community, a return that, at this point, is not yet completed.

Emerging into the daylight, physically and mentally refreshed, she feels herself come back to life and the present, and to “America”: “Suddenly I was acutely aware of all the small pleasures of being alive. The superb taste of

154 That Jong applies female body imagery to the male genre of the Bildungsroman, e.g., by letting the 28-day menstrual cycle structure the plot, has been commented on by Joan Reardon who, at the publication of the novel, applauded this innovative aspect.
the coffee, the sunlight streaming down, the people posing on street corners for you to admire them. It looked as if the whole Latin Quarter had been taken over by Americans” (298-99). Although still in Europe, she thus finds herself in the bosom of her own community: “[a]ll those innocents abroad!” (299). She of course counts herself among these innocents, and the long description of the Americans she enjoys watching makes it clear that she claims these people of diverse colors and classes as kinsmen. What Isadora sees, at this point, is thus not the Otherness, the fascinating difference of the foreign scene but the comforting familiarity of America represented by a wide variety of characters: “What a scene! Like Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims. The Wife of Bath as a black American lady making a pilgrimage to Notre Dame . . . ” (299). This comment recalls an earlier one where Isadora deplores the absence of a female counterpart to Chaucer: “Where was the female Chaucer? One lusty lady who had juice and joy and love and talent too” (101). Here Isadora seems to be thinking of herself as that new writer, the female American Chaucer.

On the train to London to be reunited with her husband, her experiences strongly suggest that she is leaving one stage of consciousness and entering another. Looking back, Isadora alludes ironically to religious quests, referring to the trip as “purgatorial.” But as her journey back to her husband has nationalist, rather than religious overtones, it might be said to be “pseudo-religious,” to use Benedict Anderson’s term. Two encounters, with a train conductor and with an American couple, may also be read as trials on the road from Europe to a better world, America. As she finds the sexual advances of a French train conductor revolting, she realizes, in a flash, that she has just been offered an opportunity to act out her favorite erotic fantasy. Instead of exciting her, it puts her off with a vengeance: “My zipless fuck . . . Puzzling, wasn’t it? A tribute to the mysteriousness of the psyche. Or maybe my psyche had begun to change in a way I hadn’t anticipated. There was no longer anything romantic about strangers on trains. Perhaps there was no longer anything romantic about men at all?” (302-303). A change has obviously taken place in Isadora’s consciousness. At this moment, she realizes that even cherished erotic fantasies like the “zipless fuck,” taking place on a train, are not liberating but, in fact, mind-traps, romance myths, keeping her locked up in the prison house of patriarchal ideology. This insight, however, proves decidedly temporary.

Having abandoned the idea of finding an empty compartment where she might be alone, she seeks the company of other travelers and finds an American couple with a baby. Set on the train from Paris, this scene constitutes yet another stage in her gradual reintegration into American society. That the first people with whom she really converses after her separation from Adrian are American and even a family, that primary unit of the national community, underscores the symbolic significance of the scene in the context of Isadora’s return to America. As the husband, a professor on a
Fulbright in France, speaks of the superiority of French schools, Isadora, whose sense of self has been strengthened, informs him that she has taught college herself. As she has a function in the “public” sphere, she has greater authority than women in the domestic sphere, such as the professor’s wife, who remains mute. “I might be a curious lone female, but at least I was not a bottle-washer like his wife,” she adds pejoratively (303). Failing to recognize the gender oppression that silences this woman, locking her in a domestic role, Isadora’s reaction is actually a negation of that feminist consciousness she had when breaking with her analyst. Early on in the novel, she testified to an awareness of the exclusion of women, counting herself among them, from the national Self. Deliberately and disdainfully avoiding the professor’s wife, she now symbolically rejects the idea of an alternative female community, a rejection that makes it impossible to classify Fear of Flying as a neo-Bildungsroman that substitutes the ideology of the traditional patriarchal counterpart with feminist values.155

That she engages in frank dialogue with the husband may be seen as an attempt to insert herself as a respected member of the national community. Such integration is facilitated by some proof of allegiance – which she provides in her defense of the American educational system, acting as if she were responding to a test of her patriotism.

‘Don’t you agree that our American educational system has misconstrued the meaning of democracy?’ he asked, all pomposity and bile.
‘No,’ I said, ‘I don’t agree . . . .’ We haven’t really figured out how to make democracy work in the schools,’ I said, ‘but that isn’t reason enough to go back to an elitist system like they have here…’ (and I gestured briefly to the dark countryside beyond the window) ‘… after all, America is the first society in history to confront these problems with a heterogeneous population. It isn’t like France or Sweden or Japan . . . .’ [ellipsis in original] (303-304)

She connects the issue of “democracy,” a central concept in American patriotic political rhetoric, to schools, institutions commonly recognized as ideological instruments in the propagation of nationalist consciousness. Her defense clearly identifies the American educational system as progressive compared to the French one, and her identification of America as “the first society in history” reveals her conviction that America is a pioneering and world-leading nation.

This conversation with a fellow-American speeds up Isadora’s return to America, a re-entry confirmed in the final chapter entitled “A 19th-Century Ending” – a heading referring to Jong’s ironic play with the conventional

155 According to Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, in the neo-Bildungsroman, a genre shaped by American marginal-group writers, the protagonist is generally ultimately integrated into an alternative community, for example a female network or a minority culture. Braendlin mentions, for instance Louise Meriwether’s Daddy Was a Number Runner, Alice Walker’s Meridian, and Isabella Rios’s Victuam.
endings of Victorian novels. The setting of the final scene, a Victorian hotel, may be read as a metaphor of Victorian ideology, holding marriage as a fundamental social institution. While she is taking a bath, musing over her experiences, she recognizes the change which has taken place since she last saw her husband: “The cold stone I had worn inside my chest for twenty-nine years was gone. Not suddenly. And maybe not for good. But it was gone” (311). Clearly, something significant has happened to her as the “cold stone,” her fear of living as an independent individual, has disappeared.

While critics like Reardon have generally read the ending in terms of purification and re-birth, the denouement is, actually, ambiguous. Isadora has indeed achieved a degree of liberation but the self-irony of the narrator (directed also at her narrating self) suggests that this condition is temporary. The ironic reverberations of Gothic imagery throughout underscore the contradictory mood of the ending: “There were only about ten guests in that haunted house” (309), in which the bathtub was “one of those long, deep, claw-footed ones. A regular sarcophagus” (310). And she adds: “‘DROWNED IN ESTRANGED HUSBAND’S BATHTUB,’ I wrote in my head for the National Enquirer” (310).

As the novel ends, Isadora appears to have accepted herself as an independent being. “Leaving Bennett was my first really independent action,” she states (285). Throughout, she is aware of how limited her elopement is in terms of revolt against patriarchy: “A really independent woman would go to the mountains alone and meditate – not take off with Adrian Goodlove in a battered Triumph” (173). And in a number of ways, the text signals that her rejection of the romance plot is actually a temporary phenomenon. The tensions at work in the ending, where, for instance, the ironically deployed Gothic imagery in the bathtub scene undercuts her “happy” acceptance of self, are the result of what must be considered Jong’s failure to transform the male success story, her failure to adapt it to accommodate female experience. When Isadora returns to her husband and the imagined community of America, her trajectory conforms to the pattern of the traditional Bildungsroman where the protagonist is ultimately reintegrated into the national community. Like her male American counterparts, Isadora is confirmed as a hero, but, although she redefines herself as an independent individual, her revolt is contained within American patriarchal paradigms.156

156 Hogeland and Suleiman provide plausible explanations for the mechanisms causing the feminism of the novel to fail. Hogeland points out that Fear of Flying contributed to spreading feminist ideas to a wider audience but that it did so at the price of moderating the radical message. This was partly the consequence of a contradiction between oppositional politics and the (conservative) arena of popular fiction (55). Suleiman, in her turn, suggests that the commercial success of Fear of Flying and similar novels (her example being Rita Mae Brown’s Rubyfruit Jungle) may be due to the lack of really challenging messages. Their popularity “may . . . be a sign that neither book is felt to imply a genuine threat to existing ways of seeing and being between the sexes. Like modern capitalism, modern patriarchy has a
While, at the resolution of the plot, she appears to imagine herself as having successfully gained selfhood, as well as access to the national Self, the text as a whole suggests that her consciousness is false. Her entry into the Victorian building where her husband is staying signals subordination to the patriarchal and nationalist social structures which lock a woman into an object position. The ironic allusions to the Gothic novel discussed above surely suggest that such is the case. The radical feminist potential of Isadora’s experience is thus seriously compromised by the resolution of the plot. As she finally returns to the conventional role of the woman in the national community, the dutiful wife, leaving the rebel figure behind, her opposition proves to have been partial and temporary. Ultimately, she is not able to liberate herself from the role of Mrs. America that she sought to escape when she eloped with Adrian. Inevitably, Jong’s failure really to transform the formula ending of the male *Bildungsroman* also detracts from the success of *Fear of Flying* as a feminist appropriation of the male Old World journey novel.

Although Isadora’s self-irony deflates the Old World as a romantic world, her trajectory actually inscribes the myth of the Old World as an “exilic” zone where personal regeneration may take place. This textual tension between myths, illusions, and progressive gestures, whereby she attempts to query powerful ideology, suggests that Isadora’s anxiety about revolt is shared by the author. This oscillation is well described in Isadora’s reflection on her time as journalist: “I started out being clever and superficial and dishonest. Gradually I got braver. Gradually I stopped trying to disguise myself. One by one, I peeled off the masks: the ironic mask, the wise-guy mask, the mask of pseudosophistication, the mask of indifference” (63). Disappointingly, however, Jong never really sheds these masks in *Fear of Flying*. And Isadora, who temporarily removes the mask of Mrs. America in Europe, finally puts it back on. Resorting to the formula of the classic *Bildungsroman* in closing the novel, Jong also draws the curtains on the complexity of Isadora’s national identity. As a consequence, while she fails to change the romance story, to speak with Greene, she does tell a different story, taking a woman’s experience as her starting point. Like the texts by English nineteenth-century female travelers studied by Mills, Jong’s is a manifestation of a “discourse of difference.” Quite literally stepping outside the domestic sphere as they journey through foreign land, these women writers may be construed as rebels, as picaras. A closer scrutiny of their stories, however, reveals that, at the end of the day, they find themselves locked inside the houses of nationalist and imperialist ideology.
CODA

The Survival
of the Old World Journey Narrative

The New World and the Old . . . is too facile a juxtaposition, and I do not
draw the conclusions I began with. If you can begin with conclusions. But I
suppose we all do . . . . in several months in Paris [I have] learned enough to
be considerably changed – and is this not in fact the purpose of young
Americans going abroad? To make them think of things they never thought
of?

. . . I have a need anyway to feel I am liked. No doubt this marks me as an
American. I must be full of national characteristics that are hidden from me
and are palpable to others . . . as home becomes palpable to me only because
I’m not there.

This study challenges the widespread idea among literary critics that, after
World War I, American novels depicting Americans in Europe have little, or
no, relation to the classic Jamesean “international novel.” Using a wider
definition of the Old World journey narrative, it argues that this mode of
writing survives – but in new guises. The Old World journey remains a re-
silient motif in American literature, and, to this day, allusions to and echoes
of the Jamesean novel can still be found in American narratives about
Europe. In American myth, “Europe” is even today referred to *en bloc* as the
Old World; the concept retains a complex of associations inherited from the
nineteenth century, signifying the past, romance, high culture, monarchy,
moral complexity, and decadence. And despite the political power of the
United States, the American attitude to Europe, particularly as regards high
culture, continues to be marked by a note of ambivalence, not to say anxiety
– a residue from the postcolonial anxiety of the first decades of the history of
the American nation, as Buell would have it. Nationalist discourse continues
to be haunted by the need to insist on “America’s” difference from “Europe” and to keep reaffirming the break with European culture and history.\footnote{That Europe is irrelevant for an American is, for example, claimed in \textit{Satori in Paris} (1973), an autobiographical travel piece by Jack Kerouac. In this book, he realizes that the endeavor to investigate his supposedly aristocratic ancestry is mistaken. To Kerouac, Europe seems to have lost its romantic allure, his homesickness showing that his life and his identity are related to America – not Europe.}

The Old World journey narrative survives but changes continually; while old motifs are retained and transformed to express new social and historical realities, new elements always appear. One of the conventional functions of the European journey, the initiation of an American protagonist, is retained but transformed in the modern and contemporary Old World journey narrative. In the nineteenth century, the European journey was expected to lead, not only to the personal development of an American, but also to his/her confirmation as a member of the national community. In other words, it served as a national cultural ritual. But while the travel narrative tended to be nationalist, it simultaneously provided a site for the questioning of national identity – both on the cultural and the individual level. In the twentieth century, as the Old World journey grew outdated as a national ritual, travel narratives continued to serve as a forum for the study of “America.” To allude to Leslie Fiedler, they still relate “discoveries” of “America.” As we have seen, the political aspect of the genre grew more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s, as ideological questioning informed the contemporary political and cultural debate. The conservative backlash seems to have had an effect on the novels of the 1980s and, in the last decade or so, the novels of Diane Johnson, whose plots pivot around transatlantic relationships in the upper classes, reflect a political/cultural climate of détente, yet one where national differences still are significant enough to provide material for captivating stories.

That the persistence of the Old World journey narrative and its engagement in the debate over national identity has been overlooked can, I hold, be attributed to the fact that the dividing lines between historical eras have been too sharply drawn. Historical breaks, such as the two World Wars, and the subsequent role reversal between the Old World and the New, have tended to be overemphasized while continuities have been neglected. American literature, it should be noted, continues to treat differences between the national cultures of the United States and the European countries. Unlike Kasia Boddy, I do not consider the differences they depict minor. The effects of globalization and cultural homogenization may have blurred national boundaries but they certainly have not erased them, and this state of affairs can be observed in the narratives of the post-World-War-II period. Increased American leisure travel may even be considered to have worked in the opposite direction, in that tourism tends to activate nationalist discourses. As
Endy points out, American post-World-War-II tourism in France actually reinforced national differences (Cold War 203-06). Glossing the national differences that American literature deals with as insignificant, as Boddy does, is a mistake, I believe, because it functions as a dismissal of the investigation into their significance, an investigation which may contribute important insights. To my mind, the fact that American writers rely heavily on conventions of the past, which they often parody, is not a sign of the exhaustion of the American European journey motif, as Boddy argues, but rather an indication of a contemporary need to reinscribe the motif and to query national identity.

Udo Natterman, one of the few who have commented on the critical neglect of the survival of the “international novel,” takes a step further – too far, to my mind. According to Natterman, commentary on the “international novel” in the postwar period by scholars such as Strout, Boorstin, and Wegelin, was underwritten by a polarizing Cold War ideology that saw the United States and its European allies as one world united in opposition to the Communist Soviet bloc (“Culture” 1-12). According to the Cold War mindset, since the western democracies had all been absorbed into the American sphere of the world, cultural clashes between the Old World and the New had to be a phenomenon of the past. Although I agree with Natterman that the critical neglect can be explained with reference to the historical and ideological context of the post-World-War-II period, the critics he refers to can hardly be considered to have dehistoricized the genre, and it is unlikely that they shared a hidden political agenda, which is what he seems to suggest.

The major change that the Old World journey narrative has undergone since the age of the “international novel” concerns its function. While the plot of the classic Jamesean novel is based on the consistent contrast or clash between American and European cultures, values, and morals, between “innocence” and “experience,” the twentieth-century variety tends to use the Old World as a setting, background or foil for an essentially American drama. This transformation concerning the role of “Europe” reflects, I believe, the historical paradigm shift already mentioned when the United States became a great power, growing out of its dependence on Europe. In the twentieth century, Americans no longer came with the intention of becoming part of European society; instead, to a great extent, they settled in isolated expatriate communities.

In all four novels studied above, Europe provides the backdrop for a story that deals, almost exclusively, with American culture. In Williams’s novel, in particular, the protagonist’s encounters with European culture are few. Here, the changing depiction of Europe accompanies and reinforces the protagonist’s shift of political persuasion. In Fear of Flying, the primary function of the geographical setting is to provide the protagonist with a zone of liberation, the precondition for Isadora’s temporary rejection of the restraints
of the role of Mrs. America, an icon in the nationalist imagination. Confrontations with Europeans do figure in Styron’s novel; here they are employed as means to elicit the negative sides of contemporary American society, such as materialism, cultural superficiality and neo-imperialist exploitation. McCarthy, in turn, utilizes the dramatic possibilities of the European scene, but Peter Levi seldom comes into direct contact with Europeans. Europe, in *Birds of America*, serves as the experimental ground on which the author puts the protagonist to a series of tests in order to examine the American liberal idealist tradition, found to be flawed.

While transformations thus mark the entire history of the Old World journey narrative, the genre has never altered beyond recognition. In the remainder of this Coda, I will sketch the changes since the 1970s; the overview, admittedly a rather superficial one, will seek to identify what has been carried over from the old tradition and suggest what new trends can be discerned. To begin with, if the Old World journey novels of the 1960s and 1970s mentioned above attempted to question “America,” in the 1980s, a return to nationalist ideology can be detected. The necessity for American leadership over Europe is, for example, suggested in John Irving’s *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), as an American family saves European culture from the communist threat, averting a terrorist attack on the Vienna Opera house. In evidence of the nationalist bias of the text, the decisive blow against the enemy is administered by the patriarch of the family, “Win” Berry, with a baseball bat. It should be noted, however, that by depicting the American victory quite humorously Irving avoids bombast. A patriotic message is also conveyed by Alison Lurie’s Pulitzer prize-winning *Foreign Affairs* (1984) which declares the futility of journeying to Europe for learning and self-realization. In this story, two American literary critics and Anglophiles return from England to the United States, stripped of what amounted to false notions of European cultural superiority. As it celebrates two American icons, the solid cowboy hero and the warm-hearted and virtuous American girl, the novel can be seen to perpetuate national myth.

The American myth of “Italy,” in turn, informs Julia Markus’s *Friends Along the Way* (1985), a first-person narrative about a young, married, and intellectual American woman, a descendant of Isadora Wing, and her journey abroad. In this novel, the Italian setting is a liminal zone of romance, eroticism, personal liberation – a vacation world that, after a period, needs to be abandoned for “real” workaday life in the United States. The final line of the novel reveals the mind-set of an American tourist: “Every once in a while, especially on a hot summer day, I think of a trip to Rome. Then I think, Europe’s a vacation. Betsy, your travels are here” (317). There are, however, exceptions to the nationalist trend, such as Don DeLillo’s *The Names* (1982). An investigation into the role of the United States in the post-World-War-II world, it is also a refutation of the myth of American innocence. In Greece, financial risk analyst James Axton realizes that, funda-
mentally, the United States is rooted in an oppressive western civilization. Having unwittingly been working for the CIA, he himself turns out to be complicit in American neo-imperialism.

In both DeLillo’s and in Williams’s books, the European continent signifies the origin of a repressive American society. Williams’s text even presents the Old World in terms of an opposite to the African American community. A number of American novels published in the 1980s by ethnic minority writers represent Europe as the historical source of dominant American society. The encounter with the Old World tends to heighten the protagonist’s awareness of his/her marginal status in the United States. *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (1981), does not pivot on the issue of oppressive forces in American society but the author uses Europe, England in his case, as the virtual negative of his own ethnic/cultural background. Rodriguez explains that, while reading in the British library, he started thinking about his Mexican American working-class origin. As he observes, in this English institution of high culture, he finds himself as far away from his origin as possible, an insight that triggers reminiscences of his past, of his problematic position as a member of a marginalized ethnic group.

In Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am*, Europe is the dead end to which white American society inevitably leads. The novel’s statement of this “truth” calls for a rejection of Europe and white America; a return to the African American community is presented as the alternative. In Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981) and Andrea Lee’s *Sarah Phillips* (1984), Europe signifies in related ways. The two female protagonists of these novels, Jadine and Sarah, have gone to France for education and careers in the white world, but here, in the origin of white American society, they are confronted with their blackness. Fashion model Jadine of *Tar Baby* encounters the incarnation of black womanhood when she runs into an impressive, queen-like African woman in a Paris supermarket. But Jadine fails to connect with the African American community. In Lee’s novel, however, the young black woman, a Harvard graduate living in Paris with a white French lover and his friends, is reconciled with her origin. Exposed to the racism and general prejudice against American culture that her male French friends entertain, she thinks back on her childhood and adolescence, realizing the crucial role that race has played in her life. This insight paves the way for her reconciliation with her family and the black community back home.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Diane Johnson published three novels particularly noteworthy in the context of this study: *Le Divorce* (1997), *Le Mariage* (2000) and *L’Affaire* (2003). What distinguishes these novels from those discussed above, of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, aligning them instead with the Jamesean “international novel,” is the fact that they build on the contrast between the two worlds and center on a transatlantic divorce, wedding, and love affair. And like James’s novels they are all set in high society.
In *Le Divorce*, the female narrator-protagonist Isabel Walker is a streetwise, late twentieth-century incarnation of the American girl abroad. In *Le Mariage* she is embodied by actress Clara Holly and in *L’Affaire* by Amy Hawkins, a dot com millionaire.\(^\text{158}\) As *Le Divorce* unfolds, it reveals Americans and their values and motives as rather complex, not to say dubious; the notion of American innocence abroad subverted. The greed of both the French and the American family is uncovered when an antique and valuable painting of Saint Ursula, the patron saint of virgins, becomes an object of heated dispute. Their struggle for the possession of the painting, originally given to Isabel’s sister as a young girl, is, I believe, a metaphor for a conflict over the figure of the American girl – one that *Le Divorce* thus comments on and engages in. By presenting her not as a victim of social forces but as an agent, someone well in charge of her life, Johnson insists on her subjecthood.\(^\text{159}\)

Like the Old World journey narratives that preceded it, *Le Divorce* draws on a convention – and adds something new. To echo Johnson’s Isabel, even today, the European journey makes an American think of things s/he had never thought of before. Modern Americans traveling to the Old World ask the same questions that their compatriots did in the nineteenth century – “What is America?” and “What is an American?” – but the answers they find are different. Contemporary Americans draw new “conclusions” from their encounter with Europe. What makes the lesson Isabel learns new is that it entails her questioning the relevance of the conventional dichotomy of Old Word experience and New World innocence. “[T]oo facile a juxtaposition,” this dichotomy does not apply to the complex contemporary world (4). Toward the end of the twentieth century, a new type of cosmopolitan American, like Isabel Walker or the worldly Clara Holly or Tim Nolinger of *Le Mariage*, or the narrator-protagonist of Lynne Tillman’s *Motion Sickness*

\(^\text{158}\) *L’Affaire* (2003) differs from Johnson’s two previous international novels in that it inscribes rather than problematizes the America/Europe binary of nationalist ideology, a shift of ideology that may be explained as related to the political tension that developed between the United States and its European allies in the aftermath of 9/11. The heroine’s family name, Hawkins, seems to hint at the desirability of a more defensive American foreign policy. Significantly, she returns home to California at the end of the story, refraining from further entanglement with an Anglo-French family – but without breaking with her Franco-Arab lover, an alluring foreign Other.

\(^\text{159}\) Although *The Pleasing Hour* (1999) by Lily King inscribes the image of the American girl as a solid and warm-hearted character, it does not present France and the French as Other. Nor does it tap into the tradition of investigating “America.” The primary focus of this novel, set in the home of a middle-class French family where American nineteen-year-old Rosie is employed as an au pair, is not national characteristics but the intimate relations and personal traumas that the characters are, ultimately, revealed as sharing. The lyrical renditions of the everyday setting serve to convey the power of Rosie’s emotions as she is displaced to a country unknown to her. Eventually, Rosie’s “home-coming” at the end of the story is not a return to the United States but rather a reconciliation with her personal past, the events she fled going to Europe.
can be born – one for whom the Self/Other dichotomy of nationalist ideology no longer has determining power.

Contemporary Old World journey narratives continue to deal with the many complexities involved in the relationship of an American to her/his personal national identity. In Baldwin’s words, they are concerned with the “contradictions” inherent in American national identity. Typically, these complexities are uncovered as an American is displaced on the European continent. American myth and nationalist ideology will, most likely, continue to inform future narratives of travel. But I believe this dominant trend will be tempered by a countertext, as has usually been the case also in the past. The growing consciousness of the constructedness of national identity and the critique of the nation-state raised by marginalized groups will, undoubtedly, continue to inform stories about American Old World journey travelers. Johnson’s *Le Divorce* and Tillman’s *Motion Sickness* exemplify this oppositional trend, an alternative to the dominant one, as they query American national identity, revealing, as have many other previous novels, its complexity – to allude once again to Henry James. Isabel Walker makes a statement unthinkable for a Jamesean hero/heroine, one that testifies to the decline of nationalist ideology occurring at the end of the twentieth century. The stand-point that Isabel formulates here expresses an awareness of the legacy of American national identity and her grounds for rejecting it: “I resolved . . . that even though I was American, a member of a nation, and thus couldn’t help but be afflicted by all those limitations other people saw as ‘American,’ I was going to ditch the curse of nationality and not think of myself as anything at all” (196).

As Tillman begins and ends *Motion Sickness*, a fictional travelogue, with references to James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* she signals the affinity of her narrator-protagonist to Isabel Archer who was equally bewildered by the complexity of the world she encountered. This young American woman’s vagabondage through Europe follows no established route and never stops at the conventional landmarks of the Grand Tour. The journal she keeps tells of an individual’s continual reflections on her identity and that of the people she meets, many of them eccentric and enigmatic. No definite conclusions have been reached, however, as the text ends. The narrator’s persistent uncertainty of what postcard to send to whom, and what to write, indicates the impossibility of capturing and fixing identity.
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