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Patterns of the negative epic quest and three modern novels by Andre Gide, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, and Malcolm Lowry

John Robert Greer

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PATTERNS OF THE NEGATIVE EPIC QUEST AND THREE MODERN NOVELS
BY ANDRÉ GIDE, LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE, AND MALCOLM LOWRY

BY

JOHN ROBERT GREER

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PART ONE: GENESIS

Introduction: Epic and Negative Epic

Many critics have approached the subject of modern epic, but like E. M. W. Tillyard,¹ they dismiss "eccentric" literature from consideration on the claim that the execution of epic requires "balance" and "objectivity." It seems unfortunate to dismiss works that--while remaining essentially negativistic and subjective in their impact--uniquely capture the spirit of their milieu and re-fract in a singular way a "choric" effect (to borrow Tillyard's term); that is, "the unconscious metaphysic of a group."² To accommodate the inverted comparison between epic and certain individuated works by modern authors, I here attempt to define a form I call the "negative epic." The term negative epic, as I use it, implies a narrative form that opposes traditional epic both in conventions and in assertions about the society with which it deals. The comparison relies on analysis of plot patterns: essentially, the quest in epic and the negative quest in negative epic. In outlining an evolution for the negative epic, I begin with the contrast between the ancient epics and

¹E. M. W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 8.

²Ibid., p. 9. For further discussion of "choric effect," see below, pages 23 and 56.

the Bible; then I deal with Jonathan Swift and George Gordon, Lord Byron to prepare for an analysis of three modern novels by André Gide, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Malcolm Lowry. At the center of the comparisons lies a recurrent narrative pattern.

Analyzing narrative patterns by defining their relation to the epic form holds at least three advantages. First, the antiquity of the epic allows comparisons that involve large temporal spans. Second, the close relation of epic to its society reveals important changes in the relations between a narrative and its purlieus. Third, the emphasis placed on the hero and his code permits contrast between differing views of man, his dignity, and his ideal rôle. The hero, in plot structures which revolve about a central figure, becomes inextricably involved in analysis of narrative form; and often analysis of plot movement must unavoidably include movement of the central figure. Thus the epic hero has provided and will continue to provide the best factor in a comparison between ancient and modern narrative structure, when that structure focuses on the problem of hero.

The narrative base for the epic structure, through which the epic hero expresses his heroism, is the quest. A basic distinction between epic and negative epic, hero and negative hero relies on the contrast between quest, with its constructive external goal, and negative quest, with its atrophy and internalization. This present discussion will attempt analysis based on historical development, succinctly treated, of a peculiar plot deliquescence that evolves from stories with descending plot lines.

The distinction between the ascending (meaning up toward success)

narrative pattern of the epic and the descending (meaning down toward failure) narrative pattern of the negative epic involves the treatment of hero, which, in turn, involves the treatment of man's role in his society. At the base of western culture lie two generally identifiable currents which affect concepts of heroism and a hero's relation to his society: the Greco-Roman and the Judaic-Christian. The literature produced by these distinct cultures demonstrates disparate ways of representing man's confrontation with the external world. The Greek view, represented by the epic, presents an aristocratic, hierarchical society, dominated by a small class of aristocratic, pugnacious heroes. The Hebraic view, manifested in writings of the Bible, presents a dynamic, often lower class, often humble hero (es. Jesus, Paul, Peter).³ Moreover, the Biblical personages, whether heroic or not, become infused with importance in proportion to their relation to an abstract principle, a single, moral god. The Homeric characters gain importance in proportion to their relation with the aristocratic hero, who stands above the common people and who associates directly (and often has a blood relation with) concrete, often whimsical—not to say immoral—gods.

The great Greek heroes, to generalize, maintain a strict external honor code, though they are not, as Aeneas in Dido's court, above occasional infraction. The aristocrats are, in fact, emphatically mortal, regardless of their association with the gods: against the eternal power of the gods and goddesses, the Greek Heroes' strife be-

³This distinction is defended in depth by Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. W. B. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 18-49.

comes all the more apparent. But strife does not lower the true Homeric hero, say Odysseus or Achilles, to defeat; for amidst all the vicissitudes of their quest-oriented adventures, the epic hero maintains his posture and therefore is static as a character.

Counterpoised to the static epic hero, the Biblical hero is dynamic and more amenable to growth as a character. Erich Auerbach argues that the Judaic-Christian view portrays a tension between appearance and meaning unknown to the Greco-Roman tradition, and, furthermore, that this tension forms the basis for irony.⁴ The mystery of human knowledge—what appears to be true—conflicts, or fails to be congruent with, divine knowledge—that which will at last manifest itself as truth when final superhuman judgement is revealed. This tension between levels of knowledge is opposed to a Grecian concept of knowledge, which involves more a difference of degree than of kind between the understanding of men and of gods. Thus there develops a mental stage where the emphasis lies in the protagonist's achievements in realms of self-enlightenment rather than in his achievements in the sphere of unilaterally significant physical prowess. Irony enters here because an actor on the level of human understanding may have his actions, adequate enough on his lower, immediate level, revealed as inadequate on the higher plain of spiritual enlightenment. The spiritual life of a Biblical hero exists on a separate, more abstract plane than that of his physical life, while the spiritual life of a Greek hero—with his repeated libations and sheep

⁴Auerbach, p. 49.

slaughterings—has its significance in an unquestionably physical world.

The narrative patterns that document the heroes' movement can be contrasted similarly. Graphically represented, and vastly oversimplified, the epic plot pattern is an upward slanting line, once an adjustment is made for the divided chronology resulting from the convention of beginning in medias res. The line has jagged depressions spaced fairly regularly to represent delays and falterings but generally moves upward toward an external goal. What the line represents, of course, is the quest, since the quest causes the movement of the plot.

A graphic representation of the typical Biblical narrative will have to be stereoscopic. On the physical plane, the plot line moves downward, cases in point being the stories of Adam, Moses, Job, or Jesus. Of these only Job returns to surpass his former bounty in material terms, though the weight of his story continues to center on his tribulations. On the spiritual plane, the plot line is parallel with the plot line representing the physical plane in its initial descent; but the "spiritual" plot line swings upward at the end to accommodate the spiritual success of, say, Paul or Peter, or to accommodate the apotheosis of Jesus.

Inherent in the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus, for example, is an underlying irony that draws together both the Judaic-Christian idea of hero and the duplicity of many Biblical plot structures. For at the base of these histories of physical decline, lies the concept of self-denial coupled with the belief that the meek shall inherit the earth. In order that these martyred heroes be acclaimed

as "successful" in their goals, an acceptance of a separate spiritual universe becomes mandatory; and the irony of success in defeat establishes the fundamental tension between this world and the other. In direct contrast to the murdered and defiled Judaic-Christian hero stands the Greek epic hero, who--like Odysseus--ends by defeating his enemies and lying with his wife.

In summary, the movement discerned in epic plot structures tends upward toward realization of an external goal, while the movement of the double-layered Biblical plot structure tends downward and then bifurcates into an upward movement and a continuing downward movement. Lying within the Biblical plot structure is the germ of the negative epic, with its complete downward movement. The Biblical story of Moses supplies the most direct contrast here, for in aspects of strength, daring, and leadership (to leave out virility), Moses compares with the epic hero with one essential difference: unlike Aeneas, Moses does not reach his promised land. Frustration and internalization form two hard felt influences of Biblical stories on subsequent thought and literature. Northrop Frye cites Job as the basis for many expressions of ironic tragedy,⁵ and W. B. Carnochan cites Ecclesiastes as the basis for what he calls "satires on man," a group to which, he claims, Gulliver's Travels belongs.⁶ The

⁵Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 42. Here Frye also cites Adam as the archetype of the "inevitably ironic," Christ as archetype of "incongruously ironic."

⁶W. B. Carnochan, Lemuel Gulliver's Mirror for Man (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 56.

vision of man as physically frustrated which gains its first great expression in the Bible⁷ becomes modified through time, gaining an increased negativity and, most dramatically in the nineteenth century, a heightened subjectivity. This frustration finds embodiment in plots that move downward toward failure rather than, as with the positive epic, upward toward success. As representations of the evolution of the negative epic I here choose works by Jonathan Swift and George Gordon, Lord Byron for illustrative analysis. In the narrative patterns chosen and modified by these two writers one finds, as with the epic's depiction of the Greco-Roman concern with arete (power of excellence) and the Biblical depiction of the Judaic-Christian concern with faith in the face of frustration, symbols for particular societal ambiances.

Swift

Jonathan Swift's important contribution to the concept of frustrated quest lies within his total negativity, through which he mocks a hero who is himself a mocking man. This negative hero, who ends an alienated misanthrope, is Gulliver, whose existence as a character lies on two planes. On the first level Gulliver plays the role of alazon—one who pretends to be more than what he is.¹ Gulliver's inane descriptions of physical detail in the midst of the improbable

⁷The Hebrews, of course, had borrowed much from the Sumerians' less influential myths, in which downward plots have perhaps their first recorded expression in the stories of Gilgamesh and of Etana, both of whom blatantly fail in their quests.

¹Frye, p. 89.

and highly fanciful, as well as his blatantly bad writing style, demonstrate his near-sightedness, his lack of accurate perception and awareness. An obvious example is found in descriptions of his "disburthening" himself, through which (while supposedly defending himself) he invites ridicule.

I had been for some hours extremely pressed by the Necessities of Nature. . . . The best Expedient I could think on, was to creep into my House . . . and discharge my Body of that uneasy Load. . . . I would not have dwelt so long upon a Circumstance, that perhaps at first Sight may appear not very momentous; if I had not thought it necessary to justify my Character in Point of Cleanliness to the World. . . .²

The bombastic tone of his style, epitomized by his conceding that a bowel movement "may appear not very momentous," makes clear the reader's legitimate persiflage of Gulliver.

The satiric commonplace of the naive narrator is also demonstrated glaringly by the conversation Gulliver has with the King of Brobdingnag, during which Gulliver innocently relates the customs and traditions of his homeland, only to hear the king reply with the conclusion that the "Bulk of Gulliver's Natives [are] the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth" (p. 101). For the most part, the first three sections of Gulliver's Travels project this stereotype of the laughable, amazed protagonist, who stumbles unknowingly through the satiric landscapes of his author's mind, innocently uncovering the noxious horrors of human nature. To understand Swift's

²Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings, ed. Ricardo Quintana (New York: Random House 1958), p. 12. All references to Swift's writings are from this edition.

relation to Gulliver as the narrative approaches its conclusion, however, one must scrutinize the change Gulliver undergoes from one level of awareness as a narrator to another. Only when one understands Swift's ironic treatment of his narrator does Gulliver's anti-positive, anti-epic pose become clear.

Part Four, "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," is the stage for the more confusing second level offered in Gulliver's Travels. Gulliver comes to participate in the judgements that were previously held above him in satirical blindness; he begins to adopt the denouncing view of the King of Brobdingnag. In Part Four the human race, for Gulliver, becomes identified with the filthy Yahoos, who in turn become associated with excrement. Although Swift undercuts Gulliver at times during this last section--the mental picture created of Gulliver kneeling to kiss the horse's hoof is sheer persiflage--Gulliver's attitudes give the impression of merging with Swift's. Note the obviousness of Gulliver's sarcasm in his description of the military. "The trade of a Soldier," Gulliver tells his Houyhnhnm master, "is held the most honorable of all others: Because a Soldier is a Yahoo hired to kill in cold Blood as many of his own Species, who have never offended him, as possibly he can" (p. 200). This account leaves no doubt of Gulliver's personal opinion of a soldier, and the passage, along with most of Part Four, differs from discussions found in the first three sections of the book. For example, when Gulliver defends his chastity before the court of Lilliput (p. 43) with regards to a lady whose entire coach fits on Gulliver's hand, the situation seems ridiculous to the reader but not to Gulliver. Similarly, Gulliver

relates the follies of the court in Lilliput with faithful detail, while he avoids condemning phrases such as "in cold blood."

The change that takes place in Gulliver's perspective from that of alazon to that of one more accurately aware of his perceptions creates several problems. First, Swift's characterization of Gulliver has been criticized, since there is no evidence of the narrator's evolving from one stage to another. Swift presents two views: that of the younger Gulliver and that of the older Gulliver. The reader sees the change but not the development.³ Secondly, since Swift has used the device of the naive narrator throughout the first three sections, one tends to distrust Gulliver's views in Part Four. Thus, as Gulliver extols the virtues of the Houyhnhnms, some see his praise as folly and label the land of the perfect horses a mock Utopia.⁴ The view that Swift says one thing while meaning the opposite, or something near the opposite, relies on a simplistic view of irony as the art of manipulating truth as it opposes falsehood, illusion as it opposes reality. In this formula irony relies on absolutes, just as pure satire relies on relatively clear moral norms and standards.⁵ While the first three parts of Gulliver's Travels fit the pattern of satiric irony in the conventional sense, Part Four moves toward what is really pure irony—where the standards and meanings of the author

³Elliot, p. 50.

⁴John Traugott, "A Voyage to Nowhere with Thomas More and Jonathan Swift: Utopia and The Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," Sewanee Review, LXIX (1961), 534-65.

⁵Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 223.

become vague and confusing. W. B. Carnochan argues that irony describes a form of double vision, where the author sees both the truth and falsity of what he states. Thus, "Houyhnhmland is not an anti-Utopia, but a Utopia in which Swift could not wholly believe."⁶ This means that Gulliver's newly acquired critical awareness should not be discounted out of hand, nor should one identify Gulliver with Swift at every step.

The two problems of perspective--the abrupt change in Gulliver's role as it is expressed in his language and the ambiguity of Swift's relation to his narrator in Part Four--reinforce the notion that "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms" represents a departure on a different literary experiment for Swift. While some, Thackery, for example, may have emphasized the subjectivity of Part Four to an extreme, most have chosen to regard the entire work as consistent with the decorum expected from eighteenth century satire. "Decorum" here means essentially control--the kind of control that Byron is said to lack when he ridicules through his best known medium, Don Juan.⁷ But control does not permeate Part Four of Gulliver's Travels as it does much of Swift's other writing, and the lack of control and norms takes Part Four beyond the realm of usual satire. In, say, A Modest Proposal we can excuse the atrocities (if we feel the need to excuse them) described therein in view of the purpose Swift obviously has in mind.

⁶Carnochan, p. 68.

⁷F. R. Leavis, "Byron's Satire," Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 85.

As in most satire, Swift uses logic blown out of proportion to illustrate the lunacy of a social institution or policy. But in Part Four of Gulliver's Travels specific objects of attack slowly begin to be overshadowed by a general criticism of the human form, the human mind. Swift forces Gulliver to see himself as something deformed, detested and feared by those who possess true reason. Gulliver tells us that his Houyhnhnm master has concluded that

when a Creature pretending to Reason could be capable of such Enormities, he [the master] dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself. He seemed therefore confident, that instead of Reason, we [Yahoos] were only possessed of some Quality fitted to increase our natural Vices; as the Reflection from a troubled Stream returns the Image of an ill-shapen Body, not only larger, but more distorted (pp. 201-202).

Implied is the controlled rationality and reason of the Houyhnhnms, which stands in contrast with the pseudo-reason of men. The main element to be admired by the Houyhnhnms, the very element lacked by men, resides in their complete control of passion. Here lies the crux of the problems involved with Gulliver's sudden change and Swift's ambiguous attitude toward Gulliver in Part Four; for between the enviable control of the Houyhnhnms and the forced, decorous control of Gulliver's language lies a tension that undercuts any possibility for heroism.

Tension results from the thrust of Swift's language, which pounds negatively with words that denounce, attack, criticize, ridicule, debase, and reflect disgust, as it contrasts with the calm surface of the narrative. For example, Swift uses Gulliver's logical argument and formal, supposedly dispassionate rhetoric as a vehicle for scathing

attacks. "It is a very kingly, honourable, and frequent Practice," Gulliver explains,

When one Prince desires the Assistance of another to secure him against an Invasion, that the Assistant, when he hath driven out the Invader, should seize on the Dominions himself, and kill, imprison or banish the Prince he came to relieve (p. 200).

Or, again, he explains:

If a Prince send Forces into a Nation, where the People are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to Death, and make slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barbarous Way of Living (p. 200).

Combined with the negative force is a subsurface pressure produced by the inclusion of taboo acts--such as excreting and copulating openly--which do not fit into the ostensible control and decorum of the narrative.

Thus, on one side Swift presents control, embodied both in the Houyhnhnms and in Gulliver's language, and on the other he injects negative energy and obsessive concern with taboo acts that come to symbolize irrationality and uncontrol. These two distinct and opposite forces exerted on the narrative tend to pull it apart; and in pulling the narrative structure apart, these tensive forces create the ambiguous middle ground where Gulliver stands at the end of the story. This middle ground is purely ironical, since the absolutes (control, uncontrol; Houyhnhmland, real society) have become counteracted by their mutual power. Swift allows, or perhaps directs, the forces to pull the narrative downward wholly, so that neither the Houyhnhnms nor Gulliver can retain our full sympathy. This total ironical treatment becomes obvious, and is best repre-

sented in the scene where Gulliver is pictured bowing low and kissing the hoof of a horse. The tension resulting from the debasement of what Swift has previously held up for admiration and empathy destroys Gulliver as a consistent character: a risk incurred when he, as uncritical narrator, was included in the critical judgements of the author at the beginning of Part Four. By participating in the superior attitudes of Swift, Gulliver commits the sin of pride and ends caught in the middle, at once hating those humans who exhibit false pride and suffering himself the sensations of pride inherent in feelings of superiority and exclusion. Swift resolves the tension and ends the narrative by withdrawing into a double negativity, where Gulliver is both denouncing and denounced.

Swift's important contribution to the descending plot structure, then, dwells in his extreme negativistic perspective. As one critic notes: "If Swift were God, he would declare himself through the Decalogue, the series of Thou-Shalt-Nots; and persist thereafter in silence."⁸ Swift's language connotes images of veto, voiding, ridicule, cleansing, and deletion.⁹ Joined with this excoriating negativity are many scatological descriptions that serve to degrade the characters and that, in Part Four, associate excrement with Yahoos and therefore humans.¹⁰ The subconsciously held obsessions are al-

⁸ Denis Donoghue, Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 30.

⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰ Examples of scatological descriptions or allusions may be found in Gulliver's Travels on pp. 8, 9, 68, 93, 94, 127, and 182, as well as in his poems "The Lady's Dressing Room," "Strephon and Cloe," and "Cassimus and Peter."

lowed expression in the conscious mind, if Freud is right, only by being denounced and negated. Thus Swift's dark view can gain expression only in negative terms—nowhere does Swift give full positive treatment of his ideals in Gulliver's Travels. Further, this broad negative perspective holds the rambling journeys of Gulliver together much as the diaphanous epic narrative holds together because of a positive, supernatural light, which forms its backdrop.

Swift's negativity constitutes a major influence on subsequent literature, but it is particularly in the "Voyage to the Houyhnhnms" that one finds a narrative pattern that foreshadows later descending plot patterns. Here Gulliver, who has participated in all the societies visited previously, leads a sheltered life as a near-untouchable. His realizations about the ignominy of the Yahoos and of his own civilization at home alienate him from his former tribe. When he is also cast out by the Houyhnhnms, he becomes completely alienated. The destruction of Gulliver's clothing throughout the story, as well as his weak eyesight, point to his frailty; and, in the words of one critic, "Gulliver progressively loses his identity."¹¹ The defeat of Gulliver as a personality and as a character contrasts blatantly with the traditional concept of hero. "The hero in ballad or epic always copes with his struggles to the last; therefore he can be fully depressed only when he is to die."¹² Gulliver, of course, does not suffer death (he is never in any danger of dying, which is one essential reason that

¹¹ Frank Brady, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Gulliver's Travels (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 7.

¹² Albert Cook, The Classic Line; A Study in Epic Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 18.

he is comic) but metaphorically resigns from his role in life. His motivations for this resignation are almost totally negative, being based on indignation. The one positive motivation for his ending in the stables, to be with the noble horses, is ridiculous. Unlike the Biblical "defeated" heroes, Gulliver fails to achieve upward movement by rising above the physical world. His alienation occurs for no high cause, rewards him not at all, and is therefore totally negative. Thus, while Swift continues the Biblical assertion of material defeat, he has gone a step further by documenting a spiritual defeat, where indignation replaces faith.

Byron

The negative plot structure involving a journey which aims toward and finally results in complete immobility or death finds its best spokesman in the so-called "Romantic Age" to be George Gordon, Lord Byron. Like Swift, Byron achieves this downward tending plot structure because of a negativistic outlook rooted deep within his personality. Other writers had of course produced satiric views of man during approximately the same time. Fielding had written Joseph Andrews while Swift was still living; and, indeed, Fielding seems particularly close to Swift when he says, "I describe not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species."¹ But what Fielding calls "the comic prose epic" is essentially that: comic.² Fielding does not deliver the intensely negative message of Swift; it is the poet, Byron, who inherits

¹Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. xxi.

²Ibid., p. xviii.

the Swiftian task of attack and denial and uses the downward plot--like Swift--as a vehicle.

In Canto VII of Don Juan Byron cites Swift among his predecessors.

Here he asks:

Must I restrain me, through the fear of strife,
From holding up the nothingness of life?³

Byron's fatalism differs from the negativity of Swift, as is demonstrated in this couplet, in its intensely personal nature. When Byron questions, "Must I restrain me?" he includes himself, the poet, in his work. The emphasis here lies not only in the "nothingness of life," but also in the present poet's course of action in the face of that nothingness. What this attitude illustrates, of course, is the self-consciousness that comes into its own in the nineteenth century. In the words of one critic, "Don Juan is of its age in being a triumph of self-revelation."⁴ In leaving Swift and coming to Byron, one leaves a personification of disgust and finds, often, a disgusted person.

Byron's contribution consists of his ability to portray characters who are deeply honest and deeply negative simultaneously. Sincerity and a hatred of hypocrisy form a foundation for Byron's philosophy; and, as Helen Gardner points out, the one aspect of Don Juan that Byron repeatedly defends is its humanness, its "truth."⁵ When

³George Gordon, Lord Byron, The Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1905), p. 867.

⁴Andrew Rutherford, Byron: A Critical Study (Stamford: Stamford University Press, 1961), p. 142.

⁵Helen Gardner, "Don Juan," in Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Paul West (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 118.

criticized for his light treatment of the epic form, Byron counters; "You have so many 'divine' poems is it nothing to have written a Human one?"⁶ The revealing verisimilitude of Byron's style joins with a general nihilism to produce the unique "Byronic hero," who stands in direct contrast to the epic hero, since he scorns society and brings all value into question. As one critic notes, "Don Juan is one of very few poems which truly assert and exemplify philosophic nihilism. . . . The heroism implied by Don Juan is that of the man who can think and think and think and be a skeptic."⁷

Byron's intense involvement with his own emotions, his internalizing of impressions regardless of the triviality or the grandness of the external subject, make him a forerunner of modern fiction, with its internalized subjectivity. Of course, as Earl Wasserman argues, a concern with the internal reactions of the mind characterized all the "Romantic Poets."⁸ What sets Byron apart is the intense self-disillusionment extent in his internalized observations, a disillusionment first given popular expression in his Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Here Byron describes himself--through a thinly veiled persona for himself, Childe Harold--as a "weed flung from the rock," "the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind," around whom "clung in-

⁶ Byron quoted by Brian Wilkie, The Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 194.

⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

⁸ "The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge," Romanticism: Points of View, ed. Robert F. Gleckner (Englewood Cliffe, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 331-346.

visible a chain/ which galled forever. . . ."9 When he calls himself "the most unfit/ Of men to herd with man,"10 he echoes the oppressed Biblical personages, Job, Cain, and, even, Adam, who is the arch-outcast. In his portrayal of a sterile soul, numb with bitterness, he recalls Job, who said: "My soul is weary of my life: I will leave my complaint upon myself; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul" (Chapter 10: 1). In his negativistic turning inward, Byron provides an essential link between the Biblical defeated hero and the defeated, introspective hero of modern fiction.

The most direct example of Byron's use of a descending narrative structure can be found in Manfred, rather than in his rambling masterpiece, Don Juan. Manfred, a closet drama, demonstrates well the emotive negativity for which Byron has become famous. The negative hero, as he evolves beyond Swift, has ostensibly become more self-consciously involved with his emotive experience. The emotions which drive the hero, Manfred, toward his doom are primarily guilt and a sense of failure. Manfred's predestined doom causes him to view the world with a dark vision:

We are the fools of time and terror . . .
Loathing our life, and dreading still to die.11

His sole desire is for death; and when the Seven Spirits offer power or the fulfillment of some earthly wish, Manfred requests only "Ob-

⁹Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1967), pp. 797-799. All references to Childe Harold and Manfred from this edition.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 819.

livion, self-oblivion" (1. 146). At the close of Act I Manfred prepares to fling himself dramatically from the heights of the Alps and is saved by the chance passing of a chamois hunter. In his supposed last speech he intones: "Farewell, ye opening heavens! / Look not upon me thus reproachfully-- / Ye were not meant for me--Earth! take these atoms!" (11. 107-109). His destiny, then, lies downward. The plot movement carries Manfred, literally as well as metaphorically, physically as well as psychologically, in a descent toward hell.

Added to the descending plot structure is a sense of fate and predestination that implies the inevitability of the fall. The sense of failure and doom precipitates Manfred's misfortune as well as results from it. Manfred's fatal gloom prefigures the catastrophe of his lover's death; he says, "From my youth upwards / My spirit walked not with the souls of men, / Nor looked upon the earth with human eyes (11. 50-51). . . . My injuries came down on those who loved me-- / On those whom I best loved . . . my embrace was fatal" (11. 85-88). This negative hero, both destructive and seeking himself destruction, is caught in an immitigable cycle. Thus a circle of fate forms the background of the plot, symbolizing the wheel of fate so often represented in tragedy.¹² The combined force of the wheel and the hero's descent create the sensation of downward spiral.

The hero's spiralling fall is romanticized because of its grand scale: one pictures Manfred falling from the highest Alps to the extreme depths of Hades, which opens especially for his fall. As one

¹²Frye, p. 237.

approaches the twentieth century negative epic, the grandness of the act diminishes, and what results is a descent filled with fatal self-consciousness yet with self-persiflage. Thus the bitter satire of Swift, which allows no aggrandizement of the individual personality, joins the obsession with fatalism and the self found in Byron's work to modify the narrative pattern depicting failure on the physical plane found first in the Bible. The pattern of spiralling descent evolves; and the element of negativity increases, perverting both the spiritual success of the Biblical hero and the physical, social success of the ancient epic hero. Total negativity prevents these more modern narrative patterns of downward gyre from qualifying as tragedies; because their heroes have been deprived of nobility, the later works are ironic tragedies in which both the excremental vision of Swift and the Byronic self-revelation endure in new forms.¹³

¹³The works to be considered most properly approach Frye's fifth phase or sixth phase of ironic tragedy. Cf. Frye, pp. 237-239.

PART TWO: GIDE, CÉLINE, AND LOWRY; THE NEGATIVE EPIC NOVELS

The Modern Temper

The pattern of defeat that I have called the negative epic, traceable through the Bible, through Swift, and through Byron, finds continued and modified expression in three modern novels: André Gide's The Immoralist, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's Journey to the End of the Night, and Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano. The grouping of these novels for critical appraisal could be approached in other ways. A possible label might be "anti-novel" or "lyrical novel," as suggested by Ralph Freedman for prose fictions that subvert the novelistic intercourse between man and society and concentrate more explicitly on the problem of awareness.¹ Northrop Frye's category of ironic tragedy is also pertinent to these three novels.² But while Freedman's category does not entail a necessarily negative or tragic vision, Frye's grouping neglects the problem of awareness as opposed to societal interaction. The term negative epic, as I have adumbrated, will imply both a negative vision--a vision of defeat--and an implicitly negative relation to society, a centering on the

¹Ralph Freedman, The Lyrical Novel (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. viii.

²Northrop Frye, p. 237.

self.

The epic's relation to society has been cogently explicated by Tillyard, who repeatedly emphasizes that an essential aspect of epic—perhaps its most important function—is its "choric" implications.³ By this Tillyard means the communication by a writer of the "accepted unconscious metaphysic" of a group.⁴ The epic writer must, holds Tillyard, have faith in the present system of values; he must exhibit the "sanity" of true genius.⁵ Because of their "morbid sensibilities," Tillyard holds that such writers as Proust, D. H. Lawrence, Gide, Kafka, and Hemingway lack the "psychological strength and healthy balance of mental parts which must mark the writer of the epic"; we must "measure the crooked by the straight."⁶ But the modern age complicates this rule with its discovery of relativity. The norms of the universe become dynamic and relative, and the "crooked" becomes the subject of much prose fiction. An epic is to be "positive, powerful, and heartfelt,"⁷ but if the age which it is to reflect is negative, the work's positiveness may be the result of naive optimism rather than undistorted mimesis by a "normal" mind. Clearly there needs to be a designation for

³E. M. W. Tillyard, The Epic Strain in the English Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), p. 15. Also English Epic and Its Background, p. 5.

⁴Epic Strain, p. 120.

⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁶English Epic and Its Background, p. 41. About the writers Tillyard is adamant, saying "epic writers never."

⁷Tillyard, The Epic Strain, p. 23.

works that are "negative, powerful, and heartfelt." If these works cannot be epics, they can be negative epics.

Some critics hold that the energy that at one time flowed into an epic would now flow more readily and naturally into the form of the novel. Others argue that the novel has not replaced the epic any more than the film has replaced the novel.⁸ Tillyard speaks of an "epic spirit" that rises above considerations of form, while he argues that "certain literary kinds exist because they answer to certain clear habits and motions of the human mind."⁹ As the modern age has advanced, new forms have emerged to reflect new awarenesses and sensations. Often these new "motions of the mind" have been less than clear and less than positive.

While pure reason and unhampered logic may have sufficed Swift's Houyhnhnms, modern fiction often indicates a distrust or a despair of ever using reason as a tool for successfully dealing with reality. Goethe captures the anxiety of the new age when he entones: "Viewed from the height of reason the world seems as a madhouse and life a grave disease." The world became increasingly irrational in the eyes of many emerging writers. Ralph Freedman notes: "The major and minor works of prose fiction which appeared in the 1880's and 90's in Belgium and France shared a . . . distortion and distraction of the external world."¹⁰ A perverted hero emerged from this generally negative

⁸Wilkie, p. 24. Wilkie does not see the novel as a replacement of the epic, though some novels may attain that high status.

⁹The Epic Strain, p. 23.

¹⁰Freedman, p. 38.

period, a hero who captured an essentially negative spirit. Perhaps no one captured this negative temper better than Dostoevsky.

"I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." Thus begins Notes From the Underground. The nameless narrator talks "whether you care to hear . . . or not." He calls his a "negative age," and states ironically that "a man in the nineteenth century must and morally ought to be a pre-eminently characterless creature." He says, "all my life I have been able neither to begin nor to finish anything." Even if he were a lazy sluggard it would be an improvement, as "it would mean that [he] was positively defined."

Dostoevsky has been called "the great master of the unmotivated man."¹¹ Yet the underground narrator advises us that "it is not underground that is better, but something different, quite different, for which I am thirsting, but which I cannot find." Dostoevsky's underground protagonist desires that which he cannot have, that which he cannot even define. It is in this blind desire that the modern negative quest finds its origin. To examine this pattern, let us first examine the superficial structure of three modern novels. We may then move to an analysis of the foundation of the negative hero concept. For sake of clarification, I shall withhold drawing many of my conclusions about the significance of the negative epic pattern until the next section.

The Negative Quest

The negative quest, the pattern of avoidance, forms the most im-

¹¹Richard P. Blackmur, Eleven Essays in the European Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1943), p. 185.

portant part of the negative epic's structure. It is the pattern of the negative quest that distinguishes the negative epic from other simply negativistic works. The narrative structure of the three novels which we are now taking under consideration significantly share this pattern of evasion.

Gide's Immoralist is divided into three parts, a trip into Africa, a stay in France at la Morinière, and a second trip into Africa, where the story ends. The movement of the novel continues uninhibitedly downward. Even the happiest parts of the novel when Michel enjoys his young bride, are seen through a sadness imposed by time, which creates an ironic tension between perspectives of past and present. The downward movement takes place in two ways, both of which are implied in the title. First, Michel moves downward, within himself, just as Byron's heroes often move away from the world and into their own world of thought and emotion. Though his mind fluctuates from devotion to Marceline to rejection of her, the greater momentum of the book carries him steadily within himself and away from Marceline. Germaine Breé describes this movement as the gradual destruction of the old personality by the new.¹ The new personality at the heart of Michel takes the form of the original man, Adam.

He it was whom I thenceforward set out to discover--the authentic creature, "The old Adam," whom the Gospel had repudiated, whom everything about me--books, masters, parents, and I myself--had begun by attempting to suppress (p. 43).²

¹ Germaine Breé, Gide (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 124. Gide considered his only novel ("roman") to be Les Faux-monnayeurs.

² André Gide, The Immoralist, trans. Dorothy Bussy, Vintage Books edition (New York: Random House, 1930), p. 43. All quotes from The Immoralist based on this edition.

Thus the inward movement is an immoral one by conventional standards. The second downward movement also becomes immoral, but with the essential difference that it is Gide's morality (if one will call it that) that is transgressed. This second downward movement is spiritual and has to do with Michel's will or his lack of will, and, just as Adam and Cain, he fails the test of will. Because Michel does not have the strength to face what he finds at his exposed center, he falls away from self-fulfillment to immobility. Thus, like the frustrated Biblical hero, he ends with defeat. His second descent to the south actually represents a retreat from himself, from self-awareness. This final fall gains momentum when Marceline becomes sick and miscarries. Michel is told of the loss of their child, and the descent rapidly begins: "The ground had given way abruptly beneath my feet; there was nothing there but an empty hole into which I stumbled headlong" (p. 98). The image of a fall is repeated as Michel describes their trip to the south: "That descent into Italy gave me all the dizzy sensations of a fall" (p. 127). The momentum seems to carry Michel along beyond his control down further and further southward, beyond the town of Biskra, where Michel had formerly gained his health. Marceline's weakness increases as they approach the desert, and the dizzy pace stops only with her death, which leaves Michel filled with inertia. He no longer has strength to move. Depending on his friends for strength, he begs: "Take me away from here and give me some reason for living. I have none left" (p. 145).

Viewed from a distance, then, The Immoralist depicts a descent into a personality, but its probing becomes a downward force that ex-

ceeds the control of the protagonist, Michel. The result is doubly negative: first, Michel negates his former life and turns inward; second, Michel is unable to live up to his ideal and is carried down by it. Gide tells us that ideas help to mould us, but we must live through our ideas—they can kill us.³ To illustrate the destructive element of obsessive ideals Gide chose the pattern of the negative quest.

Céline's Journey to the End of the Night also figures a negative quest, a movement, downward toward material and spiritual failure. Bardamu's diverse experiences ostensibly resemble a roller-coaster ride, with rambling episodes and up and down movements. When the impact of the book as a whole is felt, however, the reader realizes that Céline has brought the novel to a dead-end: "the end of the night." The author achieves this by a pervading dark vision that discolors virtually everything with which Bardamu comes in contact. Each episode results in the protagonist's running away, often disgusted or afraid. Plagued by paranoia, Bardamu shrinks from the people around him. During the war (World War I), on the Admiral Bragueton, in Africa, in the United States, and in Nancy, Bardamu faces his predicament with fear and disgust. He does not pursue any goal positively. He wishes only to escape: "Any chance of cowardice is a wonderful possibility of salvation if you know what you're up to," he claims.⁴ Yet his movement never proffers escape. Each day draws him deeper beneath the immiti-

³Bree, p. 169

⁴Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Journey to the End of the Night, trans. John H. P. Marks (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 239. All quotations based on this edition. Voyage au Bout de la Nuit first published in France November, 1932.

gable wheel of fate: "To go and convince oneself once more that fate is insurmountable, that one has to end up at the bottom of the wall each night, weighed down by the anguish of the morrow which is progressively more precarious and sordid" (p. 199).

Bardamu states that he is "in search of something; God knows what." This blind motivation recalls Dostoevsky's underground man as well as Gide's character, Michel. There is no end to restlessness in Céline's novel. Bardamu moves from occupation to occupation and from continent to continent, but absurdity reigns everywhere. Bardamu's negative quest pulls him first into World War I, where the nightmare vision begins. The passages on the war reek with descriptions of ludicrous warfare, horrifying brutality, and disgusting inhumanity. Happiness, generally represented by women, always proves illusory and unattainable. A typical passage will illustrate:

Let us sum up: the Air Force had snatched Lola from me, the Argentines had taken Musyne, and finally this melodious invert [a poet] had just scooped my splendid actress friend. Alone in the world, I left the Comedie as the last lights were being turned out in the corridors, and by myself I returned through the night . . . (p. 98).

Bardamu's numerous occupations all prove ridiculous, even that of physician. At the end of the novel, Bardamu witnesses the death of his friend, Robinson, the only character possessed of any real force in the novel. Night then closes for good on the protagonist. An inspector significantly asks, "Did you lose your way, Doctor?" (p. 506). We realize that Bardamu has never known his way--will never know his way. The novel presents no way out, no exit. The last line pleads simply "let's hear no more of all this" (p. 509).

The pattern of continual degradation and loss of will terminating in inertia is manifested as well in Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano. Perhaps D. B. Dodson expresses most cogently the essence of Lowry's novel: "Technically a symbolist novel, Volcano returns to the primal myth of Western man, the allegorized enactment of the Fall and the Expulsion."⁵ Volcano begins in the early morning and ends the night of the same day. Like Céline's Journey, Lowry's novel represents a voyage into deeper darkness. Geoffrey Firmin's day filters through to the reader hazed by delirium and despair. In a fashion reminiscent of Gide's Michel, Firmin eschews the love proffered by Yvonne, his ex-wife. Yvonne, like Marceline, dies a tragic death, wasted and without reason.

Firmin's fall is foreshadowed early in the novel when he falls drunkenly on the pavement of la Calle Nicaragua. From then on Firmin is "continually falling by degrees."⁶ The spiritual fall parallels the initiatory rituals of Cabbalistic lore, which form a base for Volcano in much the same way that the Odyssey forms the foundation for Ulysses. The spiritual and physical decline ends in a final fall when Firmin is cast into a dark barranca, a deep ditch that runs through the town. In the words of one critic, "the physical end . . . merely terminates the series of spiritual defeats he [Firmin] has suffered and accepted during his descent into degradation."⁷ Each contact that the pro-

⁵Daniel B. Dodson, Malcolm Lowry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1920), p. 13.

⁶Perle Epstein, The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1969), p. 39.

⁷George Woodcock, "Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano," Modern Fiction Studies, IV (1958-59), 151-156.

tagonist makes with the other two personalities in the novel, Hugh (his brother) and Yvonne, represents a failure to establish ties with this world. Every encounter seems a plateau at which Firmin cannot remain, hence his downward spiral ending in death. Half self-willed and half uncontrolled, Firmin's descent into death is semi-suicidal.

Volcano, The Immoralist, and Journey all repeat the pattern of descent, as well as several other important structural elements. These novels form the antithesis of the episodic epic stylistically, as they picture highly selective scenes calculated to carry inter-related significance. Instead of episodes, these novels depict a particular tormented awareness. We follow closely the strange perspective offered and move toward an understanding of the individualistic insights contained therein. The world of these novels often seems the domain of the dream. Though we find very realistic descriptions, these are used the same way surrealist painters use realism in selected objects to increase incongruous and dreamlike effect.⁸ Gide speaks derogatively of realism as "episodism."⁹ In his comments on Céline, Gide says, "It is not reality which Céline paints but the hallucinations which reality provokes. I find here [in Journey] the accents of a remarkable sensibility."¹⁰ Céline himself has stated that truth is like a stick in water; in order to make it appear straight, one must bend it slightly.¹¹

⁸Ibid., p. 153. Woodcock notes this technique specifically in Lowry's work.

⁹Breeé, p. 141.

¹⁰Gide quoted in my edition of Journey. Of himself Gide says: "I have never been able to adhere perfectly to reality." Quoted in Vito Rossi, André Gide (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 8.

¹¹Céline in a letter to Milton Hindus, quoted in Hayman, p. 18.

In other words, the negative quest exploits highly controlled and selective narrative fragments, allowing the author to represent in symbolic forms the degeneration of his protagonist. Of course, the art of all writing turns on the ability to know what elements to include and which to leave out. As literature becomes more subjective and symbolic, however, the process of selection becomes more important. Thus in allegory, the extremity of selectiveness, each encounter is carefully chosen to illustrate a point, while large naturalistic novels aim towards inclusiveness that lessens the allegorical process of selection.

Each of the three novels under consideration rotates about a single emphasized masculine person, with one other strong personality, who emits strong symbolic overtones, orbiting about him. Naturally this structure seems highly contrived, decreasing the novel's realism as it strengthens its symbolic effect. We see Bardamu continuously crossing the path of his alter-ego, Robinson, even across the Atlantic in America. Wherever Bardamu goes, he often discovers that Robinson has just left. Céline's disregard for probability is blatant, and it is also highly successful in creating a tension between his central persona and the darker, more mysterious figure of Robinson. This tension aids in defining Bardamu's amorphous personality by providing it with a comparison. Also, the added character allows Céline to depict exploits in which his timid main character could never indulge, and the constant meeting of Bardamu and Robinson adds to the flavor of inevitability that permeates Journey.

Lowry's persona, Geoffrey Firmin, is coupled with another masculine character, Hugh Firmin, his brother. Yvonne occupies a central position

between the two men, and she holds a position more central to the core of the novel than any female figure in Journey. The important ties that bind these three characters make them inseparable, but they do exist on different planes. I say this because Yvonne's position in the novel comes to represent a rejuvenation, a chance for a new life (or at least an acceptance of life as it is) for Geoffrey, and she is thus seen most significantly in light of the central persona's personality. Hugh likewise occupies a subsidiary plane in relation to Geoffrey; but because Hugh is a man, and because he represents in many ways a direct contrast to Geoffrey, he attains more independence as a character. While Geoffrey falls increasingly downward to death, Hugh maintains his stability. Perle Epstein maintains that Hugh represents the "life force."¹² Both Robinson of Céline's novel and Hugh of Lowry's represent stronger forces than the central protagonists. They perhaps exert a degree of influence on the course that the negative quest will take, but ultimately the negative hero figure ends alone in a position that is at least partially self-induced.

The central character of Gide's Immoralist is orbited by a multitude of lesser masculine characters and by one important feminine character, Marceline. Marceline, like Yvonne in Lowry's novel, exists mainly in her relation to the central character, Michel. Wallace Fowlie has said, "Marceline is more a warning than a woman, more an effulgence than a personage."¹³ This is overstating the case, but clearly her

¹² Epstein, p. 98.

¹³ Wallace Fowlie, André Gide, His Life and Art (New York: Haskall House, 1965), p. 53.

character must be seen in light of Michel's own. The minor male characters all serve symbolic purposes, but there is only one of them that exerts any true force, and that is Ménéalque.¹⁴ Among the many men that Michel observes stifled in stagnant complacency, Ménéalque stands out as a man truly free, alive, and in control. Ménéalque sees through Michel's inability to realize his own desires, and he tells Michel, "One must choose. . . . The chief thing is to know what one wants" (p. 94). Clearly, Ménéalque has the strength to know what he wants and to seek out freely his desires, even in the face of scandal.

Unlike the traditional epic, the negative epic figures a weak central protagonist orbited by a minor but far stronger male character. Instead of an epic hero who leads his men, attempting to aid and prop up the weaker among them, we find a negative hero destined to fail alone, unable to follow the example set by one of his stronger fellow men. Thus the negative quest appears more negative by contrast with the actions of a more forceful personality.

Related to the negative quest pattern that we have discovered in these three novels is a darkened setting, alluded to briefly before. This quality of darkness stands in direct contrast to many traditional epics which appear to be bathed in light. In the archetypal epic pattern the hero often descends into a dark underworld, but this darkness stands as a perversion of the light, something to get through or overcome. In Céline's work especially, the darkness is where we are born, have our life, and die. The novels of both Céline and Lowry are often

¹⁴Breé interprets the symbolic functions of the group of young boys as follows: Bachir (health, joy), Moktir (freedom from ethics), Charles (pleasure of orderly exploitation of one's resources), Heurtovent (return to barbarism), and Ali (pure sensuality), *op. cit.*, p. 128.

referred to as "labyrinths." One critic says of Céline, "Heretical, full of dread, giving off a dark gleam, his works conjure up a host of night terrors."¹⁵ Céline mocks, "I don't like the sun, as you might well guess."¹⁶

The element of darkness manifests itself in different ways in the different novels. Journey uses the motif of rain, mud, and night to darken the stage on which Bardamu acts. For example; "I returned through the night . . . to the hospital, a mousetrap set in the all-pervading mud" (p. 98). The novels by Lowry and Gide, on the other hand, depict sunnier weather. Still, the relationship of the protagonist to the sun, symbolic of his relationship to the supreme being, figures strongly in the structuring of his (the protagonist's) negative personality. The Consul, Geoffrey Firmin, illustrates the case: "The Consul looked at the sun. But he had lost the sun: it was not his sun. . . . he did not want to go anywhere near it, least of all, sit in its light, facing it" (p. 205).¹⁷

One critic has noted that the sun in Gide's Immoralist symbolizes Michel's resurrection, as well as the reality of his recuperation; he calls the work a "masterpiece of high noon."¹⁸ This view bears truth, but it oversimplifies. Certainly Michel's quest for health lies in the

¹⁵Erika Ostrovsky, Céline and His Vision (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 102.

¹⁶Céline in a letter to Eveline Pollet, quoted in Ostrovsky, p. 103.

¹⁷Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1947), p. 205. All references from this edition. Perle Epstein (op. cit., p. 192) notes that the sun and the moon appear at inappropriate times, making the cosmos seem out of order.

¹⁸Fowlie, p. 51.

way of the sunlight, physically; but spiritually his path is darker. During his stay at la Morinière, when his destructive spiritual malignancy begins to eat him, and immediately prior to the opening of the "empty hole into which [he] stumbled headlong" (p. 98), the images of darkness begin. La Morinière lies in the "shadiest wettest country I [Michel] know" (p. 59). When Michel begins poaching he becomes a prowler of the darkness: "when night fell—and it was the season now when night falls early—that was our hour" (p. 112). Mud appears in Gide's novel just as in Céline's (though it is not "all pervading"): "I went back across the fields, through the dew-drenched grass, my head reeling with darkness, with lawlessness, with anarchy; dripping, muddy, covered with leaves" (p. 113). The narrator finds his exhilaration through the anarchy of the night, through the lawlessness of his theft.

The negative epics, then, use images of darkness or of fear of sunlight to symbolize alienation—from society in the case of Michel, from nature and reality in the cases of Bardamu and Firmin. Geoffrey Firmin epitomizes this metaphysical anguish: "How loathsome, how incredibly loathsome was reality" (P. 207). In what amounts to an attempt to flee their existence, the negative heroes track their negative quests to the outskirts of civilization. Northrop Frye notes that analogical myths take place in a capital city: the center of the world.¹⁹ The negative epic, however, figures a pattern of retreat from the center of the world (i.e. civilization). Bardamu is introduced to the reader

¹⁹Frye, p. 150.

in the midst of civilization, in a cafe on the Place Clichy in Paris, an excellent city for depicting "the center of the world" in the twentieth century (and used by Gide as well). After a rambling journey that carries him to the most remote parts of the world (e.g. Africa and America), he ends, in effect, in an insane asylum. The asylum is located outside of Paris (outside of civilization), and, significantly, "Paris [civilization] is about to swallow it up. . . . It loses a garden a month" (p. 421). Céline's protagonist can only with difficulty avoid "the center of the world."

Lowry's use of location also fits this pattern. Firmin begins in a rather important post and then regresses, occupying positions of lesser importance in areas more and more remote. (In this he is like Job, who also loses will and prestige as despair gains a foothold.) His position in the small Mexican village is noted to be the lowest rung on the ladder of British foreign service.

Gide's protagonist begins by thanking his circle of friends for taking the long journey to his "distant abode" (p. 7). Since The Immoralist, like Under the Volcano, is written in retrospect, Michel has already reached the end of his negative quest. He tells his friends, "I have reached a point in my life beyond which I cannot go" (p. 7). Michel's physical journey begins in the neighborhood of Angers, implied to be a quiet and conservative enough place.²⁰ From here his journey's movement seems inimitable; only briefly in Paris and at Morinière does

²⁰We are told in the prologue (p. 4) that Michel actually "began in Paris prior to the time covered by the narrative.

Michel pause. The nameless drive sends Michel progressively further from social contact, until he at last ends in a small house in a sparsely populated, uncivilized desert area. Gide dramatizes his remote location by describing the journey his friends made to reach Michel:

We arrived here one evening, gasping with heat . . . after having barely stopped on the way, first at Algiers and then at Constantine. At Constantine we took a second train to Sidi B. M., where a little cart was waiting for us. The road comes to an end some way from the village. . . . We climbed up on foot; two mules took our luggage (p. 5).

As Northrop Frye notes, animals, e.g. the horse and the dog, as well as cities may symbolize either prosperity and dignity or chaos and sterility.²¹ In the negative epic the latter role is exploited. Firmin is followed by a "hideous parriah dog" wherever he goes. At the end of the novel the dog is thrown into the dark barranca after him. A goat is used (in a rather traditional fashion) to represent lechery, cuckholdry, and tragedy.²² Perhaps the most famous symbol in Volcano of nature gone sour resides in Lowry's picturesque descriptions of Firmin's garden. The garden is overgrown with weeds that choke and kill the flowers, which represent the hope of reconciliation. When Yvonne returns, she tries to weed the garden and restore it, but it (like their love affair) has spoiled beyond repair. At the story's end, Yvonne is trampled by a horse stampeded by the Consul; nature, reacting to the madness of the negative hero, becomes itself mad.

²¹Frye, p. 152.

²²Epstein, p. 84.

The negative quest, then, employs what Frye labels "demonic imagery, the symbols of spoliation and rejection, which opposes apocalyptic imagery, the symbols associated with the straight road toward spiritual enlightenment. These demonic images include deserts (nature unfulfilled), labyrinths, ruined gardens (to oppose the paradisaal garden), the sinister circle, the wheel of fate or fortune. The circle or wheel of fate emblemizes the sense of predestination found in Byron's Manfred and the modern negative epics.²³ Lowry's image of the broken ferris wheel conjures uniquely the sense of fate warped and ineluctable. After the introductory first chapter of Volcano, the ferris wheel turns backward to "recall" the unalterable sequence of events that led to Geoffrey's death: "Over the town, in the dark tempestuous night, backward revolved the luminous wheel" (p. 42). The pattern of seemingly preordained events that constitute the negative quest lead to the final state of inertia that overtakes the negative hero. The movement is one away from civilization and society, away from friendship and love toward deeper immersion in the landscape of demonic imagery: the barren desert, over-grown garden, and broken (ferris) wheel of fate.

The Negative Hero

The negative hero derives from a concept of guilt and inevitable punishment that has its literary roots as far back as the stories of Adam and of Cain. Each of these Biblical heroes fails a test of will and suffers the punishment of alienation and remorse. Their fall is also the fall of Lucifer from grace, with the exception that Lucifer

²³For a discussion of Byron and the wheel and drop ending in a descending spiral see page 20.

rebels and therefore rejects his guilt. The modern negative hero accepts his guilt and therefore forfeits any chance of or desire for rebellion. Instead, the negative hero brings punishment upon himself or allows others to punish him. This lack of external will and inability to react forcefully to the whims of fate also align the negative hero with Job, whose punishment is arbitrary and simultaneously unavoidable. Like Job, these heroes have no power to alter their situation; and, like Job, they have no positive faith strong enough to withstand punishment without despair.

As mentioned before, it is Byron who creates a hero who self-consciously lives under the punishment of a vague, preordained fatalism.¹ In his play, Cain, Byron inherited the concept of the failing Biblical hero but added his romanticized notions of personality. Like Byron's hero Manfred, Cain scorns life with a sour pessimism. Byron's characteristic indulgence in the personalities of Cain and Manfred makes them larger than life-sized. The Biblical heroes, Adam and Cain, are larger than life only because they are emphasized as key characters in the unfolding of the scriptures—not because they have complex personalities. Only in Don Juan does Byron undercut his fatalistic hero and thus deflate him to normal stature. "I want a hero" signals Byron's attempt at creating a truly non-heroic hero, and his effort succeeds. But the young hero of Don Juan is overshadowed by his narrator; and while the long poem reveals much of Byron's deepest personal thought, the hero himself remains outside of Byron and somehow generally untouched by the poet's deeper despair. Thus in Cain and Manfred Byron exerts his negativism through characters inflated by ego, while in Don Juan he deflates his negativism while deflating his hero. And though the double deflation in Don Juan

¹ See above, page 18.

may appear doubly negative, the poem contains a good humor and buoyancy that are the opposite of negativism.²

The heroes of the negative epics do not exceed normal size (ie. they are of the "low mimetic mode")³ and though they are deflated, often humorously, they do not end as humorous (as does, say, Yossarian of *Catch-22*); they exert a negative impact unmodified by laughter. This negativity distinguishes the heroes of the works under consideration from other types of heroes.

Heroes may be compared according to the amount of force they exert as characters. Thus, though a character such as Manfred may be labeled as "negative," the amount of force he exerts on the people and spirits with whom he comes in contact prevent him from being a truly "negative" hero, a non-force. From the point of view of force, heroes range from having supernatural power to no power at all. As for considerations of motive, heroes range from very destructive to very constructive. At the extreme point of destruction stands the hero of powerful rebellion; this is the anti-hero. The anti-hero often embodies animosities and enmities of a certain sector or group; historically he is the rebel against society and convention. Modern literature's most extreme anti-heroes would probably be those created by Artaud or Genêt. At this extreme, cruelty and diabolism have the greatest force; as Genêt argues, evil can lead to sainthood as easily as piety.

Opposed to the anti-hero, and at the extreme of constructiveness, stands the traditional hero figure who upholds a positive code and

²Helen Gardner, "Don Juan," Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Paul West (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 120.

³Frye, p. 97.

struggles against destruction. This forceful hero may champion the beliefs of a race, as did the great epic heroes, or a "generation," as does the Hemingway hero (who has often been mis-labeled as an anti-hero figure), who upholds a personal code and a sense of masculine dignity regardless of his despair. The force of the traditional heroes is essentially positive, because it glorifies the dignity of man. Thus even though a great hero may die or be defeated, he retains his faith in his personal code and his dignity to the end. Thus the great tragic heroes often have a positive impact, even though they end in pessimistic ruin, because they have contributed to the glorification of the human pose.

At the extreme of power, between and far above the two poles of positive and negative, stand the supernatural heroes: those who have undergone an apotheosis and risen above the world to a level beyond mortal good and evil. From the destructive extreme, from the rebels and anti-heroes, has risen Satan, the diabolical hero who has gained immortality and strength through extreme evil. From the side of constructive concern, from the upholders of a positive code, has risen Christ, who has attained immortality and an unearthly kingdom through acts of supreme goodness. The supernatural heroes have risen up from the extreme points of force, whether destructive or constructive, and embody the maximum amount of power. Thus Adam, the true hero of Milton's Paradise Lost, is overshadowed by the combining forces of the supernatural characters, Satan and God (Christ).

At the extreme point of weakness stands the negative hero. The negative hero has fallen to his present state and cannot rise, since he has been deprived of strength or force. Here rebellion is hope-

less, and neither positive code nor destructive power can release the non-hero from his impotency. His fall has been from the level of potential happiness to final despair, and this fall is psychological--involving a disillusionment with himself--as well as social--involving a disillusionment with societal mores and codes.

The "absurd hero" described by Camus aims his glance toward God by way of the positive pole, since he hopes without hope, like a blind man who determinedly waits for a dawn that will not arrive.⁴ The "mock hero," a hero [---such as Don Juan or Don Quixote---] whose main interest is to ridicule heroism, stands somewhere above the negative hero, since humor gives him some power through ridicule, buoyancy, or comic relief. Many stories that chronicle the fall of a frustrated man may contain within their structure a subsequent rise, as that found in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, and thus fall short of complete negativity. The negative hero, then, exists without hope in a way similar to the absurd hero with the important difference that the negative hero does not exert his will in spite of despair, nor does he possess the energy to hope without hope. He looks upward only vaguely through the destructive side--as in the case of Gide's Michel or Lowry's Firmin--or he does not look upward at all--as with Céline's Bardamu.

The three modern novels presently under consideration, then, share similarities with regard to their peculiar depiction of a non-heroic stance. Obviously there are differences as well. But common

⁴Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 5.

factors exist that may be labeled as characteristics of the negative epic hero; and these qualities stand in negative relation to the traditional role of the positive epic hero and the gods with whom he associates.

As mentioned before, the negative hero lives in a darkness that opposes the supernatural light which surrounds the epic hero. This darkness recapitulates the darkness into which Satan, Adam, and Cain are cast as lasting punishment. Geoffrey Firmin avoids light, as is symbolized by a sunflower, of which he says: "I know it watches me and I know it hates me" (p. 144). Firmin's seeking of darkness separates him from his ex-wife, Yvonne, who asks him: "Must you go on and on forever into this stupid darkness, seeking it, even now, where I cannot reach you, ever on into the darkness. . . ." (p. 50). D. B. Dodson notes that "Geoffrey Firmin's aspiration toward divine knowledge and atonement lies not in the way of the White but rather of the Black Magician, self-destructive, spiritually doomed, in search for kether, or light."⁵ The images of Under the Volcano, suggest, moreover, that Geoffrey will find—through destruction—darkness, not light.

Firmin appears first to the reader in a cantina, where he has been drinking all night. The dark interior of the bar is his domain, not the sunny outdoors, where he becomes dizzy and falls on La Calle Nicaragua. The novel's moments of brightness and gaiety do not feature Geoffrey, as when Yvonne takes a pleasant horse ride through the countryside with Hugh Firmin. The "Farolito" ("light-

⁵Dodson, p. 18.

house"), the bar where Geoffrey becomes suspected by the police, symbolizes the light that he cannot find. Directly from the "Farolito" Geoffrey is taken and thrown into "la barranca," the deep ditch that comes to symbolize the pit where all refuse ends--the pit of hell, since "the name of this land is hell" (p. 36). The novel ends at night.

Darkness also pervades Céline's novel, as is indicated by its title. All plot movement, both major and minor, tends to end in figures of night. This movement recapitulates Bardamu's view of life, as it is stated in the novel: "that's all life is, a bit of light which ends in night" (p. 119). Much of the novel has the quality of delirium or nightmare, filled with night creatures, "grinning gargoyles and tormented mockeries of men."⁶ Bardamu, though a victim of circumstance often, actually seems to seek the darkness, though his seeking has no destructive mythical foundation, as does Firmin's Cabbalistic descent into spiritual defeat. The myth, by implication, appears to be that encountered throughout: the myth of Adam/Cain, at once the arch criminal and archetypal pharmakos⁷ of both Satan and God. The negative heroes indulge in this darkness and reinforce their isolation from the positive spiritual pole. Neither Bardamu, Firmin, or Michel accept, approach, or seek a relationship with God.

While struggling against death, Michel refuses his wife's offer of prayer, he rejects God.

⁶Ostrovsky, p. 94

⁷Scapegoat. Frye, p. 98.

I was to fight with everything; my salvation depended on myself alone. . . . "You mustn't pray for me, Marceline. . . . He would have a right to my gratitude afterwards. It entails obligations. I don't like them." (p. 26).

The negative hero does not rebel against the gods in the Promethean sense; for his revolt lacks both importance and power. Rather, the heroes exist away from God, separated, as were Adam and Cain.

Geoffrey, himself, suggests a qualification of the Adamic myth:

Do you know, Quincey, I've often wondered whether there isn't more in the old legend of the Garden of Eden, and so on, than meets the eye. What if Adam wasn't really banished from the place at all? That is, in the sense we used to understand it. . . . What if his punishment really consisted in his having to go on living there, alone, of course--suffering, unseen, cut off from God. . . ." (p. 133).

The punishment, then, is the isolation, the darkness of the post-Lapsarion world. Geoffrey's guilt, similar to Cain's, stems at least partially from his murderous actions (during World War II). Lowry takes the reader beneath the surface into the subliminal workings of the mind, causing us to empathize with the torments of this modern guilt-ridden Cain, and to follow closely his ritualistic self-sacrifice.

In his solitude, the negative hero enters a relationship with life and death uncushioned by a stable role in either family or society. Significantly, the negative hero states this awareness in essentially negative terms, as in Geoffrey's statement, "How loathsome, how incredibly loathsome was reality" (p. 207). The sensitivity of Bardamu heightens his vision of death ("when one has no imagination, dying is a small matter, but for the imaginative man, dying is too much" [p. 22-23]), while Michel's vision of life results in a death (Marceline's).

The Adamic isolation and one-to-one relationship with things en-

tails an anti-feminism that results from a cutting of ties with the outside world. A denial of love, while often characteristic of the traditional epic hero, is perverted in the negative epics, since the negative heroes indulge in sex, while denying or failing at expressions of love. The brief succor obtained from sex cannot last, however, and Bardamu must leave even Molly, the Detroit prostitute who has given him much pleasure, though he can only guess why he must tear away: "Maybe that is what one is looking for throughout life, that and nothing more; the greatest misery there is to feel, so as to become oneself truly before death" (p. 227). Thus even the positive attachment of a liaison becomes perverted to pain.

Bardamu's sexual experience, though different from the Consul's, relates in that the latter also has relations with a prostitute. Symbolic of Firmin's negative expression of love, "success" with a prostitute takes place after he has been impotent in his attempts at intercourse with Yvonne, for whom he cannot form the love he longs to have. While copulating with Maria, the Consul thinks: "the only thing alive in him now [is] this burning boiling crucified evil organ-- . . . out of this suffering something must be born, and what would be born was his own death" (p. 349). Shortly after his relations with the whore, Firmin heads toward his union with darkness in the barranca.

Parallel to Journey and Volcano, The Immoralist depicts the destruction of love in the interest of physical sensation. Both Volcano and The Immoralist are explicitly uxoricidal. Of Volcano one critic says, "Geoffrey's decline and rejection of Yvonne is all

part of a ritualistic murder, which is completed when he sends the mysterious horse (number 7) to trample her in the dark woods below the Farolito."⁸ The Immoralist, as well, chronicles a "ritualistic murder," where Michel, driven by an uncontrolled and only vaguely understood lust for life, sacrifices Marceline for his freedom by taking her faster and deeper into the heat (intensity) of the South.

By accentuating the physicality of woman, and by emphasizing the elements of uxoricidal violence and homosexuality, the three heroes under consideration are attackers of the Female Principle. But misogyny ante-dates modern literature, and probably has its first expression in stories depicting the female traitor, from Eve and Delilah to Hamlet's mother. What sets the negative hero apart from other anti-feminine heroes is his intense self-infatuation, an infatuation not arisen from self-love, as is usual in Narcissium, but from self-hate or, at least, intense self-disillusionment. In the case of Michel, the disillusionment comes only after self-love, and only after his self-infatuation has precipitated the death of another "self," Marceline. Moreover, the anti-feminism is not an end in itself, but rather an extenuation of the negative hero's turning within himself.

An association with excrement or bodily discharge augments the sense of debasement and disillusionment or futility. Robinson, in Journey, makes the debasing connection between love (including sex) and excrement, when he answers Madelon—who has chased him doggedly—thusly:

All this sentimental monkey-business you're sc

⁸Dodson, p. 15.

fond of--d'you want me to tell you how that strikes me? It seems to me like making love in a lavatory! (p. 305).

Twice in Journey characters die by virtually "urinating" blood, associating the procreative organ and the fluid of life with the excremental organ. A young girl, symbolic of the destructiveness of (sexual) love, bleeds to death slowly after an abortion; Bardamu stands helplessly by--her parents won't allow her to go to a hospital for fear of shame--while her blood forms a growing puddle. During the war, a wounded captain leans against a tree, pissing blood and dying. The urination of blood depicts the ultimate futility and commonness of life's slow dissipation into death. Céline uses excrement in a way similar to Swift's: for the simultaneous demonstration of humanness and of baseness.

In The Immoralist excrement does not provoke obsessive emphasis, as it does in Journey or in Gulliver's Travels. Vomiting blood provides the symbolically and metaphorically significant image of bodily discharge in The Immoralist, where Michel's coughing up of blood represents the death and expulsion of his old self. He speaks of a blood clot: "it was no longer bright, clear blood as on the first occasion. It was a frightful great clot which I spat on to the ground in disgust" (p. 22). The vomited blood that stains Marceline's gown, sheets, and hands represents her ritualistic sacrifice by Michel (p. 142). This kind of bloody discharge is contrasted by the fresh, actually beautiful blood of the Arab boy who cuts his finger (p. 21). Representing vitality and life, the boy's blood--contrasted with Marceline's--comes to symbolize the ideal of sensual life for which Michel strives but does not attain within the context of the novel.

Paralleling the bodily discharge in these two novels is the "abyss as toilet theme" of Lowry's Volcano.⁹ The Consul, having slipped as low as possible on the social ladder, is virtually "excreted" out, into the deep ditch where refuse often ends. Debased to both Yahoo and pharmakos, the Consul represents the continued regression from Gulliver, from the pose between reason and irrationality to a succumbing to the latter.

Each of the negative heroes, then, is associated with excrement or bodily discharge; this association implies his undesirability in the social system. In contrast to the traditional epic hero, the negative hero is weak physically and unable to lead or aid his "tribe." Significantly, all three of the heroes suffer from some sickness: Bardamu, fever in Africa; Michel, tuberculosis in Africa; Geoffrey Firmin, alcoholism in Mexico. Bardamu, who is himself a doctor and therefore in a position to constructively aid his society, fails often in his practice; the most touching example involves Bebert, a young boy who dies pathetically of an incurable disease.

The Consul, as well, is unable to help his tribe; his consulship is an empty service. Further, his wartime contribution (a contribution at the center of the epic hero's leadership) haunts him with guilt—he hints at an incident in which German officers were burned in his ship's boiler furnace—and when Dr. Vigil approaches with a newspaper, Firmin hallucinates strange headlines: "Old Samaritan case to be reopened, Commander Firmin believed in Mexico." "Firmin found guilty, acquitted, cries in a box." "Firmin innocent, but bears guilt of world

⁹Epstein, p. 61.

on shoulders" (p. 137). Geoffrey's only serviceable role is that of pharmakos, one who assumes guilt; but to what extent he is to absorb the world's guilt is uncertain. Perle Epstein interprets his quest as one of assumption of guilt as opposed to pure destruction: "Can Geoffrey assume the guilt of the world on his shoulders, is he equipped to perform the Messianic descent; or has he merely become an engine of destruction for destruction's sake?"¹⁰ Unlike the archaetypal regeneration of other "descending messiahs," Geoffrey's psychological, spiritual, and physical fall does not result in a purgation and subsequent regeneration. Within the bounds of the novel his fall is complete and final. Thus he remains symbolically related to Cain and Adam, rather than to Christ or to the scarcely less immortal "saviors," the epic heroes.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 87.

CONCLUSION

Both in narrative structure and in characterization of the hero, the negative epics employ symbols that depict defeat. What this defeat represents is a frustration of will and a subsequent desire to escape the self. In Biblical terms, represented in both the Old and New Testament, the desire to escape the frustrated self means a rise above material existence (this world) to a spiritual existence (heaven), that other, perfect world, free of all frustrations. In modern terms, represented best by Freud's controversial explanation, the desire to escape the frustrated self means a desire to return to inorganic matter, in other words, a death wish.¹

The self as a burden exists as a concept long before the existentialist thought of, say, Kierkegaard. Job asks, "Why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself?" (7:20); and resolves, "wherefore I abhor myself . . . therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). Set against the abhorrent self is the serenity of death, expressed in one of the most lyrical lines from the Book of Job: "For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field; and the beasts of the field shall

¹CF. Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), pp. 294-295, for a discussion relating Freud, Swift, and scatology.

be at peace with thee" (5:23). A return to the inorganic represents freedom for the spiritual hero, Job, from the pain of selfhood, a pain that the Greco-Roman traditionally withstood, as evinced by Aeneas, who--though defeated in Troy--intones:

If you wish with your whole hearts
To follow a man who dares all, even to death,
Then follow me. . . .²

In the Book of Job the body physical represents transience, that which must be cast away: "Man wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten" (13:28). As Norman O. Brown, echoing Freud, reminds us, "the morbid attempt to get away from the body can only result in a morbid fascination . . . in the death of the body."³ The body thus becomes associated with excrement, since the body must eventually decay and be discharged" by the spirit in death; and it is this association, holds Brown, that caused Swift to see man as a dirty "Yahoo."⁴

Thus death, the final release from self and body, is unconsciously sought by the negative hero, while the traditional epic hero--though equally fascinated with death--maintains his strength and therefore his selfhood before the threat of annihilation.⁵ Further, the epic hero in one sense holds his body sacred, as is implied by not only the prolific Greco-Roman sculpture on that subject, but also by the ex-

²Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Patric Dickinson (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 38.

³Brown, p. 294.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Cook, p. 18. See above, p. 15.

explicit anti-feminism of the masculine hero. The epic hero, eg. Aeneas, must keep his physical self available for the fulfillment of his quest and must deny woman, eg. Dido, not because he hates love, but because he holds his duty above love and woman. This anti-feminism is perverted (perhaps first) by Byron, who dwells on sexual love (though not marriage) and indicates that love is higher than war, mocking the ideal heroes such as Aeneas, who leaves Dido, and Hector, who leaves Andromache. The trend toward exploitation of the physical, transient body carries into the implied philosophies of Bardamu and Firmin, both of whom indulge symbolically with whores, and Michel, who accepts homosexuality along with promiscuity. In every case, however, the world of sense provides only brief respits, and the ending note always stresses an ending, a passing from the world of sense.

Tillyard notes that modern fiction, in depicting alienation, fails to inspire a greater, rather than a lesser, involvement in life.⁶ Yet, paradoxically, the intense--though blind--searches in which the heroes of the three modern novels participate imply a great degree of involvement with "life." And while this may not be the conventional life of the somnambulant daily worker who Dostoevsky calls derogatively the "direct man," it is the life of a man in contact with existence as it is encountered outside the realm of conventional perception. Denial is necessary to free oneself from convention, and, as Carlyle has said, denial can serve a legitimate function:

Indeed, denial itself can thus be viewed as having
a vital if negative function: 'The fever of Scepticism

⁶Tillyard, The Epic Strain in the English Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), p. 166.

must needs burn itself out thereby the Impurities that caused it; then again there be clearness, health.⁷

The negative heroes are therefore "involved" in life, though they take an intensely negative stance. The "Impurities" which, according to Henri Peyre, Céline and writers like him destroy are, among other things, the "complacencies of business and wealth—apathy."⁸ Yet when, elsewhere, Peyre states that "evil . . . to Céline and Gide assumes the appearance of a positive, diabolical force," he has gone too far.⁹

Purification through cruelty, while perhaps achieved in part in some of Céline's more scathing scenes, belongs to the philosophies of Gênet and Artaud rather than to those of Céline, Gide, or Lowry. Nor can one claim that the three writers under consideration use evil or skepticism in the way Carlyle would ultimately see them used. Within the bounds of the novels, the defeat and fall are final; there are no rejuvenations. And though Northrop Frye demonstrates that, once the full circle of diabolism and despair have been traveled, literature breaks through to satire and a subsequently more hopeful view, the three negative epics here treated end at the point which Frye calls the tour abolie, the goal of the quest that isn't there.¹⁰

Gide, Céline, and Lowry exhibit in other works a tendency toward

⁷Walter Houghton quoting Carlyle in The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1957), p. 31.

⁸Henri Peyre, Literature and Sincerity (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1963), p. 340.

⁹Peyre, The Contemporary French Novel (New York: Oxford U. P., 1955), p. 42.

¹⁰Frye, p. 239.

rejuvenation: Under the Volcano, for example, was to be the "hell section" of an ascending trilogy ending with The Forest Path to the Spring; and Céline's work, according to one critic, represents—on the whole—a move toward affirmation, since it attacks western man's egocentricity.¹¹ But, especially for Céline and Lowry, the negative expressions of their view of the world provide the vehicle for their best expressions artistically. The "breakthrough" to the other side of the literary circle, if one accepts the construct, to the positive world of myth and heroic fantasy, lies within the efforts of authors such as Saul Bellow (Henderson the Rain King), John Barth (Giles Goat Bay) and, perhaps at the extreme and in many ways very close to the ancient epics, J. R. R. Tolkien (The Lord of the Rings).

"The great paradox of the epic lies in the fact that the partial repudiation of earlier epic tradition is itself traditional"¹² The works of writers like Céline—whose Journey Sharon Spencer calls "the negation of a novel"¹³—reflect the "unconscious metaphysic of a group" (to use Tillyard's term) in that they reflect the metaphysical anguish of the twentieth century. Therefore, through the inversion of a form which traditionally repudiates itself, they depict a "choric effect"—the most essential aspect of an epic form according to

¹¹ Colin W. Nettelbeck, "Journey to the End of Art: The Evolution of the Novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline," PMLA, Vol. 87 (January, 1972), p. 89. Nettelbeck does see Journey as "unequivocally negative."

¹² Wilkie, p. 10.

¹³ Sharon Spencer, Space, Time, and Structure in the Modern Novel (New York: N. Y. U. P., 1971), p. 54.

Tillyard. As one critic says of Céline,

He recounts a physical and spiritual odyssey which, in spite of its crudeness and its incredible string of misfortunes, appears like a mirror of twentieth century human existence.

Thus through a "distorted" perception, these writers reflect the anxieties of sensitive modern men.

A stance of denial--traceable throughout literature--legitimately employs a plot pattern that chronicles a move away from social involvement and downward toward spiritual psychological, and social failure as its especial vehicle. The negative epic thus expresses a repudiation of societal involvement, rather than an affirmation of it. Both socially and psychologically the negative epics represent opposition to the traditional epic concern with the foundation of a permanent community and assert an ethic which eschews stability, establishment, and permanence based on power. This attack of community is social in that it is leveled at the decrepitude of modern industrial society. But the nature of the negative epic hero's abnegation is more than social. By dissolving the connections with an outside world which he rejects as mundane and complaisant, the negative hero places himself on the edge of the most difficult frontier: the ultimate confrontation between the human mind and the impersonal world. Yvonne writes Geoffrey: "it is as though you were away at war . . . but no war could have this power to so chill and terrify my heart" (p. 345). This confrontation with reality remains obscure and recondite and can be communicated finally only in the entirety of the novels themselves. Unquestionably the neg-

¹⁴Rima Drell Reck, "L. F. Céline: The Novelist as Antagonist," in The French Novelist in the Twentieth Century (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 192.

ative hero's quest lies downward by the path of psychological and spiritual torment, a torment especially relevant in a modern world where physical comforts fail to provide spiritual peace of mind. This downward movement chronicles the rejection of compliance and comfort and takes the form of an individual apocalypse.

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VITA

The author was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia.

He won the Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, in 1969.

After having taught public school for two years in Appomattox, Virginia, he attended the University of Richmond Graduate School and taught an undergraduate level course on a part-time basis.