

to ward off fear. It has not been noticed before, but Capote deals often with archetypal situations. "A Tree of Night" has a "false" Lazarus, risen from the dead. "Master Misery" has ironic confessions to a Christ-like figure. These stories may invert Christianity — they are superstitious, pagan, and nihilistic — but they also affirm the *miraculous* danger of life.

After his first two books — *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, and *A Tree of Night* — Capote fled from his true muse. He decided to become cute and glib. (Of course, he displayed these tendencies earlier, but he did not yield to them.) Instead of dark, "headless" truths he gave us sunny reportage. It is certainly surprising that various critics — including Mark Schorer and Alfred Kazin — applauded this transformation. They actually liked *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *The Muses Are Heard!*

When we reread these works — both are reprinted in this volume — we realize that Capote has joined the yea-sayers. He preaches LOVE. Holly Golightly may inspire others — she is wild and pathetic — but I think she is more artificial than Vincent. She says the *oddest* things and loves funny cats. The charming cast of our *Porgy and Bess* troupe in Russia is also excessively picturesque.

Can we account for the change? If we assume that Capote once believed in fear as the "aboriginal demon" — D. H. Lawrence's phrase — we can surmise that he found he could no longer control it. He ran away, covering his tracks. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's* fear lurks in the background, but it masquerades as superficial *Angst*. The following exchange shows us how far Capote has descended:

"You're afraid and you sweat like hell, but you don't know what you're afraid of. Except something bad is going to happen, only you don't know what it is. You've had that feeling?"

"Quite often. Some people call it angst."

"All right. Angst. But what do you do about it?"

"Well, a drink helps."

"I've tried that. I've tried aspirin, too. . . . What I've found does the most good is just to get into a taxi and go to Tiffany's. It calms me down right away, the quietness and proud look of it; nothing very bad could happen to you there, not with those kind men in their nice suits, and that lovely smell of silver and alligator wallets."

Childish fear has become fashionable alienation. Incomplete exorcisms have become pleasure outings to Tiffany. Capote, in other words, is giving us false religion — one which soothes our souls with glittering generalities. Thus he is "popular" — he can sell this positive stuff to Hollywood.

Or he can write scintillating gossip for *Holiday* and *The New Yorker*: interviews with Marlon Brando — does *he* have a demon? — or travelogues on Ischia or Brooklyn Heights. His gift for dialogue remains; his poetic phrases still have "style." But there is little substance in these essays. Only at rare times does fear enter to save the situation, to reclaim his deep, unwilling involvement. At the end of "A House on the Heights" — even the title is annoying — Capote pictures himself walking past the "turf" of the Cobras:

*Their eyes, their asleep sick in-*

*solent eyes swerved on me as I climbed the street. I crossed to the opposite curb; then knew, without needing to verify it, that the Cobras had uncoiled and were sliding toward me, I heard them whistling; and the children bushed, the skip-rope ceased swishing. Someone — a pimply purple birthmark bandit-masked the lower half of his face — said, "Hey yuh, Whitey, lemmeseeduhcamra." Quickened one's step? Pretend not to hear. But every alternative seemed explosive.*

The passage presents fear again, without explaining it. (Is he courting attack in this scene?) The rhythms quicken; the style moves — perhaps too decorously. But, ironically enough, Capote ends the essay with his safe return to the pretty house. It would be good to see him outside again, pursued by ominous footsteps — like Sylvia in "Master Misery."

The narrator of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* says at one point: "the average personality reshapes frequently, every few years even our bodies undergo a complete overhaul — desirable or not, it is a natural thing that we should change." I hope that Capote returns to his Gothic muse, especially if he can, once again, worship fear in complex and courageous rituals.

## A fine Italian hand

**THE INCLUSIVE FLAME; Studies in American Poetry** by **Glauco Cambon**. Indiana University Press. \$6.75.

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SURELY NO LITERATURE has been more fondled and brooded over than our own, by modern critics bent on extracting from it the national quintessence. Nor is their enterprise an isolated one; they are heirs to a relatively ancient obsession with the idea of America. The idea of America: what a resonance it has had in the halls of our politics,

from Jefferson to the sleeziest jingoist. It has intrigued more dispassionate observers, too, the foreign visitors and immigrants who have tried to sum up our national ethos: Tocqueville, Crèvecoeur, Dickens, Mrs. Trollope, Santayana, Lawrence and a steady procession down to Geoffrey Gorer, Simone de Beauvoir, and Dan Jacobson. They

came, they saw, they wrote about us, almost as if there were a grail as prize for the deepest psychological penetration. And our writers themselves, ever since they discovered in early nineteenth century New York that America was a separate country deserving a distinctive literature, have encouraged the notion that something extraordinary and elusive was afoot in this country, something that challenged the powers of the creative artist, as well as those of the patriot and the analyst. Hence the pursuers of the American epic—Whitman, Longfellow, Hart Crane — and of the Great American Novel — Dreiser, Dos Passos, Wolfe.

To be sure, America *is* (or has been) unprecedentedly new, large, bumptious, democratic, socially mobile, and the rest. And its literature is resolutely odd, in many ways. Small wonder, perhaps, that literary critics and literary historians have tended to read that literature as an offshoot of American cultural history and a key to whatever is peculiar in the national spirit. Yet the phenomenon bears marking, for as far as I know it is almost without parallel in other countries. Nobody writes books about the Englishness of English literature, the special indigenous themes in the English novel, or the local metaphysics of English poetry. On the contrary, critics have been inclined to assimilate English literature and the continental literatures to each other under such rubrics as “the Renaissance,” “the Enlightenment,” and “romanticism,” stressing the similarities and playing down the differences. One must turn to Russia to find anything comparable to our preoccupation with national identity, and even there the concern has never permeated criticism to the same extent.

The critic's quest for America began more or less conventionally, with books that traced the design of literary events back to the movement of our history, books like those of Van Wyck Brooks, V. L. Parrington, Perry Miller, and Maxwell Geismar. Out of this school another one emerged, which focused its scrutiny on submerged assumptions and contradictions of American society and followed them into literature, particularly

into the novel. I think of Lionel Trilling's essays about the failure of the American novel to develop a refined sense of social reality based on class, manners, and money, and of Marius Bewley's *The Eccentric Design*, which also finds in our greatest novelists an abandonment of the social base, as well as of sensuous surfaces, in exchange for an abstract passion for metaphysics and moral thought. Recently, though, the questers have thrust well beyond the boundaries of ordinary historical and sociological criticism, into the domain of myth, archetype, and depth psychology. Thus Richard Chase (*The American Novel and Its Tradition*) and Daniel G. Hoffman (*Form and Fable in American Fiction*) have examined the relation of the American novel to myth and folklore, its penchant for the form of romance, its return to primal patterns of experience, its emphasis on disorder and on alienation from traditional social and religious forms. R. W. B. Lewis (*The American Adam*) described “the American myth” of an innocent, Adamic hero, without ancestry and “emancipated from history,” starting out afresh to confront experience. Harry Levin (*The Power of Blackness*) documented the preoccupation of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville with evil and the diabolic. Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, the holy book of the extremists in the field, sees in our fictional sensibility a rejection not only of society, but of adult sexuality as well, a substitution of death for love, an obsessive guilt over the rape of the land, the Indian, and the Negro, and an attempt at resolution in the basically homosexual romance of the hero and a dark companion. Most recently, Ihab Hassan (*Radical Innocence*) has linked some of these themes to more cosmopolitan artistic motifs, but still found in the contemporary American novel a peculiarly local pattern of inverted initiation and recoil of the anti-hero into self. To such critics, whose like is not to be found outside this country, we owe a considerable measure of self-understanding, as well as insight into our literature. But it should be noted that as criticism moves toward archetypal analysis of the national psyche it moves away from the con-

tours of individual works of art, and the literature itself — as with Fiedler — tends to disappear behind a mask of theory and critical myth. In parts of Glauco Cambon's *The Inclusive Flame; Studies in American Poetry* (published in Italy in 1956), the disappearance is nearly total.

Unsurprisingly, most criticism of this sort has concentrated on fiction, where “the American experience” can most readily be seen taking shape as fable, and where it makes most sense to talk of *the hero*. Cambon — an Italian critic now teaching at Rutgers — has carried the quest for America into poetry, especially lyric poetry, where in the absence of plot and hero the critic's mythic inventiveness is put to the severest challenge. This challenge Cambon meets by supplying a hero of his own — *the poet*, a twilight figure not quite identical with his historical self, whose poems record encounters with existential peril. The locus of the action is, of course, America, conceived as a new land conscious at once of its cultural anomalousness and of transatlantic cultural paradigms. The enemies and barriers that test the hero are space (the frontier, otherness), time (change and death), materialistic civilization, and the disorder and multiformity of experience. The American poet's weapons are his boldness, a traditional bent for experiment and prophecy, and “the word” — the shaping force of poetic language. His goal is “to grasp a totality of experience through poetry,” which thus becomes the “inclusive flame” of the book's title.

If these are the terms of the myth, small wonder that Cambon stresses the heroism of the hero, and in a language of crisis. Poe's is “a mind investigating its own frontiers, at the risk of sanity.” Melville is “an individualist exploring the frontiers of his culture.” Robinson is “a true knight of the Grail,” who confronts “in quietly heroic isolation the perilous ordeal of a quest for the ultimate experience.” Stevens refracts the “sun of reality” into rainbows, “which he then pursues to the boundaries of the invisible, and in this perilous game he uses for a prism only the word.” And a weirdly transformed Emily Dickinson “girds herself like David and flings her stone at the phantom of other-

ness." Since the other poets in Cambon's Valhalla — such various artists as Whitman, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Lowell — pass through similar ordeals, the reader is justified in wondering whether Cambon hearkens as much to the poets' voices as to an inner voice of his own. The end of such a critical procedure is the collapsing of all poems into a monopoem, like Joseph Campbell's monomyth. To be sure, Cambon never reaches this nirvana of the intellect (he does preserve individual differences), but at times he comes dangerously close.

Of the acrobatic temerity of his assimilative feats this review can give little notion. But consider by way of example his manipulation of that venerable concept, the frontier, and the associated ideas of the land and the pioneer. Given the play these ideas have had among Americanists, and given their importance in our history, no one will be surprised to find Cambon equating the virgin land with possibility, or holding it accountable for our writers' rejection of the European cultural past and their predilection for "extreme adventures." The concept stretches a bit when it becomes responsible for our poets' "experimental approach to language," or for Poe's literary fantasies. And that the frontier should beget Poe's "theatricality, mannerisms, and grotesquerie," the "abstract, disembodied, Lucifer-like" quality of his imagination, Melville's "symbolic challenge to the cosmos" and "belief in crisis as the basic experience in the human condition," and Whitman's narcissism is some cause for astonishment. In Cambon's accesses of enthusiasm, the frontier can take on a protean variety of meanings; it is "the divide between man and nature, between civilization and barbarism, between innocence and corruption, West and East, life and death." And, most ingeniously, the "blank spaces of the prairie" are equated with "the blank spaces of silence" which Whitman filled with his lines, "as though they were symbolic equivalents of the

towns that mushroomed all over the American continent in the wake of the westering settlers."

But in this critical universe anything can become, or stand for, or give rise to, anything else. A poem of Emily Dickinson's (No. 1664) describes an imagined journey: "Three rivers and the Hill are passed,/Two deserts and the sea!" Cambon has it that the lines refer to (or symbolize, or "allude" to, or "adumbrate, prophetically") (1) an endless journey toward the beloved, (2) toward God, (3) "toward the conquest of the challenging Other"; (4) the "transfiguring metamorphosis of our traveler into the bodiless"; (5) "the finite-infinite process of existence toward, through, and beyond consciousness"; (6) "the trajectory of poetry as a consummation of language"; and (7) "the posthumous adventure of Emily's verse into awareness of modern readers." Emily, like Humpty Dumpty, should have paid her words double for doing all that work, and triple at least for meaning number (7). Elsewhere in the book Poe's raven "evokes" the figure of Prometheus. Robinson inhabits a "quasi-Dostoevskian underground" (the New York subway). Melville "ideally" meets Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard at the frontiers of his culture (those writers, incidentally, loom large here, along with Jaspers and Heidegger). The world of Robinson's *Merlin* "might even symbolize" twentieth-century America. The "merely going round" of events — their repetitiveness — in Stevens' *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* turns out to be "polemically related" to Yeats' gyres and to the cycle of the *Waste Land*. And, to make an end, the organization of Crane's *The Bridge* is "parallel to" the cosmology of relativity. I quote Cambon's relational terms because they underline the ontological slipperiness of his categories. Are two things which are "polemically" related to each other also just plain related? If so, how? If something "might even symbolize" something

else, what standards are proposed for deciding if in fact it *does*? In the end, I confess, I scarcely cared, for rational analysis is nearly rendered futile by the ambiance of metamorphosis and conjecture which pervades the book (and which might even symbolize the decline of the West, for all I know).

Yet the lack of clarity is important. For one thing, *The Inclusive Flame* has serious critical points to make. A more scholarly review than this (and perhaps a fairer one) would have to take account of Cambon's tracing of image patterns in *The Bridge*; of his insights into Stevens' phenomenology; of his useful attempt to see Robinson's New England poems and his Arthurian poems as a thematic unity. But these critical excursions suffer from elephantiasis of the fancy, which is in turn a symptom of American culturitis. More important still, Cambon's conclusions about American poetry are at least potentially interesting, but in their present opaque form it is hard to see either how they issue from the poems at hand or how they mark off American poetry from any other poetry: if the phrase "the spatial expansion of consciousness as an imaginative endeavor to include most of available reality in a sphere of co-presence to be ranged at will" means anything at all, isn't it still more applicable to Dante or Joyce than to Crane?

Not this way lies America. The quest is a valid one so long as it honors the integrity of the evidence — as do the Americanists mentioned earlier, and as do parts of *The Inclusive Flame*. But the more orgiastic sections of the book (and they are many) might well serve as a sobering reminder to Americanists, and to writers on other fashionable topics like tragedy and existentialism, that the extreme end of thematic-cultural-metaphysical criticism may be a failure to talk sense, and a vaporizing of individual literary works. In the apposite words of Bishop Butler, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing."