

A DRAG, A SIP, A LABYRINTH

By Michael Ventura

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Let's say we're talking about literature, American literature, and we're just talking – not concerned with, say, inclusiveness (important though that is) but just gabbing about writers who strike us on this particular evening for no good reason but that it's this particular evening.

First to mind is Edgar Allen Poe – lets put in his dates not to be erudite but because I like dates: 1809-1849. Oh, Poe was dark – the first to intuit that America's ideal of liberty would act upon humanity's psyche like those drugs he was fond of. Poe knew darkness as well as light was loosed from our depths by liberty. Ravens spoke to him about that. Poe feared our darkness, knew its potency, sensed our fate, and wouldn't be surprised that, two centuries later, the young imitate him more than, say, George Washington.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) wrote one century after Poe. He sought romance, lyricism, enthusiasm, but, alas, he was honest. He knew that, through much of the 19th century, American writers dwelt on God, fate and the nature of Nature, but that changed. For, say, Henry James (1843-1916), society and its progress served as a universal context – God and Nature disappeared, pretty much, except for Jack London (1876-1916), who felt them hostile to us. Fitzgerald matured in the shadow of the First World War, 15 million killed in just four years – if that was “progress,” it was also horror. “In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day.” For Fitzgerald, God was absent and society a hoax. We were on our own, tasked to develop our own codes and to live by those codes according to our own lights, aided by neither society nor heaven. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925), he portrayed a materialism confused and without values (sound familiar?); its characters yearned to re-create their lost innocence (sound very familiar?), but all were doomed -- though Fitzgerald, ever lyrical, insisted even their doom might be beautiful. They were doomed precisely to the extent that they were individuals, for, in Fitzgerald's eyes, to be truly an individual is to be cut off from society and God both. It's no wonder he drank.

Society and God seem always to be asking you to join up, behave, and love them unconditionally – at which the writers I'm thinking of inhale a drag on a cigarette, sip a whiskey, and say, “I don't think so.” They know there's a price for that, and they're willing to pay.

Like Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961). With the most no-nonsense vision of any American writer since Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?), Hammett invented a new kind of character: the hard-boiled detective. He wrote *The Maltese Falcon* in 1930. John Huston filmed it in 1941. Huston's film is faithful to Hammett in every sense but one: Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade is likable. Hammett's Spade was a just man, not a likable man. A slight but all-important detail at the end of Hammett's novel is omitted in Huston's film: Spade's secretary recoils instinctively from his touch – she'd liked him some, but by the story's end he repelled her. What he's done is just, but it leaves a lousy taste. Sam Spade is a character with a code but without belief or hope. He lives in a bad world and expects it to remain bad. Apart from an intense individualism, he shares no other American ideal. He treats society warily; it may or may not be his enemy, depending on the situation, but

it's never his friend. He doesn't need a reason or a cause. It's enough for him to get through the day, and it's a real achievement to get through the night. Yet he respects justice, which is to respect life. His integrity is such that if he didn't respect life he wouldn't bother staying alive. I'd call that faith – a word to make Hammett cringe, hating to admit he, too, had faith in something, or why would he have gone to jail rather than rat out people he didn't even like when questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee?

Never believe writers who say they have no faith. They're writing, aren't they? That's a faith in something.

Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) overflowed with a nameless faith. *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), one of our best novels, isn't a book people talk much about anymore. Its intensity and lyricism are looked down upon by university-stamped literati who speak and write with snide superiority and are made personally insecure by anyone who doesn't. (Am I being superior to them? Oh, well, I suppose.) Wolfe's whole concern was with an unknowable mystery he saw in his family and everywhere, and his wild capacity for experiencing our wild America which he loved as a lover loves, unreasonably and completely. Unashamed of his gift for love, he registered every curve, scent, color, and word of what he loved. His pages glow with a lover's heat. The visions of Poe, Fitzgerald, and Hammett were not for Thomas Wolfe. What Wolfe saw in everyone, everywhere he looked, was loneliness, an irreducible loneliness, a loneliness that nothing could assuage, and he sang our loneliness unrelentingly, determined to make of it a music, not caring if he went down in flames. Which, of course, he did.

Nathanael West (1903-1940) did not go down in flames. He and his bride died in a car wreck on the way to F. Scott Fitzgerald's funeral. West was the first to understand the power of media, the first to dig that media was now our internal and external environment, and the first to warn that this new environment presented unprecedented dangers. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), an advice columnist, overwhelmed by the pain of his readers, tries to involve himself in their lives, is helpless to help them, and is destroyed. West showed that media is a two-way street, creating destructive delusions in its practitioners as well as its audience. In *The Day of the Locust* (1939), still the best novel about Hollywood, West understood that the movies were pervading modern consciousness and deeply realigning the self-images of everyone. He saw that the movies created impossible expectations in people who "haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for pleasure." He saw the movies destroying the imaginations of the unsuspecting and unselfconscious, as real folk dressed and tried to behave like people in pictures. Taking up Poe's great theme, West saw our era would have much more to deal with psychologically than any previous era, and, for many, this would be too much. He foresaw a conflagration, a burning of every assumption and structure that had come before.

Which would not for one instant depress Henry Miller (1891-1980). He cheerfully – always cheerfully! – desired civilization be destroyed, or at least turned inside-out, to be re-founded on the lustiest conceivable principals of liberty and justice for all. Poe feared America dangerously liberated the psyche; Miller declared it hadn't gone near far enough. *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) dared all demons to join us in a dance. Dance with the chaos! For Miller, this alone was the dance of joy, however bloody the feet of the dancers. Life is a sewer, so swim in the sewage! Splash!

He gave not a damn for conventions of form, but pungently poured forth his prose, staking all on the strength of his rage and his joy. He trusted desire, never minimizing its pain, but gambling that lust would light the path, fucking his way to revelation, daring God and the Devil to deny him salvation. Henry Miller manifested Pan -- if that ancient deity had grown up, like him, on Decatur Street, in Brooklyn, New York. "It was as though I had no clothes on and every pore of my body was a window and all the windows were open and the light flooding my gizzards."

It may be we won't get used to the 21st century until we can shout with Henry, "The labyrinth is my happy hunting ground!"

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