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Observer-Hero Narrative[1]

This essay attempts to describe the nature and origins of a significant modern narrative genre, which for convenience I have labeled observer-hero narrative. This genre may be defined in brief as a story told by a dramatized first-person narrator about a significant relationship or encounter he has had with another person. The two figures are both opposites and counterparts, the second person perceived both as contrasting with the first in outlook or life-style and as embodying in purer or more extreme form qualities which the observer has or sympathizes with in moderation. The observer's world seems more like our world, while the second person's seems more intensely focused and more romantic by comparison. The structure of the narrative is built upon the interplay of these complementary psychic universes.

Some noteworthy examples of this form are Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Ishmael/Ahab); Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Marlow/Kurtz); Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (Dowell/Ashburnham), F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Nick/Gatsby), Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Zeitblom/Leverkühn); and Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (Burden/Stark). Variations on the basic pattern, more or less closely related to it, are works in which a central figure is viewed by several narrators, like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*; works which alter or reverse the usual characteristics of observer and hero, like Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*; and third-person narratives which view a hero through the eyes of a single reflector, like Henry James's *Roderick Hudson*.

For all of these works, and others of similar caliber, an extensive body of criticism already exists. Some of it calls attention to shared principles of structure;[2] a handful of works on narrative aesthetics treat selected aspects of the observer-hero pattern;[3]

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but never, to my knowledge, have the conventions of the form been described as fully and with reference to as broad a range of examples as in the present essay. The prevalence of observer-hero narrative in modern fiction, particularly American fiction, surely entitles it to closer attention than it has so far received. In the process we stand to learn more not only about the peculiarities of individual works which employ it but also about the history of prose fiction in general. With these objectives in mind, I shall first outline what I take to be the main characteristics of the form, then show why I think it should be considered a distinct genre, and, finally, give a brief account of how the genre seems to have emerged during the nineteenth century from a wide variety of antecedents.

I. The Genre Defined

Observer-hero narratives are structured in terms of shared methods of characterization, point of view, and plot. This section will deal with each of these areas in turn.

The most fundamental convention of observer-hero fictions is the inseparability of the two main figures. As Walter Reed remarks of *Moby-Dick*, "neither the narrator nor the hero can exist independently; only in their interaction does the story come to life."[4] It is pointless to argue over whether the novel is "really" Ahab's or Ishmael's book. Ahab's revenge would be two-dimensional without an Ishmael to tease out its ambiguous significances with his peculiar combination of parody, documentary, and mystification. Ishmael, in turn, needs a definite focus like Ahab's quest as a field of action for his sensibility. One figure may be more or less dominant, however, either in the genesis of the work or in the final product. Robert Penn Warren began *All the King's Men* with the image of Willie Stark, having used a similar character in a previous work. Later, he felt "the necessity for a character of a higher degree of self-consciousness" to "serve as a kind of commentator and *raisonneur* and chorus."[5] Jack Burden was the result. In Conrad's fiction, on the other hand, Marlow as a developed character precedes the invention of Kurtz. Marlow is more central in *Heart of Darkness* than in *Lord Jim*, but perhaps less central in either than the anonymous captain of "The Secret Sharer." Observer-hero narratives, then, operate somewhere between the extremes of biography and autobiography. Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* for example, begins as a fictional autobiography, but we come to find that the title character's mental life gravitates around his relation to his African patron, King Dahfu. The Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* is both the protagonist of his own tale and the mere

reporter of an encounter with someone far more memorable than he.

Whichever figure seems primary to the reader, observer and hero are linked by a tie that goes deeper than any rational explanation. Mann's Zeitblom, for instance, accepts with a kind of fatality the lifelong role of underappreciated satellite and caretaker to Leverkühn. In some cases the bond is mutual. More often, though, the relationship is one-sided, the hero attracting the observer almost mesmerically but maintaining a certain aloofness. The hero is passionate in his own way, but his passions are usually directed elsewhere (toward Daisy Buchanan, toward the white whale), so that the observer's fascination with the hero contrasts with the hero's relative indifference to him.

Yet the hero needs the observer in another sense — as audience, as go-between (Nick as Gatsby's intermediary with Daisy), as errand-bearer (Marlow's mission to Kurtz's intended), as factotum (Jack Burden as Willie Stark's troubleshooter). Usually the observer accepts this adjutant role, but he may also feel oppressed by it, even to the point of striking out against the hero. Niel Herbert, in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, for instance, petulantly abandons his self-appointed post as Mrs. Forrester's protector when he decides that her conduct is unworthy of his strict moral standards. Gene, in John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, feels a strong rivalry with his roommate Phineas, the hero-figure. Projecting upon Finny his own need to dominate, Gene suspects that his friend is secretly trying to keep him from getting top grades, and in an impulsive moment he causes the accident that lames and eventually kills Finny. Though this twist is unusual, a number of other works exploit the paradox of the observer in some sense controlling the hero who in another sense controls him. Marlow's role as Kurtz's captor is an obvious example. In Ford's *The Good Soldier*, one of John Dowell's motives for telling the story of Edward Ashburnham is to take revenge on the hero: envious of Ashburnham, jealous of him for being his wife's lover, furious at not having guessed the fact until after their deaths, Dowell memorializes his ex-friend as a sentimental weakling, despite his heroic qualities. The reader sees the bias, but Dowell succeeds in obscuring what the real truth was.

The most obvious contrast between the characters of observer and hero is that the latter is more commanding or intense. The observer's personality, though more accessible, is less powerful and distinctive. For instance, the deep gloom of Poe's Roderick Usher makes him a far more striking figure than the anonymous narrator, even though the latter is a fairly plausible human being while Usher is patently a literary type. In such cases we are apt to take the

narrative voice or observing consciousness for granted and assume (prematurely) that it is a transparent medium. In cases where the observer's character is more explicitly developed, he is frequently depicted as a young person with a low self-image, or an older person with a sense of unfulfilled promise. "I am shy and lack force of personality. I stammer when I am nervous, and my appearance is more boyish than manly" — so goes the spiritual inventory of fledgling schoolmaster Brian Aspinwall in Louis Auchincloss' *The Rector of Justin*, an extreme case of this sort.[6] The hero-figure, by contrast, is usually burdened with a too lofty self-conception. Gatsby thinks he can revise the past; Ahab believes he is the Fates' lieutenant. Although hero and observer, more often than not, are peers in age, the disparity between them in personality may seem diametrical. The hero is a doer or a be-er, whereas the observer is a thinker or a seeker.

As a result, we find the observer living vicariously through the hero, who acts out a side of the former's personality that has previously been hidden. In Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, for example, Randall McMurphy's defiance of the mental hospital's bureaucracy expresses the resentments of the timorous narrator and his fellow patients. Here and elsewhere the advent of the hero may precipitate a crisis in the life of the observer. McMurphy's ward-mates alternately shrink from him as unsafe and try to follow his example, until at the end the narrator gets up the courage to escape. In "The Secret Sharer," the insecure captain is prompted by the example of Leggatt's boldness and by the ordeal of concealing him to a greater self-assertiveness and, finally, the self-confidence necessary in a good commander. The departure of the hero/double at the end of the story signifies the integration of what he stands for into the narrator's own character.

On the other hand, the observer may disapprove of and finally reject what the hero represents. This happens in "The Fall of the House of Usher," where the speaker is partially drawn into Usher's morbid world but escapes before it can destroy him. Most commonly, however, the hero-as-second-self seems simultaneously redemptive and threatening. In "The Secret Sharer," for instance, Leggatt is not only a stimulus to the captain's growth but also a lawless demonic force whose influence drives the captain close to madness and shipwreck. He rightly sees Leggatt, at the end, as obstructing his proper rapport with his ship. Some such ambivalence in the observer's emotions toward the hero-figure is always present to the extent that the latter represents an identity that the former has repressed. We have just seen this to be true of Kesey's novel, and it seems true of "Usher" as well. For example, the narrator's

first impressions of the mansion's eeriness show an intuitive acceptance of "the sentience of all vegetable things," a notion that he tries to dismiss at the time and later repudiates explicitly when Usher presents it to him in doctrinal form.[7] The narrator's surface rationality, we find, is something of a veneer. His very compulsion to rationalize disturbing impressions suggests an Usher-like hypersensitivity somewhere within him.

The concept of observer and hero as doubles or counterparts is dramatized by the use of symbolic parallels of various kinds. For instance, hero and observer may be interlinked through a common pursuit. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael and Ahab can be seen as parallel questers for mastery of the whale and thereby the secrets of the universe. In John Barth's *End of the Road*, observer Jake Horner and hero-figure Joe Morgan are linked through their *menage à trois* with Joe's wife Renee, whom each man seeks to dominate. Their relationships with her epitomize both their intimacy and their antagonism. Again, the distinctive roles of the two main figures may be mirrored or parodied through the use of secondary characters. The hero's potentially demonic side, for example, may be dramatized through a figure who serves as the hero's shadow. Fedallah in *Moby-Dick*, Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*, Tiny Duffy in *All the King's Men* are obvious instances. By symbolizing the hero's sinister aspect, they reinforce the observer's inhibitions about him, though they may also have the effect of undercutting the observer if he seems to exaggerate their devilishness or if they point to a depth of experience which he has never fathomed. Conversely, doubles may be created for the observer that help to define him. In *The Rector of Justin*, Brian Aspinwall makes use of three other biographical accounts of Headmaster Francis Prescott that make clear both his charisma and the inevitable self-servingness of any biography.

No less important than the conventions of characterization in observer-hero fiction are its conventions in the handling of narrative point of view. The observer is always in the foreground, the hero at one remove from him and at two removes from us. The observer's account is always a biased one, both because it is colored by his personal feelings and because of the nature of his role as observer. This role inevitably leads him to become both admirer and judge. The hero is raised to a special status simply by the fact that the observer has chosen to contemplate him and to define his own existence largely in terms of his relation to the hero. Yet the observer's consciousness also encloses and delimits the hero. Up to a point, this act of enclosure increases the hero's stature by enabling us to see the impact he has had upon his witness. At the same time,

this process of magnification is a subtle form of mastery, since "the hero exists as hero only in the lives of the witnesses."[8] Even while he is conjuring up an image of grandeur, the witness may in fact be deflating the hero, as when Ishmael describes Ahab as a "gray-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale around the world."[9] Sometimes the judgment of the observer is limited to a choric function and the net effect is to magnify the hero while calling attention to his characteristic sin of hubris. But equally often, as in Ishmael's wittier passages, the observer may seek to undercut the hero's pretensions — to reduce the hero, so to speak, to his own quotidian level. Ishmael does this good-humoredly; some observers do so in less attractive ways, as in the case of Ford's John Dowell. In *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden disguises his grudging admiration for Willie Stark under such a cynical veneer that his adherence to the boss seems explicable mainly on the ground of self-hatred. Hawthorne's Miles Coverdale, narrator of *The Blithedale Romance*, belittles everything around him by a persistent refusal to take the facts of his story as seriously as they seem to warrant. One suspects that this is partly a belated attempt to revenge his defeat in love by the hero-figure, Hollingsworth.

The reliability of the witness, as these examples suggest, may vary as much as the stature of the hero. Kesey's Chief Bromden is (legally) insane; Kerouac's Sal Paradise, in *On the Road*, comes close to being the author's persona. As long as events are related through the eyes of a dramatized narrator, the possibility of unreliable narration exists; and although it is not always exploited it is potentially one of the richest sources of elaboration and nuance that the genre offers. We see its advantages even in a second-rate work like Gore Vidal's *Burr*. Vidal's narrator, an ambitious but unimpressive young journalist and law student named Charlie Schuyler, is assigned to do a muckraking article about the aged politician which will prove Vice-President Van Buren is Burr's illegitimate son and thereby ruin Van Buren's presidential hopes. This sets up the expectation of a search-discovery-resolution pattern that is fulfilled only in part. First, Schuyler ironically becomes Burr's reluctant admirer. In his inner conflict between ambition and loyalty, his investigation bogs down and his reliability as witness now becomes as suspect on account of his sympathy as it was before on account of his opportunism. Only after Burr's death, in a crude surprise-twist ending, does the narrator "learn" (from a not altogether reliable source) that Burr was not only Van Buren's father, but also his own. This revelation, or pseudo-revelation, can be taken either as Vidal's gesture of clarification or as an attempt to confuse the narrator's revisionist portrait of Burr beyond all

possibility of clarification by showing the extent of the narrator's naivete.

Regardless of the character of the witness, his self-consciousness and his limits as an observer always place a barrier, more or less opaque, between reader and hero. The observed hero always remains somewhat mysterious. "Remember," says the biographer-narrator of Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, "that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale."[10] This does not necessarily mean that the hero is a highly complex personality. On the contrary, it often happens that the witness seems the more complicated figure, being more alive to us by reasons of his closeness and his powers of self-dramatization. Ford's Ashburnham, Warren's Willie Stark, and Melville's Ahab are little more than formulaic concepts by contrast with their witnesses, the texture of whose minds is much more fully rendered. Furthermore, the concept of the hero's simplicity is often an important part, indeed the most crucial part, of the observer's characterization of him. The distinguishing quality of Ahab, Gatsby, Kurtz, and Joe Morgan is the relentlessness with which they give themselves over to their respective designs. At the same time, this simplicity is also one of the main reasons why the observed hero seems mysterious to the more everyday perspective of the observer. A more immediate reason, of course, is that the witness, as an outsider to the hero's private world, can reconstruct it only by conjectures which simultaneously introduce us to the hero's mind and distance us from it. At times the author permits "direct" glimpses like Ahab's soliloquies and Leverkühn's diary, but these are rare and tend to raise as many questions as they answer. In any case, the impenetrability of the hero is crucial to the overall effect of the work. To what extent does Dahfu reciprocate Henderson's love and respect? To what extent has the king merely been using him? To what extent was Leverkühn a genuine Doctor Faustus? In what sense did he make a pact with Satan? These novels are what they are largely because these questions are unanswerable.

Such questions about the hero raise broader philosophical questions about the nature of reality and personal identity, the problem of perception, and the ethics of the observer's role. Accordingly observer-hero narratives are forever moving beyond the narrative level into discursive meditation. Nabokov's V., for example, intersperses throughout *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* asides on the problems of biographical reconstruction, as do his counterparts Aspinwall and Zeitblom. In this way, plot becomes eclipsed by commentary, and the accomplishments of the hero and the history

of his relations with the witness threaten to become less important than their ulterior significance or implication. In *Doktor Faustus*, for all the superabundance of detail about Leverkühn's development as a musician, Zeitblom turns out to be more preoccupied with the ways in which the hero's tragedy seems to reflect the tragedy of the German nation. Somehow the composer's career must be made into an epitome of the fall of the Third Reich.

Leverkühn is a prime example of how the hero-figure tends to become mythologized by the narrator's attempt to comprehend him fully. In the same way, Gatsby comes to be seen as the incarnation of the American dream, Randall McMurphy as the élan vital in opposition to "The Combine," America as machine. To itemize the mythic avatars of Ahab proposed by scholars to date would take an article as long as this one. The symbolic meanings of the hero are endorsed with varying degrees of seriousness by the observers who suggest them. Chief Bromden fully accepts and acts upon his vision of McMurphy when he escapes from the Hospital. Nick Carraway advances with full seriousness the notion of Gatsby as a midwestern Columbus discovering America in reverse, but he repudiates it as a model for himself when he turns his back on the east. Ishmael does not allow the various possible meanings of Ahab's quest to get beyond the level of possibility, and he intermixes serious-minded meditation with joshing. In Wright Morris' *The Huge Season*, the reader is continuously aware of the ironic use of cliché. Charles Lawrence, the midwestern expatriate tennis star gored in the bull ring, is to a considerable extent a humorous collage of Hemingwayesque motifs, with a touch of Fitzgerald thrown in, just as his witness, Peter Foley, is fully aware of the ludicrousness of his attempt to write, at this late date, a memoir of the lost generation.

A third set of conventions governing observer-hero narrative has to do with the handling of plot. The hero's career, like his character, tends to be more decisive than the observer's. As a rule, the action centering in the hero ends conclusively and tragically, with his death, while the witness pauses on the brink and philosophizes. The observer may also undergo a sympathetic death-and-rebirth like Marlow's sickness in *Heart of Darkness* or Henderson's brief incarceration in the room adjoining Dahfu's death chamber. But the witness never follows the hero all the way, and his failure to do so implies at least a partial dissociation from what the hero stands for. Henderson, for example, in a sense remains loyal to the king when he absconds with the cub Dahfu, supposedly his friend's new incarnation. But Henderson thereby abandons his post as Dahfu's successor, which would have required him to free the cub

and undergo the ritual hunt for the grown lion-father that has killed Dahfu. This alteration in the scenario is at once a comic undercutting of the tribal religion (the sacred animal is converted into a souvenir) and an affirmation that Dahfu has had *some* permanent impact upon Henderson — though not the impact the king intended.

Altogether, then, the observer generally sustains a vicarious and partial relation with the hero. The hero is characterized in such a way as to renew the observer's (and the reader's) faith in the possibility of a degree of grandeur that we had more or less assumed to have faded from the contemporary world; to indulge that dream for awhile; and yet finally to keep from full identification with it by viewing it as illusory and/or destructive. Thus the encounter with the hero is finally turned into a learning experience for the observer. It is significant in this regard that a number of observer-hero narratives play upon the old-fashionedness of the hero in contrast to the more up-to-date observer. Barth's Joe Morgan, for instance, is called a latter-day American pragmatist, while Jake Horner is a "modern" existentialist. Joe assumes what in Horner's universe is the archaic notion that personal identity is constant and that a man can today be held accountable for his behavior of the previous week. Gatsby represents the obsolete idealism of the American dream. Dahfu holds to a Lamarckian idea of voluntary evolution which Henderson remembers as discredited in his youth. The archaic values of the hero in these instances add to the impression that his universe is remote from the more mundane world of the witness. A more obvious device of this kind is the calculated hyperbole of the hero as royalty: Ahab as great Mogul, Willie Stark as King, Francis Prescott as Lear. Again, there is both condescension and nostalgia in these strategies. The observed heroes reflect both the dream of a nobler life-style and the feeling that it would be quixotic to act out such a dream.

II. The Question of Genre

Are the structural resemblances between the works just discussed sufficient to entitle us to group them together as a genre? Some might wish to argue, as Walter Reed has said of a narrative pattern quite close to the one described here, that observer-hero fictions are "not a genre in the common sense of the term, a formal system of publicly recognized conventions," but simply "an imaginative structure of thought."[11]

If we accept the definition of "genre" given here, we must admit that observer-hero narrative probably does not qualify, since the evidence that it has been "publicly recognized" as a genre is at best

circumstantial. I cannot prove, for example, that the authors who wrote the texts discussed above were consciously aware of working within a preestablished set of norms. The strongest piece of supporting evidence is that some, like Conrad and Cather, used the form more than once. Yet it is questionable, in any case, whether authorial intention is a necessary criterion for establishing genre. Although in some instances, like the sonnet, a conscious awareness of the "rules" is necessary to the transmission of the form, in other cases generic categorization may be an *ex post facto* construct of the literary critic. A good example is M. H. Abrams' identification of the "greater Romantic lyric."[1] [2] Furthermore, practitioners of some recognized genres, like epic, have differed among themselves to a much greater extent than practitioners of forms that did not become conceptualized as genres until centuries later — e.g., the New England Puritan jeremiad.

For these reasons it seems wise to waive the criterion of public recognition and define genres simply as paradigmatic literary structures which are exemplified by a significant number of works by diverse authors. For each genre we should expect to find a number of works (it would be pedantic to specify a numerical minimum) in which the paradigm constituted the sole or primary structural device and another, larger, group of works in which the generic trait cluster was used in a less determinative way, in conjunction with other generic traditions. Few individual works of a high literary order are, after all, pure examples of any one genre; and many generic traditions are rewoven into the fabric of works where they function as supporting or peripheral devices — e.g., epic, picaresque, tragedy, comedy.

The foregoing discussion should have shown that observer-hero narrative fits this description of how genres behave. Our definition specifies rather precise guidelines for the handling of plot, characterization, and point of view, as well as typical themes and motifs. With these stipulations in mind, we can construct an imaginary scatter diagram, at the center of which would be a cluster of works like *The Great Gatsby*, whose structures are quite fully described by the terms of the definition; others, like *Henderson the Rain King*, which share all the distinctive traits but in which the observer-hero relationship occupies a lesser, though still central, portion of the work; others, like *Roderick Hudson*, which meet some but not all the criteria; and, at the periphery, works like *Absalom, Absalom*, which deviate appreciably from the paradigm but nonetheless contain some important elements of it. This summary, I think, applies to most literary genres, not just to the one under consideration. We define them in terms of a series of core examples,

from which perspective a much larger group of works are seen as related but less "pure" embodiments of the genre.

In their *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren suggest a dual conception of genre:

> Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific meter or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose — more crudely, subject and audience). The ostensible basis may be one or the other (e.g. "pastoral" and "satire" for the inner form; dipodic verse and Pindaric ode for outer); but the critical problem will then be to find the *other* dimension, to complete the diagram.[13]

It would be risky to insist that particular "outer forms" always imply particular "inner forms" and vice-versa, in view of, say, the tendency of genres like the sonnet to develop away from the purposes for which they were originally intended. But most outer forms, as the authors suggest, do at least seem to suggest a certain angle of vision on reality. Observer-hero narrative manifestly has such an inner form, as we have seen: in confining the reader to the observer's perceptions, it implies a particular epistemology (i.e., objective reality is unknowable), and in placing the hero-figure under critical scrutiny it implies an ambiguous evaluation of heroism. Indeed, observer-hero narrative may perhaps best be described in the same terms in which Wellek and Warren describe satire and pastoral: as a genre having its "ostensible basis" in its inner form, its angle of vision, but entailing also the specific outer form I have described. This view of the matter helps explain, perhaps, why writers of observer-hero narrative have not identified it as a generic category and why previous critics like Reed have concentrated especially upon its inner form.

III. Background and Development of the Genre

Historically speaking, observer-hero narrative might be described in summary fashion as the product of two prominent, complementary trends in western literature since the Renaissance: the gradual disappearance of the traditional hero, and the rise of interest in subjective consciousness as a literary subject. Observer-hero narrative represents a compromise, so to speak, between the comparatively unmediated presentation of heroic action in epic narrative and the emphasis on the interpreting mind and the problematic nature of reality that has increasingly characterized modern writing

Those who wish can find anticipations of observer-hero fiction in the very first European novels — e.g., in Sancho Panza's relation to Don Quixote and in the picaresque convention of having the protagonist meet with secondary characters, also picaros of a sort and thus doubles of the hero, who tell their stories. The genre itself, however, seems to have grown out of a number of literary developments associable with the rise of Romanticism, the groundwork having been laid in the Neoclassical era.

During the eighteenth century, the device of viewing a central figure at one (or more) removes by dramatized narrators appears in such *histoires* as Prevost's *Manon Lescault*,[14] and the use of limited, unreliable narrators is experimented with by a number of writers from Defoe and Swift through Sterne and Maria Edgeworth, whose *Castle Rackrent* is in fact structured to a large extent in terms of the observer-hero pattern (Thady/Condy). The full emergence of the genre, during the Romantic period, was virtually assured by the popularity of a number of forms and techniques which juxtapose divergent psychic universes.

In Gothic fiction, to begin with, such an effect is created by the Richardsonian formula of allowing the protagonist (usually female) to fall from a secure, conventional life into the clutches of a fascinating but demonic villain. The relationship between Emily St. Aubert and Montoni in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is a typical case. Much of the novel's impact derives from the presentation of Montoni, through Emily as center of consciousness, as threateningly inscrutable and superhumanly powerful, at least with respect to her. Variations on the pattern of the innocent protagonist trapped by a gothic villain inform several of the narratives discussed earlier, such as *Moby-Dick*.

Some critics have interpreted the victim-villain relation as a psychosexual fantasy in which the latter represents the former's repressed desires.[15] Though *Udolpho* furnishes minimal evidence for this view, a number of other gothic fictions — like *Wuthering Heights* — certainly support it. Furthermore, the use of gothicism in Victorian fiction to portray a reality which society prefers to ignore (e.g., Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations*) shows that the concept of doubling implicit in gothic is not merely sexual in nature.[16] Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, the first significant novel in English to make use of an observer-hero pattern, shows this quite clearly. The bond between Caleb and his employer/tormentor Falkland can be read simultaneously as a frustrated love relationship and as a statement about the failure of the social structure, the common denominator being the repressiveness characteristic both of the institution of the family and the body politic.[17]

Altogether, by the mid-nineteenth century, English gothic fiction had used the victim/villain formula to represent both the ambiguous attraction-repulsion felt by the observer toward the hero and also most of the characteristic kinds of doubling and contrast used in later observer-hero narrative.

The motif of the psychological double[18] is most commonly associated with German romanticism, E. T. A. Hoffmann being the most influential figure internationally. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Hoffmann's use of doubles is the way he combines psychological insight and speculation on the nature of reality with a whimsical touch reminiscent of the playfully elaborate use of doubles in Roman comedy. The emotional intensity of the dramatic situation and the narrator's sense of the absurd are balanced against each other so that the story will seem charming rather than enthralling. The mysterious other world of the double is evoked with sufficient distance to make us aware of its fabulousness. Hoffmann's Anglo-American posterity sometimes seem more interested in rivalling his intricacy of plot than his delicacy of tone.[19] Yet beginning with Washington Irving and James Hogg there is always at least a potentially whimsical aspect to the double motif in Anglo-American fiction. Ishmael's parodies of Ahab, as when he dares to measure the sacred whale's skeleton, exemplify this.

Another gothic bequest to the genre is the framing device by which a number of late gothic fictions elaborate the hero-villain's world on the one hand and an outsider's perspective on the other. In Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the title figure's history is finally seen and, to some extent, interpreted through an editor's eyes; in *Wuthering Heights*, the story of Heathcliff is filtered through Lockwood and Nellie Dean. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we see the beginnings of an observer-hero relation in the tie between the young captain who serves as the outer narrator and the title character. In *Moby-Dick* this framing device eventuates in a full-fledged observer-hero fiction.

The historical romance, as developed by Sir Walter Scott, furnished still another early model for observer-hero narrative. A pleasant but unremarkable and untested young gentleman is thrust into a crisis that forces him to choose between political factions representing the heroic, archaic, and treasonable on the one hand and the modern, respectable, and efficient on the other. Such is Scott's usual formula.[20] When a character embodying the heroic ethos is prominent, Scott approaches observer-hero narrative. *Rob Roy* might in fact be claimed as an example of the genre. The book's most memorable portions deal with protagonist-narrator Frank Osbaldistone's pursuit and discovery of Rob. As with the

main action in the other Waverley novels, Frank's quest is a rite of passage designed to initiate him both into manhood and into the heritage of Scotland's heroic past. Like Gatsby and Willie Stark, Rob is both an admirable character who influences the narrator's growth (one critic calls Rob "a projection...of the best possibilities of Frank's character"),[21] yet also a too extravagant figure for Frank completely to accept as a model. This latter side of Rob is represented schematically by his wife, who performs the same shadow function as Wolfsheim and Tiny Duffy. Also, like several heroes discussed earlier, Rob is distanced from Frank by his obsolescence, as the representative of a glamorous but outmoded way of life.

The relation between the wavering hero and his more heroic counterpart has its parallel in another genre that began during the Romantic era, the bildungsroman. As one scholar has said of Melville's Ishmael and Hawthorne's Coverdale, the observer-figures we have been discussing often "threaten to turn stories of other people's lives into their own Bildungsroman."[22] Conversely, the admiration of a David Copperfield for a mentor-figure like Steerforth recalls the observer's mysterious need for the hero, as well as some of the other standard contrasts and resemblances between the two figures. David's willingness to subordinate himself to his friend and in some measure to live through him; Steerforth's double nature; his seduction of the girl David loves innocently; the parallel between the tragedy resulting from that and the hollowness of David's first marriage — these all echo features of the narratives discussed in part I. Even closer to observer-hero narrative is Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*, in which the protagonist's first significant other, his schoolmate and protector Glanville, plays a more continuously important role throughout the book. His is a model of some of the qualities Pelham values, like charm and political success, but also a dark and shadowy figure, haunted by a past that Pelham spends much of the novel trying to understand and assist Glanville to expiate. In the process, Pelham grows in such a way as to emulate to just the proper degree Glanville's lonely independence. Pelham matures from a frivolous youth into a more serious-minded adult but avoids Glanville's morbidity. As a prize, he wins his friend's sister as his wife — the next best thing, as a psychoanalytical critic might point out, to marrying Glanville himself.

A fourth genre which has affinities with observer-hero narrative is the familiar essay, particularly the character sketch as developed by Romanticist writers. As early as *The Spectator*, the English essay experiments with the formula of a fictive persona contemplating a second party whom he appraises both with sympathy and

detachment. The second figure personifies a common trait which the speaker sees in himself (and the reader) and wishes to commend or criticize. Samuel Johnson's essay on Suspirus (*Rambler* # 59) and Charles Lamb's "Captain Jackson" (*Last Essays of Elia*) are examples. With some of Irving's Geoffrey Crayon sketches, like "The Stout Gentleman" (*Bracebridge Hall*) we move away from the moral essay tradition toward the story proper. Trapped by bad weather in a country inn, the narrator speculates idly about the title figure, who keeps "mysteriously" to his room and is never actually seen. This personage *might* be great or villainous, or the narrator might simply be overreading the circumstantial evidence for lack of any other diversion. What results is a comically self-deprecating report of a transient obsession with the unseen figure, broken off by his departure. Irving's handling of the ruminating persona is similar to Hawthorne's use of Miles Coverdale as narrator, and even more closely akin to the narrators in Melville's short observer-hero fictions, "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Jimmy Rose."[23]

Still another antecedent to observer-hero narrative is biographical reminiscence. Several of the works discussed above are pseudo-biographies. The direct ancestor of this approach is the type of memoir in which the interplay between subject and biographer is central to the work. At times such works themselves become fictions (e.g., Ford Madox Ford's *Joseph Conrad*); at times they play, perhaps unconsciously, upon the idea of subject and biographer as alter egos. Donald Stauffer shrewdly remarks of Boswell that "Johnson was a part of himself," "Boswell as he would like to have been" — exemplifying, among other things, a greater power of self-control over weaknesses which were also Boswell's own, like gluttony and melancholy.[24] Boswell is of course the undeserved prototype for the cliché of the reverential, officious dim-witted biographer, of which Aspinwall and Zeitblom are latter-day manifestations.

The rise of observer-hero fiction cannot, of course, be explained in terms of technical developments alone. For example, the displacement of omniscient by limited narration, a necessary precondition for the genre, also reflects a growing skepticism about the capacity of individuals to perceive reality, if not a positive disbelief in the very concept of a definite objective reality. "The omniscient author dies," as Arnold Weinstein nicely puts it, "because one can no longer share his certainties."[25] Largely because of this uncertainty, the process of perception and the abysses of the self have, since the Romantic era, become at least as interesting fictional subjects as the story of a completed, decisive action. Herein probably lies the explanation for the motif of the old-fashionedness of

many observed heroes, who have been aptly described as "positive heroes in a negative field" — "literary revivals or imports from drama or epic or poetic romance."[26] This in turn suggests that the juxtaposition of two psychic worlds, seen not only in observer-hero narrative but in the antecedent genres just surveyed, is surely much more than a literary fashion. It reflects a pervasive malaise in the culture that keeps harping on it. Historical romance and gothic fiction, for instance, might be regarded as bourgeois fantasies of decisive action or sudden disorientation. The theme of the double suggests, among other things, the increasing anxiety of the individual in an environment where roles and values are uncertain or disestablished. In the broadest sense, then, the observer-hero narrative may perhaps be "explained" as an attempt to give free play to the awareness of social and psychic discord while at the same time holding its centrifugal force in a kind of uneasy check.

Precisely when observer-hero narrative emerged as a genre it is impossible to say. In Anglo-American writing, half a century seems to have elapsed between the first examples of the form and the awareness that it was a standard resource for the storyteller. In theory, once in-depth characterization of limited narrators and centers of consciousness were made fashionable by Richardson and Sterne, the rapid development of the form was possible. But the first instances seem to have been isolated accidents. One recalls the familiar anecdote of Godwin writing *Caleb Williams* backwards. In the Waverley novels, the observer-hero contrast is always important as a motif, but it is muted by Scott's preference for omniscient narration and by his concentration on the protagonist. The structure of *Moby-Dick* seems more the result of the author's personal growth than a deliberate narrative choice. The book luckily happens to stand at the midpoint in Melville's career-long drift from semi-autobiographical reminiscence to detached, undramatized narration.

Melville's magazine tales of the same period, on the other hand, seem to rely upon a preestablished formula: the naive witness reacting to an encounter with a bizarre or colorful figure.[27] "Bartleby" in particular is close enough both to Poe and Irving to suggest cross-fertilization, and all three writers draw at least indirectly on Hoffmann, Chamisso, and other German romanticists. In the short fiction of the American romantics, then, observer-hero narrative may have first been developed as a distinct form in Anglo-American literature. In the novel, however, the form did not become anything like a tradition before Conrad. James prepared the way, in two-person fictions like *Roderick Hudson* and "Daisy Miller"; and the strategies of James and Conrad were continued

and adapted in the early twentieth century by Ford, Fitzgerald, Cather, and Faulkner. Such authorial testimony as Fitzgerald's acknowledgement of a debt to Conrad suggests that by the 1920s, if not before, observer-hero narrative had become a novelistic genre.

What of its future? Walter Reed has suggested that the "meditation on the hero" is a nineteenth-century approach destined to extinction in the twentieth because of the shattering of the traditional concept of heroism.[28] Yet the fact remains that distinguished examples of observer-hero fiction continue to be produced. Some have parodied its conventions (Nabokov, Morris), some have bent them almost beyond recognition (Faulkner). But in the hands of Warren, Bellow, Barth, and Kesey, not to mention lesser figures, the genre has proven remarkably stable. This, of course, is not to say that all recent examples of it can be explained as conscious contributions to the genre, though virtuosos like Nabokov may compose in such a manner. On the contrary, we have already seen that Warren, for instance, seized upon the hero-witness device for *All the King's Men* through a process of trial and error. Knowing that genius rarely works according to fixed plan, we should expect Warren's experience to remain the norm rather than the exception. But the legacy of observer-hero narrative is by now so strong, and the structure of consciousness which gives rise to it so persistent in the post-romantic apprehension of reality, that we may also expect writers to keep discovering in themselves a predilection for the form for many years to come.

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Notes

1. I wish to express my thanks to Fernando Arroyo, Michael Frank, Thomas Linehan, Arthur Mizener, and John Olmsted for their thoughtful readings of earlier drafts of this essay.

2. The studies of individual authors that I have found most useful are R. Bruce Bickley, *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 26–44; John E. Hardy, "Robert Penn Warren's Double Hero," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 36 (1960), 583–597; Robert Emmet Long, "*The Great Gatsby* and the Tradition of Joseph Conrad," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 8 (1966), 258–276, 407–422; David Madden, *Wright Morris* (Boston: Twayne, 1964), 32–47; Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story: a Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (New York and Cleveland: World, 1971), 258–277; and Leon Seltzer, *The Vision of Melville and Conrad* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1970), 66–77.

3. The following works examine selected aspects of observer-hero narra-

tive in the process of tracing their chosen thematic/formal pattern: Frank C. Maatje, *Der Doppelroman* (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1964); David L. Minter, *The Interpreted Design as a Structural Principle in American Prose* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969); and Walter L. Reed, *Meditations on the Hero* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974). At different points in this essay I am indebted to each. Of the three, the approach of Reed's book, an intensive analysis of four nineteenth-century works, is closest to my own. Reed concentrates, however, upon the presentation of the hero-figure, rather than on the concept of a two-person narrative, in which both hero and observer are dramatized characters. Thus his category of "meditation on the hero" is broad enough to include Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Perhaps this is the reason why Reed stops short of claiming that his category constitutes a genre, whereas I press this claim for observer-hero fiction in section II below.

4. Reed, 150.

5. Warren, "A Note to *All the King's Men*," *Sewanee Review*, 61 (1953), 478.

6. Louis Auchincloss, *The Rector of Justin* (Boston: Houghton, 1964), 2.

7. Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed., Thomas Olive Mabbott (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 2, 408.

8. Madden, *Wright Morris*, 34.

9. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed., Harrison Hayford and Herschel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 162.

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 52.

11. Reed, 9.

12. M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed., Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 527–560.

13. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1942), 221.

14. See Philip Stewart, *Imitation and Illusion in the French Memoir-Novel, 1700-1750* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), 40ff.

15. E. g., Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell, 1966), 132–133.

16. The use of gothicism in Victorian literature is dealt with extensively in Masao Miyoshi, *The Divided Self* (New York: New York University Press, 1959).

17. Alex Gold, Jr., "It's Only Love: The Politics of Passion in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 19 (1977), 135–160.

18. The following studies of this motif, important in observer-hero narrative, have helped me particularly: Ralph Tymms, *Doubles in Literary Psychology* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1949); Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow Within: the Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double," *Daedelus*, 92 (1965), 326–344; Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970); and C. E. Keppler, *The Literature of the Second Self* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972).

19. Poe, for instance, preserves something of the latter in his "Tale of the Ragged Mountains" but in general (e.g., "Usher" and "William Wilson") shows a greater intellectual and emotional fervor than Hoffmann. See, however, G. R. Thompson's eloquent if not conclusive argument for Poe as a

romantic ironist akin to Hoffmann: *Poe's Irony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973).

20. The characteristics of the wavering hero and the "dark hero" are outlined in Alexander Welsh, *The Hero of the Waverley Novels* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 30-70.

21. William Cadbury, "The Two Structures of *Rob Roy*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 29 (1968), 59.

22. William Hedges, "Hawthorne's *Blithedale*: The Function of the Narrator," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 14 (1960), 305.

23. For a clearer view of the Irving-Hawthorne-Melville relation I am indebted to Roy R. Male, "The Story of the Mysterious Stranger in American Fiction," *Criticism*, 3 (1961), 281-294; John Seelye, "The Contemporary 'Bartleby'," *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 7 (1970), 12-18; and William Hedges, *Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802-1832* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 150-163.

24. Donald A. Stauffer, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 67.

25. Arnold Weinstein, *Vision and Response in Modern Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 51.

26. Reed, 9.

27. The studies mentioned in note 23 see a definite American literary tradition at work here.

28. Reed, 187-201.