"Some Enchanted Evening"-- Tuning In the Amazing Fifties, Switching Off the Elusive Decade

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Sandwiched between the dramatic Forties and the traumatic Sixties, the Fifties have suffered, as many things in history (and life) do, from uncomfortable neighborhood. This decade retained an aura of domesticity that poorly compared with the emotional havoc wreaked by the previous years of war or the subsequent disturbances of counterculture and Civil Rights. And yet as we enter the new millennium, the age associated with the suburban dream and baby booming is being re-evaluated as one of the most intriguing periods of twentieth- century American culture. Two provocative works published in the early Nineties, W. T, Lhamon, Jr.'s *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s,* and David Halberstam's *The Fifties,* have broken the ground for a revival of interest in the period, challenging the over-simplified view of the decade by raising a variety of new issues. To a certain extent, they looked back onto Eric F. Goldman who, in *The Crucial Decade: America,*

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1945–1955, claimed that this period had challenged the average American citizen to face and deal with controversial questions. A second edition, *The Crucial Decade–And After: America, 1945–60*, expanded the argument to cover the entire Fifties and concluded on an optimistic note that emphasized the speed of the changes by which contemporary American sensibility has been shaped.

Goldman's analyses illustrate how inappropriate were some of the epithets by which the Fifties were lampooned as the "Dismal Decade", the "Years of Neuroses" or more disparagingly the "Age of the Vacuum Tube" (290).[1] A backward glance into the budding Fifties, however, cannot but disclose signs of rampant anxiety, a spiritual malaise fostered by the nightmarish memories of the preceding Thirties and Forties, before complacence, material prosperity and the so-called American way of life prevailed. As the self-appointed champion of Western values in the aftermath of World War II, the United States had first to fight off the ghosts of traumatic experience before achieving the long desired dream of becoming the "Citty upon a Hill".[2] The smoke from Holocaust chimneys had not yet vanished when the decision to use the bomb against Japan spread the suspicion that no participant in the horrors of such war was to come out of it with clean hands. As Norman Mailer would later claim in his controversial essay of the Fifties, "The White Negro," no one alive at the time could possibly estimate "the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind" (303). Could these traumas account for the appearance of a junior Senator from Wisconsin, for the hysteria and the witch-hunting of McCarthyism? Could it legitimate the climate of the Cold War, the distortions and loss of sense of proportions it harbored? Could it finally justify the barricading of conservative America behind its most cherished values and the weaving of its favorite ghosts into everyday life, fostering the fear of another economic collapse and the bankruptcy of the dream?

But which were the dreams of the anointed champion of Western values? Could happiness and peace be chartered by the rules of expanding economy? Hardly, if we are to trust the novels, the poems and the plays of the period, pervaded as they are by so many signs of identity crises and shattered hopes. In the novel, for instance, the scene is engrossingly devoted to the representation of the dilemmas of the self and nowhere is such representation more visible than at the center of the prolific war novels published around the turn of

the decade. In the tradition of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, these novels—among them, Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* (1948), James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951) or Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* (1951)—foreground the helplessness of the individual against the assaults of the military organization and feature war as a mere foil for the inner conflicts of the bewildered self. The exception to the genre is Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead* (1948), a story that, in the confrontation of the American soldier with elemental vitality, is closer to the epic vein of Hemingway or Melville.

In poetry, W. H. Auden ushers in the pervasive atmosphere at the turn of the decade with *The Age of Anxiety: a Baroque Eclogue* (1947), the "Prologue" evoking Hemingway's, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" (1933, 1939) or, more visibly perhaps, recalling Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942). The lonely characters in a Third Avenue bar, meditating on the absurdities of human condition, introduce the central motif which is lyrically re-enacted throughout the poem and, like the Baroque eclogue of the subtitle, glosses over the lack of meaningful relations at the core of human existence. The long poem sums up feelings of randomness and emotional exhaustion that would characterize Second World War poetry, such as Randall Jarrell's. A poetic embodiment of the depressive postwar mood, *The Age of Anxiety* would inspire artists from diverse fields, showing how this sequence of words aptly translated the spirit of the time. That spirit is notable in Leonard Bernstein whose *Symphony N° 2* for piano and orchestra borrowed Auden's celebrated title; which was also used by choreographer Jerome Robbins in ballet and by Ben Shahn in his 1953 painting, *Age of Anxiety*.

Nowhere are the frailties of human condition and the assault on the self more visible than in Arthur Miller's dramas of the period. At the core of both *All my Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) are the commonly held dreams of success bred by illusionary social rhetoric. It is, however, in *The Crucible* (1953) that historical circumstance and social contradiction secure political overtones, eliciting the parallel between McCarthy's America and Puritan witch-hunting. Revived in the story of John Proctor and Abigail Williams, the Salem trials provide a vivid illustration of naked emotion—of guilt, suspicion, and vengeance, which are inevitably revisited whenever public life in the United States falls under such spells. A peak was reached in the political hearings orchestrated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Bigotry-driven and acting out his lust for power in the

name of national interest, McCarthy would, in the early decade, quicken the pulse of American life by his roaring "point of order, point of order, Mr. Chairman!" The "Red Scare" thrived on hysteria, betrayal and shattered reputations, the ritualistic nature of both witch trials and political hearings being secured by public confession, as Miller pointed out in his autobiography.

Tennessee Williams's theater is as much concerned as Arthur Miller's with rendering the dilemmas of the self besieged by anxiety. Qualifying, however, the current view that Williams's characters are, above all, in solitary pledge to their own emotions, I would contend that equally relevant is the relationship of each one of them with the South as a distinctive American region. Invited to watch what Kenneth Tynan has described as the subtle "choreography of individual emotion," the audience is also confronted with the recurring tension between old conventional values, the Southern way of life, and a new culture, which patterns such legacy in terms of intermittent loss and renewal. This is at the heart of *Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) or *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), to name only some of the plays that made Williams famous in the Fifties.

Their differences notwithstanding, Miller and Williams dramatized individual frustration as provoked by a gradually more complacent society. Elia Kazan, who directed their work both in theatre and movie versions, was well aware of that and cinematically found the right angle to highlight the assailed self, enraptured in his own ghosts in Williams's case, a victim of a ruthless and corrupted society in Miller's. Theirs was indeed a somber appreciation of the age and, linked as they were to the theater, theirs was an art engaged in exposing self-indulging nostalgia and the consensus that had shut American eyes to the McCarthy hysteria. Responding to the new opportunities offered by the successful postwar economy, the common American citizen was willing to exchange unpleasant memories for the celebration of the so-called American way of life, while numberless theoreticians were prepared to certify it on historical, sociological, and economic grounds. The dawning of an enchanted era loomed on the horizon, having found its wondrous vocalist in the melodious Ezio Pinza. Out of the cluster of memorable songs from *South Pacific* (1949), "Some Enchanted Evening" announced and fulfilled the promise of a happy ending for the Cinderella-like tale of the innocent American nurse and the rich French planter. As

such, it entered the heart of all those who delight in the victories of love over private and public warfare, on such an account disregarding the more somber implications of the subplot. Tuned to the nostalgic "Bali Ha'i" of an ever craved for but unattainable bliss, it vanishes before the material actuality of the place where mainstream endearing romanticism carries the love story to the rosy denouement. The musical as a genre was then in full swing and it is easy to understand why *South Pacific* was one of the most popular Broadway musicals of the decade, the living testimonial of the fertile collaboration of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. At the right time and in the right place, their talent produced the enchanting tune to which many idyllic a dreamer danced in ecstasy, without a worry about the eventual consequences of their own self-complacence.

It is true that behind the façade of material prosperity, the escalation of sophisticated weaponry lurked as a threat that was, however, outweighed by the excitement of new technologies and the mirage of an appealing democratic system. Among American bounties, none was more enticing than the transformations accomplished by the use of the machine. Some, like the radio and the car, oldtimers with established pedigrees, entered a new age and, in the latter's case, became the avatar of suburban living and of success as the Fifties defined it. Others, like television, brought the outside world inside suburban homes, introducing what Marshall McLuhan would later memorialize as the new perception of the world. Television was, nevertheless, an ambivalent window onto the scene. Its most immediate appeal lay on the erosion of provinciality, even when more often than not the "global village" shrank to the dimensions of the TV screen and was trivialized by routine.

Television as a means of entertainment within easy reach forced cinemas to close by the hundreds and for a brief period left radio in a void. Very soon, however, it faced competition from older forms of entertainment and, as argued by W. T. Lhamon, the backlash speeded up the cultural transformations of the era. Radio, for instance, taking full advantage of synthesizers, stereophonic speakers, and other techniques that brought the 1910 so-called revolution of the ear to a peak by diversifying its musical contents.[3] The old magic made a come-back with renewed sounds, regional country music and what was then named "race" music being suddenly brought closer to the listener by voices that produced new waves of

sensation and were magnified by the new technologies. They became familiar whether you were roaming the streets of the city in the quiet of the night, or fighting insomnia in the solitude of your room, or merely attuned to the new beat that quickened the pulse of life. By the mid-Fifties, country music and rhythm-and-blues merged to provide the teenagers of the decade with the thrills of rock-and-roll. What was initially brought into the suburban home as living proof of the miracles of the American way of life, soon bred into it and in the generation of baby boomers the seeds of disruption.

The cinematographic industry was also much affected by the new technologies. Cinerama, superscope, cinemascope, Todd-AO, aromarama, smell-o-vision, 3-D, drew moviegoers closer to real life and provided at the same time undreamed of, sensational views, which aligned the technological miracles with the world of popular entertainment. But movies did not escape the double-edged effect so characteristic of the Fifties. Hollywood's golden age, when the major studios catered to mass popular taste, was past. Formula movies were giving place to others that targeted more selective audiences. Exploring peripheral zones of experience, the new cinema found favor not only with "smaller, more fragmented, embattled, and alienated audiences" (Lhamon, 23), but, once again, with the youth of the decade. Directors like Nicholas Ray—*Rebel without A Cause* (1955)—and Elia Kazan—*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1952), *On The Waterfront* (1954) or *East of Eden* (1955)—were forging the heroes of a new era, the rebellious young men as personified by Marlon Brando and James Dean. In open defiance of the accepted codes of behavior, both Brando and Dean would exert enormous influence upon the new generations. So would Marilyn Monroe's personification of elusive womanhood, but as we have come to realize it is no small irony that while a product of the star-system she would elude the stereotype of the blonde Venus to which she was fated during her lifetime. More ironically still, none of these performers relinquished their iconic status by refusing to accede to values associated with the so-called American way of life.

More than Marilyn Monroe, Brando and Dean already impersonated the new emerging culture, one in which Elvis Presley's or Chuck Berry's rock-and-roll replaced the sentimental tunes of Pat Boone or the anodyne songs of Doris Day. These were the songs of America and the tunes of the plots interwoven around family life, so typical of television programs and, in a more spectacular scale, of

Hollywood musicals. Ray and Kazan, however, were mainly intent upon suggesting the disintegration of former pieties and therefore their movies are not concerned with heroic rebellion but with the absurdities of a universe where rebels have no cause. As such, the new cinema of the Fifties announces the failure of those models after which the dominant white culture was fashioned or, from a more optimistic perspective, the camera chooses to focus on the diversity of everyday experience. Like Robert Frank's photographs in *The Americans* (1958), the new cinema captures the undercurrents of life in the United States and not the glittering view of the "Citty upon a hill." Jack Kerouac phrased it eloquently in his introduction to Frank's book:

> After seeing these pictures you end up finally not knowing anymore whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin. That's because he's always taking pictures of jukeboxes and coffins - and intermediary mysteries like the Negro priest squatting underneath the bright liquid belly *mer* of the Mississippi at Baton Rouge for some reason at dusk or early dawn with a white snowy cross and secret incantations never known outside the bayou - or the picture of chair in some cafe with the sun coming in the window and setting on the chair in a holy halo I never thought could be caught on film much less described in its beautiful visual entirety in words (p.5).

The passage provides a good metaphor for the course taken by art as cultural idiom in the Fifties, a distinctive course also illustrated by the black and white photographs of Robert Frank or of Roy DeCarava, who made their pictures from unconventional angles. The metaphor also works when we recall the fiction, poetry and theater of this decade. It seems to me that all of it was intent on capturing the nuance – "whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin or the intermediary mystery of a Negro priest squatting with a white snowy cross"—that has indeed triggered new forms of perception. Much to the credit of the new technologies, their contribution to the burgeoning of a consumer's civilization and culture has also given rise to parallel inroads into the pieties and the canons of the time.

What we, for instance, used to call classical music, and which was radically opposed to popular music, has absorbed so many influences from the latter and been so modulated by electronic or-

chestration that currently it makes more sense to think of the dichotomy between the two modes rather than a polarizing of commercial and aesthetic goals. In John Cage, Milton Babbit, Harry Partch or Elliott Carter, the closer association with the new technologies certifies pervasive exploitation of tonality and timbre. But, then, we might also bear in mind how much these musicians are indebted to the new sounds of jazz and to the influence of cultures other than the European.[4]

The maligned Fifties may, after all, also be described by the disruption of established canons. In the domain of poetry, for example, Charles Olson claimed that a poem is energy transferred from the poet to the reader and thereby defied the reigning orthodoxies of New Criticism. The strictures of inherited line, stanza, over-all form were of little avail to a poetic design of "COMPOSITION BY FIELD" (16) and the concern with the significance of "the smallest particle of all, the syllable" (17). "Projective verse" was a new poetics devised for a new era and as such it did not vlaue words which were linked to previous meanings, obsolete and exhausted by meaningless communication. It was a poetics governed by the "LAW OF THE LINE," energized by the field of interrelations and bent upon breaking open "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax" (21). Olson also mistrusted "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego" (24), which he regards as outdated subjectivism. Equally suspicious of systematic binary exclusion such as results from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams's alternative "objectivism," he proposes "objectism," a word he coined to signify the singular necessary relation of man to experience. As early as 1950, Olson coined the word "postmodern" to express the structural change in sensibility that the Second World War generation underwent.

Olson also acknowledged the influence of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound as predecessors at a time when both poets were marginal figures in the American literary scene and the poetics of T. S. Eliot held the center. His indebtedness to the atmosphere of Black Mountain College, where he eventually became Rector, should be considered, especially when we think about the College as the home of so many artists such as painters Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Josef Albers and Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage), choreographer Merce Cunningham and, of course, poets Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan. Some of them were Faculty, others students, but all were committed to the vanguard of artistic

style. Most remarkably, the new sensibility anticipates the mutual influences among the different fields of art and the contemporary obsession with the erosion of boundaries between low and high culture or, ultimately, between art and life.

"Hart Crane," the elegiac poem written by Robert Creeley in the Fifties, provides a good illustration of the blurring of boundaries between the oral and the written word, and of the expression of personal emotion.. Creeley's closeness to Olson, well documented in their correspondence, is obvious in the disruption of metrical verse and conventional stanza, in the manipulation of the syllable, in the physical substantiality of the line, determined by the breathing of the poet and by his growing emotion. Words—"the words, several, and for each, several / senses"—purified from residual significance come second in the poem, primarily considered as a field of interrelations in which "each of the lines is a progressing of both the meaning and the breathing forward, and then a backing up without a progress or any kind of movement outside the unit of time local to the idea" (Olson, 23). Composed in memory of Hart Crane, the elegy shows how a poem, built on words and scraps of sentences from other poets comes to its close as a grand symphony of voices orchestrated to a sole purpose—Creeley's display of emotion for Hart Crane. Concomitantly, Olson's vindication that the new poetics might bring about some sort of drama is secured by the tension between the different voices.

Claiming that the art of poetry starts with breathing and that breathing determines rhythm, Olson and Creeley, together with other poets who joined them at Black Mountain College, were after all moving in much the same direction as the music and painting of their time. The totality of man (physical and imaginative man) is thereby engaged in the process of creation, being called upon to enter the realm of provisional meaning to which the reader is also invited. We find a similar concern in Cage and the musicians of his generation. Combining Ives's notion that music should be freely composed from the sounds and noises of nature with Edgar Varèse's obsession with pure, sculptured sonority, this new generation of musicians was attuned to the experimental vein of the age. In their compositions, they show less interest in achieving flawless masterpieces, than on experimenting with technique and compositional strategies that foreground the awareness of music as on-going process bearing the marks of a diversity of cultural influences (Sablosky, pp. 147-148).

Similar trends were being pursued by the Abstract Expressionists in painting. According to Abraham A. Davidson, these painters valued the unpremeditated, unconscious gesture and tried to avoid pre-planning their canvasses, stressing instead that each canvas was a sort of arena wherein the artist acted out his emotions in the very process of painting (p. 141). In Robert Motherwell's words such process "is conceived of as an adventure, without preconceived ideas", just like a performance without a script and powerfully relying on the emotional engagement of the performer (83). By 1950, Abstract Expressionism possessed, nevertheless, a significant matrix of intellectual ideas and a coherent body of mature work by numerous artists, notably Jackson Pollock, Motherwell, de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, and Clifford Still, among others. The New York School of painting, as the movement was also called, started in the Forties, flourished until 1956 when Jackson Pollock was killed in a car accident. Theirs was essentially a vision of art as an expression of intangible ideas and experiences, the subject was autobiography and emerged from the sheer act of making a painting. Action Painting, another designation by which the group is known, connotes a fundamental attitude towards art, itself the experience - a transference of the artist's emotional subjectivity onto the amplitude of the canvas.

Frank O Hara, then curator of the Museum of Modern Art, and John Ashbery, perhaps the most influential voice in contemporary poetry after the death of Robert Lowell in 1977, are often identified with the New York School of Poets due to their close association with the Abstract Expressionists. Their poetry is also described as autobiographic, but only qualifiedly may we speak of autobiography in a decade when semantic categories and canonical genres were already being eroded. O'Hara and Ashbery's poetry, like action painting, may be aligned with the inner landscape of the self, but not ignored as the sophisticated experimental construct that bridged the gap between high and popular forms of culture. In a derisive mood against modernist objectivity, O'Hara published "Personism: A Manifesto" (1959) in which he decrees the death of poetry only to resurrect it as an expression of the self towards the other. Iconoclastic would perhaps better suggest the true nature of these poets at odds with the canon of the New Critics and as decentered as Black Mountain College in relation to dominant canons.

In poetry, however, as elsewhere, rebellion in the Fifties had a name almost as famous as that of Marlon Brando or James Dean—the Beat Generation. No other group assumed so openly an adversarial stance against the conventions and codes of the age. Just as no other movement practiced so thoroughly the blurring of boundaries between art and life. One is tempted to draw on the parallel with Brando and Dean, who created the sublime illusion of acting out their lives as rebels. For quite a while, the Beats were dismissed on the assumption that their poetry was an excuse to play around a life style. But there was soon a reversal of opinion about their somewhat candid exhibition of psychic and emotional derangement, together with the recognition that, by incorporating the hipster lingo and the rhythms of popular music, they were forging the language of poetry in the American grain of the Fifties.

First, around the campus of Columbia University in the Forties, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs drew a sort of covenant for life. Then, taking to the road, theirs was a vision that appealed to the postwar youth, who took to reckless living in response to the commodified world of their parents. When in 1955 Ginsberg read "Howl" to the beat of Kerouac's own mournful howls in the Six Gallery, their performance stimulated the emergence of another community of poets, The San Francisco Renaissance. The Beats and The San Francisco poets, among others Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and the pioneering Kenneth Rexroth, were pivotal in the renaissance of poetic pseudo-autobiography. With Robert Lowell and the Confessional poets, another group on the fringes of the Beats, including W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, appropriated historical experience to provide personal metaphor. Deeply rooted in the dissent from the average view o life, confessional poetry would leave its mark on the age and be particularly influential until the death of Lowell in 1977.

As mentioned above, dissonance and transgression are also deeply rooted in native soil. Take, for example, Ginsberg's "America"(1956). As a poem, it is patterned after Whitman's long line combined with Kerouac's notions about spontaneous language. In surrealist juxtaposition of visual images and often disruptive words—"Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb"—Whitman's long line, nevertheless drives the poem home, the home implied in the very title and repeatedly questioned along its ninety three lines—

"America when will you be angelic?" "America when will you send your eggs to India?" More poignantly, perhaps, "America" is a revised and corrected document, Ginsberg's own Declaration of Independence. First and foremost, from the tradition uncovered by allusion and other literary borrowings, and (re)animated into a new poetic discourse and style -- Whitman's, of course, but also Williams's and, on the other side of the Atlantic, Blake's, Cézanne's and that of the French Surrealists. Coming to the last line—"America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (l. 93), the Declaration, as argued by Warren Tallman, includes a first article that grants a right to difference and to authenticity.

Looking back on the Fifties, we come to realize that behind the façade of conformity, vital declarations of independence were being made. These declarations may be read as metaphoric "points of order" addressed to the nation by its artists and other citizens. Published in 1953, but written almost a decade before the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, Ralph Ellison's "Twentieth-century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" is one of such declarations. He starts by exposing "segregation of the word" as a nefarious form of racism, denouncing the absence of black presence among the canonical authors of the first half of the twentieth century, who, like Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck, were intent on fictionalizing their own versions of representative American experience. Then Ellison draws the unfavorable contrast with nineteen-century authors who, like Emerson, Melville and Twain, acknowledged and highlighted the centrality of black experience in a nation governed by an idealist Constitution while harboring slavery in its historical experience. The essay concludes on the need to confront the United States with the hypocritical dismissal of the issue, American identity being revised in terms of the "composite image" that, in Ellison's words, would foster "a type truly great enough to possess the greatness of the land, a delicately poised unity of divergences . . . slowly being born" (83).

Invisible Man (1952), Ellison's contribution to the novelization of the composite image, runs the full gamut of human endeavor under particularly harsh conditions. To the author's credit, the protagonist reverses the odds by the sheer ingenuity of his imagination. Published in the years of raging McCarthyism, *Invisible Man* ushered in the new decade with a fiction of hope in the power of man to learn from and change adversary circumstances. At the close of the

decade with *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), Saul Bellow would articulate the dilemmas of the self in a way that might shed some light on the nature of the composite image drawn by Ellison. To start with, the protagonist is taken to Africa, a scenario of surreal fantasy and Alice-in-wonderland distortion that, as the novel unfolds, turns into a symbolic map. The "off the beaten track" character—Henderson's avowed profession of eccentric selfhood—is steered into a quest that will smuggle a whole cultural tradition into an imaginary landscape where the protagonist is guided by an African. In a narrative that has been praised for its lyricism and the depth of emotional suggestion, it is a sign of Bellow's intuition that he should have a black man lead his white protagonist at a time when Black America's voice was asserting its rights to full citizenship.

Moreover, framed by the feverish memories of life in America and in France, the African adventures as a quest for the self brings in a black king to act out some of the protagonist's perplexities and in such a role functions the protagonist's alter ego. It is impossible into the details of Henderson's adventures in this brief essay. It is, however, relevant to recall that the healing of the narrator's divided self is accomplished via the Wariri king and that, when he returns to America, the black shadow follows him in the guise of a lion cub. Bellow's concern with otherness is by now well established. What to my knowledge has been disregarded is how often he uses a black character in his composite representation of cultural identity, namely in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *The Dean's December* and *More Die of Heatbreak*. In the first of these novels, for instance, Bellow has a black pickpocket impersonating *Ecce Homo*; the moment of recognition coinciding with the moment of grace bestowed upon Arthur Sammler, the returned-from-the-Dead deluded old Jew.

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was performed in the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, the very same stage where, among other famous Broadway hits, *A Streetcar Named Desire* had also been performed. *A Raisin* features the drama of a black family, the Youngers, who like the Tyronnes of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, bring to the limelight their own deep humanity. Racial issues and African-American identity are as much at the center of the play as the frustrations of Mary Tyronne and her husband, the immigrant Irish actor who sold out his talent to material opportunity in the Promised Land. The key issues of both plays, however, concern family life—the Younger's quarrels and love for one another, like the

Tyronnes's, providing the dramatic tension that holds breathless audiences in their seats.

Above all, *A Raisin in the Sun* brings forth the dilemmas of the Younger women – their motivations, their choices and their dreams. Determined to handle their own lives, they offer an assertive response to Langston Hughes's perplexities in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, never allowing race or gender to be narrowed into stereotype. To revise Ellison's metaphor of invisibility, I would stress the fact that, as an African American dramatist, Hansberry brings womanhood into the limelight and as such she may stand for all the women authors who were disrupting the predominantly male modernist canon in the fifties. Among others, Flannery O'Connor exerted remarkable influence on postmodernist writing and mapped anew Faulkner's country, showing how grotesque combined with a sense of the mystery in Catholic dogma may bring home a distinctive point of view; Tillie Olsen who, in the observation of daily life in the States and the recollection of an old world left behind, composed a riddle many contemporary American citizens are still in the process of decoding. Finally, I would mention a woman poet, Elizabeth Bishop, who found her way into the dominant canon but, in a subtle fashion, questioning most of the assumptions on which modernist poetry is built. In her inaugural poem to *North & South*, she glossed the very nature of convention and from thence onwards went on drawing a cartography which foregrounds, above all, her own experience and womanhood. More subtly, perhaps, than Ginsberg's, hers was nevertheless as much an effective declaration of difference and authenticity.

It is, I hope, self-evident that the Fifties harbored the seeds of the Sixties' counterculture, of the seventies' ethnic revivals, as well as of the eighties' and the nineties' multicultural trends. It might also be fair to argue that, under the guise of conformity, the decade was full of dissonance, co-opting into American mainstream culture that of Southerners, Jews, Blacks and Women. At the distance provided by these elapsing decades, it is clear that a novel like *Lolita* (1955) might nowadays read as a successful attempt to capture the elusive nature of the Fifties. Authored by a Russian immigrant, it offers a shrewd, if perplexing picture of a democratic scenario shrunk to the quips of, Nabokov's aristocratic taste, at the same time revealing the unending fascination for the borders of more traveled routes. Such is the America of the imagination and as such has been held by

novelistsis, poets and dramatists; by painters and photographers; by musicians coming from different cultural traditions. Perhaps, it has been first fully appropriated in its discordant sounds and, on such an account, I am ending these notes with a reference to the composer who kept alive and diversified what we came to associate with the American musical genius—the (re)invention of the new by the (re)arrangement of the old. Many preceded Leonard Bernstein in the field, but none has combined so artfully the multifarious styles of his day into a meaningful whole as full of improvisation and dissonance as that of American culture. I conclude then by deconstructing the title of this essay. Instead of tuning to "Some Enchanted Evening", we switch to Bernstein's "life in America" from *West Side Story*.

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NOTES

[1] It might be fruitful to read Goldman's seminal study to grasp the political implications behind the "hole-in-history consensus" mentioned by Lhamon, Jr. in *Deliberate Speed: The origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (p.3). Lahmon's account of the crossovers between distinct cultural manifestations shows how the decade we associate with the American way of life and the dominant canonical culture has been influenced and changed by the so-called marginal ones. Henceforth mentioned as *Deliberate Speed*.

[2] As inspired by John Winthrop's rhetoric in his often quoted "A Modell of Christian Charity"(100).

[3] I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Lahmon, Jr.'s excellent analysis of the fifties in this section of my essay. The technological transformations and their effect upon the fifties cultural style are brilliantly explored by him throughout *Deliberate Speed*, but particularly in "Material Differences", the opening chapter (21-25).

[4] I am much indebted to Irving L. Sablosky's *A Musica Norte-Americana* (American Music) for its insightful views and his understanding of the peculiarities of a tradition that has always dwelt on the brink of innovation and brought this to fruition in the postwar years. My interdisciplinary assissment of the decade has been stimulated by my conversations with Sablosky, his books and articles, and his collection of wonderful music.